

Shining a spotlight on Armenians: exchanges on the Silk Road

Review of:

Christiane Esche-Ramshorn, *East-West Artistic Transfer through Rome, Armenia and the Silk Road: Sharing St. Peter's*, London and New York: Routledge, 2022, 224 pp., 38 black and white Figures, 20 colour Figures, £120, ISBN 9781409403067

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Sharing the complex of St Peter's in Rome is not the subject or major theme of this work but its intellectual starting point, with a consideration of the four different 'national' pilgrim compounds that were there in the period of the book's time frame, approximately 1250 to 1600 (pp. 1, 9). As well as the Armenian, there were an Ethiopian, a Hungarian and a German one, all of whose architecture and decoration, and administration and inhabitants are discussed, as far as the limited evidence permits, in the first chapter (pp. 14-41). In the Armenian case, Christiane Esche-Ramshorn notes that the architecture is unknown, but the evidence allows discussion of its location (pp. 20-24), and offers suggestions regarding its layout, whilst its church's design and decoration may be imagined by analogy with those in the other compounds.

Such complexes are, of course, suggestive of international contacts, and prompt the question of what other places and contexts and persons, besides those at St. Peter's, played a role in them, both in general and specifically with regard to art history, which is the author's specialisation. It is this question that she pursues, but only with regard to Armenians, in the subsequent chapters, with particular reference to the Armenian polity and society in Cilicia, in the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean. This was a principality in the late eleventh century and an independent kingdom from 1198 to 1375. As such, Cilician Armenia was involved in the politics of the region of the Crusader states - kingdoms set up by western Crusaders in cities and lands the Crusaders had conquered from their Muslim rulers - and with the Byzantine and Holy Roman Empires and the Papacy, as well as with the remaining Muslim powers and the Mongols. It also had commercial links with the West, notably several Italian cities. It was on the famous 'Silk Road' (actually a complex of routes, not a single road) that linked east and west, just as Greater Armenia and especially the city of Ani had been, in the period of the Bagratuni kingdom of Ani (tenth to eleventh centuries), and afterwards, until the fourteenth century - a place of 'everyday cosmopolitanisms' as Kate Franklin has termed it.¹

Cilician Armenia was, obviously, a 'crossroads', where different cultures met, and from which different influences were disseminated. In this it resembles the

¹ Kate Franklin, *Everyday Cosmopolitanisms: Living the Silk Road in Medieval Armenia*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021.

major political, and religious, especially pilgrimage, sites of Jerusalem, Rome, and Constantinople in earlier centuries. So it is a pity that it has not been considered as it deserves in scholarly works dealing with transferences of influences, especially in art and the 'migration' of 'European artistic models' 'to the Silk Road', the history and trade in fabrics and silks, and world history, as Esche-Ramshorn notes more than once (pp. 2, 10, 60, 77, 78, 87n1, 133, 143). She rightly draws attention to these lacunae and seeks to remedy them and encourage others to do so. She is disappointed that Peter Frankopan's 2015 *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*² was written 'without including the Armenians' (p. 2). This is a slight overstatement, as Frankopan's 521 pages of text do not in fact omit Armenians entirely, though their appearance is certainly minimal and low key, and unsatisfying. His Index contains three page numbers (pp. 238, 275, 324) for 'Armenian traders' and one (pp. 166-167) for the Armenian church and Mongol threat, in the mid-thirteenth century. But his traders are late-sixteenth-century, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century, are mentioned rather than discussed, and not in any context beyond trade. His book also indexes the port of Armenian Cilicia, Ayas (pp. 175, 182), describing it (p. 175) as a 'town' that became 'a new gateway for commodities and luxuries coming from the east' 'in Armenian Cilicia', where (p. 182) traders from Lucca and Siena 'could be found'. Readers are dependent on indices in a hard-copy book and a really thorough one may be too long for some publishers. Perhaps this is why neither Armenia nor Cilicia appear in Frankopan's. The e-book, on the other hand, is less disappointing. An electronic search of it produces a total of ten results for Armenia and thirteen for Armenian. All, however, are brief references, and it finds no further references to Cilicia, and none to Ani. Esche-Ramshorn is right to be critical of this.

The task that Esche-Ramshorn has set herself, and in which she is successful, has two requirements. The first is demonstration that the idea of Armenia/Armenians as intermediaries/transmitters of influences is entirely plausible, that there were a lot of Armenian-western contacts. She tackles this in Chapters 1-4, interspersing sections that establish background with two others that seem to the present reviewer not merely to do this but to constitute part of the 'meat' of the book. The second necessity is identification of 'foreign' elements in works of art, especially western ones, which she tackles in Chapters 5 and 6. Of course, different readers will be excited by different sections of this book, depending on their own background and prior knowledge.

The first chapter, 'Compounds at Old St. Peter's' is the first important and interesting section. It is sandwiched between a general 'Introduction' (pp. 1-13) concentrating on religious geography, and a more specialised one, considering 'Armenia between "East" and "West"' (pp. 42-59). The latter (Chapter 2) includes a literature review (pp. 47-57), not addressing the entire subject matter of the book, but confining itself to the issue of Armenian art, how it should be categorised, and western and eastern influence on it. It is followed by a third chapter 'Historical background' (pp. 60-91) which seeks to explore 'some major elements' of the 'cultural exchanges along the western Silk Road', specifically, what 'Italian

² Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

merchants and missionaries brought with them' from Italy, and what they took back to Italy (p. 60). These introductory sections tread fairly familiar ground, offering an orientation, presumably intended for the western scholars whose neglect of Armenia the author regrets. She herself specialises in the period of the European Renaissance, and is admittedly dependent on other scholars in her treatment of earlier times, with quotation from their works, some very extensive, for instance, twelve lines from Robin Cormack (p. 42),³ seven from Christopher Walker (p. 43),⁴ eleven from Vrej Nersessian (pp. 45-46),⁵ nineteen from Robert Hewsen (p. 92).⁶

There are some mistakes, which might mislead a reader with no prior knowledge. The Armenian Church was not, in fact, 'at' the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and it did not decide then to 'leave' the 'Byzantine-Roman Church', which was Chalcedonian, not, as Esche-Ramshorn terms it, 'non-Chalcedonian' (p. 63). The Armenian Church had other concerns in 451 and it did not reject the Council of Chalcedon until 507. Esche-Ramshorn states that a 'new' identification, in the eleventh century, of the site where Noah's Ark came to ground as the Flood receded, as being Mt Ararat rather than 'the mountain of Judi Dagħ in south-eastern Anatolia' (p. 93) is 'immediately' reflected in 'maps produced in western Europe' 'as can be seen in the *Etymologiae* by Isidore' (p. 94). Perhaps she means in an eleventh-century (or later) version, or versions, of this monumental work, since its author, Isidore of Seville, died in 636, some ten years after completing it. But much later in her text, in 'Western maps adjusting biblical geography of Armenia. Saints' (pp. 177-179) she says that 'the Cottonian map' 'dated around 1050' 'for the first time shows' Noah's Ark resting on the "' Montes Armenie'", the typical twin peaks of the Ararat' (p. 177). This Cottonian map, in a British Library manuscript (Cotton MS Tiberius B. V) is an English (Anglo-Saxon) composition which has nothing to do with the *Etymologiae*, except that Isidore was one of its several sources. Esche-Ramshorn cites the same authority, a study by Rouben Galichian, on each occasion, though different page and figure numbers.⁷

Esche-Ramshorn perhaps does herself a disservice by describing her 'discussion of the state of current research' as 'a selection of major works' (p. 49), and saying that her discussion of 'transcultural aspect of Armenian arts' 'constrains itself to a few authors only' (p. 55) because this inevitably prompts the questions of what has been intentionally left out, and why, and whether other major works support or undermine her conclusions. Her literature review does in fact seem to address the main authorities for the very particular aspect of Armenian art that it considers, but it does not include anything published after 2014. Her Bibliography

³ Robin Cormack, 'Introduction: Armenian Art from a Byzantine Perspective', in Vrej Nersessian (ed.), *Treasures from the Ark: 1700 Years of Armenian Christian Art*, London: The British Library, 2001, 11-13.

⁴ Christopher J. Walker, *Visions of Ararat: Writings on Armenia*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1997.

⁵ Vrej Nersessian, *Armenian Illuminated Gospel-Books*, London and Wolfeboro, NH: The British Library, 1987.

⁶ Robert H. Hewsen, *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

⁷ Rouben Galichian, *Countries South of the Caucasus in Medieval Maps: Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan*, Yerevan and London: Printinfo Art Books and Gomidas Institute, 2007.

(pp. 214-220) lists only three post-2014 works: Frankopan's *Silk Roads*; a 2016 article by Vera-Simone Schulz;⁸ and an article of her own in a 2017 volume that she edited in honour of Vrej Nersessian.⁹ This chronology may be the result of the disruptive effects that the global pandemic of Covid-19 has had in the past few years (2020-22) both on scholars' work and on publishers' publication schedules.

To investigate links between widely separated regions and artistic traditions, and to consider particular examples is a huge task, and inevitably some readers' favourite case studies and particular interests will not be represented in the result. The present reviewer regards the Armenian church on Aght'amar as a compelling instance of the meeting of traditions, a monument speaking a local dialect of an international visual language, as argued in her 2022 *Royal Building Programs ...* listed below. No studies of this church are mentioned in Esche-Ramshorn's literature review, though that by Lynn Jones¹⁰ is included in her Bibliography. Important previous (published) full-length books about it, to add to that, are those of Sirarpie Der Nersessian (1965)¹¹ and J.G. Davies (1991),¹² since they are not subsumed in Jones's, and the more recent collection of papers edited by Zaroui Pogossian and Edda Vardanyan (2019).¹³ Other works that the present reviewer would recommend are the following. Alicia Walker's 2012 study that considers the borrowings from foreign traditions in Byzantine artistic depictions of Byzantine emperors¹⁴ is very relevant to the questions that Esche-Ramshorn raises of art works combining different styles: 'Are they simply "Latinised" works of art and borrow foreign artistic elements or do they create something entirely new? Art historians are rather unsure how to deal with them.' (p. 49). Walker suggests that borrowing signifies appropriation, expressing domination and a statement of superiority over the 'source' culture. Maureen C. Miller's 2014 study of clerical clothing in medieval Europe¹⁵ has some thought-provoking remarks about the importance of attire and

⁸ Vera-Simone Schulz, 'Intricate Letters and the Reification of Light: Prolegomena on the Pseudo-Inscribed Haloes in Giotto's Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa and Masaccio's San Giovenale Triptych', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 58 (1) (2016), 59-93.

⁹ Christiane Esche-Ramshorn, 'Reordering the Catholic Armenian Churches of Rome and Nakhichevan: "Hò Sentito la Messa Sua in Armenia et Qui in Roma Molte Volte": Nicholas Friton (1560-1597) and Azaria Friton (1602-1604) of Aparan', in Christiane Esche-Ramshorn (ed.), *Reflections on Armenia and the Christian Orient: Studies in Honour of Vrej Nersessian*, Yerevan: Ankyunacar Publishing, 2017, 131-148.

¹⁰ Lynn Jones, *Between Islam and Byzantium: Aght'amar and the Visual Construction of Medieval Armenian Rulership*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

¹¹ Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *Aght'amar: Church of the Holy Cross* (Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies, Volume 1), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965.

¹² John G. Davies, *Medieval Armenian Art and Architecture: The Church of the Holy Cross, Aght'amar*, London: Pindar Press, 1991.

¹³ Zaroui Pogossian and Edda Vardanyan (eds.), *The Church of the Holy Cross of Aht'amar: Politics, Art, Spirituality in the Kingdom of Vaspurakan*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019.

¹⁴ Alicia Walker, *The Emperor and the World: Exotic Elements and the Imaging of Middle Byzantine Imperial Power, Ninth to Thirteenth Centuries C.E.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

¹⁵ Maureen C. Miller, *Clothing the Clergy: Virtue and Power in Medieval Europe, c. 800-1200*,

its appearance, possibly relevant to Esche-Ramshorn's 'Garments, fabrics and their meaning in Cilicia and Italy' (pp. 133-143). Thomas Sinclair's 2020 study of (the fourteenth-century Florentine merchant Francesco Balducci) Pegolotti's *Ayas-Tabriz itinerary and its commercial context*¹⁶ is certainly relevant, Pegolotti featuring in Esche-Ramshorn's *Index* as appearing on thirteen pages. New Julfa can now be studied through the recent, final, volume of Richard G. Hovannisian's series about historic Armenian cities and provinces.¹⁷

Esche-Ramshorn's 'Historical background' (Chapter 3) offers a very brief survey of the geography of historic Armenia, Armenian origins, and Armenia's Christian and political history up to the fifteenth century (pp. 61--64) before concentrating on the kingdom of Cilicia, stressing the Armeno-French character of its society and culture (pp. 64-66). Its third section concerns the presence of Armenian Catholics in Armenian lands, with Roman Catholic missionaries (pp. 68-69), the Dominicans being the most successful and establishing congregations and monasteries (pp. 69-70), a consideration of Ayas (pp. 71-72), Armenians and trade, especially in the international silk trade (pp. 72-73, 75-79), Armenian merchants' family palaces (pp. 73-74) and organisation of family firm (pp. 74-75), Latin traders in Cilicia (p. 79), silks and Armenian production of luxury textiles and dye (pp. 79-81). Chapter 4 'Colonies' (pp. 94-103) also offers background information: setting out that western missionaries had residences in trading centres, that western merchants travelled through Armenia and Cilicia and beyond, considering the itinerary(ies) and what foreign merchants would have seen in the landscape and experienced, including Christian-Muslim interaction and coexistence in the cities. It finishes with a section on Latin attacks on Armenian dogma (pp. 102-110). All of this contains useful information, but seems rather bitty. It contrasts with the fourth section of Chapter 3, 'Mutual cultural knowledge' (pp. 81-87). which considers 'imported saints', Armenian churches' furnishing, and Armenian acquaintance with Italian book illumination style. This section is more coherent and gripping than the previous ones, with very interesting detail.

'Mutual cultural knowledge' indeed seems to the present reviewer to constitute a second instalment of the 'meat' of the book, a second prelude to the book's really taking off with Chapter 5, 'Artistic Crossroads' (pp. 114-151), which addresses only two, instead of many issues, 'Crossroads of languages and alphabets' (pp. 114-128) and 'Fabrics, silks and patterns' (pp. 128-148), albeit the latter is divided into six subsections. The analysis/argument is sustained and coherent, concentrating on particular case studies, with some detail and plentiful illustrations - Armenian, Cilician, and Italian, and one from ? Tabriz. It continues in this vein in Chapter 6 'A chronology' (pp. 152-204), which considers a series of thirteenth-, fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century examples/case studies, both Armenian and Italian, mostly paintings (including book illumination) but also

Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014.

¹⁶ Thomas Sinclair, *Eastern Trade and the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages: Pegolotti's Ayas-Tabriz Itinerary and its Commercial Context*, London and New York: Routledge, 2020.

¹⁷ Richard G. Hovannisian, (ed.), *Armenian Communities of Persia/Iran: History, Trade, Culture*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2021.

woodcuts. Its chronological structure is to enable understanding of 'the contemporaneity of artistic production and reception in Italy and Armenia' and comparison (p. 152). It includes consideration of the ornamentation of Armenian khatchkars (cross-stones), from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and other Armenian sculptural reliefs in this period, which seem to incorporate some western elements (pp. 156-161) and 'Latin-Armenian illumination made in Italy' (pp. 167-172) and 'Armenian-Latin illuminators' borrowing Latin elements when decorating initials (pp. 172-177).

Esche-Ramshorn usefully draws attention (p. 115) to the suggestion of Marielle Martiniani-Reber that the pattern of the biblical king Saul's robe, in the Aght'amar sculpted reliefs, 'resembles kufic letters',¹⁸ the earliest example of three of the use of non-Armenian alphabets in Armenian arts. The second is the mid-eleventh-century representation of King Gagik-Abas of Kars, in a manuscript portrait, wearing *tiraz*, (cloth bands 'inscribed with honorifics' 'distributed by Islamic courts') (pp. 115-116), and the third, Syriac or Arabic inscriptions in two frames of Gospels' headpieces in the c. 1232 Targmanchats Gospels (p. 117). In Italian painting, Esche-Ramshorn identifies the earliest known instance of 'pseudo-Arabic inscriptions' as 1285, from a church in Florence and guides the reader through a series of 'pseudo-inscriptions' and meaningful ones, including Filarete's bronze doors for St. Peter's, Rome, 'dated 1433-1445' (pp. 120-123) and incorporating some discussion of works of translation and the study of languages. One conclusion is that 'in the 1330s, Armenian became one of the major languages to be learned by missionaries', with 'Latinised Armenians' involved in its promotion (p. 127). Another is that the depiction in artworks of the alphabets of the 'Oriental' Christian Churches, by including letters or combinations of letters from them 'meant intellectual appropriation' (p. 127). It thus signifies an expression of authority, an aspiration if not a reality, of dominance, but it might also have been meant to be inclusive in a more friendly sense.

The discussion of 'Fabrics, silks and patterns' (pp. 128-148) takes us through textiles depicted in Armenian manuscript paintings and some Tuscan ones, with observations on the meaning of colours and ornament in different artistic traditions, and different cultural markers (p. 136) and discussion of patterns and motifs. It concludes that from c. 1300 a 'new focus on display of fabric by Italian painters' both reflects 'the textile-rich market of contemporary Cilicia' and 'shows that Armenian manuscripts were studied by Latins, clerical patrons and merchants', reiterating the importance of Armenian trade and production of textiles 'in the history of international medieval fabric trade' (p. 143). It stresses that Italian merchants played a key role, 'selling Cilician fabrics in Italian markets' (p. 146) and that international taste and use of 'beautiful fabrics' extended beyond royal and aristocratic courts (p. 148). 'International styles' is the subject of Chapter 7 (pp. 205-211), with an excursus considering Ethiopians in fifteenth-century Italy and what they 'left behind there'.

¹⁸ Marielle Martiniani-Reber, 'Les tissus médiévaux arméniens: essai d'identification', in Barlow Der Mugrdchian (ed.), *Between Paris and Fresno: Armenian Studies in Honor of Dickran Kouymjian*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2008, 141-154.

Chapters 5 and 6, with the discussions of 'Compounds at Old St. Peter's' and 'Mutual cultural knowledge', make Esche-Ramshorn's case that there was significant artistic transfer, through the Silk Road, into and from Armenia, especially Armenian Cilicia, and especially between Italy and Armenian Cilicia. The illustrations are well chosen, plentiful, and lovely, illustrating and supporting the points, helping the reader's understanding of the author's commentary and exposition, and their reproduction is high quality. The publisher has served the author well in this respect. But in some others, the standard of production falls short. Of course, there are mistakes in all publications. However obsessively an author or copy editor checks and rechecks there is always something that is missed. Here, though, there are significant proofreading/copy-editing/editing errors: the book reads as if it is still in the process of being revised and checked, with the revisions and checks incomplete, and published unfinished. The following lists of instances are not claimed to be exhaustive. The confusion about the map showing Noah's Ark has already been mentioned. Some slips/confusions imply that restructuring had been undertaken but not completed, and its knock-on effects not dealt with. Thus p. 93 includes the statement 'as we have already discussed, Nakhijevan was believed to be the oldest settlement of mankind'. There is no previous discussion, but there is another reference to it much later in the text, at p. 181, in the statement 'Noah had founded the oldest settlement on earth in Nakhijevan'. On p. 126, in Chapter 5, we are told 'the following chapter concerns the Dominican missions in Greater Armenia'. In fact, the following subsection of this chapter is about fabrics, silks and patterns, whilst the next chapter is 'A chronology', and begins, after a brief introduction, with 'New image creations in Armenian manuscript illuminations in Rome'. There is some error in the numbering of and references to illustrations. The reader is referred on p. 80 to Figure 3.1, to see King Gagik-Abbas of Kars with his wife and daughter. In fact, Figure 3.1 (p. 65) shows, and is captioned as, the Port of Korykos, Cilicia, just as it is in the list of Figures (p. xi). The Kars family group is actually Figure 5.1 on p. 115. P. 183 directs the reader to Figures 5.14 and 5.15, as showing inscriptions in Armenian and Persian on Filarete's bronze doors. In fact, it is Figures 5.7 and 5.8 (pp. 123, 124) that show these. Completing the restructuring might have eliminated not only these errors but also the occurrence of one-line and other too-short paragraphs which disjoint the argument and make the writing seem a little bitty and episodic (p. 35 two adjacent 3-line paragraphs, p. 109 one 1-line paragraph, p. 176 one 2-line paragraph, p. 188 one 1-line paragraph).

Other infelicities do not suggest an incomplete restructuring but merely that the book is unfinished. Most importantly, scholars and their works that are mentioned in the text are normally cited in accompanying notes and in the Bibliography, which also normally includes works cited in the notes even if they are not mentioned in the text. Unfortunately, there are instances where this is not the case. This makes it hard for a reader who wishes to follow up the points in question. Lucy-Anne Hunt's research is described as 'a rare exception' to art historians' rarely focussing on the interactions of Muslim and Christian art (p. 47). Frustratingly, there is no note with citation(s) and there is nothing by Hunt in the Bibliography. The pieces by Robin Cormack and Dickran Kouymjian quoted on p. 42 and p. 130

respectively are each identified in a note but not listed in the Bibliography. In Chapter 7, Edda Vardanyan is cited in notes 43, 45 and 115 and pp. 187, 188 and note 118, but does not appear in the Bibliography. Likewise, the piece by Gabriella Uluhogian that is cited in the same chapter's note 48. Finally, there are inconsistencies which the copy-editing process did not rectify. The references to the Holy Siege (p. 35) and ecclesiastical sieges (p. 69) are confusing, until one recalls that the French for see (episcopal) is *siège*. Alpharanus and Alfaranus both occur, for the same name, as also Nicholas and Nicolas, Aght'amar and Akhtamar (both on p. 188), Ejmiadsin and Ejmiacin (also both on p. 188). Sergio La Porta's name appears correctly in the Bibliography on p. 218 but his surname as Della Porta in notes 33 and 34 on p. 111, and as Porta in the Bibliography at p. 219. Note 51 on p. 112 awaits a number to replace ... in the citation of one of Robert Hewsen's *Atlas's* maps.

As in Frankopan's case, it is useful that Esche-Ramshorn's book is available as an e-book. Her hard copy Index (pp. 221-224) is quite selective, though it is not entirely clear what principles have governed the selection. It does not include the scholars whose work she critiques or quotes in her text. Other entries which might be recommended for inclusion in a longer Index are Nicolas IV pope (p. 103) (the popes Nicolas III and Nicolas V are listed), other persons and places that are referred to, including the Armenian king Gagik-Abbas of Kars (p. 80 - he does appear in the Index, but under K, as King Gagik Bagratuni of Kars, and only one page number, 115, is listed) and Sha Abbas of Safavid Iran (p. 81), various cities, such as the Italian Florence, Pisa, Siena, and Venice (p. 81), Julfa (the 'most important Armenian trading centre in Safavid Iran during the sixteenth century') and New Julfa/Isfahan (p. 81), the island of Aght'amar in Lake Van with its important (highly decorated, including depictions of textiles (p. 115)) early-tenth-century Armenian church and monastery (pp. 56, 115, 188), Ani (mentioned in the Conclusion (pp. 212-213, at p. 212), and particular topics and themes, for example carpets and carpet trade (which are signalled as important and as involving Armenians (pp. 9, 72)), Church Union, embassies/ambassadors, fabric(s), textiles, silk(s) (silk trade and Silk Road trade are indexed).

Christiane Esche-Ramshorn's work here on artistic transfer, convincing and well researched, shining a spotlight on Armenians, deserves the attention of scholars and students, and not merely of those whose subject is art history. One would have liked the publisher to pay more attention to copy-editing, but this ought not to deter readers.

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