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Pagan Metal Gods: The Use of Mythology and White Supremacy in National Socialist Black Metal

Jillian Fischer

Black metal's relationship to National Socialism consists of a complicated nexus of historical and musicological narratives. Scholars such as Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Keith Kahn-Harris, and Jeffery Kaplan have undertaken a significant amount of painstaking academic work to trace some of the histories of radical right groups, both within the black metal scene and as ideological/political movements more broadly. However, black metal has been particularly susceptible to appropriation by radical right groups, as seen in the emergence of national socialist black metal (NSBM) bands in the 1990s, which incorporate black metal's musical emphasis on heavily distorted guitars and shrieked vocals with far-right political ideologies. The question of why black metal has been especially susceptible to appropriation by those with neo-fascist and radical right viewpoints has been less considered. In this article, I will argue that the black metal scene has been appealing to national socialist group members as a result of shared interests in paganism and mythology. Through an analysis of album art, lyrics, and the musical aesthetics of three national socialist black metal bands—Burzum, Graveland, and Der Stürmer—I will demonstrate how a similar fascination with paganism and mythology allows NSBM artists to place themselves within a national socialist lineage, as well as reinforce and adapt far-right political ideologies to fit within black metal aesthetics.

Paganism and pagan mythology as lyrical tropes have been established within black metal due to prominent bands incorporating it into their aesthetic. Although

early 1980s black metal bands like Venom focused on Satanism, which invoked the Christian conception of the devil, other bands like Bathory began shifting lyrical topics to paganism, which emphasized pre-Christian spiritual and mythological figures. In 1988, Bathory released an album titled *Blood, Fire, Death*, which includes chanting and sounds of horses in their intro, titled "Oden's Ride Over Nordland."¹ Although there are many black metal groups that use paganism only as a lyrical thematic trope, paganism and magical practices more broadly have a long and complicated history of being appropriated by the national socialist political party and post-World War II neo-fascist groups.²

Within the history of far-right political extremism, mythology has a history of being imbued with racialized meaning both before and during the Third Reich. Nineteenth-century intellectuals combined various mythologies and pagan religious practice that highlighted the use of *völkisch* ("folk") religions, as well as emphasized Germanic and Nordic mythology. These beliefs touted nationalist ideas that were combined with feelings of "common creative energy, feelings, and [a] sense of individuality."³ These beliefs described a golden age of German rule that had been predicated on the ruling of the "superior" German (or Aryan) race over others.⁴ Guido von List (1848-1919) and Jorg Lanz von Liebenfels (1874-1954) were some of the first leaders to begin combining *völkisch* politics with racialized underpinnings, which would eventually lead to the esoteric belief system referred to as ariosophy. Ariosophic beliefs encouraged the collection of ancient esoteric knowledge to return the Germanic empire to a race of "heroic Aryan God-men," and advocated for a stratified society based on perceived racial purity, an idea that connects it to *völkisch* thinking.⁵ These doctrines often advocate for the subjugation and destruction of those considered inferior, and emphasized "semi-religious beliefs in a race of Aryan god-men, the needful extermination of inferiors, and a wonderful millennial future of German world dominion."⁶ Others believed that the Aryan bloodline held special powers that had

¹ "Bathory," Encyclopaedia Metallum, last modified unknown, <https://www.metal-archives.com/bands/bathory/184>.

² For more on this, see: Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: The ariosophists of Austria and Germany, 1890-1935* (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1985); and Eric Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

³ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

been lost over the generations through race mixing, i.e., having children with non-Aryans.⁷

These ideas were kept alive and eventually politicized by groups such as the Thule Society. The Thule Society championed an ariosophic viewpoint that combined metaphysics with Aryan racial ideologies.⁸ In 1918, the society created the Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, or the German Worker's Party, to appeal to the lower classes, including a young Adolf Hitler. By 1920, the society had become the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP). This party emphasized the creation of a political party and mass appeal while continuing to propagate ideas of German renewal common in ariosophic and *völkisch* ideologies.⁹ The party's use of these spiritual beliefs had two major appealing points for some of the German public: first, the Nazis acted as a "power fantasy" for Germans already demoralized by defeat, and second, gave them a scapegoat for this demoralization, namely the Jewish community.¹⁰

This rhetoric was reinforced through musical choices made by the Nazi Party. Many ariosophic members of the Nazi Party adopted Richard Wagner's music and operas, a composer whose own antisemitism and deep interest in Nordic mythology has been well-documented, and is evident in his operas. The German Order used Wagner's music as part of their initiation ceremony for newer recruits, especially from his operas *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*, drawing on the opera's specifically mythological themes. This music was used in conjunction with mythological symbols, such as spears meant to represent Wotan's spear, and some members dressed in white robes with horned helmets, resulting in what Goodrick-Clarke has referred to as a "strange synthesis of racist, masonic, and Wagnerian inspiration."¹¹ Wagner's music also became an important tool to Hitler's cultural propaganda as it continued to be performed during The Bayreuth Festival—a festival to showcase Wagner's works during the war—and as a part of the Nuremberg political rallies. Although Wagner's use of pagan and mythological themes was not always in favor with other Nazi officials due to their interest in Christianity, nor were Wagner's operas always popular with the German mass-market, the composer's known antisemitic attitudes and connection to mythology remained appealing to some in the Third Reich, and his music helped define the Nazi Party sonically.¹²

⁷ Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 69.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰ Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots*, 203.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

¹² Alex Ross, *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 535.

The connections between paganism, mythology, and white supremacist rhetoric have been kept alive by various groups throughout the late-twentieth centuries. Groups like the Odin Fellowship, which started in 1969, explicitly tied Nordic beliefs to racial ideologies and tribalism.¹³ In the 1990s, groups like the Odinist Fellowship similarly argued that Norse paganism was the “racial soul of the Aryan folk,” and that “heathen gods and goddesses [are] race-specific and genetically engraved archetypes.”¹⁴ Groups such as these believe that ancestral knowledge can be passed down through DNA, and that acts of race mixing can muddy and blur these spiritual memories, ideas reminiscent of the Third Reich.¹⁵ The connections that may be less obvious, however, are the connections between the continuation of ariosophic beliefs and the role that music plays in their propagation. Like the Nazis’ use of music as a propaganda tool, proponents of later twentieth-century iterations of *völkisch* and ariosophic-like beliefs found a niche opening within black metal.

In this genre, paganism has become a trope both in bands who are and are not associated with national socialism. As musicologist Ross Hagen has pointed out, Norse symbolism can be seen in (non-NSBM) band logos like those by Enslaved.¹⁶ The logo uses Thor’s hammer as part of the design, as well as typography that recalls Viking art; the demo’s name, *Yggdrasil*, references the sacred tree Yggdrasil in Nordic cosmological myths.¹⁷ For many bands, paganism and mythological ritual have also become part of a larger ideology that emphasizes strength, and provides an alternative to Christian values deemed as “weak.”¹⁸

The concept of power plays an important role in the genre both thematically and musically. For example, Robert Walser argues that the intentional use of feedback through overdriving the amplification system allows musicians to control an otherwise uncontrollable part of the amplification process: i.e., the use of feedback to create an intentionally distorted sound. Walser argues that electronic power derived from this process of overdriving translates into feelings of affective power for the genre’s listeners that becomes a major appeal.¹⁹ In addition to the feelings of power created

¹³ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 261; also see chapter 4 in Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*.

¹⁴ Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 166.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁶ Album cover available at: <https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Enslaved/Yggdrasil/12884>.

¹⁷ Ross Hagen, “Music Style, Ideology, and Mythology in Norwegian Black Metal,” in *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World*, ed. Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 180-99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁹ Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil: Gender, Power, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 41-3. Walser further discusses how these

through guitar distortion, black metal, which falls under the category of extreme metal, takes distortion further by including the use of distorted vocals. This is often accomplished through shrieking or growling, relying on elements of what Keith Kahn-Harris has termed “sonic transgression,” music that actively seeks to push beyond previously understood boundaries.²⁰ Extended vocal techniques such as these also add a sense of danger through the possibility of damage to the vocal chords.²¹ Similar to controlling amplification feedback to create distortion, this sense of danger can be interpreted as a form of power for both musicians and listeners that makes the music enjoyable. The use of mythological and medieval tropes often adds to these feelings of power, incorporating a visual and lyrical dimension to these affective experiences. However, for some bands, the use of mythology has been directly linked to beliefs that mirror those of ariosophy and the Third Reich.

One such musician to make connections between racial politics and mythology was Varg Vikernes, the sole member and creator of the Norwegian band Burzum. Due to his infamy within the black metal scene for helping to establish the Norwegian black metal aesthetic and murdering his former friend and bandmate—gaining him what Kahn-Harris refers to as transgressive subcultural capital—Vikernes remained an influential voice within the black metal scene.²² In interviews he gave while in prison, Vikernes demonstrates his own self-identification in terms of paganism, as well as some of his more occultist beliefs. Vikernes identifies as “a heathen,” emphasizing his

associations have been made through advertisements for amplification systems, as well as how musicians have discussed their work. Walser’s first two pages also discuss the affective feelings of power.

²⁰ Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (New York: Berg, 2007). For a detailed description of the types of transgression often found in extreme metal, see chapter two in Kahn-Harris’ volume.

²¹ Zachary Wallmark, “The Sound of Evil: Timbre, Body, and Sacred Violence in Death Metal,” in *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone*, ed. Robert Fink, Zachary Wallmark, and Melinda Latour (New York: NY, Oxford University Press, 2018), 68-9. As Wallmark notes, correct growling or shrieking technique can remain safe for the performer’s vocal cords while giving the illusion of being dangerous.

²² Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 128. For this discussion, Kahn-Harris borrows Sarah Thornton’s adaption of Bourdieu’s ideas around cultural capital. In the context of extreme metal, Kahn-Harris argues that subcultural capital is gained through “constructing and performing various forms of discourse and identity” (121). Transgressive subcultural capital seeks to display “radical individualism through displaying uniqueness and a lack of attachment to the scene” (128). Kahn-Harris continues that many of the early Norwegian black metallers sought to reject the larger extreme metal scene in favor of a small group of elite members. The violence that occurred within the scene can be at least partially understood as a competition between members to gain status and power within the scene through gaining transgressive subcultural capital, in this case, through tangible acts of violence (132).

opposition to the Christian conception of God, and connecting this identity to racial purity, noting that he was “proud of my blue eyes, dark blond hair...and white skin. If I know love, it is love for my own race and culture (heathen) and land.”²³ Vikernes further advocates for “race hygiene,” which he defines as not procreating between races to avoid weakening “stronger” races.²⁴ These views bear a striking resemblance to those of Nazi-era *völkisch* politics. Although Vikernes’s beliefs are now widely known, Burzum’s earlier musical output, which helped establish black metal’s musical aesthetics, did not explicitly make these connections in the lyrics.²⁵

Vikernes’s views can be seen in other parts of the black metal community during this time. Rather than remaining a personal belief, racialized mythology became a part of the musical aesthetic for other bands. Mention of pagan figures can be found in many of the band Graveland’s albums since the band’s beginning in 1992, and like Vikernes, the band’s members have created racialized meaning around these mythologies.²⁶ In a 1994 interview with *Petrified Zine*, then-drummer Maciej “Capricornus” Dąbrowski stated that Graveland stands for a “New European pagan Empire” that represents “united Aryan power.”²⁷ Although Dąbrowski did not act as a recording musician on all of Graveland’s albums, these sentiments remained a prominent part of Graveland’s style and branding. For example, in their 2004 album *Dawn of Iron Blades*, Graveland makes specific mention of the god Wotan, the

²³ Olv. Svíþjóð, “Burzum: Up from the Ashes, or into a Prison?” *A 1000 Years of Lost Pride and Dignity*, 1994, 33. Accessed through Burzum.org.

²⁴ “Jailhouse Rock: Interview with Varg Vikernes, Metal Hammer Magazine (1996),” Burzum.org, last modified unknown, https://burzum.org/eng/library/1996_interview_metal_hammer.shtml.

²⁵ The use of pagan themes is something that Vikernes incorporates more into his later albums, some of which do not use the expected black metal musical aesthetics. However, the lyrical content, even when it references pagan figures, or makes allusions to pagan practices, generally does not explicitly connect them to white supremacist ideologies. Instead, it would take one knowing Vikernes’s own beliefs around paganism to make these connections. A lot of his output also does not directly focus on paganism, instead favoring a more Tolkienesque fantasy world for his lyrical content; he has been much more vocal in interviews and on social media about his racist ideas.

²⁶ It’s worth noting that the band’s formation coincides with the beginning of “language flagging,” in which Poland began to reject the language of the communist party. In particular, the word “class” was abandoned, and resulted in shifting social divisions to “patriots” and “traitors to the homeland” rather than based on economic status. The result was an increase in nationalist sentiments. On this, see: Piotr Żuk, and Paweł Żuk, “The national music scene”: the analysis of the Nazi rock discourse and its relationship with the upsurge of nationalism in Poland,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 15 (2019): 2700–22.

²⁷ “Interview with Capricornus of Graveland,” *Petrified*, 1994, 14. Accessed through sendbackmystamps.org.

Germanic iteration of the Norse Odin, as well as references to Valkyries and Valhalla.²⁸ In an interview with FrostKamp zine, vocalist Robert “Rob Darken” Fudali explained that the female Valkyries play an important role in mythology because they are “helping [the] White Beasts of Wotan to win” and “fight for the fatherland of their folk,” recalling the German *völkisch* movement, which emphasizes creating a racially segregated and stratified society.²⁹

These ideas have been consistent for Graveland throughout several of their albums. An earlier album, *Creed of Iron* (2001), also includes images of a romanticized past, specifically a medieval one. The album cover includes the use of Viking-like helmets, chain mail, cloaks, and medieval weaponry.³⁰ While these tropes are fairly common in black metal as a part of a larger genre aesthetic that favors theatricality that signifies nonconformity to “normal” society, NSBM bands appropriate images like these to spread a specific political agenda.³¹ Graveland’s album cover illustrates this combination more explicitly by incorporating the medieval imagery with Nazi symbolism seen in the, albeit small, swastika on the flag, noting that this imagery is meant to convey a glorification of the Aryan race. Subsequently, the band’s politics are reinforced through the visual elements of their material output.

Where Graveland’s musical output differs from Burzum’s is in how these views have been present in their lyrics and materials more explicitly. The song “Semper Fidelis” mentions both Wotan and Valkyries, as the band describes themselves as “the warrior sons of Wotan” who are defending the “honor and secure[ing] the existence of our people.”³² Lines such as these directly correlate the use of pagan figures with white supremacist attitudes, evidenced not only through Darken’s own understandings of these gods discussed earlier, but also in the latter quotation’s connection to the “14 words,” a widely recognized and circulated slogan started by known white supremacist David Lane that states “we must secure the existence of our people and a future for

²⁸ “Graveland Lyrics,” Dark Lyrics, last modified unknown, <http://www.darklyrics.com/lyrics/graveland/dawnofironblades.html#1/>.

²⁹ “Graveland Interview,” FrostKamp Zine, published August 5, 2008, <https://frostkamp.wordpress.com/2008/08/05/graveland-interview/>.

³⁰ Album cover available at: https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Graveland/Creed_of_Iron/1445.

³¹ Ross Hagen, “Music Style, Ideology, and Mythology in Norwegian Black Metal,” in *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World*, ed. Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 188. See the rest of Hagen’s entry in *Metal Rules the Globe* for more on paganism and mythology as part of a broader aesthetic within black metal and other subgenres of extreme metal.

³² “Dawn of Iron Blades: Graveland,” Encyclopaedia Metallum, last modified unknown, https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Graveland/Dawn_of_Iron_Blades/58760.

white children.”³³ When these themes are stated so directly and explicitly within the music, they begin to add political meaning to affective listener experiences. Metal’s musical aesthetics often revolve around feelings of power; however, when combined with explicitly racist lyrics, these affective experiences become imbued with political meaning.

While movements like ariosophy sought to construct Aryans as powerful and superior to other races, a lineage that Graveland continues in many ways, NSBM further propagates these ideologies through an affect of power by coopting black metal musical aesthetics. As discussed earlier, while the aesthetics themselves are often considered to revolve around ideas of power, in the context of far-right lyrical tropes, this becomes heavily politicized. NSBM coopts affective experiences of power through black metal’s emphasis on vocal and guitar distortion, and uses them to push listeners towards the same political ideas espoused in the band members’ personal statements. Powerfulness that may otherwise be experienced as a form of enjoyment now becomes a potential tool for introduction to or reinforcement of already-held racist political beliefs. Graveland’s music also allows these affective experiences to become a potentially communal experience, in which listeners can experience this politicized power together.³⁴

NSBM has also allowed bands a space in which to adapt overarching ariosophic beliefs around mythologies and racial hierarchies to more local mythologies as a part of their black metal production. The Greek band Der Stürmer is a particularly striking example, as they have combined Nazi-like *völkisch* thinking with allusions to Greek mythology. Der Stürmer formed in 1998 around the time Greek’s far-right party Golden Dawn was regaining power, especially through support from the youth.³⁵ In their song “Guards of the Solar Order” from their 2002 EP *Iron Will and Discipline*, the lyrics cast them as “defenders of cosmic order.”³⁶ The idea of trying to repair some sort of cosmic social order also harkens back to many Nazi occultist ideologies, particularly ariosophic beliefs that combine ideas of spirituality with an emphasis on starkly stratified social orders. However, Der Stürmer’s references to the “solar order” also tie in allusions to

³³ White supremacists continue to use this phrase, and the number 14 has become a dog whistle for them to covertly signify their beliefs.

³⁴ For more on hatred as a social activity in racist groups, see: Kathleen Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism: Theory, Methods, and Research* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).

³⁵ Alexandra Koronaïou, Evangelos Lagos, Alexandros Sakellariou, Stelios Kymionis, and Irini Chiotaki-Poulou, “Golden Dawn, Austerity and Young People: The Rise of Fascist Extremism Among Young People in Contemporary Greek Society,” *The Sociological Review* 63, no. S2 (2015): 238.

³⁶ “Iron Will and Discipline: Der Stürmer,” *Encyclopaedia Metallum*, last modified unknown, https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Der_St%C3%BCrmer/Iron_Will_and_Discipline/25277.

their own Greek heritage. This can be seen in lyrics such as “guards of the solar order/the Olympian ideal/the wisdom of Hellenic greatness” and “this Jewish mind’s breed baptized in Apollonian light/unshakeable will to win.”³⁷ In these lines, Der Stürmer makes reference to classical Greek mythology by invoking the name of Apollo, Zeus’s son and the god of sun, as well as referencing the Olympians, the twelve gods and goddesses who ruled on the mountain of Olympia. As a result, Der Stürmer imbues well-known Greek mythologies and figures with explicit racialized connotations.

Although the Greco-Roman mythological figures are less expected than their Norse or Germanic counterparts, Der Stürmer similarly connects them to ideas of racial purity and antisemitism in a way that parallels the ideologies espoused by Vikernes and Graveland’s music. These ideas are also intertwined directly with national socialist beliefs and ideologies both through their inclusion in Der Stürmer’s broader lyrical context, which explicitly emphasizes ideas of Aryan might and supremacy in fighting “the Jewish mind’s breed.” In this example, Der Stürmer posited themselves as a sort of continuation of the powerful mythological Greek lineage and the Nazi metaphysical lineage. Subsequently, these lyrics not only demonstrate the continuation of *völkisch* politics that place them in an established lineage of racism and political power, but they also demonstrate the malleability of these beliefs to form around different national identities.

The cover for their 2006 album *A Banner Greater than Death* visually makes the connection between Nazism and their Greek heritage by continuing a specific historically politicized practice of ruin gazing. German literature scholar Julia Hell notes that Hitler had himself photographed looking at ruins of ancient Rome as an “act of imperial mimesis” that would “[promise] a *Reich* that will last a thousand years.”³⁸ Hell explains that such imagery also instilled the “European subject in the position of scopic mastery,” and implies a future Aryan ruin gazer.³⁹ Similarly, the cover of Der Stürmer’s album depicts the Nazi flag being flown in front of ancient Greek ruins.⁴⁰ As Hell argues with regard to Hitler’s own ruin gazing, Der Stürmer’s placement of the Nazi flag in front of ancient Greek ruins invite the viewer to consider the longevity of Nazi politics within the framework of Greek heritage. Additionally, the foregrounded Nazi flag further implies not only a European scopic master, but a specifically Aryan one. With the absence of a person as ruin gazer and the level vantage point of the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Julia Hell, *The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 384.

³⁹ Ibid., 385.

⁴⁰ Album cover available at: https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Der_Stürmer/A_Banner_Greater_than_Death/89067.

photograph, Der Stürmer's album cover invites the listener to become the gazer too, and to view the ancient Greek history through a heavily politicized lens.

What this particular use of ancient Greek mythology and imagery seems to imply is that racialized mythology has become a broader aesthetic for NSBM that moves beyond the typical ariosophic beliefs of the Third Reich. Der Stürmer's creative output demonstrates that beliefs around mythology and racial hierarchies can be adapted beyond their original Germanic and Norse iterations to include other national identities and histories. Similarly, their music expands the boundaries of NSBM as a genre. Although Der Stürmer's use of racialized mythology and history differ from other NSBM bands in their use of Greek historical and mythological traditions, in contrast to bands like Burzum and Graveland, each of these bands connect ideas of racial purity and the desire to maintain it even and perhaps often through violence. The manifestations of national socialist beliefs within black metal must be understood as malleable enough to conform to Norse, Slavic, or Greek local mythos while maintaining similar overarching beliefs about racial structures and hierarchies.

While Graveland's use of Germanic and Nordic mythologies begin to demonstrate this flexibility in mythological uses, Der Stürmer strongly demonstrates this adaptability beyond the more expected connections between national socialism and paganism. Despite the differences in references, many of the ideologies present in NSBM music, which come through the lyrics to varying degrees, maintain similarities to the *völkisch* movements that conceive of Aryans as a group that needs protection and preservation, in addition to ideas of race separation. These views are also imbued with a sense of the supernatural or mythological, relating back to ariosophic ideas posited by Hitler and other high-ranking members of the Third Reich. Further, the output from these bands also indicates that national socialist philosophies can be adapted to accommodate different local identities and mythological histories. As a result, we see the merging of two historical lineages: first, the continuation of Hitler's and the Third Reich's racial ideologies; and second, the continuation of black metal mythological lyrical and visual tropes. By combining these two histories, black metal has been not only a vehicle for bands to spread National Socialist ideologies, but also a method of adapting them to local histories.

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