

Title: *Beowulf*

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MANUSCRIPTS AND EDITIONS:

- **Manuscript:** The only extant transcription, in the hands of four scribes and dating from circa 975-1025, is in the British Library (Cotton Vitellius A. xv). Facsimile: *Beowulf: Reproduced in Facsimile from the Unique Manuscript, British Museum MS. Cotton Vitellius A. xv, with a Transliteration and Notes by Julius Zupitza, Second Edition, Containing a New Reproduction of the Manuscript*, with an introduction by Norman Davis, EETS, o.s. 245 (1967).
- **First publication:** *De Danorum rebus gestis secul. III & IV. Poëma danicum dialecto anglo-saxonica. Ex bibliotheca cottoniana Musaei britannici*, edited by Grimur Johnson Thorkelin (Havnia: Typis T. E. Rangel, 1815).
- **Standard edition:** *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, edited by Friedrich Klaeber (Boston & New York: Heath, 1922; third edition, with supplements, 1950).

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The knotty problem of the date of *Beowulf* reveals a great deal about how modern readers think of the past and the kinds of assumptions that are made in confronting history. In the first edition of the poem (1815), Grimur Johnson Thorkelin identified the historical events as occurring in the third and fourth centuries, and the poem, because of the detail in such allusions, as having been written not more than a century later. This date is the earliest that has been assigned to the poem. The last composition date for the poem, the terminus ad quem, is the date of the unique manuscript for the poem. Based on the two copyists' hands, this manuscript date has been established, with some certainty, as around 975-1025. The last date would put the poem within half a century of the Norman invasions and the consequent end of the Old English language. The date of the manuscript is accepted by most scholars, but until recently most of them have argued that the poem predates the manuscript by at least two hundred years. This assumption has led to some interesting attitudes toward the manuscript.

Thorkelin's early date for the poem derives from a bias that controlled the response to it in the nineteenth century. Following investigations showing how the Homeric poems were based on earlier shorter poems that reflected the spirit of the ancient Greek people, there was a movement in early studies of *Beowulf* to see it as derivative of the Germanic *Volk*. Any Christian attitudes in the poem were presumed to be monkish interpolations. Such a reading of the poem allowed Thorkelin to ignore the date of 597, the year when Saint Augustine of Canterbury carried out his missionary work and undertook the conversion of England to Christianity (there are no direct New Testament references and no naming of Christ, though the frequent Old Testament references make it seem clear that the poet was a Christian); free of missionary zeal, it would seem likely that the poem was written at least several generations after the conversion, which would put the earliest date for the composition of the poem at about 700. At this point, the subject matter of the poem comes into play.

This English epic has no action which takes place in England; the bulk of the action takes place in Denmark, the home of the Vikings, who were raiding the English coast from 834 to the end of the disastrous reign of Aethelred the Unready (978-1016). Until recently, all those who dated the poem started with the basic assumption that *Beowulf* could not have been composed in this period, so if its language predates this period and the manuscript is eleventh century, there must be two hundred years between the manuscript and the composition of the poem. This "Viking age Englishmen must hate poems about Scandinavia" attitude is based on assumptions about grudge holding that are not evidenced explicitly in the period. There were already Danes who owned English farms in the ninth and tenth centuries, and the Viking raids, though an ever-present threat, were not constant. It does not seem impossible that a pro-Danish poem could have been written in this period, though a pro-Viking one is a different matter.

The poem has been dated by internal evidence, using linguistic forms, primarily case endings, which are then matched against externally datable texts. Such analysis reveals oddly contradictory evidence, as if a modern formal, printed text included the fifteenth-century form *axeth* (asks), the seventeenth century *thou saist*, and the only recently acceptable *ain't*. One way to account for these discrepancies was to posit that the poem went through the hands of several copyists who lived at different times and in different regions in England. This assumption is made by Friedrich Klaeber, whose 1922 edition of the poem is still the standard school text. Because Klaeber assumes that the poem has gone through at least four copyists, the manuscript is fair game for any linguistically justifiable emendation, the assumption always being that the copyist mistook a form he did not recognize. This explanation is given even when the reading of the manuscript is clear. It should be noted that the arguments against the composition of the poem in the Viking period militate even more heavily against the copying of the poem in this period (the time when Klaeber says it was done). The copying of a long poem was not a matter of interest or preference but an institutional event that took place in copying rooms called scriptoria. The copying of a text such as *Beowulf* would be an official act assigned by one monk, probably with the approval of at least one superior, to another. Since the extant *Beowulf* manuscript is in two hands, it is likely the decision to copy it this one time needed the approval of at least four men, which would have been the case each time the poem was copied before. If one would not be likely to compose a pro-Dane poem in the Viking period, it would be more unlikely that one could copy it.

Recent criticism has argued for a late date of composition for the poem, probably closely coinciding with the date of the manuscript. These scholars view the existence of antique linguistic forms in *Beowulf* as part of a poetic word stock rather than as a reflection of the composition date of the poem.

The oral-formulaic theory of the composition of Anglo-Saxon poetry supports the possibility of a late date for *Beowulf*: this theory states that most Anglo-Saxon poetry, even epics as long as *Beowulf*, were composed orally. The basic poetic unit is a four-stressed line in which three of the four stressed words alliterate. The poetry is filled with appositions and frequent modification by adverb and adjective so that a poet could instantly turn a sentence into verse. For example, the Old English bard, or scop, could look at the headline "Bush defeats Hussein in Kuwaiti desert" and turn it into the following:

Bold-hearted **B**ush. **B**ravest of **M**en

Kicked the Iraqi, most Craven of Cowards,
Saddam slipped away, scudding into infamy.

The only full surviving discussion of Anglo-Saxon poetic creation is Bede's story of the inspiration of Caedmon, an illiterate cowherd who was told by an angel to sing (to make up a song). Caedmon responded with a nine-line alliterative hymn of creation. The monks at the local monastery were so impressed with this gift that they kept feeding Caedmon doctrine which he transformed into poetry. The monks wrote down his every word. The story, no matter how apocryphal, tells of a culture where the composition of poetry was thought to be oral and writing it down was already seen to be copyists' work. Caedmon's poems, however, are lyrics, and it is not certain that an epic could be composed this way. Early oral-composition theories of *Beowulf* portrayed it as an aggregate of episodic lays, poems of the same size and kind as *The Fight at Finnsburg*, in which the Danish scop makes up a song of "Beowulf," praising the hero's victories over Grendel and his mother. A very different notion of the possibilities of oral composition followed the researches of Albert Bates Lord and Milman Parry in the mountains of Yugoslavia. In *The Singer of Tales* (1960) Lord reports on Yugoslav folk poets who could compose extemporaneously epics longer than *Beowulf*. None of these poems, however, is nearly as good as *Beowulf*. A problem that has not been addressed in the oral theory of composition is how the poems were then written down. Caedmon had a small army of monks writing down his every word, but these were lyrics. How could a long oral secular poem be written down as it was being recited in a day of quill pens and vellum? The poem would either have to be written by someone who had the whole poem in his head, either the scop himself, which would mean he could not be unlettered like Caedmon, or else by some literate man, most likely a cleric, who had learned or was an apprentice at the art of oral composition. In either case the poem as literary artifact would be different from the oral poem, if it ever existed. The likelihood of an oral stage of the poem would help explain the existence of antique words and case endings in the poem. Contrary to expectation, illiteracy is far more conservative than literacy. A phrase such as "wait *on* opposing traffic" or a pronunciation of "hep" for "help" will survive from grandfather to grandson as long as it is not exposed to the printed word. Oral generation of the text tends to preserve antique locutions even in fairly late tellings of a story.

In any case the Viking-gap theory of dating the composition of *Beowulf* assumes that the poem is strongly pro-Danish in its leanings. This assumption is based on many "brave Spear-Dane" phrases and the reports of the splendors of the Danish court, but those who accept this theory ignore the plot and setting of the Grendel episodes. Rather than existing triumphantly, the Danes are moping around impotently while they await a stranger who will defeat the monster that has rendered their glorious mead hall useless. One of the difficult determinations in this text is the establishing of tone of the war poetry of this period. *Beowulf* has often been linked with elegiac poetry, such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, which laments the loss of the glories of the hall and the hearth companions. In fact, *Beowulf* may be closer to a *yielp* such as *The Battle of Brunanburh*, which mocks the defeat of one's enemies. *The Battle of Brunanburh* says that the losers have no need to laugh or boast of their victory, a statement which implies that the winners do laugh and boast. That, in fact, is the point of the *yielp*. The spirit of *Schadenfreude*, joyful malice, is everywhere. It is quite possible to imagine that an audience which has just heard about a Viking attack on the English coast in *The Battle of Maldon* would greet the story of Grendel's meal of one fully armed Dane with uproarious laughter. In fact, the epic depths of *Beowulf* seem to intertwine the elegiac with the military *yielp*, but it is quite difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins.

The threefold structure of *Beowulf*'s confrontations with the monsters must give the reader pause since the three battles--with Grendel, with Grendel's mother, and with the dragon--seem anticlimactic. Though the dragon in "real life" may be more powerful than either of the Grendels, he is clearly less original or fearsome. *Beowulf*'s battles with the monsters must be read in an oddly foregrounded context. The background to these battles is in the stories and songs often told in celebration of victory or told as exempla: "You should not be as hardhearted as X who...." The so-called digressions produce an anecdotal portrait of the Germanic society out of which the Anglo-Saxon society arose. *Beowulf*'s battles tell of the collapse of that society--a society based on the principle of feud. Such a society is out of harmony with the principles of Christianity--a point that is too often ignored. Other poems, such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, come to the same conclusion, but then include a specific moral: "thus should a man...." *Beowulf* has no such moral, though its characters do moralize, and it is perhaps for this reason,

as much as any other, that the poem is set in the pre-Christian past. The values of the society in *Beowulf* will have to stand or fall on their own merits.

These values are based on the interrelations of the *comitatus*, the king and his warrior household. In the ideal society, the king (gold friend, ring giver) gives treasure to his thanes and they, in turn, give service to their king. There is no sense of payment here but of generosity on both sides. In order to distribute treasure, the king must have a center of power, a mead hall with a giving chair (throne) at its very center. He must also have treasure in the form of rings (gold armbands) or ancient and often famous arms and armor. This treasure is obtainable from three primary sources: directly from military victories, indirectly from the subjugation of neighboring tribes in the form of tribute, or from inheritance, though it should be noted that this last requires ancestors who have done the first two, and *no one ever forgets*. In the beginning of *Beowulf* the eponymous founder of the Danish (Scylding) line, Scyld Scefing, starts his nation by subjugating his neighbors and leaving a large treasure for his son. For this he earns simple but unqualified praise from the poet: that was a good king.

The mead hall is the social and spiritual center of the Anglo-Saxon culture, and the loss of the joys of the hall is seen as a fate worse than death. In the hall the king distributes treasures to his hearth companions, and they in turn pledge their loyalty to him. The fact that these pledges are made with the mead cup in hand is not lost on the Anglo-Saxon poet: the value of the *beot* (pledge) is based on its successful completion. If a man fulfills his *beot*, it is an "oath," and he is a man of his word; if he fails, his *beot* is merely a "boast," and his courage in the mead hall was no more than the liquor talking. The most basic pledge was not to outlive the ring giver on the battlefield, and the greatest cowards, like the sons of Offa in *The Battle of Maldon*, are those who flee before the battle is done. The duty imposed on the survivors (those who were not there, in fact, even those who were not born yet) is to pay back those who killed their kinsmen. It is then the duty of *their* relatives to get even for the deaths of their kin. Everywhere the principle of feud is kept alive; a sword taken two generations earlier from an ancestor is enough to ignite it again.

In theory there are two ways of escaping from this endless cycle of feud. The first is the payment of *wergeld* (a man's price). Each man in the society was given a price based on his rank in society. Upon the receipt of this amount the aggrieved family was supposed to give up the need to continue the feud. The second solution was a marriage between important representatives of the feuding parties, the equivalent of the prince and princess of feuding tribes marrying. The woman was seen as the bringer of peace in these circumstances, and two words for *woman* in Anglo-Saxon, which translate as "peace weaver" and "peace contract," attest to this function.

In *Beowulf* both these methods to disengage the feud mentality are measured and found wanting. Their inherent failure is seen first in Beowulf's trip to Denmark and then, even more poignantly, in his return home. The end of his reign almost certainly marks the end of the Geatish nation, which has become inextricably bound in international feud.

As a hero, Beowulf goes to the court of Hrothgar, the man who has apparently mastered the system only to discover that his mastery is for naught. Hrothgar, King of the Danes, has built the ultimate mead hall, a place from which he can distribute treasure and fulfill his function as ring giver. Hrothgar's hall, Heorot (the hart, stag), is the biggest that has ever been, but it has been rendered useless by the incursions of Grendel, who occupies it at night and has killed and eaten thirty Danish thanes. In his role as wanderer of the trackless fens and as a creature of night, "forscifen ... / in Caines cynne" (proscribed as a member of the race of Cain), Grendel appears to represent all of the aspects of chaos in Anglo-Saxon society. For that reason, it is not surprising that he is enraged by the song of the scop. The scop sings the song of creation, which is probably similar to the song known as *Caedmon's Hymn*. To Grendel the ordering of chaos is anathema, and he attacks its center and the hall joys from which he has been excluded. Perhaps the greatest irony is that, despite Grendel's epic depredations, it is not he who destroys Heorot. Beowulf will save the mead hall this time, but the end of Heorot is predicted. It will be destroyed by the uncle of Hrothgar's son. The man who will burn it is, in fact, at dinner when Beowulf comes. Beowulf can protect Heorot from monstrous, man-eating enemies; he cannot defend it against friends and relatives.

One of the odd situations of Beowulf's rescue mission is how difficult the Danes make it for Beowulf to kill their monster. Beowulf is stopped by a Coast Guardian, then by a Hall Guard, and then finally he is challenged by Unferth, the spokesman (*thyle*) of the Danish court. Unferth's basic question is, Who are you to presume to challenge our monster? At this point the Danes expect Beowulf to lose, and in a world where reputation is everything, they do not want him getting cheap—even at the price of his life—glory. Even a loss to Grendel would go down in song and story, and such a glorious end is not to be earned lightly. Unferth, as *thyle*, seems to be the court insulter, whose job is to test Beowulf in the two things that count in Anglo-Saxon culture: words and works. Unferth says that Beowulf has no reason to challenge Grendel since he was not even able to defeat the warrior Breca in a swimming race. Beowulf replies that it was not a swimming race, but two men testing themselves against the sea and its monsters. In the process Beowulf defeated many monsters, reopening the seas to commerce, an act which establishes him as a civilizer versus chaos, a principal symbolic role he will take on in his struggle against Grendel. Beowulf's answer also puts Unferth and the Danes in their place. If you are so brave, he asks Unferth, why are you still safely alive while the monster is ravaging your kingdom? Then, in a final turn of the screw, Beowulf notes that Unferth's only act of courage was the murder of his own brother. This fratricide makes Unferth, like Grendel, of the race of Cain and casts Grendel's shadow on the whole Danish court.

In his fight with Grendel, Beowulf disdains armor, stating rather gentlemanly reasons for his decision. The monster does not know the use of armor so the hero, too, will refrain from wearing it. The odd turn is that Beowulf later uses armor against Grendel's mother, who supposedly is weaker than her son. Beyond his stated reason of courtesy, Beowulf's decision not to wear armor allows the audience to confuse man and monster in the description of the fight with Grendel, which does not happen in the fight against Grendel's mother. The hand-to-hand combat of Grendel and Beowulf appears to be a fair one. Grendel has eaten thirty men, and Beowulf has the strength of thirty in his arm. The immediate effect of Beowulf's not wearing armor or carrying a sword is that he does not kill Grendel outright; he merely tears off his arm. Both of these situations—the confusion of Beowulf and Grendel in the tangle of flailing opponents and the hanging up of Grendel's arm as a token of victory in Heorot—point to the same thing: that Grendel is less alien to the Danish society than anyone would like to admit. His being of the race of Cain (there is a tradition that the mark God put upon Cain after he killed Abel was some kind of monstrous malformation) puts Grendel only one generation from the ancestry of all of mankind. Nothing is said about the naming of Heorot (the stag), but it would not be unlikely that a stag's horns might be used to mark the spot. It is clear that, when Beowulf puts up Grendel's Grip as a token (though he never says what it betokens), Grendel has in a real sense co-opted Heorot by becoming the fratricidal spirit of the place—even though he has lost the fight and run back to his lair to die.

Though Grendel's mother quickly redeems her son's arm, one can imagine the unlettered Danish tourist looking for the memorial of the great battle. Where can I find Grendel's Grip?, he might ask, and in a few years the great mead hall would be known as Grendel's. Though Grendel's mother retrieves the hand, it will soon be replaced by Grendel's head, so the tourist's question will hardly change. He had better hurry though, for the hall will be destroyed within this generation by internecine familial hate. The spirit of Cain is the equal possession of the Grendels and the Danish royal family.

The place of Grendel's mother arises out of the function of women and mothers in this society and is related to three stories about women that are told in the time surrounding her descent upon the mead hall. The first of these women is Wealhtheow, the wife of Hrothgar, who seems to be the ideal queen and woman, but her danger to Beowulf stems from this idealness. It is Wealhtheow who cements the bond between the Danes and their not-quite-welcome guests by passing the mead cup among them. Later, when Beowulf defeats her enemies, she gets him to pledge his support for her sons, in case any new enmity should come to them. The reader does not know if she already suspects the uncle's treachery, and the poem does not tell of Beowulf coming to their aid, but it is important that Beowulf has bound himself for the first time in the web of feud. At this point Wealhtheow is designated as *frithowebbe* or weaver of peace.

At the same time two stories are told about the failure of marriage as a way to end feud. In both cases the woman's presence becomes the spark for new violence rather than the ender of the old. In the first, a sketched

version of events which are also told in *The Fight at Finnsburg*, Hildeburh, the daughter of the Danish king Hoc is married to Finn, the king of the enemy Frisians, to cement peace between two warring tribes. A generation later, Hnaef, now king of the Danes, goes to visit his sister at Finn's fortress. As a king, Hnaef does not travel alone, but with a band of armed retainers. Their presence rekindles the old flames, and war breaks out. Hnaef and Hildeburh's warrior son are killed. These deaths, in turn, are avenged when Hengest, Hnaef's chief thane, spends the winter in Finn's land (a thing never done among Scandinavian tribes) and, with the coming of spring, slays his host and enemy.

The other marriage story is told by Beowulf on his return home to his own country. He tells his king, Hygelac, that the Danish princess Freawaru is about to marry Ingeld, the king of the Heathobards, in another of these peace-insuring unions. Then, in a tricky piece of narration, Beowulf tells what will happen to this marriage. The events he foretells are in fact history to the audience, and what is shocking about Beowulf's narration is the detail in which he recounts the future. The story he tells is as follows: Freawaru will come to the Heathobard court, and one of her retainers will be wearing a sword taken from the grandfather of one of the young men in the court; an old man will recognize the sword and will incite the young man to murder with an incendiary speech. Then Beowulf provides verbatim the words of a speech that has not yet been made. The poet seems to be saying that the pattern of woman as institutional peacemaker is so flawed that one can predict exactly how it will go wrong in the future. Within this pattern of woman as the net that binds together the corrosive energy of society, Grendel's mother appears. If Grendel is the deadly force that implements the murderous acts of feud, then she is the institution itself, and so it is that her killing of one man is not the unmotivated wrath and hunger of her son, but rather an act sanctioned by the society she attacks. She had been content to dwell in her lair, but the code of retribution demands that she take one life for her son's.

After Beowulf's return home, the historical digressions shift from a generalized vision of the Anglo-Saxon way to the specific history of the Geatish line which leads to Beowulf's becoming king. The history of the Geatish royal line provides a paradigm for the self-destruction inherent in the feud system. Beowulf's grandfather, Hrethel, is a successful warrior king. He rules over the *comitatus* with the aid of his three sons, all proven warriors. Then his eldest son, Herebeald, is killed in an archery accident. In the normal state of affairs Hrethel could then claim *wergeld* in lieu of punishment from the family of his son's slayer. This solution will not work, nor will the option of feud, since his son's slayer is also his son and now the heir to the throne. Hrethel suffers the ultimate frustration of a tribal leader--an unavenged son. The poet writes that Hrethel's grief drove him from the world; that is, he either died from morbid sorrow, or he took his grief into the monastery, where he then died. In any case the options and obligations of revenge incumbent on a tribal leader are closed to him.

Beowulf's actual reign of fifty years is never discussed; only the conditions--a series of disastrous wars against the Swedes which remove the three-man line for the throne ahead of him and allow him to become king--are mentioned. When the reader meets Beowulf as king, his reign of half a hundred years (fifty years seems to indicate that he has ruled his whole life rather than to designate the specific length of his reign) is almost at an end. The strength of Beowulf's right arm has apparently guaranteed the Geats a reign of tranquility despite their being surrounded by powerful neighbors waiting to swallow them up. This peace is shattered by the awakening of a dragon that has held its own peace for three hundred years. Once again it is the mechanism of the feud system which causes the uproar in the land of the Geats. The dragon is disturbed by someone designated as "niththa nathwylc" (no one in particular), a man who steals a plated cup from the dragon's treasure hoard, presumably for the purpose of paying off *wergeld*.

The dragon, therefore, puts Beowulf in the position of Hrothgar, a king whose kingdom is besieged by a monster, but Beowulf does not wait for a hero. Instead he seeks out the dragon himself. As has been his custom, Beowulf goes with an armed troop of men, and this time he carries an iron shield. Beowulf, still operating in the heroic rather than royal mode, tells his men that the dragon is his fight, not theirs. They conveniently accept this determination and skulk off to the wood to hide. That their action is wrong is confirmed by Wiglaf, the one warrior who comes to Beowulf's aid. Wiglaf condemns Beowulf's hearth companions, both before the dragon fight and after. He accuses them of failure to do service for ring giving. His condemnation of these men is a condemnation

of the system itself and renders Beowulf's tragic end pathetic. Beowulf's death in the face of the dragon's fiery wrath is inevitable. He is already an old man, but he does accomplish, with Wiglaf's help, the killing of the dragon. This feat is all Beowulf could hope for, but he hopes for more. He wants the treasure to leave to his people so that a ring giver--someone like Wiglaf--could rule over his people the way the original Scyld ruled over the Danes. Beowulf, literally on his deathbed, holds on long enough to luxuriate in the treasure he has won for his people. But all is in vain; the treasure is cursed and will prove useless. With all his virtues Beowulf has left the Geats neither an heir with a strong right arm (which Hrethel did in begetting Haethcyn and Hygelac) nor a treasure for ring giving (as Scyld did for his son, the first Beowulf). As the treasure is returned to the earth, Wiglaf's condemnation reminds us of the pathetic decline of the whole enterprise. Even if the treasure remained to be distributed, it would have been left to men like these, who were too craven to honor the treasure they had been already given.

The Beowulf manuscript, which provides the basis of all editions, has led a kind of charmed life. It survived from its tenth-century birth until the sixteenth century almost certainly in some monastic library. During the terrible depredations upon monastic holdings during the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547), it came into the hands of the antiquarian scholar Laurence Nowell, whose name, and the date 1563, are written on the manuscript. Soon after it became the property of Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1631), in whose library it was listed as Cotton Vitellius A. xv (in the Cottonian library, in the book press under the bust of the Roman Emperor Aulus Vitellius, first shelf down, fifteenth volume in). The library remained in the Cotton family for several generations, until it was donated to the British nation in 1700. The Cottonian Library was eventually designated as the manuscript collection of the British Museum when that library was founded in 1753.

By 1722 the Cotton house was considered so dilapidated that the library was moved to Essex House, and then--because this building was considered unsafe--the collection was taken to Ashburnham House, which burned in 1731. The codex survived, and the manuscript, which was bound between several other works, remained remarkably intact. The manuscript, whose importance no one recognized, should have been rebound after the fire, but no one knew its significance, and the fire-damaged vellum began to decay. Fortunately, the Danish scholar Thorkelin had some sense of what the manuscript was, and had it hand-copied in 1790. Thorkelin eventually produced an edition and a Latin translation. Though the many inaccuracies of Thorkelin's edition were recognized by the first great *Beowulf* scholar, N. F. S. Grundtvig, the Thorkelin transcription of the manuscript has proved invaluable in preserving readings lost by the gradual deterioration of Cotton Vitellius A. xv. It was not until the mid nineteenth century that the manuscript was rebound, so that it could be once again available to scholars.

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