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### Citation

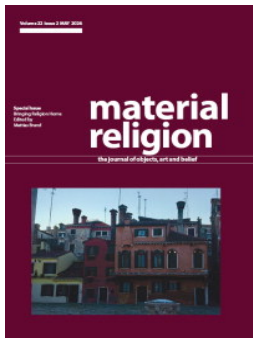
Smits, L. A. (2026). Dynamic domestic devotion: Pipe-clay images moving through the home in the late medieval low countries. *Material Religion*, 22(2), 137-154.  
doi:10.1080/17432200.2026.2660584

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4308309>

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# Dynamic Domestic Devotion: Pipe-Clay Images Moving Through the Home in the Late Medieval Low Countries

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**To cite this article:** Lieke Smits (2026) Dynamic Domestic Devotion: Pipe-Clay Images Moving Through the Home in the Late Medieval Low Countries, *Material Religion*, 22:2, 137-154, DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2026.2660584](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2026.2660584)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2026.2660584>



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Published online: 01 Jun 2026.



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**dynamic domestic  
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## ABSTRACT

Small, mass-produced pipe-clay devotional objects were immensely popular among the urban laity in the late medieval Low Countries. Although written sources concerning their use are scarce, their ubiquity makes them an interesting entry point into the domestic, lived religion of the time. This article takes pipe-clay images as starting point to explore the domestication of religion in late medieval Christianity. Ingold's notion of the meshwork, which foregrounds the movements of things and persons with the environment as domain of their entanglement, is used to analyze the movements of objects and people into, around, and out of the household. Their encounters in the fluid domestic domain, entangled with other spheres, enabled the performance of religion and the cultivation of a relationship with the divine inside the home.

**Keywords:** Christian materiality, medieval low countries, domestic devotion, sculpture, meshwork

Material Religion volume 22, issue 2, pp. 137–154

DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2026.2660584](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2026.2660584)



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## Introduction

A well-known miracle story from the Low Countries narrates how a statuette of the Virgin Mary was rescued from under the ice (Thiers 1994; De Boer and Jongen 2015, 29–30). In the year 1444, Geertgen Arents from Nykercken travels to Amersfoort (a town in the northern Netherlands, close to Utrecht) to join the convent of Saint Agnes. Among several small items she has brought from home is a figurine of Mary, which she discards into the water just outside the city gate, as she is ashamed to bring an object of such simple appearance with her into the convent. Later that winter, a maid called Griet Albert Ghisen receives three nightly visions in which the Virgin Mary urges her to rescue the image from the frozen canal outside the city gate, where it has miraculously stayed in place (Figure 1). Griet goes to the designated spot, where she breaks the ice and retrieves the figurine. At her home she places it on a dresser next to a lit candle, which burns, miraculously, thrice as long as it normally would. When Griet recounts this to her confessor, he tells her to bring the image to his house. She does so on Christmas Eve, and in its new home the statue performs various unspecified miracles. The image is brought in a procession to the chapel of

**FIG 1**

Miracle of Amersfoort, c. 1520, oil on panel. Oud-Katholieke parochie H. Georgius, Amersfoort.



Our Lady, where it becomes a pilgrimage attraction and performs many more miracles.

The remains of the image, still kept in an Amersfoort church, indicate that it was made out of gray pipe clay. This cheap material was used for molding mass-produced devotionalia resembling much more expensive alabaster objects (Rudy 2019, 31). Production started in fourteenth-century Cologne, and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Utrecht became a prominent production center (Ostkamp 2001). Pipe-clay images were displayed and used in monastic spaces, churches and chapels, artist workshops (Grimm 2013), and public outdoor spaces – a famous example was placed in a tree, which may have operated as a sort of shrine (Ostkamp 2001, 215). About their use in the urban home, little is known. The Amersfoort miracle story is one of the scarce written sources for the use of pipe-clay statuettes in the private domestic space; they were not valuable enough to be recorded in documents like wills and inventories. Nevertheless, archeological findings from the Low Countries imply that practically every urban household must have housed at least one pipe-clay image, making it one of the most popular types of devotional objects in the late medieval domestic sphere (Ostkamp 2011, 71).<sup>1</sup> As such, the images allow us to get close to the domestic, lived religion of the urban laity in the late medieval Low Countries.

The occurrence of pipe-clay devotionalia in the home can be seen as an example of the *domestication* of religion. Three-dimensional devotional objects were previously mainly found in monastic and church settings and were otherwise only affordable for the elite. The mass-producible technique of molding pipe clay made such images accessible for the growing religious needs of the urban laity. Studies on the domestication of religious objects have shown that the process of bringing an object into the domestic sphere always involves “selection, modification, and use of media and technology” (Introduction to this issue). These transformations, be they material adaptations or changes in use, take place according to domestic expectations and needs (Maurits and Van Osselaer 2020). Scholars have explored how domestic space is sacralized through the presence of holy objects and the devotional practices in which they were used, which creates a sense of proximity to the divine (Morgan 1997, 182; Morse 2007, 156; Nuechterlein 2005, 79). Domestic space is not only defined by its demarcation from other spaces, but also by its entanglement with other spheres (Corry, Faini, and Meneghin 2018, 11). This means that the *movement* of objects is an important factor: where does the image come from, where does it go, and what spaces and persons does it connect by its movements? The miraculous image of Mary rescued from the ice, coming from a domestic setting, placed in two subsequent homes, and eventually ending up as a public cult image, demonstrates that this was a dynamic and fluid process in which devotional objects could move in and out of the domestic

sphere. In this case it did so through a variety of human and non-human forces: persons discarding, retrieving, and carrying it, heavenly intervention, and water and ice.

To analyze the movements and entanglement of things, persons, and space, I make use of Tim Ingold's notion of the meshwork. Reacting against Actor-Network-Theory, which presupposes things that are in relation to each other and maps the distribution of agency as objects and people (dots) connected by relationships (lines), Ingold (2006, 13–14) speaks not of a network but of a "meshwork" (a term borrowed from Henri Lefebvre). Ingold's meshwork consists of "entangled lines of life, growth and movement" (2011, 63), persons and things being perceived as ever-transforming processes moving through time, rather than as fixed entities. Things and people, always moving, flowing, and transforming through a changing world, are represented by lines (or, actually, webs of lines, as they can move along multiple trails), while the dots represent their moments of encounter and entanglement: the relationships. The environment, then, is the "domain of entanglement." Building on Ingold's work, Erin J. Campbell has developed a model to study the early modern home as "a meshwork of people, objects, and spaces in time" (2014, 6–7), foregrounding movement and interconnect-edness in the domestic environment. These entanglements extend beyond the house; not only did objects move between spaces, but the people moving them did, as Jörg Rüpke has argued, also bring religious competency with them into different spheres (2016, 255; Introduction to this issue).

Domestic devotion in the Low Countries is still an under-studied domain, with some notable exceptions. Discussing the domesticity of sacred space in the fifteenth-century Netherlands, Jeanne Nuechterlein concludes that the home could be temporarily turned into a sacred space and that it was "not the space in and of itself that was sacred; it only became so by the prayers of the people inside it" (2005, 79). Julie De Groot (2022), analyzing inventories from late medieval Bruges, argues for a layered distinction between public and private spheres, that did not always coincide with inside and outside spaces. Cora Zwart (2024) has recently studied the religious and social activities of the urban laity in the late medieval Low Countries, showing how devotional books and other religious objects connected people with their own domestic circle, but also to wider social circles outside the home. As overview studies drawing general conclusions are otherwise missing, parallels can be drawn with the domestic devotion of the Italian renaissance, for which more written sources are available and which has been more thoroughly studied.

This article will explore the interconnections between the domestic and other spaces, pipe-clay figurines, other things in the home, and the persons interacting with them. The first section discusses the process of pipe-clay statuettes being domesticated in the urban home, the second the movement of

objects in and around the home, and the third pipe-clay figures leaving the domestic space, be it temporarily or permanently. The focus is on free-standing small statuettes (ca. 5–13 cm) of Mary and of the Christ Child, usually standing or placed in a crib, which were the most popular iconographic types followed by female martyrs saints such as Catherine and Barbara (Figures 2 and 3). An exploration of their movements in and around the home contributes to our understanding of domestic devotion in the late medieval Low Countries and more generally of the domestication of religion and the dynamic qualities of what Caroline Walker Bynum (2011) has termed the “Christian materiality” of the medieval period.

### Into the Home

A foundational question concerning the domestication of pipe-clay figures is how they were physically brought into the home. The Low Countries knew different types of production centers: monasteries, specialized professionals called *beelde-druckers* (image pressers), *beeldenbackers* (image bakers), *heyiligenbackers* (saint bakers), or *Jesusbackers* (Jesus bakers), and possibly also regular potters (Oost 1991, 292). The urban laity might have bought statues directly from such workshops. As there are regions where pipe-clay objects have been excavated



**FIG 2**

Catharine, Barbara, and Mary with Child, Utrecht, fifteenth century, pipe clay, h. c. 5 cm. Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, RMCC b36a-c, RMCC b37a-e, RMCC b38a-c. Photo Ruben de Heer.

**FIG 3**

Christ Child holding a bird, fifteenth or sixteenth century, pipe clay, h 5.7 cm. Excavated at the site of the convent of Diepenveen (near Deventer). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-NM-11284.



without evidence of production centers, they were probably also transported over longer distances to reach consumers, e.g. by vendors. A mid-sixteenth-century painting by Pieter Aertsen depicting *The return from a pilgrimage to Saint Anthony* shows a booth selling devotionalia, with what looks like pipe-clay saint statues (Figure 4; Geybels 2015, 25). Since the painting is associated with pilgrimage, it is possible that pilgrims brought pipe-clay devotionalia back home as religious souvenirs, linking them to the memory of specific cult sites.

What is more, the objects likely played a role in the culture of gift-giving. Larger Jesus dolls with cribs, sometimes called *Jésueaux*, were gifted to women entering a convent and possibly to lay couples on the occasion of their marriage (Ippel 2014, 336). Their smaller equivalents could have functioned as New Year's gifts, as the month of January was dedicated to the veneration of the Christ Child. Devotional prints of the Christ Child with New Year's wishes survive, just as small wooden and pipe-clay reliefs from Germany depicting the Christ Child with



**FIG 4**

Pieter Aertsen, *The Return from a Pilgrimage to Saint Anthony*, c. 1550, oil on panel (detail). Brussels, Royal Museum of Fine Arts Belgium, Inv. 7524.

such wishes, indicating they were exchanged as New Year's gifts (Kammel 2003, 41–49; Grimm 2011, 61; Thijssen 2019). Sources from the seventeenth century indicate that in the Low Countries pipe-clay figures were also placed on festive cakes and given to children as presents for the feast of the Magi and St Nicholas, but it is unknown how far these customs go back in time (Knippenberg 1962, 54).

Pipe-clay objects entering the domestic space would have brought with them associations with other spaces. This could be the place where it was obtained, such as a pilgrimage site; a cult site with pipe-clay images, such as the chapel in Amersfoort; or the parish church where images resembling the figurines were displayed. The popular pipe-clay "Utrecht type" of Mary and Child stands on a pedestal that imitates the cutout parts of reliquaries, through which the relics were made visible (Reesing 2012b, 330) and artists like Jan van Eyck used pipe-clay objects as models for their altarpieces (Grimm 2013), leading to stylistic similarities. This created multiple continuities: between the material culture of the liturgical and domestic contexts and between the corresponding liturgical and domestic practices with these objects. Books with religious instructions for lay people state that some exercises, such as considering one's own sins followed by prayer and petition for forgiveness, could be

performed either in church or at home (Dlabačová 2020, 11). Books of hours in the vernacular allowed laypeople to participate in the cycle of liturgical prayers at home, while these books were also taken to church (Nuechterlein 2005, 62), and liturgical practices of kissing books and osculatory tablets were imitated at home, sometimes with the help of pipe-clay replicas (Rudy 2011; Reesing 2017). Thus religious objects do not simply sacralize the domestic sphere through their presence, but also through the evocation of other sacred spaces.

What distinguishes figures in the home (and also those for private use in religious communities) from public sculpture is their miniaturized size (Sarnecka and Dziki 2023, 4). As I have argued elsewhere, small pipe-clay figures invited tactile and at times playful engagement (Smits 2020; see also Brundin, Howard, and Laven 2018, 69; Scholten 2019; Simons 2021). Assaf Pinkus and Einat Klafter speak of the “late medieval scaling turn” in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, connected to a preoccupation with measurement in the emerging monetary economy (2021, 43, 55–56). Pipe-clay statuettes can be seen as instances of down-scaling, e.g. of large statues of Mary in church or of larger Christ dolls executed in wood or metal. Down-scaling can, according to Pinkus and Klafter, lead to a sense of control: “relational sizing negotiated the human place within the material world” (51). As Zuzanna Sarnecka has argued, a reduced scale was not necessarily an obstacle for perceiving sculptures as lifelike; realism could also be enhanced by surface qualities like coloring or dressing with fabrics (2021, 203). Such dressing practices were common for larger Christ dolls, and a pipe-clay example with moveable limbs suggests that smaller examples were similarly dressed (Ostkamp 2011, 71). Other material and technical aspects provide more indications of how they were tactically used. Images with pedestals that were able to stand could be placed in an altar-like setting, while those that could not were more likely meant for tactile engagement (Sarnecka 2019, 167). Some of the pipe-clay cribs with Christ Child had rounded bottoms, allowing them to be rocked (Figure 5). Studies on domestication often focus on possibilities for experiencing divine presence, but in this case the importance of physical objects might not have been presence but rather the relationship with the divine that is cultivated through the performance of various acts of care, made possible by the domestication of images.

Here, the importance of seeing religious matters as part of a relational dynamic comes forward; devotional practices around pipe-clay images should be seen both in relation to liturgical images and practices, and to acts of care that are inherent to the domestic sphere. The domestic setting must have transformed the meaning of images that were also popular in monastic settings. In the late medieval period, when lay piety flourished, there was a keen interest in apocryphal stories on Jesus’ childhood and in depictions of the holy family in domestic setting

**FIG 5**

Crib with Christ Child, fifteenth or sixteenth century, Rhineland, pipe clay, h. 5.1 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. BK-NM-11290.



(Bynum 2020, 62; Nuechterlein 2005, 57). Mary could function as role model for mothers concerned with the spiritual upbringing of their children and “mediate between the pious home and the realm of the divine, since she herself straddled both worlds” (Brundin, Howard, and Laven 2018, 214). In the process of domestication, the same image could hold a different meaning.

**Around the Home**

Once brought into the home, statues became part of the domestic meshwork of things and people. The Amersfoort miracle story gives an idea of how they might be placed: on a dresser with a candle. As we have no other written sources indicating where and how pipe-clay objects were kept in the home, we cannot be certain whether this was the common way of displaying such statues. As Griet Albert Ghisen was a maid, she was relatively poor and probably not in possession of many devotional items. Wealthier devotees had access to a *prié-dieu* or kneeling stool (Corry, Howard, and Laven 2017, 3; Nuechterlein 2005, 67), while the majority used their daily furniture. Both written and visual sources indicate that dressers, in rooms for communal living, eating, and/or sleeping, were indeed commonly used to set up makeshift house altars, dressed with objects like paintings and candles (Bynum 2020, 65; Morse 2007, 14; Nuechterlein 2005, 67; Vandamme 2009, 83–89). The fireplace also served a devotional function, furnished with

religious images (Vandamme 2009, 89). In Italy, statues were placed on all sorts of surfaces in the house: shelves, niches, lavabos, tables, and over doors, in some cases serving a protective function (Brundin, Howard, and Laven 2018, 77; Sarnecka 2021, 201–202). Small statues and other devotionalia were stored in chests and cupboards (Brundin, Howard, and Laven 2018, 78; Nuechterlein 2005, 78), to be displayed at times of devotional activity. Larger Christmas cribs from the Low Countries sometimes came with caskets in which they could be stored (Ippel 2014, 336). Visibility and placement in the home could thus be dynamic and vary throughout the day and year. Some pipe-clay statuettes contain holes that were possibly meant to attach them to reliquary or other cabinets placed on house altars, giving them a more permanent position in the home (Oost 1991, 289).

During devotional activity, pipe-clay figurines were used in combination with other religious paraphernalia. Crucifixes and candlesticks were common objects for domestic devotion. They could be supplemented with more precious objects of wood and stone (Vandamme 2009, 90), or cheap, mass-produced items like prints (Dlabačová 2020, 12, 15) and pilgrim badges. Instructions for the use of images were found in devotional literature. Rubrics of prayers and meditations at times specify the use of images for devotional exercises, although it is often unclear whether a two- or three-dimensional image is referred to (Rudy 2016, p. 97). The diverse available objects, which could be stored and displayed, indicate that ad hoc assemblages were made in which objects entered into relations with each other and with the people assembling them. Various aspects like personal preferences, instructions in books, and the liturgical calendar influenced the assemblage that was at display at any given moment.

Pipe-clay objects moved around the household along with the family members using them. The popularity of Mary and the Christ Child can give indications as to which members of the household made use of pipe-clay figurines. I have already noted a potential interest in Mary statuettes by mothers, but children should also be considered. One indication for use by children is a discrepancy with the devotional literature for laypeople of the time, which mainly emphasizes Christ's Passion and encourages crucifixes in the domestic sphere (Dlabačová 2020, 5–7). As Elvira Ambrosius has already noted, this does not match the relative popularity of Mary, the Christ Child and female saints in pipe clay (2021, 210). Were they perhaps meant for a different audience than devotional books? The association with children is moreover found in a collection of sermons by Father Bartholomaeus of Middelburg (1484–1564) for a convent of Poor Clares in Amsterdam. Bartholomaeus gifted the sisters a Christmas crib and states that while children use such cradles to rock the Christ Child during Christmas time, the sisters can use them for spiritual growth, imitating the humble children (Ampe 1967,

171; Caron 1982, 19–20). Evidence from Italian sources tells us more about the association of images of the Christ Child with children (Sarnecka 2019, 167–169). Often mentioned in scholarship is the *Regola del governo di cura familiare* by the Dominican preacher Giovanni Dominici (Klapisch-Zuber 1987; Morse 2007, 14; 320–322; Corry 2018, 318–319). The text recommends:

Have pictures of saintly children or young virgins in your home, in which your child, still in swaddling clothes, may take delight and thereby may be gladdened by acts and signs pleasing to childhood. And what I say of pictures applies also to statues. It is well to have the Virgin Mary with the Child in her arms, with a little bird or apple in his hand. (Ed. Salvi 1860, 131; Trans. Coté 1927, 34)

Children were thought to be especially receptive to such holy examples, the more so if images were presented in a playful and pleasurable manner, because of their humoral constitution (Corry 2018). In the Low Countries, Desiderius Erasmus (d. 1536) similarly argued that children need pleasurable virtuous examples and learn best through games (Corry, Howard, and Laven 2017, 36; Orrock 2012, 13). Dominici recommends playful imitation of priests with the help of a house altar:

[S]ometimes [the children] may be occupied in making garlands of flowers and greens with which to crown Jesus or to decorate the picture of the Blessed Virgin. They may light and extinguish candles, incense, keep clean, sweep, prepare the altars, clean pieces of wax and dust off the candlesticks, have in place the little bell and run to ring it at all hours as is done in church. They may be dressed in surplices as acolytes, sing as well as they know how, play at saying Mass, and be brought to the church sometimes and shown how real priests do it, that they may imitate them. (Ed. Salvi 1860, 146; Trans. Coté 1927, 42–43)

The maintenance of domestic altars was likewise encouraged for both little girls and women in Italian treatises such as the *Decor puellarum*, attributed to Fra Giovanni di Dio da Venezia (Corry 2018, 319; Morse 2007, 14). Small altars have indeed been found in Italian inventories (Klapisch-Zuber 1987, 322; Musacchio 2009, 213–214). For the Low Countries, evidence of children “playing altar” at home is more sparse. As Dekoninck and Constant (2022) have noted, Bruegel’s painting *Children’s Games* from c. 1560 depicts two young girls playing with dolls in a domestic setting (Figure 6). On the shelves above them we can see a cradle and various small devotional or liturgical objects and images, which might be an indication that they were used as religious toys. While adults were advised to perform their individual devotions in a secluded spot (Corry, Howard, and Laven 2017, 1), children’s playful engagement with devotional objects must have been dynamic, moving them around and perhaps even out of the home.

**FIG 6**

Pieter Bruegel the Elder,  
*Children's Games*, c. 1560, oil on  
panel (detail). Vienna,  
Kunsthistorisches Museum,  
Gemäldegalerie, 1017.



### Out of the Home

Pipe-clay statuettes not only moved into, but also out of the home, be it temporary or permanently. Temporary excursions out of the domestic sphere could be initiated by playing children, as mentioned above. Moreover, just like devotional books, rosaries, and other portable objects, pipe-clay images could be taken to church for devotion in a public setting. Although sources for this are scarce, there is a written record from 1604 of children taking cribs (the materiality of which is not specified) to church on Christmas Day, which they rocked in imitation of the priest rocking the crib on the altar (Syvaertz 1604). In such cases, objects left the home with a clear destination and goal. People also wore devotional objects close to the body for protection (Corry, Faini, and Meneghin 2018, 5). Especially the smallest pipe-clay figurines without pedestal qualified for such use (Knippenberg 1962, 54; Reesing 2012a, 329).

In the end, figurines left the home permanently. When no longer wanted, perhaps because they were broken or out of fashion, they were thrown in cesspools, canals, or waste disposal sites. Their affordability would have made them more disposable than luxury devotional items. As we have seen, Geertgen Arents threw her image away because of its shabby appearance (an act portrayed as irreverent), rather than taking

**FIG 7**

The Amersfoort miracle on a pilgrim's badge from Amersfoort, found Amsterdam, c. 1450-1500. Collection familie Van Beuningen 2984 (HP2 1378). Photo: Stichting Middeleeuwse Religieuze en Profane Insignes.



in with her into the convent – which was another option for such objects to leave the lay domestic household, following their owners on their life's trajectory. This also happened at the end of life; a Jésueau had been found in a child coffin in the Antwerp cathedral (Oost 1991, 289). Moreover, images could enter into relationships with other people after surviving their first owners. The miraculous statue of Mary in Amersfoort became a pilgrimage site, performing many miracles, often connected to healing, drowning, and accidents, sometimes concerning the domestic environment, such as the flooding of houses (Van Mulder 2016, 81). Pilgrims bought badges depicting the original miracle in which the figurine was saved from the canal, which they in turn brought into the home as devotional objects (Van Beuningen and Koldewey 1993, 215; Figure 7). Thus, moving between domestic and public places, pipe-clay images were part of a complex web of intersections between movements of persons and objects.

## Conclusion

Religious life is performed inside the home through dynamic processes: devotees actively displaying assemblages of things in their homes and praying in front of them or playing with them, objects bringing people into motion by wanting to be touched, different sacred spaces that the objects relate to, and the domestic environment consisting of all these encounters. Seeing these relationship as a meshwork rather than a network allows space for the transformations that things, people, and spaces undergo through their encounters in the late medieval

household. These transformations are an essential part of the domestication process and can evolve material modifications of objects but also the transformations of the persons incorporating these objects in their daily lives. We have seen transformations such as down-scaling, miracles, the cultivation of relationships with the divine through interaction with the images, and religious education of children. The fluid boundaries of the home resulted in a complex web or meshwork of ever-transforming religious practices.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) under Grant number 12RGRA5922N.

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<sup>1</sup> For overviews of published findings, see Ostkamp (2001, 190) and Smits (2020).

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