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## ODDMENTS: A MISCELLANY OF ENGLISH ETYMOLOGIES (PART 3)<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This multi-part study continues an inquiry earlier initiated in these pages into words listed in *Oxford English dictionary* as still without satisfactory etymologies. Loans from a variety of source languages are reviewed, accompanied by commentary on earlier lexicographical praxis as it relates to various popular registers of English.

*Scythe* and *snath*: The etymological note for *scythe* in the *OED* traces the present form to Old English *sīðe*, earlier \**sigði* (the erroneously learned orthography *sc-* is ascribed to the influence of Latin *scindere*) (*OED*, s.v. *scythe*, n.). “The term is found in Latin-Old English glossaries from as early as about 725:<sup>2</sup> *Falcis*: wudubil, siðe, riftras’. The common Middle English form is *sīthe*” (Sweet 1885: 834). Cognates are Low German *seged*, *seid*, *sicht*, Old Norse *sigðr*, Norwegian *sigd*, *sigde*, *sidde*, all derived from Germanic \**segipþjōz* and ultimately from the reconstructed Indo-European root \**seg-* ‘to cut’ (Rix, Kümmel 2001: 524, s.v. *sekH<sup>1</sup>-*; Pokorny 2005: 1. 895–896, s.v. \**seg-*; Köbler 2014, s.v. *seg-*). Thus, in the early vocabulary of agricultural implements the scythe was ‘the cutter’ *par excellence*. It had obvious advantages in mowing hay and reaping cereal crops over reaping hooks and sickles (if we make this distinction between plain and serrated blades), except in very uneven terrain, thanks to the

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<sup>1</sup> This article concludes a study initiated under the same title in volume 136, issue 1 (2019) of this journal. The present group of words to be examined is drawn from the vocabulary for the harvesting of natural resources.

<sup>2</sup> *Glossary in MS Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 144* (Sweet 1885: 834).

longer blade and its wider sweep, and reduced strain on the back. This agricultural implement, consisting of a blade and a roughly five-foot pole or shaft, is first attested from the large estates of Roman Gaul in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, and one may wonder whether it was also used in sub-Roman Britain before the arrival of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, for whom it may then have represented a technological advance over the reaping hook (Rackham 1938–1963: 18.67.261).<sup>3</sup> The blade was made up of two layers of soft steel, with an internal layer of higher carbon steel that, when exposed by honing, provided the sharp cutting edge.

In northern dialects of English the term *leas* is found (met in Middle English as *ley*) and this is traced to Old Norse *lé* (cf. Swedish *lie*, Danish *lee*) (*OED*, s.v. *lea*, n.3). Here the hypothetical IE root is *\*leu-*, again with the basic meaning 'to cut' (Rix, Kümmel 2001: 417, s.v. *leuH-*; Pokorny 2005: 1. 681–682, s.v. *leu-*; Köbler 2014, s.v. *leu-*). The origin of terms for the scythe is then unproblematic, although there exists the possibility that their Germanic antecedents were first used of sickles or reaping hooks, and only subsequently of Celtic or Celtic-style scythes.<sup>4</sup> The scythe in its approximate modern form was common across Europe by the thirteenth century.

The pole or handle of the scythe is traditionally called a *snath* and was made of willow, for its lightness, straight grain, and ability to keep its shape. The earliest attestation is in Ælfric's *Homilies* from about 1000 (Thorpe 1844–1846: 2. 162–163).<sup>5</sup> In an account of the miracles of St. Benedict, Ælfric tells of a scythe blade that came loose from the shaft and was lost in a pit: "Hwilon eac befeoll an siðe of ðam snæde into anum deopan seaðe" ('At one time a scythe fell from the handle into a deep pit').<sup>6</sup> The attachment of the blade to the shaft by a pin, or ring and wedge, varied by locality and was a matter of the smithy's pride. In Ælfric's anecdote, the saint summons the scythe blade from the deep; it swims up and fits itself into the hole (*pyrel*) in the shaft. Since OE *pyrel* was used of an opening in something, this is unlikely to be a forged ring on the blade but more likely a hole through the shaft, into which the tang of the blade was inserted and fastened in place. With *snath* etymological matters are much less clear. The *OED* entry for *snath* (found in British and U.S. dialects) has a cross-reference to a more standard English form, *snead*, but continues: "all the forms are irregular and difficult to account for" (*OED*, s.v. *snath*, n.).<sup>7</sup> The entry for *snead* is more decisive: "Old English *snæd*, of obscure

<sup>3</sup> See "Sickle and scythe/man and machine" in Shaw (2013: 93–149), in particular pp. 123–129, with attendant illustrations, showing that this early scythe blade as curved, like the sickle's. Along with an early form of reaping machine, the shafted scythe seems to have been elaborated in northern Gaul.

<sup>4</sup> The British agrarian context for the use of the scythe is documented in Jones (1977). The scythe appears to have been largely reserved for men, the sickle and reaping hook for women; see Penn (1987) and Roberts (1979).

<sup>5</sup> Records from Glastonbury have the interesting form *sidsnede*, where one might have expected the elements of the compound in the reverse order: "Et [habebit] de herba quantum potest levare cum sidsnede" (Elton 1891: 165). But perhaps the phrasing is intended to make the area to be mowed more exact, since the snath-mounted blade was much more productive than a sickle.

<sup>6</sup> My translations here and below.

<sup>7</sup> See the various realizations of the vocalism in Wright (1898–1905: 5. 574, s.v. *snead*).

origin and not represented in the cognate languages” (*OED*, s.v. *snead* | *sned*, n.). This entry was first published in 1912 and “has not yet been fully updated” (*OED*). Comparative philology has since established that cognates are to be found in Celtic and Germanic. In Old Irish the verbal noun *snaide* was used of the acts of ‘cutting, chipping, hewing, planing’ and, interestingly, of the planing of spear-shafts. The basic verb is *snaidid*. Yet there is no evidence of *snaide* or a related term being used of a finished piece of wood, although *sned* occurs as ‘scythe-shaft’ in the English of Ireland (Quin 1913–1976, s.v. *snaide*). The equivalent verb in modern Welsh, *naddaf*, shows the loss of the initial *s-* of common Celtic but the root seems unrepresented in modern Breton (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* 2016, s.v. *naddaf*). In Old High German *snata* was figuratively used of the weft on a loom, the shuttle being imagined as ‘cutting’ between the threads of the warp that were separated by the raised heddle(s). Earlier Germanic *\*snadwō* meant ‘a cut’ and possibly ‘a wound’. Here the reconstructed IE verb is *\*snadh-* ‘to cut’, reflected in modern German *schneiden* (Rix, Kümmel 2001: 571, s.v. *sned*<sup>h-l</sup>; Pokorny 2005: 1. 972–973, s.v. *snadh*; Köbler 2014, s.v. *snadh-*).

How might a derivative of an early verb meaning ‘to cut’ be related to the shaft of an instrument carrying a cutting blade? The most economical solution, while speculative, would be to imagine a causative Germanic verb, perhaps something like *\*snadhjan*, with a meaning ‘to cause to cut’: the *snath* supplies the driving force to the blade. While an attractive solution, this leaves the problem of the creation of an agent noun that only replicates the stem of the verb. We should not assume that the relevant etyma (*\*seg-*, *\*snadh-*) and the concepts of ‘cutter’ and ‘cutting-causer’ were conjoined at the same point in time as the metal and wooden components of the scythe.

If this derivation is accepted, other uses of *snæd* in Old English, for a plot of land not enclosed but with defined limits, and for a morsel at the table, may also be traced to the same root, the plot ‘cut off’ from the surrounding land by its known boundaries, the morsel cut from a larger piece of meat or bread’ (Bosworth, Toller 1882, s.vv. *snæd*).

To return to the long-handled scythes of Gaul as reported in Pliny, the only name in Gaulish that is recorded for a reaping instrument or similarly configured tool, e.g. a bill-hook or pruning knife, is *serra* (< IE *\*ser-* ‘sickle, hook’) (Delamarre 2003, s.v. *serra*; Pokorny 2005: 1. 911, 1588/1560; Köbler 2014, s.v. *ser-*).<sup>8</sup> In an earlier form *\*serpa*, it was loaned into Latin and then was preserved, linguistically at least, if not in the same concrete physical form, in Old French as *serpe*. It enters Anglo-French as *serpe* ‘billhook’. The word was in use in Middle English up to about Caxton’s time (*OED*, s.v. † *sarpe*, n.1). While this word and meaning did not continue into later English agrarian terminology, it can be plausibly associated with the obsolete English term *sarpe*, which the *OED*, listing it as *sarpe*<sup>2</sup> and calling it a term ‘of obscure origin’, defines as ‘a collar, neck-ring of gold or silver’ (*OED*, s.v. † *sarpe*, n.2). The *Middle English dictionary* (Kurath 1952–2001) would trace this *sarpe* to a putative

<sup>8</sup> Note the rich Slavic evidence, e.g. Old Church Slavonic *srp*, Russian *sierp*.

Medieval Latin *serpetum*, a necklace in the form of a snake, but evidence for the derivation is lacking.<sup>9</sup> English *sarpe* seems rather a figurative extension of the tool name, based on the curved shape of the blade, and the loan is more likely to have gone in the other direction, an Anglo-French vernacular term being inserted in a Latin-language context.

In closing, we may recall the early distinction in usage between the verbs *to mow* and *to reap*, the former reserved for grass, the latter for cereal crops. But semantic blurring occurred early, as illustrated by the images of the Grim Reaper and Father Time; Shakespeare evokes the latter in Sonnet 60: “And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow”.

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*Lazy-bed*: In an entry first published in 1902 and not fully updated since, the *OED* defines *lazy-bed* as ‘a bed about six feet wide, on which the potatoes are laid, with a trench on each side, two or three feet wide, from which earth is taken to cover the potatoes’ (*OED*, s.v. *lazy-bed*). The trenches provide drainage and the exposed earth may be fertilized with dung, or desalinated seaweed where available. The earliest attestation of *lazy-bed* is from 1743 and is found in a Scottish agricultural treatise (*Select transactions* 1743: 159). Irish evidence dates from 1780. No etymology is offered for the term by the *OED*, inviting the conclusion that *lazy* and *bed* are being used in conventional (but perhaps specialized) senses. Yet the entry for the simplex *lazy*, from 1902 and supplemented as late as 1997, does not include *lazy-bed* among such ostensibly comparable compounds as *lazy-board* ‘a short board on the left side of a waggon, used by teamsters to ride on’; *lazy-cock* ‘a cock controlling the pipe between the feed-pump of a locomotive and the hose from the tank of the tender’; *lazy-painter* ‘a small temporary rope to hold a boat in fine weather’; *lazy-pinion* ‘a pinion serving as a transmitter of motion between two other pinions or wheels’; *lazy-sheet* ‘a piece of rope spliced in the clew-thimble, designed to serve in emergencies as a sheet’; or *lazy-jack* ‘each of several light ropes on either side of a sail, placed so as to allow it to be gathered in easily’.<sup>10</sup>

In this selection of compounds with *lazy* related to mechanics, *lazy* is to be understood not as indicative of a disinclination toward effort but as an expedient, a short-cut, a labour-saving device. Although it might be thought that simply covering seed potatoes with sod cut from furrows on either side of a bed might qualify as a short cut, *lazy beds* are labour-intensive tillage solutions, realized with a foot plough or spade in rocky, uneven terrain that cannot be worked with a plough. The term

<sup>9</sup> As might have been documented in *Mediae Latinitatis lexicon minus* (Niermeyer, van de Kieft 2002). In the late Middle Ages the term *sape* appeared for a small scythe used in northern France, the home of several other reaping innovations. It, too, may derive from OFr. *serpe* (Shaw 2013: 127).

<sup>10</sup> For additional examples of *lazy* in this use, see Wright (1898–1905, s.v. *lazy*). It may be speculated that the original use of *lazy* in these contexts was lightly ironic and perhaps developed in a nautical context, as did so much slang that subsequently came ashore.

is then not in the nature of a coded ethnic slur (slothful Irish potato-eaters!) but is formed of *lazy* in the technical senses reviewed above, e.g. *lazy sheet*.<sup>11</sup>

In the following this inquiry is directed toward the possibility that some native word in Irish may have prompted the coinage of the Hiberno-English term *lazy-bed*. The tillage technique itself was called *riastáil* in Irish, defined as ‘taking the surface off the furrows in the lazy-bed system of tillage’ (Dinneen 1927, s.v. *riastáil*). The compound *lazy-bed* is unlikely to be a calque on, or loan translation of, any of the commonest Irish words for such beds, which are *iompú* and *ainneor*. The semantics of the former is centred on turning; the latter is more obscure (‘maiden?’). Several Irish terms related in a broad sense to the soil suggest themselves. One is *clais* ‘furrow’, relevant in light of the hand-dug furrow or trench on either side of the lazy-bed (cf. *ag baint chlas* ‘digging furrows’). Under certain syntactical circumstances the word takes the form *chlais* /*xlash*/. This is, however, still some phonic distances from English *lazy*. The Irish lexical element *clad-* entered into formations with meaning related to digging, dirt, and laziness, e.g. *cladach* ‘dirty, miry’, *cladhach* ‘furrowed’, *cladhaim* ‘I dig, excavate’, *cladhaire* ‘sluggard’ (Dinneen 1927, s.vv). While a moral perspective easily equates slovenliness with laziness, a misapprehension, with some of the mechanics of a pun, may have led to a closer equation of dirt and sloth, furrows and beds, and laziness, in the interaction between Irish and English. Nonetheless, *lazy-bed* is surely best viewed as a native English phrase.

In view of the above, the *OED* may be faulted on at least two accounts. First, despite the substantial number of examples that is given under the rubric “Special Uses”, the dictionary’s list of meanings for *lazy* fails to make explicit its use in compounds to designate labour-saving procedures and devices, a usage that is at some semantic distance from ideas of sluggishness and work-avoidance. Second, *lazy-bed* is not included among such compounds but rather has an entry of its own, albeit one without etymological note. A third concern that might be raised – moving the present discussion to a more general level – is whether the *OED*’s etymological commentary on *lazy* is to be judged sufficient. The entry begins as follows:

Of obscure etymology. The earliest quoted form *laysy* would favour the derivation < *lay* v.1 with suffix as in *tipsy*, *tricksy*, etc.; but the spelling is not quite early enough to have etymological significance. If the word be of early origin, and especially if the alleged dialectal sense ‘naught, bad’, be genuine, there may possibly be connection with Old Norse *lasenn* dilapidated, *las-møyrr* decrepit, fragile, modern Icelandic *las-furða* ailing, *las-leiki* ailment. (*OED*, s.v. *lazy*)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> In a perhaps widespread misunderstanding, the Scots Gaelic lexicographer Edward Dwelly writes: “The term ‘lazy-bed’ applied to it in English is merely a southern odium on the system of farming in Gaeldom, where soil was scarce and where bog-land could not be cultivated in any other way” (Dwelly 2011, s.v. *fennag* ‘carrion crow; lazy-bed’).

<sup>12</sup> The entry concludes as follows: “Prof. Skeat [*Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*] suspects adoption < Dutch or Low German, and refers to Middle Low German *lasich*, *losich*, modern Low German *läösig* (Danneil), early modern Dutch *leuzig*”.

As the dictionary notes, the first recorded instance is relatively late (1549). Yet this use – polemical and slangy – might be seen as evidence for the word already being well established: “Those laisy lubbers and popyshe bellygoddes” (Bale, in Leland [1549], Pref. sig. A vij<sup>v</sup>; cited in *OED*). Rather than accept a relatively long “underground” use of a Norse derivative that had undergone a considerable semantic shift (decrepit to willfully sluggish), it may be preferable to see early modern English *lazy* as an evolved use of Middle English *lache* ‘weary, slow, dull; slack, negligent; loose, open; tasteless, insipid’. The ME term is in turn drawn from Anglo-French *lache* (variants *lasche*, *lacche*, *lasqe*) ‘lax, negligent’. Here, the overall semantic development would have been toward overt work-avoidance viewed through a prism of moral censure. This is still an extended meaning but the extension covers less semantic distance than in the Norse option (Kurath 1952–2001, s.v. *lache*). The coincident phonological development would have involved a slight shift and voicing of the fricative (/sh/ > /z/), and an amplification and raising of the final vowel (/ə/ > /i/) in realizing the common adjectival suffix *-y*.<sup>13</sup> ME *lache* was borrowed into Irish as *laiste*, without, however, displacing any native term, e.g. *lesc*.

In summary, *lazy-bed* is most likely a semi-technical English term employed to designate expedient tillage practices on thin and rocky soils of the Highlands and Ireland not accessible to the plough. Its choice as an English term for the pre-existent practice of other linguistic communities may have been in part determined by the presence of near-homophonic Irish or Scots Gaelic terminology.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, *lazy* and its compounds have not been well served by lexicographers. The former seems a fairly straightforward loan from Anglo-French, with the semantics turning toward morally censurable indolent behaviour. Among the latter, those that refer to simple and immediate solutions to work problems rather than to work-avoidance merit further analysis and comment.

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*Puke*: In the entry for the verb *puke*, the *OED* has the following commentary under “Etymology”:

Origin uncertain; perhaps imitative, or perhaps related to Dutch *spugen* to spit, to vomit (1621 as *spuigen* ...) or German *spucken* to spew, spit (16th cent. ...; compare earlier *spügen*, *spüchen* (15th cent.); ultimately related to *speien* *spew v.*); perhaps compare Middle High German *spūen*, *spūwen*, variants of *spīwen*) ... (*OED*, s.v. *puke*, v.)<sup>15</sup>

This explanation cannot be judged fully satisfactory and no other examples of Germanic initial *sp-* being reduced to *p-* in English are adduced (although Latin *sp-* becomes *esp-* in Old French and often appears in Anglo-French as *esp*, *ep/ap*, and *p*).

<sup>13</sup> One may imagine an intermediary form with /s/ with subsequent voicing (cf. Anglo-French *brache* ‘ell, arm’s length’ > English *brace*).

<sup>14</sup> *Lazy-beds* were used for oats before the introduction of potatoes (Wright 1898–1905, s.v. *lazy*). The verb *to laze* is perhaps best seen as an early (ca. 1592) back-formation from *lazy*.

<sup>15</sup> The entry was last updated in September, 2007.

The earliest attestations of the general meaning ‘to eject food from the stomach, to vomit’, used both transitively and intransitively, are from the first years of the sixteenth century, as in Shakespeare’s celebrated account from *As you like it* of the seven ages of man: “At first the Infant, Mewling, and puking in the Nurses armes”.<sup>16</sup> Yet *puke* had a narrower application, for which even earlier evidence is available: ‘of a hawk: to pass food from the crop to the stomach’ (*OED*), as exemplified in a hawking, hunting, and fishing tract from 1586: “She [*sc.* the hawk] puketh when she auoideth her meat out of her gorge into her bowels” (Berners 1586, cited as sig. E in the *OED*). Not available to the editors of the *OED* are the texts assembled by Tony Hunt that were used to teach and learn Latin in Britain (Hunt 1991, cited in Rothwell et al. 2005, s.v. *pucher*). In one of these we find Latin *nauseo* ‘I vomit’ glossed in Anglo-French by *pucher*. There are no plausible antecedents in Classical or Vulgar Latin for *pucher* and it is proposed that this is a derivative of Frankish \**pokka* ‘bag, sock’, which also generated medieval Latin *poca*, *pocha*, *puca*, *pucha*, Old French *poche* and, as best known English correspondence (via Anglo-French and drawing on a hypothetical Old English \**pohha*), *poke* ‘bag’, as in the still current phrase “a pig in a poke” (Imbs 1971–1994, s.v. *poche*).<sup>17</sup>

This would account for the form of Anglo-French *pucher* and the early modern form *puke*, transmitted through, but undocumented in, Middle English, but what of the semantics? The medieval languages of hunting and falconry share features of jargons, cryptolects, and possibly something like taboo and noa words, everyday language being replaced under certain heightened circumstances. There seems to have been an almost conscious lexicogenetic effort in medieval western European languages to establish a discrete word for the vocalization, the young, and the droppings of each animal, not to mention other body parts. Here, it would seem that the crop of the falcon is envisaged as a pouch out of which food is “dis-em-pouched” or disgorged for reingestion.

While still speculative, this etymology for *puke* accounts for all the available evidence and must be judged superior to a derivation from Middle Dutch *spugen*, which would seem an unmotivated loan. In the course of the latter half of the nineteenth century *puke* appears to have lost its quasi-clinical association with vomiting in children and adults, due to various ailments and experienced both pejoration and semantic narrowing to become the disapproving term to designate vomiting caused by an excessive consumption of alcohol, most often beer.

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*Gentle* (as a synonym for *maggot*): The *OED* has an ample entry for the noun and adjective *gentle*, and the first of the numerous meanings is ‘of persons: well-born, belonging to a family of position ...’ (*OED*, s.v. *gentle*, adj. and n.). According to the dictionary, the uncontested derivation of the term is from Old French *gentil*, *jentil*.

<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare, *As you like it*, ii. vii. 144; a somewhat earlier example appears in the work of Thomas Dekker (see examples in *OED*).

<sup>17</sup> The form *pucher/pocher* is not found in continental French, in which *pocher* means ‘to imitate, counterfeit’ and ‘to blot ink’.

A more contemporary commentary would identify these as also Anglo-French forms, which passed into Middle English. Relatively early on the list of general significations, as No. 3, is the use of *gentle* for ‘a maggots, the larva of the flesh-fly or bluebottle, employed as bait by anglers’. There is no suggestion that the term might have had an origin distinct from that suggested above, followed by its subsequent realignment with the better known word, and the incongruity in the juxtaposition of nobility and larvae goes unmentioned.

The word is first attested in this context in 1578 in H. Lyte’s English translation of a Dutch herbal: ‘white worme lyke a gentill’ (Dodoens 1578: vi. lxxviii. 746.). The *OED*’s next three examples of usage in early modern English point the way toward an explanation of the history of the word in this sphere of reference: (1) 1594: “White and glib worms, which the anglers call Gentils” (Platt 1594: iii. 12; (2) 1688: “The Cloudy, or Blackish Fly ... proceed from Maggots, or Gentills, that breed of Putrified Flesh” (Holme 1688: ii. 193/1); (3) 1736: “Gentles are a very good Bait” (*The complete family-piece* 1736: ii. ii. 261). This use of *gentle* is not noted in Wright’s *English dialect dictionary* (1898–1905) and it seems likely that it is an angler’s term, a bit of piscatorial jargon.

As the quotation from 1688 illustrates, maggots were thought to form spontaneously in rotting organic matter, in particular meat. While perhaps not identical to parthenogenesis, the development of maggots, it is proposed, was seen as something both familiar and uncanny, partaking of the quotidian supernatural of popular rural belief. This is the realm of fairies. *Fairy* is a frequent element in colloquial or regional compounds and phrases in reference to ‘plants, fungi, fossils, archaeological artefacts, etc., thought to resemble items used by, left by, or belonging to fairies, or which are particularly small or delicate’ (*OED*). The fairies, traditionally the object of some slight dread, were also designated by euphemisms, one of which was *gentle people*, or *gentry*, while *gentle* as an adjective was used of bushes, trees, dells, hillocks, springs, etc. that were enchanted or haunted by fairies. It is then proposed that maggots were seen as “fairy” or “gentle” larvae spontaneously generating in rotting meat. As suggested, this use may have originated among fishermen, perhaps the sole British community that placed any value on the insect at this or any stage. The meliorism apparent in the substitute term *gentles* – perhaps originally *gentle grubs* or *worms* – may initially have been a bit of wry humour. Over time, *gentles* would have lost its semantic tie to the well born, unless it were believed that the reference was to the superior quality of the larvae as fish bait (see further below).

The etymology of the mainstream word *maggot* is also unaccounted for but in a rather different fashion. In its etymological note the *OED* states:

Probably an alteration of *maddock n.*, either by metathesis, or influenced by *Magot*, *Maggot*, obsolete pet-form of the female forenames *Margery* (see *margery n.*<sup>1</sup>) and *Margaret* (see *Margaret n.*); compare *maggot n.*<sup>2</sup> ... An alternative theory derives the word < Welsh *mwcai* glow-worm (1758), *macai* maggot, grub (1803), but this seems unlikely ... (*OED*, s.v. *maggot*, n.)

As concerns the doubtful Welsh origin, Celtic evidence need not be dismissed out of hand, even if its consideration generates no more than an analogy. Old Irish *magar* meant ‘spawn, small fry’ and, according to the *Dictionary of the Irish language* (Quin 1913–1976, s.v. *magar*) in a figurative sense ‘bait, allurement’, even ‘wheedling speech’. But, in the absence of related verb forms, it may be that ‘bait’ is the basic meaning, and ‘small fry’ the extended and concretely focused application. If a comparable development lay behind English *maggot*, one should see ‘bait (for fishing)’ as the primary and, in affective terms, positive meaning of the term, in a prescientific world in which decomposing meat and attendant vermin were simple facts of life. “Look on the bright side, we can go fishing!” Irish is, however, unlikely to have been the source of English *maggot* and the Irish form is not reflected in Scots Gaelic, another possible route of loans from Celtic to English.

In the *OED*’s suggestion of an adaptation of *maddock* (*maggot* but in many regions *earthworm*) to yield *maggot*, the former is referred to English *mathe* ‘maggot, grub’ (Old English *mata*), which has cognates in other Germanic languages. Yet the *OED* fails to note that *maddock* also makes an early appearance in an Anglo-French medical treatise, where it might be thought to have been cited as the equivalent vernacular English term: “Si flux de sanc seit de playe trenché, perné lumbriz de terre, ceo est a dire maddockes, e ardét sur une chaude tuylle e fetes poudre” (‘If there is an issue of blood from a slash wound, take earthworms, that is to say, maddockes, and roast them on a hot tile and make a powder of them’) (Hunt 1997: 2. 156). It is also possible that *maddockes* represents an Old Danish form brought to Normandy by the Northmen and thence, with the Normans, to Britain (cf. Old Icelandic *maðkr*, mod. Danish *maddike*).

The *OED* does not consider a possible source in French *magot*, now a sum of money put aside but earlier perhaps derived from a term for a hidden treasure (Old French *mugot*) – but unlikely to be used of flies’ eggs laid in the crevasses in meat (Imbs 1971–1994, s.v. *magot*, 2). But this *magot* had a homonym now perhaps best known from the name of the celebrated café in St Germain des Prés, *Les Deux Magots*. The reference here is to porcelain figurines but the broader designation of the term is of a species of monkey. In Middle French (dates for which correspond to the first appearance of *maggot* in English) the term was more generally used of an ugly person, in particular the peoples living in the fabulous East with their non-European physical traits (Imbs 1971–1994, s.v. *magot*, 1).<sup>18</sup> Thus, a loan word from Middle French could be imagined in early modern English as designating grubs and having the affective value of “little uglies”. Since the first appearance of French *magau* as a figure in porcelain dates from 1698, it is unlikely that the similarity in the appearance of the larvae to such an object and material was also a factor in the later semantics of *maggot*, which is documented considerably earlier (1475).

Advancing beyond pre-industrial Europe’s ascription of maggots to spontaneous generation in decaying organic matter, a later age was well aware of the true etiology.

<sup>18</sup> The term is traced to the biblical *Magog*.

This note closes with an excerpt from George Orwell's childhood memories of the Thames Valley as recorded in *Coming up for air* (1939):

Then there were the kinds of bait we used to use. In our shop [the narrator's father had a seed shop] there were always plenty of mealworms, which were good but not very good. Gentles were better. You had to beg them off old Gravitt, the butcher, and the gang used to draw lots or do ena-mena-mina-mo to decide who should go and ask, because Gravitt wasn't usually too pleasant about it. ... Generally, he'd roar out: 'What! Gentles! Gentles in my shop! Ain't seen such a thing in years. Think I got blowflies in my shop?' (Orwell 1986: 71–72)

By Orwell's time, *gentles* as a name may not have been suggestive of supernatural beings but, rather, of maggots as the *gentry* among baits.

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*Flake*: Hurdles, as portable rectangular frames, originally having horizontal bars interwoven or wattled with withes of hazel, willow, etc. (phrasing adapted from *OED*), must have been ubiquitous in early medieval Europe, fabricated with a plaiting technique otherwise met in wickerwork of various kinds (baskets, weirs, sieves, nets). The earliest known references from Britain are in glossaries from the first quarter of the eighth century: '*Cratem, flecta vel hyrþil*' (Sweet 1885: 600).<sup>19</sup> Such frames were used in fencing, as gates, partitions, and, horizontally, for carrying burden, even corpses (Thorpe 1844–1846: 1. 430).<sup>20</sup> A related term, *flake*, makes a later appearance: "A brigge he suld do wrihte, Botes & barges ilkon, with flekes mak þam tighte" ('He should then construct a bridge, and similarly boats and barges, and close the gaps between them with flakes') (Peter of Langtoft 1810: 321).<sup>21</sup> This term appears to have no antecedents in Old English and a loan from Scandinavian has been proposed. In Old West Norse *flaki* and *fleki* were used of hurdles and, in a martial context, of wickerwork shields (Cleasby et al. 1957, s.v. *flaki*). As these simple constructions would not have been trade goods, it is plausible to assume that the introduction of the term in Britain was the result of population movements. Two possibilities may be investigated. *Flaki/fleki* could have been brought to Neustria, the future Normandy, with the raiding, trading, and eventual settlement of Northmen. Thence, the term could have been brought to Britain with the Norman conquest. Only two attestations lend support this speculation: "vj flakes de verges achatez de mettre de souz les chars" ('six flakes made of wooden rods, bought to be placed under the meat') (Davies 1915: 675); "Item pour la fesure de xij flakes; viij s" ('Item: for the fabrication of 12 flakes, 8 shillings') (Rothwell et al. 2005, s.v. *flake*).<sup>22</sup> Given that *flake* is not otherwise attested in continental Norman nor in Old French generally, this seems

<sup>19</sup> Glossary, etymology: Old English *hyrdel* < Old Germanic type \**hurdilo*-z.

<sup>20</sup> Ælfric: "Þa forlet se wælhreowa casere ðone halgan lichaman uppon ðam isenan hyrdle".

<sup>21</sup> Robert Mannyng, *Chronicle*, in Peter of Langtoft (1810: 321).

<sup>22</sup> Staniforth (1935), in Rothwell et al. (2005, s.v. *flake*).

more likely to be a Middle English term inserted in accounts otherwise kept in Anglo-French (Kurath 1952–2001, s.v. *flake*). *Flake* is then more likely to have entered English from the Anglo-Norse speech that resulted from Danish settlement in the ninth century along the eastern coast of England, what would come to be known as the Danelaw, land under Danish law. Norse *flaki/fleki* also seem to have some phonetic and semantic association with the verb *flatti* (pres. *flet*, part. *flattr*) ‘to cut open’, as evidenced in the phrase *þorskr flattr* ‘dried cod, stock fish’.

In later centuries, *flake* would find applications in two maritime contexts. One was as ‘a small shifting stage, hung over a ship’s side to caulk or repair a breach’ (Smyth, Belcher 1867, s.v. *flake*). Creating safe conditions for the crewman assigned to this task would have entailed something more than a platform; a modern equivalent would be *cage*. The other important historical extension of the principle and image of the hurdle and flake was in the codfishing industry, centred on eastern Canada and especially on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland. The earliest recorded instance of the term reveals an established practice: “Flakes whereon men yeerely dry their fish” (Whitbourne 1623: 57). The phrasing hints at semi-permanent structures, returned to use with each new fishing season. The term had earlier been used in Britain of drying or airing racks for a variety of food and trade stuff: oatcakes, meat, cheese, woad (Palladius 1873–1879: xii. 248).<sup>23</sup> Recalling that *flake* appears to have affinities with the notion of plaiting, the use *flake* in fish-processing represents the semantic dominance of function rather than construction. Cod-drying flakes were not truly plaited, like wickerwork, although the racks mounted two or three feet above the ground on stakes in a criss-cross pattern might well give this impression.

At this point it is of interest to consider the equivalent French and other Romance lexical evidence, especially in light of the rapid transfer of new maritime technologies among ships and crews, when large numbers from many nations were grouped in a single area such as the Labrador coast (whales), the Grand Banks (cod), and the St. Lawrence estuary. Strikingly, the most relevant French terminology also encompasses both the platform suspended over a ship’s side for repair work on the hull and the cod-drying racks assembled on shore. On the first count, *Trésor de la langue française* defines *échafaud* as ‘plateforme suspendue le long de la coque ou le long du mât, pour permettre à des hommes qui travaillent sur la coque ou dans la mâture d’atteindre les parties lisses du navire’; in the fishing industry, the term referenced ‘[un] grand treillis de bois sur lequel on fait sécher la morue de Terre-Neuve’ (Imbs 1971–1994, s.v. *échafaud*). The etymology of *échafaud* is relatively straightforward: Old French *chafaud* ‘scaffolding, platform’, from Vulgar Latin \**catafalicum*, traced in turn to Classical Latin *fala* ‘defensive tower in wood’, prefaced by the Greek element *cata-*, as seen in *catasta* ‘platform on which were displayed slaves for sale’ (von Wartburg et al. 1922–2002: 2. 486–487).

Other countries were also represented in the extraction of natural resources from North America and its offshore: Brittany, Portugal, the Basque Country. In these

<sup>23</sup> Cited in the *OED* from the Middle English translation of Palladius’s *De re rustica* from ca. 1420. See further exemplification in the *OED*.

cases, the vocabulary of medieval technology is less well known than in the case of English and French. Given the rich toponymical and archaeological evidence for Basque fish and whale processing stations, the purported impact of the Basque language on native American speech is of considerable interest in this regard. Peter Bakker (1989) has identified a number of terms in Algonquian that are traceable to trade contacts with Basques from the Age of Discovery. The vocabulary assembled by Bakker of Montagnais and Micmac, accompanied by their Basque equivalents (some of the latter originally loaned from French), is reflective of a trade pidgin that developed around essential human identities and relations, the goods of hospitality and trade, as illustrated by the following examples: Micmac *adesquides* ‘a friend, good friend’, Basque *adeskide* ‘friend’; *ania* ‘brother, my brother’, Basque *anaia* ‘brother’; *atouray* ‘shirt’, Basque *atorra* ‘shirt’; *bacaillos* ‘codfish’, Basque *bakalau* ‘codfish’; *cabana* ‘hut, cabin’, Basque *kabana* ‘hut, cabin’; *caracona* ‘bread’, Basque *garau* ‘cereals’ + *ko* ‘of’ or *ena* ‘that of’ or *ona* ‘the good’; *hessona* ‘man’, Basque *gizona* ‘man’; *acharoa* ‘big bird’, Spanish *pájaro* ‘bird’ or Portuguese *passarao* ‘big bird’ (Bakker 1989: 136–137). Yet what is one to make of Micmac *makia* ‘stick, wood’, Basque *makila* /makiɫa/ ‘stick’? Although Bakker does not make this point, Basque *makila* designated an object fashioned in wood, such as a walking stick, and is an early loan into Basque from Latin *bacilla*, pl. of *bacillum* ‘rod, staff’ (Trask 2008: 281). The early seventeenth-century French historian Lescarbot glosses pidgin *makia* as ‘bois’ on one occasion, as ‘bâtons’ (‘rods’) on another. While a reference to timber for general construction or to firewood cannot be ruled out, it is tempting to speculate that the term may have been employed in transactions in which the Native Americans supplied the Basque fishermen with quantities of cut saplings for use in the construction of flakes. This cannot be validated due to the meagre sources for early seventeenth-century Basque. If Portuguese *bacalao* ‘cured cod’ and other cognates are also derived from Latin *baculum* (via *bacillum*), we should have the interesting situation of a single Latin word generating both the name of the processed food and the instruments vital to its early processing, with the former moving to other European languages and even those of the eastern Mediterranean, e.g. Arabic *baqlah*.<sup>24</sup> The early modern range of the word was then from North and South America to Europe and the Middle East. In terms of lexical longevity, *flake* has fared less well and in the signification of ‘hurdle’ is now limited to historical writing. Consideration of the maritime harvest continues in the next note.

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*Gaff*: The origin and history of the term *gaff* are usefully considered in conjunction with those of *harpoon*, for which I have proposed an enhanced etymology (Sayers 2014). Used in the same marine environment, the two instruments share some typological features – shaft, head, claw, retentive capacity – but the *gaff* is, of course, not a missile. Similarly, the term does not originate in the maritime

<sup>24</sup> Fuller discussion in Sayers (2002).

environment but accompanies the refinement and specialization of an instrument to a new functional context. Defining a gaff as ‘an iron hook; a staff or stick armed with this; a barbed fishing spear; also, a stick armed with an iron hook for landing large fish, *esp.* salmon’, the *OED* offers as etymology ‘< French *gaffe* = Spanish *gafa*, Portuguese *gafa* (feminine), Provençal *gaf* (masculine), boat-hook’. As with *harpoon*, the term is first met in a non-nautical context, as early as 1300, and in an English-settled town in Ireland.<sup>25</sup> Then, about the same time as *harpoon* appears with its current signification, *gaff* is defined as a seaman’s tool: “*Gaffe*, an iron hook where~with Seamen pull great Fishes into their ships” (Blount 1670, s.v.).

As for the presumed French antecedent, *Trésor de la langue française* identifies *gaffe* as a loan from Provençal *gaf* ‘hook’ via a hypothetical medieval Latin \**gaffare*, which in turn is traced to a similarly unattested Gothic \**gaffôn* (Imbs 1971–1994, s.v., with reference to von Wartburg et al. 1922–2002: 16, 6b). A less circuitous filiation is more likely, one that does not involve the transient presence of the Visigothic language in southern France. A Frankish derivative of Indo-European \**g<sup>h</sup>ab<sup>h</sup>*- ‘to seize’ is plausible; cf. German *Gabel*, Swedish *gaffel* ‘fork’ (a grasping instrument with tines rather than a hook), Old English *gafeluc* ‘spear’ (Köbler 2014, s.v.). Closest to a hypothetical Old Frankish form would be Old High German *gabala*, *gafala* ‘fork’. From medieval northern French, then, *gaffe* would have spread to other Romance-speaking areas (Provence, Iberia) as well as to Britain, with frequency subsequently highest along the Atlantic coast.

*Harpoon* and *gaff* represent one aspect of lexical history, the conservatism and staying power of the phonetic shell and its orthographical expression, accompanied by extension, often figurative or analogical (e.g. from clasp or clamp to barbed and retentive spear), into a new semantic field in response to the needs of technological development for adequate vocabulary. New coinages or loans are the other face of such development. In the marine environment, the two words have largely displaced any competing terminology (*spear*, *dart*; *hook*, etc.) but *harpoon* has an exotic look (as if had come to Columbus from Taino along with *hurricane* and *hammock*) and, save for its verb, has an isolated status. *Gaff*, with other ship-board applications, e.g. *gaff-sail*, has both land-based applications (as used by the chief electrician, the gaffer, on a movie set to arrange lighting) and congeners (*gaff* as ‘outcry; nonsense; fair; house, shop’).

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*Greenland*: Near the beginning of *The saga of Erik the Red* it is stated:

Þat sumar fór Eiríkr at byggja land þat, er hann hafði fundit ok hann kallaði Grænland, því at hann kvað menn þat mjök mundu fýsa þangat, ef landit hétu vel. (Sveinsson, Þórðarson 1935: 2. 201)

<sup>25</sup> “Hail, seint dominik with þi lang staffe hit is at þe ouir end crokid as a gaffe” (“Satire on the People of Kildare”, iv, in Furnivall 1862: 153).

‘That summer Eiríkr set out to settle the land that he had discovered and he called it *Greenland* for he said that people would be eager to go there, if the country had an attractive name’.

Everyone familiar with the sagas knows these lines and smiles in recognition of the unchanging nature of promotional copy in support of real estate developments. “Green Acres” has a long history. Eiríkr *rauði* is said to have persuaded 25 shiploads of Icelanders to accompany him and “settle” the vast new land. Of these, 14 vessels would arrive safely. The venture, dated to 985 or 986, would result in the modest colonies of Vestribyggð and Eystribyggð. At their height the former comprised about 190 farms, the latter about 100. The anecdote of the naming of the new land is found in no other source and goes tacitly unquestioned in other references to colonial Greenland in *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók*, *Konungs skuggsjá*, *Grænlendinga saga*, and other sagas, and documents of various kinds.

The promotional effort ascribed to Eiríkr, at least as concerns the name he bestowed on the territories, strains credulity, even though there can be little doubt that by the time of the introduction of widespread literacy in the North the name was well established and perhaps no longer even subject to any conscious semantic or etymological reflection – it was just a name. This note, however, invites reflection on a possibly quite different source for the name, followed, at some temporal distance, by a phonological and semantic realignment with the colour term *grænn* ‘green’.

Ongoing archaeological research creates an avenue for speculation. In 2015 a team of scholars, which included such leading Greenland experts as Thomas McGovern, published an article entitled “Was it for walrus? Viking Age settlement and medieval walrus ivory trade in Iceland and Greenland” (Frei et al. 2015).<sup>26</sup> The accompanying abstract reads in part:

Walrus-tusk ivory and walrus-hide rope were highly desired goods in Viking Age north-west Europe. New finds of walrus bone and ivory in early Viking Age contexts in Iceland are concentrated in the south-west, and suggest extensive exploitation of nearby walrus for meat, hide and ivory during the first century of settlement. In Greenland, archaeofauna suggest a very different specialized long-distance hunting of the much larger walrus populations in the Disko Bay area that brought mainly ivory to the settlement areas and eventually to European markets.

In the following, a putative early, familiar name for Greenland is traced to this exploitation of natural resources and to the prime hunting grounds of the Disko Bay area.

Old Norse-Icelandic *grænn* ‘green’ was a standard colour word, with an origin in the concept of ‘growing’; it has numerous early Germanic cognates.<sup>27</sup> The term was regularly used of verdure but also had figurative and extended significations, as in *grænt sumar* ‘a green summer’ and in reference to ‘fresh’ meat and fish. But it

<sup>26</sup> Other recent research on the walrus trade of the Greenland settlements is summarized in a popular account of possible origins of the Lewis Chessmen (Brown 2015).

<sup>27</sup> All word forms in the following discussion are quoted from Cleasby et al. (1957).

also meant ‘hopeful, good’, so that *Grænland* as a ‘Land of Hope’ is somewhat less implausible than a name meant to evoke verdant grasslands. Yet there existed a near homophone of *grænn* that featured not a mid–low unrounded front vowel (æ) but a mid rounded front vowel (ö). The noun *grön* (genitive *granar*) referred to the moustache, beard, whiskers, lips (in the plural form), especially in the context of the passage of liquids through the mouth. It was employed in various expressions, e.g. *bregða grönnum* ‘to draw back the lips, grin’, so as to show the teeth.<sup>28</sup> Of particular relevance to present concerns, the term was used in the plural for the lips of a cow or bull, as exemplified in Egill Skallagrímsson’s breaking the neck of a sacrificial bull after his duel with Atli *inn skammi* (‘the short’): “Egill hljóp upp skjótt ok þar til, er blótnauti stóð, greip annarri hendi í granarnar, en annarri í hornit” (‘Egill sprang up quickly and went to where the sacrificial ox stood, grasped the lips in one hand and the horn in the other’) (Nordal 1933: 65. 210). The compound *grana-hár*, was used of the whiskers of cats and other beasts, among which, strikingly, the otter (Faulkes 1998: 1. 45). This is an eminently appropriate term to describe the impression given by a frontal view of the head of a walrus. The element *gran-*, derived from the genitive, is also met in such compounds as *gran-bragð* ‘grinning, moving the lips with pain’, *gran-rauðr* ‘red bearded’, *gran-selr* ‘a kind of seal (probably the bearded seal)’, *gran-síðr* ‘long bearded’, *gran-stæði* ‘the lips’, i.e. where the beard grows.

The above-cited article on walrus hunting in Greenland goes on to state that walrus bones have been identified in nearly every excavated archaeofauna site but tend to be found in the greatest numbers in the Western Settlement. Walrus-bone fragments, especially of maxillary bone produced by tusk extraction work, are even found on most small inland farms in both Western and Eastern Settlements. The distribution of walrus bones on both coastal and inland farms of all sizes suggests some sort of sharing out of the maxilla/tusk butchery units across the community for final processing and tusk extraction.<sup>29</sup>

Although the Greenland communities were vitally concerned with what must have been near-subsistence farming, animal husbandry, the production of woolen cloth (*vaðmál*), as well as with fishing, seal-hunting, etc., the annual walrus hunt and its succeeding operations at individual farms must have dominated the economy. Only heads and hide-ropes, and a limited amount of meat, would have been transported back to the home communities. Walrus ivory, much more likely than the raptors and polar bears of earlier accounts of the Arctic, would have made possible the import of timber, iron, barley, and even luxurious trade goods from as near as England (fine cloth) and as far as central Asia (beads).

Under these circumstances, it would not be too surprising that there should emerge a nickname, \**Gran-land* ‘Whisker-Land’, centred on a playful reference to

<sup>28</sup> Ascribed to the sardonic Skarphéðinn in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Sveinsson (1954: 128. 327).

<sup>29</sup> The article continues: “While specialized hunters may well have been present, this extraction debris distribution suggests that the walrus hunt (like sealing, caribou hunting and probably sea-bird hunting) had a strongly communal character in Norse Greenland”.

walrus and on this dominant element of the insular economy.<sup>30</sup> Yet, it may not have been the Greenlanders themselves but the stay-at-home Icelanders and Norwegians who coined the toponym and perhaps a whimsical, lightly disparaging designation for the inhabitants, \**granlendingar*. As an analogy the Norwegians called Icelanders “suet-landers” (*mör-landar*, *mör-lendingar*) because of the reliance on animal fat in their diet. The Icelanders’ taste for wordplay is evident in skaldic verse, in which the name of a friend or loved one may be punningly encrypted and scurrilous allusions directed against the poet’s rival in love. Greenlanders, those distant kinsmen at the edge of the known world, were always considered a bit uncanny. And it is in the form of a swimming walrus that the witch Þórdís appears to the poet Kormákr (“Kormáks saga” in Sveinsson 1939: 18. 265). We should also allow for the possibility of some intermediate name for the island, e.g. “walrus-hunting and farming lands in the west”, before the nickname caught on.

In the scenario offered here, a later age could have lost awareness of the topicality of the name, a process of desemantization, and, through the often concurrent process of folk etymology, have recast it in more comprehensible form and provided an explanatory anecdote as reflected in the saga. In conclusion, far-fetched in a different way from naming a glacier-covered landmass “Greenland”, the origin of Old Norse-Icelandic *Grænland* is located – very speculatively, it must be stressed – in a humorous reference to the islanders’ trade in walrus products: *Granland* ‘Whiskerland’.

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After this perhaps whimsical final note, I would reiterate the impression earlier ventured in these pages that etymology seems to have few practitioners today but many clients, as witness the numerous popular sites on the Internet. With the electronic resources now available there in the form of new historical dictionaries, the stage is set for a new generation of etymologists to take up the challenge of the many English words still without recognized origins. But at the same time we should not be fixated on the ever-receding, rather nineteenth-century goal of the true source. Subsequent history may be even more interesting than trying to recreate the circumstances of a lexical coinage. As this selection of odd words has shown, even unrelated lexemes display common factors at work in the evolution of their form and meaning. Prominent among these are movements on a semantic scale of value (pejoration, melioration), shifts in register (slang filtering upward to the vogue language of the fashionable class), extended, often figurative meanings, accompanied by selective obsolescence, so that a metaphorical use assumes the primary slot of signification, while older meanings are lost. Also to be tracked in future studies are phonological and morphological developments: attrition, accretion, the apposition of qualifiers that then enter into compounds, the phonological and referential reshaping of loan

<sup>30</sup> \**Tann-land* ‘tooth-, tusk-land’ might seem more plausible but its absence may reflect tabu avoidance, not naming the thing most important and most contingent. On the other hand, if the term were meant to be lightly deprecatory, an inconsequential feature rather than a prized product of the hunt would be chosen, yet yielding a comparable result.

words in a receiver language (often via folk etymology), and, lastly, formal coalescence that results in homonymity, which often leads to unwarranted associations in a given dictionary entry, when separate entries would have been desirable on the basis of both history and meaning.

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