

## REVIEW

Philip Mayes and Keith Scott, Pottery kilns at Chilvers Coton, Nuneaton. Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph Series: no. 10 (London, 1984), 196pp; 126 figs., 10 tables, 8 plates, 1 microfiche. Price £11 (£10 to subscribers).

This volume records the results of excavating forty-two pottery kilns and associated pottery assemblages, carried out under the direction of the authors between 1967 and 1971. The majority were excavated between August and October 1967 under the direction of Philip Mayes and the remainder subsequently by Keith Scott. It should be added to the foreword that had Bob Thomson, now of Southampton City Museums, not acted so promptly in notifying the then MPBW, following a newspaper article, then the excavations might never have taken place.

The report is divided into three sections, which deal with the geology and documentary evidence, the excavations, and the pottery. These are followed by five appendices which deal mainly with the scientific analyses of the fuels and clays and include (Appendix 1) a very useful discussion of the decorated floor tiles from both tile and pottery kilns by Elizabeth Eames.

A short but adequate report on the geology of the area by A. F. Cook is followed by a detailed account of the documentary evidence for the Chilvers Coton pottery industry by Eileen Gooder. This is an exemplary piece of work. In the absence of a fundamental source, manorial accounts and court rolls, Mrs Gooder has put together an outline of the industry from piecemeal sources such as occupational surnames and minor field names recorded during the Middle Ages, post-medieval estate maps and what appears to be an intimate geographical and geological knowledge of the area. A historian's approach to the subject is evident in that the potteries are firmly placed in their medieval administrative and tenurial setting, an important factor which is often overlooked in the siting of pottery kilns. Following the work of Derek Renn and Jean Le Patourel in the 1960s, few similar studies have appeared, the work of Anthony Streeten in the south-east and Glen Foard and Terry Pearson on the Stanion industry being notable exceptions. Such detailed inter-disciplinary studies are essential for a proper understanding of pottery production centres. Mrs Gooder's work is a model that should be followed elsewhere. The decision to print the relatively small amount of text on the post-medieval Chilvers Coton documentation in microfiche is puzzling, especially when evidence beyond the date of the excavated kilns is included within the printed text.

For this reviewer, the documentary section was very much the highlight of the volume. In contrast, with the exception of Mrs Eames' report on the decorated floor tiles, the remainder of the report was a very big disappointment. Although the structure of the report is explained (pp. 39-41, 47), the philosophy behind it is not. This, combined with considerable and quite serious inconsistencies at all levels of the report, makes it a very difficult volume to use. Perhaps the greatest difficulty is that the volume does not appear to have been conceived as a whole, but added to or amended throughout its creation. This is seen in the various location maps, drawn by different people. For someone unfamiliar with the area

it is very difficult to relate one map to another. It would have been useful if the area of Fig. 2 had been shown in outline on Fig. 1, and similarly the area of Fig. 4 shown on Fig. 3. This approach is adopted on Fig. 1 but the figure numbers for the detailed areas are omitted. A scale is missing from Fig. 2, and surely the inset key to Fig. 3 should read the 'vill' of Chilvers Coton rather than the 'parish'.

One of the major objects of a pottery report is to illustrate the pottery and present it in a consistent, coherent and easily digestible form. This is particularly important with material from a production centre. Quite rightly, the volume is devoted mainly to illustrations of the pottery, but what should have turned out to be one of the volume's strengths through the quality of the drawings is one of its numerous weaknesses. The arrangement of the drawings makes them very difficult to use. Outline full profiles (Figs. 18-64) have been separated from rim forms (Figs. 65-91), while decoration and exotica are in another group of figures (Figs. 92-112). The difficulty comes in trying to imagine what was actually associated on the same vessel. This might have been resolved by treating the one-eighth scale reductions as conventional half-section drawings, giving one-quarter reduced drawings of variations in rims against the appropriate full profile. Other difficulties occur with the one-eighth scale outline drawings. No plans of the lobed cups (Figs. 62, no. 536; 63, no. 557) are shown so that the number of lobes and the position of the handle and its fixing (which can vary) are not known. The problem with presenting profiles in this way is highlighted by the alembic (Fig. 43, no. 297). No detail of the unusual inturned collecting channel is given on Fig. 79, only the rim of its accompanying base (this is not a cucurbit as stated, but a base in which the cucurbit sits in a matrix of sand; only one was found in the deposit, and not more as is indicated by the plural). The vessels, which were made together as a unit, are not described anywhere in the volume. It is unfortunate that a reference to a full discussion of the two pots is not given (Moorhouse 1972, p. 103, Fig. 31, nos. 7, 8; p. 116), where the reason for the two pots being discarded appears - the potter failed to make a hole down the alembic spout, an error which was spotted only after firing, rendering both vessels useless! The difficulty is compounded by inconsistencies between the full profile drawings and their rim profiles, located by an ingenious numbering code for each rim. Two of a number of examples occur with Fig. 64, nos. 558 and 559; their rim profiles are reversed on Fig. 91.

In addition to the problems of arrangement, the visually excellent drawings hide a wide range of very serious inconsistencies. One of the biggest problems occurs with the detailed drawings (Figs. 92-112). Many are single views which give no real impression of where on the vessel the piece came from, or which are suggested reconstructions to make the drawing clearer to the non-pot specialist. Figure 112, no. 302 is described in the text (p. 68) as a spindle whorl, yet the single view drawing shows an apparently solid circular object impressed with a small annular stamp, but with no depth to give a profile or half section to give the form of the hole. To give some scale to the problem, a number of other examples occur on the same figure: a single plan view of a blank disk (no. 291) is not mentioned in the text (p. 67); the costrel, with a single plan view (no. 289), will not be apparent as such to many, although mentioned in the text (p. 67), and it should have had at least a longitudinal section to give a profile and constructional details. Again, the text (p. 67) does not give any details of the (?) applied face

mask (no. 293); no section of the handle is given (no. 292) and there is no indication either on the drawing or in the text as to where the separately-drawn stamp occurs on the handle or jug neck. These and other inconsistencies within the drawings and between drawings and text occur on most of the detailed drawings (Figs. 92-112).

Two inconsistencies recur throughout the drawings. Decorated pieces are often shown as sherds where they are not large enough to reconstruct the diameter of the vessel. A section would have indicated the thickness, but, more importantly, indicated where on the body of the vessel the decoration lay. The second difficulty lies with single handles. Many are shown without side profiles, which would have given some indication of the shape of the vessel from which they came. Others are without any cross-section. This is particularly unfortunate as a variety of incised and applied features occur on the back of some handles. These are not minor criticisms in what should be an important publication and, if all else was satisfactory, would seriously impair the usefulness of the information.

Other problems occur with the drawings. One difficulty for the general reader is that extension marks for broken edges are rarely shown. This is particularly important for objects for whose full form and function are uncertain, such as Fig. 105, no. 219, a straight-sided rectilinear object. The drawings are presented as a range of shapes found, with no attempt at discussion or quantification. Although, as the authors point out (p. 39), statistics on most of the assemblages would have been irrelevant and misleading, there is no indication as to which of the forms produced are the most common ones found and which are the uncommon ones. The assumption might be that the majority of the full profiles represent the run-of-the-mill wares, which is not the case. The difficulties are compounded with full profiles of unique or rare forms occurring in the eighth-scale profile section and in the detailed pottery drawings. The alembic and base (not a 'cucurbit' as stated) are unique on the site but are illustrated without comment. The three dripping dishes (Fig. 96, no. 58; Fig. 109, nos. 267-8), which could have been placed amongst the full profile drawings, are found amongst the detail drawings. The same inconsistencies occur with the floor and roofing materials (Figs. 114-120), for a number of other roof fittings are also found among the detail drawings (Figs. 21, no. 41; 94, no. 84; 97, no. 66; 107, no. 230; 104, no. 199a).

The mechanical approach is seen at its clearest, and most confusing, in the Cistercian wares (Type E) from Site 15. The ditch (F.81) contained a large group of Cistercian wares. Only a type series of forms (Fig. 108, nos. 237-50) and the variety of stamps (Fig. 108, nos. 251-62) are illustrated. No indication is given as to the frequency of the forms (the two single-handled cups, nos. 243-4, were unique and are rare nationally) or of which type of decoration occurs on which vessel, their positions and associations. Cistercian ware is as susceptible to regional styles as any other type of medieval pottery; there is growing evidence to suggest that some styles had a very limited distribution (Moorhouse 1984). These regional styles are identified from subtle variations in profile and particularly the relationship of stamps to vessel form, their combination and motifs created by them on the vessel. It is a great pity that those wishing to use the Nuneaton report in this way will have to revert to the original material. The stamps shown on Fig. 108 must be published at a half scale and not a quarter as indicated by the caption and the late fourteenth-century date suggested for Cistercian ware (p. 41)

must be a mistake for late fifteenth century, unless, like so much else in the report, the evidence has not been presented to the reader!

The illustrated vessels are linked to the site from which they were excavated by a description of the range of contents included within the brief account of the archaeological evidence (pp. 47-65). These are far from adequate. An important group of fifteenth century cups from Site 18 is illustrated by one part profile and part of a free-standing internal figure (p. 68; Fig. 112, nos. 296, 298 - no. 297 is missing). We are told 'The cup . . . . was the only vessel restored with a clay bird inside. Other animal and bird figures were present, probably originally free-standing inside the larger lobed bowls . . . ' (p. 68). This level of reporting is typical of the other sites. Very cursory descriptions of the associated material and extremely selective illustrations provide an incomplete picture of what was found. What is worrying is that the unwary may assume that the drawings are representative of their respective assemblages.

Description of the archaeological evidence (pp. 47-65) is also afflicted with brevity, to the point of frustration. The sites are described in numerical order, then by kiln, followed by individual features which are numbered consecutively throughout the 21 sites reported. The plans are grouped together preceding the site descriptions. A more sensible arrangement would have been to interleave the relevant plan in its appropriate place adjacent to the site description. Accounts of the kilns are useful but those of other features often give no more detail than is apparent on the plan, and are mostly single word descriptions. The frustration is highlighted by the plan and description of what must be one of the most spectacular finds at Nuneaton, the structure on Site 18. What appears to be an adequate plan appears on Fig. 16 but it is accompanied by a very sparse and inadequate text (pp. 65-9), making it impossible for the reader to understand fully what was found. Many of the features shown and numbered on the plan are not mentioned in the text (a feature common to other plans), evidence for the interpretation of features (e.g. Feature 106) is lacking, and no sections are given showing relative stratigraphy, such as the ashy deposit which is said to spread from Feature 106 over the adjacent foundations of the structure (p. 68). Some of the plans are equally unclear. The section line shown on Fig. 13:1 would have made more sense on Fig. 13:2 where the superimposed kilns 31c and 32a are shown.

The structure recovered by Keith Scott on Site 18 is a remarkable find. Although no interpretation is offered in the report, what was found was almost certainly a substantial part of a pottery working tenement, with a large timber structure, a series of successive kilns and an adjacent trackway. The absence of potting equipment, such as the range of tools and stone-lined levigation pits found in the Lyveden workshop, and the clean floor suggests that the structure is not a potter's workshop, but more likely a store for pots either before or after firing. The close association of the kilns supports this suggestion. Following Lyveden (Northants), Olney Hyde (Bucks.) and more recently Glapthorn (Northants.), this is one of a handful of potters' tenements, as opposed to kilns, to be examined (Moorhouse 1981, pp. 96-108). It is a pity that circumstances did not allow the full tenement to be excavated, and even more of a pity that the results of the work and the pottery it produced have not been fully reported. The presence of a pot containing residues of white lead from Feature 106 (pp. 68, 194-5), along with a lead ingot, is of great interest. Experimental firing of the lead produced a similar-coloured

glaze to that found on the pots from the site. Extant fifteenth century English recipe collections often describe in detail the production of white lead by suspending lead ingots or strips in a bath of vinegar contained in what is frequently specified as an earthen pot (Moorhouse 1981, pp. 117-18). It seems that here in the store at Nuneaton we have material evidence for that process, the results of which were ground up to produce glazes. Evidence for a similar process was found in the workshop annexe on Site D at Lyveden, while vessels containing lead compounds are known from a number of sites such as Hallgate (Doncaster, South Yorks.) and Lower Parrock (East Sussex).

Despite the major difficulties with this report, it does contain much that is of interest. The potters had a very interesting repertoire of products, which in some instances included decorated floor tiles (Table 3). Wasted examples were not only found mixed in the pottery waste heaps, which would not be evidence in itself, but wasted fragments were used as separators in the pottery kilns, for pieces were found stuck to pots. The usual combination of a potter as a maker of both domestic vessels and roof fittings, in the form of decorated ridge tiles and ornamental roof furniture, was evident, complementing the abundant archaeological and documentary evidence from elsewhere for potters supplying the ceramic fittings for the roof. This may be because the shape of the ridge tiles and often large and ornate ventilators were more suited to the shape and other contents of a potter's kiln rather than the standard tile shapes and rectangular kiln of tilers. Equally they were required in far fewer numbers than the flat tiles covering the sides of the roof. Pottery unlike that found associated with the pottery kilns was found mixed with the waste tiles in the fill of the purpose-made tile kiln, suggesting that tilers may have been producing pottery, another feature noted elsewhere in the country. The similarity of the unique tile kiln to plans of the double-flued pottery kilns has prompted John Musty to suggest (p. 27) a close working relationship between potters and tilers on the site. The plan of the tile-making complex (Site 10; pp. 60-1; Fig. 12; Pl. Vc) supplements those recently discussed by Paul Drury (Drury 1981). Unfortunately a full understanding of what was associated with the kiln (a tile drying shed and other features) is marred by a lack of information in the text.

The excavations produced a fascinating series of kiln plans, encompassing on one site almost every conceivable shape of kiln. Throughout the series of excavated sites and the association of kiln types within each site it was possible to suggest a chronological progression from a twin-flued kiln in the thirteenth century, through three-flued triangular kiln and four-flued square kiln to the six-flued multi-flue kilns of the late fifteenth century. The dating of the kilns, however, is mainly by association with pottery dumps, whose contents have been dated stylistically (without authority). This chronology requires further, more direct associations before the sequence is confirmed. The wide variety of kiln plans is perhaps a reflection of what is happening within separate kilns elsewhere in the country. On Site D at Lyveden, for example, successive remodellings of Kiln D1 altered the internal shape of the kiln dramatically between the first and last firings (Bryant and Steane 1971, Fig. 8). Similar substantial modifications are found elsewhere, suggesting that the potter was constantly trying to improve his firing or stacking technique by altering the shape and internal arrangements within the oven. The consistency with which the products were fired throughout these modifications shows that it is not the shape of the kiln that matters but the way in which it is fired.

More could have been made of the evidence for kiln superstructures. Lack of reported evidence led John Musty to suggest that the kilns may have been open-topped (p. 28). The fragments of superstructure reported from Site 12 (p. 61) were in fact a substantial number of dome pieces, many with protruding vents, found collapsed over the kiln floor. These were almost certainly vents to control the flame path and atmosphere within the kiln, rather than chimneys (p. 28), for some had baked clay adhering to their ends around the aperture. The technique is the same as that used in a charcoal kiln: vents are opened up to draw the fire to a cold spot in the kiln. The pieces of curved dome superstructure from Site 14, Kiln 33 (p. 28) are not noted in the site description (p. 63). The absence of substantial quantities of kiln superstructure in waster and levelling dumps at Nuneaton is mirrored by similar evidence from elsewhere. The experimental work carried out by Geoff Bryant has shown that a kiln can be satisfactorily fired without a dome. The archaeological evidence now seems to support this suggestion. The absence of a wide stacking flue in the Nuneaton multi-flue kilns suggests that even these kilns, unlike their counterparts in the north, possessed open tops through which the kiln could be loaded and unloaded. Coverings for the top of the kilns vary and are known mainly from Roman and post-medieval kilns, in the form of crude coarse tiles or thick circular discs of clay. These were laid in layers over the pots on a bed of straw, with each successive ring getting smaller in diameter to produce a small vent in the top of the kiln. This was achieved as the firing progressed and acted as a draw to the flame to increase the temperature at the correct rate. For a reduction firing the top and flues were sealed with damp clay, for oxidized firing the fires were allowed to die down naturally with a free flow of air through the kiln. Such coverings have been noted rarely from medieval kilns, probably because we are conditioned to look for fragments of permanent domes. Information on the covering for a kiln would be one of the many advantages in excavating a whole potting tenement, waster heaps as well.

The excavations at Chilvers Coton were, like so many excavations on pottery-making sites, carried out under difficult, rushed conditions through the chance reporting of a kiln which had been disturbed. It was the kiln and waster dumps that received attention for obvious reasons, yet the kiln formed only one element of a potter's working tenement. Many of the other features, apart from his workshop perhaps, would be impossible to identify under the conditions imposed at Nuneaton. A combination of archaeological and documentary evidence shows that the layout of a potter's tenement and its contents are seldom static: the boundaries of the tenement may change, increasing or decreasing the size of the enclosure; there may be a lapse of time or even abandonment in the potting use of an enclosure, while adjacent ones were still in use; other craft activities may co-exist alongside the pottery making in the same enclosure (iron working is associated on a number of sites, including Lyveden); and there could be an excessive build-up of displaced material by the constant levelling of waster deposits. The 'key-hole' excavation of kilns or waster heaps under these circumstances could lead to very misleading results in terms of relative associations between sites and even the validity of 'associated' material. Most of the areas excavated at Nuneaton in 1967 were between 2-3 metres deep, and on one occasion at least 4 metres deep, build-ups created by the constant levelling of waster heaps from the thirteenth century, and the backfilling of clay pits with disturbed earlier material. The methods of excavation, dictated by necessity, and the nature of the deposits being sampled must cast very real

doubts on the contemporaneity of many of the Nuneaton groups. Unless pots are actually found in situ, as in Kiln 38, then even the waster material found in the fill of a kiln cannot be assumed to be either contemporary with or the product of that kiln. Trying to interpret a kiln fired many times out of the context of its contemporary surroundings in the potting tenement is like trying to understand the significance of a re-cut posthole without looking at the rest of the timber building of which it originally formed part! The emphasis on the kiln throughout the report and, indeed, implicit in the title of the volume, is misleading. Perhaps the phrase 'production centre' or 'pottery-making site' might have been preferred, as it draws attention to the entire complex rather than one aspect of a potter's working enclosure. The term 'kiln site' has over the years obscured the true nature of pottery-making sites by focussing attention on the most visually obvious and productive part of the complex. This in turn has led to much misunderstanding in the way in which pottery-making sites are excavated and the results interpreted.

Kiln furniture is often a hall-mark of a particular centre or even potter, and can be more distinctive and regional in distribution than the products themselves. One of the features of the Nuneaton material was the variety of evidence for stacking in the kiln, including scars on the pots and purpose-made kiln furniture. A properly stacked kiln load filling the oven was essential for a successful firing. It is clear that stacking methods and the infilling of odd gaps in the stack were as varied amongst potters as attempts to gain more efficiency from the kiln by altering the plan of the oven. Apart from the occasional mention of the presence of kiln furniture, this evidence is lacking from the report. One unusual specially-made kiln prop occurred amongst material from Site 13, kiln 32a-b, where a series of small crudely-made plant-pot-like vessels were found. These are illustrated on Fig. 106, nos. 224-6, but they are shown the wrong way up and without the distinctive diagonal slice cut from the base angle, often removing half the base. They were used rim downwards, placed in threes against the shoulders of inverted large jugs on the floor of the oven. One jug was found which had collapsed during firing with the three props still in position.

Potter's tools were absent from the sites excavated, mainly because no pot-making area was found. Often the types of tools used, fashioned from other objects, can identify the products from a potter or workshop. The slashing on the backs of jug handles was done with knives, but one potter appears to have been using a knife with a serrated edge. It is unfortunate that a clay die, for making the Cistercian stamps found in Feature 81, is not illustrated or mentioned. Only one other similar stamp is known, from Wrenthorpe (West Yorkshire).

The report is very difficult to use, partly because of its structure and the very superficial level of information given, but also because it lacks an overview of the material. For a volume which includes such a variety of information, an index would have been a great help, if only to list the main pottery types and forms, and on which sites they were found. A detailed general discussion would have been unnecessary and misleading given the knowledge of the Nuneaton industry and of medieval pottery in general in the region, but there are a number of comments which could usefully have been made. The coiled necks on the wheel-thrown bodies of the early decorated jugs suggest a link with the earlier tripod pitcher tradition (Moorhouse 1971, p. 53), a suggestion strengthened by some of the decorative

elements being common to both. It is now clear that the highly decorated jugs from Coventry with dancers and other designs on them, published by Gerald Dunning (1948, pp. 239-43, Figs. 71-5; 1960, p. 121, Fig. 45, p. 122, Fig. 46), are Nuneaton products. Identical vessels were found on Kiln 32 (Fig. 49, nos. 353, 357; Fig. 105, nos. 204, 216). Indeed, it is now clear that large quantities of Nuneaton products reached Leicester, yet, apart from Coventry, Nuneaton vessels are not as common as they might be in the immediate area of the production centre. The Shelton Collection in Coventry Museum shows that Nuneaton was one of at least two large centres supplying the city with Cistercian wares, a fact which is not discernible from the report because of the way in which the Cistercian wares have been presented. Perhaps more importantly, no discussion is given for the dated typology suggested for the sequence (p. 28). Many of the dates are based on relative dates from material published elsewhere, the dangers of which are well known. Presentation without qualification in a long-awaited report like this one is dangerous, for people are bound to use the report in the future as not only a source for material but also for dating. In contrast to the paucity of Nuneaton material on local occupation sites, the early finewares travelled very widely, either through deliberate trade or more probably carried by travellers. Thirteenth century decorated jugs are known along the Nene and Great Ouse valleys in eastern England and from as far afield as Norwich and Chester.

It is perhaps unfair for someone who has been actively involved in a piece of work to review the results produced by someone else. In this case it is justified, because of the over-simplified way in which the material has been presented, the inaccuracies, inconsistencies and omissions, which could give the general reader a misleading impression of the material. The overall presentation leaves a lot to be desired, and there are an unusually large number of editing and printing errors for a Medieval Archaeology monograph; the marriage of one of the co-authors of the section on neutron activation analysis is noted between the writing of the report and the compilation of the contents page (pp. iv, 188)! Keith Scott has still to publish the post-1971 work, from which he has a number of important groups. It is hoped that some of the comments made here are considered when they are prepared for publication.

The most worrying aspect of the present report is that the pre-publication build-up (not by the authors, it should be added) and hand-outs suggested that the report would break new ground in the way material from production centres is published. As such the style of reporting may be taken by many as a model for future reports. Clearly we have to reconsider methods of producing reports on vast quantities of pottery; the reasons for publishing and disseminating the information have first to be considered, and then the methods of presenting the material assessed. Unfortunately the approaches adopted in the Nuneaton report are at odds with questions now being asked of medieval pottery: we need to know the range of stamps and decoration produced rather than simply be told in the text that they existed, and we need to see the range of shapes for a particular form rather than read that a variety were found. Some attempt at quantification is necessary, particularly on stratified sites like Site 10 and 18, if only using an approximate quantification of the type used by Phil Mayes on the Potterspury material (Mayes 1968); forms were qualified by 'major', 'intermediate', or 'minor', showing whether they were common or rare.



This at least gives the reader some guidance as to frequency. The presentation of drawings should be consistent. There is a lot of potential in the use of eighth-size drawings, but the separation of the rim forms into another part of the report is confusing; after all, summary sheets have been used with great effect for over three decades in Europe. The publication of material from pottery-producing sites will always be difficult because, as is pointed out by the authors (p. 39), we are dealing with what the potter did not sell.

The publication of the Nuneaton report has brought to a head a ceramic volcano that has been bubbling for many years! Pottery-making sites CANNOT be excavated in this way, particularly industries which covered a large area and were in production for a number of centuries. Future HBMC funding should not be put into the excavation of kiln dumps or kilns simply because they are going to be destroyed, unless potter's working tenements can be substantially or fully excavated. The approach to excavating pottery-making sites is as advanced today as the philosophy behind excavating medieval peasant houses was over thirty years ago. The potting tenement needs to be looked at in the way that it was used, by exposing all contemporary features - in other words total excavation. The advantages in terms of reliable usable information will more than repay the initial costs of excavation. Some of these have already been mentioned; the most important is obtaining well-stratified groups of material. An understanding of a poorly-documented craft industry will thus be gained. Much can be learnt about manufacturing techniques; the products of a particular phase or workshop could be identified by such features as the impressions of make-shift tools used by the potter. The number of potters involved in producing contemporary vessels, or even single vessels, could be gained by a study of fingerprint impressions. These and many other important results cannot be achieved by traditional methods of excavating such sites, nor by the fashionable technique of sampling currently being used on some sites. Let us hope that the publication of the Nuneaton report has marked a turning point in the way in which pottery production sites are excavated and the material from them published.

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