

The “Ruinscape”, Traveling Bodies, and Images: The Case of Spolia in Moissac Abbey

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Abstract: The present article examines the use and functions of spolia within the architecture of Moissac Abbey, France, during the late 11th and 12th centuries. The overarching goal of the text is to delve into the question of how the medieval monastery rewrote, reused, and reproduced the antique past through various media. It explores how the practice of spoliation contributed to the monastery’s establishment as both a sacred space and a strong political and cultural center. The spoliated elements are further anchored and interpreted within their particular material context as bearers of iconological significance that may contribute to our understanding of the iconography of the abbey’s sculptural decoration. Moreover, based on visual comparisons from across the region, it is argued that Moissac actively participated in the creation of an extensive sacred ecosystem interconnected by the constantly reminiscent memory of the ancient past, which is maintained and extended by the movement of human bodies.

Keywords: Moissac Abbey; spoliation; spolia; “Romanesque” art; cloister; pilgrimage

ES El «paisaje de ruinas», los cuerpos viajeros y las imágenes: el caso de Spolia en la abadía de Moissac

Resumen: El presente artículo examina el uso de los spolia y sus funciones dentro de la arquitectura de la abadía de Moissac, Francia, durante finales del siglo XI y el XII. El tema general del texto es ahondar en la cuestión de cómo el monasterio medieval reescribe, reutiliza y reproduce el pasado antiguo a través de diversos medios. Explora cómo la práctica del expolio contribuyó al establecimiento del monasterio tanto como espacio sagrado como fuerte centro político y cultural. Los elementos expoliados se anclan e interpretan además dentro de su particular contexto material como portadores de un significado iconológico que puede contribuir a nuestra comprensión de la iconografía de la decoración escultórica de Moissac. Además, a partir de las comparaciones visuales de toda la región, se argumenta que Moissac participó activamente en la creación de un extenso ecosistema sagrado interconectado por la memoria constantemente evocadora del pasado antiguo, que se mantiene y amplía con el movimiento de los cuerpos humanos.

Palabras clave: Abadía de Moissac; expolio; spolia; arte «románico»; claustro; peregrinación

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Words: Writing and Re-writing the Past. 3. Stones: Reusing and Reproducing the Past. 4. Conclusions. 5. Sources and bibliographic references

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1. Introduction

Highlighting the omnipresence of remnants and artifacts from former Roman architecture, Michel Greenhalgh in 2011 spoke of the medieval landscape as of a “ruinscape”¹. In this ecosystem in which the ancient past coexisted with the present, the route of a medieval pilgrim traveling to Moissac Abbey can be imagined as a journey of constantly reactivated memories of the past (Fig. 1). In fact, the Benedictine abbey, with its extraordinarily preserved late 11th- and 12th-century decorative cycles, actively participated in integrating the remnants of ancient past into its contemporary physical reality². This phenomenon of spoliation and the imitation of late antiquity in Moissac has not yet been subjected to a comprehensive analysis³.

Although it is not in the scope of this article to cover this topic in its entirety, the following lines endeavor to focus on how the spoliation practice functions within the process of building sacred ecosystems through the monumental transposition of objects from the past. The following argument is grounded in recent scholarship on the practice of spoliation, beginning with Dale Kinney, who redefined spolia as a phenomenon concerned with the appropriation and erasure of memory and called for a more contextualized interpretation of reused materials as semiotic signs⁴. More recently, this line of inquiry has been further developed in the volume edited by Ivana Jevtić and Ingela Nilsson, which advances a more dynamic, process-oriented, and interdisciplinary model of understanding spoliation⁵. Rather than treating spolia as static signifiers, this approach emphasizes how reused forms operate as agents of cultural translation, capable of generating new meanings through their relocation across temporal and spatial contexts. As carriers of emotional and narrative resonance, such elements

actively participate in shaping a shared cultural understanding through their reception by the contemporary viewers. Acknowledging Dale Kinney’s call for a more contextualized reading, this article shows that multiple approaches to spoliation can be meaningfully applied to the case of Moissac. In the first step, the article interprets the spolia at Moissac as an active appropriation of an imagined past, contributing to the construction of a myth of the monastery’s ancient and sacred identity. In the second step, it explores how this myth functioned – how it was perceived, disseminated, and operated within a broader transregional context. Building on Karen Rose Mathews’ idea of spolia work as a visual *lingua franca* of the premodern world, this study understands reused elements as generators of a shared language of sacredness⁶. It argues that at Moissac the spoliated elements built into the monastery’s fabric legitimate and further accentuate the sacredness of the space and its images, which are deliberately set into the context of ancient materials and framed by neo-late antique ornaments. Last but not least, the present text is based on the premise that this process of sacralization is mediated through the movement of human bodies not only within the specific site itself but, more importantly, even across long distances. Pre-modern pilgrims traveling through the “ruinscape” of the early 12th century were the ones who had the capacity to recollect the references to the ancient past reoccurring within the region. They thus played an active part in “disseminating” the sacred and maintaining memory of the past⁷. In this sense, the case study of Moissac is particularly evocative in that the abbey represents one of the best preserved components of a wider network in which the references to ancient past are repeated following similar formal patterns that will be exemplified through the Basilica of Saint-Sernin at Toulouse, the former church in Thézels, and the Cahors Cathedral, all situated no further than three walking days from Moissac Abbey.

Following recent scholarship, this article adopts an extended definition of spoliation as a general cultural practice of recycling, reusing and re-inventing of not only physical materials but including also textual, visual, and intellectual forms of reuse, as well as practices of imitation understood as cultural quotation⁸. The phenomenon is

¹ See Michael Greenhalgh, “Spolia: A Definition in Ruins”, in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, ed. Dale Kinney, Richard Brilliant (Surrey: Ashgate 2011), 81–87, esp. 81–82.

² For a recent list of bibliographic references on the decoration of Moissac Abbey, see, especially, Chantal Fraïsse, “Le cloître de Moissac: au-delà de la narration?”, *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa* 51 (2020): 33–42; Quiterie Cazes, Chantal Fraïsse, *Le cloître et le portail de Moissac: chefs-d’oeuvre de l’art roman* (Bordeaux: Éditions Sud-Ouest, 2023); Kristine Tanton, “The Cloister at Saint-Pierre de Moissac and the Fragility of Monumental Survival”, in *Repenser l’histoire de l’art Médiéval en 2023*, ed. Miljenko Jurković, Elisabetta Scirocco, Arnaud Timbert (Zagreb: Motovun, 2023): 725–733.

³ In fact, the research on spolia at Moissac has been fragmented in numerous partial studies concentrating separately on the individual spoliated features without establishing a synthesis of the phenomenon as such. See especially Piotr Skubiszewski, “Le trumeau et le linteau de Moissac: un cas du symbolisme médiéval”, *Cahiers archéologiques. Fin de l’antiquité et Moyen Âge* 40 (1992): 51–90.

⁴ See especially Dale Kinney, “Spolia. Damnatio and Renovatio Memoriae”, *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 42 (1997): 117–148; Eadem, “Spolia as Signifiers in Twelfth-Century Rome”, *Hortus Artium Medievalium* 17 (2011): 151–166; Eadem, “The Paradigm of Spolia”, in *Mittelalterliche Mythenrezeption. Paradigmen und Paradigmenwechsel*, ed. Ulrich Rehm (Böhlau Verlag 2015): 173–264.

⁵ See *Spoliation as Translation. Convivium Supplementum*, ed. Ivana Jevtić, Ingela Nilsson (Brno: Masarykova Univerzita, 2021).

⁶ Karen Rose Mathews, “Speaking Antiquity. Ancient Spolia as a Visual Koiné in the Medieval Mediterranean (12th to 15th Century)”, in *Spoliation as Translation. Convivium Supplementum*, eds. Ivana Jevtić, Ingela Nilsson (Brno: Masaryk University, 2021), 38–60.

⁷ Regarding the role of “moving human bodies” within medieval landscape, see Ivan Foletti, Katarína Kravčíková, Adrien Palladino, Sabina Rosenbergová, *Migrating art historians on the sacred ways* (Roma: Viella 2018), a unique project exploring the art of 12th-century France from the point of view of a medieval pilgrim through the body-changing experience of walking as a means to encounter medieval artwork.

⁸ See *Spoliation as Translation. Convivium Supplementum*. The imitation of antiquity as a subkind of spoliation has been already characterized and explored by Ingela Nilsson, “Imitation as Spoliation, Reception as Translation. The Art of Transforming Things in Byzantium”, *Spoliation as Translation. Convivium Supplementum*, ed. Ivana Jevtić, Ingela Nilsson (Brno: Masarykova Univerzita, 2021): 20–38.



Figure 1. View of the Church of St. Peter at Moissac Abbey, 12th, 13th, and 15th centuries.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

thus very broadly understood and operated with here as a creative multi-levelled and multi-media treatment of the past. The following text explores the abbey's treatment of the past on three distinct levels: The first part examines words, which became an aniconic, intellectual medium for writing and rewriting the monastery's own past. In the subsequent section, the spoliation of ancient materials and their imitation – a kind of conceptual spoliation – are explored. The final concluding section then discusses how these levels contribute to the creation of a shared visual memory of the past and the sacred.

2. Words: Writing and Rewriting the Past

In light of the amount of art-historical writing dedicated to Moissac Abbey, it may function as a veritable mirror of (French) medieval historiography. While in the 1920s it stood at the center of nationalist debates on the origins of “Romanesque” sculpture, in the subsequent decade it became a tool of Meyer Schapiro's formalist analysis, which aestheticized 12th-century visuality for avant-garde artists⁹. Finally, while research in the second half of the 20th century sought to uncover complicated theological meaning of its extensive decorative cycle, the sensorial turn at the outset of the 21st century marked the role of the beholder and the ritual usage of the space by

communities of monks and pilgrims¹⁰. The critical approach that emerged, in the case of Moissac, at the turn of the millennium brought, among other things, an effort to critically analyze the primary sources relating to the history of the monastery. Although earlier studies predominantly relied on data from the late 14th-century chronicle of Aymeric de Peyrac, the novel reinterpretation of this data, in conjunction with the expansion of research to encompass additional texts preserved from the formerly extensive monastic scriptorium, has marked a new era in research on this monument¹¹. Together with the fundamental historiographical and critical texts of Jean Wirth and Xavier Barral I Altet, this approach has set the stage for the refinement of the dating of the architecture and sculptural decoration and for novel insights into the establishment of the abbey¹².

⁹ Regarding the nationalist debates on the origins of “Romanesque” sculpture, see, especially, Émile Mâle, *L'art religieux du XII^e siècle en France* (Paris: A. Colin, 1922): 245, 378–387 for Moissac; see also a critique of it by Arthur Kingsley Porter, “Spain or Toulouse? And Other Questions”, *The Art Bulletin* 7, no. 1 (1924): 3–25. As for Schapiro, see Meyer Schapiro, “The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac Part I (1)”, *The Art Bulletin* 13, no. 3 (1931): 249–351; Idem, “The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac Part I (2)”, *The Art Bulletin* 13, no. 4 (1931): 464–531. For his role in the “aestheticization” of “Romanesque” art, see Risham Majeed, “Against Primitivism: Meyer Schapiro's Early Writings on African and Romanesque Art”, *Res*, 71–72 (2019): 295–311, sp. p. 296.

¹⁰ Among the scholars of the second half of the 20th century, see, most prominently, Yves Christe, *Les grands portails romans: Etudes sur l'iconologie des théophanies romane* (Genève: Libr. Droz, 1969) and Peter K. Klein, “Programmes eschatologiques, fonction et réception historique des portails du XII^e s. Moissac-Beaulieu-Saint-Denis”, *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 33, n. 132 (1990): 317–349. After the so-called “sensorial turn”, see more narrowly focused articles such as the one by Kristine Tanton, “Un chapiteau représentant les Béatitudes du cloître de Moissac (v. 1100): images et textes en série et représentation rituelle”, *Sens public* (2021): 1–23.

¹¹ For Aymeric's chronicle, see the French translation: Régis de la Haye transl. and ed., *Aymeric de Peyrac. Chronique des abbés de Moissac* (Maastricht/Moissac, 1994/2006). Among the analyses of other textual sources, see, for example, Fernand Peloux, *Le légendaire de Moissac et la culture hagiographique méridionale autour de l'an mil* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018); Graeme Ward, “Reading Orosius in Eleventh-Century Moissac: Text and Annotation in Paris BnF lat. 4871”, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* (2025): not paginated.

¹² See Jean Wirth, *La datation de la sculpture médiévale* (Genève: Droz, 2004); Xavier Barral I Altet, *Contre l'art roman? Essai sur un passé réinventé* (Paris: Fayard, 2006).

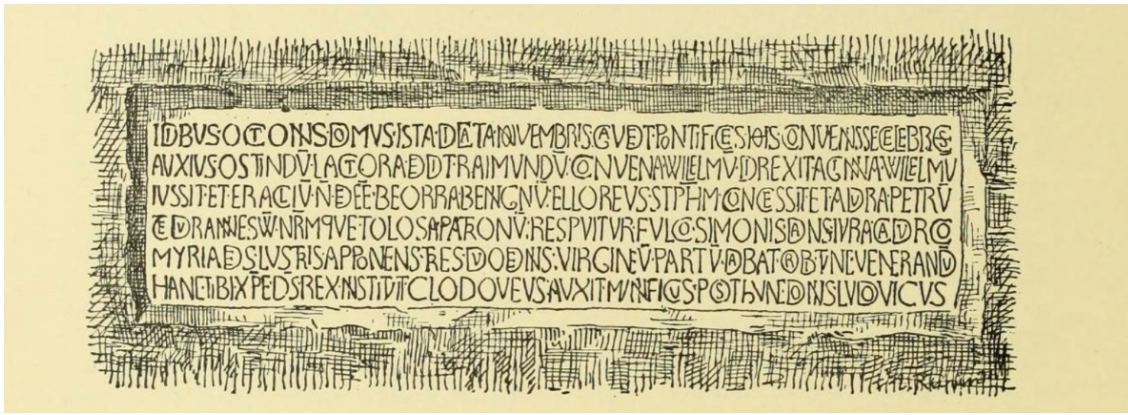


Figure 2. Dedication plaque with inscription, ca 1063.
Source: Rupin, Ernest. *L'abbaye Et Les Cloîtres De Moissac*. Paris: A. Picard, 1897.

Of primary interest for this text is the research conducted from 1996 to 2001 by Régis de la Haye¹³. It focused on the repeated practice of the monks at Moissac producing forged documents during the 11th and 12th centuries. These numerous forgeries, which often sought to imitate fictional early medieval documents, were in most cases intended to support the interests of the monastery in various political disputes and property negotiations, such as the effort to limit the rights of secular abbots and authorize the abbey's claim to certain territories and subsidiary monasteries by forging the appropriate documents¹⁴. Perhaps the most striking forgery, best demonstrating the format and audacity of this practice, is the 12th-century fabrication of a pontifical bull from 1096 for the purpose of asserting the abbey's rights over subsidiary houses¹⁵. The rewriting of the past was thus one of the means through which the monks at Moissac contributed to the establishment of their contemporary 12th-century identity and a consolidation of their position within church political structures.

Moreover, these falsifications, although generally not uncommon within this historical milieu¹⁶, in the case of Moissac ostentatiously manifested not only at the level of written words, but also in the very materiality of the abbey's edifice. In fact, one of the boldest forgeries at Moissac Abbey is literally carved in stone: the story of the abbey's own mythical origins. The stone dedicatory plaque that is still preserved today

in the choir, marking the occasion of the completion of the first "Romanesque" edifice in 1063, contains a mention of the monastery's establishment by King Clovis (+511)¹⁷ (Fig. 2). Placing the abbey's beginnings in the hands of the first Christian king of the Franks at the outset of the 6th century is further repeated by the only surviving chronicle of the abbey, written in the late 14th century by Abbot Aymeric de Peyrac (1377–1406), and the pioneers of modern historiography¹⁸. Given the lack of any older sources that would refer to the establishment by Clovis, historians are inclined to believe that the legend must have been constructed shortly after Moissac Abbey was reformed by the Benedictine Cluny Abbey in 1048 – in order to reassert the importance of Moissac and provide it with an ancient royal pedigree¹⁹.

Nevertheless, although this legend seems to be an 11th-century fabrication, it represents essential testimony to the importance of possessing an ancient past for Moissac Abbey. In fact, although the most recent research does not place the monastery's establishment before the second half of the 7th century²⁰, late antique settlement in close proximity

¹³ Régis de la Haye, "Les moines de Moissac et les faussaires (I-V)", *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique de Tarn-et-Garonne*, n. 121-124, 126 (1996-1999, 2001).

¹⁴ Let us mention, among others, the forgery of a document from the early ninth century confirming for Moissac Abbey and its priory at Marcihac, which represents one of the oldest acts of Moissac Abbey; see de la Haye 1999.

¹⁵ The date of the forged document's fabrication is probably between 1096 and 1135/45. Regarding this forgery, see de la Haye, "Les moines de Moissac et les faussaires" (1997), 55-70.

¹⁶ Forging of documents was in fact quite widespread in monastic communities at the time (11th-12th centuries). For other examples of this practice, see Florian Mazel, "Entre mémoire carolingienne et réforme 'grégorienne': stratégies discursives, identité monastique et enjeux de pouvoir à Redon aux X^e et XI^e siècles", *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'ouest* 122, n. 1 (2015): 9-39; *Israël du Dorat: être chanoine en l'an Mil*, ed. Anne Massoni, Éric Sparhubert (Limoges 2019). For more general assessment of this practice, see the recent publication Paul Bertrand, *Forger le faux: les usages de l'écrit au Moyen-Âge*, Seuil 2025.

¹⁷ The dating of the plaque's creation remains unknown, the epigraphic similarity with the inscriptions of cloister columns however suggests it could have been carved during Ansquetil's abbacy. This version is favored, for example, by Barbara Franzé, "Moissac et l'oeuvre de l'abbé Ansquetil (1085-1115): un discours de pénitence", *Hortus Artium Medievalium* 21 (2015): 385-405. The original inscription reads as follows: HANC TIBI, CHRISTE DEUS, REX INSTITUIT CLODOVEVS: AUXIT MUNCIFVS POST HUNC DONIS LUDOVICVS. For an analysis and translation, see Régis de la Haye, *Apogée de Moissac. L'abbaye clunisienne Saint-Pierre de Moissac à l'époque de la construction de son cloître et de son grand portail* (Moissac/Maastricht 1995/2020), 93-94; Chantal Fraïsse, *Moissac, histoire d'une abbaye: mille ans de vie bénédictine* (Cahors: La Louve éditions, 2006), 19-21.

¹⁸ See, for example, the pioneering late-19th-century monograph on Moissac by Ernest Rupin, *L'abbaye Et Les Cloîtres De Moissac* (Paris: A. Picard, 1897), 48-50.

¹⁹ De la Haye, *Apogée de Moissac*, 64; Fraïsse, *Moissac, histoire d'une abbaye*, 21-23; Cathrine E. Besancon, *The French Romanesque Portals of Moissac, Souillac and Beaulieu: a Response to the Papal Reform Movement and Popular Heresy* (PhD dissertation thesis, University of Southern California, 2013), 44.

²⁰ It is not in the scope of this paper to trace the origins of the abbey in detail; therefore, regarding this topic, see, for example, Fraïsse, *Moissac, histoire d'une abbaye*, 15-25; eadem, "Moissac, abbaye Saint-Pierre", in *Congrès Archéologique de France, 170^e session 2012. Tarn-et-Garonne*, ed. Marie-Paule Arnauld, Éliane Vergnolle (Paris:

to the actual monastic site is indeed documented by archaeological excavations²¹. The territory was occupied by several Roman *villae*, some of which have already been partially excavated, such as the foundations under the present Church of St. Martin²². This church was built on the remains of thermal baths, which originally constituted a part of a Gallo-Roman villa dating from the end of the 3rd or the beginning of the 4th century²³. Despite the fact that no traces of ancient settlement have been found directly on the site of the present monastic complex, it is evident that the presence of Gallo-Roman architecture and artifacts was one of the factors that shaped the medieval identity of Moissac Abbey and the city that surrounds it. In this light, the invention of the abbey's late antique establishment must be regarded as a deliberate endeavor to establish continuity with the region's past, the vestiges of which were still physically present in the 11th-century landscape. Moreover, their appropriation placed the monastery in a genealogical line with the prominent figures associated with the origins of the Christian religion in the region. However, it would be overly simplistic to consider this episode as merely a political endeavor to enhance the abbey's prestige or – as Paul Bertrand has recently argued – to view this practice from the political perspective as creating “fake news” or as compared to modern simulacra.²⁴ Rather, it forms part of a more complex set of practices involving creative “manipulations” of the past, whose role was crucial in shaping a collective reality, strengthening ties with local communities, and legitimizing abbey's position within the contemporary sacred ecosystem. As will be shown, this creative treatment of the past encompassed various media, not only written texts, and therefore could have been widely comprehensible. To this end, it is essential to acknowledge that the form of invention of the past, manifested in the forged documents and the aforementioned dedicatory inscription, was likely intended for an exclusive audience of educat-

ed laymen and, more likely, the clerical community, which had direct access to the sacred space of the choir. Nevertheless, as previously indicated, Moissac Abbey exhibits a considerable array of spoliated late antique materials and meticulous reproductions of ancient artifacts, that were visible to much larger array of audiences. These features, dispersed throughout the edifice's fabric, can be regarded as yet another means of the creative treatment of the past, yet another way of legitimizing oneself within the reality in which the artifacts of the past were omnipresent and constituted a lived experience of the people who moved across the region.

3. Stones: Reusing and Reproducing the Past

Historiographically, the period between the second half of the 11th century and the first decades of the 12th is considered the epoch when Moissac Abbey had its greatest flourishing²⁵. It is important to note that this perception is strongly influenced by the information provided by the chronicle of Aymeric, whose writings – being more than three centuries posterior to the supposed “golden age” of the monastery – must themselves be considered mainly as a product of his own time: a retrospective glorification of the past from the nostalgia of an abbot who experienced the doom of his monastic community²⁶. While taking this into account, the architectural proliferation of Moissac and the amount of relics and lands acquired by its abbots during this period, indeed testify in favor of the perception of a thriving century²⁷. The outset of this thriving is usually aligned in the scholarly literature with the abbey's reformation under the Cluniac order in 1048, being further substantiated by the subsequent architectural expansion of the abbey²⁸. This expansion is agreed to have begun with the consecration of a new church in 1063, followed by the elaborate sculptural program of the cloister, which is attested by an inscription to have finished in 1100²⁹. The apogee of this prosperity is then generally set in

Société Française d'archéologie, 2014), 269–270; and also

De la Haye, *Apogée de Moissac*, 62–70, who argued for Moissac having been established by the Carolingian dynasty.

²¹ See Bastien Lefebvre, “An archaeological window into the town of Moissac (Tarn-et-Garonne) from the 12th to the 19th century”, *Archéologie médiévale* 50 (2020): not paginated.

²² Regarding this monument, see, in general, Marcel Durliat, “L'Église Saint-Martin de Moissac”, *Bulletin Monumental* 128 (1970): 41–56; Régis de la Haye, *Saint-Martin de Moissac: plus ancienne église de France?* (Moissac: Imprimerie Setip, 1978); Bastien Lefebvre, “Moissac, ancienne église Saint-Martin”, in *Congrès Archéologique de France, 170e session 2012. Tarn-et-Garonne*, eds. Marie-Paule Arnauld, Éliane Vergnolle (Paris: Société Française d'archéologie, 2014), 319–322.

²³ The site likely represented the first place of worship and burial for the neighboring population, as it was likely transformed into a church or chapel around the 5th century. Additionally, a Christian necropolis was uncovered to the south of the church's chancel, used from the early Middle Ages onwards. For more on this topic, see Estelle Fayolle-Bouillon, “Topographie de la ville de Moissac (Tarn-et-Garonne) à la fin du Moyen Âge à partir des estimations de 1480”, *Archéologie du Midi médiéval* 29 (2011): 187–207, esp. 187–188.

²⁴ Paul Bertrand, *Forger le faux: les usages de l'écrit au Moyen-Âge*. To the author, the late twelfth century marks a period in which approaches to the facticity of coeval documents begin to shift toward a more verificatory attitude. The activities of Moissac's scriptorium must therefore be understood as part of the preceding era, for which the author posits a more nuanced and contextualized approach to the creation of what is today called “forgeries”.

²⁵ See especially de la Haye, *Apogée de Moissac*, who evocatively named his volume dedicated to this period of the abbey's history *Apogée de Moissac*.

²⁶ For a deconstruction of Aymeric's text, see Jana Černocká, *Moissac: a Sacred Space at the Borders of Social Groups* (MA thesis, Brno: Masaryk University, 2023), 72–75.

²⁷ Regarding the expansion of the lands and properties of Moissac after the Cluniac reformation, see Fraïsse, *Moissac, histoire d'une abbaye*, chap. 2.

²⁸ The reform allowed the monastery to benefit from the prestige of Cluny Abbey, which brought Moissac an increase in donations and, in turn for Cluny Abbey, this meant an extension of influence in the south of France. At the same time, Moissac had a special position within the Cluniac dependencies and the monks at Moissac retained the right to elect an abbot from among their own ranks; see Jacques Hourlier, “L'entrée de Moissac dans l'ordre de Cluny”, *Annales du Midi: Revue archéologique, historique et philologique de la France méridionale* 64 (1963): 353–363, esp. 360–361; Besançon, *The French Romanesque Portals of Moissac, Souillac and Beaulieu*, 46, n. 11.

²⁹ For research on the construction phases of the abbey supported by archaeological analysis, see Chantal Fraïsse, “Moissac, abbaye Saint-Pierre”, 269–270; Gilles Séraphin, “Moissac, Église abbatiale Saint-Pierre. Massif occidental et nef romane”, in *Congrès Archéologique de France, 170e session 2012. Tarn-et-Garonne*, ed. Marie-Paule Arnauld, Éliane Vergnolle (Paris: Société Française d'archéologie, 2014), 271–287.

parallel with the creation of the decorated porch, the completion of which – although not satisfactorily settled until today – can be probably bound with the rule of Abbot Roger (r. 1115–1131)³⁰.

While the church's nave and choir underwent major renovation in the 15th century, the extraordinarily preserved sculptural wholes of the cloister and the porch still display a remarkable presence of spoliated materials and late antique imitations, often exhibited in very sophisticated settings³¹. In the cloister, the practice of reusing older materials is most visible in the case of the pillars marking the corners and the center of each gallery (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Cloister of Moissac Abbey with corner pillar in the center, ca 1096–1100.
Source: Benh Lieu Song, Wikimedia Commons.

These massive structures, contrasting with the slender columns with decorated capitals that fill the rest of the space, are covered with marble plaques displaying the effigies of apostles and the first Cluniac abbot, Durand de Bredons (r. 1048–1071) (Fig. 4).

As reported by previous studies, these slabs are in fact reused lids of ancient sarcophagi, recarved for the purpose of adorning the cloister at Moissac³². Of special attention is the back side of the central pillar in the eastern gallery with a likeness of Abbot Durand, displaying a motif reminiscent of tiles or fish scales (Fig. 5).

This pattern is further repeated in numerous places throughout the abbey, such as the back side of the trumeau of the main portal and the top parts of most of the cloister capitals (Fig. 6).



Figure 4. Marble plaque with Abbot Durand, ca 1096–1100.
Source: Roberto Sigismondi, <https://cenobium.isti.cnr.it/>.

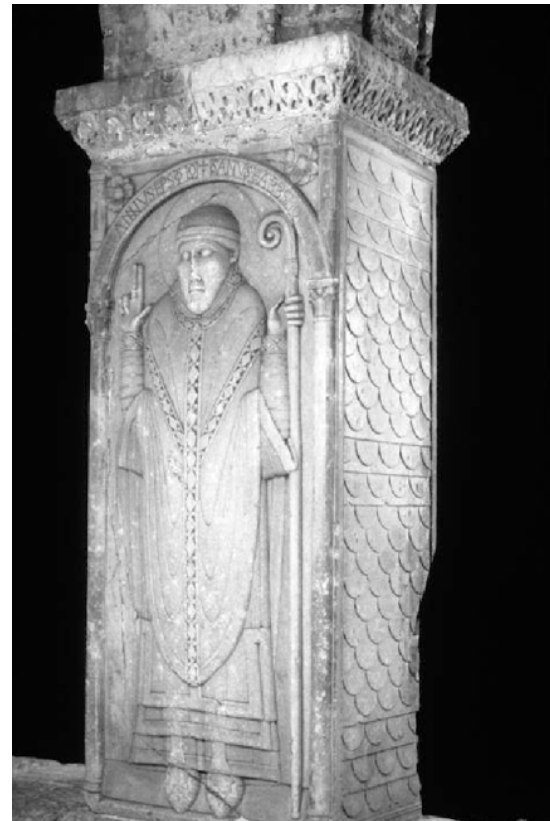


Figure 5. Back side of the plaque with Abbot Durand. Source: Cazes, Quitterie, Heike Hansen. "Moissac, abbaye de Saint Pierre. Cloître". In *Congrès Archéologique de France, 170e session 2012. Tarn-et-Garonne*, eds. Marie-Paule Arnauld, Éliane Vergnolle (Paris: Société Française d'archéologie 2014).

³⁰ The research on the dating of the porch is vast. For the most recent contributions, see Ilene H. Forsyth, "The Date of the Moissac Portal", in *Current Directions in Eleventh- and Twelfth-century Sculpture Studies*, ed. Robert Allan Maxwell, Kirk Thomas Ambrose (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 77–100; Gunther Kälberer, *Der Westbau der ehemaligen Abtei Moissac als Beispiel eines Vorhallenturmes Ein mittelalterliches Bauwerk im Spannungsfeld funktionaler Anforderungen* (PhD dissertation thesis, Tübingen: Eberhard-Karls-Universität, 2007); Besancon, *The French Romanesque Portals of Moissac, Souillac and Beaulieu*, 53–65; Černocká, *Moissac: a Sacred Space at the Borders of Social Groups*, chap. 5.3.

³¹ For the post-12th-century construction history, see Fraïsse, *Moissac, histoire d'une Abbaye*, 176–183. On the cloister of Moissac and the dating of its sculptural decoration, see, recently, Černocká, *Moissac: a Sacred Space at the Borders of Social Groups*, 74–81.

³² Forsyth, "The Date of the Moissac Portal", 84.

Based on the verbal similarity between the name of Abbot Ansquetil – the cloister’s builder – and the word *scata*, – a Latin term for fish scales –, Aymeric’s chronicle reports on this motif as being the abbot’s visual emblem³³. Although the appropriation of this motif by the abbot cannot be completely dismissed, the fact that a similar motif of fish scales appears in a number of other locations during same time period may suggest an alternative interpretation. For instance, the tiled pattern forms a part of the late 11th century altar in the Basilica of Saint-Sernin de Toulouse³⁴, which was linked to Moissac not only through diplomatic relations but also, and probably most importantly, the exchange of stonemasons working on the marble slabs with the apostles³⁵ (Figs. 7, 8).

More importantly for the present article, the same roof-tiled pattern adorns the lids of numerous ancient sarcophagi, including those that were found at the site of the Basilica of Saint-Sernin³⁶ (Fig. 9). Although we do not know to what extent the Saint-Sernin sarcophagi were visible at the time, given the popularity of the roof-tiled motif on this type of artifacts it is probable that the masons working first at Toulouse and then at Moissac took a direct inspiration from these objects – translating the trending ancient visuality into the 12th-century context.



Figure 6. Back side of portal trumeau. Source: Jana Černocká.



Figure 8. Marble plaque with St. Peter at Moissac Abbey, ca 1096-1100. Source: Roberto Sigismondi, <https://cenobium.isti.cnr.it/>.



Figure 7. Marble relief from the Basilica of Saint-Sernin, ca 1096. Source: Archaeodontosaurus, Wikimedia Commons.

³³ See de la Haye, *Chronique des abbés de Moissac*, 120-121, corresponding to folio 160v of the chronicle.

³⁴ Regarding the Basilica of Saint-Sernin, see, in general, Quitterie Cazes, Daniel Cazes, *Saint Sernin de Toulouse. De Saturnin au chef d'oeuvre de l'art roman* (Grauhelt: Ed. Odyssée, 2008); Jean Rocacher, *Saint-Sernin de Toulouse. Basilique romane* (Toulouse: Privat 1993).

³⁵ As Marcel Durliat has already argued convincingly, the formal similarities between the apostles of Moissac and the bas-reliefs of Saint-Sernin suggest a mutual artistic exchange and confirm the dating of the two wholes to around 1100; see Marcel Durliat, “Les origines de la sculpture romane à Toulouse et à Moissac”, *Cahiers de la civilisation médiévale* 12, n. 48 (1969): 12-48.

Moreover, Besancon, *The French Romanesque Portals of Moissac, Souillac and Beaulieu*, 58-59, demonstrated the spread of this motif in other places, such as the decoration of the church at Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne and the reliefs in the Church of St. Marie de Souillac.

³⁶ Cazes and Cazes, *Saint Sernin de Toulouse*, 33, 39.

A comparable case is found in the central pillar of the north gallery, the entire surface of which is adorned with an aniconic motif of undulating curves reminiscent of the surface of water (Fig. 10).



Figure 9. Sarcophagus with ten apostles around Christ found in Toulouse, end of 4th or 5th century. Source: Daniel Cazes. "Les sarcophages paléochrétiens sculptés en marbre de Toulouse et la nécropole de Saint-Sernin". In *Stucs et Décors de La Fin de l'Antiquité Au Moyen Âge (Ve-XIe Siècle)*. Edited by Christian Sapin. Turnhout: Brepols 2006.



Figure 10. Cloister marble relief with pattern reminiscent of water surface, ca 1096-1100. Source: Roberto Sigismondi, <https://cenobium.isti.cnr.it/>.

While on the one hand this decoration may be a reference to the abbey fountain, which (now unpre-served) was located in the immediate vicinity of the pillar, on the other hand it may once again allude to a motif commonly used on sarcophagi such as the one in the possession of Marseille History Museum³⁷ (Fig. 11).

This endeavor to establish a connection with ancient tradition was presumably not solely directed towards the monastic community: contemporary sources prove that at least until the middle of the 12th century the cloisters represented a lively place, partially accessible to the broad lay public³⁸. Furthermore, the allusion

to antiquity is congruent with the iconography of the pillars, which are intended to position the first abbot of Cluny within a direct lineage with the apostles of the church. The abbot's effigy, meticulously carved into the slabs of an ancient sarcophagus and adorned with an imitation sarcophagi lid pattern on the opposing side, enables us to interpret this object within a funerary context as a form of epitaph. The presence of artifacts and imitations of antiquity in the cloister at Moissac thus functions as a cohesive element that gives the space a unified visuality and, in a way, also as an accelerator of sacredness that identifies the depiction of the biblical apostles and their Cluniac successor with a shared history going back to the roots of the Christian church.



Figure 11. Sarcophagus with wavy pattern, 3rd century, Musée d'histoire de Marseille. Source: Rvalette, Wikimedia Commons.

According to Forsyth, the same type of reused re-carved marble is also used in the context of the porch, such as in the narrative scenes of the Annunciation and Visitation of the Virgin Mary, placed on the side walls of the portico³⁹. Nonetheless, the most distinctive associated element within not only the porches but also the entire monastic complex is the lintel that supports the main tympanum (Fig. 12).

³⁷ For more about the cloister fountain, see Chantal Fraisse, "Le cloître de Moissac a-t-il un programme?", *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 50 (2007): 245-270, esp. 248, 256.

³⁸ This can be deduced from the *Statuta* of Peter the Venerable, who, in the middle of the 12th century, had the need to restrict

access to the Cluniac cloisters, which were, according to him, beginning to resemble "public roads". See Constable Giles, "Statuta Petri Venerabilis Abbatis Cluniacensis IX (1146-1147)", *Corpus Consuetudinum Monasticarum*, ed. Kassius Hallinger (Siegburg: Apud F. Schmitt succes, 1975), 10-17.

³⁹ Forsyth, "The Date of the Moissac Portal", 84, n. 18.



Figure 12: Lintel of Moissac portal. Source: Jana Černocká.

This element is the only reused feature that has been subjected to a thorough art-historical analysis.⁴⁰ It has been observed that its front side, showing a series of carved rosettes, does not formally match with the underside, which, partially covered by the surrounding vertical supports, displays vine leaf and flower tendrils, exhibiting a smaller depth and more subtle execution of the relief (Fig. 13).



Figure 13. Vine leaf motive on the underside of Moissac lintel. Source: Jana Černocká.

In 1992, Piotr Skubiszewski convincingly demonstrated that, although the Moissac lintel is indeed spolia from an unidentified ancient structure, only the underside with the vine-leaf motif is original⁴¹. The front side, in contrast, is, according to him, a very successful imitation of the so-called “lintel of Thézels”, a marble block the origins of which, according to some scholars, date back to the time of Emperor Constantine.⁴² This lintel, which in its post-antique history formed a part of the architecture of the church in Thézels near Cahors – later destroyed during the French Revolution – displays

⁴⁰ See Denise Fossard, “À propos des linteaux de Moissac et de Saint-Sernin de Thézels”, in *Synthronon, art et archéologie de la fin de l'Antiquité et du Moyen âge* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1968), 209–224; Piotr Skubiszewski, “Le trumeau et le linteau de Moissac”, 51–90; Kälberer, *Der Westbau der ehemaligen Abtei Moissac als Beispiel eines Vorhallenturmes*, 176–180.

⁴¹ Skubiszewski, “Le trumeau et le linteau de Moissac”, 51–90.

⁴² Regarding the lintel from Thézels, see Fossard, “À propos des linteaux de Moissac et de Saint-Sernin de Thézels”; eadem, “Un fragment de table d'autel en marbre blanc récemment découvert au voisinage de l'ancienne église Saint-Sernin de Thézels (Lot)”, *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France* (1971): 278–280.

strikingly similar rosettes to those on the front of the lintel at Moissac (Fig. 14).



Figure 14. So-called “lintel of Thézels”, ca 5th century, stored at Musée de Cahors. Source: Fossard, Denise. “À propos des linteaux de Moissac et de Saint-Sernin de Thézels”. In *Synthronon, art et archéologie de la fin de l'Antiquité et du Moyen âge*. Edited by André Grabar, 209–224. Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1968.

It is also necessary to add that the rosette motif continues on the front side of the trumeau, where it is partially invisible due to the presence of lion and lionesses reliefs carved over it. Together, the lintel and the trumeau thus form a single structure in the shape of a T-shaped cross (Fig. 15).



Figure 15: Sculpted trumeau of Moissac portal. Source: Jana Černocká.

Although non-figural, this whole can thus be considered as a type of devotional image itself, intended for contemplation: Skubiszewski compared the structure with ornamented incipits in the coeval manuscripts produced at Moissac, displaying the letter T from *Te Igitur* (Fig. 16).

Moreover, he evoked depictions of floral-decorated crosses that served to reference the tree of life⁴³. Regardless of the intended model for the Moissac T-shaped structure, the ornament's contemplative role remains a focal point, becoming a non-figural

⁴³ Skubiszewski “Le trumeau et le linteau de Moissac”.



Figure 16: Folio 19v of *Le sacramentaire dit de Figeac-Moissac* (Latin 2293) displaying the Tau of Te Igitur, last third of 11th century. Source: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/>.

image of devotion⁴⁴. Although in the case of the cloister it is possible to hypothesize about its public accessibility, there is no doubt regarding the spoliated lintel of the portal: this element was directly accessible to lay citizens, including locals and pilgrims who waited under the portico's roofed space. Here, the presence of stone benches carved into the side walls of the portico serves as an indication of the pilgrimage function of this space, as of the intention for the newcomers to pause and contemplate the sculptural embellishments⁴⁵. The cross-like structure of the lintel and trumeau is an element so visually distinctive and peculiar that it must have caught the eye almost immediately and attracted similar attention as the figural decoration. Even today, although its original polychromy has been lost, it is this feature that first catches the newcomer's eye, as it is visible from afar – long before the figures depicted on the tympanum can be discerned. The movement of pilgrims and lay visitors can therefore be considered to be a pivotal factor in activating the decoration and mediating its sacredness⁴⁶. Furthermore, it appears

plausible to posit that it was people who traveled long distances who possessed the capacity to recognize that they were in the presence of artifacts of considerable antiquity. It should be recalled that in the same time period an almost identical lintel was located in the portal of the nearby church in Thézels (ca 30 km). While slightly more stylized in rendering, conceptually still similar rosettes can be found in the decoration of the cathedral in Cahors (ca 55 km), the portal of which is placed in a successive chronological line with the portal in Moissac⁴⁷ (Fig. 17).



Figure 17: Rosettes on the portico of St. Étienne de Cahors, 1st half of the 12th century. Source: GO69, Wikimedia Commons.

Furthermore, within a comparable timeframe, the rosette pattern disseminated across even more extensive geographical distances: notably, on the portico of the church at Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne (ca 135 km), which represents a posterior variation on the portico at Moissac⁴⁸ (Fig. 18).

It is also not possible to exclude the possibility that other artifacts of ancient origin, albeit non-preserved, might have contained ornaments similar to those previously mentioned. In the medieval “ruinscape” of Southern France, Moissac Abbey thus plays a significant role in the establishment of a “sacred ecosystem” that is intricately interconnected by images.

4. Conclusions

Tracing the phenomenon of spoliation, Dale Kinney characterized the reused materials as “vehicles of memory” within the political strategy of “appropriation” of the ancient past by the 12th-century monastic communities⁴⁹. Indeed, as seen in the case

⁴⁴ On the contemplative role of ornament in the Middle Ages, see, for example, Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004).

⁴⁵ Regarding the function of stone benches at pilgrimage churches, see especially Ivan Foletti, *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways*. See also, especially pp. 109–118, on possible modes of contemplating the decoration of church entrance structures, including the role of liminal rituals and performances that occurred in these spaces, including the monks explaining the meaning of portal decoration.

⁴⁶ For the role of pilgrims and pilgrimages and activating images by movement, see *ibidem*; M. Locker, “The Secret Language of Movement. Interior Encounters with Space and Transition during Medieval Pilgrimage”, in *Place and Space in the Medieval World*, eds. M. Boulton, J. Hawkes, and H. Stöner (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group Ltd, 2018), 1–11.

⁴⁷ Regarding Cahors Cathedral, see, most recently, Virgine Czerniak, Jean-Marc Stouffs, Myriam Tessariol, Floréal Daniel, “Les figures peintes et la polychromie du portail occidental de la cathédrale Saint-Étienne de Cahors: une étude pluridisciplinaire”, *Mémoires de la Société Archéologique du Midi de la France* 67 (2007): 97–112; *La cathédrale Saint-Étienne de Cahors: 900 ans d'histoire*, ed. Valérie Gaudard et al., (Lyon: Éditions Lieux dits, 2024).

⁴⁸ Regarding the abbey in Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne, see Michele Luigi Vescovi, “An Eschatological Mirror: The Romanesque Portal of Beaulieu-Sur-Dordogne”, *Gesta* 56, n. 1 (2017): 53–80; Nicolas Samartz, *The Church of Saint Pierre in Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne. Landscape, Architecture, Sculpture, and Precious Objects through the Experience of Medieval Pilgrim* (MA thesis, Venice: University of Ca'Foscari, 2018/2019).

⁴⁹ *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, eds. Dale Kinney, Richard



Figure 18: Lintel of the Church of St. Pierre at the abbey in Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne, ca 1130–1140. Source: GO69, Wikimedia Commons.

of Moissac, the past – forged, reused, or imitated – becomes in the hands of the abbey an important commodity coining its prestige and consolidating its position within church political structures. This practice, as we were able to see, took place at the level of words as well as the level of images and materiality. At the same time, however, it would be limiting to suggest that the use of spolia in Moissac was only one of the political tools to retroactively create its own history. As Éliane Vergnolle mentioned, the use of ancient marble blocks may not have been a demonstration of continuity with an older culture, but may simply have been an expression of taste for materials of high quality, incomparable to the quality of other commonly available materials⁵⁰.

Most importantly, however, the monumental transposition of the ancient past served as a visual frame legitimizing and reinforcing the sacredness of images and creating a shared visual language. In the cloister, this strategy is particularly evocative within a space the iconography of which – depicting narrative scenes from the history of salvation together with iconic depictions of figures representing the pillars of faith – represents a visual gallery of the past and its continuation into the present through the likeness of the first Cluniac abbot. Given the presence of relics of St. Peter inserted inside a cavity in one of the decorated capitals, the references to the ancient funerary context further reinforce the liminality of this space as a passage between life and death, past and present, leading to the sacred space of the church⁵¹ (Fig. 19).

In the case of the portal, the half reused, half resurfaced lintel and trumeau function as an an- iconic cross-shaped devotional image in which ornament functions as a means for contemplation. Simultaneously, this structure, similarly to the crosses carved or painted over the facades over the Mediterranean, is charged with sacralizing the surrounding landscape and the apotropaic potential embodied in the sculptures of lions and lionesses



Figure 19: Cloister capital displaying the martyrdom of Sts. Peter and Paul, with a small cavity hollowed in the center, ca 1096–1100. Source: Roberto Sigismondi, <https://cenobium.isti.cnr.it/>.

intertwining on the trumeau⁵². The fact that the ornamental decor is borrowed from an ancient structure and subsequently repeated all over the region makes the structure a veritable “vehicle of memory” – both memory of the past and memory of the sacred –, which is activated by the movement of human bodies, especially pilgrims who, traveling for long distances, repeatedly faced the same visual patterns. Demonstrated here with the rosettes motif, these spoliated elements can thus be understood, following Karen R. Mathews’ research, as visual *koine*, signs of ancient Roman heritage mutually comprehensible for the people traveling across the Mediterranean⁵³. Indeed, in the case of rosettes, we can speak of far more widespread circulation than just regional: similar motifs can be observed in places as distant as the cloister in Monreale, Sicily (ca 1174–1183), proving the popularity of this ornament throughout the 12th century⁵⁴ (Fig. 20).

Brilliant (Surrey: Ashgate 2011), 4, 107.

⁵⁰ See Éliane Vergnolle, “L’art Roman, epigone ou renaissance de l’art romain?”, *Cahiers de Saint Michel de Cuxa* 39 (2008): 7–21, esp. 12.

⁵¹ Regarding the presence of relics in the Moissac cloister and their activation through ritual movement, see Leah Rutchick, “A Reliquary Capital at Moissac: Liturgy and Ceremonial Thinking in the Cloister”, in *Decorations for the Holy Dead. Visual Embellishments on Tombs and Shrines of Saints*, eds. Stephen Lamia, Elizabeth Valdez del Alamo (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 129–151. Regarding the notion of liminality and medieval art, see *The Notion of Liminality and the Sacred Space*, *Convivium Supplementum*, eds. Ivan Foletti, Klára Doležalová (Brno: Masaryk University, 2020).

⁵² The function of crosses as tools for sacralizing the landscape is well attested, for example, in the medieval Caucasian churches and cross-stelae. See Manuela Studer-Karlen, “The Pictorial Compositions on the Cross Stelae in Georgia (Fifth–Ninth Centuries)”, *Convivium* 9, n. 1 (2022): 52–73.

⁵³ Karen Rose Mathews, “Speaking Antiquity. Ancient Spolia as a Visual Koiné in the Medieval Mediterranean (12th to 15th Century)”, in *Spoliation as Translation. Convivium Supplementum*, eds. Ivana Jevtic, Ingela Nilsson (Brno: Masaryk University, 2021), 38–60.

⁵⁴ For a general bibliography about the cloister of Monreale, see Carl D. Sheppard, “Iconography of the Cloister of Monreale”, *The art Bulletin* 31, n. 3 (1949): 159–169; Roberto Salvini, *Il Chiosstro di Monreale e la scultura romanica in Sicilia* (Palermo: S. F. Flaccovio, 1962); Beat Brenk, “Zur Programmatik



Figure 20: Rosette motive at the cloister of Monreale, 2nd half of the 12th century. Source: <https://cenobium.isti.cnr.it/> (public domain).

By including this motif into its fabric, Moissac Abbey was thus participating in creating a transregional sacred network interconnected by images that was recognizable by those who are on the move.

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