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Epigraphy in the Roman collections of the Museums of Sens

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Epigraphy in the Roman collections of the Museums of Sens

Nicolas Potier

The history of the museums of Sens dates back well beyond the late 19th century, when a new building first opened its doors in 1891. From the outset, the collections have included a substantial number of Roman artefacts. Their presentation in the archaeological rooms allows a diverse range of visitors to gain insight into the Gallo-Roman history of this French town of medium size. This brief paper aims to elucidate the diversity of the collections of the rich heritage of *Agedincum* (the Roman name for Sens), which is characterised, inter alia, by a plethora of Latin inscriptions.

1. The city of Sens/*Agedincum*

1.1. Overview

Sens is a town in the department of Yonne, in the region of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté. It has a population of approximately 27,000, who are collectively referred to as the “Sénonais”. The city is situated on a plateau in a meander of the river Yonne, which is itself a tributary of the Seine. The territory of Sens has been occupied by humans since prehistoric times. Archaeological evidence indicates that nomadic hunter camps were present in Marsangy, located approximately 10 km to the south of Sens. Additionally, the chalky plateau of Champagne, situated in close proximity to Sens, was exploited as a flint quarry as early as the Neolithic age.

The Gallic tribe of the Senones, referred to in Caesar’s *De bello Gallico* (V–VI) and already known since the sack of Rome by their chief Brennus in 390 (or 387) BCE, occupied a vast expanse of land prior to the Roman conquest. The ethnonym “Senones” is

thought to be derived from either the Latin root **sen-(H)-* “to win” or the Celtic adjective *seno-* “old”.

Today, the city of Sens is dominated by St Stephen’s Cathedral, which was built in the Gothic style and dates back to 1140. The very favourable geographical location of Sens, with its fertile soils, is still an economic asset today, as it was 2,000 years ago.



Figure 1: Aerial view of Sens, seen from the west. © Ville de Sens

1.2. *Agedincum* – archaeology of a “picturesque” site

The Roman city of Sens/*Agedincum* seems to have been founded shortly after the Roman conquest, during the Augustan period, on the course of the river Yonne. The name *Agedincum*, as used to designate the capital of the Senon tribe, had been in use prior to this; it was mentioned by Caesar in his *De bello Gallico* in the course of the campaign of 53 BCE (Caes. *Gall.* 6.44.3). It is possible that this *Agedincum* was situated approximately 20 km to the south of the present-day city of Sens, within the *oppidum* of Villeneuve-sur-Yonne (Nouvel et al. 2015, 234–235). Furthermore, it remains unclear whether a form of urban settlement existed at the time of the establishment of the Roman city, given the limited number of pre-Roman traces that have been uncovered.

The city of *Agedincum* was of some importance in the late antique and early medieval period. In the course of the 4th century CE, Ammianus Marcellinus (*R. Gest. div. Aug.* 15.11.11) made mention of the Senones. This was a period when the city was Chris-

tianised and the archbishopric constituted. It was designated the capital of the *civitas Senonum* and subsequently became the capital of the province *Lugdunensis quarta* at the end of the 4th century. It is identified as a city named AGETINCUM on Peutinger's map.

Agedincum's central location rendered it an important crossroads city. In the 1st century CE, the city's surface area was estimated to be approximately 180 hectares, with dimensions of 1,500 metres north-south and 1,200 metres east-west. Subsequently, the city's surface area was reduced to 40 hectares, coinciding with the construction of the city enclosure, which was probably completed by the end of the 3rd century. The rampart had a length of approximately 3 kilometres, extending in an oval shape perpendicular to the river. A city plan, dated 1741, indicates that it was pierced by 11 gates.

The existence of this structure until the mid-19th century has attracted the attention of archaeologists and antique dealers even before the French Revolution, with a clear intention to preserve as much of the Roman city as possible. The rampart also inspired artistic and scientific depictions, characterised by a penchant for the picturesque that was typical of 19th-century France. This involved a rediscovery of the region's heritage, undertaken in the footsteps of notable figures such as Baron Isidore Taylor, Charles Nodier and the draftsman Victor Petit in Sens.

The presence of carved blocks and other spolia in the city wall has been previously observed. In 1835, the city council decided to sell the city wall by auction, a process that was only concluded in the early 20th century. Upon the demolition of their sections of the wall by the new owners, a considerable number of spolia could be recovered (Saulnier-Pernuit 1987; Lamy – Ribolet 2020). Consequently, the destruction contributed significantly to the advancement of research and knowledge concerning the Roman city.



Figure 2: Roman gate at Sens.
C. Nodier – I. Taylor – A. de Cailleux, *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France. Champagne*. Vol. 4, Paris 1857 (not paginated). Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

2. History of the museums and their collections

2.1. The three collections

Situated in the halls of the former Archbishops' Palace, the museums of Sens preserve and exhibit three specific collections:

1) The Treasury of St Stephen's Cathedral collection: It comprises religious objects, relics and remains of saints, in addition to precious textiles and works of art donated over the centuries by successive archbishops. Originally, this collection served as a point of interest for visiting dignitaries, in a manner akin to the cabinets of curiosities that were a feature of the early modern era. This is one of the roots of the current museums.

2) The collection of the Archaeological Society of Sens: The majority of the Latin inscriptions that will be presented subsequently were inscribed on artefacts belonging to the Archaeological Society, collected during the 19th and early 20th centuries when sections of the city wall were demolished.

3) The municipal collection: It was inaugurated during the French Revolution with works of art and collections of ancient objects belonging to emigrant or condemned nobles and religious communities. The collection's scope aligns with the educational and standard objectives of French Third Republic-era museums. It encompasses artefacts from Sens, along with numerous items from Parisian deposits and acquisitions made at the Paris Salon and other exhibitions. Its holdings encompass local and classical archaeology, natural history, curiosities, popular arts and traditions, including objects of daily life from the city and surrounding regions.

2.2. The creation of the Archaeological Society of Sens

The Archaeological Society of Sens was founded in 1844 following the model of antiquarian societies. It was created to protect the archaeological remains of the ancient city at a time when the rampart was gradually being demolished. The society lobbied the city council to first display the remains in the courtyard of the town hall (located in the hôtel Vezou at the time) and then to build a museum that would be worthy of the name.

The society remains active to this day. It publishes several newsletters annually and organises one session each month. Its collections continued to grow, particularly with regard to historical documentation, including historic postcards, various archives and contributions on the history and archaeology of Sens and the surrounding areas.

Even before the city of Sens, the institution began to amass a heritage collection, thereby ensuring the preservation of a significant array of artefacts from both ancient and more contemporary eras. Among these are the sculpted fragments from St Stephen's Cathedral, which had been dispersed during the French Revolution.

2.3. The first museum

The first museum of Sens was inaugurated in 1891. The building was erected in the city centre next to the old town hall (l'hôtel Vezou). This museum encompassed a diverse array of collections, spanning from prehistory to the Napoleonic era. Its Gallo-Roman rooms exhibited the finds unearthed during the demolition of the rampart. The most important monuments were situated in the museum courtyard, exhibiting reconstructions that were more or less historically accurate.

2.4. The new museums: architecture and museography

Almost a century later, in the late 1970s, the conditions of conservation and access to the inaugural museum were deemed inadequate, prompting the city to pursue the establishment of a new presentation of the collections within the former Archbishops' Palace of Sens situated in close proximity to the cathedral.

The selection of this monument was prudent, as one wing of the palace had previously served as a repository for the belongings and libraries of the nobility and clergy during the French Revolution. The city had purchased half of the palace to establish a school, while the state had retained the remaining half and presented the synodal hall and the hall of the Officiality, which featured medieval tapestries, Roman mosaics, and sculptures from the cathedral.

During the revolutionary confiscations, Father François-Xavier Laire (1738–1801, librarian of Cardinal Étienne-Charles de Loménie de Brienne, archbishop of Sens at the time of the French Revolution) was the curator responsible for gathering in the synodal hall the objects that were confiscated from emigrants and those condemned to the death penalty, in addition to those from dissolved religious communities (many of which were based in Sens).

The Archbishops' Palace consists of four wings erected in different periods:

- 1) Synodal Palace (built under Gauthier Cornut, Archbishop from 1222 to 1241, later heavily restored by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc between 1851 and 1866),
- 2) Stables Wing (rebuilt c. 1762 under Archbishop Cardinal Paul d'Albert de Luynes),
- 3) François I Wing (built between 1519 and 1525 under Archbishop Étienne Poncher),
- 4) Henri II Wing (built under Louis de Bourbon de Vendôme, Archbishop from 1536 to 1557).

The renovations began in 1982 and the first rooms were opened to visitors in 1985. The monuments from the old museum were gradually dismantled and erected in the new locations.



Figure 3: The former Archbishops' Palace; the courtyard with the Henri II Wing on the left and the François I Wing on the right, followed by the Stables Wing (partially seen). © Musées de Sens

The most significant discovery during the construction works was the identification of a hypocaust dating back to the 3rd century CE, which was unearthed beneath the courtyard of the palace. This was subsequently excavated and integrated into the underground rooms, which now house the Roman collections. Visitors have the opportunity to observe the heating room (*praefurnium*), the brick pillars of the hypocaust and a tepid or warm pool (*tepidarium* or *caldarium*) with a lead pipe.

However, despite the initial success of the construction measures, all activities ceased approximately one decade later due to a reduction in financial support and an incident during construction that resulted in significant water damage. The current museum is therefore only half completed, with an area of nearly 1,500 m² for visitors, on four levels. The route is arranged in a chronological sequence, with the majority of exhibits pertaining to the period from prehistory to the Roman city of *Agedincum*. The remaining part of the museum is devoted to the arts from the Middle Ages to the present day including a room dedicated to Napoleon that opened recently.

2.5. The Roman rooms and their masterpieces

The section of the building dedicated to the Roman collections encompasses a considerable expanse, comprising over half of the completed exhibition area. It commences with the presentation of several significant monuments from *Agedincum*, situated around the reconstruction of a façade of a structure that has been interpreted as thermal baths.

Façade of the thermal baths

The reconstruction of this façade was undertaken using 36 fragments found separately during the aforementioned dismantling of the Roman rampart. It has been attributed to a thermal building due to the presence of large windows, a magnificent design, and the iconography of the carved friezes (Adam 1987; Deyts 1987).

The façade was already undergoing reassembly in the original museum but the ceilings were not high enough for the entire monument, necessitating a division of the reconstruction into two parts. To accommodate the monument's relocation, the architect created a mezzanine structure, providing the requisite height on two levels. In its current revised configuration, the reconstructed façade is over 12 metres long and 7 metres high.



Figure 4: Reconstructed façade of the thermal baths. © Musées de Sens.
Photo: Ortoif Harl

Statuette of the goddess Epona

Visitors can also admire a statuette of Epona, dating from the 1st century CE, crafted in the *sphyrelaton* technique (a method involving the use of hammered bronze sheets on a wooden core). This exceptionally well-preserved statuette is one of the most recent discoveries from the Roman period. It was unearthed in 2009 during the excavation of a well in Saint-Valérien, a *vicus* situated a few kilometres west of Sens. The site also yielded a deposit of metal dishes (Driard – Deyts 2013).

The goddess Epona is seated side saddle on a horse but shown in a frontal view according to a pattern very common in Gaul. She guides her mount with her left hand. It is reasonable to posit that the goddess held a whip in her right hand, which is now broken off. The goddess is dressed in a long pleated tunic, her hair is gathered in a chignon. She has a youthful face, her eyes were made of translucent glass surrounded by silver sheet (only traces visible). The horse's stance is controlled, the harness is carefully indicated and traces of a saddle mat are discernible on the horse's left side. The long mane cascades in thick strands and the inserted eyes are made of white and black glass.



Figure 5: Statuette of the goddess Epona. © Musées de Sens. Photo: L. de Cargouët

3. Epigraphy in the Roman collections

The smaller portion of the Roman collections is on display in the museum rooms, while the larger portion is held in storage. There are two storage locations: the lapidary store rooms, situated in a building on the outskirts of Sens, and the old museum, where a conservation store dedicated to archaeology has been established.

The Roman collections continue to grow as a result of ongoing preventive archaeological excavations and site surveillance. The computerised database currently contains 34,786 records, 8,117 of which relate to the Roman period. Of these, 84 refer to 108 epigraphic fragments representing approximately 1% of the total Roman period dataset.

The distribution of the epigraphic finds is as follows:

- Funeral inscriptions: 52 objects,
- Civic epigraphy: 56 objects.

The majority of these finds were discovered prior to the end of the 19th century, with only two examples recovered in the mid-20th century. The abbreviation “J plus number” (e.g. J 41) refers to the museum number based on the catalogues published by Julliot (1865, 1891 and 1898).

3.1. Funerary epigraphy

Funerary epigraphy accounts for approximately 50% of the identified corpus. The following section presents three examples exhibited in the underground rooms.

1) Epitaph of an imperial freedman and his wife (J 41; *CIL* XIII 2969)

Limestone *tabula ansata* (<https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/01890001178>); length 80 cm; 2nd half of the 1st century CE; found in 1857, re-used in the Roman city-wall



Figure 6:
CIL XIII 2969 = <http://lupa.at/25915>.
© Musées de Sens. Photo: J.-P. Elie

Ti(berio) Claud(io) Aug(usti) l(iberto)
Cerintho et Cl(audiae)
Venustae Iuliae
C(aei) f(ilia) Successa heres
ex testamento.

To Tiberius Claudius Cerinthus,
freedman of Augustus, and to
Claudia Venusta, Julia Successa,
daughter of Caius, their heiress
by will.

2) Stele of Bellicus (J 79; *CIL* XIII 2965)

Limestone stele (<https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/01890001106>); height 1.80 m; late 2nd/early 3rd century; found in 1864 near the Formeau gate, re-used in the Roman city-wall



D(iis) [M(anibus)].

Memor(iae) Bellicci Bellator[is f(ili)].

To the Manes.

In memory of Bellicus, son of Bellator.

Figure 7: *CIL* XIII 2965 = <http://lupa.at/25966>.

© Musées de Sens. Photo: Ortolof Harl

The stele shows a figure situated within a recessed niche, framed by two pilasters, one of which is severely damaged. The pilasters have a base with very schematic mouldings and a capital projecting on each side. These capitals are composed of a plain *calathos* and an abacus. They are corner capitals, visible on all faces, and support the semi-circular arch of the niche, as well as the quarter-cylinder acrotera, which extend over the entire thickness of the stele. The letters D and M were inscribed on the acrotera, while the rest of the inscription is located on the arch. All letters are highlighted with red colour.

The interior of the niche features a carved figure of a child bearing a sidelock, representing the image of youthful innocence. The boy is standing and holding a hammer in his right hand and placing a metal strip on an anvil with his left. He is not dressed in his work clothes, but wears a tunic down to the knees and different footwear: on his right foot a sandal with a strap, on his left foot a boot. Behind him, two tools are hanging on the wall of the niche, as they would be found in his workshop: a pair of pliers on his right and pincers on his left. At his feet are two animals: a hare on his right and a cat on his left.

3) Stele of a child (J 81; *CIL* XIII 2955)

Limestone stele (<https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/01890001241>); height 1.30 m; 3rd century (?); found in 1852, near the Formeau gate, re-used in the Roman city-wall



*[D(iis) M(anibus)] Didi(i) Leuci
et Mart(i)nae filio.
Vixit annos II
[men]s(es) IIII dies X.*

To the Manes. To the son of Didius Leucus and Martina.
He lived two (?) years, four months, ten days.

Figure 8: *CIL* XIII 2955 = <http://lupa.at/25912>.
© Musées de Sens. Photo: Ortolf Harl

This stele is of the same basic shape as the former, but is crowned by a triangular pediment. The inscription begins on the lower edge of the pediment and ends on the arch. Its letters are carved very regularly and highlighted with red colour.

The niche is occupied by a boy dressed in a tunic and a short cloak (*paenula*). His head has been chiselled off, but a long side-lock of youth is still visible behind, on his right side. He seems to be holding a vessel in his right hand and an object with a long cord in his left.

3.2. Civic epigraphy

The majority of the epigraphic finds are civic, non-funerary inscriptions, varying in length from brief to comprehensive. The following three examples illustrate this diversity. Furthermore, these inscriptions provide evidence of the profound Romanisation of the population.

1) Two building stones (J 14; *CIL* XIII 3008)

Two matching limestone blocks which marked a property line were donated to the museum in 1838 by Alfred Lorne, a prominent collector of antiquities and curiosities.



murus privat[us]

private wall

Figure 9: *CIL* XIII 3008 = <http://lupa.at/27655/>. © Musées de Sens.
Photo: Ortoif Harl

2) Honoric decree for Gaius Amatius Paterninus (J 401; *CIL* XIII 2949)

tabula ansata; a cast of the original kept in the Louvre (MN 24; INV 984; Br 4090)
Original: bronze plaque (<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010258140>);
length 41 cm; 250 CE; found in 1839; former collection of Alfred Lorne; sold to the Louvre in 1848 by Claude-Camille Rollin

As the plaque is slightly curved, it was destined to be fixed on an object with a convex surface.



Figure 10:
Cast of CIL XIII 2949.
© Musées de Sens

*C(aio) Amatio C(aii) Amat(i) Patern(i)
fil(io) <P=I>aternino aedil(i) vikan(orum)
Agied(icensium) aedil(i) c(ivitatis) S(enonum) actor(i) p(ublico) pagi
Tout(iaci) act(ori) p(ublico) quinquenn(al)i civit(at)is
Ivir(o) ab aer(ario) muner(ario) praef(ecto) an=
non(ae) design(ato) iu(v)en(i) integerr(imo)
Matern(ius) Eucharistus et Pat[er]n(ius)
Pollio Sill(ianus) off(iciales) eius ob mer(ita) p(ecunia) p(ublica)
d(omino) n(ostro) Decio Aug(usto) II et Grato co(n)s(ulibus)
kal(endis) Apr(ilibus).*

To Gaius Amatius Paterninus,
son of Gaius Amatius Paternus, aedile of the inhabitants of the *vicus*
of *Agedincum*, aedile of the *civitas* of the Senones, public advocate of the *pagus*
of *Toutiacus* (Toucy), public quinquennial advocate of the *civitas*,
duumvir responsible for the public treasury obliged to organise a gladiatorial show,
prefect of the provisions, young man of great integrity.
Maternius Eucharistus and Paternius
Pollio Sillianus, members of his office [had this inscription engraved] on public funds in memory of
the services he rendered.
Done during the calends of April, under the second consulship of our lord the emperor Decius and
under that of Gratus (April 1st, 250 CE).

3) Honoric inscription for Caius Caesar (J 1 + J 413 + J 414 + J 415; *CIL* XIII 2942)

Cast of the original in storage

Original: four matching limestone blocks; found in 1825 and 1894 on the bank of the river Yonne (<https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/01890001172>)



Figure 11: *CIL* XIII 2942 = <https://lupa.at/25892>. © Musées de Sens

<i>C(aio) Caesari August(i) f(ilio)</i>	To Caius Caesar, son of Augustus,
<i>[d]ivi nepoti pontifici</i>	grandson of the divine, pontiff,
<i>[c]o(n)s(uli) imp(eratori) principi</i>	consul, emperor, prince of
<i>iuventutis</i>	youth,
<i>[civi]tas Senonum</i>	the city of the Senones.

This is the oldest inscription in the epigraphic collection, dating back to the very beginning of the first century CE (end of 3 CE or somewhat later). It was part of a monument dedicated to Gaius Caesar, i.e. Gaius Julius Caesar Vipsanianus, adopted son of Augustus and acclaimed emperor in September 3 CE, who died on February 21, 4 CE (Debatty 2004; Rosso 2009).

The original is in storage; the museum exhibits a cast of it, situated above the entrance of the first Roman room near the façade of the baths mentioned above.

3.3. The votive inscription of M. Magilius Honoratus (J 16 to J 38; *CIL* XIII 2940)

Limestone base (<https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/01890001198>); reconstructed from 25 pieces; length 12.18 m, height 2.05 m; early 2nd century CE; re-used in the Roman city-wall



Figure 12: *CIL* XIII 2940 = <https://lupa.at/25920>. © Musées de Sens. Photo: Ortolf Harl

In ho[nor(em) dom(us) A]ug(ustae) Mart(i) Volk(ano) et deae sanctis[s](imae) Vestae M(arcus) Magilius Honor[atus ex v]oto pos(uit) [pro se su]isqu[e]

In honour of the house of Augustus, Mars, Vulcan and the most chaste goddess Vesta, Marcus Magilius Honoratus following a vow made for him and for his fellows, raised (this monument)

*Sext(o) Iul(io) Thermiano
sacerdoti arae in=
ter confluent(es) Arar(is)
et Rhodani omnib(us) ho=
noribus apud suos
functo socero*

To Sextus Julius Thermianus,
priest at the altar situated between
the confluence of the rivers Saone
and Rhone, successively honoured with
all the magistracies in his homeland,
my father-in-law.

*Aquiliae Flac=
cillae civi
Aeduae Iuli
[Thermiani]
[coniugi]
[socrui]*

To Aquila Flaccilla,
citizen of
the Aedui, [wife] of Julius
[Thermianus,
my mother-in-law].

*Iuliae Thermio=
lae Iul(i) Thermia=
ni filiae
[co]niugi*

To Julia Thermiola,
daughter of Julius
Thermianus,
my wife.

*Iuliae Reginae
Magili Honora=
ti et Iuliae Ther=
miolae filiae*

To Julia Regina,
daughter of Magilius
Honoratus and Julia
Thermiola.

*M(arco) Magilio Honorato
flamini Aug(usti) munera=
rio omnibus honorib(us)
apud suos functo*

To Marcus Magilius Honoratus,
priest of Augustus, who held games
and was successively honoured with all the
magistracies in his homeland.

*M(arco) Aemilio Nobili
flamini Aug(usti) mune=
rar(io) omnib(us) honorib(us)
apud suos functo fratri*

To Marcus Aemilius Nobilis,
priest of Augustus, who held games
and was successively honoured with all the
magistracies in his homeland, my brother.

Following their recovery, the blocks were positioned in an outdoor setting within the courtyard of the first museum in 1891. Subsequently, they were relocated to the underground rooms, where they remain to this day. The dedication inscription details the genealogy of a family of notable individuals from the early 2nd century CE. They bore the *tria nomina*, acquired Roman citizenship and held prominent offices. Sextus Julius Thermianus, the father-in-law of M. Magilius Honoratus and married to an *Aedui* citizen, served as a federal priest of the Three Gaules. He is also mentioned in a votive inscription found in Lyon (Richards 1992).

3.4. Epigraphic fragments

As might be expected, the most numerous epigraphic remains are small fragments of inscriptions. The following three examples stand out because they originate from a marble inscription. They were discovered at la Motte du Ciar outside of an archaeological context through surface collection during the 19th century. La Motte du Ciar is situated to the southwest of the ancient city and has been identified as a Gallo-Roman suburban sanctuary (Debatty 2006).



Figure 13: Fragments from the site of la Motte du Ciar (J 378 to J 380; *CIL* XIII 3002a–c = <http://lupa.at/27658>). © Musées de Sens. Photo: Ortolf Harl

4. Projects and challenges

In the course of the redevelopment process, the museums will reassess all of their collections, some of which are old and not widely known (e.g. African memorabilia of the colonial period). It is anticipated that the archaeological and epigraphic collections will form part of this project. The presentation of the findings and their interpretation continue to follow traditional methodologies that were effective in previous decades. However, these need to be adapted to modern requirements. Another planned undertaking is further research into the building blocks and other spolia recovered from the Roman city wall in order to obtain information about the ancient monuments from which they originate. The most complex project is the intention to carry out extensive excavations at the sanctuary of la Motte du Ciar, a site that has been the subject of far-reaching but contradictory interpretations for more than a century.

In June 2023, Sabine Lefebvre hosted a study day for the French Society of Roman Epigraphy at the Museums of Sens. The event provided an opportunity for the curious and local amateurs to gain insight into this discipline.

The publication of a series of three thematic catalogues on objects from the Roman collections is planned for the coming years. The first volume presents the numerous funerary stelae and has already been published (Fellague – Ribolet 2024). The second will be devoted to the architectural decoration, and the third to the inscriptions from Roman *Agedincum* and those found in the surrounding area of modern Sens.

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