

# ◆ The importance of illustration in archaeology and the exemplary work of Robert Gurd

by Seán Goddard

*This article contends that Robert Gurd's portfolio of published drawings of archaeological landscapes, sites and finds, made from the 1910s to his death in 1938, is a fine example for today's archaeological illustrator. The importance of line drawing in the recording of archaeological sites is re-stated and evaluated and Gurd's contribution to the Sussex record is assessed in that light.*

In an age when the traditional values and expectations of our visual language are being challenged, and in some cases replaced, it is heartening to review the work of a man whose style and achievement have rarely been bettered. The man is Robert Gurd and the majority of his work was for Sussex archaeology.

William Stukeley, famously quoted by Stuart Piggott (1965, 171), wrote in 1717, 'Without drawing and designing, the study of Antiquities is lame and imperfect'. Archaeology needs illustration. This is so obvious that it need not be repeated here but it may be useful to remind ourselves why it is so important. Firstly, excavation plan and section drawings provide a record of that which is destroyed by excavation. Secondly, illustration is a powerful, almost universal, medium for the dissemination of knowledge of the past as it is discovered by archaeology; illustration shares the interpretations, and, indeed experience, of landscapes, monuments, buildings, excavations and artefacts. Thirdly, and perhaps less obviously, the very process of recording and translation can promote a certain understanding on the part of the illustrator which is subliminally carried through the coded message of the illustration to the recipients who, in turn, understand and use the message conveyed. The period of close interaction between the illustrator and the subject, sometimes many hours or even days, can often reveal important information which may be missed by others. Beyond the more 'mechanical' recording of monuments, excavations and artefacts is the equally important role of re-creation. The latter gives form to a lost environment via an 'artist's impression', to share a vision of the past with others. This is archaeological illustration and it is usually black and white line.

Despite the development and use of photography as a recording tool, and the increasing ease with which these images can be incorporated into published reports, line drawings remain the most widely used and understood method of representation. The use of line to describe form was taken to its zenith with engraving where incredibly fine lines can be rendered. The human brain has the ability to interpret line, symbol and tone into a version of reality with little training. We can cope with the reality of a photograph, of course, but it is usually much easier to understand the uncluttered, 'edited' version of a drawing. This is true of many of the sciences such as in human anatomy where even modern publications using full-colour photographs of cadavers usually rely on the addition of a drawing to help the reader.

Accepting the obvious need for illustration in archaeology, we might then go on to expect good, well-drawn illustrations to accompany reports. It is as important to present information in a manner pleasing to the eye — what Stukeley, quoted above, meant by 'designing', perhaps? — as it is to be accurate. Sadly, this is not always the case. No editor would accept muddled or misleading text yet some seem able to accept any accompanying illustration, however bad. Amongst this wide variation in standards of archaeological illustration shines a beacon in the person of Robert Gurd and the *Sussex Archaeological Collections* has been his greatest beneficiary.

Gurd first appeared on the archaeological scene in 1913 as a member of the Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society helping Herbert Toms (1914, 45) and in the following year he was illustrating excavation reports in the *Sussex Archaeological Collections*. He was employed in the drawing office

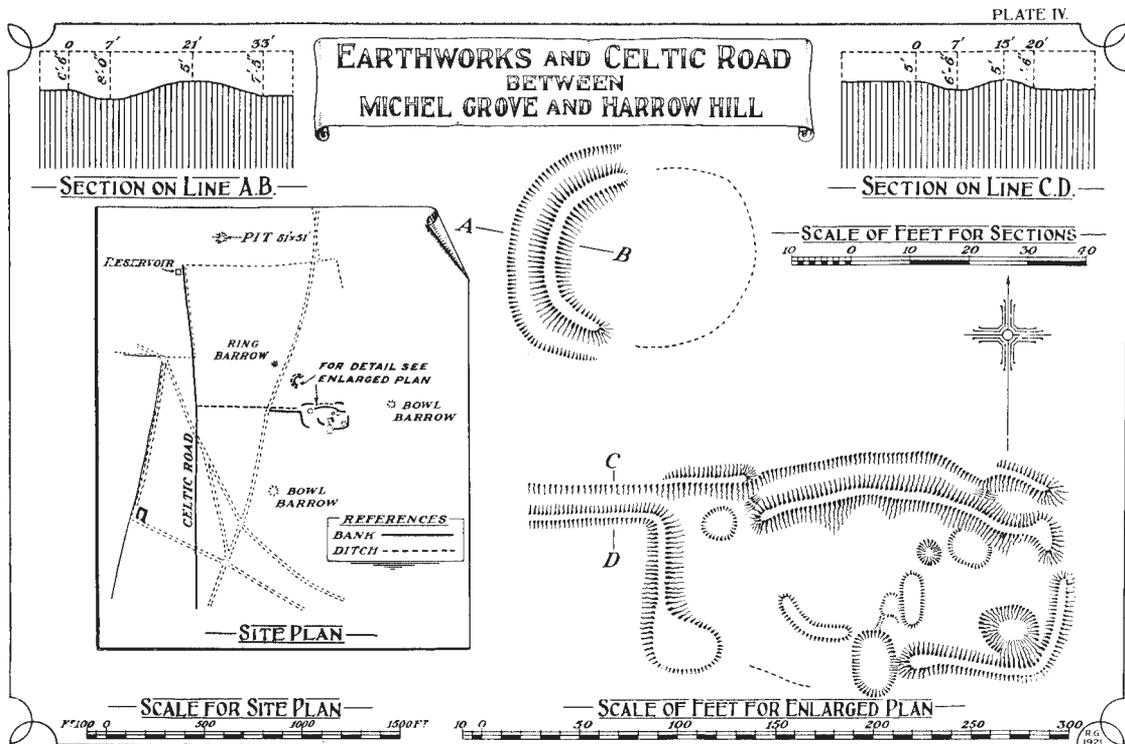


Fig. 1. A typical location map and site plan with a wonderful period feel (Curwen & Curwen 1922, 33).

of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway (later the Southern Railway) and appears to have been closely involved with Eliot and E. Cecil Curwen who did so much archaeological work in Sussex. The association with the Curwens lasted until Gurd's death in 1938. The earliest of Robert Gurd's published illustrations were maps and site plans reflecting, perhaps, his work as a railway draughtsman. It was often normal practice at this time for excavators and fieldworkers, all amateur of course, to employ professionals to produce their surveys — see, for example, the excavation plan in L. F. Salzman's report in the *Sussex Archaeological Collections* vol. 55 (1912, pl. 4), on his excavations at Selsey in 1911, which was made by F. Forbes Glennie. Gurd's involvement may, therefore, be seen in this light: interested amateur archaeologist with a useful talent in survey. Whatever the speculation about his introduction to archaeology, this early work showed a very accomplished style and would have been very modern with contemporary hand-drawn lettering and Gurd's trademark flourishes on the frame corners, as in Figure 1. His maps, often very busy

with detail, are always well balanced, calm and easy to read; the hierarchy of information is good. Plan, title and annotation, scale and frame never compete for attention. One might argue that these maps and plans should be no less than good when one considers the fine examples of the Ordnance Survey available as exemplars, then as now. Yet, amongst his contemporaries, and tragically even today, we can find examples of maps and field plans which are difficult to 'read' or interpret because they lack balance. Gurd moved on from maps and plans to artefacts including flint (Fig. 2), iron, bronze, antler and bone, coins and reconstructions. The style and competency of these drawings developed over time but Robert Gurd will be best remembered for his rendering of pottery and, in particular, his immediate affinity with the often fragmentary prehistoric material.

I have access to three pages of original Gurd pot drawings. Two of these pages are from Dorothy Liddell's report of her excavations at Hembury Fort in Devon (Liddell 1929–32; 1933–36) and the material from these excavations is stored and well-

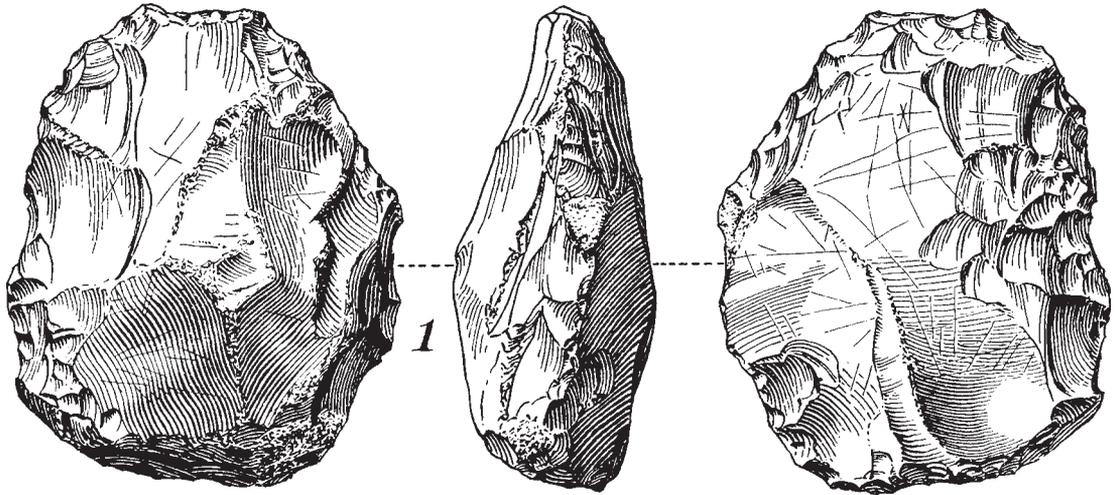


Fig. 2. Flint illustration showing the well-established rendering conventions (Todd 1936, 141). Original published at  $\frac{2}{3}$  scale, and here also.

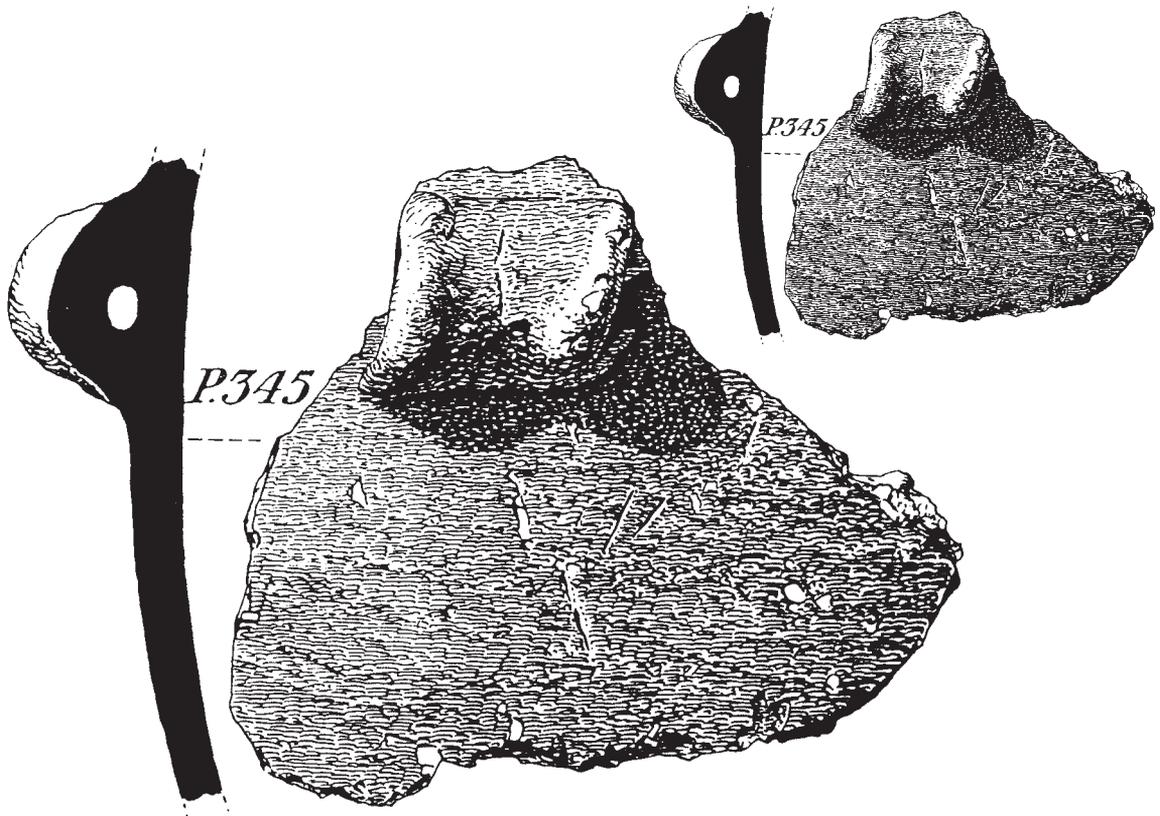


Fig. 3. An example of drawn scale (life size) and 50% reduction to show the seemingly casual style of rendering but note, also, the use of reflected light in the deep shadow (Liddell 1933-36, pl. XXXVII).

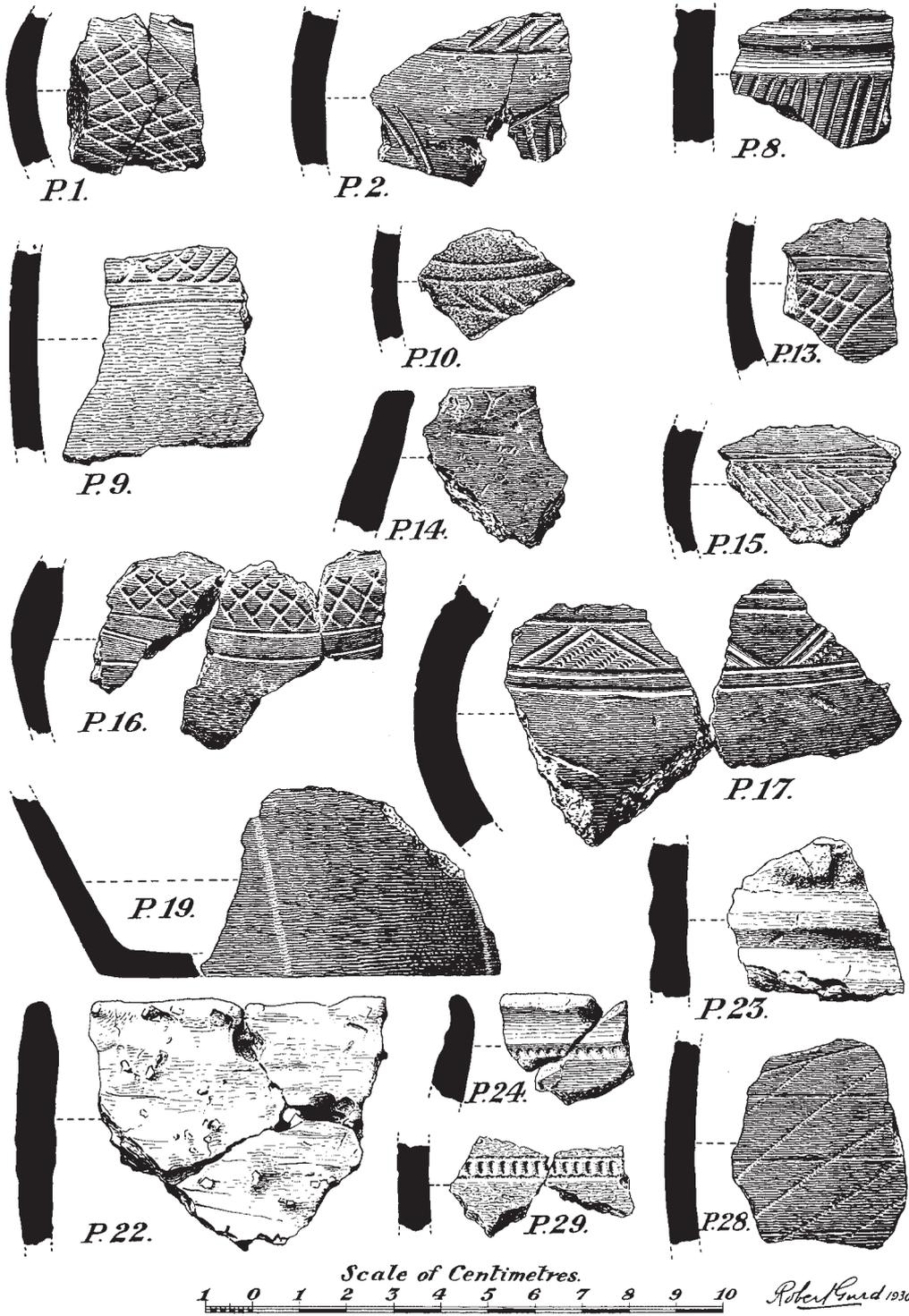


Fig. 4. Complete page of pottery illustrations (Liddell 1929-32, pl. XXVII) (c. 70%).

catalogued at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter. It would be hard to imagine anyone bettering the Gurd drawings: texture, surface eruptions of inclusions, scratches, breaks and decoration are all there in an easily interpreted form. His work not only looks good but would bear any scrutiny. What is more remarkable, and it points to Gurd's supreme confidence, is that the whole page is composed and executed on a single sheet of Bristol Board: no paste-up and not a spot of process white anywhere! Figure 3 shows an example from one of these original pages presented at drawn scale (life size) and fifty per cent reduction. What may be seen with the drawn scale examples is a pen-rendering technique which seems almost casual but which belies the true skill: this is the work of a genius. Figure 4, a complete page of illustrations (Liddell 1929–32, pl. XXVII), shows the majority of sherds as hard, black and even burnished, with incised decoration. Consider, however, sherds P22 and P23, clearly different from the rest and you will not be surprised to know that P22, which I have seen, is a soft, grey-coloured, pasty fabric. It would be absurd to talk of seeing colour in monochrome pen drawings but for anyone familiar with this material one does get a sense of colour and fabric type from the drawings. For the prehistoric ceramist they are almost perfect.

Add to fine drawings a code to describe colour and fabric, as well as excavation context, and we get to the important report of Cecil Curwen's excavations at The Trundle, Goodwood (Curwen 1929), where '... every effort has been made to render descriptions in the text unnecessary' by the use of number and letter codes within the field of the drawing, as in Figure 5. Here, vessel number 15 has (D) a brownish-grey exterior and (MA) a grey interior, with (H) medium flint grit inclusions. The '2D-C.II2' code refers to the number of the spit and the cutting or pit where the material was found. The well-executed drawing, together with the fabric description and site context, is a ceramic specialist's dream and decades ahead of its time (for a development of this idea of complete description see Hamilton 1996).

What are now regarded as 'standard' conventions for the depiction of pottery, and many other artefacts, begun by General Pitt-Rivers (1890) and others, were not consistently applied during the time Robert Gurd was active. Similarly, orthogonal or metric projection — turning views of objects

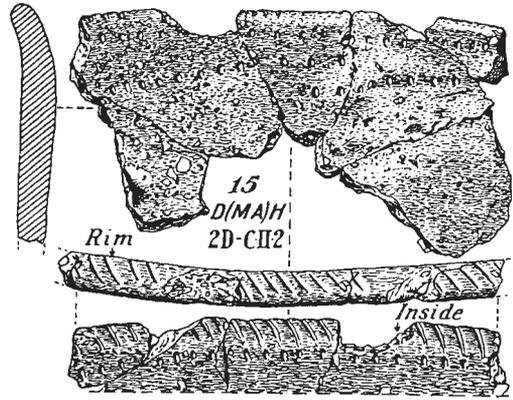


Fig. 5. Pottery illustration with additional fabric and site context information in the form of letter and number codes (Curwen 1929, 52) (c. 60%).

through 90° — was not universally adopted. Many were still drawing perspective views or sketches. As a professional draughtsman Gurd knew and understood the use of such projections and must have been aware of the 'good practice' of others. Some of his drawings of complete, decorated vessels show some of the earliest uses of measured foreshortening.

Robert Gurd had the good fortune (if anyone with this much talent could have more luck) to be working at an exciting time in British archaeology: the beginnings of modern archaeology and a time when he could be sure that his fine drawings would be faithfully rendered onto the printed page. The drawings would have had the attention of a skilled camera operator and plate maker, and then an equally skilled printer. The *Sussex Archaeological Collections* at this time used coated paper which not only allowed the integration of halftones within the text — unusual for letterpress printing — but also guaranteed the best possible results for linework. Today, if Gurd were to present his drawings to many national journals, he might be sorely disappointed with the final printed product. This is not because it is no longer possible to have good-quality copies, far from it, but because of the cost-saving advantages of low-resolution digital scanners, instead of traditional photographic copy. It is perfectly possible to scan drawings at resolutions of 1200, or even 2400, lines per inch, which would capture most fine detail and output directly to negative or plate. But for this, one must usually go to a specialist bureau and it costs more. To overcome this problem many illustrators today are abandoning their pens in

favour of the computer: output is guaranteed even if the product is a sterile, characterless version. Developments in computer software may yet give us back the sensitivity of the dip-pen which Robert Gurd might have expected.

An interesting comparison of styles between Gurd and his contemporaries may be seen in Mortimer Wheeler's report on the excavations at Maiden Castle in Dorset (Wheeler 1943), where about half of the Neolithic pottery drawings are by Gurd (although missing his usual signature, or acknowledgement to any illustrator, they are surely his drawings). The other drawings may well be by the author of the report, the late Stuart Piggott, and are perfectly good drawings. Without the juxtaposition with Gurd's work they would be judged most favourably but are ultimately shaded by Gurd's brilliance. I wonder, however, whether Piggott's inspiration to draw his own pottery — apart from his own natural talent — was stimulated not least by Gurd's example but also by his untimely death leaving half the illustrations yet to be completed? Unfortunately, I did not pursue this notion with Prof. Piggott before his death. He did tell me, however, that he used Robert Gurd to illustrate some of his pottery (see also Piggott 1937) but eventually decided to draw his own, 'to save money' (pers. comm.). So Gurd may not have been cheap!

Robert Gurd was taken ill after returning from a family holiday in Scotland in September 1938 and died a few days later leaving a widow, Gertrude King Gurd, and two sons. At the time of his death he was in charge of the drawing office of the Southern Railway in Brighton but had managed to find the time to record many Sussex monuments, excavations and their artefacts during the previous twenty-four years. Such was his reputation as an illustrator of prehistoric, and particularly Neolithic, pottery, however, that he was sought after far beyond his Sussex home by some of Britain's most respected archaeologists. He had, for example, illustrations on twenty-eight pages of volume 2 (1936) of the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*. Gurd's influence on the world of prehistoric pottery studies must have been immense and he must surely have been one of

the best known illustrators of his day.

Gurd is most closely associated with Eliot and E. Cecil Curwen for whom he did so much work in Sussex. Cecil Curwen wrote the following in the acknowledgements of the second edition of his book, *The Archaeology of Sussex*, 1954, viii:

The great majority of the drawings which adorn this work come from the pen of the late Robert Gurd, to whom we are specially indebted, not only for his technical skill, but also for the spirit in which that skill was exercised.

Robert Gurd was an amateur archaeologist in an age with few professionals but with the drawing skills of a master craftsman. He had the eye of an artist and a sensitivity, even empathy, with prehistoric pottery: a unique talent. As we enter the 21st century and witness the accelerating change in print and non-print publication, such as the Internet, compact disk and virtual-reality images, one may wonder if line illustration, as exemplified by Robert Gurd, has any part to play. I for one think that the universal language of good line illustration still has currency and Gurd's work will continue to be meaningful to generations of scholars. Robert Gurd was justly proud of his illustrations and signed or initialled almost all of his work. A great loss to British archaeology, his death robbed us of so much of his potential.

Not surprisingly, the best collection of original Gurd drawings is held at Barbican House in Lewes, but I have only made one brief visit to see part of the archive. Any Gurd original is a treasure and this remarkable collection deserves a public exhibition.

#### **Acknowledgements**

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