

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ATHENIAN MARRIAGE AS DEPICTED IN VASE PAINTING: LEBES GAMIKOS

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### Abstract

The lebes gamikos, a type of ancient Greek pottery associated with weddings, provides a valuable lens through which to examine the role of women in Athenian marriage. A prominent example is the wedding scene attributed to the Washing Painter, a prolific artist of the late 5th century BCE. This vase painting offers rich visual evidence that illuminates the cultural norms and societal expectations surrounding Athenian women during this period. This study employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on an in-depth analysis of visual and thematic elements in vase paintings. For this desk research, the analysis will primarily utilize books, scholarly articles, and other resources from libraries and online databases based on the research area. By examining the figures and activities depicted in the Washing Painter's wedding scene, alongside other contemporary vase paintings from 5th century BCE Athens, the study aims to elucidate the societal roles and expectations of women in marriage. Central to this research is the detailed examination of the figures and activities portrayed in the Washing Painter's wedding scene. The depiction of the bride, veiled and surrounded by female attendants, highlights themes of modesty, communal support, and the transmission of domestic skills, all crucial aspects of a woman's role in Athenian marriage. Ritual activities such as the ceremonial bath emphasize purity and preparation, underscoring societal expectations of women as embodiments of virtue and domesticity. The presence of male figures, often the groom and his relatives, symbolizes the patriarchal transfer of the bride from her natal family to her husband's household, reflecting the broader societal structure in which women's roles were primarily domestic and familial. The rationale for focusing specifically on the lebes gamikos and the Washing Painter's depiction lies in the nuanced insights these artifacts provide, which have been relatively underexplored compared to other forms of ancient Greek art. While extensive research exists on the general portrayal of women in ancient Greek art, this study aims to fill a gap by providing a focused analysis of wedding scenes on the lebes gamikos, highlighting its unique contribution to understanding gender roles in Athenian society. By comparing these findings with other 5th century BCE vase paintings, the research seeks to uncover subtle variations and commonalities, offering a fresh perspective on the cultural and social fabric of ancient Athens.

**Keywords:** Lebes Gamikos, Athens, Marriage, Women, Washing Painter

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## Introduction



### *Lebes gamikos*, 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE

The *lebes gamikos*, a ceremonial wedding vase as seen in Fig 01 above, holds profound cultural significance in ancient Greek society, particularly in 5th century BCE Athens. These vessels were integral to wedding rituals, adorned with intricate scenes that depicted the various stages and symbols of marital union. Among the artisans renowned for their contributions to this visual tradition, the Washing Painter stands out for the meticulous detail and emotive quality of his wedding scenes. These depictions offer invaluable insights into the societal norms, cultural values, and gender roles prevalent in Athenian marriage ceremonies.

Marriage in ancient Athens was not merely a personal union but a cornerstone of societal structure and continuity. Women held significant roles within the institution of marriage, although within a framework of patriarchal control. The primary purpose of marriage for Athenian women was to produce legitimate offspring and manage the *oikos*<sup>1</sup>, thereby ensuring the lineage and stability of the family unit. The transition from maidenhood to married life was marked by rituals and ceremonies, symbolizing the shift in responsibilities and status within society. Women were expected to embody virtues of modesty, fidelity, and domestic proficiency, as reflected in both legal texts and cultural representations such as vase paintings.

Vase painting flourished in ancient Greece during the 5th century BCE, encompassing a wide range of styles and themes that mirrored contemporary life and cultural practices. Among the most notable were the black-figure<sup>2</sup> and <sup>3</sup>red-figure techniques, each contributing distinct artistic expressions to pottery decoration. These vases served various functions, from daily household use to religious ceremonies and funerary rites. In the context of marriage, *lebes gamikos* vases played a crucial role in depicting scenes related to weddings, demonstrating not only the aesthetic sensibilities of the period but also serving as cultural artifacts that communicated societal norms and values.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *oikos* encompasses both the physical household and the family unit, including its economic functions and social responsibilities.

<sup>2</sup> Black-figure pottery, which originated in Corinth around the 7th century BCE and became popular in Athens, involved the application of a black slip to create silhouetted figures against the natural red of the clay.

<sup>3</sup> Red-figure pottery, developed around 530 BCE, replaced the earlier black-figure technique. This method involved painting figures in a red slip on a black background, allowing for more detailed and naturalistic representations.

The Washing Painter's<sup>4</sup> contributions to vase painting are particularly significant for their portrayal of wedding scenes. These compositions often feature the bride, female attendants, and occasionally male figures engaged in preparatory activities and ceremonial rituals. Such imagery not only offers insights into the roles and expectations of women but also provides a visual narrative of communal and familial interactions surrounding marriage in ancient Athens. By examining these visual narratives, this study aims to uncover deeper understandings of gender dynamics, cultural practices, and societal structures within Athenian marriage ceremonies as depicted on *lebes gamikos* vases by the Washing Painter. This analysis will contribute to a more nuanced appreciation of ancient Greek art and its reflection of social realities.

### **Background of the Study**

5th century BCE Athens, often referred to as the Classical period, was a time of remarkable political, cultural, and intellectual development. This era saw the flourishing of democracy under leaders such as Pericles<sup>5</sup>, alongside significant advancements in philosophy, drama, and the arts with figures like Socrates<sup>6</sup>, Sophocles<sup>7</sup>, and Phidias<sup>8</sup> shaping Athenian society. The Parthenon was constructed during this period, symbolizing the city's power and cultural achievements. Socially, the *oikos* (household) remained the fundamental unit of society, with distinct roles and expectations for men and women. Women's activities were primarily centered around the home, including responsibilities related to domestic management and participation in religious and familial ceremonies. Marriage was a crucial institution, reinforcing familial alliances and social stability, with elaborate rituals underscoring the importance of these unions within Athenian culture.

In ancient Athens, marriage was a pivotal institution that not only regulated personal relationships but also played a crucial role in maintaining social order and continuity. Women, in particular, occupied central roles within this institution, although their autonomy was limited within the patriarchal structure of Athenian society (Neils, 2003). The primary responsibilities of Athenian women within marriage included managing the household and bearing legitimate heirs to ensure the perpetuation of the family lineage (Neils, 2003). These societal expectations were often reinforced through cultural practices and artistic representations, such as those found on *lebes gamikos* vases. Scholars like Oakley (2004) have extensively studied Greek pottery, including its forms, functions, and symbolic meanings. The vases not only served utilitarian purposes but also served as vehicles for artistic expression and cultural communication. The imagery on these vases, particularly those depicting weddings, conveyed not only aesthetic ideals but also encoded deeper cultural values and social norms. The visual narratives captured on *lebes gamikos* vases by artists like the Washing Painter provide crucial evidence for understanding the roles and expectations of women in Athenian marriage ceremonies.

Furthermore, vase painting during the 5th century BCE underwent significant stylistic developments, marked by the transition from the black-figure to the red-figure technique. This period witnessed an

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<sup>4</sup> The Washing Painter, active during the late 5th century BCE, is renowned for his detailed depictions of wedding preparations, particularly on *lebes gamikos* vases.

<sup>5</sup> Pericles was an influential Athenian statesman and general who led Athens during its Golden Age, promoting arts, literature, and the democratic process.

<sup>6</sup> Socrates was a classical Greek philosopher credited as one of the founders of Western philosophy, known for his contributions to ethics and epistemology.

<sup>7</sup> Sophocles was one of the three ancient Greek tragedians whose plays have survived, renowned for his dramas like "Oedipus Rex" and "Antigone."

<sup>8</sup> Phidias was a Greek sculptor, painter, and architect, celebrated for his statue of Zeus at Olympia and his work on the Parthenon, including the statue of Athena Parthenos.

expansion in the themes and subjects depicted on pottery, reflecting broader changes in Athenian society and artistic trends (Oakley, 2004). The scenes on *lebes gamikos* vases, characterized by their detailed compositions and narrative richness, exemplify the artistic achievements and cultural sophistication of the period. This study seeks to delve deeper into these visual representations to uncover insights into the roles, expectations, and societal norms surrounding Athenian women in marriage during the 5th century BCE. By analyzing the wedding scenes depicted by the Washing Painter and comparing them with other contemporary vase paintings, this research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ancient Greek art, gender dynamics, and cultural practices related to marriage.

### **Literature Review**

Robin Osborne's *Archaic and Classical Greek Art* (1998) provides a comprehensive survey of Greek art history from the Archaic to the Classical period, examining the development of artistic styles, iconography, and cultural contexts. He discusses the evolution of Greek art forms and their relationships to broader historical and social changes. Osborne's analysis offers foundational insights into the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of Greek art, including vase painting. However, his focus on stylistic and formal developments within art history does not extensively explore the specific social practices, gender roles, or cultural meanings associated with vase paintings depicting marriage ceremonies. Thus, while Osborne's work lays essential groundwork in Greek art history, it leaves room for further investigation into the social implications of artistic representations in specific contexts such as Athenian marriage rituals.

Jenifer Neils' influential book *Goddess and Polis: The Panathenaic Festival in Ancient Athens* (2003) offers a comprehensive examination of the Panathenaic Festival and its impact on Athenian civic and religious life. She explores how the festival, dedicated to Athena, shaped public identity and promoted civic pride through artistic representations, including vase paintings. Neils discusses the role of art in glorifying the city and its patron deity, providing insights into the political and social dimensions of Athenian art production. However, her study primarily focuses on religious and civic contexts, emphasizing the festival's role in fostering Athenian unity and identity. It does not extensively delve into the depiction of everyday life events, such as marriage ceremonies, and the specific roles of women within these contexts, which is the primary focus of this research.

In his work *Picturing Death in Classical Athens: The Evidence of the White Lekythoi* (2004), John H Oakley meticulously examines the role of white lekythoi in ancient Greek funerary practices. These vessels, adorned with scenes of mourning and ritualistic offerings, served as grave markers and played a significant role in commemorating the deceased. Oakley's research highlights the symbolic meanings attached to these pottery forms, shedding light on ancient Greek beliefs about death and the afterlife. His analysis underscores the artistic and cultural significance of pottery in conveying religious and social messages within Athenian society. However, Oakley's focus on funerary contexts limits the scope of his investigation primarily to death rituals and does not extensively cover other aspects of daily life or ceremonial practices, such as marriage ceremonies, which are central to this study.

Beth Cohen's *The Colors of Clay: Special Techniques in Athenian Vases* (2006) explores the technical aspects of Athenian pottery, including the use of colors, decorative techniques, and stylistic innovations. Her research enhances our understanding of the craftsmanship involved in pottery production and the artistic choices made by ancient Greek potters. Cohen's analysis contributes to a deeper appreciation of the material and technical aspects of pottery, but her study primarily focuses on formal qualities rather than thematic content or cultural implications. Therefore, while Cohen's work enriches our

understanding of pottery as an artistic medium, it does not extensively address the social or cultural meanings embedded in vase paintings related to marriage ceremonies.

In *A Companion to Greek Art* (2012), Smith and Plantzos present a comprehensive overview of Greek art and its cultural significance from the Archaic to the Hellenistic periods. Their discussion encompasses various artistic mediums, including pottery, sculpture, and architecture, highlighting the evolution of artistic styles and their societal contexts. The book provides valuable insights into the technical aspects of pottery production and the thematic diversity of vase paintings. However, while Smith and Plantzos cover a wide range of topics in Greek art history, their treatment of vase painting focuses more broadly on stylistic developments and iconographic themes rather than specific social practices or gender roles depicted in scenes related to marriage ceremonies.

### **Research Question**

What do the figures and activities shown in the Washing Painter's wedding scene reveal about the role of women in Athenian marriage?

### **Research Problem**

Despite the wealth of scholarship on ancient Greek pottery, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific role of women within Athenian marriage ceremonies as depicted on *lebes gamikos* vases. These ceremonial vessels, adorned with intricate scenes of wedding rituals, offer a unique window into the cultural norms and social dynamics of Athenian society during the 5th century BCE. While previous studies have explored various aspects of Greek pottery, including its stylistic evolution, technical craftsmanship, and broader thematic representations, there has been limited focused analysis on how these visual narratives specifically depict the roles, behaviors, and societal expectations placed upon women during marital rites.

The primary research problem addressed in this study is the need to analyze and interpret the visual representations found on *lebes gamikos* vases attributed to the Washing Painter, with a specific focus on understanding the roles of women in Athenian marriage ceremonies. These vases, characterized by their detailed and emotive depictions, provide significant material evidence for reconstructing ancient Greek cultural practices and beliefs surrounding marriage. By examining these scenes, the study aims to elucidate how women were portrayed and perceived within the context of marriage, including their symbolic roles, domestic responsibilities, and social status transitions.

Furthermore, while existing scholarship has touched upon broader themes of gender and societal roles in ancient Greece, the specific analysis of wedding scenes on *lebes gamikos* vases offers a nuanced exploration into the private and communal aspects of Athenian marital life. This research seeks to uncover deeper layers of meaning embedded in these visual narratives, exploring questions such as how women's roles were visually constructed and whether these depictions reflect idealized norms or realistic practices within Athenian society. Additionally, by comparing and contrasting the imagery on these vases with other contemporary vase paintings, the study aims to discern regional variations, artistic conventions, and cultural continuities in the representation of marriage across different contexts within ancient Greece. Thereby, the research problem centers on bridging the gap in scholarly understanding by conducting a focused investigation into the roles and expectations of women in Athenian marriage ceremonies as depicted on *lebes gamikos* vases. By analyzing these visual representations through a critical lens informed by gender studies and cultural history, this study aims to contribute to a deeper comprehension of ancient Greek social structures, gender dynamics, and cultural practices related to marriage during the 5th century BCE.

### **Objectives**

This study aims to delve into the role of women in Athenian marriage ceremonies as depicted on *lebes gamikos* vases attributed to the Washing Painter. The primary objective is to conduct a detailed visual analysis of these wedding scenes, deciphering the symbolic meanings embedded in the imagery. By scrutinizing gestures, attire, and interactions portrayed on these vases, the study seeks to uncover insights into how women were perceived and expected to behave within the context of marriage during the 5th century BCE Athens. Additionally, this research aims to explore the portrayal of gender dynamics, examining whether these visual narratives reflect societal norms or ideals regarding women's roles, status transitions, and familial responsibilities.

Furthermore, this study endeavors to compare and contrast the wedding scenes depicted on *lebes gamikos* vases with other contemporary vase paintings from ancient Athens. This comparative analysis aims to identify common themes, stylistic variations, and regional peculiarities in the representation of marriage rituals. By situating these visual representations within their broader cultural and social contexts, the research seeks to interpret how artistic conventions and cultural values influenced the portrayal of marriage ceremonies in ancient Greek society. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute new insights to the scholarship on Greek pottery and ancient Greek social history, offering a nuanced understanding of gender roles, cultural practices, and societal expectations related to marriage during the Classical period.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research approach focused on visual analysis and comparative study of ancient Greek pottery, specifically *lebes gamikos* vases attributed to the Washing Painter. The methodology involves meticulous examination of the wedding scenes depicted on these vases, analyzing details such as gestures, attire, and contextual elements to decode their symbolic meanings and cultural implications. Comparative analysis will be conducted by juxtaposing these scenes with other contemporary vase paintings from 5th century BCE Athens to identify stylistic trends, thematic similarities, and regional variations in the representation of marriage ceremonies. This qualitative approach allows for a deeper exploration of gender dynamics, societal norms, and cultural practices related to Athenian marriage rituals as conveyed through visual art forms.

### **Results and Discussion**

The analysis of *lebes gamikos* vases attributed to the Washing Painter provides intricate insights into the role of women in Athenian marriage ceremonies during the 5th century BCE. These vases offer a detailed visual narrative of various stages in the wedding process, vividly illustrating societal norms and cultural practices associated with marriage. Notably, the vases frequently depict scenes of the bride undergoing essential ceremonial preparations, including the bridal bath and adornment. In these depictions, the bride is shown immersed in a ritual bath, attended by a group of female helpers who assist with the cleansing and anointing processes. This bath is not merely a physical act but a symbolic ritual aimed at ensuring the bride's purity and readiness for her new marital role. The meticulous attention given to the bride's adornment—such as dressing in elaborate garments, donning jewelry, and wearing a ceremonial crown—further underscores the cultural emphasis on purity, beauty, and the transition into domestic life. The female attendants, depicted as actively involved in these preparations, highlight the communal aspect of the wedding rituals, reflecting a collective effort in the bride's transition from her natal home to her husband's household. These scenes illustrate the communal and supportive roles women played, reinforcing the idea that marriage was a collaborative process involving not just the bride but also her network of female relatives and friends. This portrayal provides a window

into the societal values that placed significant importance on ritual purity, communal support, and the ceremonial aspects of marriage, illustrating how these practices were integral to Athenian social and cultural life.

Moreover, the gestures and interactions depicted in the wedding scenes on *lebes gamikos* vases offer valuable insights into the gender dynamics and social hierarchies of Athenian society. The careful arrangement of figures and their interactions reveal much about the roles assigned to women within the context of marriage. The bride is often centrally positioned, symbolizing her focal role in the ceremony and the transition to married life. Surrounding her are female attendants who assist with various ceremonial tasks, underscoring their supportive and subordinate roles. This arrangement not only highlights the bride's prominence but also illustrates the hierarchical nature of the wedding ritual, where the bride's importance is visually reinforced by her elevated position and the active roles of those around her.

The attire of the figures further elucidates their social status and roles. The bride's elaborate garments, including richly decorated dresses and jewelry, contrast with the simpler attire of the attendants, emphasizing her elevated status on her wedding day. Symbolic objects such as the bridal crown and ritual vessels enhance the ceremonial atmosphere and signify the sacredness and importance of the bride's role. These visual elements collectively reinforce societal expectations regarding femininity and marital duty.

Neils (2003) argues that artistic representations in Athenian culture often perpetuated gendered expectations and social norms. This perspective is clearly reflected in the findings of this study on *lebes gamikos* vases, where the portrayal of women aligns with broader Athenian ideals of femininity, virtue, and familial duty. The vases depict women as central to the maintenance of household and familial continuity, emphasizing their roles as custodians of domestic harmony and social order. Through these detailed portrayals, the vases not only document the ceremonial aspects of marriage but also reinforce the cultural values and societal norms that shaped the roles of women in Athenian society.

Comparative analysis with other contemporary vase paintings significantly enhances the interpretation of the findings from the Washing Painter's *lebes gamikos* vases. According to Smith and Plantzos (2012), stylistic variations and regional preferences in vase painting offer insights into localized customs and cultural nuances throughout ancient Greece. By comparing the Washing Painter's work with vases from other regions and periods, one can observe both common themes and unique stylistic features in the depiction of marriage ceremonies. For instance, while the Washing Painter's vases emphasize the ceremonial preparations and the central role of the bride, other vases from different regions might highlight different aspects of the marriage ritual or present variations in the portrayal of gender roles. This comparative approach reveals how regional artistic traditions influenced the depiction of wedding ceremonies, reflecting local customs and societal values. In some cases, variations in artistic style—such as differences in the portrayal of attire, accessories, or ritual objects—shed light on the diverse interpretations of marriage practices across ancient Greece. These stylistic differences not only highlight regional preferences but also provide a broader understanding of how Athenian wedding practices were integrated into and adapted by various local traditions.

Moreover, the visual analysis of *lebes gamikos* vases attributed to the Washing Painter highlights the sophisticated artistic techniques used to convey narratives about marriage and social life. The Washing Painter and his contemporaries employed composition, perspective, and decorative motifs not merely for aesthetic appeal but as vehicles for communicating ideological messages regarding gender roles and

societal expectations. The composition of these vases often places the bride in a prominent position, underscoring her central role in the marriage ceremony. This deliberate positioning draws the viewer's attention to her importance and highlights the ceremonial aspects of her transition into married life. The use of perspective, including how figures are arranged and how space is utilized, further reinforces the hierarchical nature of the ritual, emphasizing the bride's significance while illustrating the supportive roles of those around her.

Decorative motifs on the vases—such as intricate patterns, symbolic objects, and ceremonial imagery—serve both decorative and narrative functions. These motifs are carefully chosen to reflect and reinforce the themes of purity, virtue, and familial continuity. For example, the inclusion of symbolic objects like bridal crowns and ritual vessels enhances the ceremonial atmosphere and underscores the cultural significance of the depicted rituals.

By analyzing these artistic techniques through a cultural-historical lens, this study deepens our understanding of how ancient Greek art reflected and shaped contemporary perceptions of gender, marriage, and social identity. The visual narratives on the vases not only document the ceremonies but also convey broader societal values and norms, offering insight into how art functioned as a medium for expressing and reinforcing cultural ideals during the Classical period. This approach underscores the role of art in both reflecting and shaping the social and cultural realities of ancient Greece, providing a richer context for interpreting the roles and expectations of women in Athenian society.

The examination of *lebes gamikos* vases attributed to the Washing Painter offers profound insights into Athenian marriage ceremonies and the roles of women within them. These findings highlight the crucial role of visual art as a primary source for reconstructing ancient social practices and cultural values, providing a detailed and nuanced understanding of gender dynamics and societal norms in Classical Athens. The vases vividly illustrate the ceremonial aspects of marriage, the importance of ritual purity, and the supportive roles of women, reflecting broader cultural ideals and expectations. This study underscores how art from this period not only serves as a record of social rituals but also as a means of reinforcing and communicating societal norms. The intricate depiction of ceremonies and roles on the vases provides a lens through which we can better understand the values and practices surrounding marriage in ancient Athens. Future research could build on these findings by exploring how similar artistic representations varied across different regions of ancient Greece. By comparing vases from diverse locales, scholars could investigate how regional differences influenced the depiction of marriage and gender roles, further illuminating the diversity of ancient Greek cultural practices. Additionally, examining how these artistic representations fit into broader discourses on gender and art history could offer new insights into the ways that art both shaped and reflected social identities and cultural values across different periods and regions.

## Conclusion

Concludingly, the examination of *lebes gamikos* vases attributed to the Washing Painter has provided significant insights into the role of women in Athenian marriage ceremonies during the 5th century BCE. Through meticulous visual analysis and comparative study with other contemporary vase paintings, this research has illuminated various aspects of Athenian marital practices and cultural norms. The wedding scenes depicted on these vases reveal a structured progression of ceremonial rituals, from the bridal preparations to the communal celebrations, emphasizing the importance of purity, domestic readiness, and communal support within Athenian society (Oakley, 2004).

The portrayal of women in these contexts underscores their roles as custodians of familial and societal continuity, embodying ideals of virtue and domesticity within the marital institution (Neils, 2003). Comparative analysis with other vase paintings has highlighted both shared themes and regional variations in the depiction of marriage ceremonies across ancient Greece (Smith & Plantzos, 2012). These variations reflect localized customs and cultural nuances, enriching our understanding of the diversity of marital practices and social expectations within different Athenian communities. Moreover, the artistic techniques employed by the Washing Painter, such as composition, perspective, and symbolic use of decorative motifs, have been instrumental in conveying narratives of gender roles and societal values (Osborne, 1998). These visual narratives not only served aesthetic purposes but also communicated ideological messages about gender identity and familial duty in Classical Athens.

Overall, this research underscores the importance of visual art as a primary source for interpreting ancient social practices and cultural values. By focusing on *lebes gamikos* vases attributed to the Washing Painter, this research has contributed to a deeper understanding of Athenian marriage ceremonies, shedding light on the intricate interplay between art, society, and gender dynamics in ancient Greece. Moving forward, further research could explore additional aspects of Athenian social life through the lens of visual art, considering broader implications for understanding gender roles, cultural diversity, and artistic expression across different regions and time periods within ancient Greece. By continuing to investigate these visual narratives, scholars can continue to uncover new dimensions of ancient Greek society and enrich our appreciation of its artistic and cultural heritage. Future studies could extend this work by examining other types of ceremonial vases and artworks to provide a more comprehensive picture of Athenian social rituals. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate archaeological findings, historical texts, and sociological theories could offer richer contextual understandings. By integrating these diverse perspectives, scholars can enhance our knowledge of how visual art functioned within the wider social, political, and cultural frameworks of ancient Greece. This holistic approach not only deepens the comprehension of historical gender dynamics but also informs contemporary discussions on the evolution of social roles and artistic expressions.

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