Baghdād

From Its Beginnings to the 14th Century

Edited by

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BRILL

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CHAPTER 14

City of Poets, Poets of the City

Beatrice Gruendler

Introduction

The history of Arabic literature has been indivisible from that of Baghdād since al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775) founded Madīnat al-Salām in 762. This city influenced like no other the development of Arabic poetry, notably at the crucial transition from a cultural practice of Arab tribes to the means of expression of an emerging multi-ethnic society and a vehicle of Islamic imperial ideology. Not only was Baghdād the seat of the ʿAbbāsid caliphs and the residence of the administrative and military elite who patronized poets and prose writers. A sub-elite consisting of upwardly mobile merchants and manufacturers strove to imitate the elite by forming their own circles, as did poets and writers. Baghdād was also a place where ideas and trends were born, left their mark on the literature and were thus disseminated. Literature was ubiquitous in the city, whether performed orally, set to music, circulated in private notes and letters or distributed in the form of books.

Mosques, courtyards, alleys and the burgeoning book markets were sites of literary sessions, poetic jousts and satirical jabs. Then again, some poetry-accompanying practices unfit for public display, such as wine-drinking, took place behind closed doors. The *modus vivendi* of Arabic literature in public and private spaces thus mirrors the urban character of Arabic-Islamic culture. In turn, Baghdād became the paradigm of the perfect city, a place of nostalgia and the paradise of the literary *imaginaire*, whose fame would outlast all the conquests, destructions and transformations to which the city would later fell prey.[1]

In 836, circumstances forced the caliphal court to relocate to Sāmarrāʾ, circa 100km north of Baghdād as the crow flies. But this did not last, and Caliph al-Muʿtamid (r. 870-892) returned to Baghdād in 884. Sāmarrāʾ was officially abandoned as a residence in 892, but its rapidly crumbling dried brick constructions survive in the verbal architecture of the odes of ʿAlī b. al-Jahm and al-Buḥturī, which describe the residences of Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861). Even during this intermezzo, Baghdād did not lose its attraction. The

1 Cooperson, *Baghdād*.

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panegyrist Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 897), despite being dependent on the elites for his income, excused himself from leaving Baghdād for Sāmarrāʾ with a long *qaṣīda* depicting the hazards of travel.[2]

The presence of prominent poets shows the changing importance of Baghdād over the centuries. The luminaries of the late eighth and early ninth century, Bashshār b. Burd, Abū Nuwās, Muslim b. al-Walīd and Abū l-ʿAtāhiya were firmly ensconced here, as was a generation later the most famous representative of the modern style of poetry, Abū Tammām. His disciple al-Buḥturī alternated between Sāmarrāʾ and Baghdād, whereas the contemporary Ibn al-Rūmī remained faithful to Baghdād. A century later, as the city's fortunes waned, al-Mutanabbī (d. 965), the most famous poet of his time, traveled between the courts of the Ḥamdānids in Aleppo, the Ikhshīdids in Cairo and the Būyids in Shiraz, spending only a year in Baghdād in 962 to edit his collected works. The ingenious free spirit al-Maʿarrī (d. 1057) made only one brief and unsuccessful visit to Baghdād, withdrawing for the remainder of his career to his native village near Aleppo. By the time of the Saljūqs, Baghdād had lost its role as a magnet for poets, as poetry itself had yielded the rank of prestige literature to ornate prose, much of which was by now written elsewhere. One Iraqī-born but itinerant poet, Ṣafī l-Dīn al-Ḥillī (d. 1349), who composed both *qaṣīda*s and strophic poems (*muwashshaḥāt*) himself, devoted a treatise to the emerging colloquial poetic genres, and two of them (*kān wa-kān* and *qūmā*) were Baghdādī creations, in which popular practitioners competed with elite poets.[3]

Back in the first half of the ninth century, Baghdād was brimming with literary activity and provided the backdrop for the rise of modern poetry, which caused much debate among philologists and courtiers. It was a veritable tug-of-war between the dominance of the linguistic norms of classical Arabic (for which poetry had up until then supplied the model) and a new aesthetics, which suited the time and was appreciated by the governing elite. With the artistic acclaim and financial support of the courtly circles, modern poetry triumphed over the defenders of a normative definition of poetry. Instrumental herein was the class of educated courtiers, notably state functionaries (*kuttāb*), who developed a new method of practical criticism to argue in favor of the modern style, long before poetics would become an independent discipline.[4]

2 Gelder, *Terrified Traveller*.

3 On al-Ḥillī, see Heinrichs, *Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī*; on the colloquial genres, see Larkin, *Popular Poetry*, 192, 212-214.

4 See Gruendler, *Abstract Aesthetics*.

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But poetry was not limited to great names. Communication of all sorts was conducted in verse, a medium that was memorable, easy to disseminate and carried social power and cultural prestige. Irrespective of its artistic dimension, poetry simultaneously served practical purposes, and it did so more powerfully if its performance was witnessed by an audience, be that the court, the members of a gathering or bystanders in the street. Singers and street boys alike were used by poets to disseminate their verses. This was common in Baghdād, and the city's physical backdrop plays a major role in the abundant short narratives (*akhbār*, sing. *khabar*) surviving from the ʿAbbāsid period, which constitute a large part of the later historiography and fine literature (*adab*). These accounts should not be taken at face value for the individual incidents they describe, even though they are presented as historical fact and provided with authenticating chains of transmitters. They have also become literature, serving rather to inform about the perceptions and attitudes of their compilers, although, in combination, they offer a kaleidoscopic panorama of plausible scenarios of what might have been.[5]

Poetry and the ʿAbbāsid Caliphs

A frequent topic of such accounts was the goings-on at the caliphal court. It was there that poets had regular audiences on specific days, presenting their odes in hierarchical order if several poets attended. Odes treated momentous events, such as enthronements, designations of heirs and victories, as well as yearly festivals, such as the Breaking of the Fast (*ʿīd al-fiṭr*) at the end of Ramaḍān or the Iranian Nawrūz and Mihrajān (spring and autumn festivals). Specific political issues were picked up on by astute poets, such as the legitimate succession of the ʿAbbāsids versus the same claim of the ʿAlids. But poets also voiced dissenting opinions, such as Diʿbil's (d. 860) praise of ʿAlī l-Riḍā or Ibn al-Rūmī's accusatory lamentation of a Shīʿī martyr.[6] The latter poet also composed a moving lament chastising the caliph's inaction at the suffering of the population of Baṣra during a rebellion of the African agricultural slaves (the Zanj).[7] Caliphs also tried to influence the very genres and styles of poetry.

5 On literary *akhbār*, see Gruendler, *Rise of the Arabic Book*, 27-33 and further research cited there.

6 Ibn al-Rūmī, *Dīwān*, II, 497, no. 365, vv. 51-58.

7 Ibn al-Rūmī, *Dīwān*, VI, 2377-2382, no. 1251.

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Thus, Caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775-785) banned Bashshār from composing love lyrics (*ghazal*), which he considered a threat to public morality (they were indeed risqué and immensely popular).[8] The same caliph pronounced on the relative proportions of the introductory part and the main section in a panegyric ode (considering the amorous introduction a waste of time), and poets were quick to follow up on this.[9] As for the modern style, its cosmic dimensions and fantastic metaphors pleased those in power. This style's intricate language and sophisticated imagery nonetheless posed a problem of understanding. This was pointed out to both Abū Tammām and al-Buḥturī, and whereas Abū Tammām scoffed at the idea of simplifying his style, al-Buḥturī readily adjusted to the level of Caliph al-Mutawakkil's comprehension.[10] Not all poetry for caliphs was destined for public display, only ceremonial odes. Caliph al-Amīn (r. 809-813) thus enjoyed Abū Nuwās's wine poetry in a relaxed and hand-picked company. Libertine poetry amused some caliphs but worried others, such as Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775), who feared the influence of the libertine poet Muṭīʿ b. Iyās (d. 785) on his son Jaʿfar.[11]

Poetry and Urban Topography

Poetry also enjoyed a vibrant existence in the streets of Baghdād, and if some of the accounts about this might have held true for any urban space, Baghdād with its bustling population and mingling crowds was the paradigmatic city of the ʿAbbāsid era. Markets, mosques, gates, bridges and alleys were places where poetry was exchanged (see Figure 14.1). A crucial location was palace gates, where crowds of petitioners and aspiring literati would gather, posturing, competing and strategizing in order to pass beyond the gate to the other side. Sometimes actual contests were held among poets, who received model verses to emulate, and only the winner was admitted. On one occasion the poet Abān al-Lāḥiqī (d. ca. 815) had a veritable job application smuggled into a vizier's palace, advertising his skills in these rhymes:

8 Gruendler, *Farewell to Ghazal*.
9 Gruendler, *Qaṣīda*, 346-347.
10 Al-Ṣūlī, *Life and Times*, § 42.1 and al-Ṣūlī, *Akhbār al-Buḥturī*, no. 30.
11 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, XIII, 288-289.

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FIGURE 14.1 The rogue challenging the learned assembly with riddles, Maqāma 42, *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī, painted by Yaḥyā l-Wāsiṭī in 1237

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كاتبٌ حاسبٌ خطيبٌ بليغٌ ناصحٌ زائدٌ على النُّصّاح [...]
فبِمِثلي تخلو الملوكُ وتلهو وتُناجي في المُشكِلِ الفَدّاح

Scribe, accountant, orator, man of eloquence,
advisor to advisors [...]
With men like me kings withdraw and enjoy distraction,
and whisper about weighty and perplexing affairs.[12]

The boast impressed the vizier, who had a page shout the poem from the top of the palace to identify the anonymous author and invite him inside. The palace gate was also a site of clashes and controversy. After Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī (r. 817-819) had established himself as a counter-caliph, Bedouins from the hinterland of Baghdād (*sawād*) and other hangers-on flocked to him to volunteer as troops, but he lacked funds and kept delaying their payments. As they clamored outside the palace, a messenger came out to admit that the caliph was penniless. The riffraff shouted, "Bring out the caliph to sing three songs to the men of this wing and three songs to the men of that wing as payment". The insult stung, because Ibrāhīm was a better composer than a sovereign. The poet Di'bil recast this event in a satire:

يا معشرَ الأَجنادِ لا تَقنطوا وارضَوْا بما كان ولا تسخطوا
فسوفَ تُعطَون حُنينيَّةً يلتذُّها الأمردُ والأَشمطُ
والمَعبَديّاتُ لِقُوّادكُمْ لا تَدْخلُ الكيسَ ولا تُرْبَطُ
وهكذا يَرزُقُ أَصحابَهُ خليفةٌ مُصحَفُهُ البَرْبَطُ

Army troops, don't give up or put up with what was,
and don't get upset,
You will receive a tune of Ḥunayn, enjoyed alike
by beardless youth and hoary spinster
And for your generals, tunes of Ma'bad,
which cannot be put into a purse and tied up.
Thus pays his army a caliph
whose Koran is the lute.[13]

12 See Gruendler, *Meeting the Patron*, 71-72 and 80-85. See also the variants in Abū Nuwās, *Dīwān. Ed. Wagner/Schoeler*, I, 24-25: *khaṭībun arībun nāṣiḥun rā'jihun*. This and other translations are the author's.

13 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, XX, 103-104; Di'bil, *Dīwān*, 218-219 (no. 135) with two further verses. Ḥunayn al-Ḥīrī and Ma'bad b. Wahb were famous singers.

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Many literary gatherings took place in the public realm, so passers-by could overhear them take part. Mosques, for instance, housed poetic circles, and an old man visiting from Kūfa in the year after al-Amīn's enthronement witnessed another old man recite verses about his bygone youth to a group of people and break out in tears. The visitor, standing apart and listening, was moved, wrote down the verses and upon inquiry learned that the reciter was Abū l-ʿAtāhiya, a poet famous for his moralizing verse.[14]

The poet Diʿbil used a scholars' gathering in front of his neighborhood mosque to recite a threatening quatrain against his neighbor, whom he suspected of having stolen his rooster. (It had indeed ended up in the neighbor's cooking pot.) Those attending noted down the verses, and the neighbor's father, witnessing this, had his son buy up all available chickens for Diʿbil, to forestall any further satire.[15]

Another favored location for poetic gatherings was bridges. The bridge crossing over from the City of Peace to the eastern neighborhood of al-Ruṣāfa famously provided the incipit of an ode by ʿAlī b. al-Jahm with which he made his entry at al-Mutawakkil's court:

عُيونُ المَها بَيْنَ الرُّصافَةِ والجِسْرِ جَلَبْنَ الهَوى مِن حَيْثُ أَدْري ولا أَدْري

Eyes of antelopes between Ruṣāfa and the bridge
arouse passion whence I know and whence I do not know.[16]

Bridges, where passing people of all sorts mingled (see Figure 14.2), offered themselves as places of impromptu performance and guaranteed a large audience. The poet ʿAwf b. al-Muḥallim (d. 835) used a bridge upstream from the prefect's palace to shout down from it a praise poem, just as the returning prefect was passing below in a boat. It spread instantly among the gathered crowds.[17] Abū l-ʿAtāhiya used the populace on a bridge to demonstrate the truth of a poem about people's stinginess. The singer Mukhāriq had asked him to recite this poem right there, but found the closing verse, condemning all mankind, to be exaggerated: "Look around where you like, misers are all you see". The poet challenged him to produce a counterexample from among the gathered crowds. However, the singer failed in his attempts – much to the

14 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xx, 47-48.
15 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xx, 77-78.
16 ʿAlī b. al-Jahm, *Dīwān*, 141-148 (no. 51) and in a longer version ibid., 252-255.
17 Ibn al-Muʿtazz, *Ṭabaqāt al-shuʿarāʾ*, 189.

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FIGURE 14.2 People passing by on Baghdād's Maude Bridge in 1925

poet's satisfaction.[18] The speech of the populace was also a source for poetry. The humorist Abū l-ʿIbar (d. ca. 866), an aristocrat by birth who had found light-hearted verse to be a profitable art, revealed this to be the prime material of the absurdities he constantly produced. To wit, he used to sit each morning, armed with inkwell and papyrus, on a bridge and note down the cacophonous shouting of passers-by, sailors and donkey hirers. Then he would render his jottings completely nonsensical by tearing the transcript down the middle and pasting the halves together back to front.[19]

The army camp was a place that assured dissemination of a poem to the powers that be. Thus, a flyleaf with a couplet by Abū l-ʿAtāhiya (whose natural style was easy to recognize) was picked up in such a camp and passed through several recipients all the way to Caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 813-833), who acknowledged being the proper addressee. The couplet eloquently reminded him of a forgotten promise, and he immediately dispatched a gift to the poet.[20] To publish a couplet belonging to the genre of reprimand anonymously yet

18 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, IV, 79.
19 Al-Ṣūlī, *Ashʿār awlād al-khulafāʾ*, 328.
20 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, IV, 51-52.

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strategically placed was a tactful way to avoid putting the caliph on the spot, because it left him the choice of not acknowledging it.

The population of Baghdād's streets was to poets both a judging audience and a subject for moral commentary. The general Ḥumayd al-Ṭūsī (d. 825) once complained to the poet al-ʿAkawwak (d. 828) that he did not receive verses from him as glorious as those for another general, to wit: "Abū Dulaf is the world, town and country / when Abū Dulaf turns around, the world turns on his heels". The poet reused the same motif for Ḥumayd, but while the earlier verses had spread widely among the populace, the newer ones did not; the public judged for itself.[21] Likewise the public became involved in the satire match between ʿAlī b. al-Jahm, the panegyrist of al-Mutawakkil, and Marwān b. Abī Ḥafṣa, a minor verse-maker from a family of poets. Marwān produced a couplet insinuating that ʿAlī got his talent from being his own father's bastard child, and ʿAlī countered with a couplet expressing aloofness and haughty pride. The public judged in favor of Marwān's humorous insult.[22]

Involving the public in incidents of shaming could be effective. Thus the poet Abū l-ʿAtāhiya intercepted on the street a rich friend remiss in paying him the usual yearly allowance and promptly recited verses saying that he could not wait till Judgment Day. The friend paid up on the spot.[23] When the poet himself was cornered in the Bāb al-Ṭāq neighborhood in eastern Baghdād (named after the archway of the bridge crossing the Tigris there) to pay an open bill to a clothes merchant, he deviously embarrassed the merchant's handsome young assistant, who had come to collect the debt, with verses implying sexual innuendo.[24] But this practice could backfire. Once the same poet was confronted by an eloquent rogue who, after the poet repeatedly refused to give him anything, cited the following couplet by Abū l-ʿAtāhiya (who was also famous for his ascetic verse): "The share of each living being at his death is his shroud". The beggar then inquired what a shroud would cost, and the poet estimated the meager sum of five *dīnār*s. The beggar then asked for only three *dirham*s (a small fraction of this) as payment for digging the poet's grave, exposing the latter's equally well-known stinginess to the laughter of the bystanders.[25]

Other poetry-related events occurred in the city's private spaces. In the home of the above-mentioned singer Mukhāriq, the poet Abū l-ʿAtāhiya asked him to show how the following love couplet could be intoned but swore him to secrecy.

21 Ibn al-Jarrāḥ, *al-Waraqa*, 115-116.
22 Ibn al-Muʿtazz, *Ṭabaqāt al-shuʿarā'*, 391-392.
23 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, IV, 52-53.
24 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, IV, 22-23.
25 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, IV, 20-21.

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قال لي أَحمدُ ولم يدرِ ما بي أَتُحِبّ الغداةَ عُتْبَةَ حقًّا
فتنفَّستُ ثمّ قلت نعم حبًّـــ ـا جرى في العُروق عِرقًا فعِرقا

Aḥmad asked me, unaware of my feelings,
"Do you love ʿUtba really?"
I said with a sigh,
"My love of her runs through every vein".

The couplet did not fail to leak. Taking the singer to an abandoned terrain inhabited only by squatters, the poet confronted him to admit this and asked to hear the song again. Not denying his act, the singer obliged – and his song deeply impressed the poet, who was reconciled as he noticed the delight of the squatters listening around them.[26]

Much went on behind closed doors that was unfit for public display, but about which poetry spread nonetheless. Thus Muṭīʿ b. Iyās, infamous for his escapades, hosted on a day before the Feast of Sacrifices (*ʿīd al-aḍḥā*) a number of companions in his home in the Karkh neighborhood, located on the southwestern side of Baghdād, and invited another friend with a quatrain that left no doubt about the carousing that would be going on there. The verses were secretly reported to Caliph al-Mahdī (who had previously banned Bashshār's publicized *ghazal* for immorality), who was highly amused.[27] More explicit was a versified invitation by Muṭīʿ to another friend for a similar event, which ran:

إن تشتهِ فَسادًا فعندنا فَسادُ
أوْ تشتهِ غُلامًا فعندنا زيادُ

If you want mischief,
we have mischief.
If you want a boy
we have Ziyād.[28]

Muṭīʿ, who made a career of misbehaving, accepted the invitation to a Kūfan merchant's home allegedly to preside at a literary gathering. Unlike what the host had imagined, the poet induced those present to indulge in all sorts of blasphemous behavior, such as kneeling in prayer behind a lightly clad

26 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, IV, 78-79.
27 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, XIII, 296-298.
28 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, XIII, 296-298.

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slave-girl acting as a mock *imām*. The host, though resisting, was compelled to participate. Even if they were thwarted in this instance, the account clearly reveals the typical ambitions of a middle-class professional to act as a literary patron, as well as the lack of respect on the part of a poet, who was popular at court and who stood to gain nothing from such a performance but his own amusement.[29]

Not everybody agreed on the paragons of modern poetry. The debate about Abū Tammām, who went to extremes in his inventions, caused the greatest stir.[30] But his predecessor Muslim b. al-Walīd (d. 823), considered by many to have pioneered the style, experienced something similar. His most famous ode was in praise of a general of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809). It contained the following verse describing the general's ferocity in battle, which combines pun with antithesis:

موفٍ على مُهَجٍ في يَوْمِ ذي رَهَجٍ كأنّهُ أَجَلٌ يَسْعى إلى أَمَلِ

Descending on hearts' blood (*muhaj*) on a day of strife (*rahaj*)
like death (*ajal*) attacking hope (*amal*)[31]

According to the poet-scribe Ibrāhīm b. al-ʿAbbās al-Ṣūlī (d. 946), this was the only verse of poetry he ever reused in his letter-writing.[32] But another scribe walked out of Muslim's long recitations of his poems at a feast, calling them nothing special and wondering what the caliph and the elite found in them.[33] As often, criticism was a social game, and the poet had to have the last word: he called the man back and retorted with satire, "Your honor is too small to be lampooned / while praise, as you know, is much beyond you […]".[34]

Conclusion

As the above examples have shown, poetry had various locations, audiences and currencies. While the famous poets produced verbal artifices that caliphs

29 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, XIII, 315-317.
30 For a detailed depiction, see al-Ṣūlī, *Life and Times*, xv-xvi and §§ 1-28.
31 For a rhetorical analysis, see Heinrichs, *Muslim*, 230. The opposite concept of hope (*amal*) and death (*ajal*) are expressed in words with identical morphological form and last letter.
32 Al-Ṣūlī, *Life and Times*, § 55.1.
33 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, XVIII, 332-333.
34 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, XVIII, 333 and al-Ṣūlī, *Life and Times*, § 24.1. In another version the satire is addressed at the poet Diʿbil.

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rewarded with houses, horses, garbs of honor, perfume or gold and silver coins in five-digit sums – and that kept critics busy explaining them and anthologists excerpting them for centuries to come – other poets chose a more modest audience. Those accepted smaller gifts from friends and neighbors, merchants and artisans, such as Abū Mukhaffaf ʿĀdhir b. Shākir (d. after 833), who made his daily rounds in Baghdād on a donkey, praising bread and accepting it as payment, and even using a small account book to keep abreast of his many small donors.[35]

The city was a place of publication and reception, especially for the non-official kind of poetry (love lyric, ascetic poetry, satire and obscene poetry). The less formal content also affected the style. The simpler a satire, the faster it circulated, and love lyrics composed in shorter meters were easier to intone into catchy tunes. But the city also entered more deeply into the fabric of poetry, supplying poets with their very material. Here they took their inspiration for a type of verse that was essentially urban. What their predecessors had found in the fauna and flora of the desert, the Baghdādī poets took from the topography and the inhabitants of the city, and the resulting verse was at times down to earth and at other times critical or immoral, breathing the cosmopolitan and unruly spirit of the capital.

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35 Ibn al-Jarrāḥ, *al-Waraqa*, 122-124.

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