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# СООБЩЕНИЯ

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## WELSH *DAWN* 'GIFT' AND DONCASTER, YORKSHIRE

Doncaster, known to the Romans as *Danum*, is a town on the River Don, Yorkshire. Its British-Latin name (deriving from that of the river) has been obscure: although interpretations 'wet' or 'bold' or 'flowing' have been proposed from alleged parallels with the Danube, Dnieper, Don, or Rhône of the European continent, they are inconclusive, because they lack equivalents in Brittonic. A new etymology is needed. The one suggested here is 'gift; gifted one' or even 'she who brings gifts' (designating a river nymph). It is supported directly by the Welsh word *dawn* 'gift' and indirectly by the River Annan of Scotland, recorded in British-Latin as *Anava*, a form related to Welsh *anaw* 'wealth, riches, largess, bounty, gift' and presumably reflecting Celtic belief in the stream as a bountiful goddess. The Yorkshire Don (like the River Don of Tyneside) would thus have a name explicable in purely Celtic terms. Reference to Indo-Iranian, legitimately applied to continental rivers including the Russian Don and Dnieper, can here be dropped. Besides this, Doncaster can be proved as unrelated both to the "Cair Daun" of *Historia Brittonum*'s Twenty-Eight Cities of Britain (where the toponym is surely a corruption of *Cair Dam* or Cardiff), and to the goddess *Dôn* of the twelfth-century *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. On the other hand, the Yorkshire Don can be shown as a namesake not only of the River Don of Tyneside, but of the River Doon in south-west Scotland.

**Keywords:** Celtic languages, Welsh language, British toponymy, Celtic hydronymy, Old European hydronymy, etymology, Doncaster, *Historia Brittonum*, *Mabinogion*.

### 1. Introduction

Doncaster (SE 5703) is a large industrial town in Yorkshire. Located on the River Don, it has a long history as (successively) Roman stronghold, medieval market-town,

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and important railway junction. Despite closure of local coal-mines, Doncaster remains prosperous, thanks to excellent road and rail connections. What follows outlines the place’s history (where much has been lost), before discussing its name, which goes back to BLat. *Danum*, itself referring to the River Don. The form must be Celtic, but beyond that nothing has been certain.

## 2. Aspects of Doncaster’s History

Writers on Doncaster offer tantalizing glimpses of its past. John Leland (d. 1552) mentioned its “large paroch chirche of S. George” and a noblewoman’s “goodly tumber of white marble” before noting how the town was “buildid of wodde, and the houses be slatid” [Leland, 1907, 34–35]. The tomb was that of Margaret, wife to the long-lived but dispossessed Ralph Neville (d. 1484), second Earl of Westmorland [Jacob, 1961, 321–323]. It has yet vanished, like the wooden houses and parish church, the last replaced in 1854–1858 by today’s “cathedral-like” structure [Pevsner, 1967, 181]. Also modern (and better known) is Doncaster race-course, visited in 1857 by Charles Dickens, who viewed with distaste the “horse-mad” crowds there; in contrast are finds in the local museum from *Danum*’s iron and pottery works [Wilson, 1970, 738]. Another antiquity was noted in the 1720s by Daniel Defoe, who (after calling Doncaster a populous “manufacturing town” with many inns) wrote of “the great Roman highway” as here “eminent and remarkable” [Defoe, 1978, 481]. A further relic of *Danum* is an altar set up by Marcus Nantonius Orbitalus [Ireland, 1996, 188]. He was presumably a Gaul, with Celtic elements in his name.

## 3. Discussion of *Danum* and Doncaster

The *Danum* where Marcus Nantonius Orbitalus burnt incense to mother goddesses appears as *Dano* in the Antonine Itinerary and *Notitia Dignitatum*. The form has been clear, its meaning not so. A suggestion made by Ekwall in the 1920s held the ground for forty years and persists even now. He (correctly) identified *Danum* as being (like many Roman towns in Britain) called after the nearby river, and then related the name of the Don to Sanskrit terms meaning ‘humid, moist’ [Ekwall, 1928, 126–128]. Misleading evidence on the question comes from OW. *Cair Daun* in a 9<sup>th</sup>-century list of Britain’s Twenty-Eight Cities. It is repeatedly identified as Doncaster [Williams, 1929–1931, 21], but is no such thing (as we shall see). It was still mentioned by Ekwall, who derived *Danum* from the (reconstructed) British hydronym *Dana*, “which is related to the name *Danube* and is really an old word for ‘water,’ found in Skt. *danu* ‘rain, moisture’” [Ekwall, 1936, 141].

Citing Ekwall, Kenneth Jackson was silent on meaning but clarified the phonology, with long *a* in BLat. *Danum* becoming in Brittonic a long open *o* (> *aw* in Modern Welsh monosyllables), borrowed as the long *o* of early (not modern) English *Don*. The same process occurred with the unrecorded British hydronym *Frama* > OE *From* or River Frome

in Somerset, where the form still has a long vowel. Jackson dated the change to about 500 CE. Elsewhere, discussing not the Don but *W. Donwy* (used of the River Dee in North Wales), he accepted a link with Ir. *dánae* ‘bold, brave’ proposed for the Danube by Rudolf Thurneysen [Jackson, 1953, 292, 294, 379]. We shall return to this point. Hugh Smith cautiously followed Ekwall on how the Don’s name “is thought to originate in a Brit. \**Dana* from a root \**dan-* ‘water, moisture, river’” with long *a*; he added that the modern pronunciation (with short *o*) is a back-formation from *Doncaster* [Smith, 1962, 126]. But his derivation, like others, is weak, the form adduced having no Brittonic cognate. Ellis Evans’s comments on Gaul. *danno-* make that clear [Evans, 1967, 189–190]. The fact, although inconvenient, is regularly unheeded by place-name scholars.

The late Margaret Gelling thus explained *Danum* as “from a root meaning ‘water, moisture, river’” [Gelling, 1970, 83]. Then she changed tack. Eight years later she gave the explanation “from \**danu-* ‘bold,’ probably ‘rapid’ in river-names. There is another River Don in <County> Durham, which is identical. The continental names *Danube* and *Rhône* (the latter Celtic \**Rodanus*) are related” [Gelling, 1978, 43]. Why this abrupt transformation? The answer is provided by Rivet and Smith. In their monumental study they cited a 1970 paper by Kenneth Jackson on *Danum* as ultimately from \**danu-* ‘bold’ and so ‘rapidly flowing’ in hydronyms, as well as a 1957 one by W. F. H. Nicolaisen on the same base in the names of the Danube, Rhône, and Russian Dnieper and Don. Jackson in 1970 applied to the Don what he had adopted in 1953 (after Thurneysen on the Danube) for the *Donwy* or Dee. The form being so widespread, Rivet and Smith nevertheless preferred Pokorny’s translation ‘river’ from a root \**da-* ‘flüssig, fließen’ and dismissed Ekwall’s link with Skt. *danu* ‘rain’ as ‘unwarranted’; they concluded with OW. *Cair Daun* in *Historia Brittonum*, treating it unquestioningly as *Doncaster* [Rivet & Smith, 1979, 329].

Ekwall’s associations with a Sanskrit word for rain thereafter seemed dead and gone; *Cair Daun* in late manuscripts of *Historia Brittonum* by pseudo-Nennius was, however, still taken as *Doncaster* [Nennius, 1980, 40, 80]. A popular writer proposed the element ‘river’ in the names of the English and Russian Don and the Danube, but correctly noted the Don of Aberdeenshire as having another sense, ‘goddess’ [Room, 1988, 113]. *Doncaster* was thereafter rendered ‘Roman fort on the River Don’ with the hydronym understood as ‘water, river’ [Mills, 1991, 107], which seems to confuse Ekwall’s notion of moistness with Pokorny’s one of fluids in motion. Coates then classed the Don’s name with others (including those of Humber and Ouse) as pre-Celtic; despite that, his co-author has published papers on many of the forms listed (Bovey, Colne, Earn, Lox, Nadder, Nidd, Parrett, Sem, Ure), offering Celtic etymologies for them all [Coates & Breeze, 2000, 365–366]. He feels sure that the Don is Celtic too.

Publication in 2004 of the English Place-Name Society’s dictionary might be expected to resolve doubts. Its compiler certainly had none. He translated confidently ‘flowing one’ with the reconstructed element *da-* of Danube, Russian Don and Dniester, and *Rodanus* ‘great flowing-one’ or Rhône [Watts, 2004, 190]. He sided with Pokorny,

Nicolaisen, Rivet and Smith (on balance), and Mills, against Jackson and the later Gelling. Later opinion has been mixed and inconclusive. Speaking not of the Yorkshire river but the Rhône, Pierre-Yves Lambert cited Varro (via St Jerome) in the first century BC for *Rodanus* as meaning ‘iudex violentus’ and Vendryes (more tentatively) in 1955 for the sense ‘very bold, very fierce’ on the basis of OIr. *ro-dánae*; Max Müller in 1870–1872 had proposed the same etymology ‘bold, fierce’ for the Danube [Lambert, 2005, 218]. Sims-Williams, mentioning Anreiter’s 2001 study of pre-Roman toponyms in Hungary for *Danube* as non-Celtic, admitted that “its Celticity is unprovable” but (after Lambert) still possible [Sims-Williams, 2006, 216]. While the Danube is thus omitted from a recent dictionary, the Rhône is treated as “possibly Celtic” with elements meaning ‘very’ and ‘river’ or ‘flowing’ on the basis of Celtic and Indo-Iranian parallels. Hypothetical Celtic *danu-* ‘river’ is there related to forms attested in Indo-Iranian only, namely Skt. *danu-* ‘flowing, dripping liquid’ and Av. *danu-* ‘river’; there is elsewhere mention of a root *anavo-* ‘wealth, riches’ discussed below [Falileyev, 2010, 7, 17, 29, 187]. For the Rhône and other continental rivers, the terms used are still those of Ekwall in 1928, in some cases no doubt rightly. Most recently, the rare *Dyfrdonwy* used of the River Dee (and considered by Jackson in 1953) has been dismissed as perhaps a freak, a ‘metrically-driven nonce-form’ [Haycock, 2013, 34]. If so, it is worthless for comparisons with the Danube or any other river.

#### 4. A New Proposal Citing Welsh *Dawn* ‘Gift’

But our concern is not the Danube, Rhône, Don, or Dnieper of the European continent. It is the Don of Doncaster, where we can be decisive. All previous etymologies lack cognates in Brittonic, as noted. Ekwall’s forms for ‘damp’ or ‘dripping’ even lack cognates outside Indo-Iranian. There is something unreal here. Can a Yorkshire river’s closest linguistic connections really be with the Upanishads or Hymns of Zarathustra? Is there no explanation in Britain itself?

The latter seems the case. The clue is the common word *dawn* ‘gift’ of medieval and modern Welsh. It is the exact cognate of OIr. *dán* ‘gift, nature, skill’ and Lat. *donum* ‘gift’ [Morris-Jones, 1913, 82]. It has the wondrous advantage, unlike every one of the alleged cognates quoted above, of actually existing in Brittonic. Dictionaries bring out the semantic range of the Welsh word and its Irish cognate. Its original sense was not merely that of a gift as a physical object (like presents below a Christmas tree). It could refer to what is inward and invisible. In Irish, *dán* thus has the senses ‘a spiritual offering or gift’ or ‘an art’ (including music and poetry) or ‘a poem, a song’ or ‘a fate’ in store for a person [Dinneen, 1927, 306]. Its numinous qualities are indicated by a medieval Irish story on how the god Lug *Samildánach* ‘he who possesses at the same time many skills’ arrived at Tara. The watchman questioned him on his ability as carpenter, smith, harper, poet, historian, hero, or sorcerer. Tara having many such experts, but none possessing these gifts all together, Lug was admitted, thereafter

using his supernatural attributes to gain victory in battle [Sjoestedt, 1949, 44]. So *dán* might indicate magic power, befitting a god.

In Welsh are the similar definitions ‘natural endowment, innate ability, talent, genius’; also ‘one endowed with such talents’ for *dawn* used of a prince, a lord, or a holy relic, like the miraculous Cross of Chester [GPC, 906]. It might also denote supernatural grace. So much is proved by a poem in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Black Book of Carmarthen, on the Flight into Egypt and Miraculous Harvest. The Blessed Virgin is there described as “immaculate” and *daun owri* “of glorious grace” [Haycock, 1994, 128, 135]. The poem may be little older than the manuscript itself [Breeze, 2008, 73], but what is said above on Ir. *dán* implies that the application of W. *dawn* ‘gift’ to more than the merely physical or material is ancient. It will long predate the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

We therefore interpret BLat. *Danum* as meaning a place on a river called ‘gift’ or ‘one endowed with spiritual or supernatural gifts’ or perhaps ‘she who is possessed of divine gifts’ and so considered as a goddess, like the Brent, Dee, Ribble, and other rivers of pagan Celtic Britain. Gildas, writing in 536 CE, told how Britons in their blindness once bowed down to mountains and rivers [George, 2009, 35, 137]. No surprise, then, if they viewed the Don as a sacred stream, like the Ganges, flowing from the foot of Vishnu and through Siva’s hair.

### 5. Parallels in Other British Hydronyms

A sense ‘gift’ or ‘gifted one’ or ‘she who bears gifts’ for the Don has parallels. A close one occurs in south-west Scotland with the River Annan (also the name of the town on its banks), anciently recorded as *Anava*. The form was related to W. *anaw* ‘wealth, riches, largess, bounty, gift’ by Watson, so that the sense is ‘rich river, river of bounty or prosperity’ or even ‘she who brings gifts’ applied to a goddess beneath the waters; while in western Ireland, in east County Clare, is Bow River, so called from its supposed *buaidh* ‘virtue’ of guarding cattle against disease [Watson, 1926, 55, 446]. Back in Scotland, south of Aberdeen, is Arbutnot, where the form means “mouth of (the stream called) *Buadhnat*” and is partly Gaelic. The river was called “little triumph, little virtue, little one of virtue” from its healing powers [Nicolaisen, 1996, 18]. On Cornwall’s north coast is the town of Bude, on the River Bude; Welsh *budd* ‘profit, gain, riches, wealth; blessing, favour’ shows the sense here, as with the River Boyd of south Gloucestershire, both streams apparently containing healing minerals [Breeze, 2006]. Rivers in Celtic Britain and Ireland therefore had connotations of wealth, curative powers, or bounteous favour. They support interpretation of the Don at *Danum* as ‘gift, gifted one, provider of gifts’ within the same semantic range of riches or prosperity.

### 6. *Cair Daun* in *Historia Brittonum* is not Doncaster

We conclude with what the Don and Doncaster are not. Despite what is claimed, they do not figure amongst the Twenty-Eight Cities of Britain listed in late versions

of the 9<sup>th</sup>-century *Historia Brittonum*. This notorious catalogue, which has misled scholars for centuries, deals not with Roman cities in Britain (as invariably thought) but medieval towns and monasteries, especially in south-east Wales. It was compiled by a local cleric, who gave pride of place to settlements between the Rivers Usk and Wye. Because it includes as well the towns of Caerwent and Caerleon beyond the Usk, its *Cair Daun* can be emended to OW. *Cair Dam* ‘fort on the Taff’ or Cardiff. Early medieval Doncaster had little importance. It was of no interest to the Welsh. Cardiff, on the other hand, had an imposing Roman fortress familiar to all Welshmen of the south-east. For them, it claimed attention. Doncaster did not [Breeze, 2016].

### 7. The Goddess Dôn and the Danube

Nor are the Don and Doncaster related to the Celtic ancestor goddess Dôn, figuring in early Welsh poems and tales, and sometimes linked with rivers on the European continent. In a classic study, Sir Ifor Williams even declared that the name of the Danube or (in Welsh) *Donaw* was that of the goddess Dôn in the 12<sup>th</sup>-century *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* [Williams, 1945, 36]. His bold assertion falls victim to phonology. Kenneth Jackson has been quoted on how the long *a* of BLat. *Danum* gave a long open *o* in Primitive Welsh, borrowed as a long *o* in Old English: hence *Don*. Yet the long *o* of W. *Dôn* derives not from a British long *a* but a short *o*, which in Primitive Welsh “monosyllables before single consonants” was “lengthened about the end of the sixth century” so that, for example, Brit. \**rossta* ‘heath, moorland’ gave PW. \**ros* (= modern *rhos*) and thus, after borrowing by English, the name of Roose, near Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria [Jackson, 1954, 70]. On those grounds the goddess Dôn can have nothing to do with the Danube, which is recorded by Horace and Ovid as *Danuvius* (with long *a*). Dôn has been further equated with Ireland’s *Donu* or *Danu*, mother of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* or ‘tribes of the goddess Danu’ [Bromwich, 1978, 327, 549]. However, John T. Koch in 1989 denied a connection between the Welsh and Irish deities [Haycock, 2007, 324–325]. The goddess Dôn must be rejected from discussion of Danube and Yorkshire Don alike.

### 8. The Danube, Rhône, and Russian Don and Dniester

If it is accepted that Welsh *dawn* ‘gift’ relates to the Don of Yorkshire, as also the Don of Tyneside (with Bede’s monastery of Jarrow on its banks), might this assist with the Danube, Dnieper, Dniestr, Don, or Rhône of the European continent? At best, only partly. It is agreed that Slavonic offers no solution for Dnieper, Dniester, and Don, but there is one in *don* ‘water, river’ from the Ossetian language of Russia’s border-region with Georgia [Brückner, 1927, 91–92, 103]. Significant here are the Ossetian hydronyms *Ardon* ‘roaring river’ and *Sakdon* ‘deer river’ [Labuda, 1961, 139]. Also relevant, perhaps, are Pol. *Dunaj* ‘Danube’ and the Black and White branches of the River Dunajec at Nowy Targ, in the mountains south of Kraków, Poland [Rospond, 1984,

255]. Indo-Iranian derivations for the Russian Don, Dniester, and Dneiper can in any case be accepted with confidence.

But *Danuvius* or the Danube (originally, the part upstream from Vienna) and *Rhodanus* or the Rhône are another matter. BLat. *Danum* allows an association with W. *dawn* and Irish *dán*, providing an etymology ‘bountiful one’ for the Danube and ‘very gifted one’ for the Rhône. Welsh *Donaw* ‘Danube’ has been quoted. Its first element can be explained as ‘gift’ (for CCelt. long *a* > Brit. long *o* > MW. *aw* in monosyllables only, elsewhere becoming a short *o*, as with *brodyr* ‘brothers’ against *brawd* ‘brother’). As for GLat. *Rhodanus*, it would give *rhyddawn* ‘great gift’ in early Welsh, which is actually attested [Lloyd-Jones, 1931–1963, 303]. A full study of the names of Danube and Rhône in the light of Insular Celtic, giving attention to the semantics of hydronymy, would repay the effort.

On this question an anonymous referee makes a general point. Place-names are conservative units of language, river-names are ultra-conservative. Is not likely that in many cases we have, not a Celtic hydronym, but a pre-Celtic one? They would relate to the Old European hydronymy often invoked by the late W. F. H. Nicolaisen for Scotland’s river-names. Now, one must face the probability that pre-Celtic hydronyms were adopted by the Celts and modified by them. Like most things, it is a question of judgement. There are forms which nobody can explain as Celtic. The River Humber of northern England can be cited here, for its name is quite unlike anything in Welsh, Irish, or Gaulish. On the other hand, one should be beware of dismissing as “pre-Celtic” any particular difficult toponym. It may do no more than reflect the researcher’s unfamiliarity with Celtic naming-patterns. In short, as with most things, each question must be resolved on an individual basis by thorough analysis on the part of competent linguists.

## 9. The Doon of South-West Scotland

Finally, the Doon of Scotland. It flows north-west and enters the sea near Alloway, where Robert Burns was born, and will be familiar from his poetry:

Ye banks and braes o’ bonnie Doon,  
How can ye bloom sae fresh and fair?

— lines beginning the complaint of a seduced and disappointed girl who went with her lover to the river’s wooded slopes [Burns, 1904, 324]. The Doon has been taken as namesake to the Don at Aberdeen, but the reasoning for this is flawed, as can be seen from Kenneth Jackson’s exemplary note on *Aberdeen*. The form is “purely Pictish” with the first element meaning “river-mouth” and the second “goddess” (= the Aberdeenshire Don). Reconstructed Pict. *Dewon* was borrowed by Gaelic and, after shortening of *e* and loss of *w*, gave bisyllabic *Deon*, written in modern Gaelic as *Deathan*, where unstressed *o* has become *a* and hiatus is shown by (silent) *th* [Jackson, 1972, 60–61]. So ‘mouth

of (the river called) Goddess’ is the meaning of *Aberdeen*. More dubiously, this derivation is applied as well to the Doon, recorded in 1197 as *Don* [Field, 1980, 61]. The problem is that the Don of Aberdeen is pronounced with a short vowel: the Doon not so. There is reason to think that *Doon* is instead from a British form in *Dan-* with long vowel. As observed, British long *a* in the years about 500 CE became a long open *o* in Brittonic, always being borrowed with long *o* by Old English. With *Don*, the modern shortening is from the influence of *Doncaster*; elsewhere, as with Frome in Somerset, the vowel is long to this day. While the spelling *Don* of 1197 for the Doon is inconclusive, the modern pronunciation “Doon” is compelling. It appears that the Doon was the ‘gift’ or ‘bestower’ and thus equivalent to the Yorkshire Don and Don of south Tyneside; and perhaps its greater sisters the Rhône of France and the Danube of Central Europe and the Balkans, as a future researcher may before long show in detail.

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#### ABBREVIATIONS

|        |                    |      |              |       |                 |
|--------|--------------------|------|--------------|-------|-----------------|
| Av.    | Avestan            | Ir.  | Irish        | Pict. | Pictish         |
| BLat.  | British-Latin      | Lat. | Latin        | Pol.  | Polish          |
| Brit.  | Brittonic, British | MW.  | Modern Welsh | PW.   | Primitive Welsh |
| CCelt. | Common Celtic      | OE   | Old English  | Skt.  | Sanskrit        |
| Gaul.  | Gaulish            | Olr. | Old Irish    | W.    | Welsh           |
| GLat.  | Gaulish Latin      | OW.  | Old Welsh    |       |                 |

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**ВАЛЛИЙСКОЕ *DAWN* 'ДАР' И ДОНКАСТЕР, ЙОРКШИР**

Донкастер, именуемый в римских источниках *Danum*, — это город в Йоркшире на реке *Дон*. Его латинское название, производное от названия реки, остается неясным: предложенные интерпретации, возводящие топоним к лексемам со значением 'мокрый', 'отвесный, крутой', 'текущий' и предполагающие параллели между этим гидронимом и названиями таких континентальных рек, как *Дунай*, *Днепр*, *Дон* или *Рона*, остаются неубедительными, поскольку не обнаруживают бриттских параллелей. В данной работе предложена новая этимология, позволяющая интерпретировать название как 'Дар' или 'Та, что несет дары' (с отсылкой к речной нимфе). Эта этимология напрямую поддерживается валлийским *dawn* 'дар', а косвенно — названием реки *Аннан* в Шотландии, зафиксированным в латинских источниках в форме *Anava*, которая связана с валлийским *anaw* 'богатство, благосостояние, изобилие, дар' и предположительно отражает представления кельтов о реках как о щедрых богинях. Таким образом, название реки *Дон* в Йоркшире (а равно и реки *Дон*, протекающей в Тайнсайде) может быть объяснено на кельтской основе, что делает ненужными отсылки к индоиранским корням, через которые закономерно объясняют гидронимы *Днепр* и *Дон*. Кроме того, такая интерпретация позволяет еще раз подтвердить, что *Донкастер* не связан с *Cair Daun* в списке 28 городов Британии из «Истории бриттов» (где топоним необходимо читать как *Cair Dam*, т. е. Кардиф) и с богиней *Дон* из средневекового валлийского сборника сказок «Четыре ветви Мабиноги». В то же время предложенная в статье интерпретация позволяет добавить в ряд соименных рек *Дон* в Йоркшире и Тайнсайде реку *Дун* на юго-западе Шотландии.

**Ключевые слова:** кельтские языки, валлийский язык, топонимия Британии, кельтская гидронимия, древнеевропейская гидронимия, этимология, «История бриттов», «Четыре ветви Мабиноги».

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