

Dirassat & Abhath
The Arabic Journal of Human
and Social Sciences



مجلة دراسات وأبحاث
المجلة العربية في العلوم الإنسانية
والاجتماعية

EISSN: 2253-0363
ISSN : 1112-9751

Inventing Nowhere: Utopia of Thomas More as a Renaissance Synthesis

إختراع اللامكان: يوتوبيا توماس مور بوصفها توليفة لعصر النهضة

Sabrina Belzeckour ¹, Farid Benmezal ²

¹ Ph.D Student, University of Amar Telidji Laghouat, Faculty of Foreign Languages, English Language, Laboratoire: Approches Interdisciplinaires et Langues Etrangères (AILE) ,
s.belzeckour@lagh-univ.dz

² MCA, University of Bumerdes, Faculty of Foreign languages, English Language,
farid_baraki@yahoo.fr

صبرينة بلزكور¹، فريد بن مزال²

¹ طالبة دكتوراه، جامعة الأغواط، كلية اللغات الأجنبية قسم اللغة الإنجليزية s.belzeckour@lagh-univ.dz

² أستاذ محاضر أ، جامعة بومرداس، كلية اللغات الأجنبية قسم اللغة الإنجليزية farid_baraki@yahoo.fr

تاريخ القبول: 2025/09/21

تاريخ الاستلام: 2025 /06/30

Abstract:

This article explores Thomas More's Utopia as a synthesis of Renaissance realities and ideals. As a visionary text that bridges the intellectual zeal of humanism, the era's burgeoning spirit of discovery and the socio-political complexities of Tudor England and Europe, Utopia therefore, embodies both tensions and aspirations of its era and functions as a mirror to it. Through a literary and historical interdisciplinary approach, this paper reveals that Utopia's formal complexity and dialogic structure are not merely stylistic choices, nor are the thematic concerns that encompass social justice, education and religious harmony. In fact, Utopia though located nowhere functions as a vehicle through which Thomas More synthesizes Renaissance ideals, simultaneously envisioning an alternative society and mounting a profound yet cautious critique of the political corruption, social inequality and religious turmoil of his time.

Keywords: Exploration, Humanism, Renaissance, Synthesis, Thomas More, Utopia

المخلص:

يتناول هذا المقال يوتوبيا توماس مور كتوليفة ناجحة لواقع عصر النهضة ومثله العليا. بوصفها كنص استشرافي جمع بين الولع المتقد للنزعة الإنسانية، وحركة الاستكشاف المتنامية لتلك الفترة، بالإضافة إلى التعقيدات الاجتماعية والسياسية في إنجلترا وأوروبا، فإن يوتوبيا تجسد اضطرابات وتطلعات تلك الحقبة وتعتبر مرآة لها. عبر مقارنة بين التحليل النصي والتاريخي، تكشف لنا هذه الورقة البحثية أن التعقيد الشكلي والبنية الحوارية في يوتوبيا ليسا مجرد خيارات أسلوبية، ونفس الشيء بالنسبة لمواضيعها التي تضم العدالة الاجتماعية، التعليم والتناغم الديني. في حقيقة الأمر، يوتوبيا رغم تواجدها في اللامكان فهي تعتبر كوسيلة عن طريقها تمكن توماس مور تجميع المبادئ السامية عصر النهضة، بينما استشراف في نفس الوقت رؤية لمجتمع آخر، حتى يتسنى له تقديم نقد عميق وحذر للفساد السياسي والظلم الاجتماعي والفوضى الدينية التي عاصرها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النزعة الإنسانية، عصر النهضة، توليفة، توماس مور، يوتوبيا

1. INTRODUCTION

Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) is one of the most prominent literary works of the Renaissance period. A visionary text that reflects intellectual, cultural currents of its time., written during an era of immense transformation in both Europe and Tudor England, *Utopia* is believed to embody both tensions and aspirations of its time. Through a synthesis of literary, historical interdisciplinary analysis, this article argues that *Utopia* is a typical Renaissance artifact.

This study attempt first to provide the historical context prior to the publication of *Utopia*. Introductory sections devoted to the Renaissance period and England during its early years of the Renaissance are pivotal. The second part, which is the core of this study, discusses how Thomas More created a literary masterpiece by synthesizes the renaissance Humanism, exploration and religious reform alongside England devastated economic and socio-political complexities.

2. The Renaissance an Age of Efflorescence:

As its name indicates, the Renaissance was an era characterized by its departure from the medieval state of stagnation and decay, and its shift towards reformation accompanied with the rediscovery of the Greco-Roman tradition; therefore, it is not surprising that Thomas More found the frame of time suitable to conduct his vision of the idyllic and prosperous state of "Utopia". However, before delving into the very specific details of how the Renaissance influenced the conduction of More's *Utopia*, it is convenient to highlight that dreams of prosperity and justice has been existent ever since men started reflecting about sharing a social life. Moreover, since the Renaissance was undoubtedly attached to the middle Ages by countless ties¹. The publication of *utopia* was a desperate attempt to repudiate and reform many of the evil medieval costumes. In particular, when emphasizing

that More's commonwealth's vision was released at the wake of the English Renaissance

A period of transition between antiquity and the Renaissance, the Middle Ages were labeled as "the Dead Ages", hence, pandemics, thoughtless bloodshed and wars accompanied by the corruption of the church and the tyranny of monarchs has left no open door for serious reforms to take place. In fact, when it comes to the necessity or feasibility of human or social change, minds of men were rather inert, people were aware of their age deficiencies and longed for a better life, yet they lacked excitement and were afraid to share their ideas.

From a literary perspective, the political medieval poems and songs that spread in England and Europe were bold attempts to manifest both, the feeling of dissatisfaction and the aspiration for change. For instance, it is noted that these forms of literature were of high importance, as careful study of these texts, would ultimately lead to valuable assumptions. Such as that of Dudok who believes that in term of subject content, a great number of those middle age political chants provided the basis for the foundation of an ideal commonwealth, suggesting that they may have certainly served as the forerunners of utopian texts, which appeared later². Thus, staying faithful to the orthodoxy of medieval times, which succeeded in containing imagination, deserting humanities, and neglecting if not abandoning the Greek language and its models and morals, no writer attempted to generate a work describing with full details an ideal state.

2.1 The Renaissance Elements:

Out of the ruins of medieval disorder, The Renaissance was an age of change, a change that has its impact on all spheres of life; consequently, leading to the rise of the early period of the Modern Western History. In his intriguing definition, Brotton points out that the Renaissance was

an incredibly global, flexible and mobile movement. Indeed, the renaissance was a phenomenon that has occurred in many literate societies³; however, this research is particularly concerned with the Italian Renaissance, which again marked European history. As specified, nowadays there is a general agreement that “the term ‘Renaissance’ refers to a profound and enduring upheaval and transformation in culture, politics, art, and society in Europe between the years 1400 and 1600. The word describes both a period in history and a more general ideal of cultural renewal”⁴

An important turning point in European history was the conquest of Constantinople by the ottoman Turks the year (1453), which sped up the Renaissance immensely. With its extensive collections of Greek and Roman priceless manuscripts, the Capital of “Byzantine Empire” has long preserved the legacy of classical antiquity. Due to its tragic fall, a large number of Byzantine intellectuals fled to Italy and other places, bringing with them invaluable original texts like those of Plato, Aristotle, and many other ancient philosophers. Their arrival rekindled European interests in classical philosophy, literature and knowledge, and was a pillar for the Renaissance to flourish

In her review to Jack Goody’s “Renaissances: The One or Many, Nappi clarifies that Goody identifies literacy as one of the major factors that contributed to the rise of the Renaissance, hence it provides an entrance to look back and appreciate the knowledge of the past⁵. This propensity of looking backward is mirrored by the movement of Renaissance humanist. Humanists were men with refined education and whom developed a cult admiration to ancient antiquity. They embarked in a fresh and more intensive study of classical literature and history, imitating classical prose and poetry, besides exploring philosophy⁶. In addition to their interest in the revival of classical texts, they also paid attention to translation, and sought to replace the sterile medieval scholasticism

with a curriculum focused on highly dedicated systems of philosophy, theology and logic, yet with a more humane training especially in rhetoric and literature⁷. Therefore, humanists contend that individuals can attain greatness and improve society through education and cultivation of virtue. In addition, emphasizing the potential and dignity of the individual which again highlight the philosophy and paradigms of renaissance humanists

Humanism is interesting to highlight in this paper for two major raisons. Firstly, Martinuzzi asserts that Renaissance Utopias are thought to have originated primarily from the revival of Greco-Roman traditions of the idea city linked with the Judeo-Christian concept of the Kingdom of God and Garden of Eden⁸. Secondly, Humanism, which by its spread in West and Northern Europe developed its own character. Henceforth, Northern Humanism was an intellectual movement centered in Germany, the Netherland and England, best known for combining classical scholarship with Christian principles, unlike its Italian equivalent, which emphasized secularism and individualism.

Northern humanists placed a higher priority on moral and religious reform. Influential people including Johannes Reuchlin, Desiderius Erasmus, Lefèvre, Rudolph Agricola, Thomas More and many others who sought to use education to foster both intellectual and spiritual growth of the person to be a good citizen, since they believed in reforming the individuals rather than the institutions. Moreover, Northern Humanists used the printing press to spread their writings, democratizing knowledge and igniting discussions that foreshadowed the Protestant Reformation. However, despite enabling Protestantism by fostering biblical literacy, textual criticism and anticlerical sentiment, Northern Humanism was not the major reason behind the rise of protestant reformers. Because while Northern Humanists including Erasmus criticized the corruption and sought to renew the Catholic Church from within, Martin Luther’s reform

called for a radical reform that led to a schism and total rejection for the church's authority.

The spread of Protestantism and the calls for ideals to reform both the church and the state were seen as prerequisites for the further success of the Era. Simply because as Nappy notes cultures cannot truly develop unless they emerge from the theological hegemony of monotheistic doctrines⁹. Henceforth, religious reform and stepping towards secularism stimulated the creation of knowledge, and by the invention of Printing Press by Johann Gutenberg, a revolutionary dispersal of knowledge has begun in Europe

Finally yet importantly, later to the fall of Constantinople, the disruption of the former Mediterranean trade routes encouraged European powers to seek different pathways, urging immense maritime activities. Coinciding with the economic prosperity and funds, which provided the era with time and leisure to uplift art and literature, the commercial transactions enforced both contact and influence by other cultures. Furthermore, the admiration of the past did not hinder men from seeking for new horizon. Adventurous seamen and navigators were leaving European ports to disclose unpenetrated lands. Which resulted in the widening of their minds to a global scale of civilizations and diverse social form¹⁰. However, the spirit of exploration, which was driven by the competition of Europeans monarchs, reinforced both fantasy and greed, since it marked the beginning of Trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonization

3. England during Early Renaissance:

By the end of War of Roses the year (1485), the Tudor's dynasty ascended the English throne marking one of the most pivotal junctures in English History. Henry VII's reign was relatively frugal, since he focused on stabilizing the monarchy and firming up the post-war's devastated economy, meanwhile consolidating political power. It was until his heir ascended the throne (1509) that the wealth of the nation

began to dissipate irrationally over wars and luxury¹¹. Henry VIII's controversial approach towards finance and ruthless use of power resulted in corruption, injustice and widened the gap between the rich and the poor.

Deeply ingrained in medieval traditions, the English society was strictly hierarchal. The feudal system persisted, with nobles, gentry, and a rising merchant class dominating land and trade. The economy remained agrarian while wool exportation was the cornerstone of wealth and trade market. Nevertheless, the enclosure of land, which meant for the privatization of common lands for sheep farming (in order to increase wool trade to lower the prices), created further unequal distribution of fortunes, making the proprietors wealthier in the meantime depriving farmers and their employees from farming the land. consequently leading to an "inevitable decline in harvested crops, this in turn caused an increase in demand for and price of the available food putting it out of reach for many poor families"¹². Although the enclosure movement is believed to usher early modern capitalism, it results in depopulation and poverty of the lower class.

During the end of the 15th Century, England was devoutly Catholic, while the clergymen held considerable political power; the church was deeply ingrained in the daily life of both monarch and citizens. The Lutheran ideas that swept Europe calling for Protestantism and reformation eventually reached England. As a faithful Catholic Henry VIII advocacy of papal authority against Martin Luther earned him the title of "Defender of the Faith". It was until his marital crisis with his wife Catherin of Aragón, escorted by his feverish ambitions for a male heir, which called for his break with Rome, and via an act of supremacy, he declared himself the head of the Anglican Church.

In brief, the era laid the groundwork for seismic shifts, Humanist critiques of the church foreshadowed the English

reformation, while economic changes sowed discontent that would later on erupt in rebellions. Culturally speaking, the Renaissance began reshaping art, literature and education, blending medieval traditions with new ideals of human potential. In essence, England entered an era that would simply define the modern age.

4. Thomas More in the Frame of Time:

Born to a Lawyer, Thomas More received his early education at one of the best schools St. Anthony School in London. However, it was until his father placed him into the household of John Morton the “Lord Chancellor of England”, that More’s wit was sharpened, owing to the great influence and religious training of Morton, who is responsible too for More’s iterance to Oxford¹³. Notably, More’s strong interest in humanities begun while a student at Oxford, with big names such as Grocyne, Linacre and Colet as teachers and colleagues, he became acquainted with classical writings, especially those of Plato and Socrates to home his utopian ideas are bound.

More had an incredible career because of his voracious thirst for knowledge and his cooperation with other Northern humanists. Starting from being a successful lecturer, a member in the house of the commons, then persuading his father’s will in being a lawyer. Most importantly, after the succession of Henry VIII in the year (1509), and their constant meetings with each other, More received a special treatment, as he soon appointed under Sheriff in London in 1510. Hence, years after his publication of *Utopia* (1516) More was appointed as the Lord Chancellor of England.

Returning to the Creation of “*Utopia*”, the work is divided into two books, whilst (Book II) functions as a detailed description of the ideal Commonwealth, (Book I) is regarded as an expose of life in England back to those days. In fact Caudle suggests that More’s work unveil his desire to make renaissance society aware of the social and economic injustices that underlie the political system¹⁴.

However, regardless of its satiric tone, More was one of the very few writers who exposed the evils and commented on them not only for the sake of satirizing, but with a noble intention to improve his society. And even though it is acknowledged that More may have wrote *Utopia* to persuade Henry to be a just ruler, his attempt was but a failure, which years later More’s tragic execution has proven

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Renaissance Humanism

Faithful to the humanist notion of being concerned with human justice and welfare, *Utopia* is considered as one of the refined humanist documents during the Renaissance. Being a Northern Humanist Thomas More sought to inspire for change to the socio-political system of England and Europe; his *Utopia* was not a mere artistic nor a scholastic product, it was designed to exert an influence. For this reason, Thomas More followed the Humanist’s tendency of imitating the classics mainly “The Greek model”, despite choosing the Latin language for his work, since humanism encouraged the classical Latin despite the rise of vernacular literature because Latin was considered as the lingua franca of the Renaissance intelligentsia. The Greek model importance lays in providing the humanists with the suitable paradigm of thought that made their vision more conceivable¹⁵. Indeed, Thomas More indebtedness to the classical sources is undeniable, thus it appears at many levels in his *Utopia*.

Humanism and the Form of Utopia:

When it comes to formal level, “More is linked to humanist tradition at the fundamental level of language”¹⁶. His *Utopia* does not only contribute to the intellectual discourse of the time, yet it calls for attention to decode and decipher the hidden meanings, since he wrote his utopia with many rhetoric precautions¹⁷. For instance, to frame his work, More pretends that while on his mission to Flanders, he was introduced by his friend Peter Giles to a foreigner, whom he judged to be a sailor,

and this sailor is named Raphael Hythloday. It is from Raphael that Thomas More and his fellow friend are introduced to the island Utopia. Utopia is a Greek word coined by More the word consists of a negation (ou) and (topos) and a Greek suffix (ia), which according to Kristeller “denotes an abstraction rather than place”¹⁸, so utopia (no place) and its pun Eu-Topos meaning happy place.

The irony inherent in the title makes it ambiguous for the reader whether to believe the existence of such place or suspect it. The complexity of Utopia is not only contained in its playful language. Thomas More uses many rhetorical devices to give the island and the characters names that contradict their meanings, and despite the use of irony and paradox, figures of speech such as Litotes are the prevailing. To illustrate more, Amaurot’s meaning is the “city of fog” for the capital, and its river Anyder or “the waterless river”, without forgetting Hythloday, which ironically means “the distributor of nonsense”. Therefore, Furtunati asserts that one needs to place Utopia in the intellectual and moral framework of the group of humanists like those of Erasmus and Budé, in order to comprehend the occasionally opaque references and rhetorical devices weaved throughout the narrative¹⁹. Furthermore, one of the greatest achievements of Utopia’s style, is its position as the founding text of what later would become a literary genre.

Since Utopia is divided into two book, each serving its purpose, the first book particularly is structured in a form of a dialogue (between More, Hythloday and Giles), which connects it to a vast corpus of humanist literature from the era as well as the ancient authors like Plato, Cicero and Lucian²⁰. Thomas More’s choice of the dialogic form can be interpreted from different angles. The first one is a measure of precaution to distance himself, or a form of self-fashioning. As the multi-layered narration, which splits the author from his literary persona, allowing the real More to review obliquely and to include many

statements, which he would not be prepared to define in his own words

The second reason is undoubtedly his classical influence by Plato, since Plato’s ideas are present in almost every utopian novel. Equally, to Plato’s Republic, the scheme of enquiry and sharing conflicting opinions between the characters helps in highlighting the various aspects of the problems and the differences between the suggested solutions. Furthermore, by following a dialogue More was able to juxtaposed two discursive strategies, which links Utopia to Satire that was invented by ancient Romans to criticize folly and Tyranny of those in authority. Therefore, More’s structural and rhetorical choice while using fiction a vehicle for social critic and philosophical inquiry is a clear statement to the humanist belief in the power of literature to provoke minds and inspire for change.

To sum up, The formal complexity of utopia being; its classical influence, dialogue, genre blending and rhetorical irony, serves a crucial humanist educational aims, by teaching critical thinking to readers. In his though provoking work Thomas More embodies the humanist view that writing should inspire ethical contemplation and improvement, by refusing to resolve paradoxes and forcing readers to examine their own societies. As a result, to its persistent ambiguity, Utopia remains relevant, inviting coming generations to rethink and reimagine what Utopia might entail.

Humanism and the Themes of Utopia

In line with the humanist emphasis on the value of moral leadership and the notion that leaders should be guided by reason, sense of duty and common good, More’s critique of his current European government, society and economic disparities is one of the major themes. In Book1 Hythloday criticizes the harsh punishment meted out to those who turned to stealing out of desperation, and the enclosure of the land, which drove peasant off of their land into void and poverty. For

him war was the main source for these ills, the thoughtless wars that are caused chiefly by self-interest monarchs who prioritize their wealth and tyranny.

Therefore, in his island Utopia, More stresses the humanist conviction in the possibility of social progress. According to Rebhorn "the book shares certain fundamental doctrines: a faith in human's educability, a conviction of his potential goodness, rationality, and willingness to co-operate with his fellows, and the belief in social planning and the transformation of social institutions"²¹. One of the most notable aspects of Utopia is its emphasis on reason and logic as the guiding principles of an ideal society. The Utopians are portrayed as people who have structured their society around rational ideas ensuring that all elements of life are guided by reason rather than tradition. This emphasis on reason reflects the humanist belief in man to improve the world.

Indeed, utopia is organized by a system that promotes the well-being of all citizens. The theme of co-operative living in Utopia echoes the humanist ideals. In the island property is held in common, with no private ownership of neither land nor resources. A method intended to reduce materialist greed and inequality, which are regarded as the primary sources of social strife and injustice. More aims at constructing a healthy society, where social hierarchy is eradicated. In their island, the Utopians live in harmony with one another, while serving each other and cultivating their land. This concept of communal society stresses the humanist conviction in the value of social cohesion as well as the notion of individuals to have a duty towards their community

The Utopian's adherence to reason is also reflected in their approach of governing. The leaders of Utopia are chosen based on their intellect and virtue. Unlike wealth and class privileges, as tools to obtain serious positions. Utopian leaders including Magistrates, Tranibors and the Prince, all are selected by the people to

serve for a certain amount of time, offering a democratic system and a secure place for the citizens. This trait of Utopia however is believed to be linked to Plato's Republic, specifically the idea of philosopher king, as well as the view that finest rulers are governed by virtue and reason.

Education in Utopia:

Education is another important feature of Renaissance Humanism reflected and stressed in Utopia. Regardless of gender or social status, education is strongly praised and available to all the citizens. Utopians are encouraged to seek knowledge and participate in intellectual and cultural pursuits even in their free time, as noted by Correa "most Utopians occupy their free time with their studies, and if they reach a great level of education, they acquire the possibility of reaching great positions of the magistrate"²². Educational system in Utopia is designed to develop both the mind and the character of the individual. Children are educated at a young age to respect reason, seek knowledge and develop a sense of moral responsibility. Utopians perceive education as a key to build a harmonious society

In addition to formal education, the Utopians place a high value on the cultivation of virtue through practical experience. For them true wisdom stems not only from books, but also from the application of knowledge in real life situations. This is reflected in their practice of rotating citizens towards numerous vocations, ensuring that everyone gains a broad understanding of the various aspects of society. This approach to education represents the humanist conviction of the value of a well-rounded person who can contribute to society in multiple ways.

Humanism and Religion in Utopia:

Religion in Utopia is a humanistic contrast, characterized by a rational, ethical, and socially useful, and remarkably a tolerant system ahead of its time, created by human reason to promote collective happiness in earthly life, while upholding essential beliefs about God and the afterlife

aligning with natural law. Religious ceremonies in Utopia are communal and austere, with an emphasis on inner virtue rather than external show. Priests are elected based on their moral integrity, temples in contrast to the lavish churches of Europe, are devoid of costly decoration to prevent distractions from spiritual contemplations.

Additionally, different to the dogmatic divisions of the 16th Century Europe, Utopian worship is pluralistic, people are allowed to worship various aspects of the divine (sun, moon, ancestors) with no religious persecution, as long as they acknowledge a supreme creator and uphold communal agreement. Their tolerant religious system allows them to be receptive to Christianity, as they show a greater admiration to the Christ teaching and the early communal church life.

However, despite tolerance, Utopia displays a conflict between More's humanist ideals and his Catholic faith. While Utopians accept many religions, they reject atheism and regard it as a threat to moral order. Furthermore, upon learning about Christianity, some Utopians gladly convert, implying a hierarchy in which Christianity represents the ultimate truth. This dilemma exemplifies Renaissance Humanism's dual identity, promoting reason and reform while abiding within a Christian framework. Thomas More, being a devoted Catholic who later died supporting papal authority, could not fully support religious relativism. Instead, Utopia advocates a synthesis of a logical faith that primes the soul for Christian revelation.

Science, Exploration and Utopia:

The Renaissance era started a deep scientific revolution that drastically altered humanity's perception of an ideal society. Prior to the era, utopian visions were frequently static, divinely mandated or at best mythical realms. Remarkably, Thomas More was not only a man of rhetoric and humanities. In fact, More had a thorough understanding of Renaissance science and mathematics, and was a keen admirer of both astronomy and physical geography²³.

In his Utopia, More "introduced the mechanism of reaching Utopia as a voyage to a geographically distant island"²⁴ (Garvy p19). Thus, his book is strongly connected to the spirit of discovery. The flow of trip narratives, maps and accounts of the newly discovered lands and societies profoundly shaped his vision. Utopians are masters of astronomy and navigation, their maritime skills allow them to be successful traders with their neighboring lands, and thanks to their vast knowledge in agriculture and their geometric precision while farming and selecting the land, the island is self-sufficient and the community is safe from famines. In addition, Utopia embodies the mathematical ordered ideals to reach the state of harmony in all spheres of life, being it in its urban planning, communal labor system and economic equality. Meanwhile, its hygiene-focused hospitals mirror Renaissance advances in the science of anatomy.

3. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Thomas More's Utopia is indeed a thought-provoking masterpiece. The work is an excellent Renaissance's synthesis, combining humanism, exploration and science to examine 16th Century England. Humanist principles shape its social ethos and dialogic form, while its educational system prioritizes reason and virtue. In the same time, religious toleration and harmony satirizes Europe's religious corruption and conflicts. Crucially, Utopia's scientific rationality reflected through its agriculture, economy and urban planning, underscores More's vision of an ideal commonwealth created by using empirical reasoning rather than dogma. However, this Nowhere (Utopia) remains a purposeful paradox of a perfected society exposing failures of a bitterly real world. Thus, Utopia stands not as a blueprint, but as the Renaissance's self-reflective zenith, challenging humanity to bridge the real with the ideal.

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