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THE WORSHIPPERS AT THE SANCTUARY OF DIANA NEMORENSIS: AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER AND SOCIAL COMPOSITION BASED ON CULT EVIDENCE

OS ADORADORES DO SANTUÁRIO DE DIANA NEMORENSIS: UMA ANÁLISE DE GÊNERO E COMPOSIÇÃO SOCIAL COM BASE EM EVIDÊNCIAS DE CULTO

LOS DEVOTOS EN EL SANTUARIO DE DIANA NEMORENSIS: UN ANÁLISIS DEL GÉNERO Y DE LA COMPOSICIÓN SOCIAL A PARTIR DE LAS EVIDENCIAS CULTUALES

João Messias Sousa da Silva
Universidade de Amsterdam, Amsterdam Centre of Ancient Studies and Archaeology (ACASA), Amsterdam – Noord Holland – The Netherlands
joao.sousa.da.silva@student.uva.nl
ORCID: 0009-0007-4716-3957

Pieter ten Kleij
Universidade de Amsterdam, Amsterdam Centre of Ancient Studies and Archaeology (ACASA), Master European and Mediterranean Archaeology, Amsterdam – Noord Holland – The Netherlands
pietertenkleij@yahoo.com
ORCID: 0009-0004-6603-6898

Abstract: Diana is a multifaceted goddess represented in different ways and spheres throughout history. Yet, ancient and modern authors claim that she was worshipped mainly, or even exclusively, by women, and the archaeological record from the sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis at Nemi challenges this view. To investigate this assertion, this study examines selected cult evidence from the sanctuary, including votive offerings, inscriptions, and portrait material, to test whether the material corroborates or refutes a women-only devotion. The same body of evidence is then used to outline who the devotees were and how they engaged with the sanctuary. The results indicate mixed participation by men and women and reveal several social groups among the worshippers, including actors and musicians as well as slaves and freed persons, alongside locals from Aricia and visitors from farther afield. The sanctuary's theatre likely functioned as an essential setting for ritual and performance. This study also addresses the fact that, economically, raw material classes, such as terracotta versus marble, are a volatile proxy, as marble can be removed or reused. Other indicators, however, such as workmanship, pigment, and complexity, suggest that patrons come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Overall, the archaeological record suggests that Nemi appears to have attracted a socially and economically diverse community of devotees.
Keywords: Diana Nemorensis; Sanctuary; Nemi; Cult Evidence.

Resumo: Diana é uma deusa multifacetada, representada de diferentes formas e esferas ao longo da história. Ainda assim, autores antigos e modernos afirmam que ela teria sido cultuada principalmente, ou mesmo exclusivamente, por mulheres, visão que o registro arqueológico do santuário de Diana Nemorensis, em Nemi, desafia. Para investigar essa hipótese, este estudo examina evidências de culto selecionadas do santuário, incluindo ofertas votivas, inscrições e retratos escultóricos, a fim de testar se o material corrobora

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ou refuta uma devoção exclusivamente feminina. O mesmo conjunto de evidências é então utilizado para delinear quem eram os devotos e como se relacionavam com o santuário. Os resultados indicam participação mista de homens e mulheres e revelam vários grupos sociais entre os fiéis, incluindo atores e músicos, bem como escravos e libertos, ao lado de moradores de Arícia e visitantes oriundos de regiões mais distantes. O teatro do santuário provavelmente funcionou como cenário essencial para ritos e performances. Este estudo também ressalta que, do ponto de vista econômico, classes de materiais, como terracota versus mármore, são um indicador instável, pois o mármore pode ter sido removido ou reutilizado. Outros indicadores, porém, como acabamento, pigmentação e complexidade, sugerem patronos provenientes de uma gama de contextos socioeconômicos. Em conclusão, o registro arqueológico indica que Nemi atraiu uma comunidade de devotos social e economicamente diversa.
Palavras-chave: Diana Nemorensis; Santuário; Nemi; Evidências de culto.

Resumen: Diana es una diosa multifacética, representada de diversas maneras y ámbitos a lo largo de la historia. Sin embargo, autores antiguos y modernos han sostenido que fue venerada principalmente —o incluso de forma exclusiva— por mujeres, una postura que el registro arqueológico del santuario de Diana Nemorensis en Nemi pone en cuestión. Para evaluar esta afirmación, el presente estudio analiza un conjunto seleccionado de evidencias cultuales del santuario —ofrendas votivas, inscripciones y retratos escultóricos— con el fin de comprobar si el material corrobora o refuta una devoción exclusivamente femenina. El mismo conjunto se emplea para perfilar quiénes fueron los devotos y cómo se relacionaron con el santuario. Los resultados apuntan a una participación mixta de hombres y mujeres y revelan varios grupos sociales entre los fieles, incluidos actores y músicos, así como esclavos y libertos, junto con habitantes de Aricia y visitantes procedentes de lugares más lejanos. El teatro del santuario probablemente funcionó como un marco esencial para el ritual y la representación. Asimismo, se subraya que, desde el punto de vista económico, las clases de material —como la terracota frente al mármol— son un indicador inestable, ya que el mármol puede retirarse o reutilizarse. Otros indicios, no obstante, como la calidad de ejecución, la pigmentación y la complejidad, sugieren que los dedicantes procedían de una amplia gama de contextos socioeconómicos. En conjunto, el registro arqueológico sugiere que Nemi atrajo a una comunidad de devotos social y económicamente diversa.
Palabras clave: Diana Nemorensis; Santuario; Nemi; Evidencias de culto.

1. Introduction

This research utilizes cult evidence to discuss the worshippers of the sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis. The study combines material culture, inscriptions, and contextual reports to clarify the sanctuary's construction phases, history, ritual use, situating gendered participation and social diversity within the devotees. The sanctuary remains are in the Alban Hills, the current province of Lazio, around 25-30 kilometers southeast of Rome. In the past, the temple would have had a special connection with the ancient

city of Aricia, and its landscape, surrounded by mountains, dense woods, and the northern portion of Lake Nemi, a lake well known as a volcanic crater, formed the ideal scenario for the emergence of an important temple that would last for centuries.

The site, first uncovered in the 16th century, was excavated in several campaigns and is still the subject of research nowadays. Although the sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis is widely mentioned in written and archaeological sources, early documentation of this site is problematic. The proper identification of the place as the Temple of Diana occurred first in 1637 during the excavations conducted by Marchesi Frangipani (Blagg, 1985). Even though these initial campaigns were guided by antiquarian speculation, they revealed significant findings, including inscriptions, votives, figurines, and anatomical parts. After this phase, in 1885, Sir John SavileLumley began his survey, aiming to excavate the sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis as described by Strabo (Wallis, 1893). The material found in this campaign reinforced the tie with Diana and confirmed the site's location as the “Artemision”. The documentation and initial report of these excavations are notably poor, and the discovered objects were divided between Savile and the landowner, Prince Filippo Orsini.

The archaeological material recovered from the sanctuary at Nemi is today dispersed across several international collections, including the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, the museums of Nottingham in the United Kingdom, and the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia, as well as other institutions outside Italy. As mentioned previously, these objects were removed mainly during a period of antiquarian excavations, characterized by limited regulation and the active circulation of artifacts on the international art market, resulting in the extensive relocation of finds abroad. Concerning the further investigations, Orsini conducted additional excavations between 1886 and 1895; however, the discoveries from these were lost, and there is no sign of documentation. Additionally, partial and ongoing surveys have been providing more information about the site. A small theater, probably constructed in the 1st century BCE, was uncovered during recent excavations in the early 20th century. These new researchers, led by Ghini and Diosono, focused on systematic stratigraphic excavations, architectural analysis, and contextual study of previously unearthed material (Ghini & Diosono, 2012). The discovery of the architectural remains and associated material culture at the Sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis provides compelling evidence for a distinctive connection between the cult site and the world of performance, particularly actors and musicians. This special relationship between the sanctuary and performers will

be further explored in the following sections of this research, particularly in relation to the social composition of the dedicants and the functions of the sanctuary within its cultural landscape.

Despite the problems with the documentation of the excavations already mentioned, analysis of the archaeological material discovered, together with the architectural materials, still allows us to conclude that the sanctuary was built on a site already in use since at least the archaic period. Furthermore, it is also feasible to establish at least three main phases for Nemi (Ghini & Diosono, 2012). The first phase dates to the late 4th to early 3rd century BCE, and mainly corresponds to the layout documented by Lord Savile Lumley. The second phase occurred probably from the second half of the 2nd century BCE. The third phase, around the late 1st century BCE until the 2nd century CE, was the latest and most significant period. During this phase, the temple was expanded, and Nemi received important individual offerings.

It is precisely these personal offerings, such as votives, that have sparked debate about who Diana's worshippers really were. As will be discussed later in this paper, exist different sources claiming that the cult of Diana was traditionally believed to appeal exclusively to women and for reasons related to the female sphere. However, the archaeological record, including the material discovered at Nemi, challenges this assumption regarding Diana's worshippers, and besides gender, the cult evidence also points to interesting connections between the sanctuary and specific social groups, such as actors, musicians, and freedmen. Taking these aspects into consideration, this article aims to answer the following research question: "What does cult evidence reveal about the gender and social composition of the worshippers at the Sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis from the Roman Republic to the Roman Imperial Period?".

2. Methodology

In order to answer the proposed research question, this research used a mixed-method design to reassess the gender of worshippers by comparing primary material evidence with secondary scholarly interpretations. The analysis proceeded in two stages: (1) identification and coding of gender signals in selected primary sources; and (2) systematic comparison of those results with prevailing interpretations in the literature.

Regarding the cult evidence, individual votive offerings bearing inscriptions that explicitly identify the gender of the worshippers were selected. Additionally, epigraphic material, portraits, and statues have been considered. For the written sources, this paper draws on ancient and contemporary accounts. The objective is to compare whether the archaeological record challenges or corroborates the view implied by the literature.

It is essential to mention that some cult material was omitted in this research. The architectural remains, with no clear inscriptions, lamps, glass vessels, or coins, were therefore excluded from analysis. Furthermore, regarding the time period, although the sanctuary has operated in different historical periods, only the periods from the Roman Republic to the Roman Imperial Period (around 509 BCE to 200 CE) were selected because they provide a more conclusive cult material to answer the proposed research question, also because this is the time period in which the sanctuary had several modifications in the cult form attested by the archaeological evidence.

3. Discussion

3.1 Gender: Diana Nemorensis and the female sphere

Diana Nemorensis is a diverse goddess represented in different forms throughout history. For Strabo, she was a guardian of wildlife and nature who gradually assimilated barbaric “Scythian” elements over time (Hermans, 2017). She was also represented as Diana Trivia, the goddess of crossroads presiding over the intersections between life and the afterlife. Furthermore, in some ancient records, such as those written by Varro and Cicero, the goddess is a synonym for representing the moon.

These representations and Diana’s connection to liminality, or the state of being at a threshold, can provide additional insights into why the geographical location of Nemi is an ideal location for the worship of Diana. As the guardian of wildlife and nature, she travels at the crossroads between nature and culture, human and animal, and life and death. As a representation of the moon, she embodies the passage of time and the moon’s cyclical phases. These associations do not reflect static boundaries but fluid interactions between opposing elements that are fueled by transition rather than fixed interaction. However, many of these associations with Diana remain mysterious (Mancini, 2019). As such, the setting of Nemi is a geographical example of the liminality and mystery that Diana embodies. The sanctuary is located within a volcanic crater, surrounded by dense

forests and Lake Nemi, which was referred to in ancient times as speculum Dianae, or the mirror of Diana, due to the lake reflecting the moonlight so clearly that it functioned as a natural source of light for surrounding wildlife, whilst also providing hunters with game (Diana, s.d., online). The crater itself, formed where opposites fire and water met, functioned as a natural threshold as well as being an indication of a goddess that is involved with nature (Mancini, 2019). As a result, accessing the sanctuary meant crossing a threshold. Visitors had to move away from the cultivated landscape of the nearby Aricia and into the dense forests in which the sanctuary was located, mirroring Diana's position situated between opposing realms.

At this location, ritual and geography were able to interact to showcase Diana's liminality, as moonlight processions around the lake could have functioned as a representation of her embodiment of the moon and her association with cycles. Through her representation of the moon(light), the goddess was also able to guide her worshippers through the dense woods, helping them pass this dark and hard-to-navigate threshold. Additionally, the sanctuary's theater could have functioned as a space of transition as everyday identity is transformed into sacred representations or performances. Such a view on the function of the theater might help to explain why the sanctuary was frequented by actors, musicians, and freed persons. These people formed a group in Roman society that was at a threshold themselves, with actors even branded with legal infamia during the Empire (Frank, 2019). As a result, they were neither entirely excluded nor wholly integrated into society as a whole. By making dedications, either physical or ceremonial, they were able to participate, crossing the threshold, where they would not be able to in general. This is further indicated by the groves surrounding the lake being used as neutral ground for ritual gatherings that included hostile communities. By using the groves dedicated to Diana, the leaders were able to come together, making opposites meet under the watchful eye of the goddess (Mancini, 2019).

The location of the sanctuary thus represents an ideal view of Diana's liminality. Within the woods, the location is remote but still accessible. Located within nature but still monumental, the sanctuary can be seen as a point of contact between the human world, the natural world, and the divine world. A threshold that served to connect opposites.

However, even with the variety of representations connected to Diana, there are

several written sources, both ancient and contemporary, that reiterate her connection with the feminine universe. Hermans discusses the topic of gender and provides examples from different chronological periods. She demonstrates that Cicero and Pliny associated Diana's moon aspect with the menstrual cycle (Hermans, 2017). Besides that, she argues that for some contemporary authors, such as Georg Wissowa, Diana was a goddess worshipped by women in labour, wives, and mothers. Wissowa not only used written accounts to support his argument but also some archaeological materials, such as anatomical figures of male and female genitals.

Indeed, several of these artifacts were found in the sanctuary. Moltesen states that Lord Savile brought to his mansion around 400 terracotta votives, 684 Roman Republican coins, and some statues made of bronze or marble (Moltesen, 2000). Furthermore, some cult evidence might initially appear to support this specific feminine focus argued by Wissowa. There is a bronze arrowhead dating back to ca. 300 BCE, which contains the inscription diana mereto / noutrix paperia and was interpreted as an offering pro lacte. Also, a bronze plaque dating back to the early 2nd century BCE, which refers to a woman who granted a small statue to Diana on behalf of her son. However, the later archaeological cult including the votive plaques and statue bases corroborates Herman's claiming that the idea of Diana being exclusively or primarily worshipped by women cannot be sustained. The archaeological material discovered at Nemi is diverse, and the way of worshipping Diana has changed over the years.

Based on the archaeological record discovered to date, it is possible to infer that around the 4th century BCE votives were more common in the sanctuary. However, starting in the Middle Republic, inscriptions became the preferred method of addressing Diana, gradually replacing the practice of offering anatomical and other types of votives. According to Rous, during the late Republican period, there was a noticeable transition from ex-votos par destination to ex-votos par transformation (Rous, 2010). Rous also suggests that votive offerings underwent a process of increasing standardization, and that ex votos par transformation emerged as a response to this uniformity. According to the author, this development reflects a form of religious pragmatism, in which practical considerations influenced devotional practices while maintaining a deep connection to the sacred (Rous, 2010). At Nemi, around 60 inscriptions can be associated with the sanctuary and its cult practice. From those, most are votive plaques with private dedications.

Within the archaeological record, inscriptions are a good object of study because

they can sometimes indicate the devotee's gender and even social status. In the case of Nemi, it is precisely these materials that do not support the idea that the cult of Diana was a cult exclusively worshipped by women. Different cult evidence was found at the sanctuary, such as the private dedication offered by male devotees. Hermans mentions a man named Ovios Scarbenios, who devoted a libation ladle known as a simpulum. She also cited L. Lucretius Sedulus, a man who devoted a small statuette to the goddess, and Marcus Livius, who was probably a local praetor and donated a big statue. Not only in the sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis but also in other sacred places, inscriptions have proven to be a vital archaeological material because they provide ample evidence that cults traditionally believed to appeal exclusively to women, such as those dedicated to Diana at Nemi, also attracted male worshippers (Schultz, 2006).

Also reinforcing Herman's claim that Diana was a goddess worshipped by both genders, the study conducted by Bilde attests the presence of male worshippers in both historical periods addressed in this research. The study conducted by Bilde examines the role and significance of votive offerings. She highlights how these objects functioned not merely as personal expressions of faith but also as material mediators between worshippers and the divine, reflecting broader patterns of identity, ritual, and communal participation. In the case of the Sanctuary of Diana at Nemi, the dataset is composed of herms, busts, statues known from inscriptions, and other types, including one unidentified portrait (Guldager Bilde, 2000). The majority of objects date to the Imperial period, but the crucial point involving gender is the fact that male portraits are not only present throughout the whole period but also represent five times more than female portraiture. Bilde's data is not a recent study, and the identification or discovery of new portraits could change the numbers. However, it is still reasonable evidence to demonstrate that male participation occurred in the selected chronology of this paper.

According to Hermans, the concept of Diana Nemorensis being venerated mainly by females and for female-specific reasons is a modern interpretation, and it is refuted by the variety of cult evidence (Hermans, 2017). In a broader context, men usually emerge in religious dedications in an official capacity, such as a magisterial position, and their private dedications usually pertain to business aspects. Women, contrarily, mostly make offerings for their loved ones guided by familial concerns. The prevalence of one gender among worshippers of a particular deity was typically driven by personal preference

rather than formal impediments. In the epigraphic records, women and men are also community donors. Evaluating the material as a whole, women were indeed engaged in the sanctuary activities. However, as stated by Marja-Leena Hänninen, it is not possible to call the cult at Nemi a women's cult in the sense that just or specifically, women worshipped Diana (Hänninen, 2000). To conclude, it is essential to reiterate that this section aims to demonstrate the presence of male dedicants within the worshippers at the sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis and then compare with the existing material found in the literature. It does not advance a hierarchy of gendered participation. The essential role of women in the sanctuary is well attested by the archaeological record, including votives and statuary. Furthermore, their presence remains foundational to any interpretation of the cult, and a significant donation made by a woman will be addressed in the next section. The female agency was neither marginal nor incidental. The objective here is restricted to establishing male participation alongside female devotion, correcting an exclusionary reading without replacing it with another.

In addition to gender, the material cult at Nemi also provides valuable information involving social groups. Starting with actors and musicians, the cult record indicates an essential connection with these groups. A man named C. Fundilius Doctus, who identified himself as an actor, raised a statue. Moreover, the cult evidence demonstrates that the theater would have been an important topic for the devotees. A woman of senatorial status named Volusia Cornelia certainly had an important role in restoring a theater and possibly baths, since her name is found on building inscriptions and lead pipes. In the case of the musicians, Hermans mentions a peperino plaque indicating the presence of tibicines and fidicines. According to her, they were presumably united in one collegium and accompanied the ritual proceedings for the goddess (Hermans, 2017). These musicians were liberti, another crucial group of the sanctuary.

The epigraphic record attests to the presence of several liberti in the sanctuary at Nemi. Fundilius, for example, is not only an influential actor but also a freedman. Herman notes that several modern scholars, including Robert Schilling, Carin Green, and Lora Holland, have argued that the cult at Nemi may have been particularly appealing to slaves and freed individuals (Hermans, 2017). In this theory, many devotees visited this sanctuary specifically to offer thanks for their freedom. Nevertheless, it can not be fully sustained since there are several freedmen inscriptions in other sanctuaries in other parts of Italy. Therefore, at Nemi, it is possible to affirm that slaves were probably part of the devotees, but offering objects due to their freedom was not an aspect of the cult exclusive

to Nemi.

Regarding the economic aspect, one should be careful when using votives to confirm the association of sanctuaries as a whole with precise economic groups (Rous, 2010). Although terracotta was cheaper than bronze, and the use of molds allowed its production on a large scale (Blagg, 1985), the presence of more terracotta offerings than marble does not necessarily point to the presence of a poor society. Sometimes, the materials are not found in the excavations, and as in the case of marble, some artifacts could also have been reused, disappearing from the archaeological record. Considering this, Skovmøller & Sargent investigated nine portrait sculptures found at Nemi. They investigated a group of portrait sculptures from the Sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis, focusing on their original polychromy. Through a close examination of the sculptures' surfaces and carving techniques, the authors identify and analyze traces of their original painted decoration (Skovmøller & Sargent, 2013). This research considered not only the material itself, but also traces of the original paint to investigate the quality of the material, and therefore, the cost of these objects at that time. The results demonstrated that the sculptures are from the first century CE, and the material found in the toga on Fundilius, including the efforts put into the surface detailing, texturing, and painting, suggested that he was probably a prominent man and had resources.

Skovmøller & Sargent also claim that considerable wealthy Romans were attracted to the sanctuary at Nemi during the late Republican and early Imperial periods (Skovmøller & Sargent, 2013). When examining the sanctuary as a whole, the archaeological evidence seems to corroborate this, considering that in this period the temple was indeed expanded and Nemi received important individual offerings, including additions of small rooms to the buildings, and an imperial statuary. Overall, the cult evidence attests to the presence of worshippers with different economic backgrounds. Some devotees were locals, ordinary people, and elite, from Aricia, who acted as dedicators. Others were from faraway communities. Finally, there is also the presence of other high-status members, including imperial elites.

4. Conclusion

This research has engaged directly with the cult evidence while remaining mindful

of its limitations, addressing the question of who the worshippers at the Sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis were, both in terms of gender and social composition, from the Roman Republic to the Imperial Period. The evidence is fragmentary and often filtered through antiquarian recovery, which complicates the proper interpretation. Even so, by comparing the archaeological record with the existing literature, it is still possible to draw cautious, evidence-based inferences about the people who participated in the cult. Patterns in the categories of votives, individual offerings, and their distribution across contexts allow us to outline the likely composition of the worshippers, including gendered participation and the presence of multiple social groups.

Concerning gender, the cult evidence at Nemi suggests a mixed community of worshippers, comprising both men and women. Bilde's portrait corpus, in which male portraits are attested across the Republican and Imperial phases and outnumber female portraits, and the epigraphic evidence recording explicit male dedicants, such as the simpulum, L. Lucretius Sedulus statuette, and Marcus Livius statue, document not only male agency in private offerings but also their existence. Taken together, these data corroborate male participation alongside female devotion, showing that the long-standing idea of Diana's cult as exclusive to women cannot be sustained.

For the social aspect, the cult evidence suggests a diverse constituency of devotees, including at least actors, musicians, and slaves. The presence of the theater and local epigraphy suggests a durable link between the sanctuary, Aricia, and communities of performers active in ritual and spectacle. Regarding the slaves, some authors have proposed a special affinity between the sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis and this group. Nevertheless, his interpretation cannot be fully sustained. Slaves and freed people were likely among the devotees, as demonstrated by the archaeological record; however, freedmen's dedications of the type found at Nemi occur widely at other Italian sanctuaries.

Overall, the cult evidence found at Nemi can certainly provide fascinating insights into the devotees, and there are still possibilities for further study. As mentioned in this research, interpretations that treat terracotta as the typical offering of the poor require caution. Terracotta was cheaper and mass-producible, but a preponderance of terracotta does not, by itself, prove the presence of poor worshippers in the sanctuary; marble could be removed or reused and drop out of the record, making material class an unstable proxy for wealth. A more nuanced approach, such as the study by Skovmøller & Sargent on Nemi's portraits, which weighs workmanship, pigment traces, and surface complexity, offers a productive strategy for probing cost and status beyond raw material alone; their

results suggest patrons across a spectrum of means and even the attraction of wealthier Romans in the late Republic and early Empire. Taken together, the evidence suggests a mixed economic community, comprising locals from Aricia, both ordinary people and the local elite, as well as dedicators, devotees arriving from farther afield, and the presence of other high-status members, including imperial elites.

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Sobre os autores

João Messias Sousa da Silva
Mestrando do curso Digital Archeology and Heritage, Universidade de Amsterdam (UVA).
Contribuição de autoria: autor

Pieter ten Kleij
Mestre em European and Mediterranean Archaeology, Universidade de Amsterdam (UVA).
Contribuição de autoria: coautor

Como referenciar este artigo

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