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## **A Tale of Two Travellers in King Alfred's Court**

### **Dois Viajantes na Corte do Rei Alfredo**

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## ABSTRACT

Considering just the English medieval case, it seems reasonable to assume that some sorts or forms of travel writing, literary or otherwise, must have existed before such canonical texts as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, the anonymous *The Land of Cockaygne* or Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (14th century). Indeed, the two short accounts I will present were added to, and included in, the Old English translation of Paulus Orosius's *Historiarum* (or *Historiae*) *adversum Paganos Libro Septem* (5th century), ordered by, and made for, Alfred the Great, King of Wessex (871-899)

**Keywords:** Alfred the Great; Ohthere; Wulfstan; medieval voyages; Scandinavian voyages.

## RESUMO

Considerando apenas o caso medieval inglês, parece razoável admitir que alguns tipos ou formas, literários ou não, de escrita de viagens terão existido antes de textos canônicos como *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, o anônimo *The Land of Cockaygne* ou *The Canterbury Tales*, de Geoffrey Chaucer (Século XIV). Com efeito, os dois curtos relatos que irei apresentar foram adicionados à (e incluídos na) tradução para inglês antigo da *Historiarum* (ou *Historiae*) *adversum Paganos Libro Septem*, de Paulo Orósio, encomendada por (e efectuada para) Alfredo, o Grande, Rei de Wessex (871-899).

**Palavras-chave:** Alfredo, o Grande; Ohthere; Wulfstan; viagens medievais; viagens escandinavas.



“[...] tanto hoje como na Idade Média, é impossível conceber o conhecimento sem esse intenso e intranquilo vaivém de homens, palavras, ideias, experiências e culturas, num espaço onde as fronteiras do desconhecido se vão esbatendo e dilatando.”<sup>1</sup>

To Professors Carlos Carreto (NOVA FCSH)  
and Isabel Barros Dias (Universidade Aberta)

As is well known to everyone working on, acquainted with, or interested in Travel Studies, the older and traditional designation of “travel *literature*” has gradually given way, in recent decades, to that of “travel *writing*”, which is perfectly acceptable if one takes the view that --- heterogeneous as they undoubtedly are<sup>2</sup> --- not all travel writings possess and display an aesthetic quality and value that may warrant their classification as proper “literature” ..., at least in the strict sense of the word, rather than in a broader (and, to me, far too loose!) conception of literature as *any* given body of texts.

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<sup>1</sup> CARRETO, Carlos F. Clamote – “*Eppur se muove... Ritmos e cadências de um imaginário em movimento*”. In CARRETO, Carlos F. Clamote (ed.) - *Lors te metra en la voie...: Mobilidade e Literatura na Idade Média/Mobilité et Littérature au Moyen Age*. Lisboa: Universidade Aberta, 2011, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> “[...] it is no easy matter to provide a neat and unproblematic definition, or delimitation, of what counts as travel writing. The term is a very loose generic label, and has always embraced a bewilderingly diverse range of material [...] Simultaneously, and partly as a result of this intrinsic heterogeneity, travel writing has always maintained a complex and confusing relationship with any number of closely related (indeed, often overlapping genres [...]) One consequence of this heterogeneity and hybridity is that it is often hard to define where ‘travel writing’ ends and other genres begin, such as autobiography, ethnography, nature writing and fiction.” (THOMPSON, Carl - *Travel Writing*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011, pp. 11-12) and “Around the central form of the travel book [...] there circulates a still greater range of texts that can [...] potentially be understood either as branches and sub-genres of travel writing, or else as separate genres closely cognate with travel writing, [...] sometimes merging into it: guidebooks, itineraries, novels with a pronounced travel theme, memoirs, writings of place, descriptions of the natural world, maps, road movies and much else besides.” (p. 26) To sum it all up, as Thompson recalls, quoting Jonathan Raban, “travel writing is a notoriously raffish open house where different genres are likely to end up in the same bed.” (p. 11)

To this preliminary note should, however, be added another one: not all texts on travel (literary or otherwise) have been *written* from scratch and *read*; some of them, particularly the most ancient ones, must have been originally *told* and *listened to*, though this oral/aural dimension is often forgotten, if not indeed obliterated, by, or behind, the umbrella label of “travel *writing*”. In that sense, considering not just the extremely high rates, by modern standards, of medieval illiteracy, but also the fact that the Middle Ages actually *predate* the invention of printing (15th century), it would seem to make sense to think and speak of “travel *telling*” as well, when dealing with medieval texts, like the ones I will be presenting.

Irrespective of critical terminology,<sup>3</sup> let me start by asking: When did travel writing begin? In Oriental and Classical Antiquity, as suggested by Carl Thompson<sup>4</sup> and Tim Youngs<sup>5</sup>? Or, considering the erstwhile oral/aural paradigms of literature and its transmission, even further back, in some immemorial, unrecorded, and undatable past? If we think of the Bible, for example, one may wonder whether Adam and Eve told their children how they were thrown out of Paradise and simply had to move or whether Joseph and Mary ever narrated to Jesus the story of their trying journey to Bethlehem...

Considering just the English medieval case, it seems reasonable to assume that some sorts or forms of travel writing must have existed before such canonical texts as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, the anonymous *The Land of Cockayne* or Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (14th century). Indeed, the two short accounts I will present were added to, and included in, the Old English translation of Paulus Orosius’s *Historiarum (or Historiae) adversum Paganos Libro Septem* (5th century), ordered by, and made for, Alfred the Great, King of Wessex (871-899)<sup>6</sup>. Alfred

<sup>3</sup> See CRISTÓVÃO, Fernando – “Introdução. Para uma teoria da Literatura de Viagens”. In CRISTÓVÃO, Fernando (coord.) - *Condicionantes Culturais da Literatura de Viagens. Estudos e Bibliografias*. Lisboa: Edições Cosmos/Centro de Literaturas de Expressão Portuguesa da Universidade de Lisboa, col. “Cosmos Literatura”, n.º 40, 1999, pp. 13-52.

<sup>4</sup> THOMPSON - *Travel Writing*, pp. 34-37.

<sup>5</sup> YOUNGS, Tim - *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 19-23.

<sup>6</sup> As recalled by KEYNES, Simon; LAPIDGE, Michael (trans.) - *Alfred the Great. Asser’s ‘Life of King Alfred’ and other contemporary sources*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983, p. 33.

himself travelled twice to Rome as a pilgrim, even though the overall theme or topic of medieval pilgrimage will be left out from this essay<sup>7</sup>.

Borrowing Janet Bately's words, let us list some key preliminary doubts and issues:

"How, when and why did these reports come to be embedded in the translation of an important Latin text, and in what form or forms were they transmitted? By what route or routes did they reach their present position? Who were the people who made them? The actual evidence that we have is slight and often ambiguous."<sup>8</sup>

Moreover,

"[...] it seems to me highly probable that the section of the Old English *Orosius* which we now call the 'Voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan', far from being an authorial addition to the Latin source, is an interpolation, made *after* the completion of the translation, by someone who happened to have access to copies of Ohthere and Wulfstan's reports."<sup>9</sup>

To Paul Zumthor, "Le voyageur [...] fascine le sédentaire qu'il rencontre ou auprès du que il revient. Il a défié l'inconnu, manifesté la puissance de la vie [...] Déjà le roi Alfred [...] avait ordonné au traducteur [...] d'Orose d'insérer [...] le récit de voyage d'Ottar en Norvège et Finlande, de Wulfstan en Estonie."<sup>10</sup> The geographical addition to Orosius' text of accounts focused on Northern Europe (Scandinavia and the Baltic) is indeed an important one, considering not just the Scandinavians' renown as navigators, travellers, traders, and pirates, but also their historical, military, and commercial interactions with the British Isles in the High Middle Ages. Alfred's own

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<sup>7</sup> See on this SUMPTION, Jonathan - *The Age of Pilgrimage. The Medieval Journey to God*. Mahwah, New Jersey: HiddenSpring, 2003 and WEST, Diana - *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*. London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> BATELY, Janet - "Ohthere and Wulfstan in the Old English *Orosius*". In BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) - *Ohthere's Voyages. A late 9<sup>th</sup> century account of voyages along the coast of Norway and Denmark and its cultural context*. Roskilde: The Viking Ship Museum, 2007, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> BATELY, Janet - "Ohthere and Wulfstan in the Old English *Orosius*". In BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) - *Ohthere's Voyages*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> ZUMTHOR, Paul - *La Mesure du monde. Représentations de l'Espace au Moyen Âge*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, col. "Poétique", 1993, p. 170.

contemporaneity with the Danish invasions and occupation in the second half of the ninth century, as well as his celebrated open-mindedness and intellectual curiosity<sup>11</sup>, add to the documentary relevance of these primary sources<sup>12</sup>, described by Sebastian Sobceki as “[...] traveller accounts/geographical treatises [...]”<sup>13</sup>. In the Introduction to the anthology co-edited with Anthony Bale, the scholars declare:

“We have [...] taken a broad view of travel narratives that include embassies, accounts of wars, diplomatic correspondence, mercantile journeys, and cartographic materials, not least because travel writing cannot be separated from ideas about geography.”<sup>14</sup>

Before putting forward some comments on our primary sources<sup>15</sup>, both of them marked by their evident potential in terms of interdisciplinary research, as well as by the oral/aural paradigms mentioned at the outset, it must be added that these are the first two volumes of a collection entitled “Maritime Culture of the North” and edited by The Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde, Denmark. My involvement with English Studies will, however, dictate a strict and specific focus on the Wessex/Alfredian connection to the detriment of all matters pertaining Scandinavian geographical, naval, commercial, ethnological, and social history<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> According to Asser, Alfred’s Welsh biographer, “He [...] applied himself attentively [...] to foreign visitors of all races, showing immense and incomparable kindness and generosity to all men, as well as to the investigation of things unknown. Wherefore many Franks, Frisians, Gauls, Vikings, Welshmen, Irishmen and Bretons subjected themselves willingly to his lordship, nobles and commoners alike; [...]” (KEYNES, Simon; LAPIDGE, Michael (trans.) – *Alfred the Great*, p. 91).

<sup>12</sup> “Besides providing a bridge between the Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse worlds, *Ohthere’s Voyage* offers a tangible vision of the geographical understanding of the Anglo-Saxon literary elite of the ninth and tenth centuries and their intimate familiarity with Latin traditions.” (ALLPORT, Ben - “Home thoughts of abroad: *Ohthere’s Voyage* in its Anglo-Saxon context”. In *Early Medieval Europe*, ed. John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 28 (2), 2020, pp. 287-288)

<sup>13</sup> SOBECKI, Sebastian I. - *The Sea and Medieval English Literature*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2008, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> BALE, Anthony; SOBECKI, Sebastian (eds.) - *Medieval English Travel. A Critical Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Ohthere’s account is included in the Lauderdale Ms, folios 8r-8v (The British Library, Add 47967), as well as in the Cotton Tib.B.i Ms, folios 10v-11v (partly), immediately followed by Wulfstan’s report (Cotton Tib.B.i Ms, folios 11v-13v), also kept in The British Library. A digital version of the original Old English texts has been published in BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) - *Ohthere’s Voyages*, pp. 10-17; see also Janet Bately’s introduction (pp. 18-39) and notes (pp. 51-58).

<sup>16</sup> This edition is divided into the following chapters: “The Source”, “Geography”, “At Home”, “At Sea”, “Destinations” and “Trade and Exchange”.

I shall start with a few remarks on “Ohthere’s report”, bilingually published in Old and Modern English<sup>17</sup> and described in the “Foreword” as “[...] perhaps the single most important, contemporary account of a Scandinavian Viking-Age traveller of which we have knowledge.”<sup>18</sup> Ohthere seems to have been a wealthy tradesman from Halogaland, in northern Norway; the references to whales, walruses, and seals suggest that he hunted them and traded their hides, skins, bones, and ivory tusks, although the text mentions other occupations pursued by fellow Norwegians, like fishing and agriculture.

Commercial activities aside, Ohthere obviously enjoyed travelling and exploration: apart from his visit to Alfred, to whom he offered some tusks, he travelled northwards, coming close to the Arctic and mentioning peoples like the Finnas and the Beormas<sup>19</sup>, said to speak the same language. He alludes to the frequent wars between the Cwenas and the Northmen<sup>20</sup>, an animosity that may perhaps recall the hostility between neighbouring peoples, like the Geats and the Scylfings or the Danes and the Frisians in *Beowulf*. But Ohthere also travelled eastwards (The White Sea), and southwards, although the identification of some places remains uncertain<sup>21</sup>.

Regarding this account, two points should be highlighted: firstly, the references to Hedeby, Jutland and Zealand, presented as the original homes of the Angles and the Saxons<sup>22</sup>; and therefore bound to interest someone so alert to the need to preserve, revive, or restore identity traits and cultural legacies as Alfred of Wessex; and secondly, the empirical bent patent in the observation: “The *Beormas* told them [*or him*] [*Ohthere*] many stories both about their own land and about the lands that

<sup>17</sup> BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) - *Ohthere's Voyages*, pp. 40-47.

<sup>18</sup> BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) - *Ohthere's Voyages*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Translated as the Lapps and the Permians in CROSSLEY-HOLLAND, Kevin (ed./trans.) - *The Anglo-Saxon World. An Anthology*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> “The *Cwenas* [Finns] sometimes make raids on the Northmen [Norwegians] over the moorland, sometimes the Northmen [Norwegians] on them.” (BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) - *Ohthere's Voyages*, pp. 46-47). Translated as the Finns and the Norwegians in CROSSLEY-HOLLAND, Kevin (ed./trans.) - *The Anglo-Saxon World*, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> Mostly Sciringesheal (roughly corresponding to Kaupang, near Larvik and the Oslo Fiord). Hedeby (Schleswig), formerly Danish, is now part of Germany.

<sup>22</sup> “[...] for two days before he came to the Heaths [Hedeby], Jutland and *Sillende* and many islands were on his starboard side - in those lands the English lived, before they came to this country [...]” (BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) - *Ohthere's Voyages*, p. 47).

were around them, *but he did not know what there was of truth in it, because he did not see it himself.*"<sup>23</sup> In fact, apart from this 'willing suspension of belief' and the (un)reliability of sources, Ohthere's curiosity and sense of adventure stand out and strike us from the start:

"Ohthere said to his lord, King Alfred, that he lived furthest north of all Northmen [Norwegians]. He said that he lived in the northern part of the land, beside the West Sea. He said however that the land extends a very long way north from there, but it is all waste, except that in a few places here and there *Finnas* camp, engaged in hunting in winter and in summer in fishing by the sea. He said that on a certain occasion he wished to investigate how far the land extended in a northerly direction, or whether anyone lived north of the waste [*or wilderness*]. Then he went north along the coast; he kept the waste land on his starboard side and the open sea on his port side all the way for three days. Then he was as far north as the furthest the whale hunters go."<sup>24</sup>

In the words of Bale and Sobecki, "Medieval people were fascinated with the worlds that lay beyond: beyond one's town or country, beyond Europe, beyond Jerusalem, beyond the seas, beyond the known."<sup>25</sup> Paul Zumthor<sup>26</sup> and Georges Duby,<sup>27</sup> among others, looked into and discussed the perception(s) and representation(s) of medieval mind, often torn between fear of, and curiosity towards, spatial, cultural and civilizational Others. This motivation or 'drive', which, in the case of our primary sources, actually *predate* both the religious and military mobility associated with the Crusades and the geographical and anthropological curiosity that moved Marco Polo (c.1254-1324), not to mention any 'age of discovery',<sup>28</sup> is akin to that of the sailors,

<sup>23</sup> BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) – *Ohthere's Voyages*, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) – *Ohthere's Voyages*, p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> BALE, Anthony; SOBECKI, Sebastian (eds.) - *Medieval English Travel*, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> ZUMTHOR, Paul – *La Mesure du monde*, see especially chapters 8 ("La route", pp. 167-183) and 15 ("Dire le voyage", pp. 297-317).

<sup>27</sup> DUBY, Georges - *Ano 1000 Ano 2000. No Rasto dos Nossos Medos*. Lisboa: Editorial Teorema, Lda., 1997, especially "O medo do outro", pp. 49-75.

<sup>28</sup> As Paul Zumthor points out, "Du haut Moyen Age jusqu'à l'émergence [...] de la 'modernité', un mouvement général poussa l'esprit européen à concrétiser sa perception et sa conception de l'espace: à passer d'une donnée symbolique à une réalité mesurable." (ZUMTHOR, Paul - *La Mesure du monde*, p. 414)



traders, soldiers, missionaries, and explorers from the early Tudor<sup>29</sup> to the late Edwardian age; thus it could hardly fail to resonate in an English/British subject or audience, ensuring the insertion of these early travelogues in the naval historiographical tradition and hence their canonization.

A significant example of these texts' reception and 'afterlives', so to speak, is provided by Richard Hakluyt (1552?-1616), the editor of *The Principal Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589; 2nd ed. 1598-1600)<sup>30</sup>, adding and mentioning Ohthere and Wulfstan in the title of later, mostly Victorian, editions<sup>31</sup>. The ideological and patriotic build-up of Alfred's pseudohistorical image as the founder or 'father' of the first English fleet (not yet the British Navy!), besides the fact that "Rule Britannia" was sung for the first time in James Thomson's, David Mallet's (or Malloch's) and Thomas Arne's masque, entitled *Alfred* (1740), would ensure that, in an age of global commercial and imperial expansion, and naval supremacy, the connections between the Wessex king and the sea would not be lost.

The second text, entitled "Wulfstan's report"<sup>32</sup>, opens with a reference to Hedeby as well (p. 48), but, unlike Ohthere's, "[...] it is not certain that this report was made to the king."<sup>33</sup>; Helen Appleton, for instance, argues that "The two accounts are presented together, but nothing indicates that the two seafarers were present simultaneously, or even that Wulfstan attended the court at all. *Ohthere and Wulfstan* may have begun as independent records made by court scribes during the seafarers' visits to Wessex."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The Cabots' pioneering voyage to Newfoundland took place in 1497, shortly after Columbus's voyage to America and the Treaty of Tordesillas.

<sup>30</sup> The Muscovy (or Russia) Company was founded in 1555, in the wake of Richard Chancellor's voyage of 1553-1554.

<sup>31</sup> On the huge popularity of King Alfred in the Victorian age see PARKER, Joanne - *'England's Darling': The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, especially pp. 147-151. From a narrower and specific angle, see also ALARCÃO, Miguel - "O elogio de Charles Dickens ao Rei Alfred de Wessex (871-899)". In *Gaudium Sciendi*. Revista da Sociedade Científica da Universidade Católica Portuguesa. Lisboa: SCUCP, nº 7 (Jan. 2015), pp. 119-133.

<sup>32</sup> BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) - *Ohthere's Voyages*, pp. 48-50.

<sup>33</sup> KEYNES, Simon; LAPIDGE, Michael (trans.) - *Alfred the Great*, p. 258, n.155.

<sup>34</sup> APPLETON, Helen - "Ohthere and Wulfstan". In ECHARD, S.; ROUSE, R. (eds.) - *Encyclopedia of British Medieval Literature*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2017, p. 1450.

Wulfstan – who may have been an Englishman – focuses his account on the Baltic Sea, particularly Estland [Estonia]<sup>35</sup>, though he also mentions Truso, at the mouth of the Vistula<sup>36</sup>, and places said to pay tribute to Sweden<sup>37</sup> and Denmark<sup>38</sup>. All in all, Wulfstan’s text is much less interesting than *Ohthere’s*, in spite of the description of an odd Estonian tradition – a horse race or competition for a dead man’s goods – and the attending funerary rites<sup>39</sup>.

It seems appropriate to quote at this stage Eleanor Duckett:

“To all these tales [...], Alfred had surely listened with rapt mind. Books [...] were worth the world to him; yet [...] his world was the people of his land. To pass on to them [...] the narratives of those who [...] had heard and seen strange things [...], things that concerned the Europe of Alfred’s own day, narratives that told of the Northmen from whom had descended so much tribulation upon England and who were [...] now settled on wide regions of English land --- this to the King of Wessex was welcome and happy work, good [...] for himself and for those whom he longed to teach.”<sup>40</sup>

To conclude, although the literary quality of these texts is not very impressive, their documentary importance should not be overlooked, calling for further research into the geographical/cartographical science and knowledge in the Middle Ages<sup>41</sup>. As Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs state in their introduction:

“The academic disciplines of literature, history, geography, and anthropology have all overcome their previous reluctance to take travel writing seriously and

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<sup>35</sup> “The above-mentioned Estland [Estonia] is very large, and there is very many a town [or stronghold], and in each town there is a king. [...] There is very much [or great] conflict between them.” (BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) – *Ohthere’s Voyages*, p. 48)

<sup>36</sup> Elblag/Elbing, Poland.

<sup>37</sup> Blekinge, Möre (in Norway), and the Swedish islands of Öland and Gotland.

<sup>38</sup> The Danish islands of Langeland, Lolland and Falster, as well as Skane (in Sweden).

<sup>39</sup> BATELY, Janet; ENGLERT, Anton (eds.) – *Ohthere’s Voyages*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>40</sup> DUCKETT, Eleanor - *Alfred the Great and his England*. London: Collins, 1957, p. 148.

<sup>41</sup> “La potencia imaginativa de la cosmografía medieval ha sobrevivido a su ruina como visión válida del mundo y, hasta cierto punto, continúa actuando en nosotros.” (QUESADA, Miguel Angel Ladero - *El mundo de los viajeros medievales*. Madrid: Grupo Anaya, S.A., 1992, p. 89)

have begun to produce a body of interdisciplinary criticism which will allow the full historical complexity of the genre to be appreciated.”<sup>42</sup>

Like Tim Youngs once wrote, “We are still assembling our equipment for the long and exciting journey ahead. The literature of travel has barely been approached.”<sup>43</sup> Let us hope that, somewhere in this process, medieval travel writing will get its due share of critical attention.

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<sup>42</sup> HULME, Peter; YOUNGS, Tim (eds.) - *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> YOUNGS, Tim - “The Importance of Travel Writing”. In *The European English Messenger*, vol. 13.2, Autumn 2004, p. 61.

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