

STEPS TOWARD AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF LIFE

by

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Abstract: This contribution is intended as a personal perspective on recent developments in archaeological thinking inspired by new materialism and post-humanism. It seeks to identify a middle position between symmetrical archaeology, which redefines the subject as a “discipline of things” and more biocentric approaches which render the material world as the environment or context of organisms. In arguing for an “archaeology of life” it follows Tim Ingold in imagining an animate cosmos, while addressing the possibility of inorganic life, and of a continuum between organic and inorganic entities. It is suggested that such a perspective provides a conceptual apparatus for investigating such more-than-human phenomena as the European Neolithic.

Keywords: archaeology; new materialism; life.

Resumo: Esta contribuição pretende apresentar uma perspetiva pessoal dos recentes desenvolvimentos do pensamento arqueológico inspirada pelo novo materialismo e pelo pós-humanismo. Procura identificar uma posição intermédia entre a arqueologia simétrica, que redefine o assunto em causa como uma “disciplina das coisas” e abordagens mais biocêntricas que encaram o mundo material como ambiente ou contexto dos organismos. Ao defender uma “arqueologia da vida”, alinha na perspetiva de Tim Ingold no imaginar de um cosmos animado, ao mesmo tempo que aborda a possibilidade da vida inorgânica, e de um continuum entre entidades orgânicas e inorgânicas. Sugere que tal perspetiva nos fornece um aparato conceptual útil para investigar fenómenos que estão para além do mero fenómeno humano, como é o caso do Neolítico europeu.

Palavras-chave: arqueologia; novo materialismo; vida.

INTRODUCTION: ADDRESSING A CYBORG NEOLITHIC

Recent years have seen the rapid development of a series of new directions in archaeological and anthropological thinking, which arguably build upon, extend or radicalize ideas that were present in the postmodern, poststructuralist, feminist and phenomenological thought of the period around the turn of the millennium. These

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include the new materialisms, object-oriented ontology, symmetrical archaeology, and the archaeological application of Deleuzian assemblage theory (Thomas, 2015a; Harris & Cippolla, 2017). This contribution, which originally took the form of an online lecture to ADECAP, is intended as a personal perspective on these emerging approaches, guided to a great extent by the author's particular archaeological preoccupations. To be specific, I have spent much of my academic career absorbed by the question of what exactly a "Neolithic society" might represent (Thomas, 2015b). It has sometimes been proposed that such a society is one that practices an agropastoral way of life, becomes sedentary, uses polished stone tools, constructs monuments for its dead, or possesses a particular genetic ancestry (Thomas, forthcoming). But another way of addressing the question is by suggesting that the Neolithic represents a paradigm example of a more-than-human phenomenon (Tsing, 2013: 27), although clearly not one that could have existed in the absence of humans.

A Neolithic society, then, is one in which the temporalities of people, things, animals and plants become spliced or splinted together, in the process forging a more enduring social entity. If each of these beings could be understood as a line extending through time and space (Ingold, 2015), then in the Neolithic these lines became more densely bundled and entangled through bonds of care, dependency, habit, and domination. This lends the social form greater durability, as the "lives" of some of these entities extend longer than others, and the resulting stability provides a context that harbours the conduct of delayed-return economic practices. We might argue, then, that these social arrangements were often the precondition for agriculture, rather than its outcome, and that other economic regimes might equally be pursued by Neolithic societies. More than simply a multi-species community, a Neolithic society hybridizes the worlds that are made by people, animals, plants and materials. And all of these different kinds of entities have histories of their own, which are drawn on, and drawn into the present. So a Neolithic society is one that manifests its multiple histories, often in tangible ways.

Anna Tsing has remarked that the social is made up of entangling relations with significant others (2013: 27), and it follows that we need to think of societies as being composed of more than just intersubjective relations between human beings. This in turn demands that we set aside the categorical division of the world into culture and nature, human and nonhuman, object and subject (Latour, 1993: 21). We might, perhaps, talk about a "cyborg Neolithic", although I want to suggest that the other-than-human elements of the Neolithic represented more than prostheses: more like partners, although far from equal ones. I would also like to suggest that at another level of analysis the Neolithic represents an example of what Timothy Morton refers to as *hyperobjects*, phenomena that are massively distributed in time

and space (Morton, 2013: 1). Hyperobjects, like global warming, are pervasive in their effects (which are nonetheless experienced locally), and yet their totality cannot be apprehended at the local level. As in the case of global environmental change, these hyperobjects are often more-than-human in character. They extend beyond the human scale, and involve constituents, conditions and consequences that may not be intended, apprehended or appreciated by humans. Neolithic activity might generate zoonotic diseases through human-animal interaction, progressive vegetational change through stock grazing, long-term morphological changes in animal and plant species, and the establishment of innumerable traditions, habits, and customary or repetitious forms of behaviour that might never have been subjected to conscious scrutiny. It follows from this that Neolithic societies will have given rise to quite distinctive historical processes and developments.

ACTIVE THINGS AND MATERIAL RECORDS

In order to address these questions, I argue that what is required is an archaeology of life, which attempts to find a common framework for investigating the diversity of beings that make up a world. In this respect I am well aware that I am not alone in seeking such an approach. In this contribution I hope to outline a middle position, between some of the new materialisms, and in particular symmetrical archaeology on the one hand (Olsen *et al.*, 2012; Shanks, 2007; Witmore, 2007; Webmoor & Witmore, 2008), and the important criticisms of those approaches that have recently been articulated by John Barrett (2014; 2016) on the other. In doing this, I will be using the works of Tim Ingold (2015; 2021) as my guide, which seem to me to be the most potent evaluation presented in recent years of how it is that the world is lived. The key point that I will be seeking to make throughout is that there is a crucial and fundamental relationship between the way that we think about the phenomenon of *life*, and the way that we understand the character of archaeological evidence.

It is arguable that for the past forty years, archaeologists have been working through the implications of Ian Hodder's proposition that material culture is active rather than passive (Hodder, 1992: 14), a statement that can be interpreted in a variety of different ways. Previous academic generations had held that artefacts represented the tangible manifestation of collective cultural norms, or the physical component of strategies of adaptation to external environmental conditions, or internal changes in the composition of social units (Flannery, 1967). Hodder's shift toward the identification of material culture as meaningfully constituted indicated that the

significance of things was not self-evident, and that consequentially they had to be carefully interpreted in context, through a form of “thick description” that led the archaeologist into an appreciation of a past cultural order. It was now recognised that objects could be deployed in social strategies, and used to construct identities or social positions. Yet because material things might have unintended or unrecognised meanings, they were capable of escaping their makers and users, and generating effects that were independent and unforeseen (Hodder, 1992: 12).

While Hodder’s original reflections were principally concerned with the role of artefacts as material symbols, they introduced into archaeological discourse the proposition that objects are not simply a consequence or by-product of human behaviour, and that they can generate effects and outcomes of their own. So, while people make things, things to some extent make people too. This notion of *objectification*, in which there is understood to be a dialectical relationship between people and things, has been influential within anthropological material culture studies (Tilley, 2006). More or less contemporaneously, a different but complementary set of arguments were developed within the philosophy of science and technology, where Michel Serres (1997) pointed to the capacity of material things to stabilize and canalize social relationships, facilitating the routinisation of practices at an unconsidered level. Since architecture and artefacts are often more durable than human beings, they can potentially provide a long-term framework or scaffolding for the reproduction of social order, particularly in the absence of enduring political institutions. Building on these arguments, Shirley Strum and Bruno Latour (1987) pointed to the extensive deliberation, negotiation and testing required within primate societies, who lack both formal traditions of conduct and constructed artefactual worlds. The point about objects is that alongside enduring social institutions they remove much of this hard work, by providing the unacknowledged infrastructure for everyday life (Pollock *et al.*, 2020). In their different ways, all of these perspectives begin to lead us to the conclusion that social life is not separate from the material world, and that artefacts are intrinsic to sociality.

Still more crucially, John Barrett (1988; 2001) has consistently argued that the recognition that artefacts are never merely the products of social life is fatal for the long-established concept of the “archaeological record” (Lucas, 2012). This notion is ultimately attributable to Gordon Childe (1956: 38), who stipulated conditions for the remnants of the past to constitute a legible and interpretable record. However, for Lewis Binford (1964: 425) it implied that archaeological evidence represented a “fossil” record of the operation of an extinct society, which reflects all of the other structures of that society. Yet Barrett notes that artefacts and architectures are actually the settings and media through which social life is conducted and reproduced,

and that they are continually reworked and modified in the course of that process. Consequently, our evidence is not a record of past events, but a surviving component of a past material reality. As a result, he has at times referred to his approach as an “archaeology of inhabitation”, concerned with the material conditions that were occupied by past human agency (Andrews, Barrett & Lewis, 2000: 15). Now, I wish to concur with his insights here, but also to develop them further, and away from inhabitation and containment. In passing, it is also important to note Ingold’s view of this notion of the material record, which is that material things are not parts of a record, so much as the trace of their own ontogenesis. This draws our attention to the way that things are never static, and indeed that materials are continually flowing into and out of configurations as artefacts, buildings or landscape features, however slowly. For Ingold, a thing is its movements (2012: 437).

If we return for the moment to Bruno Latour, it is arguable that his later work developed in a rather different direction, toward the view that societies are composed equally of humans and various kinds of non-humans, who together constitute “actor networks”. Thus, objects represent “fully-fledged social actors”, and any significant happening in the world is the outcome of the working-together of a heterogeneous assembly of different kinds of entities (Latour, 2004: 81). Humans never achieve anything in isolation, and agency is always distributed in networks. Yet as soon as Latour evokes the notion of artefacts as social actors, we have moved from active material culture to object agency, a concept that was developed entirely independently, and in a rather different way, during the 1990s by Alfred Gell (1998). Both Gell and Latour were then influential in what Ewa Domańska (2006) refers to as the “return to things”, a growing imperative within the humanities to take the corporeal seriously, from the turn of the millennium onwards.

For Domańska this development involved a rejection of constructivism and anthropocentrism, and a desire to reinstate a real world of irreducible physical presences that escapes the imposition of our conceptual schemes and exists independently of our involvement. It also takes from Bill Brown (2001) a desire to stop seeing objects as windows through which we can apprehend history, society and culture, and to value the things themselves. Brown argues that the social life of things is not just concerned with the way that objects circulate between people, but also with the work that they do, maintaining a world. Coming from a background in literary studies, Brown’s convergence with Latour is remarkable, and sets the scene for an archaeological response to the “material turn”.

In practice, this initially took the form of symmetrical archaeology, which embroiders on two themes drawn from Latour (Olsen *et al.*, 2012). The first is the need to overcome the conceptual binaries that are characteristic of modern thought:

culture and nature, mind and body, essence and substance (Whitmore, 2007). The second is a rejection of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. For the symmetrical archaeologists, this is to be achieved by an analytical leveling, in which all entities are given equal consideration, including humans (Olsen, 2007; 2010: 89; Webmoor & Whitmore, 2008). The effect is a kind of ontological humility, intended to develop a renewed respect for material things, and a consideration of our ethical relationship to them. However, it has been argued by some that this imperative to balance the relationship between humans and non-humans nevertheless leaves the dichotomy between the two in place (Ingold, 2012: 430).

BETWEEN FLAT AND DEPTH ONTOLOGIES

Now, the means by which symmetrical archaeologists seek to achieve their analytical levelling is through the adoption of a “flat ontology”, and this is a term that has caused a great deal of confusion. It is arguable that it can mean a number of quite different things, not all of which are necessarily mutually compatible. One particularly important distinction hinges upon two very different kinds of “flatness”, which are perhaps being conflated in some cases. Craig Cipolla (2021: 510) has recently reconstructed the history of flat ontologies in a very helpful way. As he notes, the concept originated with the philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar, who actually used it in a pejorative way. Bhaskar (1975) rejects a view of the world in which everything is equally occurrent and perceptible, composed of a series of readily accessible entities with self-evident qualities, and amongst which causal relations are linear and transparent. He preferred instead a “depth ontology” in which there are forces and causes at work that are not directly observable, and which need to be inferred through their effects. In this sense, depth ontologies can be identified in Marxism, structuralism, psychoanalysis and various forms of scientific thinking. Manuel DeLanda (2016), by contrast, positively evokes a flat ontology to propose a form of analysis in which we do not assume the importance or centrality of any entity before we begin our analysis. Things may prove to be different from each other in ontological terms, but we should nevertheless subject them all to the same kind of scrutiny. In particular, this kind of a flat ontology resists humanistic perspectives which maintain that human beings have a transcendental nature or essence (involving rationality, a soul, language, an ethical sense, etc.) which fundamentally sets them apart from the rest of creation, so that they must be investigated with a completely independent set of analytical tools. However, in one account of Bruno Latour’s work, he might be

considered to uphold a kind of flat ontology very similar to that identified by Bhaskar, in which all of the actors in a network are effectively equally important, whether human or non-human, and none has any kind of causal priority (Harman, 2009: 16).

Now, it is customary to draw a distinction between ontology — our understanding of how things are in the world — and epistemology — the philosophical means by which we can acquire that understanding. But it may be that we can throw some light on this question by drawing on the further distinction that Martin Heidegger (1962: 12) makes between the ontological and the ontic. For Heidegger, ontology is concerned with those aspects of reality that are primordial and fundamental: with Being in general. The ontic, however, relates to the empirical and measurable characteristics of the particular things that surround us in the present moment. This contrast allows him to distinguish between “Being” and “beings”, which he refers to as the ontological difference. Heidegger attributes many of the failings of modern philosophy to the forgetting of this difference, and imagining that we can move seamlessly from the description of occurrent things to the nature of Being in general. So, the confusing thing about a flat ontology is that it might be referring to a depthless universe, or to the way that particular kinds of things do not enjoy any kind of primordial privilege within a universe.

It follows that it is entirely possible to reject a humanism that proposes that the essential qualities of humankind are universal, and exist outside of space and time, while at the same time upholding a view of the phenomenal world as stratified in various ways. In practice, many of those thinkers who propose a flat ontology, in the sense of arguing that the differences between worldly things are ontic, rather than fixed in the unchanging fabric of the universe, also imagine a stratified reality. Thus, Graham Harman (2005: 19) argues that material objects have withdrawn inaccessible cores, and only interact through their sensual exteriors. Similarly, assemblage theorists like DeLanda and Deleuze distinguish between inorganic, organic and alloplastic strata or registers, which can nonetheless be approached using similar conceptual tools, and also have a view of the generation of difference that involves the virtual, the intensive and the actual (Jervis, 2019: 57).

So, we could argue that a “soft” flat ontology does not commit us to the view that everything is much the same as everything else, or that existence represents a featureless plane of accessibility, even if we might be cautious about using the term. On the contrary, we might wish to see the world as rich, complex and variegated, and distinguished by a plurality of differences. One aspect of this differentness is the various developments associated with the emergence of humankind, and as archaeologists we are very much concerned with these issues. But we arguably foreclose on the possibility of understanding them if we assume that the distinctiveness of

humanity is fixed and pre-given at an ontological level, written into the structure of reality, even before we begin.

In seeking a levelling between humans and non-humans, symmetrical archaeology emphasizes one aspect of post-humanism, but potentially neglects another one. During the period around the millennium, archaeologists were much concerned with the issue of personhood, and the critique of modern conceptions of the human subject (Fowler, 2004). In particular, the western individual as a rational, unencumbered, autonomous agent was identified as both culturally specific and a kind of regulatory fiction. This image has been progressively undermined by the Romantic and psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious, the Marxian notion of ideology, the post-structuralist dismantling of the ego, and theories of becoming that render the person as a process rather than a fixed and bounded entity (Morris, 1991; Dews, 1987). Yet sometimes, it seems, the way in which objects have been valorized in recent archaeology has been by rendering them as isolated, free-standing individual entities, endowed with an agency which is either their own, or deferred from humans (Jones & Boivin, 2010: 432). Part of the problem here is the view that agency is the possession or attribute of an entity, even if it can only be exercised in relation to other things.

It is important to stress that agency, power, and responsibility are always relational and confederate, and that there is no position outside of our worldly entanglements from which to act. But at the same time, we should be mindful of Ruth Van Dyke's (2021) recent argument that a flat ontology has potential ethical implications. If we lavish respect on objects, do we then neglect to care for people, and forget about social justice? It may be that one answer is to follow Michel Foucault (1994: 340), and argue that simply because everything is relational, it does not follow that the relationships in which we find ourselves are homogeneous or balanced, even if they never have a centre or a focal point. These circuits of relationality have knots, and blocks, and resistances as well as flows, which make them asymmetrical. Every element within an assemblage or a meshwork is both enabled and constrained, and afforded a distinctive set of potentials by virtue of its relational involvement. The way that those potentials are exercised is still a matter of ethics and politics, even if action is never an entirely autonomous burst of intentionality, beamed in from outside the relational nexus. Moreover, the elements that make up these networks are not static blobs that pulse with agency, they are always movements, or lines, or flows, or histories. So as Ingold notes, they are never just inter-acting, as if from a position of distance. They are always *corresponding*, moving in concert, under conditions of a total immersion in the world (Ingold, 2021: 9). This brings to mind an image from Jacques Audiard's film *Rust and Bone*, in which Marion Cotillard

stands in front of a plate glass window *corresponding* with the movements of a killer whale on the other side.

MORE-THAN-ORGANIC LIFE

In describing organisms and materials as lines of becoming, Ingold begins to break down the distinction between the thing and its relationships, thus obviating the question of whether objects or relations have primacy. He rejects the Cartesian view of material substance as inert, and instead presents a world in which everything is vibrant and in motion, at different spatial and temporal scales (Ingold, 2006: 14). If things are at once fundamentally embedded in a relational world and continually in a state of movement, it is no longer necessary to install some kind of entelechy or life-force into them to enable them to move. So it is not so much that life is something that is installed in objects, things are in life, in the sense of being caught up in the flows and fluxes of the world's endless coming-into-being. Everything moves, flows, and undergoes morphogenesis. It follows that this is a vitalist universe, in which everything is alive, even if organisms are alive in a different way from inorganic entities, and this is a point to which we will return. As Jane Bennett (2015: 82) puts it, life is "a restless and self-altering field of processes, flows and shifting assemblages of human and nonhuman components".

Can we, then, talk about non-organic life? When we consider geology, it is clear that matter is always in process (through sedimentation, metamorphosis, weathering and erosion) even if the matter-flow may be exceptionally slow at times. And clearly, in processes like the formation of soils, organic and inorganic elements are mixed up in the assemblages of life. Equally, hydrological and atmospheric strata are composed of flows of matter and energy. So, what we commonly think of as inert matter can exhibit complex non-linear forms of behavior that may involve novel kinds of self-organization, bringing difference into the world in ways that may be chaotic rather than deterministic (DeLanda, 1992). However, Barrett raises the very important point that organisms and inorganic entities operate in quite different ways. Non-living things tend toward their lowest possible energy state, while living things dissipate energy as a means of sustaining their own growth and development. Biological evolution therefore describes a stratified trajectory, culminating with complex multi-cellular organisms (Barrett, 2016: 1648).

This distinction is of considerable importance, but we might none the less want to resist a categorical division of the world into the living and the non-living

(Protevi, 2012: 248). This is because there is a danger of rendering the latter as static, or as an externality: an environment within which life makes itself at home, or a set of resources that it consumes. Furthermore, in practice the organic and the non-organic form a continuum, rather than a fundamental bifurcation of the world, even if the analytical division between the two is useful and important. Manuel DeLanda (1992: 131) describes the way that far-from-equilibrium conditions facilitate the creation of bioids, or chemical systems that are sensitive to small fluctuations, resulting in oscillating behaviours. These can represent “chemical clocks” that pulse regularly, and are in some ways similar to the chemical processes that occur within organisms. Thus, there are continuities between the non-organic and the organic, and Gilbert Simondon discussed the way that the creation of a cellular membrane enclosing chemical processes that had existed before the development of cells created the conditions of the spatiality and temporality of organisms (Sauvagnargues, 2010).

Part of the importance of stressing a continuum between the non-organic and the organic, rather than a binary division, is that on the long time-scale organic life must have emerged out of non-organic systems. But beyond this there is genuinely a grey area between life and non-life. There is, for instance, a continuing debate amongst scientists over whether viruses are “alive” or not (Boyer *et al.*, 2010; Moreira & López-García, 2009). A virus is a nucleic acid, whether RNA or DNA, encased in a virus-encoded protein capsid. Yet a virus cannot reproduce itself independently: it needs to hi-jack the metabolic and replicative processes of a host cell in order to reproduce. Nonetheless, the processes by which viruses proliferate are broadly Darwinian in character, as we are currently finding out in the course of the Coronavirus pandemic, to our cost.

This suggests that the vibrant world of materials and organisms is one that we could potentially divide up in a variety of different ways: organic and inorganic, vertebrate and invertebrate, with or without a central nervous system, sentient and non-sentient, linguistic and non-linguistic. These are all significant and legitimate distinctions to draw, and each identifies sets of entities that behave in distinctive ways. But the point is that where we privilege one division over the others, we end up placing particular, more active, beings at the centre of the cosmos, surrounded by lesser, more passive entities, which are relegated to the status of “the environment”. This creates a picture of an inanimate world inhabited by animate life, whereas we might prefer to see the whole universe as in motion. Ingold (2006: 12) suggests that we should review our traditional conception of an organism as a bounded and sutured entity that stands proud from its surrounding world, and think of it instead of a ramifying web of lines of growth and becoming. So the world is not a container

surrounding free-standing entities, but a domain of entanglements, within which things leak and absorb, inhale and exhale, consume and excrete, grow and exfoliate.

Life does not begin and end with organisms, and geology, biology and technology are always to some extent mixed up together. Organic and inorganic life are both animate, and both are social as well. This has significant implications for the way that we as archaeologists understand the evidence that we are confronted with. We have seen already that material things are not simply a record, which represents the outcomes of the doings of past persons. But nor are they simply the material settings and media through which humans enacted their purposes, or exercised their agency, or inert resources that they drew upon, transformed and consumed. On the contrary, things are integral to social action, as the suggestion that Neolithic societies were cyborg communities would imply. Things and materials can resist human designs, and humans have to work with them, and accommodate their constitution, movements and effects. Much the same is true of plants and animals, which have processes, cycles, rhythms, and motions of their own (Protevi, 2012: 242). Barrett argues that forms of life moved, worked and knew their worlds from within contexts that were provided in part by the material conditions within which they found themselves (2016: 1684). But we might worry that this renders those material conditions as relatively passive and powerless containers of life, rather than dynamic *ingredients* of forms of life, and social processes. Such a view has sometimes been described as *biocentrism*, and is to be distinguished from holistic approaches, which reject any absolute distinction between organism and environment (McShane, 2014; Rottman, 2014). A holistic perspective on archaeological things would emphasise that they are not a reflection or representation of a past society, but are surviving fragments of such a past society.

This potentially has profound consequences for the practice of archaeological inference. Archaeological evidence is always incomplete, and always “haunted” by the absent presences of the people who are implied by the artefacts, the animals represented only by their bones, and the plants that only survive as charred husks (Lucas, 2012: 15). But if we take the view that societies are hybrid entities composed of people, creatures and things, our material actually constitutes a fragmentary portion of a past social formation. An archaeology of life is therefore a more-than-human archaeology, concerned with the changing ways in which these various constituent elements of the social, with their diverse potentials and temporalities, became bound together, meshed, and unravelled, creating the possibility for novel forms of existence and expression, and diverse historical trajectories. This is not an archaeology that displaces humanity from the focus of analysis, replacing humans with things. Instead, it puts humans and things alongside each other as irreplaceable elements of the social world.

CONCLUSION

The implication of the argument presented here is that archaeology has struggled with the notion of “active” material culture because it has attempted to accommodate it to a modernist framework of autonomous individuals, inert matter, and conscious mental processing. Material things are active, because everything is always in motion, growing and decaying, and everything is capable of having effects, impacts and consequences, at some spatial or temporal scale. But material things are not agents, in the sense that they are not free-standing entities capable of effecting change through their sovereign intentionality. But it could equally be argued that human beings are not fully autonomous agents either, if we accept the kind of confederate or distributive model of agency proposed by Jane Bennett (2005). Certainly, some kinds of beings have the ability to intervene reflexively in the flows and currents of the world, but this capacity is itself emergent, situated, embedded and graded, rather than warranting a fundamental divide between humans and others. This position does not rely on a “hard” flat ontology, but instead upon a kind of ontological naturalism, which tries to apply the same principles to inorganic, organic and human systems, while recognizing that real and significant differences between kinds of beings have developed within specific and contingent sets of circumstances.

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