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Coping with Disaster: Florence after The Black Death

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Ever since it first took its place in the universe, our planet has been shaped by the impact of successive natural disasters. Geological evidence gives proof of the ravages of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods and major changes in climatic conditions in periods long before human life was evident. As humans spread across the earth, accounts of such events were transmitted from generation to generation, firstly by oral means, and then by the written records that enable us now to review the events of the past. Biblical accounts of the Great Flood and of famines are but examples of such records which may have their basis in oral tradition, or in actual events.

This paper, however, does not focus on disasters which arise from seismic or other physical disturbances to the earth, or from its climatic conditions, but upon another form of natural disaster that is represented by epidemic disease. In his *Plagues and Peoples*, William McNeill (1976) describes the effect that epidemic diseases had on the shaping and decline of early community groups. Many diseases which now hold no fear for modern society were likely to be fatal in early communities. As a result, epidemic disease played a significant role in the decline of some community groups, and even civilisations. In the main, these epidemic diseases were described by translators of chronicles or other literature as 'pestilence' or 'plague' so that some caution needs to be exercised in interpreting such records for the identification of any specific disease. The natural disasters with which this

paper is concerned are the visitations of bubonic plague in its various forms during a relatively short period in European history.

Some early accounts, such as those of the plagues which Moses brought down upon Egypt, might well be of bubonic plague, but they might also be describing a severe outbreak of small pox, or even measles, since it was said that this plague inflicted sores that break into pustules on man and beast. Other biblical references are even less specific. Without attempting a detailed review of the many recorded visitations of plague or pestilence, it can be noted that there are two accounts now generally thought to be early accounts of bubonic plague; that described by Thucydides, the plague of Athens, in the course of the Peloponnesian War, and that described by Procopius, during the reign of Justinian, in 542-543 AD.

The evidence of Procopius indicates that the death rate during the so-called plague of Justinian was quite high (Procopius 1976, Book II, Chpts xxii, xxiii). This visitation was followed by others on the Mediterranean coastlands over the next two centuries. There is no clear evidence, however, that these later plagues were truly bubonic in nature (McNeill 1976:123). Taking a broad view, it could be said that bubonic plague effectively disappeared from the European scene late in the 8th century and did not reappear for over five and a half centuries. During that time, recollections of the devastation caused by bubonic plague would have faded, being displaced by experiences of other types of epidemic disease which were rampant in late Medieval Europe, and the havoc and suffering caused by other natural disasters such as severe famines and floods.

The bacillus responsible for bubonic plague remained active however, in foci of infection amongst burrowing rodents in Central Asia and in Africa, periodically giving rise to epidemics amongst the surrounding human populations. Rumours of a disastrous outbreak of plague in China in the early 1330s gradually filtered through to Europe. The chronicler Giovanni Villani recorded that the outbreaks were connected with violent earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, lightning, and rain in the form of eight-legged poisonous serpent-like creatures that gave rise to an all-pervading stench (Villani 1969, XII, 84). There was, however, no coherent or realistic concept of the origins and nature of the disease at that time and there was no real knowledge of the means of transmission. In fact, a new factor, not present during the plague of Justinian, was to aid the spread of infection in a way quite impossible to imagine then. The intervening period had seen the development of trading links between Europe, the Middle East and the Indo-China region, and this combination of land and sea transport was to provide the bridge for transmission of the disease.

We know now the way in which the plague bacillus is transmitted to humans. During an epizootic outbreak of bubonic plague amongst a rodent population, a great many of them succumb to the disease. The fleas which normally live on the rodents, and by that stage are carrying the bacillus, seek other hosts. Humans living close at hand may readily become the new hosts. All the conditions necessary for an epidemic amongst humans have then been met. In Medieval times, rats and humans lived in fairly close proximity and it needed only the means of transmitting the bacillus from infected rats to the European rats to launch the devastation of the Black Death. After a slow movement of the infection down the trade routes of Central Asia, it reached the Black Sea port of Caffa, a Genoese trading base, in 1346. Whilst it is possible that the disease was carried in more than one way from the Crimean area, it is probable, based on evidence of the sequence of outbreaks, that it was borne principally by rats aboard ships along the sea trading routes. Plague had broken out in most ports linking Caffa and Genoa by the end of 1347, and thereafter, it travelled to other European ports and then radiated inland from those seaports.

The period 1348-1351 saw bubonic plague devastate Europe. Whilst some centres such as those not directly on trade routes were often less affected, the mortality rate overall was very high. There are some difficulties in arriving at estimates of total deaths during this epidemic since Medieval chroniclers are not noted for precision in these matters. Figures for some areas are believed to be more reliable than those for others and the former can be used to give indications as to the death rate overall.

Genoa, with some 100,000 inhabitants, and Pisa, with about 40,000 inhabitants, each lost between 30% and 40% of their populations. Siena appears to have lost about half its population. Florence, then one of Europe's most prosperous cities with a population in excess of 80,000 in 1348, suffered severely, with estimates of those who succumbed ranging from 45% to 75% of its citizens. Venice, then a very important trading city, was also badly affected. Its population at the start of the plague epidemic was over 120,000, but based on official statistics, it has been estimated that some 60% of the population died in the 18 months following the outbreak of the epidemic (Gottfried 1983:47-48). At the end of 1351, Pope Clement VI had estimates of the number of deaths in Christian Europe calculated. The figure arrived at was 23,840,000, some 31% of the pre-plague population of the area, a figure which fits reasonably well with the varying impact of the disease across Europe (Gottfried 1983:77).

Whilst it could be concluded readily that this was a disaster of a magnitude never before encountered, it could be argued also that it was a natural disaster without parallel even to the present day. The shock to

individuals and to communities must have been enormous, but general experience shows us that humans are very resilient in situations of disaster, and people do learn to cope with most situations. This, in fact, happened, but there was to be another factor which was to make the coping process much more difficult. Instead of raging for a period and then passing on, bubonic plague was to remain endemic in Europe for several centuries, and with each re-appearance of the plague, many who had been spared during earlier epidemics were taken at a later stage. An individual's hold on life became very tenuous indeed.

Much has been written on the Black Death and its impact on Europe, particularly as to its demographic, economic and political effects. Somewhat less emphasis has been placed on the personal and the psychological nature of the impact, and the effects of the constant threat arising from the all-too-frequent re-appearances of the plague over an extended period. This paper reviews some of these more personal issues, considering the various ways in which individuals and community groups reacted, how they coped with the devastation surrounding them, and how they set about restoring the social fabric of their communities. The focus of attention will be Florence and the surrounding areas, since Florence was one of the more important cities in which the plague raged fiercely and about which many contemporary accounts remain to help us interpret reactions to the disaster. One could note in passing that the way in which the Florentines reacted was not dissimilar to that of the people of other European cities.

Amongst contemporary accounts of the plague in Florence, the most famous description is that of Boccaccio in his Prologue to the Decameron. Informative and evocatively descriptive as this literary account is, there are others which cover the same period and reflect more directly some of the personal and family experiences which are relevant to our review. In addition, there are other sources which allow us to review reactions to subsequent re-appearances of the plague through to the 16th century. The sources chosen for reference include letters, chronicles and personal diaries from the late Medieval and the Renaissance periods. Naturally, these reflect some differences in personal and community attitudes to the plague. Whether the writers were recording their own reactions or those of others, all reactions and methods of coping had to be founded on the general consciousness current in the community and on ideas of causation held at that time. It would be useful to give some thought to these ideas at this point.

A strong religious faith motivated the people of the Medieval period. This went beyond an adherence to the rituals of the Church. It was founded on a view of a world order at the centre of which was an all-powerful God who

controlled all earthly events. He was, however, the God of Vengeance of the Old Testament, who, to quote an early 14th century chronicle, 'smote and castigated sinners' (Compagni 1913:XXIX,164). He did not forget or overlook offences. Punishment may not have been inflicted immediately but 'when he has delayed it, it is for the purposes of greater punishment'; it was 'the vendetta of God' (Compagni 1913:203). Human transgression attracted God's wrath and punishment. That, simply, was the equation which people recognised. If it were on a personal level, those concerned must have sinned in some way, and so had to look to themselves to make amends. This view continued to be held for a considerable period. Writing in his diary in 1494, Landucci recorded the fact that his son had been stabbed that evening, seemingly by accident. Nevertheless, he added: 'it happened in punishment of our sins' (Landucci 1927:77). On a more general level, Petrarch, when writing to a friend on the plague of 1348, expressed the sin-punishment equation as follows:

. . . so does it happen that Your mercy, oh Lord, gradually exhausted by human faults, and depressed by the continuing increase in such faults, finally can take no more . . . ? we suffer punishment not only for our sins but those of our fathers (Petrarca 1975:418).

The same idea was expressed by Giovanni Villani when he wrote in his *Chronicles* that God had permitted the plague to fall upon the city 'as punishment for sins' (Villani 1969:XII, 84).

People of the period saw the signs of God's wrath and of impending retribution in many natural phenomena. Earthquakes, comets, eclipses and volcanic eruptions were all seen as warnings of trouble ahead. Chroniclers often recorded details of the birth of malformed children and animals, seeing in these portents of disaster (Landucci 1927:47). Other celestial events held the same significance. An early 14th century chronicler noted the appearance over the city of Florence one evening of a vermilion cross in the sky and concluded 'that God is strongly opposed to our tormented city' (Compagni 1913:108). Even two hundred years later Landucci noted in his diary that he believed that an eclipse of the moon was responsible for the fact that three people had fallen down dead in the city (Landucci 1927:37). These beliefs were, of course, closely related to the broad acceptance of astrology as a means of explaining naturally occurring events. Many found such a belief consistent with their religious faith, for it could be explained that God controlled not only living things but the movements of the stars and the planets. It was, in fact, not uncommon for Popes to consult astrologers for forecasts of future events and propitious dates.

Astrology could be seen as reflecting God's will, although it could also offer indications of future events. Villani explained the relationship in

describing a great flood in Florence in 1333, saying that while it was predicted by astrologers, and that theologians conceded that their claims could be true in part, such predictions would not necessarily come to pass, but only to the extent that it pleased God. He added: 'For God is above all celestial movement, he causes the movement, governs and rules over the heavens' (Villani 1969:XI,2).

Astrology also had strong links with the medical profession of the time. Consequently it was associated with then current ideas on the causation of disease and, to some extent, with theories on the transmission of disease (Thorndike 1934:III, 281-293). Some of the latter, however, were based less on astrological theory than on the earliest of medical doctrines which blamed polluted air and water for many ailments. All of these considerations, their religious beliefs, an acceptance of the influence of astrology, and a residual belief in the efficacy of magic, formed the basis of the various defensive mechanisms which were evidenced.

Giovanni Villani has left for us in his chronicles an account of the events surrounding the early phases of the plague in Genoa in 1347 (Villani 1969:XII,84). He noted that galleys returning to that city were full of sailors sick and dying from the plague. Those that survived the journey, died at Genoa and 'they corrupted the air where they arrived and all that had contact with them died quickly'. Priests who came to confess the sick and those that in other ways watched over them, were often struck down by the plague so that before long the sick were abandoned. They were not confessed, no sacraments were administered to them, there were no medicines available to them and no one to watch over them. This lack of care for the sick caused the Pope to grant special absolution to those priests who confessed, administered the sacraments, visited or otherwise looked after those stricken by the plague.

As the epidemic spread, reports of its disastrous consequences were received in Florence, and it was duly noted by Villani that 'many provinces and cities remained denuded of people'. Such was the fear generated amongst the Florentine community that the authorities called for a solemn procession through the streets to appeal to God to stop the epidemic and to protect Florence and its surrounding territories from the plague, which Villani believed was sent 'to punish the sins of the living'. The procession took place in mid-March 1347 and lasted for three days. Clearly it failed in its objective since Florence was devastated by the plague in 1348 and Giovanni Villani himself succumbed to the disease.

In a letter to a friend, Petrarch expressed some of the horror and anguish that was experienced by the people of Florence when the plague raged in 1348:

Everywhere we see sorrow, on all sides we see terror . . . Dear brother, would that I had never been born or has died earlier!

In what chronicles did anyone read that dwellings were emptied, cities abandoned, countrysides filthy, fields laden with bodies, and a dreadful and vast solitude covered the earth?

After viewing a city full of funerals, we return to our homes only to find them empty of our loved ones . . . We used to be a crowd, now we are almost alone. We must seek new friendships. But where or for what reason when the human species is almost extinct and the end, as I hope, is near? (Patrarca 1975:415, 417).

A less literary and emotional account of the 1348 plague in Florence can be found in the chronicles of Marchionne di Coppo Stefani (1903:230-232). His account noted that if a house was struck by the plague, most inhabitants died and almost no one survived beyond four days. Neither doctors nor medicine were of any use since the disease was unknown and there seemed to be no remedy. It struck down men and women and also such animals as dogs, cats, hens, cattle, asses and sheep. Such was the fear engendered by the epidemic, that as soon as a house contained a victim, all others fled. Frightened people left their homes to seek refuge in another house in the city, or in the countryside. Family bonds dissolved under the terror of the plague. Stefani recorded that: 'the son abandoned his father, the husband his wife, the wife her husband, one brother another, one sister another'. He gave an example of the type of subterfuge that had been employed. The sufferer would be told: 'I am going for the doctor', but those departing would quietly lock the outer door of the house and never return.

The whole city was pre-occupied with death, and fearful of the overwhelming evidence of it in the city. Orders were given to limit the ringing of bells at funerals lest the sound should scare those who were still well. Normal burial formalities were often ignored or restricted because the mortality rate was so high. Many died without the benefit of confession or the last rites, and others died completely unattended, their passing only being discovered due to the odour of the corpse. Stefani recorded that many bodies were simply taken from the houses and thrown into ditches, bodies upon bodies, with a little earth between layers: 'just as lasagna is interspersed with cheese'. Where a normal burial could be arranged, it could only be afforded by the rich because of the steep rise in the costs of all services associated with a funeral. Candles, coffins and mourning clothes all rose sharply in price. Those who could be persuaded to dispose of the bodies became rich on the rates they charged.

The many calls upon doctors caused a high death rate in the profession and in consequence a shortage of those who could attend the sick. Those who survived demanded exorbitant fees to be paid in advance of a visit, and once with the patient, their examinations were rather perfunctory. They checked the pulse with heads turned well away, and from a great distance

they examined the urine of the patient while holding scented herbs to their nostrils. The doctors were not the only professionals to become richer because of the plague. Stefani noted that priests and friars also charged high fees for their services and became quite wealthy.

Towards the end of 1348 there was a lessening in the severity of the plague, and people began to return to Florence. They were amazed to find a great number of fine houses which had remained open and unattended when all the inhabitants had died. In the early stages everyone was afraid to touch the belongings of those who had died from plague. Experience had shown that these belongings seemed 'poisoned' and those who handled them also were stricken by the plague. Months later however, many who returned to the city took the risk and enriched themselves with the belongings of the dead, and began parading about in unaccustomed grand style.

This was no more vividly portrayed than by Matteo Villani who assumed the role of chronicler after his brother's death from plague in 1348. He drew a very bleak picture of people's actions in the aftermath of the Black Death:

. . . men, so reduced in numbers and enriched from the wealth of the dead, gave themselves over to shameful and dishonest living, in ways unlike the past . . . the men and women of the lower classes were not prepared to work at the usual trades and sought delicacies for their daily food, married as they chose, and low-born women and children wore the expensive clothing of well-born ladies (Villani 1957:II,4).

Due allowance must be made for the fact that Villani reserved his criticism for those he considered of a lower social ranking to himself. By implication, others had acted honourably and responsibly.

All evidence, however, points to a massive social upheaval, enormous loss of life, and an all-pervading sense of fear and impending disaster, emotions which fitted well into the apocalyptic tradition of the Medieval period. But people did not stay frozen in attitudes of fear. They gathered together the remaining threads of their existence and rebuilt their individual lives and that of their communities. They acted in ways which they believed would resolve the disastrous difficulties of their lives. For most people there was no need to develop new mechanisms for coping with disaster. The teachings of the Church had predisposed them to psychological and cultural mechanisms for coping with such events, and these were brought into play. For Florentines, the situation was exacerbated by the fact that the plague was visited upon the city thirty-three times between 1348 and 1531. Over this period, however, changes in perception are evidenced. Initially, all levels of society were involved, and no one could escape the horror of the situation. Later, as we will see, it was the poorer classes who suffered most, both in terms of the incidence of infection, and in regulations imposed by the community.

One of the most significant ways of coping with the situation can be seen in the way in which individuals and the community participated quite actively in religious exercises which they believed could provide respite from the ravages of the plague and give them comfort in their losses. We have already seen in Giovanni Villani's account of the three day procession seeking to halt the progress of the plague even before it had struck Florence, that this form of religious exercise was considered to be important. Stefani also recorded the fact that many such processions were held in Florence during the full onslaught of the plague in 1348 (Stefani 1903:232).

These processions took a form which continued to be used in Florence for another couple of centuries. On matters of great importance to the city, and certainly the devastation caused by the plague was such, the whole population became involved. Citizens, the Church hierarchy, and other religious orders, formed into groups to carry through the streets the holy relics located within the institutions of the city, and the banners of saints whose aid was being sought to intercede on behalf of the city and its citizens. In Stefani's account he refers only to the banner bearing the portrait of S. Maria Impruneta, a saint whose help was often sought by Florence for many types of disaster, but many other saints also were the recipients of prayers of intercession during these processions. Stefani noted that the processions ended with a gathering before the Palace of the Priors where orations and prayers of supplication were offered.

These public displays of piety were only one aspect, although a very important aspect, of the greatly increased involvement of the laity in religious observances in that period. Largely as a result of the mendicant friars, there had been a considerable growth in the numbers and memberships of lay confraternities. Some of these concentrated on the singing of hymns of praise to the Virgin and to their patron saints, whilst others engaged in acts of self-mortification of the flesh, in acts of flagellation. Whatever pattern was followed, all such pious ritual was founded on belief in a system of religious patronage wherein the patron saint could be persuaded to assist the supplicants to achieve their desired objectives. This pattern was valid both for the public and the private rituals of the confraternities.

Since the number of confraternities rose sharply in the period following the Black Death and that during which the plague continued to disrupt the life of Florence, it is reasonable to conclude that such organisations provided individuals with a positive way of coping with the personal trauma of the plague. The widely held view that visitations of plague were in response to God's wrath and were punishment for sinful behaviour, suggests that being able to participate in the propitiatory or expiatory rituals of the

confraternities, must have provided solace for many on both an individual level and one involving the community.

This period was notable also for the large endowments which found their way to the confraternities, both by way of legacies from the dead, and as contributions from the living who sought to establish a favourable position in the after-life with the assistance of a patron saint. These funds were used for many worthy charitable works by the confraternities, as well as for the commissioning of works of art and buildings which would honour their patron saints. Hospitals, orphanages, the incurably sick, and the indigent all received benefits from the confraternities, so enlarging the fairly rudimentary social support system of the Florentine republic.

Another of the methods of coping with the plague which can be found frequently in contemporary accounts is that of seeking to avoid infection by leaving affected areas. We have already noted reference to this in Giovanni Villani's chronicle, in Petrarch's letter and in Stefani's account of Florence in 1348. As each new epidemic struck the city, those who were able, notably the more affluent citizens, retreated to areas which they thought were free from infection. A simple example can be seen in Landucci's diary for 1479. As the fury of the plague attack increased in intensity, he departed with his family to live in his villa in the countryside, leaving his apprentices to attend to his apothecary's shop (Landucci 1927:127). They simply waited for the plague to die down before returning to their home in Florence. Obviously, however, given the nature of the bubonic plague, this was no recipe for certain success.

The diary of Buonaccorso Pitti for 1374 reveals a different outcome. After his father had died, presumably from the current plague, the eight remaining members retired to their country villa. Whilst there, however, two members of the group died of plague (Brucker 1972:22). At a later stage, in 1411, Pitti sought again to escape the plague this time by moving his family to Pisa. Within two months however, one of the servants and one of his own daughters died of the plague. They moved then to a house outside Pisa and stayed for another five months before returning to Florence (Brucker 1972:87-88). Pitti referred briefly to his status as a tax delinquent in 1417, a matter which precluded him from holding public office in Florence. This arose from the decision of the Florentine republic to levy a special tax on those who had fled the city during the plague, ostensibly to permit the republic to engage persons to guard vacant property, but also, it is likely, to help maintain public order in a city made restless by many factors, only one of which was the incidence of plague.

Gregorio Dati, another Florentine who kept a diary, lost a son and a daughter within a few weeks of each other in an outbreak of plague in 1400.

In 1420, his household was again affected. As he put it in his diary: 'God who shows his wisdom in all things, permitted the plague to strike our house'. Over a short period he lost two servants and two daughters, after which they moved to another house to escape the infection. A few days after the move, however, a third daughter died, and they moved house once more, only for another two members of the household to die of plague. This tragic account is concluded as follows: 'It passed off after that and we all returned to our house. May God bless them all' (Brucker 1972:132). Dati later accepted minor public office in a town under Florentine control for a period in 1424 in order to avoid the plague (Brucker 1972:136).

Priests also were often accused of fleeing danger and neglecting their flocks. This was a matter of considerable debate within the Church hierarchy, some taking the view that it was a serious sin for the clergy to flee from the plague, others questioning why they should not be able to act as the animals which follow their God-given instinct for recognising and avoiding danger (Schullian 1948:395-399). Despite the fine theory of the argument, and the fact that some of the clergy faithfully served the afflicted, in general, the clergy of the Church did not win great favour with their flocks for neglecting their pastoral duties.

Throughout Europe there were clear examples of reactions to the plague epidemic which sought to lay the blame for the infection on minority groups which lay outside the main structure of society. Christians blamed Muslims, Muslims blamed Christians, and both groups blamed Jews. Lepers also attracted blame in some areas. Examples of blame laid against Jews are rather fewer in Italy than in other parts of Europe. There were examples however, of laying the blame on other minority groups in Florence. Prostitutes and homosexuals were regularly placed under restrictions during times of trouble and the plague epidemic provided the same stimulus to control and allocation of blame. It would appear that the authorities did not consider that the infection was sexually transmitted but that the behaviour of these groups was sinful and offensive to God and would attract His wrath. As a consequence, all prostitutes and homosexuals were ordered out of the cit (Carmichael 1986:99).

Travellers from other regions and specific national groups were periodically banned from entering the city, although not without some inconsistency in the application of the regulations to high ranking travellers. Because, as we have seen, the wealthier citizens fled the city whenever an outbreak occurred, the plague naturally claimed a disproportionate number of the poorer classes in the series of epidemics which followed the Black Death. It was then not a big step to arrive at the conclusion that plague was a disease of the poor, and as a result, plague controls gradually took on the

nature of social controls. Whilst the republic set up isolation hospitals and took other measures to attempt to control the spread of infection, there is an example of oppressive behaviour to the lower classes in an incident in which the plague health officials entered the hospitals and drove the ailing poor from the city on pain of torture if they attempted to return (Landucci 1927:141).

Were these actions and responses typical only of a time long past, or is there something more fundamental in human responses which we can identify? I believe that we can group the coping responses which we have gleaned from contemporary documents and identify them in the psychological terms used currently to describe predictable categories of response to life threatening situations. These categories are fight, flight and denial.

A significant proportion of the citizens of Florence, and the republican government itself, believed that they could ward off the evils of the plague by turning away from sinful living and seeking God's forgiveness. All of the activities involved in the community religious processions and the pious rituals of the confraternities were positive activities, that is, they were concerned efforts to fight against the effects of the plague. That there was but a scant and imperfect knowledge of the disease and its methods of transmission does not negate the fact that individuals and groups stood to fight the disease on the basis of their own understanding.

Others, as we have seen, took flight at any opportunity, and there is no uncertainty in matching their actions to response expectations. Finally, we have the denial category to investigate. Behaviour which projects the blame or risk on to another group or to another individual is a denial - 'it cannot happen to us because we are not members of that group'. Directing the blame towards prostitutes, homosexuals, other ethnic groups, and the poor represents a classic example of denial response. The stigmatised groups become 'the dangerous other'.

Not only do the observed responses to the plague by the citizens of Florence correspond closely with the predictable categories of response to disaster situations, but reported comments and reactions during natural disasters of modern times show a remarkable similarity (Wolfenstein 1957). Overall, it appears that there is a clear predictability about human reactions to these conditions. The methods used may have varied over time, but the fundamental responses remain the same. That people do not surrender readily to adversity has been well documented in the behaviour of the citizens of Florence. The proposition remains valid still today. Nor should we overlook the fact that it was in this period of tremendous upheaval that

Florence became so clearly identified with the flowering of the Renaissance in Italy.

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