

Book History in the Nordic Countries **Introduction**

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BOOK HISTORY IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

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What characterizes Nordic book history?¹ This was the first thing on our minds when we considered the present special issue of *Mémoires du livre – Studies in Book Culture*. Setting out on the project and distributing the call for papers we hoped to come up with some sort of answer to our question. However, there is no simple single-word or single-sentence answer that encapsulates Nordic book history. On the contrary, several new questions arose: Are there any research topics that are especially common among Nordic book historians? And is there a special Nordic book historical approach when it comes to theory and practice?

Faced with such an array of possible avenues for research, we asked ourselves: what better way to address them than by providing examples of ongoing book historical research in the Nordic countries, as well as examples of research being conducted elsewhere, but dealing with Nordic subjects?

In this wide-ranging special issue, 16 scholars explore book history from a Nordic perspective, each of them offering a glimpse of their own current research. Taken together, the articles constitute a mosaic of northern book history. They draw from range of different materials, employ several

different theories and methods, and explore topics spanning from manuscript culture to audiobooks. Chronologically the articles also cover a wide period, from the early modern era up until today.

From the moment we began outlining our call for papers, we faced the difficult task of defining what we meant by “northern countries.” The Nordic countries (also known as “the North” or “the Nordics”), are here defined as the five Nordic nations, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, and therefore also include the autonomous regions of Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Åland.

Ideally, we would have featured a few articles dealing principally with Finnish and Icelandic perspectives and offered better coverage of the more peripheral regions of the Nordics. Still, without striving to be comprehensive, this special issue provides an overview of some of the themes currently being explored by Nordic book historians, as well as a glimpse of the book historical research milieu. We hope that the collection of perspectives united here will contribute to broadening international interest in Nordic book history.

Since the issue offers glimpses rather than a full picture, a few remarks on the status of Nordic book history may be of use to start. What distinguishes Nordic book history from the discipline internationally? And what has traditionally interested book historians in the Nordic countries? In an attempt to answer these questions, we will provide a brief historical survey of the field and offer some thoughts about the changing circumstances that have shaped Nordic book history over the years.

Until recently Nordic book historians have rarely published in English. It has simply not been necessary. Most Scandinavians, as well as a great number of Finns, can read and understand the other Scandinavian languages (except for Icelandic and Faroese), which to some extent explains why a large part of Nordic book history is only available in the Scandinavian languages. Another important reason for this is that Nordic book history has arguably addressed chiefly Nordic issues and targeted primarily a domestic audience. Consequently, the Nordic countries constitute, at least to some extent, a blank area on the international, non-Scandinavian book historian’s map, so that they must often rely on translations, summaries, and

second-hand information. However, in recent years, a change has taken place, and Nordic researchers are increasingly publishing their findings in English. Our special issue follows that trend.

The Origins of Book History in the Nordic Countries

For much of the Middle Ages and the early modern period, the Nordic countries consisted of two empires: Denmark and Sweden. This effectively meant that there were two separate although closely related book markets, with two major book hubs. The printers in Copenhagen catered to the needs of Denmark as well as Norway and Iceland, and the corresponding industry in Stockholm saw to the needs of the entire Swedish Empire, which included Finland, and, at its height, parts of the Baltics and present-day Germany. The book markets in Denmark-Norway and Sweden-Finland respectively were nonetheless not isolated from one another, and the fact that the inhabitants of the Scandinavian language area have always been able, at least with some effort, to read and understand each other's languages, has created a special dynamic for the Nordic book market. For much of the early modern period, German was also a *lingua franca* throughout the Baltic Sea region, and in the early age of print, the book industry in what is now present-day Germany supplied the Nordic market with printed works.

The lineage of Nordic book history can be traced back to the early modern period. Focusing on collecting and mediating artifacts and stories of a celebrated past, book collectors and historians established grand libraries and created scholarly editions of medieval manuscripts.² The modern academic study of book history in the Nordic countries developed in the late nineteenth century, following in the footsteps of historical science, which had by then achieved the status of a scholarly discipline.³ Just like in the rest of Europe, the first book historians in the Nordic countries focused on the earliest printed books, compiling detailed national bibliographies.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of bibliophile societies were established all over the Nordics, and several of them published important book historical findings. The bibliophile communities created a social space for those interested in book history and furthered the field by sponsoring scholars and publishing facsimile editions

of rare prints. In a time when collecting rare books was a common hobby, the catalogues issued by antiquarian booksellers, publishers, and prominent book collectors also played an important role in boosting interest in the field.

The establishment of an infrastructure for book historical research, especially at the royal libraries in Stockholm and Copenhagen and the former university libraries in Oslo and Helsinki, marked another important milestone. And even though the field lost some of its momentum over the course of the twentieth century, work on several joint book historical publications continued. Monumental works such as *Nordisk leksikon för bogväsen I–II* (1949–1962), *Nordisk handbok i bibliotekskunskap I–III* (1957–1960), and the journal *Nordisk tidskrift för bok- och biblioteksväsen* (1914–1997)⁴ were the result of a pan-Nordic publishing effort with an editorial presence in all Nordic countries. The publications are still indispensable resources for Nordic book historians.

Academic Institutions

In the decades after the Second World War, academic research on Nordic book history picked up speed, as universities began to expand. However, there was still no academic community or centre for academic studies in book history. The research at the universities took place on an individual basis within different disciplines: literary history, history of art, philology, library science, history, theology, church history, and so on. The book historical networks were limited to the bibliophile societies, and to some extent the national libraries. This was largely the situation up to the beginning of the 1990s, when a major change occurred: Lund University appointed the Swedish literary scholar Per S. Ridderstad as the first professor of Book and Library History. Today, Lund University remains the only academic institution in the Nordic countries offering courses in book history at both the undergraduate and graduate/PhD levels. In 2009, Ridderstad was succeeded by the Danish historian Henrik Horstbøll. With a Dane in the post, even stronger ties were established between Danish and Swedish research environments. In 2018, the Swedish historian Jonas Nordin stepped into the role. Nordin has continued to encourage strong co-operation among the different countries. Today, most of the book historical research takes place in cross-disciplinary settings, and the

individual researcher's institutional affiliation often colours the focus. Due to its cross-disciplinary nature, it is not always easy to draw a line between book history and its related subjects, and many of those engaged in book historical projects do not necessarily define themselves as "book historians."

Collaborative Projects and Digital Horizons

In the last decades of the twentieth century, at the same time as the institutionalization of book history was taking place, the traditional bibliophile societies were dwindling. In both Sweden and Denmark several societies merged as a direct consequence of an aging and declining membership. In short, there was a change in attitude towards book collecting, and before long, a significant part of the antiquarian book trade moved online. In the wake of these changes many classic antiquarian bookshops disappeared.

The digital turn has also changed the preconditions for book historical research. In recent years, large-scale digitization projects have made major library holdings available online, paving the way for new research projects as well as facilitating casual, non-academic use. Funding from major research bodies such as Carlsbergfondet (The Carlsberg Foundation), Norges forskningsråd (The Research Council of Norway), Svenska Litteratursällskapet (The Society of Swedish Literature in Finland), Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation), and Vetenskapsrådet (The Swedish Research Council) have also supplied the necessary means for several book historical projects, many of which are transnational.

With no major linguistic barriers in place, it is comparatively easy to arrange collaborative projects and conferences, and to build networks across borders. Scholars can use their native Scandinavian language when working at a university in one of the neighbouring countries, and even when publishing their findings. This ties the Nordic book history community together, and also means that there is great mobility in the field.

Despite the many opportunities for close transnational cooperation, however, there is currently a lack of joint publishing forums for Nordic book history. The peer-reviewed journal *Nordisk tidskrift för bok- och*

bibliotekshistoria experienced a short revival in 2000 before it was finally discontinued in 2007. It is still sorely missed. Although there is no longer a single common outlet for Nordic book history, journals such as the Swedish *Biblis – Kvartalstidskrift för bokvänner* and the Danish *Bogvennen* do partially fill the void, together with *Fund og Forskning*, a peer-reviewed journal published by Det Kgl. Bibliotek (The National Library of Denmark).

Meanwhile, Nordic book history is being presented in new formats and for new audiences, and increased participation from Nordic scholars in international symposia and conferences (such as the annual Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing [SHARP] conferences) points towards an emerging internationalization of the Nordic field of research. Increasingly, international conferences are also arranged within the Nordic countries. One recent example was the 2019 Literary Citizens of the World (LitCit) conference, which marked the 500-year anniversary of the first book printed for the Norwegian market and attracted book historians from all Nordic countries as well as scholars from Europe and North America.

Today, the book historical research in the Nordic countries takes place both in and beyond the academic setting. Due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, the subject has become more widely accessible than ever before. Online conferences and exhibitions, lunch lectures, live-streamed PhD defences, and online courses are being offered by libraries, universities, museums, and organizations across the Nordics. Even before the global pandemic set in, Nordic book history was widely available online. Moving their courses online as early as in 2012, the Division of Book History at Lund University has been able to attract more students than ever before. Private societies such as *Dansk Bibliofilkub* (Danish Bibliophile Club), *Foreningen for Boghaandværk* (The Society for Printmaking), *Biblis, Bokhistoriska Sällskapet* (The Book Historical Association), *Norsk bok- og bibliotekhistorisk selskap* (The Society for Norwegian Book and Library History), and *Sällskapet Bokvännerna i Finland* (Friends of Books in Finland) regularly arrange public lectures for book collectors and researchers alike, and issue newsletters and special editions for their members.

New Nordic Book History

Nordic book historians in recent years have tackled a wide range of topics in the field. Of particular interest have been the development of literacy and reading habits, the importance of freedom of the press, the history of libraries, and the work of writers for children.

Studies of reading and literacy occupy a special place in the Nordic scholarly tradition. The Nordic countries have some of the world's earliest documented literacy campaigns, which saw basic reading skills spread through all segments of the population as early as the seventeenth century. The household examination records in combination with church protocols make it possible to study reading at a remarkably detailed level. The work of Egil Johansson, continued by Daniel Lindmark and others, has been ground-breaking in this area, and his findings have sparked interest beyond the Nordic sphere.⁵ In a Danish context, the research of Charlotte Appel and Henrik Horstbøll has shed new light on the history of reading, “the common citizens,” and the Danish book market in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Denmark.⁶ Jostein Fet and Tuija Laine have explored the subject in a Norwegian and Finnish context respectively.⁷

Censorship and freedom of press is another subject that has received considerable attention, particularly in recent years. The Swedish Freedom of the Press Act of 1766, which still applies in present-day Finland, was the world's first legislation concerning the freedom of the press.⁸ Recently, the Act was nominated for the UNESCO Memory of the World program. Denmark was right behind Sweden, and their Press Freedom Period (1770–1773) saw a brief but formidable surge of political pamphlets and other writings, the result of a publishing market set completely free. This dynamic publishing period, which sent shockwaves across the joint Danish-Norwegian book market, has been the subject of extensive scholarly interest.⁹

Both national and university libraries have traditionally been hubs for book historical scholarship in the Nordic countries, although within the last decade, several libraries have experienced cuts in their research budgets. Aspects of library history are therefore also a recurring theme, ranging from e-books and the development of public libraries to provenance studies and

democratization.¹⁰ The books taken as war booty by the Swedish army during the Thirty Years' War, for instance, have been subject of ceaseless interest for over a century.¹¹ Some of the most famous books kept in Swedish institutions, including *Codex Argenteus* ("The Silver Bible") and *Codex Gigas* ("The Devil's Bible"), were plundered in the seventeenth century as spoils of war. Meanwhile, notable acquisitions have also been made under more peaceful circumstances. A few years ago, the National Library in Oslo purchased a map collection from the collector William B. Ginsberg, a formidable addition to the Nordic cartographic research environment. Another significant cartographic acquisition was made in 2020, by UiT The Arctic University of Norway. Both these collections constitute a significant addition to the Nordic cartographic environment and will be at the centre of attention for coming research projects.

The Nordic countries are also famous for their children's literature, with authors such as Hans Christian Andersen, Jostein Gaarder, Tove Jansson, and Astrid Lindgren.¹² Unsurprisingly, this has also left a mark on book historical scholarship, as is evident from some of the contributions to this issue. To some extent it is also possible to talk about "Nordic moments" in World Literature. The first such moment was arguably during the late nineteenth century, following the success of the radical writings of the Modern Breakthrough authors, when the plays of Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg were performed on stages across the world.¹³ The great wave of Nordic crime fiction, the "Nordic Noir," which has also attracted the attention of book historians, can be said to constitute another such moment.¹⁴ And currently, we are seeing something that may be regarded as yet another "moment": the advent of audiobooks, which has seen Nordic companies such as Storytel and Spotify taking more market shares in the international audio book market.

The Current Issue

In the following special issue, we are pleased to present essays on a variety of themes, ranging from transnational book culture, libraries, reading, the multifaceted role of the author, and audiobooks to studies of different genres such as broadside ballads, women's magazines, and encyclopedias.

The first article is Emma Hagström-Molin's transnational and trans-chronological study "Provenance Research: Book History, Historiography, and the Rise of an Epistemic Category in Nineteenth-Century Europe," which moves geographically from Central Europe to Sweden and chronologically back and forth from the mid-1800s, via the Thirty Years' War and finally to the medieval period. The article places the medieval manuscript at the centre of a book historical discussion concerning material culture, historiography, and nationalism, and highlights the efforts made by the Austrian scholar Beda Dudík in his politicized quest to locate and study Moravian manuscripts and other cultural objects in Swedish libraries: an attempt to recover traces of a glorious past.

In their article "A Nordic Press: The Development of Printing in Scandinavia and the Baltic States before 1700 from a European Perspective," Arthur der Weduwen and Barnaby Cullen look through a wide-angle lens at the book market and print culture in the Nordics in the early modern period—the "incunabula age," to use the authors' own words, in a Northern European context. The article, which favours a transnational perspective over the national narratives that have often characterized descriptions of print history in the Nordic countries, looks beyond the Scandinavian setting and includes Iceland as well as Estonia and Latvia.

Peter Sjökvist's article "The Library of Leufstabruk" continues in the same vein, offering insight into the transnational northern European book market in the eighteenth century through the example of the remarkable library of Leufstabruk. The book collection there was assembled by generations of members of the De Geer family and remains in its original setting to this day. By studying historical library catalogues, preserved sales records from Dutch booksellers, as well as the provenance of particular books, Sjökvist is able to draw a detailed picture of the prominent collection's history and outline Swedish-Dutch trade networks.

The following three articles all focus on different aspects of reading in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. Roar Lishaugen's article "... but he stayed up reading?: Books, Readers, and Reading in an Eighteenth-Century East Norwegian Parish" abandons the transnational perspective for a highly local one. Mining a treasure trove of probate, church, and auction records for evidence of reading, readers, and book ownership in the parish of Odalen in

Eastern Norway, he provides detailed insights into the benefits and challenges of studying book culture at a local level, while at the same time reminding us of the inherent interconnectedness of early modern book culture.

In the article “Children’s Books and Childhood Reading in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Denmark: Memoirs and Autobiographies as Sources for Children’s Media Repertoires,” Charlotte Appel, Nina Christensen, and Karoline Baden Steffensen put a specific group at centre of attention: children. By using memoirs and autobiographies as a means to trace children’s reading habits during the period 1750–1850, the study highlights the potential and shortcomings of these sources and uses the concepts of *media repertoires* and *media ensembles* to further our understanding of media habits among children from different strata of society.

Henning Hansen’s somewhat experimental article, “The Vicar, the Nobleman, and the Peasant: About a Book and its Readers,” focuses on a specific copy of an eighteenth-century Swedish collection of sermons. By scrutinizing the provenance recorded in the volume, which ranges from signatures and fingerprints to inscriptions and underlinings in the book, the article traces the transforming reading habits and conditions in rural Sweden during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, following the book as it changes hands from one owner to the next.

The next article is about a library. The Finnmark library in Vadsø, a public library in the northernmost Norwegian county, was given the complex and somewhat contradictory task of constituting a vehicle for the Norwegianization policy directed at the Sámi and Kven people, and at the same time collecting and making available scholarly literature of relevance for the region. Established in 1892 and administered by a relatively progressive leadership, the library became a unique institution in the region. Although most source material was lost in the burning of Finnmark in 1944, Geir Grenersen is able to draw a detailed picture of several aspects of the library.

The following three articles explore three different genres of books, each of which displays particular features or qualities. The first is devoted to Norwegian broadside ballads. Yuri Cowan’s article captures the collecting

practices of Thorvald Boeck, a famous Norwegian book collector in the nineteenth century, who was also a devoted collector of the so-called *skillingsviser* (broadside ballads). In the flourishing nationalism in Norway following the relative independence from Denmark achieved in 1814, broadside ballads were perceived as a link to the past and a part of the national heritage, worthy of preservation.

The second article deals with Danish encyclopedias, whose contrast to the ephemeral *skillingsviser* could not be greater, either in content or in format. Comparing the reception of some of the most important encyclopedias in Denmark, Maria Simonsen's article "Encyclopedias and Nationalism in Denmark: A Study of the Reception of Three Encyclopedias, from Print to Digital" explores the relationship of encyclopedic publications and the national perspective, and traces the transformation of the encyclopedic genre from printed to digitized. The third article, "Culottes and Warm Pyjamas: Patterns for Home Sewing in Sweden During the Second World War," addresses 1940s women's magazines. Focusing on the intersection between textile history and print ephemera, Gunilla Törnvall's study explores new terrain in the field of material culture. The sewing patterns included in mid-century magazines offered Swedish women a chance to dress fashionably in an affordable way and allowed them to stay in touch with the global fashion trends, even as the war raged on around them.

The world-famous Swedish author of children's books, Astrid Lindgren, is the subject of an ongoing research project aiming to decode some of Lindgren's original manuscripts, which were all written in shorthand. Project leader Malin Nauwerck's study "Storyteller, Stenographer, and Self-Published Superstar: How Astrid Lindgren's Multiple Roles in Book Production Created the Lindgren Myth" moves beyond Lindgren's authorship to highlight her creative and editorial process, zooming in on Lindgren's role as her own secretary, editor, and publisher. Since Lindgren had a hand in the entire production cycle of her works, from idea to finished book, Nauwerck agrees with Alf Prøysen's assessment of Lindgren as a "solar system of her own."

While most of the articles in this issue deal predominantly with analogue media, notably print and manuscript, the final piece, "Modelling Subscription-Based Streaming Services for Books," explores digital

audiobooks. With the success of Nordic audiobook companies such as Storytel, Mofibo, BookBeat, and Nextory, it is justifiable to talk of a veritable boom in the Nordic audiobook market. In their article, Karl Berglund and Sara Tanderup Linkis explore the growth of audiobook consumption and propose a new model for understanding the medium, one which places the streaming company at the centre.

In the process of working on this special issue we have certainly learned a lot, and we hope that readers will, too. At this point we would like to take the opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to all the authors and reviewers who have so generously taken time to devote themselves to the task of writing and assessing the manuscripts. A heartfelt thank you also goes to the editorial board, Anthony Glinoyer and Judith Haviernick, who have—armed with a seemingly endless amount of patience and goodwill—guided us through this process, and have also taken on the arduous work of communicating with authors, external and internal reviewers, copyeditors, and guest editors, ultimately ensuring that the end result is a proper journal issue rather than an impenetrable jumble of Word files, unanswered emails, and lost thoughts.

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Maria Simonsen (born 1978) is Associate Professor in History at the Department of Politics and Society, Aalborg University, and part of a three-year talent program for younger researchers at the Faculty of Social Sciences. She earned her PhD in Book History from Lund University in December 2016. Her research interests include the history of the book, history of knowledge, university history, and digital history. She has

published widely on the history of Scandinavian encyclopedias and the history of knowledge. She is currently conducting a three-year research project entitled “Knowledge for the World: The History of Aalborg University, 1974–2024”. E-mail: simonsen@dps.aau.dk.

Notes

¹ For a longer and more detailed overview of Nordic book history, see Eide, Elisabeth, Esko Häkli, and Karen Skovgaard-Petersen, eds. “Recent Research in Nordic Book History.” *Nordisk tidskrift för bok- och bibliotekshistoria* 86, no. 2 (2002): 161–333. In five articles the authors review Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish book history from 1980 to the beginning of the millennium. For an overview from the turn of the millennium until today, see Tore Rem, ed., *Bokhistorie* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2003); Magdalena Gram, “Bokhistoria som forskningsfält: var står vi och vart går vi?” *Biblis* 45 (2009): 32–38; Anders Toftegaard, “Princely libraries, the readings of common man and the entry of the book cover into literary studies. Trends in book history research in Denmark,” *Jaarboek voor Nederlandse Boekgeschiedenis* 20 (2013): 159–81 and Anders Toftegaard, “Dragende materialitet. Forskydninger i den boghistoriske praksis efter den digitale revolution.” *Boghistorie i Skandinavien*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

² Toftegaard, “Princely libraries, the readings of common man and the entry of the book cover into literary studies” and Toftegaard, “Dragende materialitet. Forskydninger i den boghistoriske praksis efter den digitale revolution”.

³ Henrik Horstbøll, “A Survey of the History of the Book and Libraries in Denmark since 1990,” *Nordisk tidskrift för bok- och bibliotekshistoria* 2 (2002): 166.

⁴ The title was later changed to *Nordisk tidskrift för bok- och bibliotekshistoria*. The journal is currently being digitized by Project Runeberg: <http://runeberg.org/bokobibl/>.

⁵ Morten Fink-Jensen and Charlotte Appel, *Religious Reading in the Lutheran North: Studies in Early Modern Scandinavian Book Culture*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.

⁶ Charlotte Appel, *Læsning og bogmarked i 1600-tallets Danmark*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2001; Henrik Horstbøll, *Menigmands medie. Det folkelige bogtryk i Danmark 1500–1840*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 1999.

⁷ Jostein Fet, *Lesende bønder: Litterær kultur i norske allmugesamfunn før 1840*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1995; Tuija Laine, “From Learning the Catechism by Heart towards Independent Reading,” in *On the Legacy of Lutheranism in Finland: Societal Perspectives*, ed. Sinnemäki, Kaius et al., 138–154. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2019.

⁸ Bertil Wennberg and Kristina Örtenhed, eds. *Press Freedom 250 Years: Freedom of the Press and Public Access to Official Documents in Sweden and Finland—A Living Heritage from 1766*. Stockholm: Sveriges riksdag, 2018.

⁹ Henrik Horstbøll, Ulrik Langen, and Fredrik Stjernfelt, *Grov Konfækt: tre vilde år med trykkefrihed: 1770–73*, vols. 1–2. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2020.

¹⁰ See for example Steen Bille Larsen and Nan Dahlkild, eds, *Dansk Bibliotekshistorie*, vols. 1–2. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2021.

¹¹ Emma Hagström Molin, *Krigsbyttets biografi: byten i Riksarkivet, Uppsala universitetsbibliotek och Skoklosters slott under 1600-talet*. Göteborg: Makadam, 2015.

¹² Nina Christensen and Charlotte Appel, *Children's Literature in the Nordic World*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2021.

¹³ Narve Fulsås & Tore Rem, *Ibsen, Scandinavia and the Making of a World Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

¹⁴ Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017; Karl Berglund, "Mordens marknad: Litteratursociologiska studier i det tidiga 2000-talets svenska kriminallitteratur". PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2017.

¹⁵ This list offers just a small selection of relevant titles in the area; it is far from a complete overview of the book historical research that Nordic scholars have published over the years.

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