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Building the Plan of Saint Gall

A Living History Enterprise Back to the Roots
of European Culture

*„The past is recalled not because of itself
but because of what it adds to the present."*

John Dewey

For three centuries, the Plan of Saint Gall has inspired a vast number of architects and even more historians. Yet, it had never been realised in full scale – until today. Inspired by the amazing project of building a medieval castle at Guédelon in France, a registered non-profit society called "karolingische klosterstadt e.V."[1] (Carolingian Monastic City) has accepted the challenge to build the fictitious abbey as it is shown in the manuscript (Codex 1092) within a period of 30 years, applying methods and tools of the early ninth century.

Building a Long Lost Idea?

We[2] had been asked by the above mentioned society to explore the aspects of building a living history site with staff in period costume, portraying construction and everyday life as well as the monastic culture of the Carolingian times – a period setting stage for our common medieval heritage – in the microcosm of an almost autonomous abbey. If the society's ambiguous idea for a medieval construction site of this size will be realised, new avenues for communicating archaeological and historical information to the German public will open up, while at the same time serious questions in terms of interpretation and quality management arise.

To begin with, the term "open-air reconstructions" would obviously be highly inaccurate concerning structures taken from the manuscript, since they never existed in the manner described.[3] Therefore, by now we are using the term "heritage centre" to designate the idea of the construction site – bearing in mind that only future successors will answer the question if the project's outcome does actually meet the museum's definition by ICOM (cf. ICOM-Deutschland 2003: 18.2b.viii) or the German Museum Association (cf. Deutscher Museumsbund e.V. & ICOM-Deutschland 2006).

Fabricated Imaginations of the Past

A sceptic might easily argue that any modern attempt to realize the Plan of Saint Gall is accursed to be a failure in itself, since the structures as shown on the manuscript never existed for real. Furthermore, the Saint Gall manuscript Codex 1092 holds many secrets and uncertainties. Decoding its depictions and blending them with the rare archaeological records of the Carolingian period have been major tasks of

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[1] Cf. http://www.karolingischeklosterstadt.com.

[2] Speaking of "Rete Amicorum" (cf. http://www.rete-amicorum.de), a company owned by the authors, providing living history services, situated at the city of Aix-la-Chapelle, the most favorite imperial residence of Charlemagne.

[3] While the Plan as a whole wasn't built, it bears similarities in certain details to archaeological findings e.g. below the Fulda Cathedral (cf. Jacobsen 1992: 145–146) and the Reichenau Abbey (cf. Zettler & Schlichtherle 1988: 240), the place where the manuscript was manufactured (cf. Bischoff 1962).

research that led to many controversies in literature (cf. Jacobsen 2002). Hence, sceptics could conclude that a "heritage centre" would not represent true history and, therefore, should not be built at all. This, however, is not only a philosopher's dispute, but a very serious objection that will lead us directly to the central issue of any living history activity.

Open-air museums, archaeological reconstructions or themed environments in general are highly popular with non-scholars, simply because their untrained eye can not decipher the scraps of history like that of an expert (cf. Colomer 2002: 92). But people want to connect to their heritage (cf. Schörken 1995), therefore they reach out for the help of visual representations of the past that compensate for the lack of specialized knowledge (cf. James 1999: 117).

Perfect Museum or Heterotopia?

From a visitor's perspective, the value of these representations is enhanced by providing both intellectual and emotional stimuli.[4] For instance, a survey (cf. Höge 2004: 41–46) revealed that visitors of open-air museums love to enter the buildings and so get a feeling what life had been then.[5]

At this point we should also take into consideration if "open-air reconstructions ... may be understood as theatre spaces in which people today can negotiate their own relations with each other and the world around them through making the taken-for-granted everyday profoundly meaningful in the 'safe' environment of the past", effectively turning an open-air site into a heterotopia by Michel Foucault (2005), as Angela Piccini (1999: 152, cf. 161) suggested.

Whatever underlying motivations draw visitors of all ages to a heritage site, we have to acknowledge that they do not wish to be reduced to receivers of arcane wisdom. They want to participate in the learning process while engaging in social interaction.[6] They long for touching objects and would like to experience on their own.[7] Regarding this, living history sites, naturally rich on opportunities for exploration and stimulation of all senses, might be praised to be the method of choice in order to make all visitors' dreams of the perfect museum come true.

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[4] On the relevance of "emotional education" to museums and heritage centres cf. Nahrstedt 2004.

[5] Probably stopping at things that strike a chord within their personal experience, as findings of another survey on exhibitions suggest (cf. Schäfer 2003: 87–88). Obviously, Tilden's first principle was right on the spot (cf. Tilden 1977: 9).

[6] On the relevance of participation, communication, multi-sensual input and self-motivation with leisure education cf. Haller 2003: 150–154 and Csikszentmihalyi & Schiefele 1993.

[7] A "house to touch" was furnished in 1999 at the open-air Museum at Detmold/Germany with great success (cf. Apel 2007: 94–95). On the success and limitations of hands-on activities in exhibitions (cf. Owen 1999; cf. Höge 2004: 49–52).

Fighting the Demon of Deception[8]

Unfortunately, reconstructions and living history in general tend to create a "hyper-reality"[9], conveying over-simplified stereotypes, easily misunderstood as the *real* past (cf. Ahrens 1990: 178; cf. James 1999: 120–121), taking on *"a life of their own, conveying ideas that are not explicitly stated elsewhere"* (Moser 1999: 95). Adding the credibility costumed interpreters emanate unconsciously[10], great dangers inhere in any living history enterprise.

A heritage centre based on the Plan of Saint Gall will transform an obscure medieval fiction to a hyper-reality very easily to believe in. A fast victory to the sceptic? We do not think so, because to focus interpretive efforts on this bitter truth might be the key to solve the dilemma.[11]

Contrary to the beliefs of many curators artefacts don't speak for themselves[12], and neither do reconstructions[13] – or in this special case, representations of past concepts. Relaying the shortcomings of reconstructions to visitors while they are surrounded by a very vivid and thus believable representation of the past is undoubtedly a very difficult task[14], since it seems to be contradictory to the idea[15] of living history (cf. Hochbruck 2008).

Based on her observations Piccini (1999: 170) concluded that all efforts on de-construction would be abolished by the mechanics of heterotopia, by which reconstructed structures are *"quickly subsumed within particularly functional ways of viewing the world outside the heritage industry."* If this is to be true, we would consider it poor interpretation. Heterotopia can be connected to Constructivist Learning, a theory very relevant to effective interpretation (cf. Hein 2000; cf. Haller 2003: 145–146; cf. Gerstenmaier & Mandl 1995).

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[8] *"Eine zweifache Betrugsmöglichkeit eröffnet sich somit dem Dämon, der auch im Museum hausen kann: die Täuschung der Sinne, etwas zu sehen meinen, was nicht so oder gar nicht ist und etwas erinnern, was nicht war oder so nicht war."* (cf. Pircher 1990: 73)

[9] Hochbruck (2008) called it "Hyper-Anschaulichkeit", translated to hyper-clearness. Speaking of themed environments, we find "reality" to be an appropriate transition, since these self-contained environments are bound to cultivate the image of a whole past culture.

[10] We often experienced situations like this: while giving talks in period costume, visitors directed their questions always to us first, while curators and experts in plain clothes, standing beside us, were totally ignored! So the use of a costume can exude competence – a factor to be reminded.

[11] *"Die Archäologie muss in ihren Museen, mit ihren Bildern zugleich die Fähigkeiten vermitteln, die aufgefüllten Lücken zu erkennen."* (Kraus 2007: 32; cf. James 1999: 130)

[12] *"Objects appear to 'speak' to visitors only if they create resonances with pre-existing experiences, if they can be related to prior knowledge and understanding. Those who proclaim that 'objects speak for themselves' have typically spent a lifetime working with material culture"* (James 1999: 127). For German literature cf. Bäumler 2004: 40–41.

[13] *"... the visitor is often in exactly this position with a museum reconstruction, where there is no one present to expound the 'story' behind the image"* (James 1999: 122).

[14] Ahrens (1990: 178) thought that illustrative texts would be overwhelmed by the vibrancy of reconstructed structures, simply because reading them is an extra effort. He had no answer to this problem. Able interpreters can't be ignored that easily.

[15] Yet, any living historian should remember that *"the technique* [of living history] *offers us the opportunity to replicate aspects of the past, not its total simulation"* (Robertshaw 1997).

Therefore, we call on interpreters to refine their techniques to get through (cf. Duit 1995: 912–916), thus enabling their audience to question the constructed images of the past by themselves. This task must be accomplished by presenting the tools used by scholars and alternate views on the topics shown. The (easy to grasp) fact that the presented abbey never existed, might even serve as an aid in this process. In short, the ultimate success of the site would be that visitors will leave happily, after discovering for themselves that history is a flimsy fabric woven by the present.

Doing so, the Plan of Saint Gall might become a proving ground for the progress of an adolescent German living history movement, since purposeful de-construction is the only serious interpretive approach to the uncertainties of the manuscript and representations of the past in general.[16]

Towards Quality

Saying all this, what has to be done in order to implement the above mentioned at the Monastic City project? First, a scientific advisory council should be established, since no member of the society in charge does hold a degree in archaeology or history.[17] A permanent research and quality management department has to follow quickly. Its staff would ideally be made up by an archaeologist as well as a sophisticated craftsman and a living historian, since these three professions will be needed to judge each structure, tool, item of clothing etc. to be highly accurate for the heritage centre's purpose. Every item needs to be issued or at least approved by this department before its use at the site. Otherwise, pocket knives and further personal items that are inappropriate to the time frame will soon start to seep in. Neither tight budgets nor laissez-faire policy towards the staff should be an issue here, since the "material authenticity" of the site will be crucial towards its success[18] and right to exist.

The "trinity" of specialists is considered most effective with decision-making and creative processes (cf. Woodtli 2007: 136–137). However, a fourth person needs to be taken in the equation: the 21st century architect, who has to construct 9th century buildings according to today's regulations. In order to fulfil his duty towards security needs as well as historical accuracy, he has to work in close cooperation with the research department and the advisory council.

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[16] Schörken (1995: 14) argued that any popular representation of the past that does not comply to the ethics of scholarship would be illegitimate.

[17] This was called for emphatically a decade ago by Klaus Goldmann (2001), a historian who met hard resistance by colleagues himself when he was involved in establishing one of the first German post-WWII archaeological open-air museum at Düppel/Berlin in the 1970s.

[18] Thomas Shaw, Assistant Site Manager at Historic Fort Snelling, observed that *"accurate clothing is most important for interpreters who are portraying a particular person from the past. The visitor will take in everything about them. I firmly believe that visitors can spot a phoney. While their mental images of the past are largely formed by motion pictures (often erroneously so) they instinctively know what is legitimate even if they cannot articulate the particulars"* (ALHFAM Historic Clothing Committee 1998). We can attest this to be true from our own experience.

Recreational Learning

In recent years competition with expanding leisure industries caused an intense, yet fruitful discussion on the "audience-centred museum" (cf. Noelke 2001; cf. Commandeur & Dennert 2004). Evaluations give deep insight in the peoples' motives for attending museums and how interpretation can enrich the individual learning experience by taking visitors' motivations and needs into consideration.

Aside from school classes, people visit heritage centres during their leisure time. They obviously are not likely to seek instruction on scientific facts alone[19], but recreation and social relations[20], too – each of these being legitimate desires which a site's administration must take into consideration.[21] On the one hand, we encourage every heritage site to increase visitors' delight by providing room for these different agendas.[22] On the other hand, we warn them to sacrifice their primary mission for the sake of plain amusement! Their most fundamental mission will always remain to interpret our common heritage – because this will make the difference in competition with any other leisure activity.[23]

"The Story's the Thing"[24]

A heritage centre can boost its attraction and learning experience by providing plenty and varied human interaction (cf. Beyer & Sturm 2006: 69–70). Here, living history methodology discerns two distinct modes of live interpretation: first- and third-person.

First-person interpretation is practised widely at North-American and English historic sites. Being an appealingly narrative medium, it is considered an entertaining, yet powerful instrument for teaching history to non-scholars (cf. Robertshaw 1997; cf. Roth 1998: 3–4). Yet, we believe that the value of first-person approach is highly overestimated. Turning into forth-wall interpretation[25] or well placed vignettes, it might be the right choice on some occasions, e.g. illustrating social phenomena like

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[19] In a survey, conducted at 37 German museums in the mid 1980s, about 56% of visitors were looking for a combination of knowledge and entertainment (cf. Klein & Almasan 1990: 280).

[20] Most visitors that aren't with an organised group, attend museums with their family or spouse (cf. Klein & Almasan 1990: 231–236). Of those who come alone, most wish for companions actually (cf. Klein 2003: 126).

[21] Also see the "Visitors' Bill of Rights", the most comprehensive compilation on the parameters for a visitor-centred museum we encountered until today (cf. Schäfer 2003: 107–109).

[22] The "historical construction-playground" (Bau- und Geschichtsspielplatz) Roter Hahn at Lübeck/Germany was purposefully developed to a meeting point for all ages, locals and tourist. It is now appreciated by these for its pedagogic efforts as well as recreational area (cf. Andraschko, Puhle & Thomas 2007: 104–105).

[23] Kallinich (2004: 75) called on museums to incorporate entertainment and events in their activities while making heritage to their trademark at the same time. Cf. Bäumler 2004: 156–159.

[24] *"It should be clear … that while the interpreter is called upon to employ a combination of the arts, his main reliance will be upon a proficiency in what we call rhetoric; that is the art of writing or speaking. Especially, it implies skill in the presentation of ideas, adapted to whatever situation is at hand."* (Tilden 1977: 26)

[25] A type of first-person interpretation, "that does not offer visitors an opportunity to question or interrupt interpreters' dialogue while a scene is in progress." (Roth 1998: 183)

medieval politics full of symbolic gestures.[26] But while doing a classical first-person interpretation, you will have to stay in character and take care not to violate your time frame while talking to 21st century visitors, effectively erecting barriers in communication.

Very often encounters with first-person characters cause comic or awkward situations, because visitors are unfamiliar with the concept and/or cannot accommodate themselves to it. Even more severe deficits can be observed in terms of relating substantial background information that is needed to understand a scenario or period.[27] On top of it all, it will effectively put an end to all efforts for de-construction. First-person characters simply can't talk about archaeological remains and researcher's tools.[28]

Furthermore, preparing a believable first-person character is a very time-consuming and complex thing to do. It takes a lot of research on the character's social and material background as well as the general time frame you can act on in order to produce adequate reactions to visitors (cf. Roth 1998: 41–49). While this can be done with periods rich in primary sources, an early medieval character will become mostly fictitious, simply because the sources are rare and deliberately present idealized prototypes rather than real individuals.[29] So, using first-person on a full-time basis seems to be out of question for a heritage centre based on the Plan of Saint Gall. Instead, costumed interpreters will have to utilise third-person techniques mostly.

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[26] *"First-person is particularly suited for the depiction of human feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and social interactions. ... it promotes understanding rather than memorization, empathy rather than detachment"* (Roth 1998: 20). This approach is already practised at the Kiekeberg open-air museum (Germany). There, volunteers work in third-person mode mostly, but highlight social matters by some staged vignettes (cf. Duisberg 2008: 93).

[27] Schindler (2003: 206–216) described typical deficits in communication between first-person characters and visitors at length in her study on interpretation at US historic sites. Cf. Ahrens 1990: 155.

[28] A structural problem living historians seek to balance by using out-of time interpreters, called "red t-shirting" or else (cf. Robertshaw 1997). We don't know any studies on the effects of this constant change of time lines, but would assume it might confuse some visitors further.

[29] Gerd Althoff, a historian at the university of Münster, emphasized this talking about an actor's portrait of emperor Otto I. during a TV-debate on the use and validity of visualization techniques in a recent German TV-documentation called "Die Deutschen" (cf. Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen 2008).

Getting Professional: A Profile for the "Middlemen of Happiness"[30]

Now, we should have a closer look on these live interpreters. Wolfgang Hochbruck (2008) stated four key competences they should combine:

1. high quality gear
2. historical and archaeological knowledge
3. didactics
4. performance and presentation techniques

This quartet is a solid basis for any living historian, but while we already had a look on the gear, the three items left need to be expanded and even modified for the needs of the heritage centre we're speaking about.[31]

Level One: Basic Interpretative Training for Building Labourers and Craftsmen

The leading theme of the whole enterprise is and will be construction activity. In the beginning, some of the workers might be easily recruited from government-funded re-integration programmes for long-term unemployed people – a common habit with such projects, notoriously short of money. These employees, like any modern craftsmen, will have to learn medieval construction techniques in the first place, but they will eventually come in contact with visitors when the site is opened to the public about a year after initial work on-site has begun.

With employing non-graduates or even ill-educated people, which fill the ranks of the unemployed (cf. Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland 2008), major problems arise. No doubt can they be trained to deliver facts of their craft or even play an easy scripted historical character who has been researched by others. But still, this does not enable them to talk freely about general aspects of early medieval life, with the underlying danger of trading their very own perception to visitors. A perception that is seldom based on extensive knowledge of the subject and, therefore, might be inaccurate or even clouded by very personal prejudices. A problem that is well known with re-enactment societies[32] and professional interpreters.[33]

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[30] Tilden 1977: 12.

[31] For further details on the interpreters' basics cf. Beck & Cable 2002: chap. 10 Technique before Art.

[32] For instance, American Civil War re-enactors were criticized to convey overly-righteous selective idealism (cf. Jones 2000).

[33] Beard & Henderson (1999: 68) criticized a Museum of London's first-person interpretation of a freed slave situated in Roman London to be badly influenced by modern multiculturalism in general and noticed that after the show, the actress related their very own prejudices to visitors: *"Yes, it was a nice era, the Romans – after they left the whole place became filthy again."* Freeing the portray of the past from modern perspective or even ideology as far as possible is another vital topic to any good living historian. Ahrens called it "illegitimate actualism" (unzulässiger Aktualismus), when he observed first-person characters at Viking Adventure/Dublin to transfer modern patterns of thought into Viking age Christianisation (cf. Ahrens 1990: 182–183).

In addition, current re-integration programmes are limited to the maximum of twelve months. This leaves terrible little time for effective training. Therefore, training sessions can include only the very basics of interpretation:

- mechanical skills
- psychological requirements (building up self-confidence for working with visitors[34])
- basic communication techniques
- historical knowledge, social and costume history

Level Two: Fully Trained Interpreters

In consequence, interpretive activities that fulfil the task of de-constructing a themed environment do call for more sophisticated, full-time interpreters. Any short-time worker on the site has to learn to direct visitors' questions that go beyond his knowledge to a scientifically trained interpreter. The requirements for this second level interpretive staff will be much more comprehensive:

- be able to process and store complex data in a short period of time
- have faculty of speech
- possess scientific *and* creative thinking (and being able to discern)
- have a certain physical fitness[35]
- have manual skills
- know verbal and non-verbal communication techniques by heart and be able to apply them at once
- have understood all relevant theories on learning, and how they are connected to interpretive techniques
- know all methods of living history (e.g. third- and first-person interpretation) and when they are appropriate
- have accomplished a basic training on stage performance
- recognize the needs of different groups (of age, level of education, special needs, ...) and adjust interpretation accordingly
- be able to control stage-fright
- be able to act as team-player as well as soloist
- be self-reflective
- have a fair share of humour
- above all, any good interpreter does need passion – *"passion for the resource and for the people who come to be inspired by it"* (Beck & Cable 2002: 8.15)

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[34] The Bremen museum theatre project revealed that many long-term unemployed people suffer from depression and other severe mental and/or physical problems that have to be dealt with prior to a sufficient performance (cf. Fruchtmann 2008: 140–141).

[35] Mind the picture of modern, middle-aged Roman legionnaires, sporting a well-groomed, very modern pot-belly beneath their historical armour!

In contrast to the requirements for pedagogic staff with museums constituted by the German Museum Association (cf. Kunz-Ott 2008: 20) and Wolfgang Hochbruck's studies on museum theatre (cf. Hochbruck 2008), we purposely did not include a degree in a field of study related to the museums' content.

At universities scholars are taught to follow strict routines and to communicate with colleagues rather than addressing their ideas to the public.[36] This is fine with the academic world, but an interpreter's work isn't directed to this community.

We prefer to regard (costumed) interpreters as "artists", with scholars' research on their disposal to do a piece of art (cf. Tilden 1977: chap. IV).They always need to be striving for new avenues in thinking when developing programmes aiming at non-academics. Therefore, a graduate might not always be the best choice for an interpreter's slot.[37] Finally, live interpreters with the gift to inspire their audience by "exposing the soul of things" (Tilden 1977: 38) are a rare species. We should not dry up the pool any further by erecting too many formal barriers.

Instead, we suggest that costumed interpreters without a background in archaeology or related fields might receive a training that enables them to understand the specific workings of research in order to relate it properly to the audience. We should bear in mind that interpreters in this scenario are not required to do a lot of actual research by themselves, because they are backed up by a research department, as we suggested above.

Although we did advise to use first-person interpretation sparsely, an actor's training was introduced. We did this because a live interpreter is always "on stage", even without playing a character. Therefore, any able interpreter should undergo an adequate training. The vivid lecture by the actress Sara Fruchtmann of the Bremer Geschichtenhaus at the Kiekeberg conference in 2008 was a memorable demonstration of how one can benefit from it in terms of performance, even if actual stage-play is rarely done.[38] In the long run, any costumed interpreter should be prepared for some role-playing when the need arises, although his performance might not be required to culminate in an Academy Award.

To sum it up, two training programmes will have to be set up for the Monastic City: a basic training for short-term workers and a much more in-depth programme that goes beyond volunteer programmes and the use of re-enactment societies. A training programme has to be designed that will enable a group of full-time live interpreters

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[36] On the disability of scholars to communicate history to the public cf. Hoffmann 2005: 221 and Schörken 1995: 164. Hilgers (2001: 17) reasoned on the future viability of museums, that theoretical expertise alone could no longer be sufficient for today's museum employees. The most valuable traits for would be found within their personality.

[37] Still, the problem remains that no officially recognised education for costumed live interpreters does exist in Germany. On the other hand, this is also true for the more traditional pedagogic staff (Museumspädagogen) at museums (cf. Maaß 2006: 3).

[38] An actor's training teaches basics like body language and awareness, well pronounced, punctuated speech – all valuable assets to an interpreter's ability to tell his stories.

to develop and conduct all interpretive experiences at the heritage centre on a solid academic basis.

This enterprise seems to be a monumental task to accomplish for a heritage centre run by living history novices and financed by entrance fees mostly. Yet, the idea of building the manuscript of Saint Gall does show us quite plainly that the serious issue of hyper-reality can not be trivialised, but should be taken on more actively by living historians.

We would like to make it clear that this paper is only a general outline of the living history project Carolingian Monastic City, and that it will have to be modulated according to the development of the project and new findings in historical and archaeological research as well as the art of interpretation.

Conclusion

The public in general is easily led to perceive history as a truth, consisting of reliable facts. Yet, it is a well known fact to every first term student of history that the past is a very elusive one, its picture drawn by questions of the present, and, therefore, it will never be more than a scratch, plagued by gaps and uncertainties (cf. Goetz 2002: 23–26).

Because of this, living history is still rejected by some scholars (cf. Huwyler 2008; cf. Apel 2008), similar to reconstructed buildings before. Yet, reconstructed buildings are accepted widely today, because they have proven to be a valuable instrument in terms of attracting visitors and communicating archaeology to them (cf. Andraschko 2008: 48–49; cf. Baumeister 2006).

In order to serve education best, costumed interpretation in themed environments must not communicate a finalized picture of the past solely, but the process of making as well. Our experience in working with audience since 2001 leads us to believe that this task can be accomplished without lessening, but even enhancing the pleasure of the stay. If the described project fails to do so, the Monastic City will be a mere historical amusement park while it could be a vivid blending of enjoyment and education.

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