

MISSION OR PRAGMATISM? THE MIGRATING WORLD OF CISTERCIAN MONKS IN THE 12TH AND 13TH CENTURIES: SOME OBSERVATIONS

**Misja czy pragmatyzm? Migrujący świat cysterskich mnichów w XII i XIII stuleciu.
Kilka uwag**

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Abstrakt: W dziejach zachodnioeuropejskiego kręgu kulturowego średniowiecznej Europy okres od końca XI do XIII stulecia stanowi epokę wielkich przemian na różnych płaszczyznach życia duchowego, kulturowego i społecznego. Zakonem, który ukształtował się w tym czasie pod wpływem i zarazem w nurcie zachodzących przemian, był zakon cystersów. Ekspansja terytorialna zakonu dobitnie wskazuje, że cystersi, najpóźniej od połowy XII stulecia, byli zakonem o zasięgu ogólnoeuropejskim, z centrum w Burgundii. Wpłynęło to korzystnie na krajobraz kulturowy średniowiecznej (i późniejszej) Europy, gdyż w rozmaitych dziedzinach ówczesnego życia klasztory cysterskie stały się źródłem nowych inspiracji, spełniając dziejową misję odnowy życia monastycznego i nie tracąc w podejmowanych działaniach fundacyjnych koniecznego pragmatyzmu. Zjawisko to widoczne było również na ziemiach polskich, wpisując się w historyczny, duchowy i kulturowy proces fundacyjny o niepodważalnym znaczeniu przenikania się kultur i ruchów migracyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe: cystersi, Bernard z Clairvaux, fundacje, klasztory, migracje

Abstract: In the history of the Western European cultural sphere of medieval Europe, the period from the late 11th to the 13th century marks an era of profound transformation in various areas of spiritual, cultural, and social life. One of the religious Orders that emerged during this time, both influenced by and contributing to these changes, was the Cistercian Order. The territorial expansion of the Order clearly indicates that by no later than the mid-12th century, the Cistercians had become a pan-European Order with its center in Burgundy. This had a beneficial impact on the cultural landscape of medieval (and later) Europe, as Cistercian monasteries became sources of new inspiration in various aspects of contemporary life. They fulfilled a historical mission of monastic renewal while maintaining the necessary pragmatism in their foundation activities. This phenomenon was also evident in the Polish lands, where it became part of a historical, spiritual, and cultural process of monastic foundations – one of undeniable significance for the interpenetration of cultures and migration movements.

Keywords: Cistercians, Bernard of Clairvaux, monastic foundations, monasteries, migration

In the history of the Western cultural sphere of medieval Europe, the period from the late 11th to the 13th century marks an era of profound transformations across various domains

of spiritual, cultural, and social life. These transformations also affected the Church, which clearly defined its place in contemporary society by reforming relationships that had been entrenched since the Carolingian system. The internal reform of the Church was associated with a vast movement of moral, disciplinary, and administrative renewal, linked to the centralization of the papacy, the revitalization of monastic life, and the revival of both canon and civil law.¹

The Cistercian Order emerged during this time, shaped by and simultaneously contributing to these changes. Within the context of European monasticism, the Order represented a cenobitic – eremitic model, embracing a form of monastic life that combined the ideals of solitude and withdrawal from human settlements with community life in a cenobium – a monastery.² The Order's foundation stemmed from the strong reformist aspirations of a group of Benedictine monks from the monastery of Molesmes in Burgundy. More directly, however, its emergence resulted from an internal conflict within the Burgundian abbey between proponents of traditional monastic life and reformers seeking to renew monasticism by adopting entirely new principles for observing and interpreting monastic discipline – principles that diverged significantly from those previously in force.

This prompts the question: Was the reformist stance of the Benedictines at Molesmes driven by a mission to renew the Order, or was it a carefully calculated act of pragmatism? Or perhaps it bore elements of both mission and pragmatism?

To attempt an answer, one must trace the beginnings of the renewal movement, which ultimately developed into a significant reform initiative (a migratory one, perhaps?), culminating in the formation of a new Order grounded strictly in the Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia and a set of newly drafted monastic constitutions. It is important to emphasize that the earliest reformers referenced the principles established in the 6th century by St. Benedict. Consequently, after appropriate preparation – described in detail in the *Exordium Parvum* – the reformist group left the Molesmes monastery in early 1098 and established a new monastic community based on a model of communal life that was somewhat different from that of the Benedictines.³ This spiritual unrest at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries led many monks to “wander” from their old Benedictine abbeys – though perhaps more accurately, it was a specific kind of migration toward an interior world, away from the distractions and burdens of external reality. Without delving into details well-known in the historiography of the Order, it should nonetheless be noted that attempts to leave Molesmes had been made several times before. The monks from Molesmes are believed to have founded a monastery in a now-unidentified location called Vivicus, as well as Aulupus in the Diocese of Geneva.⁴ The final exodus from Molesmes, which ultimately led to the founding of the *Novum*

¹ J. Kłoczowski, *Wspólnoty chrześcijańskie. Grupy życia wspólnego w chrześcijaństwie zachodnim od starożytności do XV wieku*, Kraków 1964, p. 163–203; idem, *Ruchy reformatorskie w chrześcijaństwie zachodnim w XI wieku*, “Znak”, 14/1964, no. 97–98, p. 947–977; A.M. Wyrwa, *Powstanie zakonu cystersów i jego rozwój na ziemiach polskich w średniowieczu*, in: *Monasticon Cisterciensae Poloniae. Dzieje kultura męskich klasztorów cysterskich na ziemiach polskich i dawnej Rzeczypospolitej od średniowiecza do czasów współczesnych*, vol. 1, eds. A.M. Wyrwa, J. Strzelczyk, K. Kaczmarek, Poznań 1999, p. 27–28.

² J. Kłoczowski, *Wspólnoty chrześcijańskie*, op. cit., p. 204–235.

³ *Exordium Parvum*, “Regina Mundi”, Biuletyn Polskiej Kongregacji Cystersów, vol. 2, Mogiła 1989, p. 19–34, cited in: A.M. Wyrwa, *Powstanie zakonu cystersów*, op. cit., p. 29, footnote 12.

⁴ H. Kostrzański, *Dziedzictwo białych mnichów*, Szczyrzyc 1991, p. 14–15.

Monasterium and later the establishment of the new Order, was preceded by formal petitions to ecclesiastical authorities for permission to depart.

The leading figure behind the initial vision of the Cistercian Order – Robert, Abbot of Molesmes (d. 1111) – received such permission in early 1098 from Hugh, Archbishop of Lyon and papal legate, to carry out his plans. Upon receiving this approval, Robert, along with his closest companions, Alberic and Stephen Harding (future abbots of Cîteaux) and eighteen monks, left Molesmes and settled in “a solitary place called Cîteaux [...] in the Diocese of Châlons.”⁵ Avoiding the intricacies of the well-documented history of the Cistercian foundation, we may focus instead on several essential points pertinent to this study. The monks’ new residence was initially called the “New Monastery” (*Novum Monasterium*), later replaced in Cistercian documents by the designation “Monastery of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Cîteaux.” According to the sources, neither Robert nor Alberic initially intended to establish a new religious Order. Their objective, within the framework of reform, was to restore the inner (spiritual) life of monasticism and, in doing so, to break with the traditions of the Cluniac congregation, to which the Molesmes monastery belonged.⁶

The foundation of the Cistercian Order was a direct consequence of the successful development of the Cîteaux monastery. This success was partly due to the great interest aroused by the founders’ proposed new form of communal religious life.⁷ At the request of Alberic, the second abbot of Cîteaux, Pope Paschal II issued a bull – known as the “Roman Privilege” – on October 19, 1100, formally recognizing the new Order, which lived according to different monastic principles. To distinguish the monks arriving at *Novum Monasterium* from various parts of Burgundy, Champagne, and Normandy, Alberic replaced the traditional black habit with a grey one (eventually white), worn with a black scapular.

In the 12th century, this event was interpreted as a manifestation of divine will. The newly established Cistercian monastery in Cîteaux – now regarded as the motherhouse – soon founded its first filial monastery: La Ferté in 1113, Pontigny in 1114, and Clairvaux and Morimond in 1115. Due to their seniority, these four were later recognized as the Order’s proto-abbeys. Through direct and indirect filiations, they became the founding centers of all Cistercian monasteries throughout medieval Europe.

The mission to revive religious life, based firmly on the principles of evangelical poverty and adherence to the Rule, served as a model for the renewal of authentic religious practice within monastic structures. As already noted, Cistercian monastic life was grounded in the Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia. This was enriched by internal regulations codified first in the *Exordium Parvum*, then in successive versions of the *Charta Caritatis* (the Order’s constitutions), and further supplemented by the *Instituta generalis capituli apud cistercium*⁸. These documents laid the organizational and spiritual foundations consistent with the ideals of monastic spirituality.

At that time, the Cistercians became an attractive option for large numbers of young people drawn to the new ideal of life, which was effectively promoted by one of the Order’s most

⁵ A.M. Wyrwa, *Powstanie zakonu cystersów*, op. cit., p. 30-31.

⁶ *Exordium Parvum*, op. cit., p. 28-30; H. Kostrzański, *Dziedzictwo białych mnichów*, op. cit., p. 12-20.

⁷ A.M. Wyrwa, *Powstanie zakonu cystersów*, op. cit., p. 31.

⁸ On the *Instituta*, that is, the statutes of the annual General Chapter and an analysis of its current resolutions, see: J.A. Lefevre, *A propos de la composition des “Instituta Generalis Capituli apud Cistercium.”* “Collectanea Ordinis Cisterciensium Reformatorum”, 16/1954, p. 152-182.

outstanding early figures – Bernard of Fontaine, the future abbot of Clairvaux. The rapid growth of the new Order was closely connected to its influence on the choices made by the sons of leading knightly families in contemporary France. The path taken by Bernard of Fontaine and his companions at *Novum Monasterium* continued to be followed by later generations, many of whom travelled hundreds of miles under difficult conditions to reach Cîteaux, Clairvaux, or Morimond. The fact that Bernard entered the Order with thirty companions undoubtedly increased the appeal of the Cîteaux monastery and sparked wider interest in the Order, which – as history would show – was destined to play a significant role in the religious and political life of the Church and European states on many levels. Was this a well-considered mission by the future Saint Bernard or a carefully calculated act of pragmatism? It is worth noting that the rapid expansion of the Order was also partly due to the high birth rate in Europe at the time – an element not to be underestimated.⁹

The position of Bernard and his significant influence on the evolving structures of the new Order, its growing numbers, and its popularity in medieval European society were further strengthened by the schism of 1130 between Pope Innocent II and Antipope Anacletus II. This schism provided an opportunity for a confrontation between new reformist circles and the old understanding of monastic life behind cloister walls. The primary representative of the latter was the abbey at Cluny (though it is worth noting that the abbey, under Abbot Peter the Venerable, supported Innocent II).¹⁰ In this confrontation, Bernard of Clairvaux played a decisive role by siding with Innocent II, thereby contributing significantly to his victory. In doing so, and under these circumstances, the Cistercians – largely through Bernard's efforts – gained a prominent position as a new Order within Church politics. This status was further confirmed by the episcopal appointments of many Cistercian monks, culminating in the 1145 election of the Cistercian abbot Bernard of Pisa (ca. 1085-1153) from the Roman monastery of St. Anastasius at the Tre Fontane, who became Pope under the name Eugene III.¹¹

So, was the significance of the new Order based solely on a spiritual, religious mission, or was it also the result of calculated pragmatism on the part of its outstanding figures – among whom St. Bernard of Clairvaux undoubtedly stands out? The facts inseparably linked to the process of founding Cistercian monasteries, initiated in France, and swiftly spreading across nearly all of contemporary Europe, provide an ample answer to this question. It is important to emphasize that until the year 1120, all Cistercian monasteries were established exclusively within the territory of what was then France. The expansion beyond France began shortly after: in 1123 the first monasteries appeared in Germany, in 1129 in England, in 1131 in present-day Switzerland, in 1132 in present-day Belgium and Spain, in 1135 in Austria, in 1140/1141 in Poland (as will be discussed further), and in 1142 in Ireland.¹²

By 1153, there were already 343 Cistercian monasteries functioning across medieval Europe. The greatest number of these were founded between 1145 and 1152/1153 – during the pontificate of Pope Eugene III (a Cistercian himself) and the height of St. Bernard

⁹ I. Eberl, *Cystersi. Historia zakonu europejskiego*, Kraków 2011, p. 42-43.

¹⁰ Quoted in: G.B. Winkler, *Die Ausbreitung des Zisterzienserordens im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert*, in: *Die Zisterzienser. Ordensleben zwischen Ideal und Wirklichkeit*, Bonn 1980, p. 88.

¹¹ B. Peugniez, *Routier des Abbayes Cisterciennes de France*, Eckbolsheim 1994, p. 62; P. Dinzelbacher, *Bernard von Clairvaux, Leben und Werk des berühmten Zisterziensers*, Darmstadt 1998, cited in: I. Eberl, *Cystersi. Historia zakonu europejskiego*, op. cit., p. 43.

¹² A.M. Wyrwa, *Powstanie zakonu cystersów*, op. cit., p. 34.

of Clairvaux's influence, including his influence on the pope. By the mid-13th century, the number of Cistercian abbeys had increased to 647,¹³ and by 1675 the Order had established a total of 743 monasteries. This remarkable expansion of the Order, its visible charisma on multiple levels, and – above all – the charismatic personality of the future saint Bernard of Clairvaux were inseparably tied to a significant migration movement of young men and women across Europe in search of a suitable place to serve God and fulfill their vocation.

The 12th century and the first half of the 13th marked the zenith of the Order's growth. This explosive wave of monastic foundations coincided with broader patterns of social and migratoion movements throughout Europe. The most prominent filial line of the Order was that of Clairvaux, the third proto-abbey, which alone accounted for the foundation of 355 or 356 abbeys – 80 of which were direct filiations of Clairvaux.¹⁴ After 1153, all Cistercian monasteries in Ireland, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden, as well as those in Denmark, Hungary, and the western regions of the Kingdom of Spain,¹⁵ belonged to the Clairvaux line. In contrast, the Clairvaux lineage was weakly represented in German-speaking regions and only began to appear in Slavic countries around 1140/1141.

A significant foundational role was also played by the fifth lineage of the Order, originating from the proto-abbey of Morimond (established in 1115 in the department of Haute-Marne). The peak of its foundation activity occurred in the 1190s, with around 250 monasteries established through its network.¹⁶ A notable feature of the Morimond line was its incorporation of military religious Orders on the Iberian Peninsula. The Order of the Templars, founded in 1120, followed a rule drawn up by Bernard of Clairvaux in 1129 – one heavily influenced by Cistercian customs.¹⁷ Furthermore, in its early years, the Templar Order, like the Cistercians, recruited from closely related noble circles. This type of “dynastic migration” allowed founders to actively support their own and their Order's foundations and to exert a degree of control over the direction of monastic expansion.

After 1153, however, the foundation boom began to wane. A serious blow to the growing popularity of the Cistercians was the failure of the Second Crusade (1147-1149), which had been vigorously promoted by Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugene III. Its failure undermined Bernard's authority and led to a more cautious attitude toward the Order, which in turn resulted in fewer monastic foundations across Europe. Nevertheless, this period also saw the Order's expansion into Northern and Central Europe – Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Bohemia, Hungary, the lands of the Polabian Slavs, and the Polish territories.¹⁸ After 1250, the Cistercian Order reached the height of its development. However, it was then gradually overshadowed by the rising prominence of the mendicant orders.

¹³ G.B. Winkler, *Die Ausbreitung des Zisterzienserordens*, op. cit., p. 87.

¹⁴ M. Heimbucher, *Die Orden und Kongregationen der katholischen Kirche*, 2nd ed., Paderborn 1965, p. 335, cited in: I. Eberl, *Cystersi. Historia zakonu europejskiego*, op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 63.

¹⁶ As in the case of Clairvaux and other proto-abbeys, the majority of filial monasteries founded (or originating) from Morimond – i.e., 75% – were established by the mid-12th century. Thus, a comparison with Clairvaux is justified, since four of its filiations were founded between 1120 and 1127, twelve between 1131 and 1137, and five between 1142 and 1149. This comparison shows that the 1130s were the period in which the greatest number of filial monasteries were founded. See more: I. Eberl, *Cystersi. Historia zakonu europejskiego*, op. cit., p. 63-66.

¹⁷ A. Demurger, *Die Templer. Aufstieg und Untergang 1118–1314*, Munchen 1993, p. 22-39.

¹⁸ A.M. Wyrwa, *Rozprzestrzenianie się zakonu cystersów w Europie Zachodniej i na ziemiach polskich*, in: *Cystersi w kulturze średniowiecznej Europy*, ed. J. Strzelczyk, Poznań 1992, p. 39-43.

It is worth noting that the first Cistercian monks arrived in Poland during the Order's most dynamic period of growth – between approximately 1140 and 1153, coinciding with the papacy of Eugene III and the spiritual leadership of St. Bernard. According to long-standing research, the principal initiators of the Cistercians' arrival in Poland were members of the higher diocesan clergy (bishops), but also, and perhaps above all, princes and representatives of powerful knightly noble families. According to historian Jerzy Kłoczowski, their motivations were rooted in medieval religiosity and even a kind of neophytic zeal among the 12th- and 13th-century Polish nobility.

Aside from their religious significance, these foundations also served the prestige of the founding families. By establishing a monastery, the founder sought not only to secure divine favor but also to gain the respect of the community and the Church – whose patronage, particularly during the period of feudal fragmentation, held great value.¹⁹ An equally crucial aspect was colonization, an area in which the Cistercians made significant contributions throughout Europe, including in medieval Poland. Monasteries tended to foster settlement around them, and the Cistercians were from the outset a land-based, agriculturally focused Order. Ownership and management of large estates were central to their existence, and the communities around their abbeys were in constant motion due to the steady movement of large groups of people.²⁰

Without delving into the contentious debate about which was the first Cistercian foundation in Poland, historiography generally considers Jędrzejów Abbey, founded by Bishop Janik of the Gryfici family (1140/1141), to be the oldest.²¹ It is worth examining the broader spread of the Order throughout Polish lands, including the migration of the first monks, who came from various parts of Europe – particularly Burgundy, Champagne, and Normandy.

Between the 1140s and the end of the 13th century, 26 male Cistercian monasteries were founded within the present-day borders of Poland. Recognized as independent religious institutions under canon law, these abbeys were established in all major historical regions of medieval Poland: Lesser Poland (Małopolska), Greater Poland (Wielkopolska), Silesia, Western Pomerania, and Gdańsk Pomerania.²² The number of monastic foundations – and hence of monks arriving from Western Europe – increased significantly during the so-called second wave of foundations, spanning roughly from 1210-1218 to ca. 1300-1372.²³

It should be stressed that all medieval Cistercian abbeys in Poland originated from two filiations: Clairvaux and Morimond. The earliest monks who came to Polish lands belonged to one of these two proto-abbeys, participating in the great migratory movement of the 12th century. Through Clairvaux, three monasteries were founded in Western Pomerania and

¹⁹ S. Kwiatkowski, *Powstanie i kształtowanie się chrześcijańskiej mentalności religijnej w Polsce w XII wieku*, Warszawa–Poznań–Toruń 1980; idem, *Moralne i społeczne innowacje etosu mendikańskiej w trzynastowiecznej Polsce. Etos cystersów a etos mendikański*, in: *Zakony franciszkańskie w Polsce*, vol. 1, part 1, Lublin 1983, p. 185-194; A.M. Wyrwa, *Cystersi. Geneza, duchowość, organizacja życia w zakonie*, in: *Cystersi w Polsce*, ed. D. Olszewski, Kielce 1990, table 3, p. 35.

²⁰ Z. Kurnatowska, *Rola klasztoru benedyktynów w Lubiniu w organizacji osadnictwa Wielkopolski wczesno-średniowiecznej*, in: *Klasztor w kulturze średniowiecznej Polski*, eds. A. Pobóg-Lenartowicz, M. Derwich, Opole 1995, p. 41-46.

²¹ This topic is discussed in greater detail in the works of A.M. Wyrwa.

²² A.M. Wyrwa, *Rozprzestrzenianie się zakonu cystersów*, op. cit., p. 39.

²³ Ibidem.

the Neumark region: Kołbacz (Mera Vallis, 1173-1176),²⁴ Mironice (Heymelsted, ca. 1300-1372),²⁵ and Bierzwnik (Marienwalde, 1286-1298),²⁶ as well as one in Gdańsk Pomerania-Oliwa (1178-1186).²⁷ The remaining Cistercian monasteries in Poland were direct or indirect filiations of Morimond. These were founded in Lesser Poland, Greater Poland, Silesia, and parts of Western and Gdańsk Pomerania – e.g., Bukowo Morskie (1248-1259)²⁸ and Pelplin (ca. 1258).²⁹ Only in Lesser Poland were direct filiations of Morimond established. Overall, 22 monasteries were founded in medieval Poland through the Morimond network. Direct foundations included Jędrzejów, Wąchock, Sulejów, and Koprzywnica. Ludźmierz-Szczyrzyc (1234) was founded indirectly via Jędrzejów, as were, somewhat later, the abbeys in Rudy (1255) and Jemielnica (1290) in Silesia.

All these Cistercian foundations occurred during the period of Poland's feudal fragmentation and often reflected the founders' efforts to consolidate their territorial control by establishing a highly esteemed monastic order, whose widespread influence was evident from the outset.

The territorial expansion of the Order leaves no doubt: from at least the mid-12th century onward, the Cistercians were a pan-European religious Order, with its center in Burgundy. This had a profoundly positive effect on the cultural landscape of medieval (and later) Europe. In many areas of life, the Cistercian monasteries became centers of innovation and inspiration, fulfilling a historic mission of monastic renewal while never losing the pragmatic edge that ensured the Order's vitality and endurance. This pattern was also visible in Poland, becoming part of a broader historical, spiritual, and cultural process of foundation, cultural transfer, and migration.

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²⁴ The mother house of the monastery at Kołbacz was the abbey at Esrom on the island of Zealand (Denmark); the monastery at Kołbacz, like the one at Dargun, was established as a result of Danish political influence and was an indirect filiation of Clairvaux. See more: J. Jarzewicz, E. Rymar, *Kołbacz*, in: *Monasticon Cisterciensae Poloniae*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 135-148.

²⁵ The motherhouse of the monastery at Mironice, located in the Neumark region, was Kołbacz (a filiation of the monastery at Esrom); therefore, Mironice was also an indirect filiation of Clairvaux. See more: J. Jarzewicz, E. Rymar, *Mironice*, in: *Monasticon Cisterciensae Poloniae*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 251-255.

²⁶ The motherhouse of the monastery at Bierzwnik, located in the Neumark region, was Kołbacz, as in the case of the monastery in Mironice, Bierzwnik was an indirect filiation of the abbey of Clairvaux. See more: E. Rymar, B. Stolpiak, T. Świerszcz, *Bierzwnik*, in: *Monasticon Cisterciense Poloniae*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 17-33.

²⁷ The mother house of the monastery in Oliwa, in Gdańsk Pomerania, was Kołbacz; as in the case of the monasteries in Mironice and Bierzwnik, Oliwa was thus an indirect filiation of the abbey of Clairvaux. See more: D.A. Dekański, L. Wetesko, *Oliwa*, in: *Monasticon Cisterciense Poloniae*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 268-280.

²⁸ The mother house of the monastery at Bukowo Morskie in Western Pomerania was Dargun in Mecklenburg; as in the case of the monasteries in Mironice, Bierzwnik, and Oliwa, it was an indirect filiation of the abbey of Clairvaux. See more: B. Popielas-Szultka, K. Kalita-Skwirzyńska, *Bukowo Morskie*, in: *Monasticon Cisterciense Poloniae*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 34-41.

²⁹ The mother house of the monastery at Pogódki-Pelplin in Gdańsk Pomerania was Doberan in Mecklenburg, which was a filiation of the abbey of Morimond; thus, the abbey in Pelplin is an indirect foundation of Morimond. See more: K. Bruski, A. Konieczny, *Pogódki – Pelplin*, in: *Monasticon Cisterciense Poloniae*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 300-313.

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