

Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia (philosopher and mathematician)

June 5, 1646 – July 26, 1685



Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia is the first woman in the world to receive a Ph.D. She was of noble birth in Venice – her extended family included three popes and eight cardinals, four doges, great statesmen, and the Queen of Cyprus, Caterina Cornaro. Elena’s family traced its lineage back to the Roman family of the Cornelii. Centuries before Elena was born, Federigo Cornaro’s loan of 60,000 gold ducats to King Peter Lusignan I of Cyprus helped the king in his journey to the papal court at Avignon to seek French aid to defend Cyprus against the Turks. Unable to repay the debt, King Peter Lusignan I, conferred upon Federigo and his heirs the title “Knights of Cyprus” and made them lords of a castle called “Piscopia”. Elena’s father Gianbattista Cornaro Piscopia was descended from the Cornaro family branch that had decided to add Piscopia to their name. Her father Giabattista Cornaro Piscopia was different from all the other fathers of women scientists which we have seen in this blog: he was the one who pushed Elena to excel academically. He knew from the beginning that his daughter was a prodigy, and he wanted to use her intellect to bring glory back to the Cornaro name.

Her science journey began when Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia was born at the Cornaro Piscopia Palace (now called Loredan Palace) in Venice, Italy on June 5, 1646 to Gianbattista Cornaro Piscopia and his mistress Zanetta Boni. Gianbattista was what one would call a playboy in modern times. But he changed his playboy



ways when he met Zanetta Boni. Zanetta was born in the Piedmont town of Val di Sabia, near the city of Novara. She was from a very poor peasant family, and she probably moved to Venice to escape starvation at home. She worked as a servant girl in one of the grand palaces in Venice and Gianbattista met her there and fell in love. She became the mistress of Gianbattista and bore him five children. Three of them, including Elena, were born out of wedlock. The “Laws of the State” did not consider these children to be of noble heritage.

Zanetta was a commoner and Gianbattista’s fervent wish was to have his two boys listed in the register of Venice’s nobility, *Libro d’oro*. This would make Gianbattista’s sons eligible to serve on the governing Great Council. But his daughters, because of Zanetta’s lowly birth, could never be included. In 1654, Gianbattista married Zanetta when Elena was eight years old.

Gianbattista recognized his daughter’s intellect at an early age. He made it his life’s goal to make sure everyone knew of his daughter’s intellect, and he pushed her to strive towards the highest possible academic goals. Giabattista’s own goal was to cleanse the Cornaro name, as it had been sullied with scandals. The children of Giovanni Cornaro, a previous doge, profited unfairly from their father’s position. One was illegally appointed cardinal, and two others were fraudulently elected to the Senate. One of them, Giorgio Cornaro, made a fortune importing cattle from Dalmatia while Giovanni was in office. When a man named Zen accused him of wrongdoing, he hired assassins to kill the accuser. But the accuser survived and pointed out the mastermind, Giorgio Cornaro. Giorgio fled to Ferrara but was found and exiled. Eventually he was killed. The scandal rocked Venice and the Cornaro family.

To inspire his daughter, Gianbattista would walk around the palace with Elena and show her the ancestral trophies and treasures of their home. He wanted her to appreciate Cornaro’s family history and heritage. Elena listened to her father intently. She was particularly interested in the story of her ancestor Francesco Cornaro. He was the Bishop of Paphos in southwestern Cyprus and in 1519 he

made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He was an eloquent Renaissance intellectual who enlightened the reformist Council of Trent with his extensive knowledge. Although the middle child of three surviving siblings, Elena was brought up as if she were an only child.

HER EDUCATION

At the young age of seven, she began her private studies with her first tutor, Monsignor Giovanni Fabris, the Cornaro's parish priest and a family friend. After receiving a doctorate in Theology, Monsignor Fabris became the pastoral priest of St. Luke's Church. His love of philosophy and theology were influential in Elena's academic future. Monsignor Fabris started Elena's studies by teaching her Latin grammar. Then after a few months, he taught her Greek. Monsignor Fabris was seventy years old when he started giving Elena private lessons. He encouraged her to read both secular and religious works. Elena soon realized that she loved studying. Her father was ecstatic!



Another prominent figure in Elena's intellectual development was Gregorio Barbarigo, a nobleman who had come to seek the advice of Monsignor Fabris on monastic orders. Years later Gregorio Barbarigo would become the Bishop of Padua and Chancellor of the Theological Faculty at the University of Padua.

Elena persuaded her parents to find a teaching convent for her after she finished her studies with Monsignor Fabris. In 1657, at the age of eleven, Elena began her church education in a Venetian order. At first, Elena was happy that she could now fulfill her deep interest in a contemplative life. But the convent her parents chose was neither silent nor contemplative. The nuns who ran the convent were intelligent and well-informed women but became politically influential for the public good. She returned home disappointed with the convent experience.

Monsignor Fabris welcomed back his student and structured a private curriculum modeled on the public curriculum used in teaching boys. Her studies were first focused on the acquisition of languages, and he urged Elena's father to hire

additional private tutors to teach Greek and Latin grammar and literature. Monsignor Fabris also continued teaching Elena the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. At the young age of eleven, she was reading such traditional classical Latin works as Caesar's commentaries on the Gallic Wars, Cicero's speeches and philosophical works, Virgil's epic poem, *The Aeneid*, Livy's history of Rome, *Ab Urbe Condita*, and Horace's *Odes and Satires*. To complement her language studies, the Jesuit Carlo Vota, head of the Venetian Academy of Geography, taught her state-of-the-art mathematics, physics, astronomy, and geography¹.

To augment her studies in art, Elena's father built an art gallery to house his painting collection which included works inspired by Titian and Veronese, works of Jacopo Bassano, and miniatures by Carlo Loth. Elena studied all the paintings and became an authority on these paintings. An organist, Maddalena Cappelli, lived at the palace to provide music education to Elena. She was Elena's teacher and confidante for more than two decades.

An educated woman in those times was considered evil and unchaste. Elena's father had to defend her from these accusers. Among them was Elena's own mother! She was suspicious and disapproved of Gianbattista's goal of educating his daughter. But his name and membership in the Cornaro family shielded him. His library was considered one of the best in Venice. It contained sets of mathematical and astronomical instruments and was well stocked with valuable Greek and Latin manuscripts. Prominent scholars were invited to visit the library. One day a noted professor from the University of Pisa, Carlo Rinaldini, arrived and accidentally met Elena at the library. He was amazed at the intelligence of this young girl!

In 1661, although Monsignor Fabris remained her main tutor, Elena had a new tutor, an Englishman, Professor Alexander Anderson. He became her new professor in Latin. He added a new language, English, in her curriculum. Professor Anderson also recruited Abbott Luigi Gradenigo as her Greek tutor. The Orthodox priest was a member of the large Greek colony in Venice. By the age of fifteen, Elena was considered an accomplished scholar in both Greek and Latin. She became famous and was nicknamed *Oraculum Septilingue* (The Oracle of Seven Languages).

¹Vota was an admirer and correspondent of Leibniz and Gallileo.

In 1667, Elena once again met Carlo Rinaldini, the man she had encountered in the Cornaro Library. He was now the head of the University of Padua philosophy faculty, and he became the new tutor of Elena. Then another tutor, a rabbi from a Venetian synagogue came to teach Hebrew and Aramaic. This provided Elena a unique opportunity to study the Old Testament in the original tongues and to discuss it with Jewish masters. Rabbi Shalma Abbroff was considered a leader of Venice's small but prosperous Jewish community, whose ancestors have been expelled from Spain in the 15th century. Rabbi Abbroff's teaching inspired Elena and his personal piety and compassion deepened her admiration.

According to her tutor, Professor Carlo Rinaldini, Elena was proficient not only in philosophy but also in mathematics, dialectics, and astronomy by the age of seventeen. At this age she was also recognized as a skilled musician, singing and accompanying herself on the harpsichord. In addition to the harpsichord, she also mastered the clavichord, the harp, and the violin. Her mastery of musical instruments was crowned by the music she composed. She became famous as an accomplished young woman. Her father served as her promoter, hoping that it would also lead to his own advancement.

After he failed twice in his petitions to be appointed to the prestigious office of Procurator of St. Mark, he finally was named Procurator for life on March 1, 1664. The position included the privileges of having an office in the Ducal Palace, an entrée to the procurators' council chamber and an apartment in the new Procuratie building overlooking St. Mark's Square. At this time, he sought again to have his surviving sons Francesco and Girolamo included in the *Libro d'oro*. He had to plead before the Senate, the upper house of 200 men and the Great Council. He had been denied twice before but now the Doge approved his petition and allowed his sons to be included in the book.

In 1668, Professor Carlo Rinaldini, who was also the Chairman of Philosophy at the University of Padua, published a book written in Latin and centered on geometry. The book was dedicated to a twenty-two-year-old Elena.

In 1668, Monsignor Fabris died of a stroke at the age of eighty-six. Elena was so affected by the death of her mentor she sought refuge at her family's summer palace in Padua. She would sit and pray under a cypress tree for hours. In the

spring, she discovered a nest of nightingales in the lower branches of the tree, which gave her inexplicable comfort.

The next year she translated into Italian, a Spanish book *Colloquio di Cristo nostro Redentore all'anima devota*, by Giovanni Laspergio. The translation was dedicated to Gian Paolo Oliva, her close friend and confessor. The volume was issued in five editions in Venice from 1669-1672.

HER RELIGIOUS LIFE

As a child, Elena's main models were saints and others who came from noble families who renounced their wealth and lived in poverty. Those models included St. Ignatius Loyola, the son of the noble houses of Onaz and Loyola; Aloysius de Gonzaga², a Jesuit who was born in an ancestral castle of the distinguished Gonzaga Family; and Saint Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Spanish Carmelite nun and noblewoman, known for her writings and for opening fifteen monasteries and seventeen convents throughout Spain. Elena begged her father to allow her to join the convent of the *Vergini di Castiglione*. Her confessor Carlo Boselli intervened, and Elena told her father Gianbattista that eventually after her parents' deaths and with his permission she wished to enter the Dimesse women's order in Padua.

HER MANY SUITORS

Her parents had always dreamed of a fashionable wedding for their daughter. It was quite a relief when she decided not to enter the convent. But Zanetta had high hopes that her daughter would someday marry in an elaborate wedding in Venice with a groom from another high profile and wealthy family in Venice. Both Zanetta and Gianbattista looked for suitable suitors, but Elena would rebuff all suitors. There was a German prince who had crossed the alps to visit Venice for Carnival and probably at the invitation of Zanetta. He appeared among guests at a Cornaro Piscopia Palace party. After dinner that evening, Elena recited and sang in six languages to entertain the guests. The prince was mesmerized and asked for her hand in marriage and Gianbattista gave his permission. But Elena said no and excused herself from the party.

² Aloysius was recognized as a saint after Elena's death.

A BENEDICTINE OBLATE

In 1665, she took the habit of a Benedictine Oblate of the Third Order without, however, becoming a nun. After a private ceremony at San Giorgio Maggiore, she asked permission to always wear a monk's habit hidden underneath her fancy gowns. As an oblate she dedicated herself to the religious life but was not bound by monastic vows. She chose the name "Scolastica" in honor of a nun who was the twin sister of St. Benedict and foundress of the Benedictine order of nuns.

RECOVERY IN PADUA

Elena had a bout of red fever, scarlet or rheumatic fever, at the age of twenty-five. She moved to the family's summer palace in Padua to recuperate. The Cornaro Summer Palace was located near the *Il Santo*, the pilgrimage church dedicated to Saint Anthony. It was very serene and was an ideal retreat for the contemplative Elena. Elena regained her health.

IN PURSUIT OF A DOCTORATE

Back in Venice, several important academies in Italy and abroad had invited Elena for membership. She became President of the Accademia dei Pacifici in Venice and her intellect became more renowned in Italy and Europe. Her mentor Carlo Rinaldini thought she should concentrate on the requirements necessary for a degree from the University of Padua. Carlo Rinaldini consulted with Gianbattista and Elena's father agreed it was time to achieve this final goal. The moist climate of Venice was contributing to Elena's frequent illnesses so they all agreed she should move back to Padua.



In 1677, her father Gianbattista sent a petition to the University of Padua's Rector of the Arts Faculty, Girolamo Basadonna, seeking a degree in Theology for his daughter. The Rector and the Examining commission of Senators endorsed the letters unanimously. But the final approval was not granted by the Bishop of Padua, Gregorio Cardinal Barbarigo. He said he would never approve a female doctor in Theology. Outside of convents women were not allowed to teach and therefore did not need a degree. But Gianbattista persisted. Eventually Bishop Barbarigo agreed to grant a degree in Philosophy and not in

Theology. This cleared the way for Elena to become history's first woman university graduate and the first woman to receive a Ph.D. in the world.

This historic event took place in Padua on June 25, 1678. People from all walks of life, knights and nobles, clergy and students, city officials, and representatives from other European universities assembled in Padua to witness the dissertation by Lady Elena. It was originally planned to be held at Aula Magna (the University Hall of the University of Padua) but the crowd was so big that it was moved to the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin of Padua (Il Duomo) on the Piazza del Duomo. It became a spectacular public event! Elena discussed the works of Aristotle. Random passages were assigned for her interpretation, two passages were from Aristotle's *The Physics*³ and *The Posterior Analytics*, one of six treatises on logic. For over one hour, Elena animatedly expounded in classic Latin answering the questions with simple ease and dignity. After her presentation she was approved "viva voce" instead of by secret ballot, the usual way of voting. Her tutor, Professor Carlo Rinaldini then pronounced her Master and Doctor of Philosophy. Professor Rinaldini then conferred the poet's crown of laurel on his student. Fr. Rotondi, another tutor, then gave the mozzetta, a teacher's ermine cape, to Professor Rinaldini who placed the cape around the shoulders of Elena. A heavy gold doctor's ring with the University of Padua seal was then placed on Elena's finger. Then the customary volume of Philosophy was presented to Elena. The judges who gave the examination to Elena were so astounded on the amount of knowledge this young woman had that they declared the Philosophy doctorate was hardly an adequate honor for her intellect.

In *Hypatia's Heritage*, Margaret Alic states that Elena became a mathematics lecturer at the University of Padua after graduation in 1678. Elena also became a member of various academies in Europe.

DEATH AND BURIAL

Elena Cornaro Piscopia's achievements spread all over Europe, but she did not survive long after her extraordinary achievement. For over thirty years she had secretly served the poor, the sick, the orphans and all in need while leading a life of penitential austerity. Her parents suspected that she may have contracted a disease

³ "Physics" was then a name for all kinds of natural science.

in her dealings with the poor. She has always been in poor health and anorexic. She died on July 25, 1684, at the age of thirty-eight from multiple system failure. She had kidney failure and diseased lungs. Several weeks before her death, doctors discovered a malignant growth between her shoulder blades. Zanetta was surprised to know the extent of her daughter's pain; Elena had suffered in silence. Some references have attributed her death to tuberculosis. She died in the presence of her family, the priest, and the two women closest to her, Maddelena and Abbess Felice. Her body was treated with aromatics and was robed in a complete Benedictine habit, tunic, scapular, and hood with the hem stitched together carefully by Maddelena. Her body was carried the next day from the palace library to the Basilica of Santa Giustina so that the people of Padua could pay their final respects. Her father Gianbattista was overcome with grief. Zanetta took over and made sure her daughter's funeral was worthy of a noble woman. She issued invitations to the entire college of doctors and philosophers at the university. On the day of the funeral, all shops were closed in honor of Venice's distinguished daughter. Over a monk's black habit, Elena was garbed in the ermine mozzetta cape representing her doctorate. Her head was crowned with two wreaths, one with the poet's dark green laurel and the other with virginal white lilies. Thirty-six university professors wearing their full academic regalia marched with the funeral procession. Gianbattista wanted her daughter to be buried at St. Anthony's Basilica where Caterina Cornaro was also buried. But the parish priest of the Church of St. Lawrence of Padua claimed his church was more suitable because Elena was a parishioner there. Elena's personal wish was to be buried with the Benedictine abbots and monks in the mortuary of St. Luke's Chapel in Santa Giustina and they followed her wish and buried her there.

HER LEGACY

Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia was the first female to break all barriers to the highest academic achievement. Italians today refer to a woman with scholastic superiority by exclaiming: "E una Piscopia" ("She is a Piscopia!").

On January 11, 1685, The University of Padua announced the coining of a medal to honor Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia. It was the first time that such a tribute has been awarded to a woman.

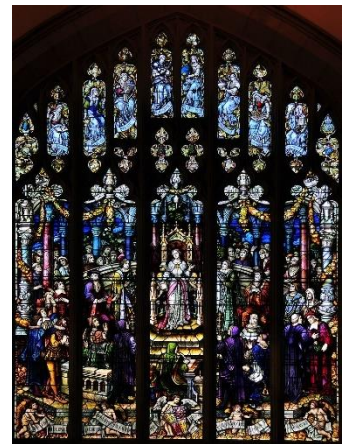


In 1688, The University of Padua published the remaining collection of Elena's writings.

In 1771, a wealthy Venetian countess, Lady Caterina Delphina donated to the University of Padua a life-size statue of Elena. It had been sculpted by Bernardo Tabacco of Bassano. It was an elegant, classical goddess rendition in Carrara marble portraying Elena in ermine mozzetta. The statue is located at the University's "Il Bo" at the foot of the Cornaro stairway leading to the second-floor gallery.

In 1895, Abbess Mathilda Pynsent of the English Benedictine Nuns in Rome had Elena's tomb opened, the remains placed in a new casket, and a suitable tablet inscribed to her memory.

The Frederick Ferris Thompson Memorial Library at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York was completed in 1905. The next year, a magnificent, 22-foot-high stained-glass window was installed in the west wing of the library. Known as the Cornaro Window, it depicts Elena's graduation at the University of Padua, a fitting symbol for this college founded for women's education. In 1915, Vassar celebrated its fiftieth anniversary by doing a presentation called "Pageant of Athena" where the students reenacted the library window scene with Elena reading a passage from Aristotle, responding to questions from her examiners, and then being invested with insignia of her doctorate.





In 1949, a mural of Elena Cornaro was unveiled at the University of Pittsburgh, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The statue of Elena at the University of Padua served as a model. The mural shows Elena surrounded by symbols of learning and was painted in Bologna by Giovanni Romagnoli. The

mural was a gift from Italian women in the Pittsburgh area.

In 1969, Ruth Crawford Mitchell, an alumna of Vassar who suggested the mural at the University of Pittsburgh was invited to Padua to plan the celebration of the 300th anniversary of Elena's 1678 graduation. Two large Cornaro tercentenary committees were formed, one based in Italy and the other in the United States. Ruth Mitchell was chosen the chair of the US committee, Dr. Maria Tonzig the chair of the Italian group. The United States Cornaro Tercentenary Committee was headquartered at the University of Pittsburgh. A book on Elena Cornaro written by Fr. Nicola Fusco was published after the author tragically died in a car accident. The proceeds from the sale of the book were used to restore Lady Cornaro's burial site. The response to the tercentenary celebration was tremendous! There were over 135 observances across the US and Europe throughout 1978. Fifty-two Benedictine Priors held commemorations. Descendants of the Cornaro family came from all over the world to celebrate. In the spring of 1978, one of the first celebrations was held in Washington, DC by the Italian Cultural Society, the American Italian Bicentennial Commission, and Georgetown University. Italy renamed St. Luke's Chapel, the Capella Cornaro (Cornaro Chapel). Elena's grave was repaired. Fragments of the first gravestone were placed on a nearby chapel wall. Installed on the pink marble floor was a classical replica of Elena's original, simple, black marble stone with the 1684 inscription. On its frame were the seals of the Benedictine order and Santa Giustina, the crest of the University of Padua, and the Cornaro Piscopia coat of arms.

In Elena's name, the University of Padua established the 'Elena Cornaro' University Center in 2018, which promotes research and training activities from a gender perspective and aims to raise greater awareness of gender issues within the University of Padua and society.

In 2018, the University of Padua Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia Study Prize Award was established. The study prize award is dedicated to the participation of women in the eight centuries of history of the University and aims to give renewed attention to the theme of gender equality by enhancing studies and reflections on the role of women and their presence at the University of Padua and the Italian university system. The award aims to reconstruct the role of women in the history of knowledge, research, and teaching as committed authoritative narrators whose work and studies in all scientific fields have left an impactful mark on the University of Padua.

Study prizes are awarded to young scholars who have obtained a master's degree or a Ph.D. in any scientific-disciplinary field at the University of Padua. Ph.D. students who carry out research activities related to the subject are also eligible for the award.



On June 5, 2019, Google had a doodle for the 373rd birthday of Elena Cornaro.

The doodle was drawn up by California artist Alyssa Winans showing Elena reading a book in the library. Winans wished to portray that Elena was happiest when she could read in the library undisturbed.

The Piscopia Initiative, named after Cornaro, was founded in Edinburgh in 2019 to tackle the participation crisis of women and non-binary people in mathematics research in the United Kingdom. The Piscopia Initiative encourages women and non-binary students to pursue a Ph.D. in mathematics.

In February, 2024 the Italian Embassy in Washington celebrated the Week of Women in Science with the Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia International Award. The Italian Ambassador to the United States, Mariangela Zappia, hosted the first edition of the Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia International Award at Villa Firenze, honoring Italian women scientists working in the US, in the presence of Monica Bertagnolli, Director of the National Institute of Health.

The award celebrates the contribution of women scientists and scholars to research, innovation, and the development and dissemination of an increasingly equal scientific culture.

HER SCIENCE JOURNEY

1646 - Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia was born at the Cornaro Piscopia Palace (now called Loredan Palace) in Venice, Italy

1653 - Started her private studies with Monsignor Giovanni Fabris

1657 - Went to school at a teaching convent in Venice but was not happy there and went back to her private tutor Monsignor Fabris

1661 - A new tutor, Professor Alexander Anderson added English language in the curriculum

1664 - Gianbattista became procurator of St. Mark

1667 - Carlo Rinaldini became her new tutor

1668 - Monsignor Fabris died of a stroke

- Professor Carlo Rinaldini wrote a book in Latin focused on geometry and dedicated to Elena

1669 - Elena translated from Spanish into Italian *Colloquio di Cristo nostro Redentore all'anima devota*, a book by the Carthusian monk Giovanni Laspergio

1671 - She had scarlet fever and moved to their Summer Palace in Padua

1677 - Gianbattista sent a petition to the University of Padua's Rector of the Arts Faculty, Girolamo Basadonna, seeking a doctorate degree in Theology for his daughter

1678 - Elena received her doctorate degree in Philosophy and became a lecturer in Mathematics at the University of Padua

1684 - Elena died at the age of thirty-eight from multiple system failure

1685 - The University of Padua announced the coining of a medal in honor of Elena Cornaro, the first time that such a tribute was given to a woman

1688 - The University of Padua published the remaining collection of Elena's writings

1771 - A wealthy Venetian countess, Lady Caterina Delphina donated to the University of Padua a life-size statue of Elena

1895 - Abbess Mathilda Pynsent of the English Benedictine Nuns in Rome had Elena's tomb opened, the remains placed in a new casket, and a suitable tablet inscribed to her memory.

1906 - Installation of the Cornaro Window at the library of Vassar College

1949 - A mural of Elena Cornaro was unveiled at the University of Pittsburgh, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

1978 - Tercenary celebration in Italy and United States of the granting of the doctorate degree to Elena Cornaro

2018 - The University of Padua established the Elena Cornaro University Center and started the University of Padua Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia Study Prize Award

2019 - Google had a doodle for the 373rd birthday of Elena Cornaro

- The Piscopia Initiative named after Elena Cornaro Piscopia was founded in Edinburgh

2022 – Two city councilors of Padua, Italy proposed a motion to add the statue of Elena Cornaro Piscopia to the 78 male statues at Prato della Valle, Padua, the largest public square in Italy. This motion created a lot of controversy.

2024 - The Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia International Award was established

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3. [The Negotiations of Sir Thomas Roe in his Embassy to the Ottoman Porte, from the Year 1621 to 1628 Inclusive](#). See [Page 745](#) .

The photos and some of the information were taken from the following websites:

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