



The Pre-Islamic Poem in the View of German Orientalists

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Abstract:

There is no doubt that the German Orientalists' studies of pre-Islamic poetry have contributed to certain critical Arabic studies concerning the structure of pre-Islamic poetry. This work revolves around a fundamental issue: the problem of composition within these poems. Specifically, it addresses whether the themes of individual poems are coherent and interconnected, forming a cohesive thematic unity, or whether they consist of disjointed and independent segments. Consequently, some German Orientalists have argued, in their studies of pre-Islamic poetry, that Arabic poetry lacks internal coherence. In light of this perspective, this study aims to elucidate the various stances adopted by these Orientalists. Furthermore, it seeks to assess the accuracy of their positions after elucidating the psychological frameworks underpinning their approaches to Arab heritage in general and literature in particular. The study also examines the stance of Arabic literary criticism towards their investigations into thematic unity within pre-Islamic poetry.

Keywords: German Orientalists, Poem Structure in Pre-Islamic Poetry, Thematic Unity, Stances

Le poème préislamique vu par les orientalistes allemands

Résumé :

Il ne fait aucun doute que les études des orientalistes allemands sur la poésie préislamique ont contribué à certaines études critiques arabes portant sur la structure de cette poésie. Ce travail s'articule autour d'une question fondamentale : le problème de la composition au sein de ces poèmes. Plus précisément, il s'agit de déterminer si les thèmes des poèmes individuels sont cohérents et interconnectés, formant une unité thématique unifiée, ou s'ils se

composent de segments disjoints et indépendants. Par conséquent, certains orientalistes allemands ont soutenu, dans leurs études sur la poésie préislamique, que la poésie arabe manque de cohérence interne. À la lumière de cette perspective, cette étude vise à élucider les différentes positions adoptées par ces orientalistes. De plus, elle cherche à évaluer la pertinence de leurs positions après avoir mis en lumière les cadres psychologiques qui sous-tendent leurs approches du patrimoine arabe en général et de la littérature en particulier. L'étude examine également la position de la critique littéraire arabe face à leurs recherches sur l'unité thématique au sein de la poésie préislamique.

Mots-clés : *Orientalistes allemands, Structure poétique dans la poésie préislamique, Unité thématique, Positions.*



Introduction:

Orientalism is defined as academic studies conducted by Westerners to understand the East and everything related to it in all fields. It is established that German Orientalism had an effective role in caring for and paying attention to the Arab and Islamic heritage, as they were pioneers in understanding the East and its features. They devoted their efforts in researching all areas of Arab and Islamic heritage, whether scientific or literary. Regarding Arab literary heritage, we can say that German Orientalists dealt with Arabic poetry, especially pre-Islamic poetry, with criticism and analysis. The pre-Islamic qasida did not escape their concern with Arabic literature. Among the most prominent issues they addressed in this field was the issue of thematic unity in the pre-Islamic qasida. Some of them argued that the pre-Islamic poem lacked thematic unity due to the multiplicity of subjects within a single poem. Through this study, we wanted to identify the positions of each Orientalist individually and verify the correctness of their positions by answering the following problems: What were the positions of German Orientalists regarding the structure of the pre-Islamic poem? What is the validity of their positions? What are the responses of Arabic critical studies to their positions? This research aims through its results to: clarify the methodologies of German Orientalists through their positions on the structure of the pre-Islamic poem; clarify the stance of Arabic criticism regarding their views on thematic unity; and clarify the extent to which the Arab writer was influenced by the studies of German Orientalists concerning literature in general and the pre-Islamic poem in

particular. To accomplish this research, I started with an introduction in which I defined Orientalism and Orientalists and their interest in Arab heritage. I also prepared the subject of the German Orientalists' treatment of thematic unity in the pre-Islamic poem and their methodologies in that regard, as well as pointing to the positions of Arabic criticism of their studies. I also posed the problems of the research and its objectives. As for the methodologies used in this study, I employed various approaches, each serving a certain aspect of the research. The critical and analytical method specialized in analyzing and critiquing the positions of the German Orientalists in certain parts of the study. The inductive method was not absent throughout the stages of the research, since our research relies essentially on observing the positions of the German Orientalists and their methodologies, and the positions of Arabic criticism on that, followed by critique and analysis, reaching the results presented in the conclusion.

1. Methodologies of German Orientalists:

The orientations of German Orientalists differ according to their affiliations, convictions, and intellectual schools, as well as their methods in their studies and research. This is clearly evident in their treatment of various issues related to the Arab-Islamic heritage in all fields. In this research, we have limited ourselves to mentioning the most prominent methods they have adopted:

1.1 The Projective Method

One of the most commonly used methods among German Orientalists is "the projective method, which consists of: 'the researcher's submission to his own desire



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and his inability to free himself from the impressions left by his cultural environment, and his inability to liberate himself from preconceived judgments" (haj) he forms on the subject of his research, whether these judgments are rational or emotional. He sees only his mental image and not other intellectual images that may contradict his preconceived judgments.¹ He tries in every way to subject all other images to his thought, even if this contradicts scientific truth.

The German Orientalists generally applied the projective method to Islamic and literary studies, and thereby reached arbitrary judgments that had nothing to do with objective scientific analysis. They also interpreted Islamic history and civilization in a projective way. Since this method is subject to the researcher's desire and preconceived assumptions, most results were wrong. This is because the Orientalist – who is in reality a product of his environment and a strong believer in his culture and method, considering them the perfect model for all cultures – subjects all other phenomena that require study to his intellectual formation that he acquired in his country. Thus, his positions come out wrong and contrary to what the correct scientific method requires.

It is concluded from the above that the projective method among German Orientalists or others contradicts what the scientific researcher requires. An example of this is what Noldeke did in his book: *History of the Qur'anic Text*, when he set the results first and then began to search in analyses from his own desire in order to reach the results he had already established at the beginning.

1.2 The Method of Doubt

The methodologies of the Orientalists were numerous and diverse, and perhaps the most prominent of their methods was the method of doubt in their studies. According to this method, 'the researcher doubts the historical fact or denies it if necessary without providing proof for what he claims. On the other hand, he assumes certain events and conclusions. In the first case, he doubts what is closer to the truth, while in the second case he believes what is closer to falsehood. He often uses expressions such as: perhaps, it may be, likely, the nearer possibility.' (huwaidi, 2000)

This method led many German Orientalists to adopt it in their writings. For example, Noldeke addressed the issue of the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry and the way it reached readers and scholars - through transmission and recording - in diminishing its value. Karl Brockelmann followed a special approach in addition to doubt, by citing our own people. As for the method of doubt applied by Margoliouth - considered the leader of this approach - in his book *The Origins of Arabic Poetry*, he said: 'Let us suppose this literature was authentic. How did it reach us? The answer is: either in writing or orally, and the first assumption is the one to be preferred.' (margiliouth, 2006)

It is also noteworthy that Noldeke, through his position which was basically based on doubt, clearly wanted to transfer his doubt to the reader by using verbal maneuvers connected with certain historical events. Many German Orientalists adopted this style, even Brockelmann in his book: *History of Arabic Literature* did not abandon the method of doubt and assumption. In conclusion: these are not the only methodologies they adopted. Other methods were also applied such as: the comparative method, the



Soumission : 15/05/2025 Acceptation : 17/06/2025 Publication : 25/08/2025

inversion method, the secular method, among others. But it is certain that German Orientalists did not leave any method without mastering it, especially concerning Islam and its issues. Unfortunately, some of these methods infiltrated our own thinkers and writers, following their Orientalist teachers. It has been reported that the dean of Arabic literature, Taha Hussein, called for what his Orientalist teachers called for when he advocated doubting the authenticity of the narration of pre-Islamic poetry (hocin, 2000). Hence, many responses appeared criticizing Taha Hussein, especially concerning this issue.

1.3 The Philological Method

Philology, defined as the science of language, had great importance in Europe in general and in Germany in particular. In the nineteenth century it was based on the historical studies of European languages, and the method was developed there (mutaweri, 2015). Many people came to Germany to study this science because of the Germans' precise methodology. In the German Orientalist school emerged a number of philologists, among them Fleischer, who had a great role in establishing Arabic studies in Germany.

Some researchers believe that 'since the nineteenth century, the philological method was applied to Islamic texts by German Orientalists, in the study of the Prophet's biography as well as in the Qur'an. Gustav Weil (1808-1889) wrote a book in German entitled A Historical-Critical Introduction to the Qur'an.' (mutaweri, 2015, p. 215) It is not correct to apply the philological method to the Qur'an, for the Qur'an is divine revelation, as God Almighty said:

'Indeed, it is We who sent down the Reminder, and indeed, We will be its Guardian.' By applying the philological method to the Qur'an, Orientalists considered it human speech, a view repeated by many German Orientalists.

The philological method was also found in the works of Brockelmann, as well as August Fischer and Fleischer. As for Reiske, he was aware of the particularity and independence of the Arabic language. Therefore, he elevated Arabic philology to the rank of an independent science. Reiske aimed to make Arabic philology a starting point for his historical research (mutaweri, 2015, p. 213). This position earned him strong criticism, because he opposed what was intended for philology, namely making Arabic serve Hebrew.

It is concluded from the above that the philological method applied by Orientalists in their studies had two sides: a positive side that served the Arabic language to some extent, and a negative side, especially concerning Islamic texts. Their studies led to reducing many Islamic texts to Jewish sources by relying on the philological method.

2. Positions of the German Orientalists on the Thematic Unity in the Pre-Islamic Qasida

Many Arabic critical studies have revolved around an important issue represented in the problem of structure or the construction of poems.

The question here is whether the subjects of a single poem were coherent, sequential, and interconnected with each other, possessing a cohesive thematic unity, or whether they consisted of fragmented and independent



parts. From this perspective, some Orientalists argued that the Arabic qasida lacked internal structure.

There are different themes placed next to each other without profound justification. Moreover, often there appears to be no logical connection between verses within the same theme of a qasida.

Usually, one can translate each verse individually and understand it, but one cannot comprehend the qasida as an integrated whole.

Among the German Orientalists who adopted such views are:

2.1. Theodor Nöldeke:

Theodor Nöldeke is considered one of the earliest German Orientalists who addressed the issues of pre-Islamic poetry, if not the very first German Orientalist to touch upon the issue of attribution and falsification in pre-Islamic poetry. Amid the debates about this issue, Nöldeke addressed another fundamental problem no less important than attribution, namely, the problem of structure and specifically thematic unity in the pre-Islamic qasida.

Nöldeke argued that the pre-Islamic qasida lacks coherence and internal unity. It is, in all cases, a fragmented whole with a loose structure, making it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a reader to grasp its subject. He says: "... One of the greatest difficulties in understanding pre-Islamic poetic pieces is that they have been presented to us extracted from their contexts. The structure of the Arabic qasida consists of a sequence of images depicting aspects of Arab life, and in it, each verse is almost independent by itself... Understanding the old qasidas would have been

much clearer had we received them complete." (noldke, 1979) Elsewhere, he also states about the looseness of Arabic poems:

"... The looseness of the structure of Arabic poems has led to the fall of some verses or sections or to changes in their order. If the composition of parts were not arbitrary, and if the construction were not fragmented as people usually think, the present form of the pre-Islamic qasida would have been much firmer and more consistent than it is now." (noldke, 1979, p. 23)

Nöldeke thus built his position on the absence of thematic unity based on the nature of how the pre-Islamic poems reached us, mainly through oral transmission. He says: "... Since the old poems were constantly alive in the mouths of people, they were exposed to the risks of falsification, distortion, and confusion in the arrangement of verses within a single poem" (noldke, 1979, p. 22). Some verses were lost entirely from poems due to the weakness of the transmitters' memory, causing the thematic unity to be shaken.

He also says:

"... Even the strongest memories cannot prevent gradual changes from occurring in what is preserved. (noldke, 1979, p. 22) "

Therefore, Nöldeke made the issue of skepticism in the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry one of the main reasons for the absence of thematic unity in the qasida.

2.2. Renata Jacobi:

The German Orientalist Renata Jacobi did not differ from Nöldeke in her opinion regarding thematic unity, especially



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when she linked the oral tradition to the construction of the poem. She believed that oral transmission corrupted the sequence of verses and caused fragmentation. She says

"... The oral transmission, over the long time that separated the poet from the age of writing, did not allow the qasida to be transmitted exactly as it was. Alteration and distortion were inevitable. Therefore, a qasida exceeding fifty verses could not maintain artistic connection between its verses." (darabsa)

This argument, while somewhat acceptable concerning the role of oral transmission in creating fragmentation, cannot be generalized based on the length of a poem. Jacobi further argued that short poems in the Jahiliyyah were mostly thematically unified, unlike the long ones (darabsa).

However, to prove her theory, statistical evidence would be needed comparing the number of long poems and their supposed fragmentation with the number of short poems and their unity. What we know is that there are short poems with diverse themes and long poems with evident thematic unity. Hence, Jacobi's theory remains weak and unconvincing.

2.3. Ewald Wagner:

Ewald Wagner also addressed the issue of thematic unity in the pre-Islamic qasida. His initial position was in opposition to his predecessors who claimed a lack of logical sequence and thematic unity. He says:

"... In the past two decades, increasingly more voices have emphasized the logical sequence of individual verses and the overall construction of old Arabic poetic works within a unified idea; these views are not wrong." (darabsa)

He further adds:

"... It is beyond doubt that pre-Islamic qasidas are not merely a mixture of verses that can be rearranged however one wishes without disturbing the whole. Changing the order of one verse would affect the general structure of the qasida" (wagner) However, Wagner contradicted himself elsewhere, saying:

"... It seems that often no logical link exists between individual verses within the same theme. One can translate each verse individually without being able to understand the qasida as a whole. I have attempted to show the different ways in which poets succeeded in making originally independent sections into a structural unity. The aesthetic unity thus achieved was recognized and realized by the great poets of Arabia."
(wagner) Here Wagner recognized a degree of thematic unity, though inconsistently.

Arab critics also disagreed over this issue. Scholars like Shawqi Dayf and Taha Hussein believed that "the pre-Islamic qasida lacked unity due to the loss of verses during oral transmission. Others, such as Hasan Yusuf, maintained that despite the variety of themes, the qasida was held together by an emotional and intellectual bond, creating harmony across themes (youcef h. , 2013)". Yusuf states:

"... Although the qasida included multiple subjects with intellectual variation, this did not prevent the poet from uniting them within an engaging emotional framework, so that the parts fused together in a marvelous structure. The poet's transition between purposes followed precise artistic measures."
(youcef h. , 2013, p. 135)

He further adds:



Soumission : 15/05/2025 Acceptation : 17/06/2025 Publication : 25/08/2025

"... The poet's shift from one theme to another was carried out with such finesse that readers often did not feel the transition." (youcef h. , 2013, p. 142)

I see that the difference of viewpoints among critics on the issue of thematic unity in pre-Islamic poetry indicates, on the one hand, the correctness of the Orientalists' opinion, as pre-Islamic poems have truly proven their lack of thematic unity, given that thematic unity means that the pre-Islamic poem should focus on one topic and one idea, and this is what a number of pre-Islamic poems were not distinguished by, as the poet's transition in his poem from one purpose to another is independent in thought from the previous purpose.. This is indefinitely a diversity beyond, even if the reader does not feel it. Perhaps the best evidence of what is only agreed upon in the Mu'allaqat is the one about the ruins and the mention of the dwellings - after which the poet moves on to another - "The transition to the ruins introductory poems actually disrupts the thematic unity. (ALHATTI, 2007) "For example: Imru' al-Qais in his Mu'allaqat, as he moves after the ruins introductory poem to a description of hunting, horses, and aspects of nature, he says in describing the horses:

His saddle and bridle were on him all night and he stood there in my sight, not letting go (ELKAYS, 1984).

This was the case for most of the poets of the Mu'allaqat: Tarafa, Zuhair ibn Abi Salma, and others, as their poems were known for multiple topics, which added to pre-Islamic poetry a kind of disintegration and disruption of the thematic unity in it. However, the Orientalists' belief that most pre-Islamic poetry lacks thematic unity remains an inaccurate statement in my opinion, as pre-Islamic poems

have proven their thematic unity from the beginning to the end, whether short or long, and we specifically mention in this proposal the poetic poems of the vagabond poets. In this, Yusuf Khalif says:

"...the observer of the poetry of the vagabonds is drawn to that thematic unity in most of its poems, such that he can give each poem a special title indicating its topic; and it is a phenomenon that pre-Islamic poetry did not know as a whole; those poems that begin with an introduction of ruins and then continue to move from one topic to another until they reach Its end (KHALIF)".

In another place, Youssef Khalif confirms his previous statement about the unity of subject matter among the vagabond poets, as he says: "... We hardly find any difficulty in giving titles to these poems, for example, the Ba'iyah of Shanfara (Raid on Al-Aws), the Ra'iyah of Ta'abbat Sharran (Deception), the Wafa'iyah of Al-Sulayk (The Frightened Nightingale), the Ba'iyah of Hajiz (Salvation), and the Kafiyyah of Ta'abbat Sharran (The Vagabond Friend)..., and thus we can do with all the pieces of vagabond poetry and short poems without feeling any difference between them and their titles." (KHALIF, pp. 265,266) In addition to this, Khalif believes that with regard to the long poems of the vagabond poets, unlike the Mu'allaqat, they contain thematic unity even if their purposes are multiple, but they do not deviate from their original intellectual context.

3. Imagination in Pre-Islamic Poetry

The pre-Islamic Arabic qasida represents an integrated artistic model expressing Arab culture. As part of the Arab heritage, it demonstrated creativity both in its external structure and its deeper artistic layers.



Soumission : 15/05/2025 Acceptation : 17/06/2025 Publication : 25/08/2025

It is within this context that some German Orientalists, " while studying the structure of the qasida, raised the issue of imagination in pre-Islamic poetry" (KHALIF, p. 266). Among those who engaged with this topic were: Renata Jacobi, Wolfhart Heinrichs, and Ewald Wagner. Modern studies have shown that German Orientalists differed in their views on this issue".Some claimed that imagination in pre-Islamic poetry was shallow, some denied its presence altogether, while others admitted to its limited presence in certain examples" (MOHAMED, 2009).

I think it is natural for orientalists to take such stances, considering that they have continued to rely on taking from their orientalist teachers, and this is what made the majority of them not use their intellects to understand pre-Islamic poetry and its artistic poetic texts in a comprehensive manner, or to scientifically investigate the facts and prove the correct opinion without religious, ethnic, sectarian or scientific fanaticism in order to extract scientific benefit from our literature and heritage, as well as to add to their research the spirit of the academic scientific method in service of human civilization.

3.1. Wolfhart Heinrichs:

In his book "Arabische Dichtung und Poetik, "Heinrichs discussed the characteristics of Arabic poetry. He relied on the work of Tadeusz Kowalski, who attempted to describe Arabic literary creativity. Kowalski argued that Arab thought was scattered and fragmented, which led to the disjointedness of pre-Islamic qasidas. He stated:

"... The looseness of composition is an essential feature of Arabic poetry. The Arabic qasida is a heterogeneous mixture and not an organic whole." **(RABABA)**

From this, Heinrichs adopted the idea that the pre-Islamic qasida had a fragmented structure.

Consequently, and in connection to the issue of imagination, Heinrichs claimed:

"... The absence of imagination is what gives pre-Islamic poetry its distinctive nature. "

Here Heinrichs sought to persuade readers that the lack of imagination was itself a defining feature of pre-Islamic poetry, though he provided no concrete evidence.

He further suggested that this issue could be clarified through comparative methodologies, stating:

"... The total absence of myths and symbols from pre-Islamic poetry has great significance in this context." **(RABABA, p. 68)**

However, comparing pre-Islamic poetry with Greek poetry in order to negate imagination in the former is problematic. Each poetic tradition has its own environment and cultural framework.

The imagination of the pre-Islamic poet was not based primarily on myths and symbols, as Heinrichs claimed, but rather stemmed from a natural creative faculty inspired by the poet's environment and inner feelings.

3.2. Renata Jacobi:

In her book "Studien Zur Poetik Der Altarabischen Qaside," Renata Jacobi presented various views on poetic imagery.



From her discussions, it can be inferred that she attributed the supposed poverty of imagination in pre-Islamic poetry to the nature of the pre-Islamic environment.

She argued:

"... The Arab poet lived in an environment that could not offer much for imaginative creativity" (**RABABA, p. 78**)

However, evidence suggests otherwise. Pre-Islamic poets were able to draw extensively from their environment – both living and non-living elements – and employ them artistically in their poetry.

For example, when 'Amr ibn Kulthum boasts of his tribe's power, he says:

"We filled the land until it could no longer contain us, and we are the sea, filling it with our ships. (**KALTHOUM, 1991**)"

Here, the poet exaggerates his tribe's strength by imagining the land overflowing with their soldiers and the sea crowded with their ships. This is a clear demonstration of creative imagination, contradicting Jacobi's claim.

3.3. Ewald Wagner:

In his book, "The Foundations of Classical Arabic Poetry - Pre-Islamic Poetry," the German orientalist Ewald Wagner discussed imagination and realism in pre-Islamic poetry. He believes that "pre-Islamic poetry was mostly realistic, and is described as realistic because the poet describes what he can sense. Hence, sensuality is concentrated in the details. If things are described in detail, the reason is not only due to the sharp observation of the Arabs, but also to the fact that the things described were known to the listener as they are known to the poet. However, the poet can present new

things through the method of simile." (RABABA, p. 82) From this standpoint, we can say that the new things that come through simile, according to Wagner, are the sensual image of the pre-Islamic poet, which has transformed from realism. The pre-Islamic poet, as some researchers see it, seeks to depict what is sensible with another sensible thing. Therefore, Wagner did not deny the existence of imagination in pre-Islamic poetry, as his student did. Heinrichs, who denied imagination from pre-Islamic poetry, categorically, Wagner saw that the pre-Islamic poet was able to go beyond the literal correspondence with reality, and was able to employ the pre-Islamic poet in his poetry the surrounding existences in the form of imagination, and with this he confirms the inclusion of imagination in the pre-Islamic poet, saying: "Imagination was not absent from pre-Islamic poetry completely - as Heinrichs claimed - and the evidence for that is that imagination is present when animals begin to speak, such as: the conversation of the man with the snake in Al-Nabigha Al-Dhubyani, and the conversation of Imru' Al-Qais with the wolf (RABABA, p. 82) "and other conversations of poets.

Conclusion

At the end of this research, we arrive at the following results: The methods adopted by German Orientalists in their studies of pre-Islamic poetry in particular and literature in general, including the projective method, the philological method, and the method of doubt, which had the greatest share in their positions, are methods that do not aspire to scientific truth, even if they were correct in some of



Soumission : 15/05/2025 Acceptation : 17/06/2025 Publication : 25/08/2025

their positions. However, what is certain is that these methods led their studies into pitfalls that deviated from the truth, and what made matters worse was their following each other's studies and adopting the visions and positions of the Orientalists who came before them in judging pre-Islamic poetry by relying on the same methods of their predecessors among the Orientalists. Therefore, we can say through this study that pre-Islamic poetry contained thematic unity in a section of its poems, as evidenced by the poetry of the vagabond poets, which the German Orientalists overlooked, or perhaps they deliberately overlooked, in order to generalize the phenomenon of disintegration in pre-Islamic poetry. This is what made their positions on this matter hostile to and contrary to accurate judgment. Regarding imagination in pre-Islamic poetry, the positions of German Orientalists were similar, with only Wagner differing from them. This may be due to the nature of these Orientalists' understanding of the nature of imagination. Wagner was more moderate, as he demonstrated the presence of imagination in pre-Islamic poetry, both as an analysis and representation.

As for the recommendations with which we conclude our research, they are:

- The investigation of truth in scientific research stems from the primary sources of the study in question, not by returning to the positions and judgments of predecessors and citing them as definitive proofs. This is what most Orientalists did in their judgments of pre-Islamic poetry.

- The status and scholarly value of pre-Islamic poetry does not lie in its thematic unity or in the imagination, which German Orientalists claimed was absent, but rather in its

status in what it expresses and through which it expresses the reality and circumstances surrounding it in the environment in which pre-Islamic poetry arose. - German Orientalists' studies of pre-Islamic poetry remain mere speculations, not definitive judgments. Ultimately, they are based on their Western methodologies and Western formation, which obscures Arabic poetic concepts in their poems.

- Arab criticism that contradicts the Orientalists' positions on pre-Islamic poetry compels us to re-examine and initiate new studies with greater scrutiny and in-depth research to arrive at the definitive scientific truth.

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