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Cath Filmer-Davies

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Abstract

Recounts and criticizes various contemporary examples of the use of the Arthurian mythos for commercial or political purposes. Applauds the rehabilitation of the myths by Stephen Lawhead.

Additional Keywords

Arthur, King; Lawhead, Stephen. Song Of Albion trilogy



KING ARTHUR IN THE MARKETPLACE, KING ARTHUR IN THE MYTH

Cath Filmer-Davies

After a millennium and a half, the mythological accretions we call the Matter of Britain have been constructed, deconstructed, reconstructed, and generally tampered with in a myriad of ways, generally for some polemical purpose, including political purposes. Gwynfor Evans, the first Plaid Cymru (Welsh Nationalist) member of the British Parliament, says in his overview of Welsh history that "[Arthur] won a special place among the great in the gallery of the defenders of Wales", and "made a notable contribution to the endeavour which ensured the continuance of the Welsh tradition" (68).¹ This is not history but a myth exploited for political purpose. Such an exploitation is not an indictable offence, nevertheless, in making this claim, Evans not only deconstructs the English claim to Arthur, but also constructs him as a Welsh national hero, and disingenuously speaks of a "Welsh" tradition, which to the divided and tribal Celtic Britain of the fifth century would have had little real nationalist meaning. To refer to a "British" tradition might be more accurate; but such a phrase would be too inclusive for Evans's Welsh-nationalist stance. Still, however disingenuous Evans's misuse of the Arthurian myth might be, it is more defensible than much contemporary exploitation of the legends of King Arthur. It seems that the Matter of Britain can be used as a marketing strategy for all manner of commercial enterprises and products, from tourism and the souvenir trade to occult religions, including those which call themselves "druidic."

Newspaper bulletins from Britain during the 1995 summer solstice reported that there were, at Stonehenge, any number of druids and other New Age characters, including one who claimed to be King Arthur. The association of Arthur with Stonehenge is ambiguous; it is quite clear that myths which attribute to Merlin the building of Stonehenge are unfounded, simply because the Merlin is supposedly a fifth-century character and Stonehenge is Neolithic. Furthermore, the "druidic tradition" so fervently followed today can have little to do with the actual practices of the original druids, since the druids left no written lore. Their oral tradition was one of eloquence and acute memorisation, but, sadly for us, their esoteric and religious practices went unrecorded. Further, the only commentaries upon druidic practice extant are those of the Romans, and are generally highly critical; but the Romans were outsiders and observers, and would not have been admitted to the druidic mysteries. Not only that, but the Romans clearly despised what they saw as low or barbaric customs.² All we have today is fake and forgery, a "druidic tradition" made up by the highly intellectual stonemason, fraud and forger Edward Williams, who is better known

by his bardic name of Iolo Morgannwg, and who lived from 1747 to 1826. Even those ceremonies so acclaimed for their colour and charm, which introduce and which conclude the Eisteddfodau of Wales and Cornwall, are Iolo's inventions (Evans, *Welsh Nation Builders 192-200*).³ So the druids at Stonehenge or at any other site suring the solstice are doing more to commemorate Iolo than King Arthur.

But Arthur has been associated with other places in Britain and elsewhere; indeed there are very many sites associated with Arthur and which commemorate the Matter of Britain. The Welsh Arthurian scholar Bedwyr Lewis Jones has commented upon the tenuous nature of the relationship between the names of places and historical veracity; some place names, Lewis Jones notes, are recent impositions, some Welsh translations of English replacements for ancient Welsh names which had nothing to do with Arthur.⁴ Nevertheless, sites such as Edinburgh's Arthur's Seat, and Cader Idris, or Arthur's Chair, in Wales, might well have historical links with the real Arthur, so Britain, at least, is entitled to its Arthurian legends. But what of Arthurian sites in, say, Australia? In Glen Innes, New South Wales, as part of an impressive array of Standing Stones, the first post-Christian array anywhere in the world, there is a "sword-in-the-stone" replica based upon someone's superficial knowledge of Mallory's Arthuriana. In Mallory we are clearly told that the sword is placed "in an anvil on a stone" and not in the stone itself. In Australia, where politicians are steering the populace towards a republic by the bicentennial of Federation in 2001, it is something of an irony to discover an inscription pointing to a rightful king of the realm. But in Celtic Australia and in the international cross-cultural mythopoetic subconscious, the business of kingship and the right use of power — that is, through humility and grace — are still pre-eminent.

More complex, however, are the uses of Arthurian legend for tourism and exploitation. This is nothing new. It is quite clear that the "discovery" of the bones of Arthur and Guinevere by King Henry II and his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine and their "interring" in the abbey grounds at Glastonbury was part of a political move to identify the king and his queen with the legendary Arthur and his wife. More, the "graves" at Glastonbury were designed to attract pilgrims to the abbey and the Tor, and in medieval times pilgrimages were the equivalent of tourism. Some scholars, in particular Geoffrey Ashe, defend the monks of Glastonbury; Ashe cites Dr Ralegh Radford who excavated the site in 1962-63 and declared that the bones "of some prominent person" were interred there (Ashe viii).⁵ But as Phillips and Keatman point out, the bones could be

the bones of anyone; although the inscription which supposedly had appeared on the graves raises some questions. In 1190, the inscription was supposed to have read: HIC IACET SEPULTUS INCLYTUS REX ARTHURIUS IN INSULA AVALLONIA CUM UXORE SUA SECUNDA WENNEVERIA (Here lies the renowned King Arthur in the isle of Avalon with his second wife Guinevere)(P&K 16). This is the inscription which Gerald of Wales claims personally to have seen and "traced" (Gerald, 282 and 287).⁶

But later, when the legendary accretions around Arthur seemed to establish that he had only one wife, the inscription was said to have read: "HIC IACET SEPULTUS INCLYTUS REX ARTURIUS IN INSULA AVALONIA" (Here lies the renowned King Arthur in the Isle of Avalon) — with no mention whatsoever of Guinevere. Furthermore, as Phillips and Keatman go on to reveal, the monks at Glastonbury also claimed graves for Gildas, St Patrick, and Archbishop Dunstan, whose remains had lain undisturbed at Canterbury for more than 200 years. Such 'relics' were displayed at the 4Abbey and attracted generous donations from pilgrims and worshippers (P & K 16-17).

There is no doubt that the word "Arthur" in any place name in Britain confers upon it a sense of mystery, intrigue, myth and wonder that otherwise it might not have, although it might be argued that Britain has so much genuine history and religion, so much heroism and so many stories in its past, that it hardly needs to "fake it" with spurious Arthurian sites.

Although there are several Cornish sites supposedly associated with Arthur, the location of Arthur's birth at Tintagel has been questioned by serious Arthurian scholars. However, it is now generally accepted that the ruins at Tintagel date from about the twelfth century, and the association of Arthur with the site is an invention provided by Geoffrey in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Recent excavations have shown that before the building of the Norman castle, Tintagel promontory had been the site of monastic communities and therefore an unlikely place for any birth (Phillips and Keatman 13). Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the Arthurian industry prospers in Tintagel and at Glastonbury. My recent visits to both sites have revealed lots of souvenir shops and New-Age crystal shops, fortune-tellers and tarot-card readers, and a thriving New-Age, White-Witchery tourist business. Even on my solitary jaunt up the Glastonbury Tor, I encountered, in the dead of winter, a small motor-van painted with all kinds of mystical symbols, and a large sign that read: "Fred will read the Tarot for four pounds (US \$10)". In that weather, I should say he was earning every penny of it, but I did not avail myself of his services. However, I believe that the superimposition of a twentieth-century neo-paganism over fifth-century Christianity is both deceptive and maleficent. It detracts from what truth there is in the Arthurian myth and overlays it with spurious spiritualism which claims ancient antecedents but which is really a twentieth-century anachronistic construct. It is not a popu-

lar thing to point out that the worship of the Mother Goddess, the inspiration for many movements within and without neo-paganism, tells only half the story. Certainly, it has been said that the druids worshipped goddesses, many of whom had three faces or aspects (Stewart 60-61).⁷ But they also worshipped gods, many of whom also appeared in triple forms: and these nature spirits and horned gods such as Cernunnos, the sea god Manannan or Mac Lir (in the Welsh "Llyr")(120), and Arawn, lord of the Otherworld in the story "Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed" in *The Mabinogion*, as well as father-gods such as Nuadda (or Nudd) and the Daghdha or Good God, are thoroughly and unquestionably male (Stewart 103,104,115). While the Queen of Darkness was feared, her son Mabon, the Prince of Light, was of equal significance. Such appropriations of Celtic and Arthurian legends are probably legitimate enough; nobody has a copyright upon mythic tales. Nevertheless, the overlays of neo-pagan pragmatism and commercialism are major contributions to King Arthur's relegation to the marketplace, with consequent damage and dislocation to the myth and to whatever truth lies behind it. In any case, scholars seem to agree that King Arthur was a Christian king; in fact, Arthur's Christianity is the source of much of the conflict in Marion Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*.

Perhaps the most ethically questionable use of the Arthurian material has been that by the British National Lottery company, Camelot, which conducts its prize draws in King Arthur's Hall, in, of course, Tintagel, Cornwall, amid some of the most blatant commercialisation of the myth one could hope to find. The National Lottery provides for the gullible a dream of instant riches, but to date stories of the winners, and even of the losers, have about them overtones of sadness and tragedy — as indeed do the Arthurian stories themselves. The lottery is not necessarily the fulfilment of a dream; but to associate a hero of the legendary stature of Arthur with instant cash seems to be in the poorest of taste, a reduction to commercial terms of a mythic construct which might once have had the power to inspire and to encourage aspiration to high and noble ideals. There is nothing very noble about greedily pocketing lots of cash, although I am aware even as I say this that there are all manner of defenses available for use by those who while away their lives dreaming of a win. Be that as it may, it seems to me that as the sponsor of a National Lottery, Arthur has hit his dimmest hour; yet still it is far from impossible that, if the myth can be rehabilitated from the marketplace, his light will shine again.

But if one is to rehabilitate the myth as myth, the question arises about what constitutes the myth and what value such a rehabilitation might have. First, it is necessary to establish exactly what value the concept of Myth might actually have. In everyday association, myths are simply lies; yet the human animal constantly proves itself mythopoeic and mythopathic — a myth maker, and inspired by myth. Myths reach across the human consciousness and shatter every great divide of culture, creed, class or



ethnic origin. Myths, according to C.S. Lewis, are 'real though unfocused gleams of divine truth falling upon human imagination' (*Miracles* 148n)⁸. What the American fantasy writer Ursula Le Guin says of fantasy is true also of myth: it is not factual, but it is true (Language of the Night 47). In other words, myth has the ability to convey truth; moral truth, I hasten to point out, and perhaps spiritual truth; not historical or factual truth. It might have been of the myths associated with forests rather than of the forests themselves that Wordsworth wrote, "One impulse from a vernal wood/Can teach you more of man/ Of moral evil and of good/ Than all the sages can". Certainly Coleridge, in his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and even in his famous "Kubla Khan", draws from the mythic truth of imagined events. In order to rehabilitate Arthurian myth, we do not have to establish for it any strict historical basis, but we need to show that it encourages its audience to aspire to high ideals, or to work towards psychological and spiritual wholeness.

One writer who sees this kind of value in the myth is Stephen Lawhead. He is, in my view, a more-than-worthy successor to C.S. Lewis. My comparison is not fortuitous, for Lawhead has won the C.S. Lewis Award for Fantasy fiction, and it is far from coincidental, I suspect, that Lawhead gives the name "Lewis" to the principal character in his marvellously mythopoetic *The Song of Albion Trilogy*. In the Otherworld, to which the character travels, Lewis becomes "Llew", the name of the mythical Celtic god and hero. Some of the stories associated with Llyr appear in both Irish and Welsh myths. In the Irish stories, he appears as Lugh and in the Welsh *Mabinogion* he appears as Llew Llaw Gyffes; the same mythical figure is the literary ancestor of Shakespeare's King Lear. The Lewis/Llew relationship Lawhead constructs suggests to me not imitation of C.S. Lewis, but influence and perhaps admiration. Lawhead is not the absolutist and determined polemicist that Lewis was; Lawhead's fiction is, though it features battles and tyrants and struggles, a gentler if no less insistent persuader. Like Lewis and Tolkien before him, Lawhead acknowledges the evil inherent in the misuse of power; but Lawhead allows his heroes to be seduced by power, and in doing so demonstrates that evil is not characterised by chanting Orcs with harsh speech nor Calormenes waving scimitars, but humans who aspire to good who see power as a means to bring about heaven on earth. But to consider this possibility is to overlook the theological truism that life can only be found when it is lost, and true power lies in the total relinquishment of power. Arthur is, paradoxically, at his strongest when he lies wounded and repentant. In his death comes the promise of renewal and hope; he has failed as the king of an earthly Summer Country, but he has found the enduring and true Kingdom in the moment when his natural pride is subdued and he realises his mistake. It is a message which has perhaps been encouraged by the times in which we live when we are tired of fighting and endless struggle; and as a race, I suspect, humanity longs for a place where

it can lie down and rest. Lawhead rehabilitates the Arthurian myth by locating it in the world of the mind and of the spirit, the site of every reader's own most difficult battles. The greatest myths are those which have at their deepest level of significance shared human experiences and universal truths.

I am not uncritical of Lawhead, however. I think he has made a serious error in feeding potatoes to his ancient Celts, since potatoes were not eaten in Europe until the Spanish explorers had brought them back from the New World, especially the Peruvian regions, where they were originally cultivated. However I concede that Celts being what they were, they would have enjoyed potatoes if they had had them! Lawhead's careful research into ancient Welsh and British history, into the *Mabinogion*, from which he quotes at length, and into the Welsh Triads, is extensive and, for the most part, accurate. He portrays not a courtly, medieval society, but one which is consistent with what we know of fifth-century Britain. More, he acknowledges the historical existence of characters such as the bard Taliesin, Merlin the wizard and prophet, and David, the monk who worked with his small band of followers to bring western Britain to Christ. That the cycle includes these characters, and shows David establishing a monastery at Glastonbury, is to Lawhead's great credit.

Unlike many Christian writers except C.S. Lewis, Lawhead recognises and acknowledges the good in pre-Christian and non-Christian belief systems. The druid Hagfan, who eventually converts to Christianity, is always a seeker after truth. For Lawhead as for Lewis, who seeks finds; as seen in the character Emeth in *The Last Battle*, who worshipped Tash, but who found in Tash only the image of Aslan. Aslan tells Emeth, "Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me" (*The Last Battle* 154). Even the name Emeth is Hebrew for "Truth". And to a character in *That Hideous Strength*, the Pendragon, Ransom, remarks, "When you mean well, he always takes you to have meant better than you knew" (THS 282). This redemptive quality of a search for truth also informs Lawhead's works and in particular his Arthurian.

His characterisation is such that their qualities are human and believable. It is possible for readers to identify with each of them, with their inner struggles and outward failures and successes. A major issue arising from critical comments on his Pendragon cycle is that he has associated the destruction of Atlantis with the coming of the Fair Folk to Britain; Avallach and his household, including Charis, who is to be the wife of Taliesin, are Atlanteans fleeing from the catastrophe which fell upon their island. However this association is also to be found in *The Welsh Triads*, and the character Charis herself is no mere functionary. Not only is she the wife of Taliesin and mother of Merlin, but she is the historian and the scribe who records the events of Taliesin's life.

What she records primarily is Taliesin's vision of the

Summer Country. It seems that a suppressed paronomasia is at work here: the Kingdom of Summer is, by definition, the Kingdom of the Sun/Son. His vision is millennialist, the rule of peace and healing and joy which Christ will usher in upon his return to the Earth. Towards this, all Christians aspire, for it they all long. Arthur is not and cannot be the Summer King, and yet he can foreshadow the return and the reign of Christ. It is clear that in the vision of the Summer Kingdom, there has been a slippage from Christian eschatology to Arthurian myth. This is obvious also in the later Grail legends which medieval writers have added to the original stories, and from the many references to a belief in Arthur's return. It is the coming of Christ as King for which we long; but the event seems to have been endlessly deferred, and as in Lewis's *The Last Battle*, things look bleak and hopeless "in the last days of Narnia" (LB 7), "Aslan never does turn up" (LB 16). When life is hopeless and bleak, we look for a saviour; if God seems to be, as experientially he might, "a very absent help in time of trouble", then humanity shares the habit of looking for a human hero who might suffice. Nevertheless the human hero must fail on the cosmic level and even, perhaps, on the local or national level, while succeeding personally; he is human and weak and fallible, after all. But the key issue in Lawhead's Pendragon Cycle is not that of success or failure, but of vision. As the Scriptures put it: "without a vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18); indeed. Without hope, life and endeavour are pointless, and the human, or the human society, with hope and vision long for death. This is the Night-Mare "Life-in-Death" of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, the hopeless endeavour of striving without fulfilment, of working without reward, of struggling without result or acknowledgment. But if despair is the death of human aspiration, vision also is fraught with danger, as Arthur becomes aware.

It is said that in the accounts of saints' lives in fifth-century Wales and later, Arthur is depicted as the recipient of advice from the various saints — usually reprimands for his arrogance, lust and pride. Brynley F. Roberts observes that Arthur is portrayed in the *Vitae* as

a foil for the saint, an arrogant, grasping tyrant who is humbled in ignominious defeat, not in any armed struggle but in his childish greed and even in his failure to fulfil his traditional role as giant or dragon slayer (as in the lives of Padarn, Carantoc, Cadoc, Efflam). These appear to be genuine fragments of Arthurian legend, manipulated so that they may display Arthur in the worst possible light. (Roberts 83)¹⁰

As Roberts notes, the *Vitae* are all pre-Geoffrey (82); and while their purpose is obviously that of hagiography for each of the relevant saints, the Arthur which they depict might be more like the real Arthur than the chivalric knight of post-Geoffrey legend.

Lawhead's Arthur displays all the human weaknesses attributed to him in the *Vitae*, yet at heart he longs to be the King of Summer that he is meant to be. His failure wracks

his emotions painfully; yet even in the admission and confession of his failures, the vision is restored. He has not been the King of Summer that he was meant to be; but he has been the best he could be (Arthur 487). Nothing more than that, ultimately, is expected of any human being.

Lawhead's Arthur is a flawed and fallible human being like all human beings. If that is the case, I think Lawhead is suggesting that, in a sense, we are all Taliesin, Merlin and Arthur. Each character represents human attributes and abilities; Taliesin is the singer and the bard, the visionary and the prophet. Merlin is the wizard, the wise guide and the guardian, the one who must recognise and preserve truth and guard our spiritual inheritance; he is the priest. Arthur is the anointed one, the heir to the Kingdom, the child who must be nurtured and taught, the man who must learn discipline and humility, the soul which will be "born again". We readers must all, in our own realms and domains, be prophets and priests and people of the Son's kingdom. As Lawhead has his character Charis say in the conclusion to the book *Taliesin*, all must "keep the vision alive" (512). And in a sense, the Arthurian myths echo for us the eschatology of the Christian myth, the belief that Christ will come again to establish his perfect Kingdom where there will be no sorrow or pain or tears. That is a vision which believers hold dear, the echoes of which they treasure when they find them reflected in the great myths of our culture or in the great works of fantasy from the pens of inspired writers.

Lawhead's researches have led him close to the reality of the historical Arthur. Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman have examined recent archaeological evidence, historical evidence, manuscripts and stories to arrive at a credible conclusion about who King Arthur really was. When one observes the interweaving of fact with legend, one is left with little but admiration for the vision and the hope which the fifth-century war leader has bequeathed to us as his legacy.

In their exciting little book, *King Arthur: the True Story*, Phillips and Keatman demonstrate ably the depth of their Arthurian scholarship and their knowledge of contemporary archaeology. Their suggestions about who the real King Arthur might be are worthy of serious note, and accord fully with what fact can be separated from the fictions which have sprung up about the Bear of Britain.

The family of Arthur is traced to that of Cunedda, the fifth-century Celtic prince who moved from Edinburgh to Gwynedd. Among Cunedda's great-grandsons was Cunomoros, King of Dumnonia, who can be fairly securely identified with King Mark of Cornwall, since King Mark and Tristan (sometimes called Dustran). The Arthurian character, Mordred, is also linked with Cornwall by virtue of that spelling and pronunciation of his name, the Welsh version for which is Medraut. Mordred's rebellion against Arthur in most of the stories stems from the revolt of the Cornish king, Cunomoros. Phillips and Keatman argue that from the historical evidence, it is highly likely



that Mordred is a conflation of two quite distinct figures, Cunomorur and Maglocunus, the second of whom was a ruler of Powys. Since Phillips and Keatman argue that Arthur was the son of a Head Dragon, a *Pendragon*, the title given to the kings of Gwynedd after Cunedda, the historical Arthur must be a descendant of Cunedda. Cunedda was succeeded by his son, Enniaun Girt, who is identified in the genealogies in the *Annales Cambriae* as the grandfather of Malgocunus and Cuneglasus. British unity was disrupted after the reign of Arthur; so Enniaun's son must have been the true Arthur and uncle of Cunomorur — that is, the uncle of Mordred. I quote from Phillips' and Keatman's summary:

◆ [Enniaun Girt's son] was ruling in the last decade of the fifth century, precisely the period in which the *Historia Brittonorum* locates "Arthur".

◆ [He] was the son of one of the Gwynedd kings, who were known as the "head dragons". "Uther Pendragon", meaning "terrible head dragon", was the father of "Arthur".

◆ [He], as as king of both Gwynedd and Powys, was the most powerful ruler in Britain at the time of the Battle of Badon, where the British were led to victory by "Arthur".

◆ [He] was the father of Cuneglasus, whose predecessor was called the "Bear". The "Bear" is almost certainly the origin of the name "Arthur".

◆ [He] may have died in battle in the valley of Camlan near Dolgellau. Camlann is where the *Annales Cambriae* record the death of "Arthur".

Phillips and Keatman (60-61)

Nothing is known of this prince except his name: Owain Ddantgwyn, Owen Whitetooth. We have no idea what he looked like, what his personality was like, nor whom he married. As Phillips and Keatman suggest, because we know so little about him, "he was free to become many things to many people" (161). And indeed, he has; from the fifth-century warlord of Lawhead, to the king of the fifteenth-century Italianate Camelot of the movie *First Knight*, set in a twentieth-century Italianate village in Wales called Portmeirion.

But what of the value of the medieval stories? Nothing can detract from them. Now entrenched in the literary canon, their chivalric world of knights and ladies, battles and conspiracies, magic and esoterica, has a rightful place in the realm of legend and of fiction. As Nikolas Tolstoy writes, "The Matter of Britain survives only in shattered images and broken shards, a ruined city glimpsed beneath the darkened waters of a mountain lake"¹¹ But, as in the movie *The Dark Crystal*, the crystal shards can be painstakingly replaced; if this is done at the proper time, the brilliant light of individuation and healing will restore what was broken. This message might be eschatological and millennialist in terms of the world at large; but it is

immediate and achievable by the individual who recognises that life is the Great Quest, and that Christ, the real Grail, is both the Way and the destination. The association of Christ with Grail is hardly fortuitous; the second book of *Chronicles* puts into the mouth of God the words, "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray, and seek my Face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, forgive their sins, and heal their land." (2 Chron. 7:14). That is the Grail, that the ultimate healing; it is available to us so that we, too, can create "Camelot".

The story of Arthur is the story of a human, not a God, who tries to bring about the reign of God on earth by human means. Any such endeavour, no matter how noble, is doomed to failure. Arthur lives on, in countless tales of heroism and true nobility, of martyrdom and sacrifice, in individual lives. We cannot prevent the marketplace from appropriating the stories of King Arthur; for the market there is no such thing as the sacred, only the profane. It has, after all, commercialised the birth and death of Christ Himself. But some of us can rehabilitate the the sacredness of the myth of King Arthur, and see in it the quality that inspires all human life and activity, the vision without which humanity will perish, the bright promise of hope. ☛



Notes

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- Stephen Lawhead's *Pendragon Cycle* consists of:
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 - Merlin* (Oxford: Lion, 1988)
 - Arthur* (Oxford: Lion, 1989)
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