

# **THE OLD GRAMMAR SCHOOL CARMARTHEN**

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD EVALUATION**



Report No. 2004/101

Report Prepared for:  
**REGAN NORRIS PARTNERSHIP**

**CAMBRIA ARCHAEOLOGY**

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CARMARTHEN  
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By  
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As part of our desire to provide a quality service we would welcome any comments you may  
have on the content or presentation of this report

## **SUMMARY**

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Cambria Archaeology Field Operations on land adjacent to Carmarthen Old Grammar School, the Esplanade, Carmarthen (a Grade II Listed Building), in support of a planning application to construct a two-storey dwelling on the site.

The site lies immediately to the southeast of the known defences of *Moridunum*, the Roman town of Carmarthen, and in close proximity to the precinct of the medieval St. John's Priory (a Scheduled Ancient Monument) to the north and east.

A series of three archaeological trial trenches revealed made ground deposits of imported garden soil and building demolition debris overlying a substantial mortar-bonded regularly coursed wall, likely to be medieval, and a linear ditch or gully of unknown date but possibly Roman in origin

The location of the revealed section of wall, which runs slightly to the northwest but parallel with the presumed line of the priory precinct wall suggested by previous work, strongly implies that it may in fact be part of the medieval priory precinct wall.

The results of the evaluation have shown that there are important archaeological features present on the site and any groundworks could have a significant impact on these remains.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 PROJECT PROPOSALS AND COMMISSION**

Proposals to build a two storey dwelling on the plot of land immediately adjacent to the west gable end of Carmarthen Old Grammar School, by Bassett MacGregor, required an archaeological field evaluation in support of the planning application (Planning Application W-06345). The evaluation was required because the site lies adjacent to the Old Grammar School, a Grade II Listed Building (PRN 129), close to the line of the defences of Roman Carmarthen and near the precinct of the medieval priory of St. John, a Scheduled Ancient Monument (PRN 44: SAM CM 236). The site lies outside the scheduled area.

The architects Regan Norris Partnership, on behalf of Bassett MacGregor, commissioned Cambria Archaeology Field Operations to carry out the field evaluation during October and November 2004.

### **1.2 SCOPE OF THE PROJECT**

The scope and aims of this evaluation were to investigate the extent and character of any archaeological features or deposits through the excavation of a number of trial trenches located across the proposed building footprint itself and in other areas where building groundworks might be carried out.

### **1.3 REPORT OUTLINE**

This report describes the physical environment of the site (Section 2) before summarising the results of the fieldwork (Section 3) and the conclusions (Section 4) based on the results of Sections 2 and 3. Supporting data, including detailed fieldwork records, are given in a series of appendices.

### **1.4 ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS REPORT**

All archaeological features and layers are referred to using the three-figure context numbering system (e.g. *001*; *010*; *100*) employed by Cambria Archaeology Field Operations. The context numbers are shown in italics throughout this report. Trench numbers (T1, T2 and T3) refer to the order in which they were excavated rather than their location. Where appropriate other sites mentioned in the text are annotated with their Primary Record Number (PRN) as recorded in the Sites and Monuments Record held by Cambria Archaeology at their offices in Llandeilo. All grid references are prefixed with NGR (National Grid Reference). All levels are referenced to Ordnance Datum (OD).

## 2. THE SITE

### 2.1 Location

The proposed building plot lies adjacent to the southwest end of the Old Grammar School, a Grade II listed building (PRN 129) built in 1846 (Lodwick 1972, 222), at the northeast end of the Esplanade in the town of Carmarthen at NGR SN41902038. Beyond the north of the building plot part of the Old Grammar School garden lies within the precinct of the medieval St. John's Priory, which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The line of the defences of Roman Carmarthen are located close to the west side of the site (James 2004, 194-195).

The outstanding archaeological potential of this part of Carmarthen has been highlighted in a recent study undertaken for Carmarthenshire County Council and Cadw (James and James 2004). The report states:

*“it is Cambria Archaeology's view that this whole site is one of the most archaeologically significant in Wales, not only for the medieval Priory but also for the Dark Age and Roman periods. Consideration should be given to extending scheduling to protect as much of the site as practicable”* (James and James 2004, 20).

### 2.2 Site topography

Topographically the site is low lying, standing below the 15m contour, and situated just above the flood plain of the river Towy from which it is now separated by the relatively recently built east Carmarthen by-pass, and historically by the former railway line. The ground to the west rises quite steeply becoming an elevated plateau upon which the Roman town was established. Geologically this raised plateau is the result of glacial drift deposits that are in part overlain by fluvio-glacial sands and gravels, which continue downslope and were encountered on the site during the evaluation excavations. The solid geology of the area is represented by Ordovician shales.



*Plate 1: general view of the Old Grammar School, looking northeast, with T2 visible in the foreground.*

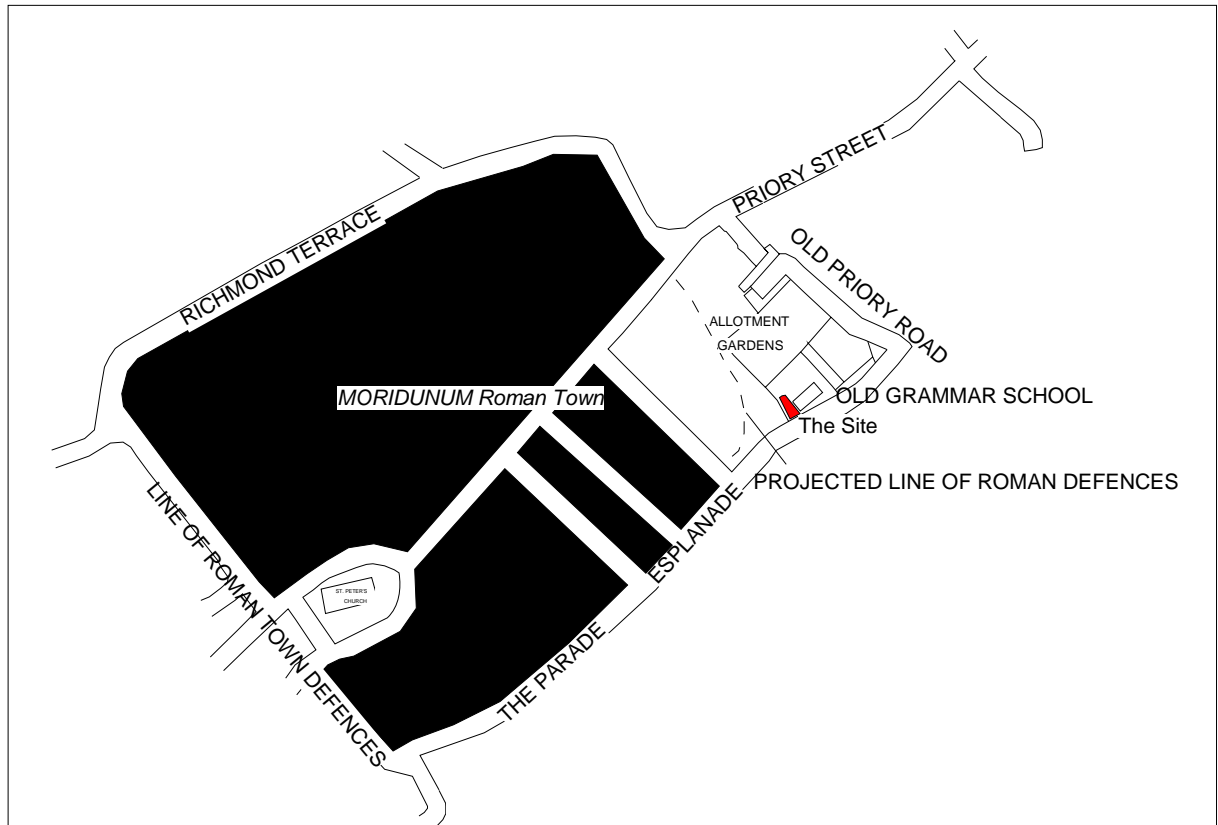


Figure 1: Location map showing proposed development site.

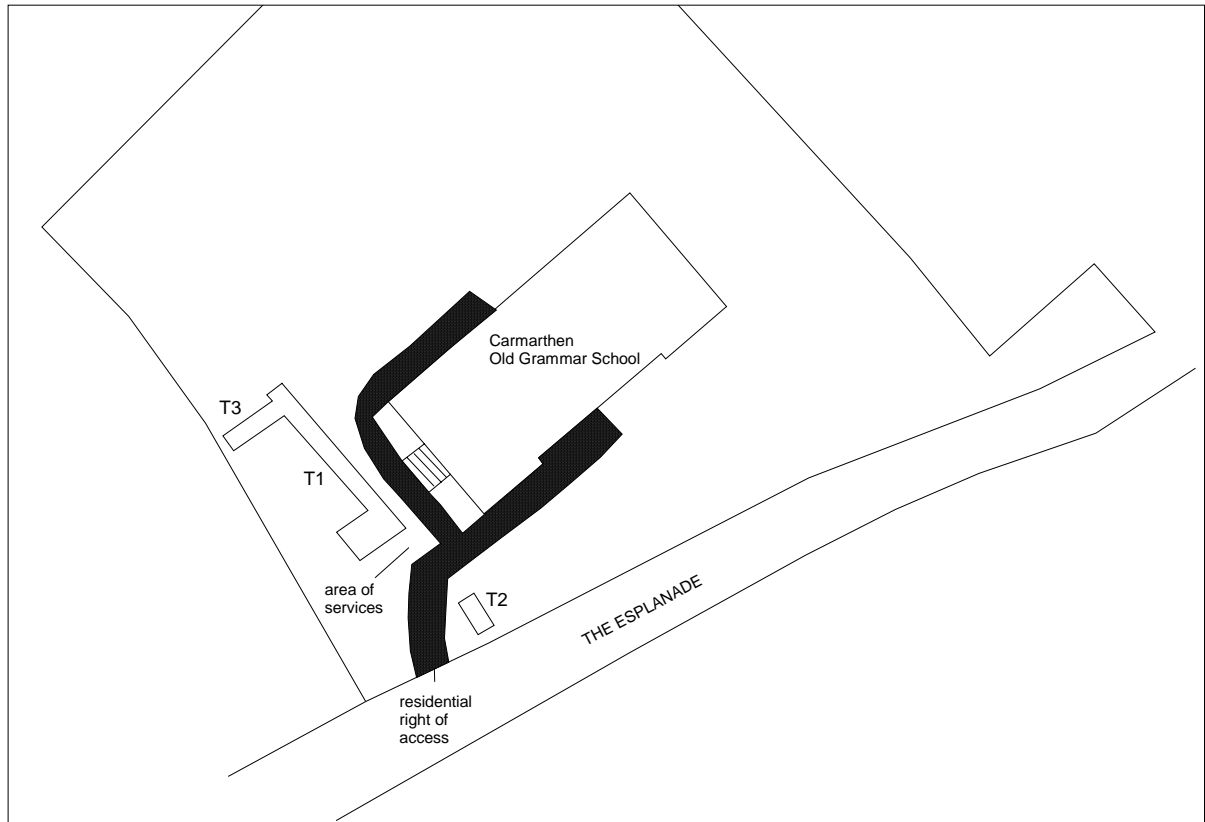


Figure 2: Site plan showing locations of trenches.

### **3. SUMMARY OF FIELDWORK RESULTS**

#### **3.1 METHODOLOGY**

A total of three trenches (T1, T2 and T3) were machine excavated using a digger with a toothless grading bucket, giving a total excavated area of around 27 square metres (see Fig.2). The original intention was to excavate two trenches giving a total excavated area of 43.5 square metres but factors of health and safety, ground instability, services, and residential access prohibited this.

Two trenches were positioned along (T1) and across (T3) the footprint of the proposed building and excavated to a maximum depth of 1.2 metres. One trench (T2) was positioned at the southeast edge of the site close to the Esplanade road frontage.

#### **3.2 EVALUATION RESULTS**

##### **Trench 1 (T1)**

Trench 1 measured 12 metres long (north-south) and was 1.2 metres wide for most of its length. An attempt to dig a 90 degree return to the west at the southern end of the trench had to be aborted because of a collapse due to the unstable nature of the ground, which resulted in the excavation being c.3m wide at that point (see Fig. 2). The trench had an average depth of 1.2m, but was up to 1.5m deep at the southern end. The deposits are described from the lowest to highest, i.e. earliest to latest.

##### *Possible Roman gully or ditch 003*

Stratigraphically, the earliest archaeological feature revealed in the trench was a 0.5m wide linear gully or ditch (015) which extended diagonally across the trench for a distance of 3.8m continuing beyond the excavation trench at both its northwest end and southeast side (see Fig. 3). This feature was partially excavated and shown to be cut into natural fluvio-glacial deposits (007) to a depth of 0.3m with near vertical sides and a nearly flat base and contained two deposits (018 and 008). The lower fill was a 0.06m deep layer of grey silty clay (018) containing a low percentage of very small rounded stones. The upper fill (008) was a 0.24m deep brown silty clay soil matrix containing an 80% mix of small rounded pebbles and angular stones with the occasional fragment of red brick or tile. The character of the fills suggests that the gully had remained open for some time, allowing the base to become silted up, and subsequently backfilled with 008. The red brick or tile fragments were retained for analysis and dating. Overlying the gully and its fills was a layer of loose brown silty loam, to an average depth of 0.55m, which contained 5% rounded and angular stone fragments, several post-medieval potsherds, and animal bones (006). This layer represented a buried garden soil horizon, which is overlain by the present black humic garden soil with an average depth of 0.30m (001).





*Plate 2: possible Roman gully/ditch 003. Fragments of possible Roman brick or tile are visible in the section.*

#### *Wall 002*

Close to the southern end of T1 a substantial well built wall (002) measuring 1.2m high by 1.0m wide was revealed some 0.5m below the present ground surface at a depth of 10.50m OD. The wall continued beyond the edge of both sides of the excavation trench so its full extent was not established, but enough of it was revealed to allow a description of its fabric. It was of regularly coursed mortar-bonded stone rubble construction comprising large stone blocks, between which occasional flat shale slabs had been inserted to level up the courses and overcome the unevenness of the stones used. The north face of the wall exhibited a fairly steep batter, whilst the south face was near vertical, which resulted in the wall being 1.35m wide at its base, where its foundations were seen to be cut into compact fluvioglacial gravels (007).

There was evidence, in the form of adhering cream coloured mortar, to suggest that the southern face may have once been rendered. In addition to the render there was a distinct horizontal line of greyish white coloured mortar c.2cm thick, also adhering to the wall, below which there was no evidence of the render. The presence of the horizontal mortar line and the adhering render above it may suggest that this face of the wall could represent the internal wall of a building, with the white mortar representing the floor line below a rendered wall face. There was no evidence to suggest that the northern face of the wall had been rendered.



*Plate 3: The north face of wall 002.*



*Plate 4: The south face of wall 002 showing the cream-coloured render and the building debris 003 that had accumulated against the wall.*

#### *Building debris 003*

An extensive layer, 1.10m deep, of friable greyish brown mortar rich soil matrix containing 60% angular stone blocks, 10% roofing slates (both whole and fragmentary) and frequent coal and mortar fragments (003) had built up against the southern face of wall 002. The majority of the identifiable roofing slates were found at the lower levels of this deposit, which appeared to be building demolition debris, at a similar level to the white mortar line adhering to the wall face c.9.83mOD.



The full extent of this layer is unknown but it continues beyond the edges of the evaluation trench and is overlain by the current topsoil 001 throughout with the exception of an area of modern disturbance caused by the laying of a modern mains water pipe, close to the surface on the eastern edge of the trench.

It is likely that the building debris layer 003 represent tumble from a now demolished building that had been constructed against the south face of wall 002, after the priory had been abandoned.

#### *Later deposits*

A number of deposits were encountered against the northern face of wall 002. The earliest deposit (017) was a greyish brown mortar rich soil containing 60% small shattered shale fragments and 10% medium sized rounded and angular stones and could be seen in section (Fig. 2) to be shallow banked against the base of the wall. It extended some 0.80m from the face of the wall. It is possible that this layer represents material waste deposited during the construction of the wall, but it could also have been deposited or built up some time after the wall was constructed.



*Plate 5: The later deposits banked against the north face of wall 002. Note the thick mortar layer 004, which appears to have been derived from the demolition of the wall.*

A loose brown silty clay soil layer (005) containing 10% mortar fragments, 5% angular and rounded stone and 3% large and small roofing slate fragments was also banked up against the north face of wall 002 and overlay 017 (Fig.2). This distinct deposit may represent *in situ* tumble from the possible building suggested by the lower deposits of building debris layer 003 encountered on the south side of the wall.

Pottery sherds, of probable post-medieval date, and animal bones, were recovered from within this deposit.

Overlying 005 and banked up against the upper part of the north face of wall 002 was an extensive greyish brown mortar rich layer of building demolition rubble (004) consisting of 60% angular and rounded large and medium size stones similar to the demolition debris 003 but without the roofing slate fragments. This layer sloped down and extended for at least 1.9m to the north of the wall but its true extent was not revealed as excavation ceased due to health and safety issues concerning the instability of the section and the depth of the trench. Although not fully characterised this layer obviously represents demolition debris associated with wall 002.

Demolition layer 004 was overlain at its northern edge by a number of stony deposits (010; 011; 012; 013 not described here, but see Fig.3) noted both in the east facing section of T1 and, in some instances, seen to extend across the excavation trench. The true nature of these deposits was not wholly understood during the evaluation because they could not be fully characterised. However, it could be seen that they lay above a stiff brown silty clay layer (014) that contained few coarse components and which may represent a buried soil developed upon both the natural fluvioglacial gravels 007 and 004. Some of these deposits contained post-medieval artefacts, suggesting that they may be part of the landscaping of this area of the town, possibly during the development of the Esplanade, or the building of the Grammar School in 1846. The buried garden soil layer 006 overlay all these deposits and 004.

## **Trench 2 (T2)**

Trench 2 measured 2.4 metres long by 1.2 metres wide and was excavated to a depth of 1.1 metres below the present ground surface (11.07mOD). It was situated at the southeast edge of the proposed building plot close to the Esplanade road frontage. Its position was dictated by existing services and residential access to the Old Grammar School and the northern edge of the Esplanade.

The earliest layer revealed in this trench was a brown stiff silty clay soil matrix containing 10% rounded stones, 1% mortar flecks with some animal bone, pottery and red brick or tile (019). Only the top 0.3m of this layer was revealed and it continued to an unknown depth. The coarse components appear to be building debris but little can be said to interpret this layer.

Overlying 019, to an average depth of 0.28m, was a dark brown stiff silty clay soil matrix containing 10% white mortar flecks with occasional small fragments of shattered shale and flecks of charcoal (021), which may represent a buried garden soil. This horizon was in turn overlain by a 0.15m depth of stiff orange clay (022). The clay, which appears to have been heat affected, may represent a makeup layer dumped in order to raise the ground level.

Two pits of unknown function, but possibly post-medieval or modern rubbish pits, were observed in the trench sections. Both appeared to have been dug from a level immediately below the present topsoil horizon. In the south-facing section a 0.8m wide near vertically sided flat bottomed cut (023), dug to a maximum depth of 0.4m,

was seen to cut through layers 022, 021 and 019. This pit was filled with a loose dark brown silty loam (024) containing 20% small rounded stones, 2% mortar fragments, occasional fragments of animal bone and sherds of post-medieval or modern pottery. In the west-facing section a shallow steep sided pit (025) measuring 1.3m wide and 0.30m deep was cut through the heat affected clay layer 022. The fill of this pit (026) was a brown friable silty clay soil containing 10% small rounded stones and no other coarse components or finds.

The topsoil (020) varied in depth from 0.18m to a maximum of 0.30m and comprised a friable black humic loam containing 30% plant roots and 5% small angular and rounded stones.



*Plate 6: Pit 023 in the south-facing section of T2.*

### **Trench 3 (T3)**

Trench 3 was excavated to investigate the nature of the existing garden terrace. The terrace sloped quite steeply down from the northwest (11.46mOD) to the southeast (10.26mOD). The trench measured 4.4 metres long x 1.2 metres wide x between 1.2 and 1.5m deep, and was excavated from the western edge of T1 after that trench had been recorded and backfilled. This was done for safety reasons and to allow better access for the mechanical excavator.

The earliest horizon exposed in this trench was represented by the natural fluvioglacial gravels 007. These were, again as in T1, overlain by the buried garden soil horizon 006 with no intervening layers or features noted. This horizon was seen to exhibit a definite slope downwards from west to east and varied in depth from 0.44m at the west end of the trench to 0.20m at the east end.



A shallow sub-circular pit cut into buried soil horizon 006. The pit (028) was about 1.1m in diameter with steep sides to a depth of 0.25m. The pit was filled with a dark brown bone-rich silty clay soil (029) containing 30% angular stones, 10% animal bone, occasional sherds of pottery and a few fragments of glass. The pit was sealed by an overlying layer of light brown silty clay soil containing c.2% small angular and rounded stones, small coal fragments, post-medieval potsherds and brick and tile fragments (027). This layer, which was c.0.4m thick, was not noted in T1.

A layer of brown clay, containing modern brick and garden debris (030) overlay the western end of 027. The present day garden soil horizon (001) overlay this horizon and layer 027 to an average depth of 0.35m.

All the soil layers observed in T3 appear to represent episodes of post medieval garden soil deposition reflecting the various phases of terracing and landscaping in the garden to the west of the old Grammar School.

No early archaeological features were observed in T3 at depths that would be affected by the proposed building work.



*Plate 7: east-facing section of T3 showing post-medieval deposits that made up the existing garden terrace.*

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The results of the evaluation support the idea that the site lies within the medieval priory precinct.

### **4.1 Wall 002**

The exact position of the southwest section of the precinct wall for St. John's Priory is not known but its likely position, based on tithe map and topographic evidence, has been conjectured (James 1979) as being some 8m to the south of the Old Grammar School. The section of wall (002) revealed during this evaluation had the same alignment as the conjectured precinct wall but lay approximately 12m to the northwest. The wall was of substantial enough build to be considered as a boundary wall and its location and alignment are close enough to the conjectured position for it to be a reasonable assumption that it represents part of the precinct boundary.

It is likely that the footings for the basement area of the Old Grammar School have all but destroyed any remnants of 002 if indeed it did continue for any great length in that direction. If the wall turns to the north, it may be encountered in the westernmost foundation trench for the new building.

### **4.2 The possible building**

Unfortunately the health and safety limitations of the evaluation did not allow further investigation of the extent of 002. Nor was it possible to reveal any further evidence to assess the potential building (represented by the render on the south face of the wall and the building debris 003) abutting the south face of the wall.

Any groundworks on the southern side of wall 002 may reveal further evidence of the possible building.

### **4.3 Possible Roman gully or ditch 003**

The nature of ditch/gully 003 was not established, but the presence of what appeared to be Roman brick or tile fragments suggests a Roman or post-Roman date, but does not provide any evidence for its function. Similar, but much larger features were noted during the excavation of part of the medieval priory buildings, c.50m to the east of the Old Grammar School, and dated to the early medieval period (James 1979, 127-128).

### **4.4 Potential impact of the proposed development**

The site for the proposed building will cross the wall 002, extend to the north into the garden area of the Old Grammar School, and would for the most part occupy the existing garden terrace. Therefore, if the current building proposals remain as planned, the wall 002 and the deposits that rest against its north and south faces would be affected by any groundworks undertaken at the southern end of the site. At the northern end of the site the post-medieval and modern garden deposits may be deep enough to minimise any disturbance to the possible Roman gully/ditch 003.





## **APPENDIX ONE: CATALOGUE OF EVALUATION ARCHIVE**

The project archive has been indexed and catalogued according to National Monument Record (NMR) categories and contains the following:

- A.** Copy of final report
- B.** Records made during fieldwork, including context record sheets and site notebook.
- C.** Drawing catalogue and site drawings.
- D.** Site photographs - catalogue, colour slides, B/W contact sheets.
- E.** Finds catalogue, individual finds records and finds report.
- I.** Archive report, draft copies of final report.
- J.** Publication drawings.
- M.** Miscellaneous correspondence.

There is no material for classes **F, G, H, K, L** and **N**.

The archive is currently held by Cambria Archaeology Field Operations, Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire, as project number 52438.

## **SOURCES**

### **Unpublished sources**

- |                          |      |  |
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