

# *Che si conoscono al suo già detto segno* Vasari's connoisseurship in the field of engravings

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The esteem in which Giorgio Vasari held prints and engravers has been hotly debated in recent criticism. In 1990, Evelina Borea suggested that the author of the *Lives* was basically interested in prints only with regard to the authors of the inventions and not to their material execution,<sup>1</sup> and this theory has been embraced both by David Landau<sup>2</sup> and Robert Getscher.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Sharon Gregory has attempted to tone down this highly critical stance, arguing that in the life of Marcantonio Raimondi 'and other engravers of prints' inserted *ex novo* into the edition of 1568, which offers a genuine history of the art from Maso Finiguerra to Maarten van Heemskerck, Vasari focused on the artist who made the engravings and not on the *inventor* of those prints, acknowledging the status of the various Agostino Veneziano, Jacopo Caraglio and Enea Vico (among many others) as individual artists with a specific and recognizable style.<sup>4</sup> In at least one case, that of the *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* engraved by Raimondi after a drawing by Baccio Bandinelli, Vasari goes so far as to heap greater praise on the engraver, clearly distinguishing the technical skills of the former from those of the *inventor*:

[...] So when Marcantonio, having heard the whole story, finished the plate he went before Baccio could find out about it to the Pope, who took infinite

<sup>1</sup> Evelina Borea, 'Vasari e le stampe', *Prospettiva*, 57–60, 1990, 35.

<sup>2</sup> David Landau, 'Artistic Experiment and the Collector's Print – Italy', in David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print 1470 - 1550*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994, 284. Already in a previous article ('Vasari, Prints and Prejudice', *Oxford Art Journal*, 6, 1983, 3–4 and 10) David Landau argued that the generally poor reputation of engravings as mere reproductions of frescoes and paintings by the masters, widespread in the twentieth century, should be attributed primarily to Vasari.

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Getscher, *An annotated and illustrated version of Giorgio Vasari's history of Italian and Northern prints from his Lives of the artists (1550 & 1568)*, Lewiston: Mellen, 2003, 2–3.

<sup>4</sup> Sharon Gregory, *Vasari and the Renaissance Print*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, 25–26 and 37–39. Gregory's theory was accepted by Michael Bury. See his review in: *The Burlington Magazine*, 155:1320, 2013, 181. According to Lisa Pon (*Raphael, Dürer and Marcantonio Raimondi: copying and the Italian Renaissance print*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, 139), in his *Life* of Raimondi Vasari succeeded in capturing the fluid reality of the world of the sixteenth-century print, citing both *peintres-graveurs* and printers and publishers, but this material was of course difficult to contextualize within the biographical structure of his work. See also on this: Laura Aldovini, 'Intagliato col disegno et invenzione: disegnare per incidere secondo Vasari', in Dominique Cordellier, dir., *Le dessin dans la révolution de l'estampe*, Paris: Soc. du Salon du Dessin, 2012, 37–38. For the influence of Borghini, collector of prints, on Vasari, see: Eliana Carrara, 'Borghini's Print Purchase from Giunti', *Print Quarterly*, 17, 2000, 3–17 and Barbara Agosti, *Giorgio Vasari luoghi e tempi delle Vite*, Milan: Officina Libraria, 2013, 107–108.

delight in the arts of design, and showed him the original drawing by Bandinelli and then the printed engraving. The Pope recognized that Marcantonio, with great judgement, not only had made no mistakes, but had corrected many errors of no small importance made by Bandinelli and that he had demonstrated greater knowledge and skill in his engraving than Baccio had in his drawing.<sup>5</sup>

However, Vasari's dislike of Bandinelli is well known, and this passage remains virtually unique in the *Lives*.<sup>6</sup> As such, to analyse this issue in greater depth it is worth addressing it from the point of view of the history of connoisseurship as well: was Vasari the connoisseur interested in establishing who was responsible for the invention of the prints or their engraving, or perhaps of both? For obvious reasons, in the field of engraving there was often no need for connoisseurship at all: prints often had signatures giving the name of the *inventor* and the *sculptor*, or at least one of the two, and certainly in his life of Raimondi Vasari relied primarily on the information that he could deduce directly from the prints themselves.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in her fundamental recent volumes *Lo specchio dell'arte italiana*, Borea has shown that Vasari often confused the engraver and *inventor*, or the engraver and printer, confirming his fundamental lack of interest in the engraving technique itself.<sup>8</sup> He therefore did not possess a sufficient critical understanding to determine the authorship of engravings, and perhaps not even a genuine interest in doing so, in

<sup>5</sup> '[...] perciò che avendo finita Marcantonio la carta, prima che Baccio lo sapesse andò essendo tutto avisato, al Papa, che infinitamente si diletta delle cose del disegno, e gli mostrò l'originale stato disegnato dal Bandinello, e poi la carta stampata; onde il Papa conobbe che Marcantonio con molto giudizio avea non solo non fatto errori, ma correttone molti fatti dal Bandinello e di non poca importanza, e che più avea saputo et operato egli coll'intaglio che Baccio col disegno', Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568* [edited by Rosanna Bettarini and commented by Paola Barocchi], Florence: Sansoni, 1966-1997, vol.5, 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> Also important in this context, however, is the passage on the various states of the *Battle between the Romans and Sabines* by Rosso Fiorentino and Jacopo Caraglio: 'Afterwards Caraglio began the Rape of the Sabines for Rosso, which would have been a very rare thing; but as the Sack of Rome intervened it could not be finished, because Rosso left and all the prints were lost, and whilst it did in time come into the hands of the printers, it was a poor thing, because the engraving was done by someone without expertise, just to make money from it' ('Dopo cominciò il Caraglio per il Rosso il ratto delle Sabine, che sarebbe stato cosa molto rara; ma sopravvenendo il sacco di Roma non si poté finire, perché il Rosso andò via e le stampe tutte si perderono: e se bene questa è venuta poi col tempo in mano degli stampatori, è stata cattiva cosa, per avere fatto l'intaglio chi non se ne intendeva, e tutto per cavar danari'), Vasari, *Le vite*, vol.5, 17.

<sup>7</sup> According to Getscher, Vasari did not pay much attention to the signatures on engravings, but this seems an excessively peremptory judgment: without the help of the signature Vasari could not, for example, have attributed the *Allegory of Death and Fame* to Agostino Veneziano. See: Getscher, *An annotated and illustrated*, 17-18, and also David Landau, 'From Collaboration to Reproduction in Italy', in David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print 1470 - 1550*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994, 120.

<sup>8</sup> Evelina Borea, *Lo specchio dell'arte italiana: stampe in cinque secoli*, Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2009, vol.1, 141-144.

the absence of monograms or more detailed signatures. Essentially, Vasari had no problem in writing: 'Marco da Ravenna likewise, besides the things we have mentioned, which he executed in the company of Agostino [Veneziano], made many things by himself, which can be identified by his aforementioned mark [the monogram SR], and they are all both good and praiseworthy.'<sup>9</sup> The 'mark' was the only true indication of the hand of an engraver. Vasari made no reference to the potential for distinguishing a print by Agostino Veneziano from one by Marco Dente da Ravenna on the basis of style, nor do we read anything of this kind regarding Raimondi himself or Caraglio anywhere in the chapter on Raimondi and the other engravers. Engravers are more or less lauded depending on their differing technical skill, but they are never identified thanks to a distinctive style. Vasari barely mentions the greatest engraver of the mid-sixteenth century, Giorgio Ghisi, who had mastered an extraordinary and innovative technique, referring to him only for his reproductions of Michelangelo and Bronzino.<sup>10</sup> This does not necessarily mean that Vasari was uninterested in the figures of the *peintres-graveurs*,<sup>11</sup> since the two prints with scenes from the Trojan War engraved by Ghisi after inventions by Giovanni Battista Scultori are amply praised (executed 'with invention, design and extraordinary grace');<sup>12</sup> however they are attributed exclusively to the latter, considered both their *inventor* and their *sculptor*.<sup>13</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Vasari confused the manner of the Raimondi school, in other words that of Agostino Veneziano and Marco Dente, with the very different one of Caraglio, attributing to the former the engravings of the major stories of Raphael and his school in the Loggia of Cupid and Psyche at the Farnesina, later unanimously attributed to Caraglio.<sup>14</sup> Knowing that Marcantonio, Agostino and Marco had worked tirelessly on inventions by Raphael, Vasari automatically named Raimondi's two students. A very different approach is taken by Francisco de Hollanda, who in around 1540 listed the most famous engravers of the time without any reference to the *inventor* and specifying that Agostino Veneto 'began with great patience, with the fine lines, and finished with the thicker ones', a description of technique that we would look for in vain in the chapter on Raimondi and the other engravers in the *Lives* of 1568.<sup>15</sup> Vasari could certainly attempt to attribute a print

<sup>9</sup> 'Marco da Ravenna parimente, oltre le cose che si son dette, le quali lavorò in compagnia d'Agostino [Veneziano] fece molte cose da sé, che si conoscono al suo già detto segno [il monogramma SR], e sono tutte e buone e lodevoli', Vasari, *Le vite*, vol.5, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Suzanne Boorsch, Michal Lewis and R. E. Lewis, *The Engravings of Giorgio Ghisi*, exhibition catalogue, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985, n°9 (53–57), n°14 (71–73) as well as Borea, *Lo specchio dell'arte italiana*, 142.

<sup>11</sup> Borea, *Lo specchio dell'arte italiana*, 142. See also: Borea, 'Vasari e le stampe', 34–35. On this point see the clarifications of Michael Bury, 'The Taste for Prints in Italy to ca. 1600', *Print Quarterly*, 2:1, 1985, 25–26.

<sup>12</sup> 'con invenzione, disegno e grazia straordinaria', Vasari, *Le vite*, vol.5, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Boorsch, Lewis and Lewis, *The Engravings of Giorgio Ghisi*, n°7–8 (49–52) and Gregory, *Vasari and the Renaissance Print*, 26–29.

<sup>14</sup> Vasari, *Le vite*, vol.5, 12; Achim Gnann, entry in Konrad Oberhuber, ed., *Roma e lo stile classico di Raffaello 1515–1527*, exhibition catalogue, Milan: Electa, 1999, n°73 (132–133).

<sup>15</sup> 'cominciò con grande pazienza, con i tratti delicati, e finì con i grossi', Francisco d'Olanda, *I trattati d'arte* [edited by Grazia Modroni], Livorno: Sillabe, 2003, 164. See also: Sylvie

lacking a monogram or signature to one engraver rather than another based on the information in his possession (as in the aforementioned case of those after the Farnesina frescoes): knowing that Caraglio had engraved the *Marriage of the Virgin* for Parmigianino, which bears the names of both artists, he stated that Jacopo had also reproduced 'other things by the same artist'<sup>16</sup> but, significantly, without explicitly naming any of them. He therefore did not mention the *Diogenes*, not coincidentally lacking signatures, now unanimously attributed to Caraglio himself, whereas he explicitly praised the other famous chiaroscuro *Diogenes* by Ugo da Carpi, correctly ascribed to the two masters, bearing the signatures of both.<sup>17</sup> For early sixteenth-century prints, in short, it is clear that Vasari generally knew who the engravers were, rather than being able to recognize them.

However, particularly as regards the authorship of the inventions, there are some cases in which Vasari was forced to attribute engravings: those for which the signatures did not provide him with sufficient information. One of the most lauded engravers in absolute terms in the *Lives* is Enea Vico of Parma (a friend of the author, who also gave him his own drawings to engrave), perhaps above all because Vico was also an antiquarian scholar who had published numerous prints on erudite topics.<sup>18</sup> In both the *Life* of Raimondi and in that of Francesco Salviati, Vasari refers to Vico's famous *Conversion of Paul*, a print of exceptionally large size.<sup>19</sup> However, many other engravings by the artist from Parma are mentioned in the *Lives*:

Nor was Enea Vico of Parma less excellent than any of those mentioned above. As we can see, he engraved in copper the Rape of Helen by Rosso, and similarly another plate after the drawing by the same artist, Vulcan with some Cupids fashioning arrows at his forge while the Cyclopes are also at work, which was truly a beautiful print; and in another he made Michelangelo's Leda and an Annunciation to Titian's design, the story of Judith that Michelangelo painted in the chapel.<sup>20</sup>

Naturally, Vasari could not be mistaken about the prints drawn from Michelangelo, but the *Annunciation* dated 1548, one of the first executed in Venice by Vico and said to be by Titian, cannot be attributed with certainty to an invention

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Deswarte-Rosa, 'Francisco de Holanda collectionneur (1514/1518–1572)', *Revue de l'art*, 34, 1984, 172; Bury, 'The Taste for Prints', 24.

<sup>16</sup> 'altre cose del medesimo', Vasari, *Le vite*, vol.5, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Borea, *Lo specchio dell'arte italiana*, 79.

<sup>18</sup> Borea, 'Vasari e le stampe', 31.

<sup>19</sup> Alessandro Nova, entry in Catherine Monbeig Goguel, ed., *Francesco Salviati o la Bella Maniera*, exhibition catalogue, Milan: Electa, 1998, n°29 (136).

<sup>20</sup> 'Né è stato meno eccellente d'alcuno dei sopradetti Enea Vico da Parma il quale, come si vede, intagliò in rame il ratto d'Elena del Rosso, e così col disegno del medesimo, in un'altra carta, Vulcano con alcuni Amori che alla sua fucina fabbricano saette, mentre anco i Ciclopi lavorano, che fu certo bellissima carta; et in un'altra fece la Leda di Michelangelo, et una Nunziata col disegno di Tiziano, la storia di Iuditta che Michelangelo dipinse nella capella', Vasari, *Le vite*, vol.5, 18.

by Vecellio.<sup>21</sup> On 19 November 1546, Enea requested a privilege to print his engravings in Venice, 'having for his own livelihood rediscovered some beautiful and very rare drawings never before seen or printed, which he wished to engrave and publish to the benefit and profit of all painters and sculptors, and other virtuous people, requests the privilege [...]'.<sup>22</sup> It is possible that Vico himself did not know who had executed the drawing, which certainly had not been supplied to him directly by Titian (and indeed the name of the *inventor* was not specified). It does not seem likely that the engraver himself informed Vasari about this print, on the occasion of the artist-biographer's second stay in Ferrara in 1566 (when the print was anything but recent; see also *infra*). More probably, when drafting the chapter on all the engravers, Vasari recovered Vico's (signed) engravings and deduced from the style of the print its possible *inventor*. The author knew that Vico did not always limit himself to reproducing the inventions of others, and he must have instantly recognized in that *Annunciation* the features of the Venetian school and specifically of Titian. Vasari may have had in mind the *Annunciation* in the Scuola di San Rocco in Venice (ca. 1530–1540), and in any case Vico's invention has features in common with Titian's other youthful work in the Cathedral of Treviso (1520).<sup>23</sup> This was, in short, an essentially correct attribution.<sup>24</sup>

The two prints for which Vasari named Rosso Fiorentino as the *inventor* are somewhat more problematic: both are signed only by Vico, who executed them in Rome in the early forties, when the print market was first emerging and the circulation of drawings and engravings to be copied immediately became so intense as to cause a great deal of confusion.<sup>25</sup> In this case, too, we should ask whether Vico himself knew who the author of these inventions was. The *Forge of Vulcan* is now known to be a copy after a print by the School of Fontainebleau from a drawing by Primaticcio (Louvre), probably relating to the decorations of the Cabinet du Roi (ca. 1541–1546).<sup>26</sup> The other invention, formerly thought to be related to Rosso's frescoes

<sup>21</sup> See: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1500402&partId=1&searchText=titian+vico&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1500402&partId=1&searchText=titian+vico&page=1) (accessed March 18, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> 'havendo per sustentamento del vivere suo ritrovato alcuni bellissimi et rarissimi disegni non più veduti ne stampati, i quali volendo lui intagliare et mandare in luce a beneficio et utile di tutti li pittori et scultori et altre virtuose persone, supplica il privilegio [...]', quoted in: Michelangelo Muraro and David Rosand, 'Tiziano e la silografia veneziana del Cinquecento [introduction]', in Michelangelo Muraro and David Rosand, dir., *Tiziano e la silografia veneziana del Cinquecento*, exhibition catalogue, Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1976, 66, note 49.

<sup>23</sup> It should also be noted that Vasari probably never visited Treviso. On the matter see: Antonio Caleca, Andrea Del Grosso and Margherita Melani, eds., *La topografia artistica di Giorgio Vasari*, Poggio a Caiano: CB Edizioni, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> The traditional attribution to Titian of this invention is still accepted by some critics. See: Giulio Bodon, *Enea Vico fra memoria e miraggio della classicità*, Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1997, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Borea, *Lo specchio dell'arte italiana*, 85–91.

<sup>26</sup> Dominique Cordellier, entry in Dominique Cordellier and Bernadette Py, eds., *Primatice maître de Fontainebleau*, exhibition catalogue, Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2004, n°121 (268–270).

in the Gallery of Francis I,<sup>27</sup> remains mysterious: its subject is unclear and the invention might not be by Rosso.<sup>28</sup> But if Vasari eventually decided on the name of the Florentine painter for both prints relying purely on his *connoisseurship*, we can certainly not accuse him of incompetence today: he came very close to hitting the mark. Vasari, as we have seen, said that the *Forge of Vulcan* 'was certainly a beautiful print', and indeed he used Vico's prints for one of his frescoes in Palazzo Vecchio in which, furthermore, Vulcan was modelled on another engraving definitely based on an invention by Rosso;<sup>29</sup> the latter print may have prompted him to attribute the other to Rosso as well. In the fresco, then, Vasari the artist and connoisseur succeeded in harmoniously combining Rosso and Primaticcio.

But there are other, less justifiable, mistakes in the life of Vico, in this case relating to the identification of the *sculptor* and not of the *inventor*. Vasari states that Vico also executed:

the portrait of Duke Cosimo de' Medici as a young man, with a design by Bandinello; and the portrait also by Bandinelli, and afterwards the battle of Cupid and Apollo, in the presence of all the Gods. And had Enea been retained by Bandinello and awarded for his efforts he would have engraved many other beautiful plates [...]. He also engraved the portrait of Emperor Charles V, with an ornament full of victories and trophies made for the purpose; for which he was rewarded by His Majesty and praised by all.<sup>30</sup>

Only for the latter print did Vasari rightly claim that Vico was both the *inventor* and the *sculptor*, but he failed to notice that the portrait of Charles V was largely modelled on that by Titian (the two artists had stayed together at Augusta in 1550).<sup>31</sup> The other three were all drawn from drawings by Bandinelli, but unfortunately none were engraved by Vico: the two portraits were both signed by Niccolò Della Casa, whom Vasari completely ignores, while the 'battle of Cupid and Apollo' was signed by Nicolas Beatrizet (though to be fair the engraver's initials, on the bottom right, are barely visible).<sup>32</sup> Certainly this confirms what has already been

<sup>27</sup> Erwin Panofsky and Dora Panofsky 'The iconography of the Galerie Francois I at Fontainebleau', *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 100, 1958, 155 as well as Gregory, *Vasari and the Renaissance Print*, 371.

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1500010&partId=1&searchText=rosso+rape&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1500010&partId=1&searchText=rosso+rape&page=1) (accessed March 18, 2017). See also: Borea, *Lo specchio dell'arte italiana*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> Gregory, *Vasari and the Renaissance Print*, 382.

<sup>30</sup> 'il ritratto del duca Cosimo de' Medici quando era giovane, col disegno del Bandinello; et il ritratto ancora d'esso Bandinelli, e dopo la zuffa di Cupido e d'Apollo, presenti tutti gli Dei. E se Enea fusse stato trattenuto dal Bandinello e riconosciuto delle sue fatiche egli avrebbe intagliato molte altre carte bellissime [...] Parimenti intagliò il ritratto di Carlo V imperadore, con un ornamento pieno di vittorie e di spoglie fatto a proposito; di che fu premiato da Sua Maestà e lodato da ognuno', Vasari, *Le vite*, vol.5, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Bodon, *Enea Vico*, 29–30.

<sup>32</sup> Tommaso Mozzati and Michela Zurla, entries in Detlef Heikamp and Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, eds., *Baccio Bandinelli scultore e maestro (1493–1560)*, exhibition catalogue, Florence: Giunti, 2014, n°75–76 (524–527) and n°85 (544–545).

said, in other words that it cannot have been Vico who informed Vasari on his career as an engraver. And yet Vasari knew Beatricetto: when he signed his prints in full, Giorgio was able to identify him: 'In Rome, in addition to the aforesaid, Niccolò Beatricio of Lorraine has worked so hard at engraving with the burin that he has made many plates worthy of praise [...] and a story of the daughter after the drawing by Girolamo Mosciano, a painter from Brescia.'<sup>33</sup> Vasari, in short, stated on the one hand that the prints by Marco da Ravenna could be 'identified by his mark' but on the other was not truly an attentive connoisseur of prints who always looked for initials and monograms to identify the *inventor* and *sculptor*. In any case, by praising Vico and ascribing to him a collaboration with Bandinelli even more significant than it actually was, Vasari aimed (as always) to criticize Baccio (as in the passage already reported on the *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* by Raimondi), in this case guilty of not having retained the Parmense in Florence. Paradoxically, however, in the case of the so-called *Allegory of Death and Fame*, an engraving by Agostino Veneziano in all probability drawn from Rosso Fiorentino, Vasari erroneously attributed to Bandinelli the invention of this extremely important and ambitious print, assigning this masterpiece to the catalogue of the sculptor, his arch enemy at the court of Cosimo I de' Medici.<sup>34</sup> Vasari was aware of the close collaboration between Bandinelli and Agostino Veneziano, and automatically attributed to the former the invention of the *Allegory*. Significantly, in his long discussion of engravers, he hardly ever failed to attribute to someone (the engraver himself or another artist, whether a painter or sculptor) the invention of the prints he described: Vasari (in contrast to Francisco de Hollanda, as we have already said) always felt the need to determine who the author of the invention was. The famous *Stregozzo*, certainly a product of the school of Raimondi (the authorship of the engraving is still contested between Marcantonio and Agostino Veneziano), a print of which he must have known, is left out of the *Lives* completely: Vasari probably had no idea who was responsible for the invention and thus chose not to mention it at all.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> 'In Roma, oltre ai sopradetti, ha talmente dato opera a questi intagli di bulini Niccolò Beatricio loteringio, che ha fatto molte carte degne di lode [...] et una storia della figliuola col disegno di Girolamo Mosciano pittore da Brescia', Vasari, *Le vite*, vol.5, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Stefano Pierguidi, 'La *Furia* di Rosso Fiorentino e il *Laocoonte* di Bandinelli: l'antitesi tra "notomia" e antico', *Grafica d'arte*, 24:93, 2013, 5–7 (with preceding bibliography).

<sup>35</sup> On the *Stregozzo* see: Gnann, entry in *Roma e lo stile classico*, n°128 (192–193). Vasari attributed engravings by Agostino to Marcantonio on at least two occasions (Landau, 'From Collaboration to Reproduction in Italy', 120), but for the author it was particularly important to emphasize that both were drawn from inventions of Raphael.



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