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Religion and the urban

Historical developments¹

Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli and Jörg Rüpke

1. Introduction

To date, religion has been seen as cause for dramatic developments in the history of cities: foundations, waves of immigration, transformations, ghettoisation and destruction. It has been a decisive factor in forming the concept of citizenship as well as in justifying the expulsion of large groups. It has contributed to the monumentalisation of centres and / or has given importance to ex-centric places. Very recently, sociologists and anthropologists have been discovering religion in the contemporary and supposedly “secular” global city.² But still awaiting *historical* investigation is the *specific urban character* of religious ideas, practices, and institutions and the role of urban space shaping this very “religion.” As the time-span from the Hellenistic age to Late Antiquity has been proven to be crucial in the establishment of concepts and institutions of religion, on the one hand,³ and is a period of renewed and more extended waves of urbanisation, on the other,⁴ the Mediterranean basin and the Roman Empire offer a rich and comparatively well-documented space for pursuing such an investigation. Taking seriously the proposition that space is condition, medium, and outcome of social relations,⁵ the development of religion in lived urban space as “urban religion” acknowledges processes of religious change that have been neglected by both the history of religion and the study of ancient urbanism. Our key thesis is that city-

¹ This chapter is a revised version of our article “Urban Religion in Mediterranean Antiquity: Relocating Religious Change” appearing in *Mythos 12* (2018). It builds on research within the framework of the newly established Centre of Advanced Studies in the Humanities on “Religion and Urbanity”, based at the Max-Weber-Kolleg of the University of Erfurt and funded as FOR 2779 by the German Science Foundation. We are grateful to Annette Weisenrieder for establishing this collaboration and to Maik Patzelt for the further organisation of the conference on which this volume is based.

² Garbin, Strhan 2017; Strhan 2015, 35–42; Lanz 2014.

³ Rüpke 2016.

⁴ Zuiderhoek 2017, 20–36.

⁵ Lefebvre 1991 (1974), 2003 (1970), 15; Soja 1989.

space engineered the major changes that revolutionised Mediterranean religions. Evidently, such a claim is beyond proof in the form of a book chapter. Thus we limit ourselves to plausibilising this claim as a basis for future investigation against the background of actual research and to developing the conceptual tools for such an enterprise. Consequently, we can only indicate lines of research that might be useful for a new approach to prayer as an urban practice with regard to its performance as much as its medial representation and by factoring in space in both regards.

2. Writing city and religion spatially in the ancient Mediterranean

The history of ancient Mediterranean religion is undergoing a major re-evaluation. All in all, the range of sources considered important for reconstructing ancient religion and the developments leading to the formation of those late ancient religions that still are major factors in today's world, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam,⁶ all in their many varieties, has been enormously enlarged. In order to understand the complexity of religious interaction, the concept of "lived religion"⁷ as developed for contemporary religion has been adapted and enlarged by the "Lived Ancient Religion" approach for the study of pre-modern and specifically ancient Mediterranean religious practices and ideas.⁸ It has showed that funerary rituals and domestic religion, the social and ritual practices of voluntary associations, and the unanticipated, non-civic political use of religion by administrators and political elites are neither independent strands of religious practice nor replications of, or counter-models to, "civic religion." Religion is best conceptualised as a single field of action and forces with many loci of religious authority in permanent fluctuation.

The relationships of religion and space, in general, and between religion and urban space, in particular, are still under-theorised and under-researched. Although practices and discourses previously framed in terms of "polis religion" have been successfully integrated into the description of "lived ancient religion,"⁹ the city itself as a living environment crucial to the religious practices of antiquity and as the driving force of religious change has never been a major concern of research. Almost all research on cities in the deep past (i.e., prior to the late medieval and early modern period) mainly assume that the task is to illustrate how the viability of the city is grounded in a religious identity that is by the

⁶ See Bowersock 1990; Markus 1990; Schwartz 2010.

⁷ McDannell 1995; Orsi 1999, 2005; McGuire 2008.

⁸ Rüpke 2011c, 2016; Albrecht et al. 2018.

⁹ E.g. Degelmann 2018; Patzelt 2018; Rüpke 2018.

same token also a political one.¹⁰ As scholars' focus has been on political and civic identities, in the history of ancient religion space has been addressed rather reluctantly and above all as an imaginary realm. Only very recently attention has been paid to the Roman Empire as a conceptual space of identities and a lived space that informed actual behaviour.¹¹ Yet the dominant models remain synchronic and functional with regard to religion or diachronic and hermeneutic in relation to urban space.

It is our contention that the empirical settings of ancient cities are to be viewed and studied specifically as *city-spaces*,¹² that is, not only as a built environment and a physical extension, but as a space apprehended as challenging and inspiring, enabling, and constraining, featured by particular configurations of social relations, built forms and human activities which distinguish it from other spatial formations. A paradigmatic site for examining processes of social change at the time of the founding fathers of sociology and urban studies (Weber, Simmel, and the Chicago School), the early 21st century re-emergence of the city as a distinct scientific object of social research¹³ has largely benefited from critical spatial theory (aka "spatial turn") and the related emphasis on the "spatial specificity of urbanism."¹⁴ Different disciplinary insights now concur in saying the cities are peculiar spatial constellations. Since Michel de Certeau's seminal "Walking in the City,"¹⁵ urban sociologists, who rarely take anything into account prior to the modern period, have emphasised "lived" urban space as a praxeological and thus ultimately dialectical relation between the urban space and the human agent, who perceives and appropriates urban space on an individual basis. Scholars of urban planning, social ecology, geography, and (political) sociology preferably define cities as *phenomena of density* with regard to the concentration of people and buildings at certain spots in broader landscapes and to the social consequences of an extreme increase of contact zones.¹⁶

Drawing critically upon these theoretical insights, we propose to survey ancient city-spaces by concentrating on both real and imagined loci of religious experiences and agency. Imagination beyond concrete, measurable space, of course, is no privilege of the subalterns, and agency is no prerogative of the dominants: against the counter-cultural overtones of the typical use of "Thirdspace" and "Heterotopy," we prefer the less normatively charged notion of "lived

¹⁰ See the studies in Yoffee 2015a – except Sinopoli, focusing on religion in cities dominated by competing merchants.

¹¹ Orlin 2010; Woolf 2011; Mattingly 2011; Eshleman 2012; Ando 2013; Bricault, Bonnet 2013; Collar 2014; Rüpke 2014; Ando 2015; Morgan 2015.

¹² Soja 2000, 8; 2006.

¹³ Sassen 2010; Berking, Löw 2005.

¹⁴ Soja 2000, 7–10. On this link see Berking 2008, 15.

¹⁵ de Certeau 1984 (1980), 91.

¹⁶ Löw 2011, 19–21. Also Roskamm 2011; Berking 2008; Nassehi 2002.

space,¹⁷ without denying that the very nature of religious practices implies the imaginative construction of alternative space beyond any given physical location.¹⁸

3. From civic religion to urban religion

The very recent rise of the study of religion in contemporary cities focuses on the development of new forms of religious practices, i. e., religious change, and the appropriation of urban space by non-elites.¹⁹ Our research combines these insights with recent developments in the study of ancient lived religion that acknowledge the plurality of religious agencies and the complexity of religious interactions and appropriations. It aims to demonstrate that many religious phenomena, and especially major religious changes, can be better understood by viewing them in spatial terms, that is, as a result of a spatially informed dialectic of “co-production”²⁰ of urban life and religious communication in the ancient Mediterranean world from the Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity. Focusing on the impact of cities on religion and how the interaction with city-space changed religion, we call this side of the dialectic “urban religion.”²¹

If our central hypothesis can be sustained, then many features of ancient religion would be more plausibly viewed as the outcome of specific effects and uses of space and their social and cognitive bases rather than as inherent characteristics of a specific religion. Such features are, for instance, the development of certain massrituals connected to theatre and circus structures, the widespread staging of theatrical processions, the declining role of animal sacrifice, the intellectualisation of religion and the establishment of specifically religious networks and (initially small) group religions, but also forms of fixating gods to specific places and the very structure of a polytheism informed and indexed by a plurality of local temples. By addressing a sufficiently broad range of religious practices, imaginaries, groupings, and professions hitherto examined separately and/or addressed without an eye to urbanism, such research will elucidate changes in ancient religion as important as the late ancient development of “religions” (e. g. Christianity, Judaism) as the result of an ongoing interaction of different agents with a distinctly urban space.

Connected to this historiographical achievement is our ambition to develop and sharpen heuristic concepts and analytical tools that (a) may function as

¹⁷ See Soja 1996, Foucault 1986 (1967), and Lefebvre 1991 (1974), respectively.

¹⁸ Rüpke 2020, 50.

¹⁹ See Knott 2005; van der Veer 2015; Knott, Krech and Meyer 2016. More literature will be provided below.

²⁰ Day 2017, 3.

²¹ Lätzer-Lasar and Urciuoli 2021; Urciuoli 2021; Rüpke 2020.

comparative instruments for further research into ancient religion in its many regional varieties, trans-local trajectories, and long-term trends and transformations, and (b) help connect past changes with present developments by deepening understanding of both.

Planetary urbanisation is one of the key developments of the present world that cause immense changes in people's daily lives as well as to the landscape of global networks. Praised as the solution to, or cursed as the embodiment of, the major problems of humankind, the urban question is one of the grand challenges of today. Research on Mediterranean antiquity cannot escape but rather contributes to this discussion by setting ancient religion into a wider framework and by showing that developments in antiquity are relevant even for contemporary concerns. By changing the approach, the outcome of such an agenda will affect claims about the evolutionary role of religion, which is too often viewed in terms of key provider of social cohesion²² or examined in ways largely neglectful of individual agency.²³ Instead of focusing on political integration and social stratification as functional foci of a "polis"/"civic religion,"²⁴ we aim to stress urban aspirations, the appropriation of urban space, and the creation of urban diversity. Aside from hierarchy, we attempt to emphasize "heterarchy."²⁵ Instead of urban trapping and centralized administration, we highlight network activities. As research on "lived ancient religion" has demonstrated, such results are highly relevant to contemporary societal challenges.

The critical use and the establishment of the concept of urban religion are paramount for this task. Defining a "continual process in which the urban and the religious reciprocally interact, mutually interlace, producing, defining, and transforming each other,"²⁶ urban religion is the flagship notion of a cross-disciplinary approach to the study of religion in contemporary and preferably global cities. This approach has eventually proved the role of religion in shaping allegedly secularised urban city-spaces and vice versa. Moreover, by significantly enlarging the range of the agents and the motivations involved in the creative co-constitution of religion and urbanity, this body of research has increasingly made clear the thoroughness of this interaction.²⁷

²² See most recently Norenzayan 2013; Whitehouse et al. 2019. For a reassessment, see Urciuoli 2020.

²³ See recently Yoffee 2015b.

²⁴ E.g. Sourvinou-Inwood 1990; Cole 1995; Hägg 1996; Sartre 2006; Kindt 2009; Bruun 2009; Evans 2010; Horster 2012; Scheid 2016.

²⁵ Crumley 1995.

²⁶ Lanz 2014, 26. For a similar definition, see Orsi 1999, 43. For a contextualization, see Garbin, Strhan 2017, 6–11.

²⁷ See Orsi 1999; Al Sayyad, Massoumi 2011; Garbin 2012, 2013; Becci, Burchardt, Casanova 2013; Strhan 2015; van de Veer 2015; Goh, van der Veer 2016; Garbin, Strhan 2017; Berking, Steets, Schwenk 2018; etc.

As demonstrated by the previous research project on “lived ancient religion”, religion is always “religion in the making”²⁸ and thus urban religion, too, is a dynamic concept focusing on change. It is inclusive and when tested on antiquity it permits analysis of the development of specific religious agency and practices (neighbourhood shrines, theatrical processions, authors and entrepreneurs), peculiar forms of religious knowledge and imaginaries (imaginative places, imagined communities, heavenly cities) and social constellations such as participation in civic rituals or membership in religious communities in the appropriation, modification and formation of urban space. Religious change is always investigated in the ongoing interaction between space and different agents: temporary inhabitants and voluntary or involuntary immigrants, residents and administrators, people living off religion or employing religion for realising their urban hopes.

In its dominant use on contemporary capitalist urbanism, however, the object of urban religion is not religion but globalisation – with religion rather serving as a lens onto globalisation. Therefore, the enquired interlacing of globalisation, cities, and religion has hardly opened up a real space for historical research, even though historians of religion have been willing to employ this concept for pre-modern phenomena of translocality, universalisation, regionalisation, localisation and their interactions.²⁹ By critically applying the notion of urban religion to ancient Mediterranean cities and religions, our ambition is precisely to *thoroughly historicise* the analysis of the range of phenomena illuminated by this conceptual tool. For instance, delving into a typical subject matter of the urban religious research such as “migrant faiths” and “diasporic identities,”³⁰ we aim at understanding the role of religion for migrants and immigrants into cities³¹ by asking whether participation in specific religious activities or networks was a means of stabilising former identities within a new urban space, or rather a strategy for pursuing urban aspirations and developing new identities. This is only possible by strengthening and broadening the *diachronic scope and reach* of urban religion.

4. Definitional issues and key analytical tools

How can we make plausible the bold claim that city-space and interacting with city-space engineered the major changes that revolutionised Mediterranean religions? How can we determine how and to what extent religious practices,

²⁸ Albrecht et al. 2018.

²⁹ Cancik, Rüpke 2009; Rüpke 2011a, 2011b, 2014. On translocality see Freitag, von Oppen 2010.

³⁰ Garbin 2012, 2013.

³¹ Holleran 2011; Woolf 2015; Lo Cascio 2015; Tacoma 2016; Tacoma, Lo Cascio 2017.

imaginaries and institutions changed or developed in lived urban space? And to what extent we speak of a co-constitution of practices of religious communication and urban spatiality? Responding to all these questions calls for the use of well-considered concepts defining our object of research, starting with city and religion, as well as for the selection of key analytical tools to navigate the amount of potential evidence and research tracks.

4.1 City

For heuristic purposes and against the background of the state-of-the-art,³² we prefer to avoid clear-cut and highly technical definitions of city valid only for specific cultures. Very large conceptualizations are not heuristically serviceable either. Nor is our intention to draw on existing typologies or construct new ideal types to be added to an already thriving taxonomic panorama. Rather, we opt for a polythetic approach that deliberately selects out characteristics which are of prime importance for our research questions and thus understands cities as places with the following features:

- City is a spatial form that organises and regulates phenomena of density on a larger scale (*high density*)
- City is a place offering specific opportunities and evoking distinctive hopes (*urban aspirations*)
- City is a place engendering diversity and endemic conflict (*diversity*)
- City is a place subject to administrative attempts at comprehensive organisation (*governmental power*)
- At the same time, city is a place functioning as a heterarchical system, where power can be ranked in a number of ways, shared, or checked (*heterarchy*)
- City is a place inhabited by a substantial population of non-food-producing individuals pursuing different trades (including intellectual occupations) on the basis of an agricultural surplus (*division of labour*)
- City is a place that is recognised as city and defined contrastively against (culturally variable forms of) non-city (*urbanity*)

³² Already in 1950, the Australian Marxist archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe opened one of the most heavily cited pieces in the history of archaeology (“The Urban Revolution”) by saying that “the concept of city is notoriously hard to define” (Childe 1950, 3). Over time, this statement has become proverbial among specialists of different disciplines, as well as particularly convenient to advertise “a somewhat fuzzy core concept rather than to try to establish criteria that will clearly demarcate all cities from all noncities” (Cowgill 2004). It is still true, however, that “neither anthropologists nor geographers have been able to agree on a generally acceptable cross-cultural [and cross-temporal] definition of urbanism” (Trigger 1972, 576). Non-definitional approaches to the issue relying on human capacities for mental mapping are also possible: thus Finley 1977, 305. For an overview of five conceptually different approaches to the classification of urban forms, see Trigger 1972; most recently Smith et al. 2016.

4.2 Religion

For the purposes of the project, we theorise *religion* as relevant communication with and about special agents (sometimes including objects) with properties different from the everyday human, that is, dead (ancestors) or unborn (angels), simply superhuman (demons) or fully superhuman (gods) agents to whom agency is accorded in a *not unquestionably plausible* way. Communication with or concerning such divine agents might reinforce or reduce human agency, create or modify social relationships, and change power relationships.³³ This is of particular interest with regard to the frequent encounters and dense networks but also fluid and exchangeable relationships (“weak ties”) typical of cities. Furthermore, like any other cultural practice, religious communication is a *spatio-temporal practice* induced and shaped by the spatial organisation and in turn re-creating space.³⁴ At the same time, our conceptualisation of religion suggests that there is a specific spatial character of religious communication, a conceptual relationship not likewise valid for other cultural practices. If place-making can be equated with “dwelling” and is frequently achieved with religious practices, religious communication is inherently also a practice of “crossing.”³⁵ Religion as used here is defined as an action transcending (in a very simple sense) the immediate and unquestionably given situation, that is, temporarily and situationally enlarging the environment judged as relevant by one or several actors.³⁶ In the ancient Mediterranean world, just as today, the spatial character of religious communication was reinforced by *sacralising* objects or places and was thus manifest in material form even in other uses of space.³⁷ Creating religious space was part of an ongoing process of claiming and appropriating urban space which implies specific competitive dynamics of place-making involving both physical and rhetorical strategies.³⁸

4.3 Key concepts

The manifold ways in which religion is used by different agents in order to deal with city-spaces, as well as the extent to which urban spatiality affects forms of religious practices, are elucidated with the help of three key concepts: a) agency and aspiration, b) spatial imagination, and c) appropriation.

³³ Rüpke 2015.

³⁴ Knott 2005.

³⁵ For this tension, see Tweed 2006.

³⁶ In this sense, the trans-local references inherent to religious communication by way of agency claims need not wait for a radicalised axial-age transcendence and the posterior debates on icons, re-presentation and presence, anthropomorphic or non-anthropomorphic forms, images or no images, etc. (see Bellah 2011; Bellah, Joas 2012).

³⁷ Insoll 2009; Droogan 2013; Raja, Rüpke 2015.

³⁸ On this see most recently Lander 2017.

a) *Agency and aspiration*. Agency can be assigned to objects. By their form or very presence they make humans re-act, “afford” certain behaviour.³⁹ We use the concept of agency of objects and places but likewise focus on human agency and creativity within social contexts and situations. We conceive agency as the constant interaction between people that creates the structures and traditions that constrain and limit the subsequent exercise of agency, which in turn may alter or even challenge those same structures and traditions.⁴⁰ As outlined above, religion enlarges the field of agency. By invoking in specific situations agents or authorities held to be divine, religious agents acquire extended possibilities for imagining and acting. Yet the converse is also possible: the same mechanism can also trigger an abjuration of personal agency, resulting in impotence and passivity, with agency being reserved for the divine agents.

A specific aspect of agency related to city-space is captured by a further term. Recent urban studies have taken up the term aspirations from studies of social mobility⁴¹ to designate specific driving motifs and attitudes of immigrants as well as of home-grown inhabitants: namely, “forward-looking hopes of achievement” instantiated in ideas and behaviours connected with urban life and mobilised in ways that engage and overcome urban issues. The situations in which religiously infused motivations stir urban creativity and even create alternative urban worlds, or urban concerns are conducive to religious innovations, are described by the dialectical notion of “urban religious aspirations”.⁴² It is our aim to build on and develop this rather vague concept on the basis of historical research, at the same time exploring the possibility of a mutually exclusive relationship between religious and urban concerns. The socially uneven, though universal, cross-cultural and temporal capacity to engage agentially with the urban environment, and to aspire in relation with it, is to be used to nuance the analysis and description of individual and collective agents in structured situations.

b) *Spatial imagination*. Lefebvre’s notion of “lived space” has taught us that agents do not merely “perceive” or “conceive” urban space. Whereas perceived space describes spatial practices that reproduce a spatial order (in the case of the urban, by mapping daily routines onto the established blueprints of everyday urban reality) and conceived space refers to the intellectually designed dominant conceptions of space (e. g., those of the urban planners, social engineers, and administrative authorities), lived space highlights the human aspirational capacity to imagine space differently, to overlay it with unanticipated systems of symbols and signs, in a word, to change its use and appropriate it.⁴³ Accordingly, city-based human agents develop alternative “representational spaces,” new ways

³⁹ Gosden 2005, Hodder 2012.

⁴⁰ Joas 1996, Emirbayer, Mische 1998.

⁴¹ Appadurai 2004.

⁴² van der Veer 2015; Goh, van der Veer 2016.

⁴³ Lefebvre 1991 (1974), 38–39.

of using the city-space and, moreover, new forms of memorising, symbolising, imagining, and transcending urban spaces beyond their commonsensically perceived and professionally designed spatial layouts – including fictional spaces, theoretical spaces or dreamed/utopian spaces as modelled by philosophers, poets, and religious specialists. The city thus reveals itself as “an imaginative object,” an ever-changing assemblage of views that in turn conditions particular spatial practices.⁴⁴ Already highlighted by Lefebvre,⁴⁵ the role played by religion in producing lived space is foregrounded by considering religious imagination and practice as spatial imagination and practice that do not just reproduce or legitimize existing knowledge already attached to a location, but actually create new interpretations, meanings and uses by drawing upon extraneous religious knowledge. At the same time, the users’ practice and knowledge of the city produce and affect lived religion. Hence the concept of spatial imagination helps to elucidate key dynamics of the dialectic between urban space and religious practice and knowledge in our evidence.

c) *Appropriation*. Over the last decades, postcolonial and subaltern studies have rehabilitated the hitherto negatively charged notion of appropriation (i. e., to make one’s own) by explaining it as “a potentially two-way process” where “exchange and creative response may take place.”⁴⁶ In its far less controversial sociological use, which we mainly refer to, the term describes a specific transformation process of the relations between human agents and man-made products (language, things, space) whereby the former agentically adopt and adapt the latter by gaining power and/or stressing identity via and over them. Appropriation can thus designate the “innumerable and infinitesimal transformations”⁴⁷ of a language by the speakers, the creative transition of a thing from being an anonymous commodity to a highly personal good,⁴⁸ the tactical interpretation of the city-space by the footsteps of its walkers. In de Certeau’s seminal praxeological analyses, the frequent use of the term always implies a focus on the acts and practices of the consumer rather than on the producer, or better, on the proactive and productive character of consumption.⁴⁹ This logic shuffles (and, for its critics, blurs) the hierarchical directionality of cultural processes (designer/public, active/passive, etc.) in a manner that resonates with the nowadays fashionable business term of “prosumer.” Successful appropriations emphasise the multidimensionality and polysemous nature of signs, things, and spaces, but they are conditional upon the decisions and requirements of the

⁴⁴ Blum 2003, 13–20.

⁴⁵ Lefebvre 1991 (1974), *passim*.

⁴⁶ Ashley, Plesch 2002, 6.

⁴⁷ de Certeau 1984 (1980), XIV.

⁴⁸ Carrier 1995, 107–126.

⁴⁹ de Certeau 1984 (1980).

agents themselves in concrete situations, as well as upon their social roles and the related expectations.⁵⁰

Like any other cultural practice, religious communication engages with space, in general, and urban space, in particular, in ways that can be described as “appropriation.” Preceded by a selection, this use recognises and accepts the character of spaces as defined by previous, common, or prescribed usages, but it also modifies the space through performance and thus changes the future memory of the place. Religious traditions themselves, of course, are not simply given but need permanent reproduction and are transformed by the (also) spatiotemporally contingent modifications of the users (most frequently micro-changes but sometimes revolutionary). Appropriations of city-space and inner-city areas and locales by religious agents can be both ephemeral and long-lasting, rhythmical or permanent. Massive investments in media as a tool for communication with not unquestionably given addressees impinge significantly on the durability of the processes of appropriation.

5. Conclusion

As stressed in the beginning, this chapter does not historically substantiate any far-ranging claims but develops a coherent research programme. Against the background of research on religion *in* ancient Mediterranean cities, above all for the Hellenistic and Roman period, we argue for a change of perspective. We need to switch from histories of religion that trace religious practices (like prayers) and ideas (like gods or salvation) as an expression of political change in cities to the assumption that city-spaces themselves engineered the major changes that revolutionised ancient Mediterranean religions. Of course city-space in itself is not an independent variable, but again is a result of complex cultural, economic and political interactions with space. Prayer, as shown by the study of Maik Patzelt, offers an excellent example of such a production of space.⁵¹ The conceptual tools developed here allow for an adequate heuristic and description of processes that we assume to be of paramount importance.

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⁵⁰ Carrier 1995, 117–120 (on the gendered quality of appropriations).

⁵¹ See Patzelt 2018.

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