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BETWEEN PLANNING AND HERITAGE: CULTURAL PARKS AND NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS

Abstract. The number of cultural parks and heritage areas is increasing in Europe and the United States. Those are spreading over other areas where the economic sectors related to tourism and leisure gain weight. Heritage areas or parks are heterogeneous initiatives that place cultural heritage at the heart of spatial planning policy and economic development, aiming at the reinvention of large territories and local community participation in planning. Their relevance stems from their potential influence on the territorial configuration of broad regions and their impact upon the articulation of traditional protected areas. Notwithstanding this, they have attracted scant academic attention so far. **Key words:** cultural parks, national heritage areas, spatial planning, cultural heritage, development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural parks are ‘slippery objects’ (Law and Mol, 2002) that make it impossible to disentangle some aspects from others, to ‘purify’ and analyze separately each element. Spatial planning, tourism, institutional organisation, heritage and museum management among others, interact in such a way that it is impossible to define precise areas of activity for each discipline. Thus, cultural parks can take different meanings depending on the disciplinary root of the author who is accounting for them. They can be simultaneously spatial planning instruments, cultural heritage stewards or vectors for tourism attraction and sustainable development. In parallel, cultural parks can be articulated differently at the local level depending on who plans and supports them, with which objectives and in what context. This paper sets out to analyze cultural parks in a cross-Atlantic comparative perspective, addressing the different assumptions underlying their organisation and implementation. It suggests that Europe and the United States generally

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have different approaches to the cultural park phenomenon in terms of definition, objectives and management that derive from these different assumptions.

Essentially, the fields of spatial planning and heritage studies converge in cultural parks. Those move beyond the conception of a ‘park’ as a publicly-owned, enclosed space, aimed at conservation. Cultural parks seek to actively preserve extensive inhabited landscapes and their heritage resources, linking them to the tourist economies through the creation of a management structure. Thus, they overcome the idea of ‘heritage sites’ as dots in space, embracing the notion of territorial heritage or cultural landscape, thus being overall regarded as positive technical territorial interventions and devices of local development based on heritage resources.

Although their number is growing rapidly, cultural parks have attracted little scholar attention (figure 1). As Bray (1994, pp. 3–4) argues,

Heritage Areas don't fit neatly within any concept or specialization we are familiar with. [...] Planning, development and management of heritage areas requires the coordination of many specialized skills [...]. A positive consequence of this circumstance is the opportunity to enlarge the dimension of specialized skills by linking up disciplines. But it has left heritage areas to be an orphan without one specialized profession able to claim it as its very own.

Also, management guidelines and projects are only made publicly available in exceptional cases (e.g., Casas, 2006). Not only there is a lack of interdisciplinary



Fig. 1. Map of National Heritage Areas in the United States. Since the 1980s, forty four national heritage areas have been implemented for only ten new national parks

Source: <http://www.nps.gov/history/heritageareas/VST/INDEX.HTML> (24.04.2011)

investigations about them, but almost all the studies come from the US and Europe due to the fact that very few cultural parks exist out of these areas. This fact is related to the close relation between the emergence of cultural parks and advanced levels of socio-economic development. Cultural parks thrive in post-industrial economies. In those areas, the role accorded to the territory by spatial planners changes due to processes of de-industrialisation that impoverish many areas. One way forward is to reinvent themselves and shift towards post-productivist economies based on the tourism sector. In this context, cultural parks emerge as suitable instruments for the articulation of the territory towards tourism-based economies.

This paper traces the genealogies of cultural parks and sets out their fundamental defining traits, patterns of creation and trends of development. It presents the results of theoretical research in the topic which was afterwards extended with ethnographic studies of cultural parks in the Barcelona area and in Asturias (Spain). This multidimensional methodology or methodological bricolage (Viejo-Rose, 2011) has enabled me to gain a holistic knowledge about cultural parks that moves beyond disciplinary boundaries.

2. A GENEALOGY OF CULTURAL PARKS AND HERITAGE AREAS

The concept of 'landscape' underlies most initiatives for the creation of cultural parks. Specifically, the concept of 'cultural landscapes' (Cleere, 1995) and its increasing acceptance among institutions and planners has been fundamental for the development of cultural parks in both the US and Europe. Currently, both UNESCO and the National Park Service (NPS) of the US have established frameworks for the study, definition and preservation of cultural landscapes. At least one and a half century of debate between geographers, spatial planners and social scientists have resulted in manifold conceptualisations of landscapes and cultural landscapes. What interests us here is that the concept 'cultural landscape' is bounded to that of 'heritage', implying an idea of something valuable that has to be preserved, a trait that is no straightforwardly present in the traditional idea of 'landscape'. Doménech Reinoso (2005, p. 134) defines cultural landscape as 'the result of a gradual and continuous sedimentation of socioeconomic processes that reflect the evolution of a society in a given territory. It is unfeasible to discuss about landscape, art or heritage without taking into account the role of human beings in the territory'. Thus, 'cultural landscapes' are *special* landscapes that for some reason are set apart from *landscape* in general. Cultural landscapes are beautiful, exceptional or unique, and therefore generate added territorial value. Also, they are considered to be heritage by academics and institutions (Fowler, 2003). Consequently, the disciplinary 'hinterlands' of spatial planning and heritage stud-

ies coalesce in them. Thus, the concept of cultural landscape is fundamental for understanding the growth of cultural parks in the last decades and especially since the 1980s. However, the genealogy of cultural parks can be traced back to the 19th century in both Europe and the US.

Europe presents a wide heterogeneity of practices depending on each State. However, it is possible to outline some common trends that have led to the development of cultural parks. A crucial factor is the conceptualisation of the museum (i.e. Prado or Louvre) as an essential cultural foundation of the legitimacy of the nation state born in the 19th century (Sherman, 1989). This idea is still very influential and has led to a clear-cut separation between museums and protected areas such as national or natural parks,¹ which are associated with the idea of natural preservation. Actually, national parks appeared relatively late when compared to the US. During the 20th century several processes and forms of management have facilitated the advent of cultural parks:

1. The Scandinavian tradition of open-air museums where folkloric collections were exposed in contact with nature, such as the Nordiska Museet in 1880, or the Skansen museum in 1891. This tradition strongly influences contemporary Scandinavian ecomuseums and cultural parks such as Bergslagen (see Hamrin, 1996).

2. The advent of New Museology and the Ecomuseum. The latter influenced cultural parks in their focus in becoming instruments of economic and social growth and representatives of their communities (Maggi and Falletti, 2000).

3. The Italian tradition of protected area management did not conceive parks as enclosed spaces or wildlife sanctuaries but as part of a complex ecological and cultural fabric (Gambino, 1997). Moreover, it has a strong cultural character that contrasts to the naturalist-functionalist American school (Magnaghi, 2005), serving as a base for the constitution of cultural parks and cultural park networks such as the one in the Italian Tuscany (Regione Toscana, 1995).

4. The French regional park scheme created during the 1960s. Whereas national parks are owned and managed by the State, regional parks are locally-driven initiatives that involve different types of ownership and social actors. Natural and cultural heritage conservation is not a scope in itself, but a way of providing the region with an image of quality that supports socio-economic development, attracting tourism and enhancing local capabilities.

5. Industrial Archaeology has been a determining factor on both sides of the Atlantic since the 1960s. It has promoted a spatial conception of industrial heritage sites and a democratic approach to their management that is usually linked with socio-economic development.

¹ National Parks are State-owned areas set aside for the preservation of nature with a view to purposes of recreation. Normally, these are conceived as enclosed spaces with clear limits where human intervention is absent or reduced to a minimum degree.

In the US, the National Park scheme began with Yellowstone in 1872 and was institutionalized with the establishment of the NPS in 1916. Since their inception, the parks functioned as a 'pastoral myth' and as repositories of the national identity (Bray, 1994). National parks strive to reach a balance between preservation of natural wilderness and the narration of the conquest of that nature and the events associated with it. The constitution of cultural parks has been a controversial and difficult process to assume in the US due to a deeply rooted idea of parks as conservationist and enclosed spaces with gates that are publicly owned and managed (Bray, 1988).

The creation of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1949 and the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 paved the way to the emergence of National Heritage Areas (NHA) (Eugster, 2003). Then, from the 1960s onwards there was a shift in the management of the parks associated with the environmentalist turn represented by the ecological planning school in the US (Steinitz, 1968) and landscape ecology in Europe (Forman and Gordon, 1986). This new paradigm overcomes the idea of a park as a delimited space to embrace an all-encompassing idea of large ecosystems that include socio-cultural elements. The 1980s witnessed the appearance of new spatial and heritage management programs at a regional scale in the states of Connecticut, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.

3. CULTURAL PARKS: DISTINCTIVE TRAITS AND DEFINITIONS

The traditional foundations of national and natural parks or biosphere reserves in its multiple forms responded to a paradigm grounded on the conceptual couple of nature and conservation. Their aim was to delimit spaces and remove them from their social contexts to preserve wildlife and spectacular panoramas. Also, they were regarded as entities of public and national concern that should be publicly funded. Government ownership of land involved a technical-scientific and bureaucratic approach to management *against* people, whose opinions and forms of life were barely taken into account (Phillips and World Commission on Protected Areas, 2002). Cultural parks seek to differentiate themselves from this management paradigm. First, the goal of cultural parks is not preservation but the active management of heritage resources in order to promote the local identity of the territory and economic development (Bray, 1994). Unlike most other models of spatial planning, they are often organized bottom-up by grassroots groups. Usually, local communities create partnerships where different social actors participate in collaboration with public institutions. Both in Europe and the US, this usually entails that the preservation of natural and cultural resources is carried out by partnerships without any institution assuming land ownership (Frenchman, 2004). This

is a usual procedure in other forms of park management in the US and Europe, where the NPS or the States hold the property of parks (Barrett, 2003).

Normally, management entities are created to guide the implementation of the park, develop long-term plans that identify objectives for the territory and assign responsibilities to stakeholders (Daly, 2003). Also, they actively intervene in the design of the territory, creating links between cultural and natural corridors, tourism services and cultural assets like museums or interpretation centres. Cultural parks draw on the territorial resources of a specific area to generate both an image of the park and an administrative structure that provides cohesion and meaning to space (figure 2). These projects focus ‘on the interaction between people and their environment. Heritage areas seek to tell the story of people over time and how the landscape shapes the traditions of the people’ (Vincent and Whiteman, 2008, p. 1). Thus, the territory is generally organized from cultural landscapes or cultural itineraries, which are organized around a central theme such as the industrial past, military episodes, archaeological sites etc. (Battaglini *et al.*, 2002). In all them, heritage normally functions as the overall organising principle from which local communities plan their economic, environmental and cultural future. According to Eugster (2003, p. 51), cultural parks provide cohesion to communities

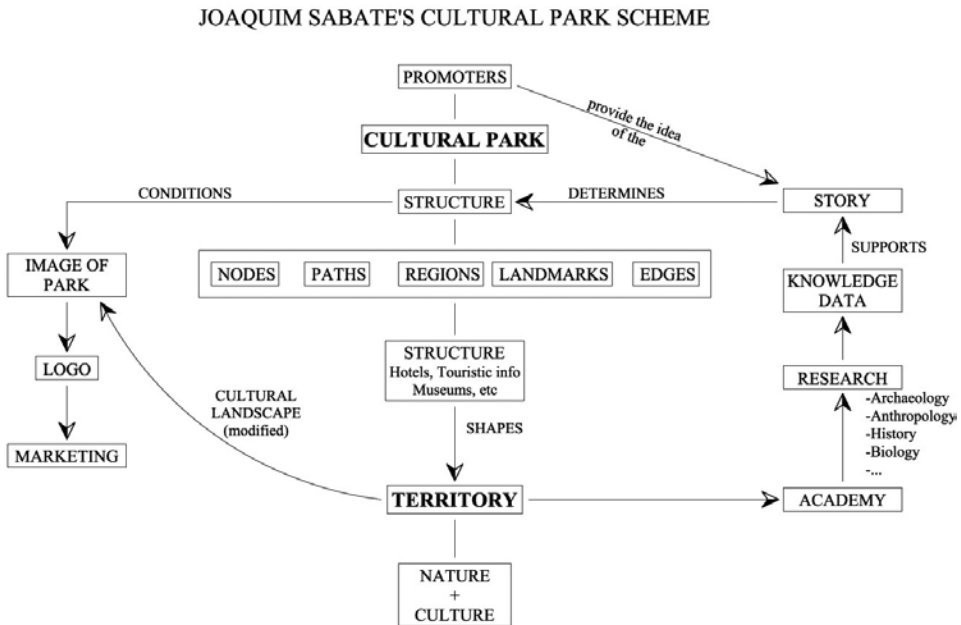


Fig. 2. Scheme summarizing Joaquim Sabaté’s view of cultural parks according to his ‘ideal cultural park’ formulation

Source: author from Sabaté (2002)

[...] because all people have a heritage and it has meaning to them [...] Heritage areas have a heart, soul, and human spirit that many traditional master plans, land use plans, and zoning ordinances lack. Heritage areas allow people to claim these places and make our communities, landscapes and regions relevant and special to the populations they serve.

Accordingly, the emphasis shifts from the national to the local level, and management responsibilities move from scientists and experts to local agents and intermediaries who combine technical and local knowledge and perform manifold tasks (Phillips, 2003). In all cases, the geographic scope of the parks varies according to the local circumstances (figure 3). The cases presented in the figures have been selected for their relevance, the availability of data and their representativeness within the sample. They provide a useful way of understanding the complexity of cultural parks in terms of territorial scope, type of heritage employed, the predominant objective and their topological shape.

As the parks are underpinned by the socially constructed notion of ‘cultural landscapes’, rather than by the objective notion of a reified ‘nature’ to be preserved, their conception and planning should shift from a technical-bureaucratic perspective to a heritage-centred interpretative stance. The enhancement of a landscape is considered to be a way of providing visitors with a ‘code’ to understand the territory, in order to

[...] enhance the cultural significance of the territory through a reading, which giving value to memory, transposes its meanings to the current day situation. Identity and economic, social and cultural energies able to transform memory into an innovative factor, in new forms of development and in preservation. It is an initiative, which permits an innumerable number of transformations in the sense of a productive metamorphosis of places in which a cultural identity and sense of belonging to the territory, are regained (Barilaro, 2006, p. 101).

The will to recover the ‘soul’ of places, the local identities and the senses of belonging is an strategy allowing territories to differentiate themselves from other areas within the global competition for markets, tourists and investments, a process that Rullani (2004) defines as the repersonalisation of economy. Cultural parks reinforce those territorial synergies ‘by capturing and telling the stories of the people and their place. These stories, when linked together, reflect a regional identity and support a collective awareness of the need to protect and enhance what makes our places unique’ (Daly, 2003, p. 2).

Cultural parks are places of leisure and entertainment for both local people and visitors in humanized environments that are not enclosed anymore as ‘green areas’ in delimited spaces (Sabaté and Frenchman, 2001). Ultimately, their aim is the transformation of economically and demographically depressed areas into dynamic territories (Battaglini *et al.*, 2002). To do so, they employ marketing strategies that support the development of brand images that allow for the identification of the territory, its values and cultural assets, as commodities (Busta-

mante and Ponce, 2004). Cultural parks are normally interventionist in terms of spatial planning and have commercial objectives. However, this fact does not render them thematic parks because they manage real identities and heritages for the sake of sustainable development and not for the intensification of profit (Sabaté and Lista, 2001).

In Europe, definitions of cultural parks are heterogeneous. Those basically draw on ideas from UNESCO and the European Landscape Convention. Contrarily to the US, there is no overarching cultural park system. However, there are some regional cultural park schemes such as the one in Aragon (Spain) or in Tuscany (Italy). According to the Cultural Park Law of Aragon, a cultural park is 'a territory that contains significant elements of cultural heritage, integrated in a physical frame of unique landscape and/or ecological values, which enjoy global promotion and protection as a whole, with special protective measures for relevant assets' (Ley 12/1997). In turn, Sabaté (2009, p. 630) conceives them as 'instruments of project management, which acknowledge and enhance the value of a particular cultural landscape, pursuing not only the preservation of their heritage or the promotion of education, but also local economic development'. For Bergdhal (2005, p. 71), 'the cultural park concept has expanded its reach [...] their aim is not only to preserve the history of a region. They seek to contribute to a positive economic development of an area, a rather uncommon objective for a museum, which means that they are more projected towards the future of a territory than towards its past'. Meanwhile, Bustamante and Ponce (2004, p. 14) consider them as projects 'that privilege the production of an image that grants an identity to a territory, where heritage along with other natural and cultural resources are combined, presented, and promoted intentionally in order to form a patterned landscape that tells the story of such territory and its dwellers'.

In the US, it is common for heritage areas to develop their own synthesis publications midway between the spheres of scientific and outreach literature. Their framework is closer to issues of tourism, leisure and local community, in contrast to the European focus on landscape management. For Barrett and Copping, heritage areas are 'large-scale living landscapes where community leaders and residents have come together around a common vision of their shared heritage' (Copping and Martin, 2005, p. 1), whereas Bray (1988, n.p.) considers them

[...] multi-resource urban and regional settings with a coherence or distinctive sense of place based on factors like rivers, lakes, transportation systems (canal and historic railroad lines) and cultural heritage. They have been called partnership parks because of the diversity of stakeholders (including private land owners, NGOs and multiple units of governments and functional governmental agencies) involved in the planning and management for the area's intersecting goals of preservation, recreation, education and sustainable economic development like cultural and eco-tourism. Successful heritage areas keep current residents in the forefront in terms of ownership, control and celebration.

In addition, successful cultural parks and heritage areas know how to achieve a balance between the enhancement of a wide variety of heritage resources and drawing on one main typology (figure 2).

In the United States, the National Park System defines them as places

[...] designated by the United States Congress where natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. These areas tell nationally important stories about our nation and are representative of the national experience through both the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved with them (National Park System Advisory Board, 2006, p. 2).

Despite their different disciplinary and geographic roots, these definitions together provide an idea of how cultural parks work and how they are conceived by different actors. Those are seen as instruments, projects, landscapes, regional initiatives or museums, which draw on the couple territory – heritage to promote a transition towards a new socio-economic model based on leisure and tourism. That is, the element to enhance becomes the identity of a territory and the social groups living in it as tangible and intangible heritage. Thus, cultural parks are not only oriented to the preservation of nature or the past, as traditional parks and reserves did, but rather to the planning of the future through the reorganisation of a space by a social group rooted in it.

There is a difference, however, between the assumptions sustaining cultural parks in Europe and the United States. In Europe, these projects are usually framed in close relation with terms like ‘museum’ and ‘landscape’, as the management of some heritage assets located in a certain area which are enhanced in order to promote economic development (figure 5). In turn, American definitions emphasize the role of local communities and the potential benefits of heritage areas for their cohesion, sense of belonging and identity preservation. Also, they underscore the importance of ‘telling the stories’ of local communities or of the American nation. In fact, many heritage areas are actually articulated around those narrations, a feature which is less common in Europe (Sabaté, 2005).

4. ORIGINS AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Cultural parks can be also characterized by certain common procedures and ‘ways forward’. The aim of this section is to outline the most common forms under which cultural parks are created and begin to function. Concerning geographic location, there is a clear tendency to create parks around linear features such as rivers, canals and historic roads, as they facilitate the storytelling and the articulation of space (figure 6). Although a detailed analysis of the constitution of cultural

parks reveals how each of them responds to specific coordinates, there are certain elements that are commonly repeated.

The American NHA often arise bottom-up, from grassroots groups or heritage associations. According to Conzen and Wulfestieg (2001), the usual promoters during the 1990s were fundamentally environmentalist NGOs. Once the project is launched local groups set out to seek technical and financial support from the NPS, the State and Federal governments, and private sponsors (Nelson and Sportza, 1999). Management tasks are usually carried out by corporate consultants. Economic and legal issues prevail over cultural aspects, an understandable attitude considering that the NPS only provides funding for fifteen years to each NHA and therefore those need to seek outsourcing to survive.

In Europe, and also in Latin America (Flores, 2005), the nature and extension of heritage areas 'varies from country to country, as does the level of national support. However, important examples of heritage area development can be found in almost every country' (Frenchman, 2004, p. 2). Despite the wide variety of contexts, a model of bureaucratic management prevails according to which the parks are organized top-down, basically by public national and regional institutions with the support of universities or research centres. Whereas in America economists and lawyers are normally in charge of the projects, in Europe the leading role is assumed by architects, engineers and spatial planners, and, to a lesser extent, by archaeologists and geographers. Reflecting on the case of Catalonia, Sabaté (2004) considers that cultural parks were originally an academic initiative that later gained support by regional institutions and local communities. Normally, European cultural parks foster the participation of local actors within their schemes. However, it is rare that projects are organized bottom-up by grassroots groups. For example, the Cultural Parks of Aragon (Spain) are an initiative by the regional institutions, whose governing councils are composed by representatives from the regional government of Aragon, the University of Zaragoza, local city councils, and from civil associations of all kinds.

The process of creation of the managerial bodies usually runs in parallel to the spatial articulation of the park. Typically, the first step undertaken is the compilation of a preliminary inventory of natural and cultural assets and their classification according to their typology and value in relation to the intended aims of the project. According to Sabaté (2002), all successful cultural parks articulate their resources around a story, a narration that serves as a guide for the visitors. His stance is clearly influenced by American standards that emphasize the need for a high degree of interventionism in the territory and to narrate a story. Despite this is currently being revisited, the European perspective remains bounded to a museological perspective that emphasizes scientific and ecological values, territorial identities and the need to reach sustainable development. Consequently, heritage assets are often integrated within networks and routes

without forming an overall narrative or 'story'. Rather, cultural parks serve as 'umbrella' denominations under which a number of museums, monuments, archaeological sites, historic towns and landscapes are brought together. Thus, whereas American NHA are easily associated with a specific theme related to the origins of the nation or to a certain part of it, European parks most often arrange heterogeneous elements that overlap chronologically and thematically in the landscape palimpsest.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The fields of heritage management and spatial planning converge in the sphere of cultural parks, which have become a novel way of assembling heritage assets to govern territories for the sake of sustainable development. Spatial planning, understood as the ways through which we define how to use space and govern the territory, always reflects the ideology or the specific dominant system of values and beliefs of each era (Gunder, 2010). This paper suggests that cultural parks are an expression of contemporary ideology because they combine the spheres of culture and leisure via the concept of heritage. In parallel, they provide a suitable solution to the territorial problems posed by de-industrialisation and the subsequent transition towards a post-industrial economy in the US and Europe (Benito del Pozo and Alonso González, 2012). At the level of management, they are useful instruments that enable different social actors and institutions to participate in decision-making at the local level, reflecting a more democratic approach to planning issues. At market level, they facilitate the reinvention and theming of certain territories and cultural landscapes, generating brand images that add symbolic value to local products by endowing them with a distinct identity. This usually enhances the performance of tourism economies and the attraction of investment.

It is important to note that there is an increasing tendency for most protected areas of all kinds to adopt management and planning frameworks similar to those deployed in cultural parks. This is basically due to the increasing involvement of protected areas with economic development and to the awareness among planners and institutions of the impossibility of managing parks and reserves as islands with clear-cut boundaries. The wide variety of cultural parks configurations, their potential influence on macro-territorial and protected area planning frameworks, and the novel ways of assembling and enhancing heritage assets they set out, makes it necessary to situate them as specific objects of investigation.

This paper has shown that a comparative cross-Atlantic perspective can be useful for understanding the different assumptions underlying cultural parks and how this reflects different mentalities, management strategies and political contexts. It

seems clear that there are some differential traits between European and US models, especially given that the US has an overall framework for their management and implementation which Europe lacks. However, despite the heterogeneous European national cultures, there seems to be a prevalence of bureaucratic and institutional actors in the design and implementation of cultural parks, while the US present a tendency to develop managerial approaches usually stemming from local initiatives. Therefore, instead of talking of a radical differentiation between the US and European frameworks, we should refer to two ideal-types with reciprocal influences, shared features and a certain degree of cross-contamination. There is a tendency for cultural parks to become hybrid realities, drawing from different influences in their conceptual and practical evolution. Then, their formation, functioning and structure will always be a combination of national traditions and international charts, the strength of local grassroots organisations, institutions and research centres, and the different objectives each park aims to achieve in relation with specific socio-economic and political contexts.

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