

'He Plays on the Pillory'. The Use of Musical Instruments for Punishment in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era

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Abstract

Illustrations by the Dutch renaissance artists Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Jan Wierix both show a man imprisoned on a pillory, a former place of enforcement of judicial sentences, and playing a musical instrument. Taken as legal iconographic sources, these illustrations of the old saying 'He plays on the pillory' can be understood as references to a specific kind of punishment used in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era. Specifically, delinquents had to wear wooden or iron 'neck violins' or 'neck flutes' while being pilloried or chased through the streets in order to be humiliated in public. As well as this historical fact, there also exists an interpretation that takes the illustrations by Bruegel and Wierix literally. It suggests that these punishment practices originally date back to a more ancient use of real instruments in a penal system that was applied and understood as a 'healing punishment' (*poena medicinalis*) to banish the ill and re-establish the good in the delinquent, the community and the world as a whole due to musical sounds. By means of legal iconographical and historical methods, this article explores the different nuances of punishment that

employed real or symbolic musical instruments. Thus, it examines a historical aspect of 'music in detention' where the (symbolic) sounds do not emanate from the punisher but from the punished themselves.

Key words: Medieval punishments, torture, pillory, public humiliation, musical instruments, *poena medicinalis*, legal history

In 1559, Pieter Bruegel the Elder created a famous painting called *Netherlandish Proverbs*. It shows over 100 different visualisations of proverbs, folk metaphors or 'proverbial phrases'¹ (p. 11) used at that time. Regarding the context of 'music in detention', one of the proverbs illustrated in the Bruegel painting is of particular interest. In the centre of the upper part a man with an open mouth can be seen playing a stringed instrument—which appears to be a violin or its medieval parent, the fiddle, while kneeling in a kind of cage built on a pole. It is clear that this is a place for the enforcement of judicial sentences, since the painting shows hacked-off hands (a punishment for perjurers) as well as hacked-off ears (a punishment for thieves) nailed to the framework of the cage (fig. 1). A similar illustration can be found in an etching by Jan Wierix that was created about ten years later, using one of Bruegel's paintings as a model. In the background of this etching, a man can be seen standing in exactly the same type of

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Fig. 1: Bruegel (1559), painting detail
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pillory, this time playing a wind instrument that may be a shawm (a predecessor of the oboe) or a flute (fig. 2). These picture details arouse our interest because, in these portrayals, the artists combined an instrument of law enforcement and ‘detention’ (a pillory) with instruments of music, the latter being played not by the punishers but by the punished themselves.

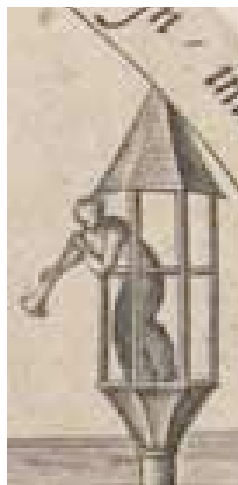


Fig. 2: Wierix (around 1569), etching detail
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The illustrations raise questions about their historical background. Which proverb did Bruegel, and with him Wierix, intend to depict here? What is the relationship between the visualisations, the underlying proverb and the penal system in the Holy Roman Empire which in Bruegel’s and Wierix’s lifetimes encompassed areas which currently include the Netherlands and Germany as well as parts of Poland, Austria, Italy and France? In this regard, what relevance did the pillory have, and what was the significance of the musical instruments? The present article aims to provide answers to these questions. By combining artistic, legal, cultural and historical considerations, it examines the legal concepts on which ‘music in detention’ might have been based during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era. In this context it is important to remember that in the Netherlands of Bruegel’s time, no unified body of law was yet in force (as for example the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina* of 1530). Instead, there were four different legal sources: Roman law, princely edicts, and a large number of local and customary laws. The type of punishment this article deals

with belongs to customary law, which was operational in the Netherlands as well as throughout the entire Holy Roman Empire² (for these types of punishments in England see e.g. Ingram³).

The presumption is that Bruegel reflected the legal practices of the 16th century in his paintings, just as the poet Dante Alighieri included the legal practices of the early 14th century in his *Divine Comedy*. Still, Bruegel and Dante used their work to express themselves artistically; therefore their artworks have an artistic surplus of meaning compared to reality.

On this basis, this article will first connect the details of Bruegel's painting and its potentially related proverb to legal practices that were common in his time, namely public humiliation and mirror punishments. For example, these practices were enforced through public 'wearing' of symbolic violins or flutes made of wood or iron. Second, I will refer to a speculative but interesting interpretation by Herbert Fischer, who took seriously the pictorial details of Bruegel's painting and the corresponding proverb respectively as an indication of laws that have long been forgotten. Fischer assumed that long before the Middle Ages, musical instruments similar to those shown in the painting and etching were used in law enforcement, for the purpose of 'healing'. This article intends to modify Fischer's interpretation based on the assumption that any kind of music within a legal act, no matter if it be decorative, declarative or constitutive in character^{4,5}, was seen as analogous to the harmonious and balanced condition that the legal system necessarily imposed on the world. So, every indictable offence was a violation of that harmony. Re-establishing this harmony was the primary aim of jurisdiction. My aim is to show that the medieval and early modern punishment of

wearing symbolic musical instruments can be linked with Fischer's cultural and historical ideas that both sides of 'music in detention' are apparent in these kinds of punishments. Although music often has a pleasant, supportive and healing effect, it can also be tormenting, in this case through its use for public shaming. In this context, music becomes an instrument of torture.

Bruegel's painting is part of a multiplicity of artworks that include representations of common proverbs. In many of these works, the chosen proverbs are identical. Collecting proverbs was very much in vogue in Europe in the late 15th and 16th centuries^{6 (p 22)} and found expression in encyclopaedias as well as the arts. For example, Erasmus of Rotterdam's 'Collectanea Adagiorum', one of the many proverb collections of that time, increased from 800 proverbs in its first edition of 1,500 to over 4,000 in the last edition of 1560.^{6 (p 22)} Because Bruegel did not name his painting or the proverbs represented in it, one cannot be absolutely sure of their exact meaning. While in many cases the corresponding proverbs are easy to find, for the pillory scene that is the starting point of my investigation there is apparently no common proverb that matches the shown scene exactly. Numerous attempts have been made to explain these particular picture details and to find the correct proverb. One of these attempts has been to connect them with the saying 'De speelman is op het dak' ['The gleeman is on the roof']^{7 (p 54)}, meaning that someone sees things through rose-coloured spectacles. This saying obviously does not match the pictures that explicitly show a pillory and not a roof, and therefore a punishment usage, not matching a situation where one might see things through rose-coloured spectacles. Also, the old saying 'Iemand aan de kaak stellen' ['To pillory someone']^{6 (p 110)} that has been

proposed time and again in relevant secondary literature does not match this picture since it does not reference the playing of music. So neither saying fits the distinctive features of this picture. In most of the accompanying commentaries, however, these picture details are known as 'Hij speelt op de kaak'⁸ (p 332) ['He plays on the pillory']. There are different interpretations of this saying. One approach presumes that it means 'Someone acquires something unlawfully'⁹; it is also understood as an admonishment, meaning 'If you stand on the pillory, do not also angle for someone's attention'.⁹ (p 57)

Obviously, an unambiguous assignment of a particular proverb to the illustrations is difficult. Instead, it seems easier to connect the details of Bruegel's and Wierix's work to the legal practices that must have been familiar to them and their contemporaries. Within the penal system (not only) of the Holy Roman Empire, as well as common practice, pillories of different forms were widely used to dishonour criminals responsible for all kinds of offences. Records of pillory punishments can be found beginning in circa 1200 AD.¹⁰ (col. 1881) Pillorying was done with the purpose of humiliating someone in public. Punishments for discreditable actions were conducted in front of the community and therefore commonly observed. These were public performances, in which the observing crowd played the parts both of a receiving audience and an active executor, and which were therefore in their character absolutely comparable with theatre performances.¹¹ (p185ff),^{12,13} The close relationship between theatre and law enforcement also becomes apparent in the pillories, often built at a higher level similar to a stage. For example, the form of pillory painted by Bruegel was known as a 'stage pillory'. Pillories could, and sometimes still can, be found in public places or next to public

buildings (such as a town hall), where everyone could gather and watch the convict. Because of the public character of this punishment, it was thought of as a deterrent as well as retribution. Another aspect of pillorying was to uphold the law for the future because it was assumed that, through witnessing pillorying, members of the community would be more likely to keep track of the activities of the delinquent and thereby prevent more wrongdoing.¹⁰ (col. 1881) Because the public played an important role in the effectiveness of the punishment by first taunting the delinquent and then monitoring them, pillorying someone was not only a legal sentence, but was also an act of popular justice.

Together with the iron collar, the pillory is counted among the stationary instruments of punishment. There was also a category of portable equipment that lawbreakers were forced to wear, either while being pilloried or while walking through the streets. People of the Middle Ages were very imaginative in the invention of a whole range of these portable tools, tools which in some way revealed, characterised or mirrored the misdemeanour: straw crowns resembling bridal bouquets for fallen women, oversized rosaries for those who missed church without an excuse or fell asleep during service, chains made from huge dice and playing cards for people who had cheated at cards.¹⁴ (col. 1351) Shame masks were also used. These were styled to fit the particular offence, e.g. big ears for gossiping women (they heard everything), eyeglasses (they saw everything) and big mouths and long tongues (they spread vicious rumours).¹⁵ (pp338-341) This idea of punishments that mirror the misdemeanour can also be found in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the souls in hell and purgatory were punished according to the principle of retributive justice, called *contrappasso*.¹⁶

To come one step closer to Bruegel's (and Wierix's) illustration: There were at least two other particular kinds of equipment in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era used for punishment along with the pillory, namely wooden or iron items attached to the prisoner and called neck (or shame) violins and neck (or shame) flutes (figs. 3.1 and 3.2). These names were based on the tool's visual similarity to real musical instruments. Neck violins were used for delinquents that indulged in verbal offences, for example, blasphemy, fortune-telling, defamation or gossiping in church.⁴ (p 110) It seems that this form of punishment was more often imposed on women, notably on those who were perceived to be loud and shrewish. Derived from this latter type of punishment, neck violins are also called 'shrew's fiddles' in English. Neck flutes were for the main part used for bad musicians¹⁷ (p 227) to mirror their misdemeanour (namely making bad music).

Neck violins or neck flutes functioned as mirror punishments and restraint due to the hands being fastened, thus leaving the delinquent defenceless to attacks from the 'audience'. These instruments were also used in the enforcement of sentences of public humiliation, by means of which the delinquent lost his or her social position within the

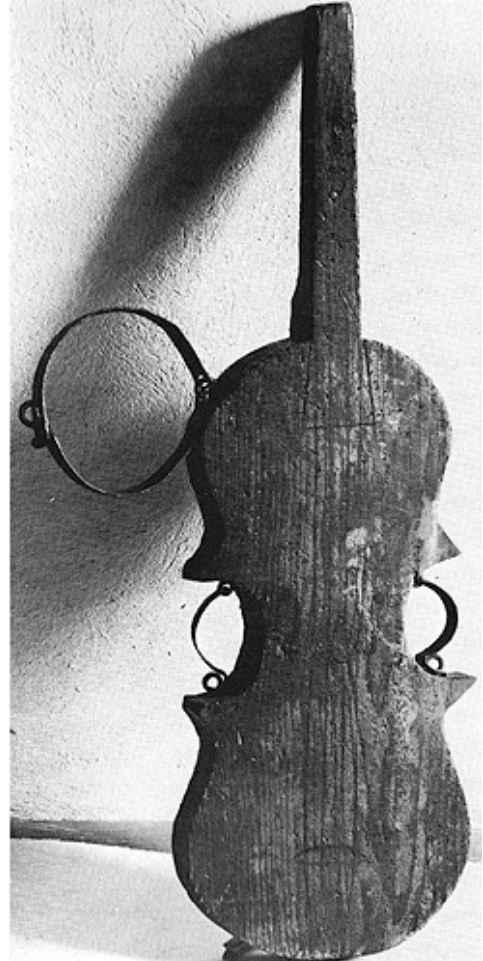


Fig. 3.1 Shame violin made from spruce with iron rings, which slim form clearly leans towards the violin, not the fiddle, ©Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum



Fig 3.2 Stylised wooden neck violin ©Medieval Crime Museum, Rothenburg ob der Tauber

community because he or she lost his or her honour. In the Middle Ages and especially in the Early Modern Era, one's honour meant a good deal more than in many societies today: it was directly relevant to one's legal position within the estates of the realm. The often-used term *fama*, covering individual honour as well as rumour and gossip, shows how much one's honour depended on public reputation and talk in the community.¹⁸ Dishonour due to public humiliation had far-reaching consequences, not only for the delinquent but also for his or her family and descendants.¹⁹ (col. 1232) It could lead to expulsion from professional guilds, as well as the loss of position within the feudal system, whether as the lowest vassal, or as judge or advocate. The social consequences of public dishonour and the guild expulsions reached their climax in the Early Modern Era, when such disreputable persons were not only not allowed to hold an honourable or municipal office, but were also not allowed to participate in court proceedings, either as a witness or claimant. Even his or her private testimony was sometimes challenged.²⁰ (col. 1241) Public perception of dishonourableness could lead an individual to the condition of social outcast, which was commonly applied to travelling people such as musicians. These people were not directly 'affected' by the dishonouring aspect of public punishments, but were nevertheless humiliated, laughed at and damaged by the *fama*. In the worst cases, after public disgrace that damaged his or her *publica fama*, the delinquent no longer wanted to remain a part of his or her community, and decided to drift away to start again somewhere new.¹⁷ (p 212)

Against this legal historical background, Bruegel and Wierix seem to reflect the common legal practices of their time. Yet, based on today's knowledge about the use of neck instruments, their illustrations cannot

be considered as legal iconographic sources, for several reasons. Legal iconography distinguishes between pictures that 1) visualise the legal content of the text²¹ (pp 86-88), in other words illustrate the meaning of the sentence (e.g. punishment through excommunication which relinquished the excommunicated soul to the devil; Bruegel's and Wierix's illustrations surely do not belong to this category) and that 2) convert the legal text directly into a figurative depiction²¹ (p 88) (e.g. several illustrations of the bearing of the judge as demanded by the Soester Gerichtsordnung (Soest Court Regulations, circa 1500), in which he was instructed to sit on his bench like a 'grumpy lion' [griesgrimmiger Löwe]²¹ (p 88), crossing his right foot over his left. The picture details do not fall under this point either); and that 3) depict the legal act that is mentioned in the text; this being possible because the legal act per se was picture-like (i.e. performative or theatrical¹¹ (p 185ff)) and thus its graphic representation was not an imaginative construct but an image of reality²¹ (p 88). Bruegel's and Wierix's pictures would have fallen into the third category of legal iconography, if the violins or flutes used in the prevailing law had been real instruments that the delinquent had to play while being pilloried, which was, as far as we know, not the case. Therefore, showing as they do real instruments in action, their virtual illustrations are nothing less than artworks, based on an artistic transcendence of meaning compared to reality.

This could be due to the fact that these artworks are pictorial realisations and visual interpretations of a proverb. In their illustrations, Bruegel and Wierix used the real contemporary context of pillorying and wearing neck violins or neck flutes, i.e. public humiliation, while changing the external forms of the duplicated instruments to those of real ones. The reason for this was almost

certainly the proverb that underlay the picture details. The artists took legal items and symbols from their daily context and modified their appearance to illustrate something else, a proverb with a meaning that we are no longer able to reconstruct. Looked at in this way, the picture details are not pictures of reality, but an artistic means of expression, connected with the lived experiences of the artist and his contemporary recipients.

However, this use of meaning in Bruegel's and Wierix's illustrations could also lead us back to ancient, forgotten laws that actually used real musical instruments for the purpose of punishment, laws that had survived through the corresponding proverb and underwent a pictorial materialisation. Because people did not always adhere to the terms of legislative texts, these texts may not fully reflect the actual legal practices of the time.^{17 (p 52)} One can instead extract a lot of information from the sources of applied and customary law as documented in chronicles, town descriptions, travel reports, autobiographies, comic tales, poems (such as *The Divine Comedy*, already mentioned) or town bills, and also in legends, fairy tales, children's games^{17 (p 52)} or proverbs. The latter were of particular importance for everyday life because they enabled their legal content to be remembered and internalised. When Bruegel included, in his *Netherlandish Proverbs* painting, a picture of a man kneeling and holding a violin in a construction that is clearly designed as a pillory, he may have resorted to exactly such a proverb that carried within itself indications of long-forgotten law.

This was the conclusion drawn by Herbert Fischer, an Austrian historian of law, who in 1971 stated that the reason for the use of neck violins and flutes as punishment in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern

Era could be found in anterior legal and cultural history. He provided an interpretation of Bruegel's and Wierix's pictorial details, treating the artworks as a reliable legal source that proved the former existence of the legal proverb 'he speelt op de kaak'^{22 (p 326)} and understanding their transcendence of content as evidence of a legal reality that began long before Bruegel's lifetime. Taking this as the initial point, he first of all presumed that the pictured instruments, being real ones, not wooden or iron reproductions, refer to a kind of punishment from even older times when the jurisdiction actually used genuine instruments^{22 (p 325f)} and which dates back to times before the wearing of neck violins or neck flutes became common. Fischer also presumed that these very old punishments, due to playing on real instruments, can be understood as demonstrations of punishment from older legal doctrine that he referred to as 'poena medicinalis' ('healing punishment').^{22 (p 321)} In his opinion, the people of these old times believed that not only the harmony of the community (and, thereby, of the whole world) was disordered by the done deed, but so was the delinquent's soul as well. To regain harmony, the delinquent was required to play harmonious music to undergo a 'retuning' of the soul, as well as to eradicate the disharmony in both the community and the world; harmony thus being restored on every level. So Fischer awarded to music the power to clean, to 'harmonise',^{22 (p 323)} and to effect a unitary 'tuning' of delinquent, community and world. With this concept of a kind of 'magical' musical power within a 'poena medicinalis', Fischer referred to a theory that dates back to antiquity at least, where music was seen as a sensual manifestation of the celestial harmony in the Pythagorean tradition. This comprehensive concept also included mental medical purposes, as we can

learn from Aristoxenus of Tarentum, who reported that the Pythagoreans used music to heal the soul just as they used medicine to heal the body.²³ (p 15) In this context of ‘poena medicinalis’, Fischer also referred to the role of violins and flutes in old cultural history, holding that the use of a violin or fiddle was said to have healing effects on the heart (i.e. sentiment) while the flute was said to have effects on the bowels (i.e. desires).²² (p 329) He assumed that these old cultural beliefs had survived in the medieval and early modern neck instruments. Additionally, the ‘magical’ sounds of music, real or feigned, would have had the task of positively influencing the misapplied voice (misapplied, because used in committing an offence) located in the neck of the delinquent where the ‘instrument’ was fixed.

In alluding to the ‘double magic of tones’²² (p 324; my translation) by quoting the old idea ‘Sanat, quod sauciat ipse’²² (p 324) [‘What heals does also wound and what wounds does heal again’], however, Fisher himself modified his highly speculative interpretation. Therefore, it seems appropriate in this article to do the same and also modify his somewhat mystic interpretation of and legal historical conclusion from the picture details of Bruegel and Wierix. Fischer used the double action of music to make clear that the healing approach could also have been used to humiliate and dishonour the delinquent: ‘What pleases, strengthens, raises the high-minded, makes the ignoble uneasy, debilitates and torments him’²² (p 324; my translation). So if the person who, in the very old era Fischer talked about, was condemned to playing real music was not actually a musician, which was surely the usual situation, he or she would have produced ugly sounds that would have revealed his or her inability to play the instrument. Consequently the noises produced would have

sounded similar to the cacophonous music of the long tradition of the so-called ‘Katzenmusik’, ‘Charivari’, or, in Anglo-American tradition, ‘rough music’ or ‘skimmington ride’, that was performed by enraged fellow citizens, not by the delinquents themselves, to admonish those who had behaved improperly and thereby disturbed the harmony of the community. The purpose of this tradition was typically not only to mock a culprit (mostly one who had committed some kind of sexual offence²⁴), but also to show him or her quite plainly what foul deed he or she had perpetrated. The disharmonic, ugly sounding and disturbing music was designed to reflect his or her action as well as his or her character.

Fischer’s idea of the use of real instruments as ‘poena medicinalis’ in former times cannot be proved as a legal source, either by referring to Bruegel’s painting or the proverb that is pictured in it or in any other known ways. But if we consider the practice of the medieval ‘Katzenmusik’, ‘Charivari’, ‘rough music’ etc., wherein the concept of ‘poena medicinalis’ has been reversed, also the ‘disharmonic’ music ‘played’ by the person on the pillory, the punishment of wearing neck violins or neck flutes in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era becomes more coherent. These delinquents were not just mocked by their fellow citizens; they were forced to mock themselves. They had to make themselves ridiculous in the eyes of the public, through playing sounds that mirrored their deeds and character. In other words, they had to ‘play’ (or ‘perform’) their own Charivari to themselves. Furthermore, the wrong deed (through the disturbance of the community – mostly, as already mentioned, by ways of misusing the voice) was ‘repeated’ in public by the delinquent, as enforced self-mockery and punishment. In the case of the musicians, who had to wear shame flutes

after making bad music, this punishment was not designed to dishonour them, because as travelling people, they were already classified as dishonest and therefore had no honour to lose. Instead it was designed to reflect their social delinquency, and to mock ^{20 (col. 1241)} and injure them in their professional practice. As a result of this public exposure of and fama on their poor ability to play the instrument they would have very little chance of getting new jobs to earn money.

The use of humiliating and mirroring punishment did not aim to achieve healing (as the interpretation by Fischer suggests) but retaliation. Yet the result was the same; through self-mockery, the done deed was exposed and emphasised as a disturbing wrong by the wrongdoers themselves. Not least because of the public nature of the punishment, the committed offence and the self-mocking of it cancelled each other out. The same can be said of the retributive justice of the mirroring or, with Dante's words, *contrapasso*. Through these adjustments, the harmony of the world was reinstated, which, however, happened at the expense of the honour of the delinquent (or the financial situation of the musicians). So, not the cure of the individual, but the intactness of the community was the highest goal. However, this is not to say that the theory of the healing power of music was not alive in the background, for in Fischer's theory, only beautiful, harmonic sounds could have magical healing power. The enforced playing, real or symbolic, of the untrained, that necessarily 'sounded' disharmonic and ugly, fell short of the nature of music and proved to be a destruction of harmony itself. To come full circle, this kind of ugly 'music' was not able to heal as, with its disharmony, it destroyed the harmony of music in the same way as the offence of the delinquent destroyed the harmony of the

world. The offence was thereby symbolised and reflected in its disturbing and wrongful character. Perhaps this is what Fischer meant by referring to the 'double magic' of music.

In any case, here we have arrived at a very crucial point in his understanding of supposed historical uses of punishment, as the idea of understanding the playing of music as mockery (in contrast to music being a healing power) was what made it possible in the first place to be carried out without real music playing on real instruments. Instead, a kind of symbolic 're-enactment performance' without sound was sufficient. Thus the use of imitated musical instruments made it equally clear to the 'audience' that the person 'playing on the pillory' had to be disgraced.

Many questions remain about the meaning of Bruegel's and Wierix's picture details, and knowledge about the exact historical and cultural background of the punishment of 'playing on the pillory' remains incomplete. What we know, however, may be interesting for the purpose of investigation of the use of music in detention. In the European Middle Ages and Early Modern Era, there certainly existed a type of humiliating punishment that included the enforced wearing of symbolic musical instruments. This possibly referred back to the use of real instruments as a means of mental healing, to be achieved by harmonising the soul of the delinquent, of the community and of the world as a whole through music. Just as the historical punishments discussed here, which mainly can be subsumed under the categories of public humiliation and mirror punishments, make very clear the two sides of a tort (the injustice that had happened and the retaliation derived from it), the two sides of music, real or only symbolic, used within these punishments also become apparent. While

music can establish ‘omnipresent harmony’, it also can be used to torture. This double-edged nature of music is not only reflected in the painting of Bruegel and subsequently in the etching of Wierix, but was and still is one of the most crucial aspects of ‘music in detention’.

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