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The Knights of the Front: Medieval History's Influence on Great War Propaganda

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Abstract

Spanning a number of academic areas, "Knights of the Front: Medieval History's Influence on Great War Propaganda" focuses on the emergence of medieval imagery in the First World War propaganda. Examining several specific uses of medieval symbolism in propaganda posters from both Central and Allied powers, the article provides insight into the narrative of war, both politically and culturally constructed. The paper begins with an overview of the psychology behind visual persuasion and the history behind Europe's cultural affinity for "chivalry," then continues into specific case studies of period propaganda posters that hold not only themes of military glory and prowess, but also themes of race, gender, and religion as well. Finally, the article makes the argument that the realities of the First World War shattered the chivalrous and romantic ideals of war so completely that the concepts and images were no longer appropriate for use as propaganda.

Keywords

Medieval, WWI, propaganda, Joan of Arc, Knights

The Knights of the Front: Medieval History's Influence on Great War Propaganda

Haley Claxton

“For Honour’s Sake! Our Cause is Just!”¹ A group of the king’s heralds called knights to do their duty in an impending war within the kingdom. “Take up the sword of Justice!”² Your king needs you to maintain the honour and glory of the Empire!”³ Clad in armor, knights, as the story goes, quickly rose from their peaceful lives as farmers or nobility to face their foes, to maintain the code of chivalry, and to seek the glory and adventure of battle.

Fast forward several centuries to the advent of World War One. Throughout Europe, and soon the United States, these were the words that rang out from poster after poster, plastered to every surface and circulated by any means available. Posters urged men to join the military to uphold the honor of their nation, and to do their manly duty in combat. Many posters included images of the distant past. The iconic medieval knight served as the chivalrous protector of the homeland and the weak. Images of the mythology of medieval war, the legends of heroism and chivalry, were widely propagated to garner new fighting forces.⁴ War itself, according to the story woven together by the governments and cultures of the Entente and Central Powers, was adventure. War offered the chance to be remembered as strong and patriotic, or even as a national hero, harkening back to tales of knights and chivalry of old.

The glorious story of battle success in the European Middle Ages was retold in many ways through the ages, and at the start of World War One, very prominently through propaganda posters and other images. The visualizations and rhetorical techniques of propaganda were artfully constructed to draw parallels between ancient battles and the more modern war effort.

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¹ Forde, *Scottish War Savings Committee*, 1917, Lithograph on paper, 76 x 51 cm., Ball State University Libraries, Muncie, IN, available from Ball State University Libraries, Digital Media Repository, accessed November 23, 2013. <http://libx.bsu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/WWIPosters/id/1595>.

² Bernard Parkridge, *Take Up the Sword of Justice*, 1915, Lithograph on paper, 102 x 63 cm., The George C. Marshall Research Library, Lexington, VA, available from the website of the George C. Marshall Foundation, accessed November 23, 2013. <http://marshallfoundation.org/library/posters/take-sword-justice/>.

³ Lawson Wood, *Your King and Your Country Need You to Maintain the Honour and Glory of the British Empire - A Chip of the Old Block*, 1914, lithograph on paper, 75 x 50 cm., Library of Congress, Washington, DC, available from World War I Propaganda Posters: Examples of Propaganda from WWI, accessed November 23, 2013. <http://www.ww1propaganda.com/ww1-poster/your-king-country-need-you-maintain-honour-and-glory-british-empire>.

⁴ Allen Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1.

The massive changes in technology between 1914 and the Middle Ages served not to alter the face of war in the minds of soldiers, but instead “reduced the range of effective vision on the battlefield,” providing a familiar, albeit far removed and fictionalized idea of conflict.⁵ The influence of medieval-themed posters had its roots in the European cultural memory of chivalry, masculinity and knighthood during the Middle Ages. European and American World War One propaganda often emphasized themes of glory and chivalry through allusions to the Middle Ages. Thus, they constructed parallels between the stated goals of the war and those of medieval warfare, at least as they were found in the popular imagination. These posters not only encouraged young men to join the armed forces, but also encouraged those on the home front to support the war efforts.

Persuasive visual argument, or propaganda, is defined by psychologist Frederick Bartlett as “an attempt to influence opinion and conduct... in such a way that the persons who adopt the opinions and behavior indicated do so without themselves making any definite search for reasons.”⁶ This form of visual argument can appear in many different media. To effectively cause people to adopt ideologies shown in persuasive posters, themes presented must have a basis in widely accepted social ideologies and beliefs and be simple enough to understand quickly.⁷ Propaganda often uses symbolism or historical allusions to draw upon deeply rooted cultural ideals of its viewers. History is often the basis for cultural ideals.

For European nations in particular, chivalry and knighthood are widely regarded as historical concepts of great pride. In the centuries between the Middle Ages and the start of the First World War in 1914, stories of knights, chivalric codes, and other forms of “medieval history” were well recognized and formed “a prism through which the contemporaries viewed the present.”⁸ This history had been told and retold through scholarly works, folk tales, epic poems, ballads, and more. With each retelling and rewriting, certain facts were highlighted, others discarded, and some even invented to augment what was already there. The continual narration became a game of historical telephone. The evolution of fact, infused with elements of fiction and modern reinterpretation, is what the collective memory of all history is made of. Those who study historiography, or the way that history is recorded, must contend with alterations in the historical record as it frequently evolves through time. Historical events, time periods, and symbols are often referred back to in many different situations and elements emphasized in diverse ways in order to stir universally underlying ideals.

Knights, like St. George, or the “hero warrior” King Arthur, are such historicized archetypes referenced time and time again due to the basic and relatable aspects of their stories: human conflict, masculinity, and the search for glory.⁹ Posters depicting glory in medieval warfare were used to connect not only to the way a dramatically narrativized history of European combat was taught to young men in the classroom, but also to popular literature and images outside of academia. The history of war, as it was displayed to youth in England, was “a tradition of loyalty, honour, chivalry, Christianity, patriotism, sportsmanship, and leadership.”¹⁰ These themes were presented not only to English youth, but to most European and American youth as

⁵ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: J. Cape, 1976), 262-263.

⁶ Frederic C. Bartlett, *Political Propaganda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸ Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance, and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 14.

⁹ James Lewis Henderson, *A Bridge Across Time: The Role of Myths in History* (London: Turnstone Books, 1975), 49.

¹⁰ Peter Parker, *The Old Lie: The Great War and The Public-School Ethos* (London: Constable, 1987), 17.

well. It is no surprise that echoes of these knightly ideals resonated deeply with young men at the advent of the First World War and further emphasized the glory promised by military service.

A prominent cultural hero icon for young European boys was the archetypal knight in shining armor. Atop a brilliant steed, the knight was a symbol of justice and gentlemanly victory. In *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War*, Loyola University Chicago professor Allen J. Frantzen argues that “the Middle Ages and World War I were inextricably linked” through these ideals and images.¹¹ Visual representations of “the armored knight... setting off to defend the weak, uphold the king’s honor, and find glory in combat... supplied a vigorous model for the modern soldier,” and encouraged men to see these ambitions as reasons to sign up to join the war effort.¹² These three goals (to defend defenseless women and children at home, to maintain national pride, and to gain personal prestige) were the socially voiced war aims sought by most of the individuals who voluntarily joined the military during the Great War.

Medieval imagery and propaganda echoing the political rhetoric of the war were alluded to in German writings and in speeches given by politicians. The speech of Herbert Henry Asquith, prime minister of England, in November 1914, is one example highlighted by historian Stefan Goebel. “We shall not sheathe the sword until Belgium recovers all, and more than all, she has sacrificed,” Asquith proclaimed after the Germans had marched through neutral Belgium.¹³ This quote was later used on posters, but it was presented simply as text without any visualizations. Images, however, were what made many propaganda posters distinctly “medieval.” After an Imperialist age, when imaginings of “taming the wild” were romanticized and heroes of conquest elevated, the “glamour of medieval... knights, dragons, and chivalric emblems, including swords, banners, and armor” were appropriate images to appeal to the masses and reflect the visions of war held dear by young male volunteers.¹⁴ Though propaganda posters had many different aims, medieval imagery was flexible and applicable to a variety of goals. Knights could be shown as “occupying both defensive and offensive positions,” amongst “workers and peasants” or “aristocratic women and damsels in distress.”¹⁵ One way in which these images were used was to recruit men to the military.

There are many examples of propaganda posters incorporating themes of medieval chivalry and knighthood to encourage participation in the military. One instance is German artist Helmuth Stockmann’s *Freiwillige aller Waffen sichert Berlin; Tretet ein in die Brigade Reinhard*, which encouraged men to join the Reinhard volunteer brigade.¹⁶ The image above the caption is of a German soldier in a traditional military uniform including the characteristic steel helmet, which was easily blended with the conception of medieval armor.¹⁷ The figure also wields a sword and a shield with a coat of arms. These instruments are distinctly reminiscent of knightly weapons and national pride. This poster aimed to recruit men to the military by implying a heroic and glorious personal victory for individual men who join, just like the soldier knight who stands strong and alone. Another poster, published by the British Parliamentary

¹¹ Frantzen, *Bloody Good*, 13.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Goebel, *Great War*, 81.

¹⁴ Frantzen, *Bloody Good*, 158.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Helmuth Stockmann, *Freiwillige aller Waffen sichert Berlin; Tretet ein in die Brigade Reinhard*, 1916, lithograph on paper, 94 x 71 cm., available from Encore Editions: Yesterday’s Paintings Today, accessed November 23, 2013. <http://www.encore-editions.com/freiwillige-aller-waffen-sichert-berlin-tretet-ein-in-die-brigade-reinhard-helmuth-stockmann--2>.

¹⁷ Goebel, *Great War*, 164.

Recruiting Office (see Figure 1), presents the words, “BRITAIN NEEDS YOU AT ONCE,” in all capital letters surrounding an image of a knight on horseback stabbing a lance through a dragon.¹⁸ This particular poster places a British soldier in the role of the knight, “St. George... the patron saint of the English.”¹⁹ Saint George was a meaningful and patriotic symbol of masculinity and chivalry in war that was deeply embedded in English culture. According to myth, Saint George was originally a Roman tribune who, while traveling, slayed a horrific



Figure 1. *Britain Needs You at Once*, 1915. Lithograph on paper, 76 x 50 cm.

dragon, which had tormented the region's princess.²⁰ Depicted in British World War One propaganda, Saint George is atop a white horse, a majestic symbol of purity and strength, and of the traditional cavalry charge. The dragon here is the enemy that, though daunting and demonic, is easily vanquished, single-handedly, by the heroic British knight, who might go on to save some distressed damsel.

Through victory heroic knights rose in esteem and became memorialized in epic poems and ballads, carvings and sculptures, and various other forms of art during the Middle Ages. The potential for memorialization and glory, which exists for any soldier, was strong motivation to join the military during the Great War. Though these cravings for recognition were often not satisfied at war's end, this motivation for military volunteerism was a continually repeated theme of post-war literature. In perhaps the most widely recognized post-war poem, “Dulce et Decorum

¹⁸ *Britain Needs You at Once*. 1915, lithograph on paper, 76 x 50 cm., Library of Congress, Washington, DC, available from the website of the Library of Congress, accessed November 14, 2014. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003675387/>.

¹⁹ Frantzen, *Bloody Good*, 14.

²⁰ C. Grant Loomis, *White Magic: An Introduction to the Folklore of Christian Legend* (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1948), 119.

Est,” poet Wilfred Owen laments that men were drawn to the trenches, “ardent for some desperate glory,” though these dreams were ultimately dashed.²¹

Great War soldiers’ aims of personal glory, which echoed the goals of historicized and chivalrous knights, were not the only parallel ambitions between the two groups of men to be presented in propaganda posters. In using medieval imagery, “myth, art, and propaganda [regarding war] conspire[d] to... present the surface of heroic masculinity,” a common theme in much of the recruitment propaganda of the First World War.²² Masculinity and men as protectors of the weak were themes in many recruitment posters. Typically these thematic elements were paired with images of women and children in need of defense. An example of this is the widely circulated *Women of Britain Say Go!* poster created by E.J. Kealey.²³ The protective element of chivalry had links back to Medieval codes, which often held that “the knight must defend women, children, and the weak” at all costs.²⁴ This idea was further inserted into fairy tales and other narratives, with the knight in shining armor, like St. George, vanquishing the dragon to save the archetypal damsel in distress.

This damsel in distress motif was used in many posters that depicted various nations as helpless females, victimized by the enemy. These visualizations were frequently used in order to enrage should-be-protective males into joining the military. One example of this is the United States Army’s recruiting poster entitled “Destroy this Mad Brute.”²⁵ In this poster a large ape, wearing a characteristic German military helmet holds a woman in his muscular, dark paws. The woman appears to be not only shamed at having been ravaged (her breasts are exposed through her torn dress and her hands are hiding her eyes), but also to be small, weak, and defenseless. Her long, blonde, wavy hair and light-colored and flowing, though torn, dress further parallel the characteristics of the classic damsel in distress figure. Protecting the “sanctity” of women, a strong cultural goal expressed in the chivalric codes of medieval knights remained so for their descendants, encouraging many men to join the fight.

Men, however, were not the only targets of propaganda during the Great War. As a new home front emerged, the need for action off the battlefield to raise funds, save food, and support the men in the trenches became vital. This need was reflected in many propaganda posters. Posters with these aims, as with recruiting posters, often had medieval themes. One iconic figure used to appeal to women was Saint Joan of Arc, a cultural hero in France who was also recognized by most Westernized cultures. Her image served as an elevated role model for females completing masculine tasks.²⁶

Still, Joan’s image was not threatening to the social hierarchy that elevated men over women as military heroes and protectors of the weak. For many, “Joan’s femaleness...

²¹ Wilfred Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est,” *The Complete Poems and Fragments* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983).

²² Frantzen, *Bloody Good*, 14.

²³ E. J. Kealey, *Women of Britain Say ‘Go!’*, 1915, lithograph on paper, 75.9 x 50.5 cm., Imperial War Museums, United Kingdom, available from the website of the Imperial War Museums, accessed November 23, 2013. <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/14592>.

²⁴ Frantzen, *Bloody Good*, 82.

²⁵ H. R. Hopps, *Destroy This Mad Brute*, 1917, lithograph on paper, accessed November 23, 2013. <https://web.viu.ca/davies/H482.WWI/poster.US.DestroyThisMadBrute.jpg>.

²⁶ Susan Visvanathan, “Representing Joan of Arc,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1997): 26.

allegorized [national] virtues (compassion, purity, self-sacrifice) essential for a great national destiny” in the war, but did not encourage women to go to battle themselves.²⁷ These virtues were the key to the chivalric ideology fueling the goals of male soldiers throughout the conflict. Though Joan of Arc did have masculine characteristics as a hero in combat, those elements of her legend were not focused on when her image was used to encourage women to participate in the war effort. Though some women did participate in military endeavors, European men were still at the forefront of military service. More women became involved on the home front, as Joan of Arc, clad in medieval armor, encouraged them to buy war bonds in England²⁸, France²⁹, and the United States.

In the United States, the Department of the Treasury produced a poster (see Figure 2) with the text, “Joan of Arc Saved France; Women of America Save Your Country; Buy War Savings Stamps,” framing a romantically illustrated and armored Joan of Arc.³⁰ Despite her armor, this image of Joan of Arc does not appear extremely militant or masculine. Instead, she appears to be a holy virgin: her eyes look upward toward heaven; her face is classically beautiful with full feminine lips; and her armor is form-fitting, highlighting her womanly features. Instead of encouraging women to take up arms and fight like men, the poster suggests that buying war bonds and helping to fund the war is metaphorically the same as fighting, and of equal importance. However, and more importantly, by evoking thoughts of holiness and virginity, it implies that buying war bonds would not sully the sacred feminine and chivalrous ideals upheld by men of Europe and the United States that were still prevalent throughout the war. In many ways, the “idealization of the Middle Ages [at the outbreak of the Great War] had pointed to dissatisfaction with the aesthetic, moral, and social condition of contemporary society” and to a desire to maintain ancient ideals of feminine incorruptibility in a world turned on its head by war.³¹ The *Joan of Arc Saved France* poster deftly expressed that desire. Though relatively few women were allowed into actual combat in the First World War, they did contribute significantly to funding the war effort through buying bonds and other products.

Posters of Joan of Arc were not the only ones encouraging those at home to support the war effort by representing the purchase of war bonds and other products as equally heroic as participation in combat. Many other posters depict victorious knights clad in national colors and symbols, in heroic stances, defeating the enemy through the purchase of war bonds. One Austro-Hungarian poster shows an armored knight on a white horse trampling a dragon (an enemy nation) by piercing it with a lance. The national flag waves in the backdrop and text entreats

²⁷ Nadia Margolis, “Joan of Arc: Maneuverable Medievalism, Flexible Feminism,” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 22, no. 1 (1996): 23.

²⁸ Bert Thomas, *Joan of Arc Saved France - Women of Britain - Save Your Country - Buy War Savings Certificates*, 1916, lithograph on paper, 75 x 51 cm., Elmer L. Anderson Library, The University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, available from the University of Minnesota Libraries, UMedia Archive, accessed November 23, 2013. <http://purl.umn.edu/76118>.

²⁹ A. Malassiné, *Emprunt 4% 1918 . . . l'Emprunt de la Défense Nationale*, 1918, lithograph on paper, 80 x 61 cm., Library of Congress, Washington, DC, available from the website of the Library of Congress, accessed November 23, 2013. <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.12517/>.

³⁰ Haskell Coffin, *Joan of Arc saved France--Women of America, save your country--Buy War Savings Stamps*, 1918, lithograph on paper, 101 x 73 cm., Library of Congress, Washington, DC, available from the website of the Library of Congress, accessed November 13, 2014. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002708944/>.

³¹ Goebel, *Great War*, 13.



Figure 2. Haskell Coffin, *Joan of Arc Saved France--Women of America, Save Your Country--Buy War Savings Stamps*, 1918. Lithograph on paper, 101 x 73 cm.

people to “*Zeichnet die sechste Kriegsanleihe*” (Subscribe to the Sixth War Loan).³² Another Austro-Hungarian poster shows a knight in full armor towering above a miniaturized mountain background with sword drawn and raised. He appears ready to attack, having already trampled an enemy’s war banner. The poster’s text tells people to buy war bonds in Prague.³³ A German poster (see Figure 3) with the text, “*Der letzte Hieb ist die 8. Kriegsanleihe*” (The Last Blow is the Eighth War Loan), shows a soldier holding a golden sword above his shoulder as if preparing to strike.³⁴ Once again, a parallel was created between buying bonds and participating in combat. Such parallels drew people on the home front into participation and made them feel as though their part was as valuable as combat itself. These posters played a vital role in strengthening a financial resource of war – bonds – that had never previously been utilized to the extent they were during the First World War.

³² Maxmillian Lenz, *Zeichnet die sechste Kriegsanleihe, 1914-1917*, 1917, lithograph on paper, 76 x 55 cm., Library of Congress, Washington DC, available from World War I Propaganda Posters: Examples of Propaganda from WWI, accessed November 23, 2013. <http://www.ww1propaganda.com/ww1-poster/zeichnet-die-sechste-kriegsanleihe-1914-1917>.

³³ *Zeichnet die fünfte Kriegsanleihe ... Živnostenská Banka in Prag und ihren Filialen!*, 1916, lithograph on paper, 148 x 85 cm., Library of Congress, Washington, DC, available from World War I Propaganda Posters: Examples of Propaganda from WWI, accessed November 23, 2013. <http://www.ww1propaganda.com/ww1-poster/zeichnet-die-f%C3%BCnfte-kriegsanleihe-%C5%BEivnostensk%C3%A1-banka-prag-und-ihren-filialen>.

³⁴ Paul Neumann, *Der letzte Hieb ist die 8. Kriegsanleihe*, 1917, lithograph on paper, 57 x 43 cm., Library of Congress, Washington, DC, available from the website of the Library of Congress, accessed November 13, 2014. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004665977/>.

The use of propaganda in World War One had a profound impact on the conflict. This was one of the forces that encouraged the rapid growth of the British army, which recruited a total of 4,006,158 men from England alone, not including English colonies, between 1914 and 1918.³⁵ Similar results were found in the United States, though the United States military only participated in the war for a short time. The success of bond sales campaigns, advertised through propaganda, was also substantial. American Liberty Loans were purchased by tens of millions of Americans in 1917 and 1918.³⁶ Some estimates claim that around \$185 billion were contributed to the war effort by Americans through purchasing liberty bonds, which in addition to helping the men at the front, united the nation in a patriotic endeavor.³⁷

Medieval imagery in propaganda may have played a large role in the success of attempts to recruit soldiers and maintain the fight on the home front. Medieval-themed propaganda served to promote increasing military strength. It also established an ideological framework for how people thought about the war. Paralleling medieval legends, the war aims publicly displayed



Figure 3. Paul Neumann, *Der letzte Hieb ist die 8. Kriegsanleihe*, 1917. Lithograph on paper, 57 x 43 cm.

³⁵ Chris Baker, "The Long, Long Trail," available from the *The Long, Long Trail: The British Army in the Great War*. *The Long, Long Trail: The British Army in the Great War*, accessed November 21, 2013. <http://www.1914-1918.net/faq.htm>.

³⁶ Sung Wan Kang and Hugh Rockhoff, "Capitalizing Patriotism: The Liberty Loans of World War I," NBER Working Paper 11919 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic, 2006): 36.

³⁷ James J. Kimble, *Mobilizing the Home Front War Bonds and Domestic Propaganda* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2006), 6-7.

through propaganda posters (maintaining chivalric ideals, the honor of one's nation, and one's honor as a man) were upheld. These ideals were coupled with those of protecting the sanctity of women and children at home. In reference to the battlefield, or the home front, the depiction of these aims sought to legitimize the war. Propaganda attempted to transform the bloodshed, violence, and utter horror of the trenches, into a sacred war—one worth fighting.

Still, by the end of the war, these ideals had been shattered. War was not a glorious spectacle with glittering swords and shining armor in which dragons were slain and damsels in distress were saved. Instead, it was hell on Earth. This realization would forever leave an impact on those who had lived through the Great War. In their retelling of war, battle would no longer be an epic folk history of chivalry. Instead, many survivors told the opposite story. Popular American author F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote that the Great War created a “generation, shouting the old cries, learning the old creeds” of chivalry and victory, “destined finally to go out into that dirty gray turmoil to follow love and pride... dedicated to ... the worship of success,” who had instead “grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.”³⁸ All historical retellings of glory in war had also proved false. Consider the poignant sorrow of the protagonist, Paul Bäumer, in Erich Maria Remarque's World War One classic, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. “We were eighteen and had begun to love life and the world,” Bäumer narrated, emphasizing the fairy tale beliefs young men held dear. He continued, “We had to shoot it to pieces... We believe in such things no longer.”³⁹ The mythic visions of knights in shining armor agonizingly yielded to the tragedy and horror of a war that left the world devastated. Though glorious knightly images of war had widely aided in promoting support for the Great War, no glorious retelling of World War One would ever exist to achieve the same effect that the retelling of medieval battle had had on soldiers and the home front during the First World War.

³⁸ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1948), 194.

³⁹ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. A. W. Wheen (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929), 88.

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