

THUCYDIDES AND HESIOD

ABSTRACT: The puzzling reference by Thucydides, during his account of Demosthenes' Aetolian campaign in 426, to the death of Hesiod, can be explained as an instance of foreshadowing through myth: Hesiod's tragic end prepares the reader for the tragic consequences of Demosthenes' decisions. A similar use of mythical foreshadowing in Herodotus is compared.

Thucydides mentions Hesiod once. During his Aetolian campaign in 426, the Athenian general Demosthenes encamps in Ozolian Locris at the temple of Nemean Zeus, where, the historian tells us, 'the poet Hesiod is said to have been killed by the inhabitants, in fulfilment of an oracle that said that he would die in Nemea'.¹ This is a brief reference to a story known in fuller form from other sources.² The earliest account, apart from Thucydides, occurs in the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, in a section explicitly attributed to Alcidas, and so dating to the first half of the fourth

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¹ Thuc. 3.96.1 ἀλυσιάμενος δὲ τῷ στρατῷ ἐν τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Νεμείου τῷ ἱερῷ, ἐν ᾧ Ἡσίοδος ὁ ποιητὴς λέγεται ὑπὸ τῶν ταύτη ἀποθανεῖν, χρησθὲν αὐτῷ ἐν Νεμέᾳ τοῦτο παθεῖν.

² For these different traditions see W. Burkert, *Homo Necans. The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (transl. P. Bing; London, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1983), 203-4 (pp. 225-6 of the German edition, Berlin and New York 1997²), T. M. Compton, *Victim of the Muses. Poet as Scapegoat, Warrior, and Hero in Greco-Roman and Indo-European Myth and History* (Hellenic Studies 11; Cambridge, MA and London 2006), 76-86, and H. Koning, *Hesiod: The Other Poet. Ancient Reception of a Cultural Icon* (Mnem. Suppl. 325; Leiden and Boston 2010), 134-5.

century.³ Arriving at Delphi to dedicate a tripod, Hesiod is warned by the oracle to avoid the grove of Nemean Zeus, since that is where he is fated to die. He therefore keeps away from the Peloponnese, and travels to Oenoe in Ozolian Locris, where he lodges with Amphiphanes and Ganyctor, the sons of Phegeus. They suspect him of seducing their sister, kill him, and throw his body into the sea; they thereby fulfil the oracle, since the whole region was said to be sacred to Nemean Zeus. Hesiod's body is brought to shore by dolphins and buried by the local people, who begin to search for his killers. They flee in fear, setting sail for Crete; but Zeus sinks their boat with a thunderbolt.

Slightly different accounts are found in later authors. So according to Eratosthenes, the sons of Ganyctor are called Ctimenus and Antiphus; they end up being sacrificed by the seer Eurycles to the gods of hospitality; their sister is seduced by a companion of Hesiod, called Demodes, who is lynched together with the poet; she hangs herself out of shame; and the people of Orchomenus later bury Hesiod in their own country as directed by an oracle.⁴ In Plutarch, who refers to the poet's death three times,⁵ Hesiod lodges in Locris with a man from Miletus, who seduces the daughter of their host, Ganyctor from Naupactus. Hesiod is blamed for the crime, and killed in an ambush by the girl's brothers near the temple of Nemean Zeus. His body is cast into the sea, but rescued by dolphins and brought to Rhion. The Locrians, who are holding a sacrifice there, find the the poet's corpse and establish that he had been murdered; having

³ Contest 14-15. For the date of the work see M. L. West (ed.), *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer* (Loeb Classical Library 496; Cambridge, MA and London), 298.

⁴ Eratosth. fr. 17, 21 in J. U. Powell (ed.), *Collectanea Alexandrina* (Oxford 1925).

⁵ Plut. *Soll. Anim.* 969e, 984d, *Sept. Sap.* 162ef.

discovered the killers (thanks to Hesiod's dog, who barks furiously when confronted with them), they drown them in the sea and raze their houses. Hesiod is buried near the temple, in a secret location, since the people of Orchomenus want to recover his body in accordance with an oracle. Pausanias also discusses the tale, and emphasises how stories of Hesiod's death differ. All accounts agree, he tells us, that Ctimenus and Antiphus, the sons of Ganyctor, flee from Naupactus to Molycria because of the murder, that here they sin against Poseidon, and that in Molycria they receive due punishment. The sister of the young men had been ravished; some say the deed was Hesiod's, and others that Hesiod was wrongly thought guilty of another's crime.⁶

Thucydides' account is much briefer than these, and focusses not on sexual violence, miraculous assistance from animals, or justified revenge, but on the misinterpretation of a prophecy. Even in abbreviated form, his reference to Hesiod's death is surprising. Although it refers to a historical personage, it has the air of myth or folk-tale:⁷ precisely the kind of information which Thucydides famously tells us that his work will not provide.⁸ Yet despite this programmatic statement, myths are occasionally found in his history. Tereus, Alcmaeon, Aeolus, Hephaestus, Charybdis, Odysseus, Cyclopes, and Laestrygonians all find a place in this work

⁶ Paus. 9.31.6.

⁷ The division between mythical and real figures of the past (for which see E. Baragwanath and M. de Bakker, 'Introduction: myth, truth, and narrative in Herodotus' *Histories*', in *id.* (eds.), *Myth, Truth, and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford 2012), 1-56, at 24-5 n. 95) does not always seem to have concerned Thucydides; so in the 'Archaeology' in book 1, Minos and Agamemnon jostle with Polycrates as forerunners of contemporary Athenian seapower.

⁸ Thuc. 1.22.4.

which allegedly spurns τὸ μῦθῶδες.⁹ The subject of myth in Thucydides could do with a dedicated analysis: it seems that many of his modern interpreters have taken the historian at his word, and neglected to ask why a few mythical references do make their way into his work when previously he has explicitly disclaimed their use. The present article asks this question of a single passage; perhaps the considerations that it raises may be relevant to some of the others.

Thucydides' description of the death of Hesiod has provoked a range of responses. Westlake simply dismisses it as 'this irrelevant aside';¹⁰ we should, however, at least try to discern the historian's purpose before we accuse him of incompetence. According to Scodel, Thucydides here 'reports a local tradition'; this may be true, but it invites the question of why this particular tradition from this particular place should have been thus immortalised.¹¹ Classen and Steup argue that Thucydides brings up the story to criticise oracles by emphasising their

⁹ Tereus: 2.29.3 (not a relation of Teres). Alcmaeon: 2.102.5-6 (formation of the Oenussae islands). Aeolus: 3.88.1 (a reference to the islands of Aeolus). Hephaestus: 3.88.3 (his forge is said to be on the island of Hiera).

Charybdis/Odysseus: 4.24.5 (a description of the straits of Messina). Cyclopes/Laestrygonians: 6.2.1 (their location in Sicily). Cf. Hornblower on 2.102.5 (the Alcmaeon passage): 'it is surprising to find this myth, or rather extract from a myth, given so calmly and fully by Thucydides'.

¹⁰ H. D. Westlake, 'Λέγεται in Thucydides', *Mnemosyne* 4th ser. 30 (1977), 345-62, at 359. In a later work (*Essays on the Greek Historians and Greek History* (Manchester and New York 1969), 10-11) he remarks that 'this note has no topographical value, since it does not help the reader to identify the site of the precinct. The story is of a kind characteristic rather of Herodotus than of Thucydides'.

¹¹ R. Scodel, 'Hesiod Redivivus', *GRBS* 21 (1980), 301-20, at 301.

misleading nature;¹² but, as Marinatos notes, ‘the phrasing . . . does not emphasize the discrepancy (Nemea–Locris) but the coincidence (Nemea–Nemean Zeus)’, and the unexpected fulfilment of prophecies is a widespread literary motif.¹³ Thucydides’ contempt for prophecy and the like is apparent on a number of occasions in his work,¹⁴ but this is not one of them; nor is there any obvious reason why he should want to launch such an attack in the present context.¹⁵

In his commentary Hornblower writes of our passage that ‘Th<ucydides> uses it to spice the narrative’.¹⁶ Subsequently, he discusses the story in the context of an analysis of 3.104: ‘Just why Thucydides chose to insert this long and brilliant excursus, with its Homeric quotations, just

¹² J. Classen and J. Steup (ed., comm.), *Thukydides. Dritter Band* (Berlin 1892³), ad loc.: ‘Der Anlass zu dieser Erwähnung liegt für Th<ukydides> gewiss in seinem kritischen Interesse für Orakelsprüche, die eine verschiedene Auslegung zuliessen’ (comparing 2.17.2, 2.54.3).

¹³ N. Marinatos, ‘Thucydides and oracles’, *JHS* 101 (1981), 138-40, at 139; ‘it was a very typical oracle’ (thus A. W. Gomme (comm.) *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides. The Ten Years’ War. Volume II. Books II-III* (Oxford 1956), ad loc.). For this type of prophecy see also T. Rood, ‘The Cylon conspiracy: Thucydides and the uses of the past’, in A. Tsakmakis and M. Tamiolaki (eds.), *Thucydides between History and Literature* (Trends in Classics suppl. 17; Berlin and Boston 2013), 119-38, at 131 with n. 37, 134; and for the wider phenomenon of the misunderstood oracle cf. Hom. *Od.* 8.71-82, Soph. *Tr.* 1159-73, Hdt. 3.64, J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle. Its Responses and Operation with a Catalogue of Responses* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1978), 58-60.

¹⁴ Thuc. 2.54, 7.50.4, 8.1.1.

¹⁵ λέγεται does not necessarily mean that Thucydides disbelieves the story, although ‘the qualification suggests that reliability *could* be an issue. This more hesitant treatment of spatially and temporally distant events bolsters the reliability of the rest of the narrative’ (T. Rood, ‘Objectivity and authority: Thucydides’ historical method’, in A. Rengakos and A. Tsakmakis (eds.), *Brill’s Companion to Thucydides* (Leiden and Boston 2006), 225-49, at 244).

¹⁶ S. Hornblower (comm.), *A Commentary on Thucydides. Volume I. Books I-II* (Oxford 1991), on 3.96.1.

here, is an old problem. The first answer is surely literary: we are in the middle of a long boring slab of north-western campaigning and this colorful chapter certainly livens things up.

(Incidentally, that is surely one reason for the bit about the poet Hesiod's death at 3. 96, a piece of τὸ μῦθῳ δέει if ever there was one.)¹⁷ Indeed, this passage as a whole has seemed a little lacking in passion to other scholars, even if their assessment of it is slightly more approbatory: so according to Funke and Haake, 'the neutral, distanced style in which Thucydides describes the Athenian catastrophe is impressive; equally striking is the way in which he avoids dramatization of any kind. Information about the natural environment in Aigition is kept to a bare minimum, despite the fact that this environment has contributed to the Athenians' defeat.'¹⁸ Their additional claim that 'this style goes hand in hand with the extremely vague topographical details which Thucydides gives . . . The structure of the narrative reveals that he had little interest in defining the geographical and topographical context'¹⁹ fails, however, to take account of the mention of Hesiod with its prominent topographical reference; it is significant that the reference to the poet's death does not find a place within their summary of the episode.²⁰

Rhodes too argues for a literary explanation for the reference, although he sees the episode as a whole in a much more positive light. In his view, 'the point for Thucydides is presumably that this is a sanctuary to which an interesting story is attached, and here, at the

¹⁷ *Id.*, 'The religious dimension to the Peloponnesian War, or, what Thucydides does not tell us', *HSCP* 94 (1992), 169-97, at 194 = *Thucydidean Themes* (Oxford 2011), 25-53, at 50.

¹⁸ P. Funke and M. Haake, 'Theaters of war: Thucydidean topography', in A. Rengakos and A. Tsakmakis (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Thucydides* (Leiden and Boston 2006), 369-84, at 376.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* 375-6.

beginning of one of his most vivid pieces of narrative, he momentarily relaxes his normal austerity and mentions the story.²¹ So too, for Dewald, ‘the three accounts of Demosthenes’ exploits in year six . . . are complicated as well by a substantial increase in narrative detail – terrain, motives of all the actors, and even mythology (iii.96.1)’.²² This seems a preferable line of attack: the Hesiod story is introduced not as a purple patch sewn onto an otherwise uninteresting narrative, but as one of an array of devices aimed at exciting the reader’s engagement.²³ Yet even this does not help us to understand Thucydides’ practice much. Many, perhaps most, narratives in Thucydides are exciting: yet the great majority contain no mythological references. If Thucydides’ purpose in the present instance was simply to enliven the narrative, we might wonder why he did not adopt a similar practice more often.

A recent work on Thucydidean digressions takes a different tack, suggesting that the mention of Hesiod’s death is intended to help the audience remember the name of the temple, and in general to make the narrative more attractive.²⁴ The latter point has been discussed above;

²¹ P. J. Rhodes (ed., comm., transl.), *Thucydides. History III* (Warminster 1994), on 3.96.1.

²² C. J. Dewald, *Thucydides’ War Narrative. A Structural Study* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2005), 32.

²³ Campaign narratives might have been more gripping to people who had actually participated in military campaigns, or who knew people who had; the fraction of an ancient society with such experience will have been larger than that of most modern ones.

²⁴ V. Pothou, *La place et le rôle de la digression dans l’oeuvre de Thucydide* (Historia Einzelschriften 203; Stuttgart 2009), 91: ‘Le fait que Thucydide ne se réfère à cette légende que très sommairement indique une certaine méfiance de sa part. On se demande alors pourquoi l’historien y fait allusion! Peut-être utilise-t-il cette légende afin de préciser le nom du temple et faciliter par là-même la compréhension du récit; n’oublions pas la présentation orale de

as for the former, the temple in question plays no further part in Thucydides' narrative, and he had no reason to draw his audience's attention to it for its own sake. Countless other places and people in Thucydides are much more important than this building, yet they are not highlighted by means of a myth.

A more promising approach is hinted at by Luschnat, who takes the passage as an example of the tragic colouring found in the Demosthenes narrative; however, he does not elaborate on what he means by this.²⁵ 'Tragedy' is a capacious term, and using it as a mere label without further discussion does not assist our understanding of this or any passage very much. But Luschnat's approach is nevertheless suggestive, and its neglect in subsequent scholarship is unfair. In the remainder of this piece, I attempt to show how the Demosthenes narrative could be described as 'tragic', and how that fits with the reference to the oracle.

The mention of Hesiod's death comes at a crucial moment in Thucydides' narrative. During the previous two chapters the focus has been on the general Demosthenes and his troops in western Greece.²⁶ Their attack on Leucadia, in conjunction with the Acarnanians and others, seems to be going well; Leucas itself is vulnerable to a siege, and the Acarnanians beg

l'oeuvre pendant l'antiquité! Les digressions mythologiques visent ainsi à rendre le récit plus agréable et plus attirant pour le public.'

²⁵ O. Luschnat, 'Thukydides', *RE Suppl.* 14 (1974), 760-86, at 773: [this and another passage] 'in einem Zusammenhang mit dem tragischen Akzenten stehen, mit denen Th<ukydides> seine Darstellung des Aitolienzuges des Demosthenes versieht . . . Th<ukydides> zeigt damit Anteilnahme an dem von ihm berichteten Geschehen und erweckt Anteilnahme: Anschaulichkeit kann durchaus den tieferen historiographischen Absichten des Schriftstellers dienen.'

²⁶ Thuc. 3.94-5.

Demosthenes to invest the town. At this point, however, Demosthenes is persuaded by the Messenians to take on a much bigger target: Aetolia. The Messenians emphasise the warlike nature of the Aetolians, but are confident that their relative deficiency in armament and organisation would make them easy to subjugate; they tell Demosthenes that once they are dealt with, he would be able to conquer the whole mainland up to Attica itself. Demosthenes allows himself to be persuaded because of his regard for the Messenians, and because he hopes to proceed from Aetolia through Ozolian Locris and Phocis, allying with, or coercing, the inhabitants, and then to attack Boeotia. This entire daring manoeuvre, he believes, could be undertaken without reinforcements from Athens, giving him (it is implied) immense personal prestige.

Demosthenes receives an early setback when the Acarnanians refuse to participate in this venture, but this seems more than compensated for by the enthusiastic participation of the Ozolian Locrians. These people, Thucydides tells us, were armed like the Aetolians, and familiar with their country and way of life: their help, he says, was likely to be valuable. Demosthenes encamps for the night at the temple of Nemean Zeus in Locris; and now, with the general poised to begin a campaign destined, surely, to bring him great fame, comes the reference to Hesiod's violent death. On the next day, events do not turn out as Demosthenes had been expecting.²⁷ He continues to trust the Messenians, who tell him that he should set off against the Aetolians with all speed; he would, they say, have no difficulty in conquering them. So he attacks without waiting for his Locrian allies: a great mistake, it turns out, since the Aetolians use their local knowledge to devastating effect against the invaders. Their light-armed troupes, regarded with

²⁷ *Ibid.* 3.97-8.

such contempt by the Messenians, turn out to be more than a match for the Athenians.

Eventually, much depleted, the Athenians make their way back to the same ill-omened place from where they had set out.²⁸ Among many losses, one hundred and twenty of the heavy-armed Athenian troops had perished, all young men: ‘the finest troops’, Thucydides tells us, ‘that Athens lost during the war’.²⁹ The episode ends with Demosthenes afraid to return to Athens as the people would no doubt be angry with him.³⁰

The entire episode forms a dramatic instance of a reversal of fortune. A general fresh from early success, and anticipating great triumphs, takes bad advice and leads his men into disaster: so far from winning glory, he cannot even bring himself to face the likely wrath of his own people. This, I suspect, is what Luschnat is referring to when he calls this a ‘tragic’ account. The term, properly explained, may be helpful, so long as we do not understand it to mean that the episode has an especially close relationship with Greek tragedy. Certainly, the theme of frustrated expectations, of success turning to failure thanks to bad advice or poor decision making, is prominent in several tragedies: Aeschylus’ *Persae*, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, Euripides’ *Bacchae*, and so on. But it is too widespread a motif to be associated wholly or primarily with a single genre; it is found in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, for example, and in

²⁸ *Ibid.* 3.98.3 πᾶσά τε ἰδέα κατέστη τῆς φυγῆς καὶ τοῦ ὀλέθρου τῶ στρατοπέδῳ τῶν Ἀθηναίων, μόλις τε ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ τὸν Οἰνεῶνα τῆς Λοκρίδος, ὅθεν περ καὶ ὠρμήθησαν, οἱ περιγεγόμενοι κατέφυγον.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 3.98.4 τοσοῦτοι μὲν τὸ πλῆθος καὶ ἡλικία ἢ αὐτῆ οὔτοι βέλτιστοι δὴ ἄνδρες ἐν τῶ πολέμῳ τῶδε ἐκ τῆς Ἀθηναίων πόλεως διεφθάρησαν.

³⁰ Subsequently Demosthenes enjoys military success and is able to return to Athens (3.105-14); but this part of the story finishes on a pessimistic note.

Herodotus. Rather, it constitutes a story pattern fundamental to all kinds of high literature, and to human life in general.

The reference to Hesiod's death comes at a key point in this narrative: the night immediately preceding the first full day of the campaign. Our first reaction might be that this is a singularly ill-omened introduction to a military operation. And indeed, as we have seen, it is followed by an account of Demosthenes' fatal error (setting off without the Locrians) and the catastrophe that afflicts the Athenians as a result. The tale presages the coming disaster, marking the pivotal moment where Demosthenes' lofty expectations are replaced by the grim reality of military failure.³¹ Like Hesiod, Demosthenes makes assumptions about the future which turn out to be fatally mistaken. And the ensuing catastrophes are both intimately connected with the locality. Hesiod presumably believes that he is in a safe place, when in fact he has chosen the very place where he is most in peril. Demosthenes makes false assumptions about the ease with which the surrounding peoples can be conquered, and ends up returning defeated to the very same location from which he had earlier set out with such hope. Other aspects of Hesiod's story, such as his seduction of a local girl, are not described by Thucydides. This is perhaps partly because a lengthy account, such as we find in Plutarch or Pausanias, would slow down the narrative too much, but partly too because such aspects of the tale are irrelevant to Demosthenes' situation. The anticipation of doom caused by the reference to Hesiod's death, and the emphasis on the fallibility of human expectations contained in the story, are adequately conveyed by the tale as it stands.

³¹ See M. Davies, 'Anticipation and foreshadowing: a use of myth', *SIFC* 3rd ser. 7 (1989) 7-11 on apparently casual stories which foreshadow or anticipate thematically important material.

One further point perhaps requires stressing. Neither Thucydides, nor his readers, believed that sleeping in that particular location actually caused the coming disaster: such a belief is intrinsically implausible, and in any case Thucydides has already taken care to set out the factors which will lead to the Athenians' defeat. Rather, the mention of Hesiod's fatal mistake is a signal to the reader of imminent disaster: on the level not of history, but of narrative, it anticipates the catastrophe that is to come.

A passage from an earlier historian might support an interpretation along these lines. Early on in Herodotus' account of Xerxes' expedition against Greece, the Persian king arrives at Celaenae in Phrygia. Herodotus tells us that this town lies near the course of the Maeander; and then remarks that in its agora the skin of the Silenus Marsyas is hung up to view, which Apollo, according to a local tale, stripped off and placed there.³² This mythological reference is immediately followed by the introduction of Pythius the Lydian, a man of immense wealth, who proceeds to offer Xerxes a vast contribution to his campaign expenses and a feast for him and his army; Xerxes is delighted and shows appropriate gratitude. But when, a little later, Pythius asks Xerxes to excuse the eldest of his five sons from the war, Xerxes' response is full of rage: so far from sparing Pythius' son, he has his body torn in two and marches his army between the pieces.

The mythological reference to Marsyas appears at first sight to be a merely decorative element that leads nowhere in particular. Closer inspection suggests otherwise. The significant placing of the tale just before the introduction of Pythius may have encouraged Herodotus' audience to anticipate a similarly public humiliation for this Lydian of immense wealth. And it

³² Hdt. 7.26.3 ἐν τῇ (sc. ἀγορῇ) καὶ ὁ τοῦ Σιληνοῦ Μαρσύεω ἀσκὸς [ἐν τῇ πόλει] ἀνακρέματα, τὸν ὑπὸ Φρυγῶν λόγος ἔχει ὑπὸ Ἀπόλλωνος ἐκδαρέντα ἀνακρεμασθῆναι.

turns out that Marsyas' fate provides an unhappily close analogy for the member of Pythius' family who is dearest to him. Like Marsyas, Pythius' son experiences a violent end which leaves him not even the dignity of an intact corpse. Like Marsyas, his death results from the enmity of a far superior power who can inflict the most terrible punishment without fear of retribution. And like Marsyas, Pythius' son has his remains exposed as a public humiliation, and as a demonstration of the penalty for wrongdoing.³³ A brief, prominent mythological reference thus provides an anticipation of the fate in store for a character in the succeeding narrative; the similarity with Thucydides is obvious. Yet in each case the foreshadowing is not made explicit, and is all the more powerful for that: readers are at liberty to make the connexion for themselves, and to ponder the mysterious link between the worlds of myth and of reality. Far from being irrelevant asides, these mythological references in fact exemplify a subtle and sophisticated aspect of these historians' narrative techniques.

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³³ A. M. Bowie, 'Mythology and the expedition of Xerxes', in E. Baragwanath and M. de Bakker (eds.), *Myth, Truth, and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford 2012), 269-86, at 274 sees this episode as one of 'a number of more detailed mythological references, which offer various viewpoints on the significance, moral quality, and likely failure of Xerxes' campaign'; he goes on to say that (p. 275) 'Marsyas had challenged Apollo to a musical competition, lost and been flayed alive, so we are here reminded early in the piece of another man who presumptuously challenged the gods and paid a heavy price.' My interpretation is not inconsistent with Bowie's; there is no reason why the tale should not have been susceptible to interpretation on more than one level, providing analogies for both Xerxes and for Pythius. For this story see further R. Thomas, 'Herodotus and eastern myths and *logoi*: Deioeces the Mede and Pythius the Lydian', in Baragwanath and De Bakker, 233-53, at 235-44.

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