

The Monster of Ravenna: A Brief Look at the Monstrous in Premodern Europe

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In a diary entry written by apothecary Luca Landucci from 1512 states:

We heard that a monster had been born at Ravenna, of which a drawing was sent here; it had a horn on its head, straight up like a sword, and instead of arms it had two wings like a bat's, and at the height of the breasts it had a fio [y-shaped mark] on one side and a cross on the other, and lower down at the waist, two serpents, and it was a hermaphrodite, and on the right knee it had an eye, and its left foot was like an eagle's. I saw it painted, and anyone who wished could see this painting in Florence.¹

In Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling by Ross King a mention is made of this monster born in March 1512 at the city of Ravenna as cited above. Ross states that this monster was utilized in a sermon by Egidio da Viterbo during mass on the first day of The 5th Lateran Council where Egidio announced to the assembly that the military defeat at Ravenna was divine judgment and was foretold by the birth of this monster which occurred eighteen days prior to their trouncing.² In this sermon Viterbo utilizes the birth of this deformed child as a portent of the military defeat that had befallen Ravenna and all the current dire circumstances Italy was experiencing were because the Lord was displeased with the Church of Rome.³

This intriguing mention reawakens an area of curiosity and wonder for these marvelous stories of the unknown and macabre which stir the cauldron of imagination for this writer. In my youth, the stories about Joseph Merrick, werewolves, hirsutes, and all the creatures which dwell in the shadows of daily life have always intrigued this writer with all their possibilities and magic. On screen, in art, and through the countless books consumed, the hunger to meet and listen to them has never abated. In this stunted exposition, a minutest meandering will occur which will just brush upon the hems of our collective nightmares and what they can teach us.

In the following few pages, it will be briefly demonstrated how monsters are useful for seeing ourselves and the world by offering us a blunt perspective, by challenging otherness, and giving us mirrors to reflect upon as we tremble with uncertainty and unease just beyond the safety of the evening fire. In this paper the questions of what were the monstrous to the premodern world? What the potential meaning and purpose such creatures may have held for the people of that time so bound by the Church? What did these creatures give to history?

Our first step is to define monster, a vital component which articulates much about how they have been understood at a basic level. In nearly every book on this topic somewhere in the

¹ Touba Ghadessi, *Portraits of Human Monsters in the Renaissance: Dwarves, Hirsutes, and Castrati as Idealized Anatomical Anomalies*, *Monsters, Prodigies, and Demons: Medieval and Early Modern Construction of Alterity* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), PDF e-book, 12.

² As this paragraph is being written, it so happens to be the 508th anniversary of this sermon which took place May 3, 1512, spooky.

³ Ross King, *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 253.

early pages the meaning is laid out before the reader communicating that the etymological root is in the Latin *mostrare* which carries the meaning both to show and also to warn or advise.⁴ A root which goes at least as far back as Augustine who saw monstrous births as demonstrating something significant in a visual form.⁵ It is from this origin that we become aware that monsters are a type of educational or instructional thing or being. That in their existence we must find some knowledge or insights for life in their twisted and macabre actuality. The monsters were guides, instructors, and even prophets and they were to be heeded.

The word monster is typically utilized interchangeably with the terms monstrous and monstrosity throughout most literature. This diverse utilization for these three tangled terms demonstrates not simply fancifulness or frivolousness but how complex and important monsters are both culturally and symbolically among other things. The need to articulate and communicate such a spectrum of diverse manifestations begged for some tangling of terms in all the communications regarding these outsiders. As there tends to be a blurring of these three terms Alexa Wright appeals to Michel Foucault and Georges Canguilhem to argue that these designations must be separated for the social and cultural effects but this idea lacks acknowledgement in the readings examined for this paper as well as it seems to betray the premodern ideas of these interchangeable terms.⁶

In this exceedingly simplified expose of the monstrous, the deformed, the portentous freaks, mutated animals, and fantastical creatures among other beings which dwell in the catchall phrase of the monstrous; what were they to the premodern world?⁷ This questions ties with the next question to what meaning and purpose such creatures may have held for the people of that time so entrenched in the Church? Together these questions work closely together but cannot be given as much space that they necessitate yet an attempt will be made.

The idea of monsters and the monstrous has been argued to have arisen in tandem with the same aesthetic-intellectual impulse that gave birth to civilization. It has been argued that

⁴ Alexa Wright, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), E-book, 3. Additional readings seem to back Wrights claim of definition prevalence as found in the readings done for this paper which include the following where similar definitions are found: Elizabeth B. Bearden, *Monstrous Kinds: Body, Space, and Narrative in Renaissance Representations of Disability*. Corporealities: Discourses of Disability Series. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019) , PDF e-book, Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, eds., *The Monstrous Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), PDF e-book, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*. Medieval Cultures Volume 17 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), PDF e-book, John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), PDF e-book, Toubia Ghadessi, *Portraits of Human Monsters in the Renaissance: Dwarves, Hirsutes, and Castrati as Idealized Anatomical Anomalies, Monsters, Prodigies, and Demons: Medieval and Early Modern Construction of Alterity* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), PDF e-book, David Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), PDF e-book, Richard H. Godden and Asa Simon Mittman, eds., *Monstrosity, Disability, and the Posthuman in the Medieval and Early Modern World. The New Middle Ages* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), PDF e-book, Iris Idelson-Shein and Christian Wiese, eds., *Monsters and Monstrosity in Jewish History: From the Middle Ages to Modernity* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), PDF e-book, Jennifer Spinks, *Monstrous Births and Visual Culture in Sixteenth Century Germany*. Number 5. Religious Cultures in The Early Modern World. (London: Routledge, 2009), PDF e-book.

⁵ Jennifer Spinks, *Monstrous Births and Visual Culture in Sixteenth Century Germany*. Number 5. Religious Cultures in The Early Modern World (London: Routledge, 2009), PDF e-book, 8.

⁶Alexa Wright, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), PDF e-book, 3.

⁷ Bettina Bildhauer, and Robert Mills, eds. *The Monstrous Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), PDF e-book, 2.

visual portraits of fearful creatures occurred precisely at the same time as literacy. The consciousness of such ideas occurs in known archeological records starting around 3500 B.C.E.⁸ Aside from some figures found in European cave art, the first unequivocal and identifiable monsters are found in early Egypt, Mesopotamia, and in the Indus Valley which is in present-day Pakistan. These early archeological finds seem to point towards a parallel development within civilization.⁹ So as we learned to express ideas both linguistically and artistically on all levels even our fears found expression.

So, what are these monsters? As the word monster is used glibly to describe anything that is found to be loathsome, terrifying, dangerous or even different yet for our purposes here the term will be confined to usage of physical abnormalities, freaks and birth defects, physical anomalies or deformities either real or perceived. This spectrum of real persons and animals assisted in moving premodern Europe forward from crippling superstition towards reason and logic. Unfortunately, we will need to leave to the side much of the stream of monsters that is wholly supernatural, mythical, or the magical products of our collective past. Werewolves, witches, wendigos, and all those other creatures of glorious supernatural leanings must be set aside for today as the space will not allow the time to observe them with the reverence they deserve.¹⁰

Leaving aside pre-Christian era understandings which are drifting from view with the advent of the Church two significant voices emerge that are integral for the journey of understanding our history and interactions with monsters. These are Pliny the Elder and Saint Augustine. Each one of these men contribute significantly to our knowledge and misinformation for millennia about all manner of monster both natural and supernatural. The foundation stones laid down by their pens still echo today nearly two thousand years later.

First, Pliny the Elder a Roman natural philosopher significantly shapes the coming centuries of literature, culture, and art as he builds the narrative of the monstrous using early texts including a wondrous letter from Alexander the Great. This apocryphal letter was purportedly written by Alexander to Aristotle, a letter which took most of its content from a book about India written by Ctesias in the fifth century B.C.E., is reinforced by Pliny a few centuries after in his writing of his Natural History series.¹¹ This Natural History played a crucial role in the history of monsterology, Pliny's Natural History was written on a spectrum between reflective skepticism and gullibility and it became the ultimate authority on the subject of monsters and the astounding for fifteen hundred years. These books transmitted ancient pre-Church beliefs about the marvelous and monstrous into the premodern world. But today Pliny is considered more of a scrivener and an unreliable inventory taker than a systematic synthesizer like Aristotle.¹²

⁸ Martin Parker, "Teratology, Hierarchy and the Tyranny of Heaven," www.Academia.Edu, accessed June 27, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/4120968/Teratology_Hierarchy_and_the_Tyranny_of_Heaven.

⁹ David Gilmore, David. *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 2003, PDF e-book, 5-6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*,6.

¹¹ Stephen T. Asma, Stephen T. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), PDF e-book, 21-22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 33, 47. Aristotle also plays a significant role in the study of monsters; he walks history towards a more rational and early scientific understanding of these creatures reasoning that monsters are simply mistakes that occur when normal reproductive processes are interrupted or otherwise corrupted. Nature inadvertently creates monsters when the essence of the animal or individual is corrupted by wayward matter.

Turning to Augustine who establishes some of the earliest theological responses to the records and instances of the monstrous for the Church and how he interpreted them utilizing Pliny's material, the Bible, and other sources. As these monstrous races and creatures were becoming increasingly important in the Church imagination during its early years, they begin to contemplate their spiritual status: Can these monstrous races and creatures be redeemed by the Gospel? This is where Augustine enters the discussion and establishes the first of three broad historical responses to these beings.¹³

Moving unjustly and with haste this is a hobbled summation of Augustine's contribution. Augustine working from the concept of *ex nihilo*, the idea that all matter is created from nothing by God then all the monstrous were created by God as they are made of God created matter. For Augustine they existed because God wanted them to exist. So, Augustine responds that natural monsters have a purpose and reason in God's creation. Augustine communicates quite charitably that

Whoever is anywhere born a man, that is, a rational mortal animal, no matter what unusual appearance he presents in color, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in some power, part or quality of his nature, no Christian can doubt that he springs from that one protoplast. We can distinguish the common human nature from that which is peculiar, and therefore wonderful.

Augustine believed the hand of God was on these creatures and they must be observed and learned from as the definition communicated at the beginning articulates.¹⁴ This one paragraph is a great disservice to all of the complex theories and theology Augustine built in regards to the monstrous and their ability to be saved but alas we must press on.

A second important query also arises for the earliest theologians regarding the lineage of monsters. As Augustine lays a baseline that they can be saved, the question of genealogy must be addressed, a question that has answers which echoed loudly into the premodern world and beyond. Working from the book of Genesis, focusing largely on chapter 9, three working theories emerged, one is that monsters were direct descendants of Noah or they were a product of the curse of Ham and a third option, which Augustine leans on, is that all monsters are simply from Adam's line directly. Either way they came from a human source and were to be responded to as such within the ecclesial mission. Additionally, Genesis 11 further refined the theories and provided a framework to understand physical and cultural differences which had an influential role in explaining the diversity of humans and the monstrous throughout the earth.¹⁵

In *The City of God* Augustine suggests that distant monstrous races and individual monstrous births are closely interconnected. Augustine spoke against the idea that when a child is born with extreme physical maladies, some would conclude that God was either a poor craftsman or was pouring out judgement. What Augustine proposed was that monstrous races and individuals exist in order to prevent us from drawing this impious conclusion and show us instead that God knows what He is doing. Augustine persisted in moving the conversation to Gods providence and desire to educate the Church and was not pouring out wrathful judgment

¹³ Ibid., 37.

¹⁴ Ibid., 75-81.

¹⁵ Ibid., 84-86.

for sin.¹⁶ These monsters were important to demonstrate God's love and power over creation and this theory was the first predominant theory held within the Church for next several centuries.

As time passed, Augustine's grace filled theology and theories begin to wane in prominence and xenophobic ideologies began to creep in for both monsters and the monstrous races of distant lands. The Jews, Tartars, Moors, etc. are added to the realm of the monstrous with their perceived deformed characteristics and customs which were signs of God's displeasure and corroborated by burgeoning crusade literature that was replete with evidence of these groups monstrous and ungodly traits. Augustine and others had put the monsters and the monstrous inside God's benevolent plan, but many later Christians began interpreting monsters as threatening forces from outside the Kingdom of God, enemies to be overcome in the crusade of righteousness. The second broad approach to the monstrous begins to dawn on the premodern European world.¹⁷

It is during these next few centuries medieval theologians and theorists return to Genesis to isolate the origins of all types of monsters. It is now that Cain rises as the source of these creatures and persons, he becomes the perfect candidate for monster races and related creatures because of his murderous and sinful ways. The mark that God places upon him is found in the other, the different, and the unknown. Simultaneously Seth the third born son of Eve and Adam rises to the role of what is good, pure, and righteous. Seth who eventually gives rise to the normal human races and does not corrupt the creatures around him and most importantly he is the lineage that gives rise to Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁸

These developing theologies and ideologies of otherness are moving at pace with the growing world exploration and moral cartography. Israel becomes the center of the world; the good lands are near that point and the bad monstrous things are shoved to the margins beyond salvation. The idea of what is familiar and similar to the self is considered good, whilst what is other is strange and evil and must be avoided, conquered, or destroyed.¹⁹ As the rising tide of the pious fury of the crusades spills across the known world and the monstrous become hunted, enslaved, or slaughtered for their otherness fueled with the help of deficient theologies and its progeny corrupt cartography. These ideas of differentiation spill across all that is monstrous, human, or animal, with a zealous rage for purity.²⁰ Again a reminder this is a gross simplification of a much more nuanced history, but space demands a broad brush for expediency.

Many books, pieces of art, and maps are created in the next few centuries each building upon and feeding upon these ideas of what the monstrous have come to be understood by most premodern Europeans at that time. Significant contributions include Hereford Mappa Mundi dated from the early fourteenth century. This map shows a range of monsters in their "proper" geographical location, at the very edges of the earth.

The Mappa Mundi functions as a visual and textual account of medieval religious and cultural values, illustrating the cosmology and theology of the late Middle Ages. It is a mixture of agendas and new information provided by recent travelers, pilgrims, and Crusaders. This map acted as an authoritative source for medieval scholars and theologians. This map put Jerusalem at the centre of the Christian world and the monstrous are placed around the edges just beyond the

¹⁶ Ibid., 86.

¹⁷ Ibid., 85.

¹⁸ Ibid., 88-89.

¹⁹ Alexa Wright, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture*, PDF e-book, 18.

²⁰ Stephen T. Asma, *Stephen T. On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, PDF e-book, 90-

Nile. The monstrous depicted include real, supernatural, and imaginary exotic persons and beasts, such as an elephant, a manticore, a parrot, a camel, a unicorn, and a dragon as well as many of the monstrous races.²¹

These were persons and creatures beyond salvation and Gods graces which are sentiments that have echoed through the ages to even those outside today's accepted status quo, moralities, and such. We can see how margins are still the place where the monsters dwell today such as LGBTQ+, the homeless, blacks, indigenous, and many others who are placed beyond the gates of Jerusalem and are seen by many as things removed from Gods goodness and love.

It is the in early sixteenth century, give or take a decade, when history enters the third and current broad understanding of the monstrous which leans heavily on science and not God or other supernatural forces. Gradually, during this premodern period, theological and popular beliefs were examined under increasingly medical or scientific viewpoints and premodern Europeans began to study monsters in a rigorous and systematic approach. Early scientific communities emphasized empirical examination to explain both normative and unusual phenomena. It is from this intellectual movement that attempts at cataloguing monstrous humans, animals, organic matters, and fantastic creatures were made throughout the sixteenth century and beyond.²²

The first systematized and published attempt appears to have been the 1503 treatise on signs and wonders *De signis portentis, atque prodigiis* by a Freiburg scholar and genealogist to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian, Jakob Mennel. Followed many years after by another significant contribution in 1560 by Pierre Boaistuau who published *Histoires prodigieuses*, in which he shared various stories gathered from ancient sources, constructed from imaginary biblical occurrences, and featuring fantastic creatures, and then combined them with descriptions of congenital diseases. Even though Boaistuau's organizational preservation came close to an actual classification, he made no direct attempt to define categories of monstrous beings. Boaistuau did provide detailed descriptions and his complex theories on these oddities but did not demonstrate a scientific causality for their existence.²³

Thanks to Gutenberg books on the monstrous became abundant and there were many key textual contributions that occurred during the sixteenth century and a couple others which need brief mention. The publication of *Les histoires prodigieuses* by Ambroise Paré first published in 1573 is one more significant voice in the journey into modernity.²⁴ Paré wrote his volume with the intent to enrich the practice of medicine by adding to it the knowledge of monstrous as he outlined in his preface. Additionally, unlike Boaistuau, Paré provided a definition of monsters and defined the various terms he used:

Monsters are things that appear outside of the course of nature (and are most often signs of some misfortune to come) such as a child who is born with one arm only, another with two heads, and other limbs that are out of the ordinary. Prodigies are things that happen against nature, such as a woman giving birth to a snake, or to a dog, or to anything that

²¹ Alexa Wright, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture*, PDF e-book, 21-23.

²² Touba Ghadessi, *Portraits of Human Monsters in the Renaissance: Dwarves, Hirsutes, and Castrati as Idealized Anatomical Anomalies, Monsters, Prodigies, and Demons: Medieval and Early Modern Construction of Alterity* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), PDF e-book, 16.

²³ Ibid., 16-17,

²⁴ Annie Bitbol-Hespériès, "Monsters, Nature and Generation from the Renaissance to the Age of Reason: The Emergence of Medical Thought." In *The Problem of Animal Generation in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Justin E.H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

goes against nature.[...] The mutilated are the blind, one-eyed people, hunchbacks, lame people, or people having six fingers or toes, or less than five fingers or toes, or fingers and toes joined together, or arms that are too short, or noses that are set too deep like those with crooked noses, or lips that are big and reversed [...] or anything that goes against nature.²⁵

Throughout this volume, Paré presents numerous case studies accompanied by illustrations, therefore “guaranteeing” that the book dealt with visually verifiable knowledge. Paré’s training as a barber-surgeon, his experience with battlefield surgery, and his position as the official surgeon to several kings of France gave him credibility and ample opportunity to encounter and access to many of the monsters he records. It is certain that *Des monstres et prodiges* is not considered a strict medical examination of the pathologies that led to anatomical deformities, but it was a step toward medicalizing the discussion on the monstrous.²⁶

Although initially Paré held onto theological ideas that the individuals whose bodies deviated from accepted aesthetic norms were signs of divine wrath these creatures did require systematic methods of examination necessary to understand the phenomena. Paré fell back on the definition of monsters outlined above to explain the divine mark placed on these monsters as those who faced God’s wrath. However, Paré went further and expanded the idea of to see or be shown as a means to financial benefits and shared a number of cases that backed this reality demonstrating that they could be more than a burden or a drain on society. There is profit to be made on the other and surely God would concur.²⁷

A final voice of importance in premodern Europe was Fortunio Liceti who provided a more strictly conceived scientific treatise on monsters titled *De monstrorum natura* in 1616. Liceti, a doctor from Padua, initially believed monsters were divine omens and insisted on their importance as living beings who expressed truths of nature through their unusual physical appearances. Holding this belief Liceti embraced them as a means to acquire true knowledge which justified the scientific investigation of their bodies. Eventually, Liceti abandoned the idea of the monster as an ominous sign but rather as expressions of differences necessary in the face of adverse conditions. Liceti demonstrated that monsters in the seventeenth century began to be seen as rational variants of nature to be contrasted against the normal body to be better understood.²⁸ This approach by Liceti exemplifies the rudimentary understandings of monsters as epistemological alternatives in the drift from a wrathful God understanding.²⁹

With Liceti’s adherence to an Aristotelian view of nature, as well as the defined categories he devised, Liceti provided his audience with a more robust medical view on these abnormalities. With the above contributions and many others all working to move European

²⁵ Ghadessi, *Portraits of Human Monsters in the Renaissance: Dwarves, Hirsutes, and Castrati as Idealized Anatomical Anomalies, Monsters, Prodiges, and Demons: Medieval and Early Modern Construction of Alterity*, 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-21.

²⁸ A. W. Bates, “The De Monstrorum of Fortunio Liceti: A Landmark of Descriptive Teratology,” *Journal of Medical Biography* 9, no. 1 (n.d.): 49, https://www.academia.edu/11378809/The_De_Monstrorum_of_Fortunio_Liceti_a_landmark_of_descriptive_teratology.

²⁹ Ghadessi, *Portraits of Human Monsters in the Renaissance: Dwarves, Hirsutes, and Castrati as Idealized Anatomical Anomalies, Monsters, Prodiges, and Demons: Medieval and Early Modern Construction of Alterity*, 21.

church and society forward in their understanding of monsters and the monstrous it would take a few more centuries till an exact and universal name for the science of studying monsters appears.³⁰

It was in 1832 that zoologist, Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire wrote a treatise on monsters titled *Traité de tératologie*, in the text Saint-Hilaire coined the term teratology as a distinct and separate science from physiology and other related sciences. Saint-Hilaire argued the necessity of studying monsters and the monstrous, not only as a branch of pathology or philosophical anatomy, but as an independent area of legitimate inquiry. Saint-Hilaire's work built upon the many centuries of previous study and he validated this area of inquiry as a uniquely scientific endeavor and denounced any supernatural component. This was a significant leap forward in the understanding of the monstrous other. Although Saint-Hilaire's was largely successful in removing much of the theological and supernatural components attached to the study of monsters there is still a lingering aroma of otherworldly origins to this very day.³¹

It seems that monsters and the monstrous offered significant contributions in forcing the premodern Europeans on all levels of society into the light of knowledge regarding otherness and ourselves. It forced the Church to grapple with and to respond to a world more complex and diverse than their rudimentary understandings initially anticipated or had space for in their fear and insecurities. These beings offered opportunities to look in the mirror and wrestle with the abyss of unknowing, to look deeply at areas of shadow where our nightmares dwelt whispering truths found in their twisted existences that all needed to heed.

The monsters place us between the right order of things and chaos, where inside and outside, self and the other intertwine. Demonized or deified or somewhere in between, monsters, the unknown other, bring us beyond the edge of certainty and security. We are simultaneously drawn toward and repulsed by these creatures which create moments of vertigo in a milieu of fear and desire teetering on the threshold of an abyss to greater knowledge just outside the cave. The monsters call us away from our restless slumber of confidence in the knowing of what is good and right as they have over the millennia, these others pull us to the margins beyond our secure, comfortable, and predictable centers. They reveals the monstrous otherness within ourselves as we gawk at them in our surety of rightness, These prophets beckon us to the table to commune and heal our fears and pride grounded in our false concepts of what is good and acceptable. ³²

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³⁰ Ibid., 21.

³¹ Ibid., 22.

³² Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), PDF e-book, 195-196.

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