

Dunrobin Castle Estate

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History of the Designed Landscape

Summer 2026

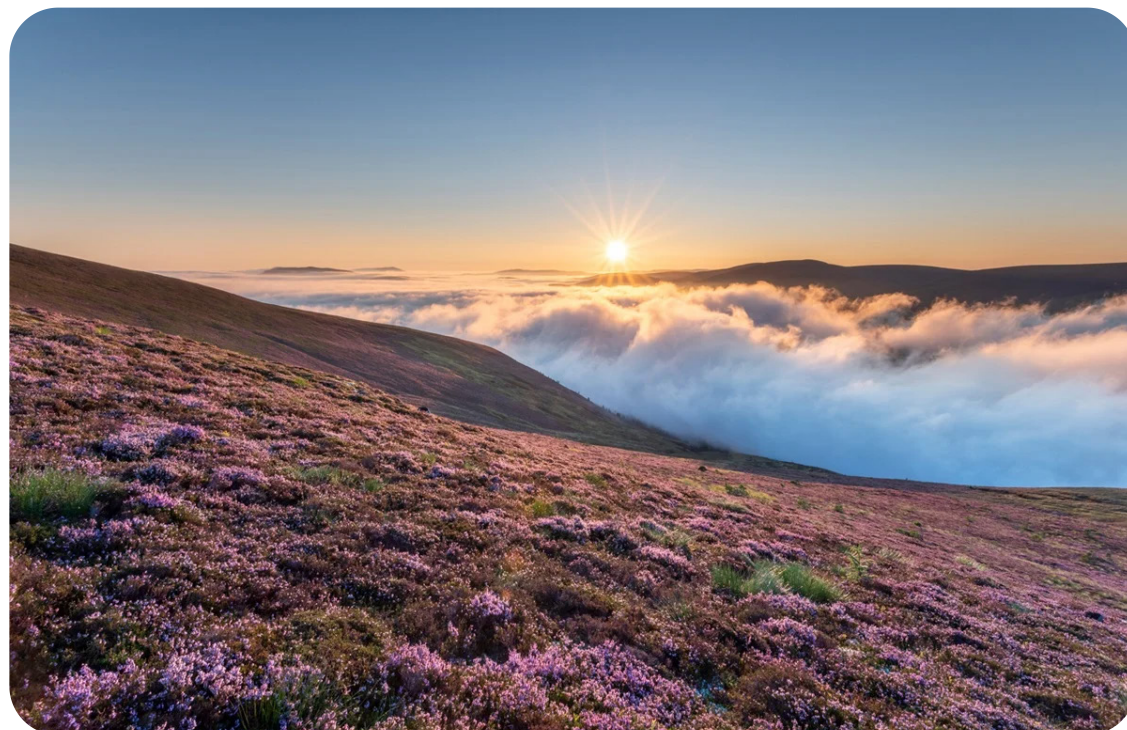


Landscape of Personal Significance

Cairngorms National Park is the largest national park in the UK. Located in the Highlands and established in 2003, it spans 4,528 square km which is about 6% of Scotland's land mass. In the fall of 2021, I went on a trip to the U.K. with my terminally ill mom. This was one of the last places where I got to see my mom truly happy and able to walk. We visited a small portion of the park, just outside the town of Aviemore. We visited Loch Morlich, a fresh water loch with sandy beaches, surrounded by Glenmore Forest, and at the foot of the Cairngorms mountains. We also drove up to the base of Cairngorm Mountain Resort. Today, Cairngorm Mountain is a year round resort with skiing, hiking, mountain biking, and is a top tourist destination in Scotland. In recent decades, there has been a large push to restore, preserve, and rewild various parts of Cairngorms National Park.



Loch Morlich



Ruthven Hills



Ben Macdui



Cairngorm Plateau

Highland Clearances & Romanticism

From 1746 to 1860 people of the highlands were forcibly and violently evicted from their residences in what is called the Highland Clearances. The clearances drastically altered the landscape through intense deforestation, arson, and violence. Prior to the clearances, the highlands and its people were run by self-governing clans. Upon the loss of the Battle of Culloden on April 16, 1746, and following the Highland Clearances, the clan system fell apart. The clearances paved the way for the profit-driven sheep pastoralism, and led to depopulation and emigration from Scotland. This shift to profit-driven sheep farming along with the Industrial Revolution led to massive deforestation.

Following the breakdown of the clan system, the Highland Clearances, depopulation, famine, and economic instability, the English made a concerted effort to romanticize Scottish culture through literature, art (as seen in detail images), music, architecture, and landscape. Once thought of as savage and lawless, the Scots were romanticized to be fearless and noble soldiers, while Scotland was then romanticized to be seen as a beautiful, picturesque land. Queen Victoria and her Balmoral estate and Sir Walter Scott greatly helped advance this romanticized view of Scotland. As a result, Scotland became a popular tourist location. The British romanticized the Cairngorms by promoting the allure of wild hiking with picturesque views and hunting by shaping the entire mountainous region into managed deer forests. Ancient Caledonian Pine growth forests were cut down to support shipbuilding and firewood, and transformed into sheep grazing land and managed red deer forests through controlled muirburn (controlled and intentional burning of vegetation on moorland) and predator eradication. Scottish Baronial style hunting lodges were built for tourists and wealthy landowners.



The Last of the Clan, Thomas Reed, 1865

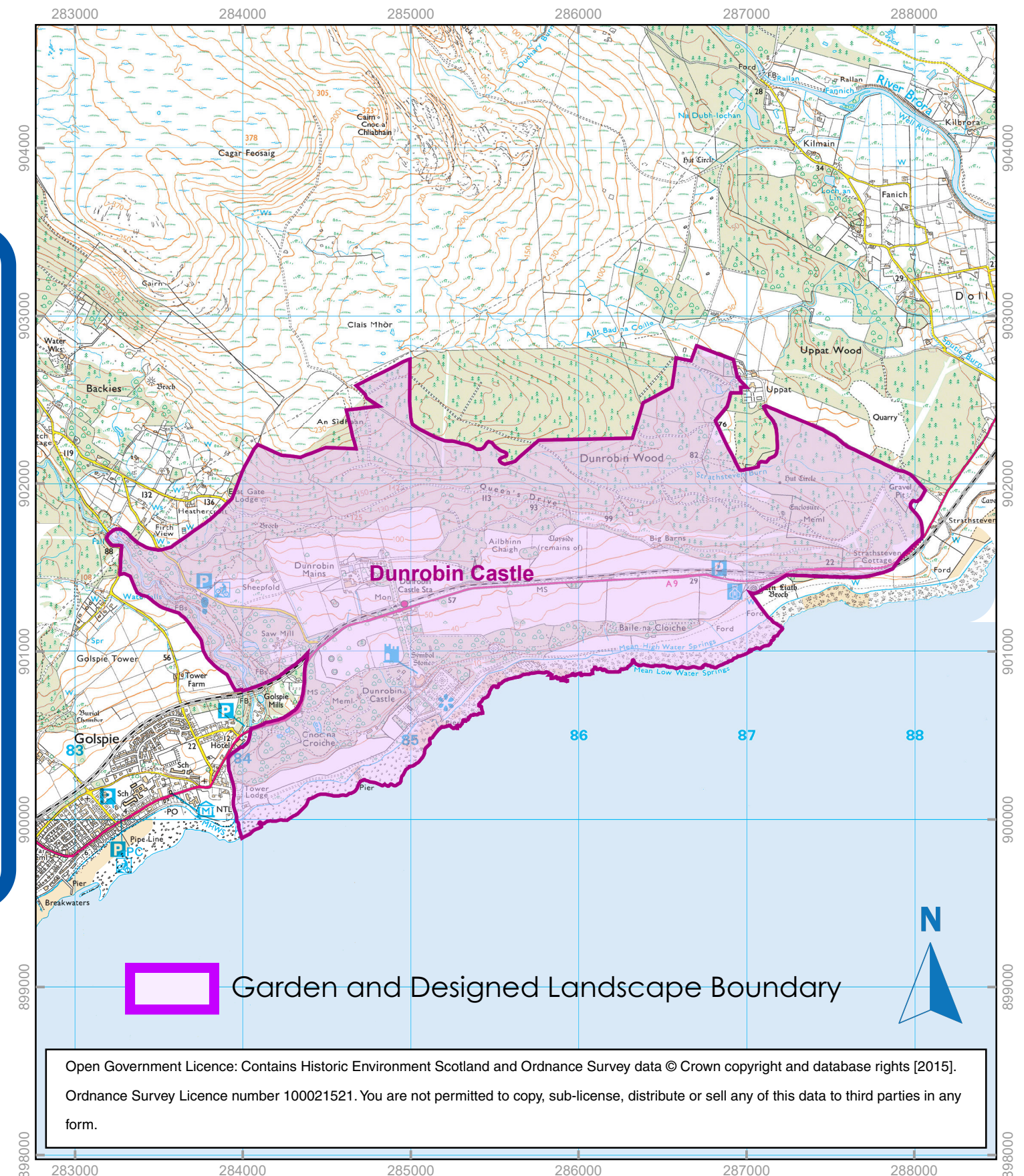


*A View of Tantallon Castle with the Bass Rock
Alexander Nasmyth, 1816*

Dunrobin Castle Estate

My chosen site, Dunrobin Castle Estate, lies in the Highland council area and historic county of Sutherland, a mile north of the town of Golspie, on the northeast coast of Scotland. The castle and gardens overlook the Moray Firth, the largest inlet of the North Sea along the coast of Scotland. The castle is located at 57.9817° N latitude, similar to the latitude of Churchill, Manitoba and Juneau, Alaska. Dunrobin Castle is likely to be on the site of a medieval fortress and has been home to the Earldom and Dukedom of Sutherland since its establishment in 1235 CE.

The 2nd Duke of Sutherland and his wife, Duchess Harriet, were the main powers and influence behind the worst atrocities of the highland clearances. The duchess employed Patrick Sellar, the estate manager, to pave the way for large scale, profit driven sheep farming. Sellar used vicious and deadly methods for these evictions including arson, violence, terror, and oppression. The duke and duchess also used architecture and landscaping to romanticize their Scottish estate.



Microclimate

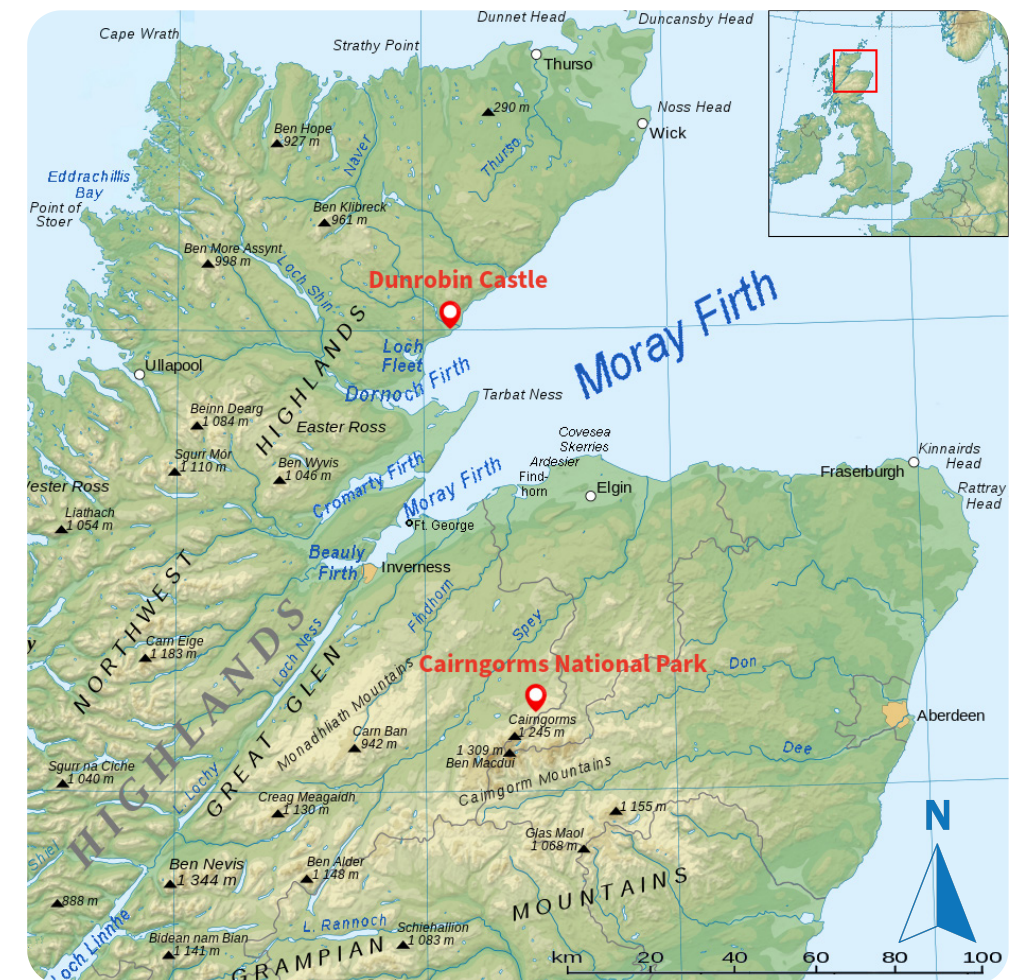
What makes the Dunrobin Castle gardens truly unique is its location and microclimate. The gardens are sheltered between the castle and the ocean. An extension of the Gulf Stream, the North Atlantic current/drift, flows around Cape Wrath on the west to Duncansby Head, the most northeastern point of mainland Scotland. The current brings warmer water into the North Sea and down to the Moray Firth and by Dunrobin Castle. The ocean current helps regulate and moderate the temperatures of the coastal gardens. The castle itself and its surrounding trees also help shelter the gardens by acting as a windbreak. Despite such a high latitude and rugged conditions of the northern highlands, these sheltered conditions create warm pockets and allow for unusual plant diversity in the gardens, including many non-native plants.



Gulf Stream and North Atlantic Current/Drift NTS



Aerial View of Dunrobin Castle and Gardens



Map of Northern Scotland and Moray Firth NTS

Dunrobin Castle

In 1845, Charles Barry, the architect for the Houses of Parliament (Palace of Westminster) in London, was commissioned by the 2nd Duke of Sutherland, and his wife, Duchess Harriet, to re-model the castle from a fort to a Scottish Baronial home, inspired by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's new estate, Balmoral. Dunrobin castle has features of both the French chateau style and Scottish Baronial style. The conical metal spires, steep roofs, and formal gardens convey the French chateau style, while the enclosed medieval core of the castle, parapets, turrets, and battlements exude Scottish Baronial style.



Dunrobin Castle; View from Front Drive



Dunrobin Castle; View from Gardens

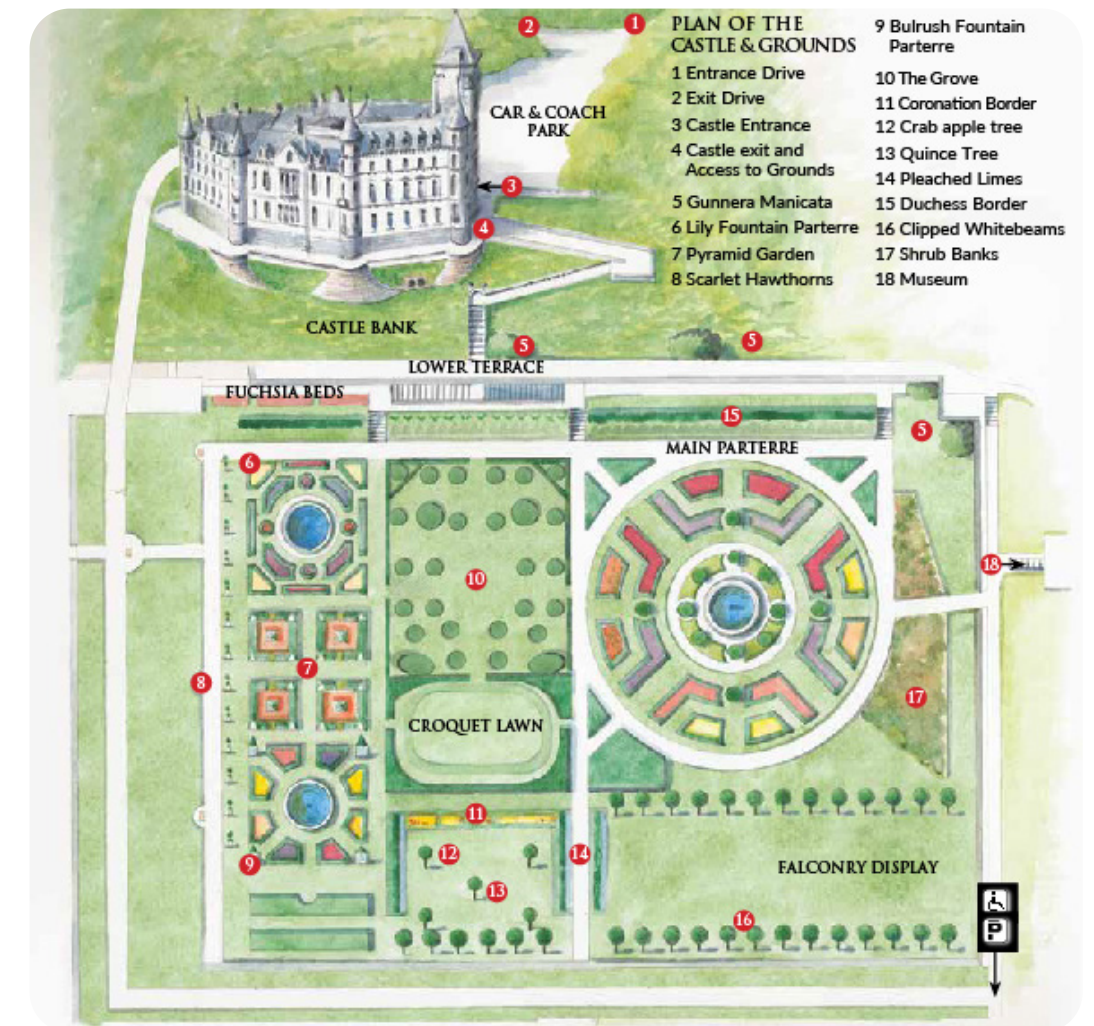
Dunrobin Castle Gardens

Charles Barry also designed the formal French gardens below the castle. He was inspired by André Le Nôtre's work in the Versailles gardens. Each parterre was set around a circular pool with a fountain, with boxed hedges set up in a precise geometric pattern, with seasonal flowers in the infill as seen in the detail photo. The Main Parterre has eight geometric sections, set up as four pairs of mirrored boxwood hedges circling the grand fountain. Between the hedges lie conical topiaries made from whitebeam trees. Paths are provided between all the sections, allowing the visitor to enjoy the rotating six-week succession of vibrant seasonal bedding plants and perennials. Throughout the growing season, the varieties include Dahlias, Tulips, Forget-Me-Nots, Wallflowers, Perennial Geraniums (Cranesbill), Lilies, Violas, and Begonias. The grand fountain is a 19th-century marvel powered by gravity from a hidden reservoir. Water flows naturally from a hillside tank, creating enough pressure to force that water 20 feet into the air before cascading back down.

Although originally designed with fountains, the other two Parterres, the Lily Fountain Parterre and the Bulrush Fountain Parterre, have just the remaining circular ponds. Between these two Parterres is a new formal Pyramid Garden featuring 20 wooden pyramids supporting flowering and fruiting climbers, surrounded by colourful perennials with stepover (miniature and espaliered) apple tree frames.

Dunrobin Castle gardens offer a great example of a formal French garden with parterres placed in an otherwise inhospitable environment, taking advantage of the local microclimate. These geometric and highly cultivated parterres are very close to their original configuration over 175 years ago and reflect the British aristocracy's display of control and dominion over their environment.

Cairngorm National Park and Dunrobin Castle and gardens are both the product of Britain's romanticization of the Scottish landscape, the former a contrived, picturesque wilderness executed over a very large, mountainous and formerly densely forested region and the latter a storybook castle with a strictly maintained and controlled formal garden.



Dunrobin Castle Garden



Main Parterre



Pyramid Garden

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