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Carlo Crivelli.
Nuovi studi
e interpretazioni



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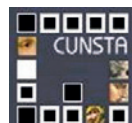
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Sant'Emidio di Ascoli's Book and Manuscripts with Velvet Covers at the Sublime Porte

Ayşe Aldemir*

Abstract

This paper explores the shared utilization of luxurious fabrics in the Ottoman Empire and the Venetian Republic during the late fifteenth century through an Italian velvet frequently depicted by Carlo Crivelli. After conquering Constantinople in 1453, Sultan Mehmed II designated the city as the new capital of the Ottoman Empire and established a personal library at the Topkapı Palace. This library housed a collection of rare manuscripts, some of which were covered with red and green Italian velvet. The abundance of Italian fabrics in the Ottoman court serves as evidence of a robust network of commercial relations between the two powers. From the fifteenth century onwards, the Ottoman capital emerged as a significant hub for the import and export of fabrics. Simultaneously in Italy, the thriving trading center of Ancona witnessed economic prosperity and its residents benefited from the flourishing environment. The commercial activities preceding this great transformation in Ancona began in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, precisely when Carlo Crivelli was active in Marche. In 1473, Carlo Crivelli completed the *Polittico di Sant'Emidio* for the Duomo di Ascoli, in which Sant'Emidio is depicted holding a manuscript covered in bright red velvet fabric. This masterpiece is emblematic of Crivelli's consistent incorporation of contemporary fabrics into his paintings. This paper delves into the significance of these fabrics as indicators of a shared cultural and artistic language,

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transcending political boundaries and fostering a rich dialogue between the Ottoman and Venetian worlds.

Questo articolo esplora il diffuso uso di tessuti di lusso nell'Impero Ottomano e nella Repubblica di Venezia durante la fine del XV secolo attraverso un velluto italiano frequentemente raffigurato da Carlo Crivelli. Dopo aver conquistato Costantinopoli nel 1453, il sultano Maometto II designò la città come nuova capitale dell'Impero Ottomano e istituì una biblioteca personale presso il Palazzo Topkapı. Questa biblioteca ospitava una collezione di manoscritti rari, alcuni dei quali erano ricoperti di velluto italiano rosso e verde. L'abbondanza di tessuti italiani alla corte ottomana è la prova di una solida rete di relazioni commerciali tra le due potenze. A partire dal XV secolo, la capitale ottomana divenne un importante centro di importazione ed esportazione di tessuti. Contemporaneamente, in Italia, il fiorentino centro commerciale di Ancona viveva una grande prosperità economica e i suoi residenti beneficiarono di un ambiente fiorentino. Le attività commerciali che precedono questa grande trasformazione ad Ancona iniziano nell'ultimo quarto del XV secolo, proprio quando Carlo Crivelli è attivo nelle Marche. Nel 1473, Carlo Crivelli completa il polittico di Sant'Emidio per il Duomo di Ascoli, in cui sant'Emidio è raffigurato con in mano un manoscritto ricoperto di tessuto di velluto rosso vivo. Si tratta di un capolavoro emblematico del sistematico inserimento di tessuti contemporanei nei dipinti di Crivelli. Questo articolo analizza il significato di questi tessuti come indicatori di un linguaggio culturale e artistico condiviso, che trascende i confini politici e favorisce un ricco dialogo tra il mondo ottomano e quello veneziano.

For scholars studying the arts of the book, particularly those focusing on the Medieval and early Renaissance, miniatures within the pages of manuscripts, paintings on the walls of sacred spaces and found in church altars serve as an important source of information. These images often depict primarily religious figures either holding or placed in the vicinity of books adorned with various covers. The books accompanying saintly figures also number among the primary attributes of Carlo Crivelli's paintings¹. Crivelli, a book lover himself, portrayed his figures as literate individuals, positioning them in environments filled with books. In his famous painting *The Annunciation with Sant'Emidio*, the Virgin Mary is shown reading her book on the lectern in her room behind a barred window, while red and green leather-bound books are lined up under the lectern and on the shelf on the wall². In the background of the painting, a figure reading a text seems to have placed another book,

¹ I presented this paper on Sant'Emidio di Ascoli, a protector against earthquakes, at the conference titled *Carlo Crivelli: Nuovi Studi e Interpretazioni*, organised by the Università di Macerata between 1-3 February 2023. On 6 February 2023, two earthquakes of a magnitude of 7.7 occurred within 9 hours of each other in the southeastern provinces of Turkey, resulting in thousands of casualties. I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of the victims of this biblical catastrophe.

² Carlo Crivelli, *The Annunciation with Saint Emidius*, 1486, London, The National Gallery, inv. no. NG739.

bound in red leather, on an Anatolian rug of the “Crivelli type” hanging over a rounded arch entrance. Figures in Crivelli’s oeuvre thus often display a fondness for reading and carrying books.

Carlo Crivelli’s own affinity for books and familiarity with the arts of the book is well documented. Some of the miniatures from an *incunabulum* preserved in the Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome are attributed to his hand³. While creating his paintings, he drew inspiration from manuscript illustrations⁴. There is no doubt that numerous books would have passed through his hands, providing him with the opportunity to familiarise himself with every aspect. In his paintings, he skillfully depicted these objects that he was able to examine firsthand. As a result, the books held by Crivelli’s figures showcase great diversity in terms of their covers and bindings. Saints and holy figures are often depicted with volumes bound using techniques dating to the Gothic period. These books, like those featured in paintings by his contemporaries, are predominantly covered in leather⁵. The most valuable books of the mid-fifteenth century, however, were bound in silk velvet fabric, and such valuable items could only be owned by wealthy and prominent individuals⁶.

Much like the late Gothic-early Renaissance painters in whose studios he worked, Carlo Crivelli also depicted saints carrying fabric-bound books in his paintings. In a 1447 polyptych by his masters, Antonio Vivarini (d. 1476/1484) and Giovanni d’Alemagna (d. 1450), saints are portrayed holding various books bound in the Gothic style. One of the books in particular is covered in red velvet fabric adorned with gold⁷. In the 1451 painting of San Pietro attributed to Antonio Vivarini and his brother Bartolomeo (d. 1499), the saint is also shown holding a book covered in red fabric in his right hand⁸. Antonio Vivarini’s polyptych created in 1464 for the Confraternita di Sant’Antonio Abate di Pesaro, depicts the saints carrying books covered in black fabric⁹. Sandro Botticelli (d. 1510), a contemporary of Crivelli’s, also placed a cream-coloured velvet-bound book in the hand of the saint in his 1487-1488 painting, *Pala di San Barnaba*¹⁰.

³ Adorasio 1972.

⁴ For one of Crivelli’s sources, see Geroni 1996.

⁵ One of the painters who often inserted books into his portraits was Lorenzo Lotto (1480-1556). The books depicted by Lotto are mostly bound in leather. For books on Lotto’s paintings, see Pickwood 2022.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 131.

⁷ Antonio Vivarini, Giovanni d’Alemagna, *Polyptych with the Adoration and Saints*, 1447, Prague, National Gallery, inv. no. 11983-11987.

⁸ Antonio Vivarini, Bartolomeo Vivarini, *St Peter*, 1451, Prague, National Gallery, inv. no. 8302.

⁹ Antonio Vivarini, Bartolomeo Vivarini, *Sant’Antonio Abate*, 1464, Città del Vaticano, Musei Vaticani, Pinacoteca Vaticana, inv. no. MV.40303.0.0.

¹⁰ Sandro Botticelli, *Pala di San Barnaba*, Firenze, Le Gallerie degli Uffizi, inv. no. 8361.

In 1473, Carlo Crivelli completed the *Polittico di Sant'Emidio* for the Duomo di Ascoli in Ascoli Piceno. In this work, Sant'Emidio di Ascoli (273-303/309) is depicted holding a manuscript covered in red velvet fabric, which is different from the books Crivelli usually paired with his figures (fig. 1)¹¹. The bright red fabric of the book belonging to Sant'Emidio di Ascoli, the patron saint of Ascoli Piceno, is likely an Italian velvet produced in Venice or Florence¹². Crivelli often included the most dazzling Italian velvets in his paintings. In fact, in 1937, two of his paintings showcasing magnificent examples of Italian fabrics were displayed in the Italian fabric exhibition “Mostra del tessile nazionale: l'antico tessuto d'arte italiano,” held in Rome¹³.

Crivelli depicted the fabrics of his era in the costumes of his figures, as well as in the draperies hung behind or beside them. In fact, he consistently used this particular red velvet fabric from the 1460's to the 1480's. This period corresponds to the years he was active in Marche. At this time, Ancona, the largest city in Marche, was a trading centre¹⁴. Ancona, which had played a role in the revival of trade throughout the Crusades in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, experienced its most prosperous period in commercial history beginning in the early sixteenth century, becoming a regional port of geographical significance that engaged in international activities and transformed into a major warehouse. The commercial activities preceding this great transformation in Ancona began in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, precisely when Carlo Crivelli was active in Marche, and the city's residents benefited from this vibrant environment. Ancona was not only the centre of international trade but also played an important role in the limited internal trade among the coastal cities of the Adriatic during this period. Moreover, it was one of the ports through which inland Italian cities such as Florence, Siena, and Fabriano were able to reach the sea and its trade routes¹⁵. As a result, a wide variety of products passed through the port of Ancona, both from abroad and from landlocked Italian cities, as well as from the Adriatic. Various fabrics, silks,

¹¹ Carlo Crivelli, *Sant'Emidio di Ascoli, Polittico di Sant'Emidio*, 1473, Ascoli Piceno, Cattedrale di Sant'Emidio.

¹² The velvet fabrics characterised by this pattern type called “velluto a inferriate” were woven in Florence and Venice, and have significant similarities. Further analysis is needed to precisely determine the location in which these fabrics were produced. In order to avoid any mistakes, and following the recommendation of Daniela Degl'Innocenti, the curator of the Museo del Tessuto in Prato, the article will refer to these fabrics simply as “Italian velvet” instead of specifying them as being either Florentine or Venetian. I am grateful to her for her assistance.

¹³ For more on this exhibition and the paintings by Crivelli that were displayed, see Prete, Penserini 2020, pp. 883-888, especially pp. 884-885.

¹⁴ For details on Ancona's commercial activities and volume of trade, surviving commercial documents, and trade relations with Eastern territories, especially the Ottoman capital, see Earle 1969; Delumeau 1970.

¹⁵ For Ancona's trade outside the Adriatic in the 1470's-1490's, see Earle 1969, pp. 32-35.

and velvets were among these items, to which residents of the city must have had access¹⁶.

It is likely that Crivelli, living in Marche, must have possessed fabric samples as well¹⁷. Although they would have been expensive, it is at least possible that he owned various fragments. For instance, we know that Jacopo Bellini's (d. 1740) wife, Anna Rinversi, belonged to the Lucchese family residing in Venice, and was thus connected to the silk trade¹⁸. It is therefore possible that Jacopo acquired fabric samples through Anna's family. While we cannot make a similar connection in Carlo Crivelli's case, even if he did not own fabrics himself, it is certain that he would have been able to observe them closely¹⁹. Perhaps, much like Jacopo Bellini, he made sketches of the fabrics and patterns that he saw and used these drawings for his paintings.

Two surviving sketch albums by Jacopo Bellini were handed down to his son, Gentile Bellini (1429-1507), by his widow after his death²⁰. Gentile took one of the albums with him to the Ottoman capital in 1479, and left the other to his brother, Giovanni (1430-1516). It is unknown whether Anna Rinversi gave Gentile the remaining fabric samples along with the albums. However, one pattern among the drawings in the album Gentile brought to Constantinople is particularly noteworthy²¹. For this drawing, Jacopo most likely drew inspiration from metalwork produced in the Islamic lands in the first half of the fourteenth century, possibly during the Mamluk period in Egypt or Syria²². It is conceivable that Carlo Crivelli may have used a similar design from Jacopo's collection or a related source in depicting the attire of the Virgin Mary in one of his *Madonna and Child* paintings²³. Crivelli may have been exposed

¹⁶ Ancona would become the commercial hub of the fabric trade in the 1520's; see *Ivi*, p. 35. Also see Monnas 2008, pp. 8-13.

¹⁷ In her study of wearing and owning silk, Lisa Monnas discusses how painters gained the privilege of wearing silk garments through receiving the honour of knighthood. Carlo Crivelli was among the painters who earned the title of "knight". Monnas 2008, pp. 23-39, particularly pp. 30-39.

¹⁸ Coutts *et al.* 2008, p. 392.

¹⁹ Blakemore 1966, pp. 33, 39 and 49. Also see Monnas 2008, pp. 168-172.

²⁰ One of Jacopo Bellini's albums is at the Musée du Louvre in Paris (inv. no. RF 1475-RF 1556), while the other is in the collection of the British Museum in London (inv. no. 1855,0811).

²¹ Jacopo Bellini, *Feuille de modèles vénitiens du XIV^e siècle*, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, inv. no. RF 1556, 113.

²² For metal objects produced in Venice in the late-fifteenth century that are similar to Mamluk metalwork, see Campbell, Chong 2005, pp. 27-28, 32-35. For more on the master of the period, Mahmud al-Kurdi, see Auld 2007; La Niece 2007.

²³ Carlo Crivelli, *Virgin and Child*, ca. 1480, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 492-1882. The Virgin Mary's golden upper garment is adorned with figures of "birds with spread wings and open beaks," similar to those depicted in Jacopo's drawings. I would like to express my gratitude to Giovanni Valagussa, for demonstrating the resemblance between the bird motifs in Jacopo Bellini's drawings and the fabric depicted by Crivelli, during his presentation titled «La formazione di Carlo Crivelli e l'importanza di Jacopo Bellini» at the conference

to drawings other than those in Jacopo's collection. Indeed, the existence of surviving drawings of Italian fabric patterns from the fourteenth century to today, demonstrates the diversity of sources available to painters for their artistic inspiration and use as source material²⁴.

We might assume that Crivelli was in possession of a drawing, either sketched by himself or otherwise acquired, depicting a patterned fabric similar to the red velvet covering Sant'Emidio di Ascoli's book in his polyptych. However, the sheen, texture, folds, and colour variations of the fabric are portrayed so masterfully that it seems unlikely he would have achieved such precision with only a drawing as his reference. This strengthens the notion that he possessed a small fragment of this velvet. Indeed, having both a sample and a drawing would have enabled him to easily depict the same fabric in various colours. One of the finest examples of his depiction of the same patterned fabric in different colours within a single painting can be observed in his work, *Madonna and Child with San Francesco and San Bernardino di Siena*, dated ca. 1490²⁵. The Virgin Mary's upper garment, the pillow on which the child Christ is standing, and the fabric cascading from the marble in front of them, are all variations of the same patterned cloth, in different colour combinations.

Carlo Crivelli incorporated the bright red velvet into his 1468 *Madonna and Child*²⁶ (fig. 2) and his 1482 *Madonna and Child in the Trittico di Camerino*, draping it behind the Virgin Mary (fig. 3)²⁷. In the 1468 painting, the red fabric is depicted in a more painterly manner, while in 1482, Crivelli managed to portray the same velvet with remarkable realism. In *Dead Christ Supported by Two Putti*, a scene from a triptych painted in the 1470's, the same fabric hangs in front of the figure of Christ (fig. 4)²⁸. Here again, the velvet seems more realistic. This strengthens the hypothesis that Crivelli may not have been in possession of the fabric in 1468, but that by the 1470's, he had had the

Carlo Crivelli: Nuovi Studi e Interpretazioni on 1-3 February 2023. Another fabric that Carlo may have depicted with inspiration from Jacopo's designs is the one seen on Saint Catherine of Alexandria, in the Demidoff Altarpiece. The saint's clothing is adorned with these same birds in gold, on a navy blue background. Carlo Crivelli, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, Demidoff Altarpiece, 1476, London, The National Gallery, inv. no. NG788.4.

²⁴ For silk fabric patterns believed to have been sketched in the second half of the fourteenth century, either in Venice or Lucca, see Coutts *et al.* 2008, pp. 389-392. For Pisanello's (d. 1455) drawings of fabric patterns, see Monnas 2008, pp. 49-54.

²⁵ Carlo Crivelli, *Virgin and Child with Saints and Donor*, ca. 1490, Baltimore MD, The Walters Art Museum, inv. no. 37.593.

²⁶ Carlo Crivelli, *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1468, San Diego CA, San Diego Museum of Art, inv. no. 1947.3.

²⁷ Carlo Crivelli, *Madonna col Bambino, Trittico di Camerino*, 1482, Milano, Pinacoteca di Brera, inv. no. 155-350-351.

²⁸ Carlo Crivelli, *Dead Christ Supported by Two Putti*, ca. 1470's, Philadelphia PA, Philadelphia Museum of Art, inv. no. Cat. 158.

opportunity to closely observe and study a fragment. Indeed, by 1473, Crivelli appears to be very familiar with the fabric, which shows up as an upper garment for San Giorgio in the *Polittico di Sant'Emidio*. Here, his skillful depiction of the texture of the velvet and its shimmering under light, evokes a real sense of the material (fig. 5)²⁹. Thus, Crivelli used an exact replica of this velvet fabric twice in the *Polittico di Sant'Emidio*, both in San Giorgio's attire, and on the cover of the book held by Sant'Emidio di Ascoli. It is clear that by this point, he had a clear understanding of the characteristics of this luxurious fabric and enjoyed showing it in his paintings.

Sant'Emidio di Ascoli's fabric-covered book, similar to preceding and contemporaneous depictions of books in illuminated manuscripts and paintings, is an example of Gothic binding techniques. The manuscript is bound between heavy wooden boards covered with Venetian velvet and decorated with metal bosses, likely made of brass. The central boss is in the shape of a flower. The book is equipped with a clasp and catch, enabling it to stay closed. Aiming to enhance the realistic appearance of the volume, Crivelli fashioned these components out of their actual materials, mounting them onto his painting³⁰. It is likely that this book represents the *sacre scritture*, the sacred scriptures to which Emidio dedicated his life to studying. It is therefore not surprising that these holy texts would be bound in a fabric adorned with a pomegranate motif, associated with sanctity.

The pomegranate has carried holy attributions from pre-Biblical times onwards³¹. In Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Old Testament, the pomegranate is listed among the bountiful produce of the promised land, along with wheat, barley, grapes, figs, olive oil, and honey³². Also in the Bible, the capitals of the columns in the Temple of Solomon are said to be adorned with pomegranate motifs³³. However, of greater significance for the topic at hand are verses from Exodus, describing the sacred, ritual garments to be prepared for priests as being made of fabric decorated with pomegranate motifs. The verses state:

²⁹ Carlo Crivelli, *San Giorgio, Polittico di Sant'Emidio*, 1473, Ascoli Piceno, Cattedrale di Sant'Emidio.

³⁰ During the conference *Carlo Crivelli: Nuovi Studi e Interpretazioni*, Rossana Allegri and Giuseppe Di Girolami delivered a presentation titled «Il polittico di Sant'Emidio: tecniche e materiali. Dati inediti dalle indagini scientifiche e dall'intervento di restauro del 2020-2021» in which they described the restoration process of the artwork. They discussed the real materials used, such as semi-precious stones and metals, mounted on Sant'Emidio and the book depicted in the painting (see their papers in this volume).

³¹ I would like to thank the Bishop of Macerata, Monsignor Nazzareno Marconi, for his opening speech during the conference *Carlo Crivelli: Nuovi Studi e Interpretazioni*, as it reminded me to examine the "pomegranate" motif on the fabrics.

³² Deuteronomy 8:6-9.

³³ Jeremiah 52:20-23; 1 Kings 7:15-20; 2 Chronicles 3:15-17.

And beneath upon the hem of it thou shalt make pomegranates of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, round about the hem thereof; and bells of gold between them round about. A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, upon the hem of the robe round about³⁴.

In the Qur'an, as in Deuteronomy, the Surah Al-An'am counts the pomegranate among the blessed produce of the land, for which it is said «Behold! in these things there are Signs for people who believe»³⁵. Thus, the pomegranate became coded as a sacred motif that could be adopted as an embellishment for fabrics worthy of holy saints as well as devout rulers.

Moreover, among the books in the Topkapı Palace Library is a group of approximately thirty volumes covered with Italian velvet, adorned with the same pomegranate motif and featuring a glossy red colour, similar to the fabric used for Sant'Emidio di Ascoli's book³⁶. These manuscripts, produced in Istanbul between 1475-1481, were bound in the Ottoman court workshop using the red and green variants of this velvet (fig. 6). The abundance of Italian fabrics in the Ottoman palace is evidence of the intense commercial relations of the period.

The exchange of goods between Italian city-states and the East gained momentum in the fifteenth century, but it is known that trade relations date back to the eleventh century³⁷. The Italian cities and Eastern states had long engaged in commerce, including fabrics, especially through Mediterranean marine routes. A story that most vividly depicts this environment and emphasises the value of fabrics can be found in Giovanni Boccaccio's (1313-1375) *Decameron*, in the tale of Messer Torello, a knight of Christendom, and Saladin, the Sultan of Babylon (d. 1193)³⁸. Scenes from this story are depicted on the decorative medallions on a fourteenth-century chest, preserved in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence³⁹. In one of the medallions, Saladin, arriving in Pavia disguised as an Eastern merchant, is depicted alongside Messer Torello's wife, both holding garments made of valuable fabrics (fig. 7).

From the fifteenth century onwards, the Ottoman Empire had not only political and military relations but also intense cultural and commercial ties

³⁴ Exodus 28:31-35, also see Exodus 39:22-26.

³⁵ Qur'an 6:99, also see 6:141 (Yusuf Ali).

³⁶ I became familiar with these books covered with Italian velvet thanks to the former director of the Topkapı Palace, the late Filiz Çağman, whom I remember with great fondness. Some of these book covers were shown in the exhibition "Venezia e Istanbul in Epoca Ottomana", held at the Sakıp Sabancı Museum in Istanbul from 18 November 2009 to 28 February 2010. For the works displayed in the exhibition, see Bellingeri, Ölçer 2009, pp. 196-199. For the use of fabric in bookbinding, see Tanındı 1985. For book covers covered with velvet fabric, see Tanındı 1995.

³⁷ For general information on the commercial relationship between Venice and cities in the East, see Howard 2000, pp. 15-19.

³⁸ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, day 10, story 9.

³⁹ *Storia di Saladino e messer Torello* (cassone), ca. 1390-1410, Firenze, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Bargello Mobili Antichi, inv. no. 160.

with Italian city-states, particularly Venice, Genoa, and Florence⁴⁰. Among the goods being traded were textiles, carpets, glassware, metals, and ceramics. Anatolian carpets, in particular, were highly sought after in the West, becoming an important trade commodity that reached European cities through Italian territories beginning in the thirteenth century⁴¹. They quickly became luxury items desired by European nobles, the church, and the wealthy. Their labour-intensive production and the long maritime journey required to obtain them made carpets prestigious objects that were difficult to acquire. From the fourteenth century onwards, these carpets began to appear in paintings. Certain Turkish carpets came to be known by the names of the painters who depicted them, including Giovanni and Gentile Bellini, Lorenzo Lotto, and Hans Holbein (d. 1542), among others. Italian glassware, on the other hand, found favour in Ottoman territories⁴². One of the largest glass orders placed from the Ottoman Empire was the monumental commission of 900 pieces given to Venetian glass workshops in 1569 by Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Paşa, through the mediation of the Venetian *bailo* Marcantonio Barbaro (1518-1595). Of these, 300 were glass chandeliers and 600 were *cesendelli*. Fortunately, some fragments from this order have survived to the present day⁴³.

The interest in fabrics produced in Italy and in the Ottoman territories was mutual. Ottoman velvets were appreciated in Italian city-states, while Italian fabrics found favour in the Ottoman lands⁴⁴. From the fifteenth century onwards, the Ottoman capital became an important market for the import and export of fabrics⁴⁵. Italian intermediaries and merchants settled in Istanbul and Bursa, facilitating the trade of Ottoman fabrics to Italy and Italian fabrics to the Ottoman court, including those produced in Venice, Florence, and Genoa. There are more kaftans made of Italian velvet than of Ottoman velvet in the Topkapı Palace⁴⁶. Among these fabrics, those adorned with Ottoman

⁴⁰ For the relationship between Venice and the Turks, see Hocquet 2007. For Venice and the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean, see Faroqhi 2009, particularly pp. 35-36.

⁴¹ Denny 2007. Also see Ölçer 2009.

⁴² For the history of glassmaking in Venice and the trade of glassware, see Mentasti, Carboni 2007; Aldemir Kilercik 2009.

⁴³ These lanterns from this commission are in the collection of the Topkapı Palace. It appears that the gold gilding and floral ornamentation on the lanterns were executed after their arrival in Istanbul; *Pair of Mosque Lamps*, 16th century, Istanbul, Topkapı Palace, inv. no. 34/467, 34/468.

⁴⁴ The proximity is such that it is difficult to determine whether some fabrics are of Italian or Ottoman origin. For a suggested technical study that might be able to distinguish between the two, see Sardjono 2007.

⁴⁵ For more on production for the Ottoman market, see Denny 2007, pp. 187-189.

⁴⁶ Alpaslan Arça 2009. A ceremonial robe made from a red velvet very similar to the one on Sant'Emidio's book belongs to Şehzade Korkud (d. 1513), the grandson of Mehmed II. The robe was specially tailored for Şehzade Korkud to wear when he took charge of a province in Manisa in December 1483; *Ceremonial Kaftan*, 1483, Istanbul, Topkapı Palace, inv. no. 13/829.

motifs were woven specifically for the Ottoman court. The Ottoman court was an important customer of the Italian textile industry, with even the widths of looms being adjusted according to Ottoman demands. Italian fabrics were not only used for the sultans' kaftans, but also as upholstery in the palace. Ottoman velvets, on the other hand, exported mainly to Italy, Poland, Hungary, and Russia, were used widely for church vestments⁴⁷. Italian fabrics were also used in making church garments throughout European cities.

The red velvet depicted by Carlo Crivelli on the cover of Sant'Emidio's book reappears in these church vestments. A group of chasubles and copes, sewn from this fifteenth-century Italian red velvet, is preserved in museums around the world, such as the Victoria and Albert in London and the Metropolitan Museum in New York⁴⁸. The style of the orphrey crosses and band appliqués adorning these textiles indicates their probable use in churches in Germany and its surrounding regions. It is evident that the church favoured this fabric in various colours, carefully selecting it for garments and accessories. A substantial collection of ecclesiastical textiles, assembled by Robert Lehman (d. 1969), was subsequently donated to the Metropolitan Museum⁴⁹. The collection includes many examples of ecclesiastical fabrics, sewn from the same material in red, navy blue, dark green, maroon, and black⁵⁰.

A group of books covered with both Italian and Ottoman velvets stands out in the collection of the Kremlin Museum in Moscow, highlighting Russia's role as a prominent customer in the Mediterranean fabric trade (fig. 8). Dated to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these gospels are bound in velvet and brocade, both patterned and plain⁵¹. Their front covers are mounted with metal plates decorated with precious and semi-precious stones. The cartouches found at the centre or in all four corners of these plates depict religious scenes.

For more on this robe, see Roxburgh 2005, pp. 304-305, 443. Also see Tezcan 2006, pp. 18, 95, 98, 242.

⁴⁷ One of the numerous examples of an ecclesiastical cope, likely sewn in the mid-fifteenth century from Bursa fabric, is preserved at the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice; Denny 2007, p. 187, cat. no. 70. Another example is a chasuble, sewn from Bursa velvet in the seventeenth century, today in the Carmelite Monastery in Piasek (Kraków); *Distant Neighbour, Close Memories* 2014, p. 144, cat. no. 39. For a great number of examples sewn from Ottoman fabrics and used in Polish churches, see *Ivi*, pp. 143-151.

⁴⁸ For instance: London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 1375-1864; 536-1893; 8354-1863 and New York NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 1975.1.1853; 1975.1.1898.

⁴⁹ For more on the collection, see Mayer Thurman 2001.

⁵⁰ For various chasubles, copes, dalmatics, and stoles made of different coloured velvets in Lehman's collection, see New York NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 1975.1.1897; 1975.1.1840; 1975.1.1794; 1975.1.1792; 1975.1.1878; 1975.1.1813; 1975.1.1766; 1975.1.1888; 1975.1.1842.

⁵¹ For examples of these gospels covered in Italian and Ottoman fabrics: Moscow, Kremlin Museums, inv. no. КН-9; КН-18; КН-21; КН-24; КН-33; КН-34; КН-37; КН-41; КН-86; КН-94; КН-109; КН-123; КН-137; КН-183; КН-193; КН-198; КН-573.

Some books also feature plain plates mounted on their back covers, while others do not have metal plates and are instead decorated with metal bosses. The spines of the books are left without metal embellishments for ease of use, thus the fabric on their back covers and spines are often clearly visible. The presence of such a variety of Italian and Ottoman fabrics shows that they were used in Russia well into the eighteenth century, and that the Russian Tsardom (1547-1721) and Orthodox Church were important customers in this trade.

Some of the volumes covered with Italian velvet in the Topkapı Palace were prepared for Sultan Mehmed II's (1432-1481) treasury, indicated by the specific inscriptions within their pages. After conquering Constantinople in 1453 and establishing it as the new capital of the Ottoman Empire, Mehmed "the Conqueror" founded a personal library at the Topkapı Palace, consisting of rare and artistic manuscripts, including those inherited from the Imperial Byzantine Library⁵². The sultan's library featured rare volumes written in Turkish, Persian, and Arabic as well as Greek, Hebrew, and Latin⁵³. Literature, philosophy, and politico-historical texts were among Mehmed II's primary areas of interest.

The sultan's passion for books was known to Italian citizens residing or engaged in trade in Constantinople. Florentine merchants presented Mehmed II with books, at least one of which he had translated⁵⁴. Certainly, this was not the only book he was gifted, and many volumes found their way to the palace through other Italians in the city⁵⁵. Books on ancient and contemporary Italian history were translated at court, indicating Mehmed II's interest in the subject and the ready availability of such books coming from Italy in his library. The sultan was particularly fascinated with Alexander the Great (d. 323 BCE), indeed identifying with him⁵⁶. To this end, it is known that following his conquest of Istanbul, Mehmed II had *Anabasis*, one of the manuscripts from the Imperial Byzantine Library that narrated the life and adventures of Alexander the Great, read to him every day⁵⁷. Furthermore, in a copy of the *İskendernâme*, commissioned by the sultan in the 1460's and preserved today

⁵² For Mehmed II's library, see Deissmann 1933; Raby 1983; Erünsal 1992. For the cultural environment at Mehmed II's court, see Necipoğlu 2023.

⁵³ The books left by Mehmed II were catalogued during the reign of his son, Bayezid II; Necipoğlu 2023, p. 41.

⁵⁴ For information provided by the Florentine Benedetto Dei, who resided in Pera between 1460 and 1467, and some of the translated books found in Mehmed II's library, see *Ivi*, p. 57.

⁵⁵ Indeed, it has been documented that Italian merchants arriving in Istanbul brought gifts for the Ottoman sultans. It is thought that books with engravings were also among these gifts; *Ivi*, pp. 67-68.

⁵⁶ For Mehmed II's image of Alexander the Great, see *Ivi*, pp. 35-43.

⁵⁷ A copy of *Anabasis* was transcribed in the 1460's in the sultan's scriptorium and is still preserved today in the Topkapı Palace; Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Library (henceforth TPL), inv. no. GI 16. Also see Raby 1983, p. 18; Necipoğlu 2023, p. 39.

in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice, Alexander is depicted in a manner resembling an Ottoman sultan, wearing a kaftan and a turban⁵⁸.

The accounts of Giovanni Maria Angiolello (1451-1525), a Vicenza-born Italian courtier in the Ottoman palace, are a primary source of information on Mehmed II and his temperament, and mention his fondness for reading as well⁵⁹. Through diplomatic channels, the sultan persistently invited artists and architects from Italian city-states, particularly Rimini, Naples, Florence, and Venice, to the Ottoman court. These Italian artists sent to Constantinople were, in a way, diplomatic gifts for Mehmed II⁶⁰. Angiolello also bore witness to the activities of Gentile Bellini, who served at the Ottoman court between 1479-1481, and to his closeness with the sultan⁶¹.

The books prepared for Mehmed II's treasury at the Topkapı Palace and covered with Italian velvet pertain to the subjects of logic and philosophy, medical sciences, mathematics and geometry, geography, music, ethics, and politics. The bindings of the books are in a style known in Islamic bookbinding as *çârkûşe*, in which the edges of the book are wrapped in leather and the centre is covered in fabric or paper (fig. 9)⁶². The earliest Islamic fabric bindings are Mamluk examples dating to the second half of the fourteenth century⁶³. The inner covers of these books in the Topkapı Palace also feature Mamluk silks from the same period⁶⁴. Meanwhile, in the Ottoman Empire, books were covered with fabric from the fifteenth century onwards. The group of books in question, covered in Italian velvet, constitutes an early example of this technique, and though relatively few survive compared to volumes covered in leather during the reign of Mehmed II, they are still noteworthy.

These examples indicate that these fabrics were appreciated enough by the Ottoman court to be used as covers for the books in the sultan's library.

⁵⁸ Venezia, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Cod. Or. XC [=57], fol. 256r. See Necipoğlu 2023, pp. 39-40.

⁵⁹ In describing Mehmed II, Angiolello states "Fù Huomo ingegnoso; si diletta de virtù, et havea Persone, che gli leggeva." Angiolello 1909, p. 119.

⁶⁰ Necipoğlu 2023, pp. 22, 30-31.

⁶¹ Angiolello 1909, pp. 119-121.

⁶² *Çârkûşe* binding refers to a type of book that is covered with fabric and surrounded by leather with cornerpieces forming squares on its four corners. It takes its name from these cornerpieces, *köşebentler*, which means "corners" in Turkish. The word *Cha-hâr* in Farsi means "four," reflecting the four cornerpieces of this binding style.

⁶³ For these two books in the Topkapı Palace belonging to the Mamluk period, prepared for the grandson of the Mamluk Sultan Kalavun (d. 1290), and dated 1373 (TPL, inv. no. A.804) and 1391 (TPL, inv. no. A.317), see Tanındı 1985, pp. 27-29, 33.

⁶⁴ The fact that the Mamluks, the principal trading partner of the Serenissima in the Mediterranean, also bound their books with valuable fabrics of the period is a delightful example of cross-cultural encounter. Undoubtedly, books are a prime example of objects in motion that travelled quite easily. For further information on the relations between Venice and the Mamluks, see Howard 2007.

The fact that the books were prepared between 1475-1481 also demonstrates the speed at which Italian fabrics reached Ottoman lands. Gentile Bellini, who was familiar with such materials through his mother, Anna Rinversi, and had a penchant for using them in his paintings, was also serving in the court of Mehmed II at this time, accompanied by assistants he had brought from Venice⁶⁵. We know that Bellini lived at the palace, and interacted with other artists working there⁶⁶. The fact that they were present at court at the same time certainly may have facilitated the transfer of ideas between the Ottoman bookbinders, who were already using fabric to cover their books, and the Italian painters, who depicted similar materials in their paintings, although we do not have direct knowledge of any specific encounters between the two.

Perhaps the most remarkable among the books covered with Italian velvet in the palace is the *Masâlih al-Abdân wal-Anfus*, transcribed for Mehmed II by the renowned calligrapher Şeyh Hamdullah (d. 1520)⁶⁷, serving at court during this time⁶⁸. Considered the founder of Ottoman calligraphy and a master of his craft during the reigns of Mehmed II and his son, Sultan Bayezid II (1447-1512), Şeyh Hamdullah's masterpiece being bound in this Italian velvet demonstrates the high esteem in which the fabric was held at court. Following the death of Mehmed II, the volume passed into the library of Bayezid II, his successor⁶⁹.

⁶⁵ The *Seated Scribe*, attributed to Gentile Bellini or Costanzo da Ferrara (d. circa 1524), and estimated to have been made in Istanbul around 1478-1481, is depicted wearing an extravagant garment made of lavish fabric, which appears to be adapted from both Italian and Ottoman designs. It is evident that Italian painters active in the Ottoman palace had the opportunity to observe these fabrics. (Gentile Bellini, *Seated Scribe*, Boston MA, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, inv. no. P15e8.)

⁶⁶ During the same period Sinan Beg, Mehmed II's favourite court artist, was trained by an artist known as Maestro Pavli. In 1480, Sinan Beg was sent to Venice as a court interpreter on behalf of the Ottoman Empire. It is evident that, as well as being a painter, Sinan Beg was also proficient in the Italian language. Other artists in the palace also did not have difficulty communicating with their Italian colleagues due to the presence of many multilingual individuals in the palace. For more information about Sinan Beg, see Necipoğlu 2023, pp. 30-31.

⁶⁷ During Mehmed II's reign, Şeyh Hamdullah was not at the Topkapı Palace but in Amasya. He came to Istanbul after the sultan's death, when Bayezid II ascended the throne. Şeyh Hamdullah wrote the work in question in Amasya and sent it to the capital. For more on Şeyh Hamdullah, see Serin 2023.

⁶⁸ The book, written by Abû Zayd al-Balhî (d. 934), is about physical and mental health. Istanbul, Süleymaniye Manuscript Library (henceforth SML), Ayasofya Collection, *Mesâlihu'l-Ebdân ve'l-Enfûs*, inv. no. 3740. On folio 1a of the manuscript, there is an inscription stating, «Kitâbu Mesâlihi'l-ebdân ve'l-enfûs li-Ebî Zeyd el-Belhî, li-mutâla'ati Sultâni'l-berri ve'l-bahr es-Sultân Mehmed b. Murâd Hân halledallâhu mülkehû,» indicating that this copy was transcribed for Mehmed II. A facsimile of this valuable work has been published: see Okuyucu, Tiryaki 2012.

⁶⁹ The first and last pages of the book bear the oval seal of Sultan Bayezid II, a known bibliophile.

Following the conquest of Constantinople, the establishment of new medical *medreses* (schools) and *dariüşşifas* (hospitals) transformed the city into an important centre of medical education and practice. Mehmed II not only invited artists and painters to the capital, but also encouraged the arrival of foreign physicians⁷⁰. Among these was the Persian physician Mesud b. Hakimuddin el-Tabib el-Hasanî el-Şirazî el-Gilânî (d. fifteenth century), who is believed to have come from Shiraz. Of the two medical treatises in the Topkapı Palace that el-Gilânî dedicated to Mehmed II, *Düstûru'l-Âmil fi Vac'al-Mafasil* was written in Persian, on the matter of joint pains⁷¹. The physician completed the manuscript in 1476-1477, and it was bound with red Italian velvet. There are other medical volumes in the palace library, covered in the same red velvet material (fig. 10)⁷². One of these, the *Kitab al-Malahi*, was written by Abu Talib al-Mufaddal ibn Salama in the ninth century, and discusses ancient Arabic musical instruments, singers, and players⁷³. Though the exact date of its copying is unknown, the book was rebound with Italian velvet during the reign of Mehmed II.

Another book covered in Italian velvet is the *Risāla-ye Falakiyya*, penned by 'Abdallāh ibn Muhammad Kiyā al-Māzandarānī during the Ilkhanid period, most likely in the mid-fourteenth century. It is a fifteenth-century copy of an early example of official accounting practices in the mediaeval Islamic world, probably dating to the 1460's⁷⁴. This book bound in green Italian velvet also passed into the possession of Bayezid II following his father's death⁷⁵. A third volume bound in green velvet is a compilation of Islamic philosophy, derived from the *Kitābü't-Telwîhâti'l levhiyye ve'l-'arşiyye*, the *Kitābü'l-Muḳāvemât*, and the *Hikmetü'l-işrâḳ* by Sühreverdî el-Maktûl (d. 1191), the founder of the Ishraqî philosophical movement (fig. 11)⁷⁶. Another example, again covered in green velvet, is a collection of mathematical and astronomical treatises revised by the Persian scholar, Nasir al-din al-Tusi (d. 1274)⁷⁷. The book includes the theories of Greek mathematicians and astronomers, such as Euclid (third century BCE), Menelaus of Alexandria (70-140 CE), Theodosius of Bithynia (ca. 169-100 CE), Autolycus of Pitane (ca. 360-290 BCE), and Archimedes of Syracuse (ca. 287-212 BCE). Although the exact date it was copied is unknown, the book was once again bound with Italian velvet during the reign of Mehmed II.

⁷⁰ For the Persian physicians who came to Ottoman lands during the reigns of Mehmed II and his son, see Özdiñç 2020.

⁷¹ TPL, inv. no. A. 2005.

⁷² TPL, inv. no. A. 1939/2 and A. 1973

⁷³ TPL, inv. no. A. 2286.

⁷⁴ SML, Ayasofya Collection, inv. no. 2756.

⁷⁵ This book also bears the oval seal of Sultan Bayezid II on its first and last pages.

⁷⁶ TPL, inv. no. A. 3266.

⁷⁷ TPL, inv. no. A. 3456.

It appears that during the 1470's and 1480's, a collective effort was undertaken at the Topkapı Palace to bind and restore the bindings of volumes on various subjects. Several recently copied books were given new covers of Italian velvet. Additionally, books dating to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with original bindings that were either worn out or lost entirely were rebound with these velvets. As a result, around forty books in the Topkapı Palace Library came to be covered with red or green Italian velvet. As more books were covered in the red velvet, it appears that this material was favoured and more abundantly produced by the palace.

Around the same period, Carlo Crivelli depicted a similar book in the hands of San Giacomo Maggiore for the *polittico* he made with his brother Vittorio, at the Chiesa di San Martino Vescovo in Monte San Martino. The red, green, and gold fabric he portrayed on the cover of the volume stands out from its contemporaries⁷⁸. Crivelli also showed two other books covered with fabric held by San Pietro and San Domenico in the *Trittico di Camerino* (fig. 12)⁷⁹. San Domenico's book, which he is holding alongside his attribute, the lily, is covered with red and gold gilded velvet⁸⁰, while San Pietro's features a navy velvet.⁸¹ In this triptych, Crivelli used the same velvet in green to cover the interior of the crimson cloak worn by San Venanzio, who carries a model of the city of Camerino⁸². Following his brother's example, Vittorio Crivelli would also go on to depict numerous saintly figures holding books covered with similar velvet fabrics⁸³.

It might seem provocative to suggest that the books covered with Italian

⁷⁸ For a fragment similar to the fabric depicted by Crivelli, see *Woven Silk Velvet*, ca. 1450–1500, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 1339-1864.

⁷⁹ Carlo Crivelli, *I Santi Pietro e Domenico, Trittico di Camerino*, 1482, Milano, Pinacoteca di Brera, inv. no. 155-350-351.

⁸⁰ For a fragment similar to the one depicted by Crivelli, see *Furnishing Fabric*, 1450–1475, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 1028-1900. Museum experts had initially recorded the fragment as being an Ottoman example from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. However, they later concluded that the fabric was of Italian origin, but influenced by the Ottomans, and dated it to 1450–1475. Indeed, the tulip motifs on the fabric are quite Ottoman, rather than Italian. It is likely an Italian example made for the Ottoman market, and might have been seen by Carlo Crivelli.

⁸¹ For a similar fragment, see *Piece*, 15th century, New York NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 08.109.21.

⁸² Carlo Crivelli, *I Santi Pietro Martire e Venanzio, Trittico di Camerino*, 1482, Milano, Pinacoteca di Brera, inv. no. 155-350-351.

⁸³ Vittorio Crivelli depicted the red fabric hanging in the background of his *Madonna and Child*, which he painted between 1481 and 1482; Vittorio Crivelli, *Virgin and Child*, ca. 1481-1482, Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 4214. In Vittorio's other works, such as Saint Louis of France, painted around ca. 1481-1502 (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. SK-A-3390), Saint Catherine of Alexandria from the 1490's (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, inv. no. WA1899. CDEF.P27), and another Saint Catherine of Alexandria painted in 1481 (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 765A-1865), the figures are depicted holding books covered with fabric.

velvet in the Topkapı Palace should be associated with Crivelli's name and referred to as "Crivelli-type fabric bindings", in the same way that Anatolian carpets with large star motifs produced from the fifteenth century onwards came to be described as "Crivelli-type carpets". However, the presence of manuscripts bound with the same fabrics in both the Ottoman Sublime Porte and the Venetian Serenissima, as well as the depiction of these volumes in paintings by the Crivelli brothers, are reminders of a time of intense artistic exchange. Carlo Crivelli's life unfolded in a land witnessing cultural interactions between the East and West, in coastal cities where goods were transported across the sea, both to and from the Eastern world. He certainly would have heard of his contemporary Gentile Bellini, a fellow Venetian artist who had his own adventure at the court of Mehmed II, and must have been alarmed by the intimidating Ottoman presence in Otranto emerging in 1480. Crivelli's pictorial compositions are thus the products of this environment, enriched by these various and increasing cross-cultural encounters.

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Appendix

Fig. 1. Carlo Crivelli, *Sant'Emidio di Ascoli* from *Polittico di Sant'Emidio*, 1473, tempera and gold on panel, Ascoli Piceno, Cattedrale di Sant'Emidio



Fig. 2. Carlo Crivelli, *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1468, tempera and oil on panel, 62.23×40.96 cm, The San Diego Museum of Art: Gift of Anne R. and Amy Putnam, inv. no. 1947.3



Fig. 3. Carlo Crivelli, *Madonna col Bambino, Trittico di Camerino*, 1482, tempera and oil on panel, Milano, Pinacoteca di Brera, inv. no. 155-350-351



Fig. 4. Carlo Crivelli, *Dead Christ Supported by Two Putti*, ca. 1470's, egg tempera and tooled gold on panel, 71×47 cm, The John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, inv. no. Cat. 158



Fig. 5. Carlo Crivelli, *San Giorgio, Polittico di Sant'Emidio*, 1473, tempera and gold on panel, Ascoli Piceno, Cattedrale di Sant'Emidio



Fig. 6. A copy of the *Asas-el Iktibas*, transcribed in 1475 by Muhammad al-Badahsani in Kaffa (Theodosia) and covered in red Italian velvet, 30.5×19 cm, Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Library, inv. no. A. 3444



Fig. 7. Wedding chest, *Storia di Saladino e messer Torello*, ca. 1390–1410, tempera and gold on carved wood, 60×69×145 cm; Firenze, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Bargello Mobili Antichi, inv. no. 160



Fig. 8. Altar gospel bound in Ottoman velvet, 17th century, gold, silver, precious stones, pearl, glass, wood, velvet, taffeta and paper, 40x27 cm, Moscow, Kremlin Museums, inv. no. KH-41



Fig. 9 (above). A copy of the medical treatise *El-Kanun-fi't Tib* transcribed in 1325 by Ata Malik al-Hamadani and covered in red Italian velvet, 40.3×29.5 cm, Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Library, inv. no. A.1939/1



Fig. 10 (right). A copy of the medical treatise *El-Kanun-fi't Tib* transcribed in Istanbul in 1475 and covered in red Italian velvet, Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Library, inv. no. A.1973



Fig. 11. Book on Islamic philosophy, compiled from the *Kitâbü't-Telvîhâti'l levhiyye ve'l-'arşiyye*, the *Kitâbü'l-Muqâvemât*, and the *Hikmetü'l-işrâk* by Sühreverdi el-Maktûl (d. 1191) in its green Italian velvet cover; Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Library, inv. no. A. 3266



Fig. 12. Carlo Crivelli, *I Santi Pietro e Domenico* from *Trittico di Camerino*, 1482, tempera and oil on panel, 167×63 cm, Milano, Pinacoteca di Brera, inv. no. 155-350-351

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