

# WORDS AND COINS

*From Ancient Greece  
to Byzantium*



MER

WORDS AND COINS  
from *Ancient Greece to Byzantium*  
24.11.2012 – 17.03.2013

An exhibition organized by the Fondation  
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# VIII

## WRITING AND IMPRINTING

### THE HISTORY OF

### THE ROMAN WORLD

Charikleia Papageorgiadou

In an age when communication was extremely difficult, not only due to the limitations of technology, but also to the more general ignorance and illiteracy of the populations, the power of the images on coins was used by all centres of authority to disseminate political messages. The Romans, having immediately grasped the possibilities offered by coins – possibilities that the Greek cities had taken advantage to the full – represented an immense variety of subjects on their flan, in this way transmitting important messages to a wide public. The coinage of Rome, notwithstanding its differentiations, is a constant to be traced through a long period, with iconography and symbolisms as its vehicle.

#### *Mythical tradition, the early years and the Roman Republic*

Rome, the city whose name was to be linked with a vast empire, traced its founding back to the Trojan hero Aeneas, according to the poet Virgil and the tradition widespread among the upper classes, particularly in the first century BC and the early years of the Empire. In this way the Roman elite promoted the idea that the origin of the Romans was equal in nobility to that of the Greeks, on whose territories Rome's expansionist policy at that time set its sights, and that the Romans were the worthy continuers of

an heroic past. However, according to another tradition, the twin brothers Romulus and Remus, direct descendants of Aeneas, were the ‘historical’ founders of Rome, possibly on 21 April 753 BC. This tradition is corroborated by archaeological evidence and echoes more the city’s tribal past and the conflicts between the local populations.<sup>1</sup> The relevant myths, which allowed Titus Livius to proclaim proudly in his work *Ab urbe condita* that ‘if any people ought to be allowed to consecrate their origins and refer them to a divine source...’<sup>2</sup> this people is the Romans, recur frequently in Roman art and are a favourite subject also in the coinage of the later periods of the Empire.

fig. 1



fig. 1

Bronze *as*, Antoninus Pius (138–161 AD), Rome, ca. 140 AD, with representation of Mars with Rhea Silvia, from whose union Romulus and Remus were born.

Traditions relating to the foundation of Rome recur frequently on imperial coins.  
Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 84 (05.05.2010), lot 1029

Around the end of the sixth century BC, the aristocratic families ousted the last kings and took power, establishing the Senate (*Senatus*) as supreme authority, which together with the people, *Senatus populusque Romanus*, constituted henceforth the ‘personification’ of the Roman Republic.<sup>3</sup> In this period, in 211 BC, the *denarius*, the silver coin that was to be associated as no other with the history of Rome,<sup>4</sup> was introduced. Its iconography, with clear influences from the Greek cities of Italy and Sicily, revolves around deities associated with the Romans’ heroic past and present.

In this period, moreover, the sense of Rome’s omnipotence is consolidated, as described *inter alia* by Titus Livius.<sup>5</sup> This omnipotence is now represented on the coins too, not as a goddess but as the personification of the Roman State, the *res publica* or the fatherland (*patria*).<sup>6</sup> Much later, in imperial times, Roma, with the characteristics of a martial goddess, such as Athena, is identified in many cases with *Minerva*,<sup>7</sup> while she is encountered also on coins of Greek cities, where she was worshipped in the same temple as the emperors.

As coinage increased and Rome was opening up to its new possessions and was moving away from the austere archaic tradition, the officials responsible for producing coins, the *monetales* (moneyers), felt free to seek also other sources of iconography and indeed from their family past, considering that coins were a medium of personal enhancement in the desired *cursus honorum*.<sup>8</sup> The specific types, although passing essentially unnoticed by the general public, which had no idea about the events depicted, nonetheless projected the appropriate messages to the circles of power.

fig. 2: see cat. no. 163

fig. 3



fig. 2

Bronze coin, Nicomedia, C. Papirius Carbo, 59/8 BC.  
The assimilation of Roma with the Greek goddess Athena is observed  
already in the years of the Republic.  
KIKPE Collection, Athens



fig. 3

Silver *denarius*, L. Hostilius Saserna, 48 BC.  
The numismatic representations refer to Julius Caesar's victories in Gaul.  
Indeed, the figure on the obverse is identified as the legendary Gallic  
chieftain, Vercingetorix.  
Nomos, Auction 3 (10.05.2011), lot 167

### *The Empire*

The assassination of Julius Caesar on 15 March 44 BC ushered in a ten-year period of civil wars, from which his direct descendant and successor, Octavian,<sup>9</sup> emerged as the monarch of the Roman world and, in actual fact, the founder of the Empire.

Augustus, the first to link inextricably the emperor's actions with the fate of the Empire, exploited to the utmost the potential of coins<sup>10</sup> — and indeed of every art form or other medium — to project the guidelines of his policy, by utilizing iconography.<sup>11</sup> The emperor is portrayed on coins as imperishable and ageless, with idealized features, just as the Empire should be too. The development and the maturing of Augustus' policy are distinguished only by the corresponding inscriptions, according to which he is transformed from *Imperator Caesar Divi Filius*, Caesar's son and worthy continuer, to *Pater Patriae*, Patriarch of the Nation.

The use of coins as agents of promoting the imperial house that began from Augustus — in a way, the *monetales* of the Republic had preceded — is one of the characteristics of Roman numismatics and has generated much debate as to whether it should be considered as a means of propaganda, publicizing or projection of imperial achievement.<sup>12</sup> However, regardless of theoretical stance, the fact remains that coin

iconography offers important information on the reconstitution of imperial policy, since the coin offers the field for the development of the messages to be publicized.

On the obverse, the portrait of the emperor, framed by a series of titles<sup>13</sup> following and dating his career, was the sole permitted image, which confirms the dominant figure of the period. The way in which this figure is portrayed signified not only the personality of the emperor, with specific facial features and personal traits, but also the basic axes of his governance. For the immediate imperial milieu and the higher echelons of society this kind of information could be circulated through works of art, as well as imperial literature, whether *res gestae* and autobiographies, or correspondence with distinguished persons.<sup>14</sup> For the rest, the rendering of the imperial portrait was open to multiple readings, given that beyond the obvious, the citizens of Rome at least were able to discover other, more covert aspects of their emperor, as in the case of Domitian, who although described by Tacitus as bold, is represented with luxuriant curly hair both on coins and in official portraits.

The coin portrait depicted the emperor as he ought or would want to appear to his citizens, depending also on the policy he applied. Those who linked their authority with major military operations and the expansion of the Empire are depicted with features revealing vigorous personalities, beginning with the Flavians or Trajan, while Caracalla instituted the profile of the emperor-general, which was adopted by subsequent rulers who had risen from the ranks of the army.

fig. 4: see cat. nos 215,  
23, 229, 232



fig. 4

From Augustus to Diocletian the portraits on coins provide significant information on the emperors, as well as on the way in which they wielded their power.

Obverses of gold *aurei*: Augustus (27 BC – 14 AD), Lugdunum, 7–6 BC;  
Hadrian (117–138 AD), Rome, ca. 125–128 AD; Septimius Severus (193–211 AD),  
Rome, 200–201 AD; Diocletian (284–305 AD), Cyzicus, 293 AD.  
Fondation Martin Bodmer, Cologne

On the contrary, the emperors-philosophers, particularly Hadrian, but also Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius – emperors renowned for the serious introspective inquiries, who wanted to be presented swathed in classical beauty – adopt portraits impressive for their serene majesty. A special case is Septimius Severus, who established different types of the imperial portrait, stressing certain characteristics associated with his personal career from soldier to continuer of a lineage of emperors and divine sovereign, and last to philosopher.

The imperial issues of the third century, when the empire is collapsing and seeking salvation in divine intervention, which may also take on the form of the emperor, are placed on a more general ideological foundation. Gallienus is portrayed identical to various deities, while a few years later Aurelian, all too aware of Rome's fate, appears on his coins as *RESTITUTOR ORBIS*, and even more, as *DEO ET DOMINO NATO AURELIANO AUGUSTO*. Born god and prince, Aurelian was the first of a series of emperors who believed themselves to be born of gods and creators of gods, to which alone they give account, in order to be assimilated with them in the end. This was the case with the emperor Theodosios I, who on a relief from Ephesus is represented together with his family, in the midst of the Olympian gods.<sup>15</sup>

Sometimes the rendering of the imperial portraits follows contemporary aesthetic currents. A case in point is Nero, who is portrayed in meticulous detail and with obvious differences in age as the years passed. This is an exceptional example of imperial portrait in a period in which Roman art is disengaging itself from Hellenistic models and turning towards realistic representations of figures – distinctive quality of the pure Roman tradition.

Almost two hundred years were to pass before a significant change occurred in the rendering of the portrait, this time of Gallienus, whose figure is presented as a mask. This is a new artistic trend, distinguished by schematization and cubic outlines, which was to convey in the best possible way the ideological basis of the Tetrarchy, established by Diocletian in 293 AD and supported by the rulers' concord and *similitudo*, which is expressed aesthetically by the uniformity of volumes and the playing down of the different features.

If the imperial portrait is in many ways a constant, the remarkable variety of representations on the reverse of coins echoes imperial reality in its full scope. Regardless of the final recipients of the messages and the gamut of their acceptance and comprehension, regardless of the beautification of the acts and of the nature of power promoted by the imperial milieu, the numismatic types truly iconize an era for which there are only literary testimonies. Moreover, the Roman historians were not always objective and their work is informed by their personal principles and ambitions, or even by their likes and dislikes.

Indicative examples are the two main historians of the first century of the Empire, Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (*ca.* 69 – after 122 AD) and Publius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus (56–117 AD). The first, in his work *De Vita Caesarum*, focused on the adverse



side of the personal life of the emperors, giving the more general picture of a corrupt, debauched, blood-loving and scandalous principle characteristic of Roman power, whereas the second, although himself a senator, in the *Annals* and the *Histories* has no qualms about describing in the darkest terms and a belittling manner the Romans in general, and specifically the members of his class.

Even the third-century historian Dio Cassius (*ca.* 150–235 AD), although referring to events of previous centuries, is critical both of his fellow Roman citizens and of their enemies, but for obvious reasons does not adopt the same stance towards his contemporaries the Severans.



fig. 5

Gold *aureus*, Septimius Severus (193–211 AD), Rome, 200–201 AD.  
Represented are his natural heirs, Caracalla and Geta. Dynastic continuity was among the emperors' principal concerns, even though the choices or the hereditary succession were not always to the benefit of Rome.

Fondation Martin Bodmer, Cologny



fig. 6

Gold *aureus*, Trajan (98–117 AD), Rome, 103–111 AD.  
Represented is the emperor on horseback defeating his enemy.

Fondation Martin Bodmer, Cologny



fig. 7

Gold *aureus*, Vitellius, Rome, 69 AD.  
Vitellius stayed in power for eight months, before being usurped and executed by Vespasian. The reverse representation is associated with the *Quindecimviri Sacris Faciundis*, who were able to interpret the Sibylline Books in time of crisis.

Fondation Martin Bodmer, Cologny

However, there is a common axis linking the historians' texts with the coin iconography. Building projects, familial relations and dynastic continuity, military operations and spiritual inquiries are indicative and characteristic of the nature of authority and imperial power.

Once again, a case in point is the coinage of Nero, on which the different facets of his contradictory personality are unfolded, with the detailed recording also of the emperor's acts. For although known to history as an exemplar of bestiality and insanity, he could nonetheless boast considerable achievements, as is apparent also from his coin iconography in which public works projects, such as the harbour of Ostia, and gifts to the people coexist with the conspicuous display of the artistic talent of the emperor who identified himself with Apollo.

fig. 5: see cat. no. 230

fig. 6: see cat. no. 226

fig. 7: see cat. no. 221

fig. 8



fig. 8

*Sestertius*, Nero (54–68 AD), Rome, 64 AD.

The harbour of Ostia, which was completed in 64 AD, is represented in meticulous detail, after the model of analogous mural paintings.

Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 90 (23.05.2012),

lot 1471

One further field in which the emperors had to boost their image was that of domestic policy, especially in the first and second centuries when wars were no longer of vital importance for the Empire and what mattered was the well being of those living within its narrow boundaries. Characteristic is the case of Trajan, who, as is apparent also from his correspondence with Pliny, had taken serious measures to relieve the plight of the social underdogs throughout Italy. These measures are referred to on his coins, on which are engraved representations of the *ITALIA RESTITUTA* and *ALIMENTA ITALIAE*. However, the management at close hand of the problems of the far-flung provinces interested emperors such as Hadrian, who, as *Restitutor Orbis Terrarum*, imprinted on a notable series of coins the provinces he visited.

The principles on which the emperor governed, which were the hallmark of the central authority, are personified and appear on coins as allegorical figures, particularly in the time of Hadrian and his successors. Virtues such as *Liberalitas* (Liberality), *Indulgentia* (Indulgence), *Patientia* (Patience), *Pudicitia* (Modesty), *Tranquillitas* (Tranquility), *Hilaritas* (Joy) typify Hadrian's authority, whereas *Clementia* (Clemency), *Honos* (Honour) and *Justitia* (Justice), were the principles according to which Marcus Aurelius desired to reign.<sup>16</sup> Very often these ideological references affected

fig. 9: see cat. no. 227

also the depiction of the gods, who acquire specific characteristics, such as *Roma Felix*, or have the qualities of *Pax* (Peace) and *Salus* (Salvation), *Jupiter Conservator* or *Liberator*, *Venus Victrix*, *Minerva Pacifera*.



fig. 9

Gold *aureus*, Antoninus Pius (138–161 AD), Rome, 148–149 AD.  
Representation of Nemesis, goddess of Justice, holding a pair of scales and a cornucopia.  
Fondation Martin Bodmer, Cologne

Despite the emperors' efforts to broadcast a policy of principles, the unequivocally bellicose nature of the empire is marked from the early years of its existence by the image of Roma as a martial deity seated on breastplates, holding a spear and accompanied by related attributes. From the simpler form on the coins of Titus to the more sophisticated one that accompanies the end of the Empire and holds Victoria proffering her a wreath, while a figure of a suppliant kneels at her feet, Roma is the *par excellence* representation of the magnificence of the empire. A magnificence that was seriously threatened by barbarian incursions, as a result of which the coins now carry the image of the emperor on horseback vanquishing his foes, and gods such as *Mars* and *Minerva*, *Sol Invictus* and VICTORIA AETERNA, while of the emperor's virtues the martial VIRTUS AUGUSTI now prevails.

It is clear that the choice of the iconographic types imprinted on a coin was made with care and was the expression of kind of imperial 'ideology', the projection essentially of an emperor as he should or would like to be, and of a principle which had responsibility for maintaining the Empire, and which was unfolded on both sides of the coins. Independently of the range of recipients and the recognizability of these messages, the court wished to make its work known in the best possible way, and coins were the most suitable medium, given that they circulated quickly in large quantities and over long distances.

#### *Roman provincial issues: merging tradition into a new reality*

One of the questions concerning the actual power of coins as agents of propaganda to the far-flung regions of the Empire is connected with the coinage of the provinces.<sup>17</sup>

The institution of the provinces was the organizational backbone of the immense territory of the Empire, which had to impose a single administrative, economic and military system upon a series of diverse ethnic groups, peoples and tribes which had

equally different roots. The division into provinces of the West and of the East, and the corresponding management of the economy and coinage with pre-existing structures as guideline, is characteristic of the effectiveness of Roman policy.

In the western provinces principal feature of this policy was the imposition and absolute establishment of Latin as the official language and of Roman administration in the local societies, the majority of which lacked analogous sturdy infrastructures, such as the cities of the East. Concurrently, the creation of new structures and infrastructures aimed at exploiting the local sources of wealth to the advantage of Rome and her elites.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the frequent upheavals, due either to attacks by barbarian tribes or to insurrections of local warrior chieftains, left little leeway for a relatively autonomous development of the western provinces. It is possible that the cities' relatively limited numismatic activity, which for reasons still vague had neither the duration nor the variety<sup>19</sup> encountered in the eastern provinces,<sup>20</sup> is due to precisely these particularities of the western provinces, whose economy was based largely on Roman coins.

In the eastern provinces, including Hellenic lands, which were the historical continuation of the Hellenistic kingdoms, significant mechanisms of economic administration and coinage had developed *inter alia*, upon which the Romans relied. Indeed, from the outset they allowed the various local authorities to issue coins, mainly of small denominations, as petty currency to cover local needs.

These issues are among the most interesting,<sup>21</sup> as they were not determined by the central power but were under the control of the local authorities, who came primarily from the local elite. Given, moreover, that most populations in the East<sup>22</sup> were familiar with the tactics of the Hellenistic rulers, which aimed at publicizing and disseminating political messages through coins, a huge variety of images was created. These are important sources of information on the imperial presence, the response of the cities to the new world order, the manner of administration and the relations with the central authority, Roman control over annexed lands, the very history of the cities of the Roman Empire and the role of provincial coinage in the economy of the Roman Empire.<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding peculiarities of the provinces, with regard either to their local history or to the manner of their inclusion in the Roman Empire, certain common axes run through their numismatic activity and bear witness to a wider ideology of imperial times, with which coins are directly linked.

Indicative is the case of representations of purely local interest pertaining to deities and cults of the region, the imagery of which had been crystallized long ago. Even so, an attempt to render them in affinity with Roma is frequently observed. The case of the goddess Athena, who shares characteristics in common with the martial nature of Roma, is among the best-known examples, while very often the emperor is identified with a god,

fig. 10: see cat. no. 87

as in the case of Nero depicted as *Jupiter Liberator*, on the occasion of the ‘liberation’ of Achaëa; the empresses too often acquire the features and attributes of female divinities.



fig. 10

Bronze coin, Patrae under Caracalla (198–217 AD), 213–217 AD.

Represented is Hermes with his characteristic attribute the caduceus.

KIKPE Collection, Athens

Representations of landmark monuments and constructions of the region are one more typical choice and are associated usually with imperial building programmes, the renovation of earlier buildings on the occasion of a visit by members of the imperial family or the rebuilding on imperial initiative after natural or other destructions.<sup>24</sup>

The local societies, either wishing to flatter the supreme authority or simply following the trends of the time, also copied representations from the Rome mint, which in reality were of no symbolic or semeiotic interest to them.

fig. 11: see cat. no. 48



fig. 11

Bronze coin, Marcianopolis under Gordian III (238–244 AD).

Represented on the obverse is the emperor with the god Sarapis, whose cult spread from Egypt to the territories of the Empire under the Severans. On the reverse is a view of the city, showing a temple and an altar, which was surrounded by walls with thirteen towers.

KIKPE Collection, Athens

Of special character is the coinage of the Roman colonies,<sup>25</sup> on which types associated with their founding – colonist or priest who defines the boundaries of the colony, or the standards of the legions if it is a military colony – are among the most recognizable, as well as the coinage of the *koina*, mainly of religious character, primary concern of which was imperial cult, the centre of which – usually a sanctuary – was the commonest iconographic type.

However, for all the vast variety of representations, the iconography of the provincial mints rarely refers to major events affecting the whole of the Empire, such as great military victories. The coins of the provinces convey the sense that they were addressed solely

to the local societies, with pronounced reference to the emperor, to whom they owed their well-being, and followed a flow of issues, independent of the coinage of Rome, on which events were immortalized immediately. Most probably in the distant provinces there was such a delay in keeping up with events that they preferred to continue an unbroken coinage on which were imprinted the local past and present, as this was formulated within the unified Empire and on the basis of the new ideological components.

*The 'Renaissance' of the Roman coinage*

Ancient coins combined art with precious metal, a fact that has always attracted the interest of affluent connoisseurs, while their size, which facilitated transport and storage, made them a favourite collector's item already in Antiquity. Moreover, the representations, which may have been familiar or have carried recognizable symbolisms, also made them ideal objects for presenting as gifts, as Suetonius records for the emperor Augustus.

The Italian Renaissance of the *Quattrocento* brought to the fore Classical Antiquity and especially Roman art, finds of which were being brought to light in large number throughout the West. Coins in particular, not least because of the frequency of their discovery, were an economical as well as an impressive choice as collectibles. At the same time, as in Antiquity, collectible coins were appropriate as gifts, often accompanied by epistles or poems, or as keepsakes.<sup>26</sup>

Petrarch is accredited with being the first collector of coins in the Renaissance. As an authentic Renaissance man, he wanted to enhance and to instill in his contemporaries the virtues promoted by the Roman rulers, an endeavour that he realized through writing a collection of biographies, *De viris illustribus*, on the model of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*.<sup>27</sup> Petrarch, like the highly inquisitive Leon Battista Alberti, considered coins a means of approaching the humanistic ideals of Antiquity, which is why he offered coins as a gift to the Holy Roman emperor Charles IV in 1355 (possibly in his effort to persuade the sovereign to abandon the newly-built luxurious palace in Prague and move permanently to Rome, as expression of awakening Roman tradition and the Roman Empire). Eminent personalities of the age had created significant collections, some of which later constituted the core of modern museums, such as Elector Joachim II of Brandenburg, who founded the Coin Cabinet of Berlin.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas intellectuals were keen to extol and transfuse to their contemporaries the moral values and virtues of ancient times, rulers were more interested in being identified with the persons of the heroic past, just as the Roman emperors had once been identified with deities. Medallions were considered the most suitable means to this end, and these, taking as models Roman coins, began to be designed and produced in most of the Italian courts from around 1300, for the purpose of lauding the princes.

The catalogues in which coin images were copied assiduously were also models for the artists, while the profile rendering of figures was extended to painting too, where the first portraits of eponymous or anonymous persons appear.

The love of ancient coins and the interest in collecting them seem to have been a kind of measure connected with the profound knowledge of the humanistic ideals of the past, which typified the *homo universalis* of the Renaissance.

#### Notes

1. Gaudemet 1982<sup>2</sup>, pp. 260–4, with relevant references to the excavations; Grandazzi 1997.
2. Titus Livius, *Ab urbe condita* 1.7.
3. Titus Livius, 4.2.4; Valerius Maximus 1.8.1; 9.5.1; Velleius Paterculus 2.89; cf. Gaudemet 1982, pp. 281, 349–53; Hoelkeskamp 2004.
4. *RRC*, pp. 616–8.
5. ‘But the fates were resolved, as I suppose, upon the founding of this great City, and the beginning of the mightiest of the Empires, next after that of Heaven’; Titus Livius, 1.4.2.
6. Mellor 1981, pp. 950–1030. The figure with helmet of Phrygian type, which is identified with Roma, is in opposition to the analogous one with Corinthian helmet, which is identified with the martial goddess Minerva. Also, Hoelkeskamp 2004, p. 119.
7. Mellor 1981, pp. 973–5. Also, Fayer 1976; Fears 1978, pp. 274–86.
8. Hamilton 1969, pp. 181–99; *RRC*, pp. 725–34; cf. also, Harlan 1995. Concurrently, the moneyers, consistent with Roman tradition, honoured their ancestors; cf. Cheung 1998, pp. 53–61. Meadows and Williams 2001, pp. 27–49.
9. Edmondson 2009, with exhaustive bibliography.
10. Sydenham 1920; Sutherland 1965 and 1978. See also, Wallace-Hadrill 1986, pp. 66–87.
11. Zanker 1990. Indicative of the manipulation, by all means, is the fact that shortly before his death Augustus composed his political autobiography, the *Res Gestae*, cf. Scheid 2007.
12. Hannestad 1986, with earlier relevant bibliography. See also, Sutherland 1951; Jones 1974, pp. 61–8; Crawford 1983, 47–64; Levick 1982, p. 104.
13. Fears 1981, pp. 827–948.
14. Dilke 1957, pp. 78–97.
15. Given the fact that Theodosios was mainly interested in the imposition of Christianity, it is more probable that this was a local initiative, on the occasion of the reconstruction of Hadrian’s temple, in order to honour the imperial family.
16. Birley 1987<sup>2</sup>.
17. Howgego 1985; Butcher 1988; Ando 2000<sup>2</sup>; Heuchert 2003, pp. 313–43; Howgego *et al.* 2005.
18. Leveau 2007, pp. 651–70.
19. Norena 2011; Haeussler and King 2007.
20. *RPC* I, pp. 18–20.
21. Harl 1987.
22. Alcock 2007, pp. 671–97.
23. Franke 1968.
24. Price and Trell 1977.
25. Papageorgiadou-Banis 2004.
26. Cunnally 1994, pp. 129–43.
27. Kohl 1974, pp. 132–44.
28. Cunnally 1984; Cunnally 1999.

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