

The Archaeology of Fontmell Down

**Fontmell Down,
can be found at
Fontmell
Magna, Dorset**

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In 2013, as part of a six-year, part-time Continuing Education degree in Archaeological Studies at Bristol University I undertook a field project examining the prehistoric archaeology of Fontmell Down, Fontmell Magna (ST 880 180). This dramatically positioned spur-end of the Cranborne Chase chalk downlands is owned by the National Trust and exhibits two scheduled cross-ridge dykes (Dorset Historic Environment – HER - Monument No 205941). There are wide views across the Blackmore Vale (*see Figure 1*).

Cross-ridge and spur-end dykes ('cross-dykes' for short) are stretches of bank and ditch across narrow ridges, usually dated to the Late Bronze Age or the Iron Age and Romano-British periods. There are many examples across the Oxdrove Ridge, of which Fontmell Down is the Western spur. My tutor had not long completed his thesis (Tubb, 2009) on the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age landscape of the Vale of Pewsey. Using the analogy of Giant's Grave, Martinsell Hill, for example, the obvious disturbance between the cross-dykes might indicate the presence of storage pits and roundhouse platforms, suggesting an occupation site, in which case the breaks in the cross-dykes could be original entrances. Heywood Sumner's survey of the earthworks of the Cranborne Chase had been published a century before in 1913, and I intended to refer to both these publications in my project.

To investigate the archaeology of the site within the prehistory of the Cranborne Chase, I used a variety of geophysics techniques targeting specific areas with equipment generously loaned from the Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society (BACAS) and with the help of members. John Oswin managed magnetometry, resistivity, ground-penetrating radar (GPR), profiling and an EDM survey.



Figure 1
Fontmell Down looking West. The East cross-dyke is visible across the crown, the West cross-dyke runs along the line of the tree plantation (photo by author April 2012).

I combined the results with field surveys, earthwork survey, historic aerial photography and aerial reconnaissance (in a light sports aircraft from Compton Abbas). The research is summarised here, and not intended as a formal report.

Middle Down

Middle Down is the area on the crown of the spur between the cross-dykes. The field survey indicated extensive earthworks here and a magnetometry survey was carried out over the whole field. We also used the magnetometer over the break in the Eastern cross-dyke to establish whether it was original or a secondary break (which might, or might not, indicate a settlement entrance). The Dorset HER holds brief records of some slight mounds to the East of this cross-dyke, described as possible round barrows (HER Monument No 205935), so the magnetometry survey was extended into this area. We targeted a smaller area of Middle Down and the cross-dyke break with resistivity. Unfortunately, the latter was corrupted by a faulty connection.

The first magnetometry results were frustratingly negative (*see Figure 2*). There appeared to be little or no pattern to the multitude of scattered anomalies. It was obvious that linear 'features' with occasional high responses represented modern footways. Aerial photographs taken in the very dry

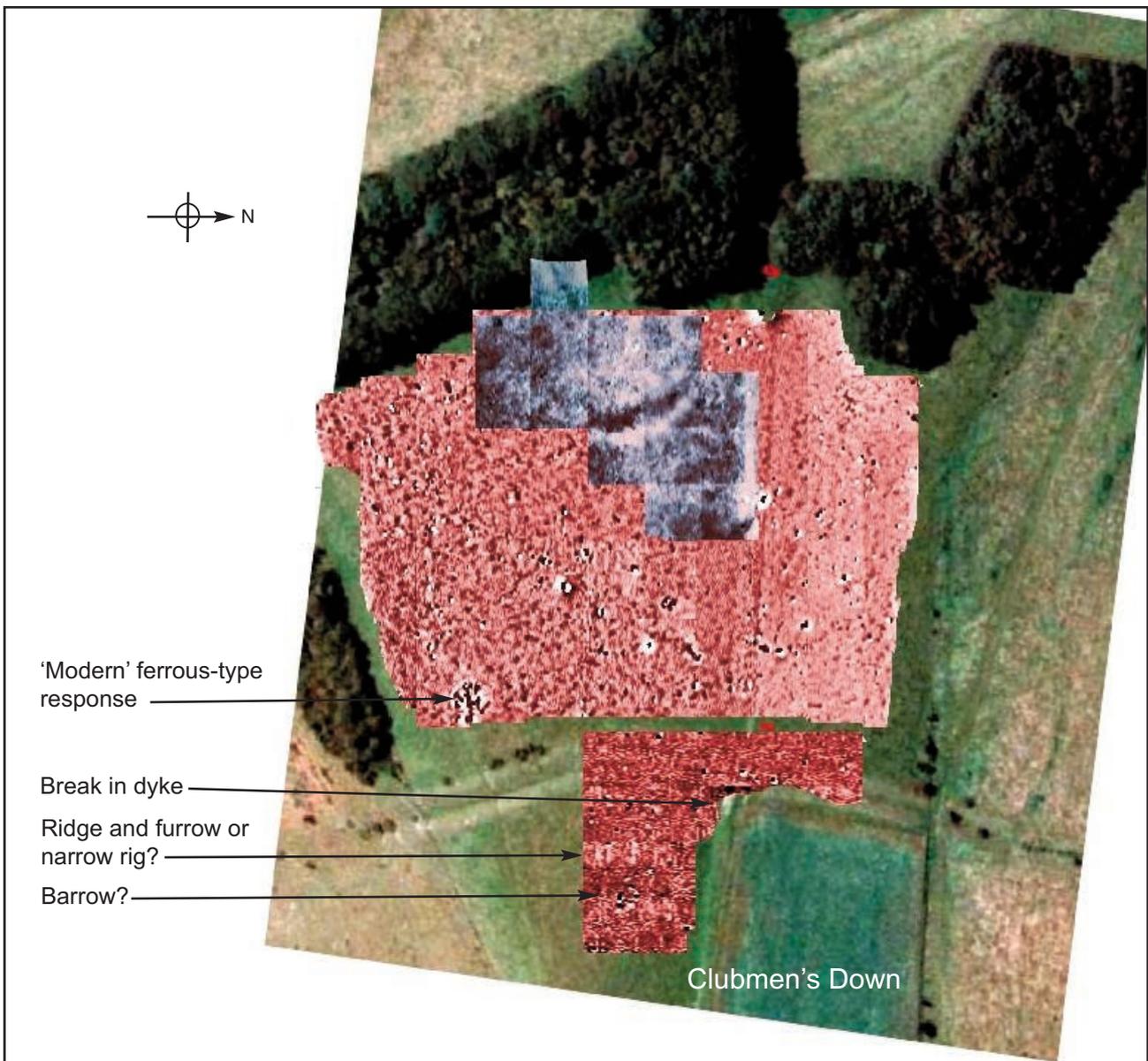


Figure 2
Magnetometry results across the site are overlain by resistivity results to East (top). These BACAS interpreted results are overlain onto an aerial photograph © Dorset County Council, explorer.geowessex.com.

spring of 2012 indicated cultivation lines across the crown of Clubmen's Down (to the East). These can be identified in the geophysics as stripes, which may be ridge and furrow and so outside the scope of the project. The 'round barrow' readings do not suggest a barrow site, and could be modern features.

The most surprising aspect of the magnetometer survey was the lack of result across the dyke itself. The survey failed to register any difference between a 1.5m bank and associated ditch, this negative response is more apparent without the enhancement of the aerial photograph. Chris Ellis (Ellis, 2012) had a similar negative result on extant features on chalk geology at Home Farm, Sixpenny Handley. He suggested that shallow features, either not filled or back-filled with a similar material to the surrounding geology would fail to provide a contrasting signal. This provided a good explanation for the Down results, although not the sorry result from the ditch of the cross-dyke.

I consulted the Fontmell Magna Surveyors of the Highways' accounts covering the latter half of the eighteenth century at the Dorset History Centre. Parishes were responsible for maintenance of their roads, and this involved 'metalling' with considerable quantities of stone and flint. Most of this stone was carried from the surrounding downs where irregular scoops and deeper quarries are still in evidence. Fontmell Down is littered with poor-quality, brittle flint nodules and earth-workings so the most likely explanation is that the anomalies here are the result of extensive, shallow quarrying for flint.

There was one area without disturbance, and we ran the resistance meter across it with rather spectacular results (see Figure 2). Although this looks like the ring ditch of a settlement it is in fact a putting green from the early twentieth century. I had been warned by the local history group that this area had been a golf course between the World Wars. However, I was professionally advised that a small-scale local course such as this would not be constructed with extensive, expensive landscaping. I thought there would be undisturbed areas, alas not so!

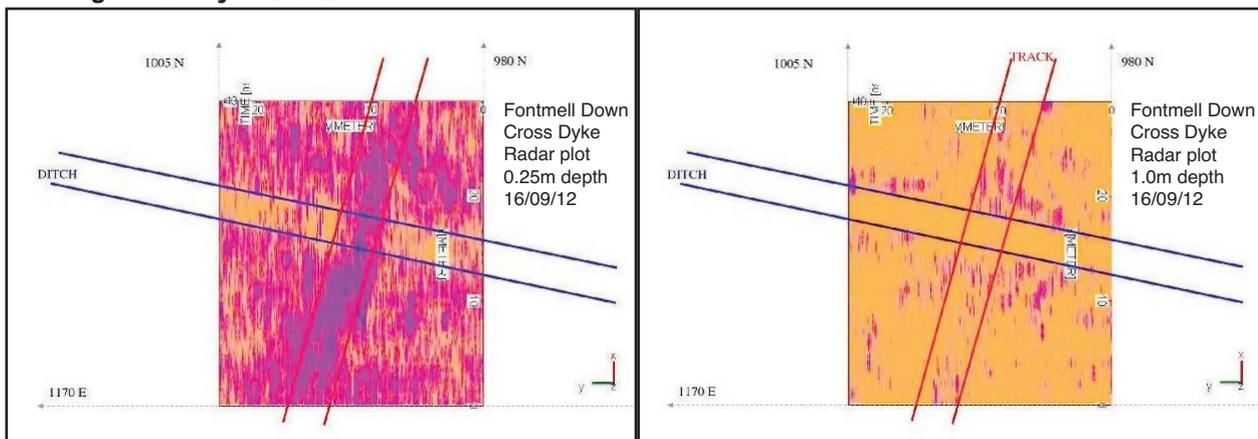
The putting green with a small associated teeing mound to the North can clearly be seen on the 1940s oblique aerial photographs. Prior to destruction in 1954 there were also putting greens and bunkers in the vicinity of the 'barrows' on Clubmen's Down, suggesting this was their origin. The upkeep of the course would have required substantial breaks through the dykes for ground maintenance. So, were the breaks original entrances or tractor routes?

The East Dyke Break

We used a number of survey techniques across the break in the East dyke to ascertain whether the ditch continued under the track. Two are illustrated here: Ground Penetrating Radar and Depth Profiling with the resistivity meter (see Figures 3 & 4).

During the latter half of the twentieth century, a water pipe was constructed along the length of Fontmell Down. The line was taken through the breaks in the dykes, and this is evident in the Depth

Figure 3
Ground penetrating radar. At .25m depth (left), the track (running left to right) is evident over the ditch (top to bottom). At 1.0m (right), the ditch is evident, the track is not. The ditch underlies the track.
Image courtesy of BACAS.



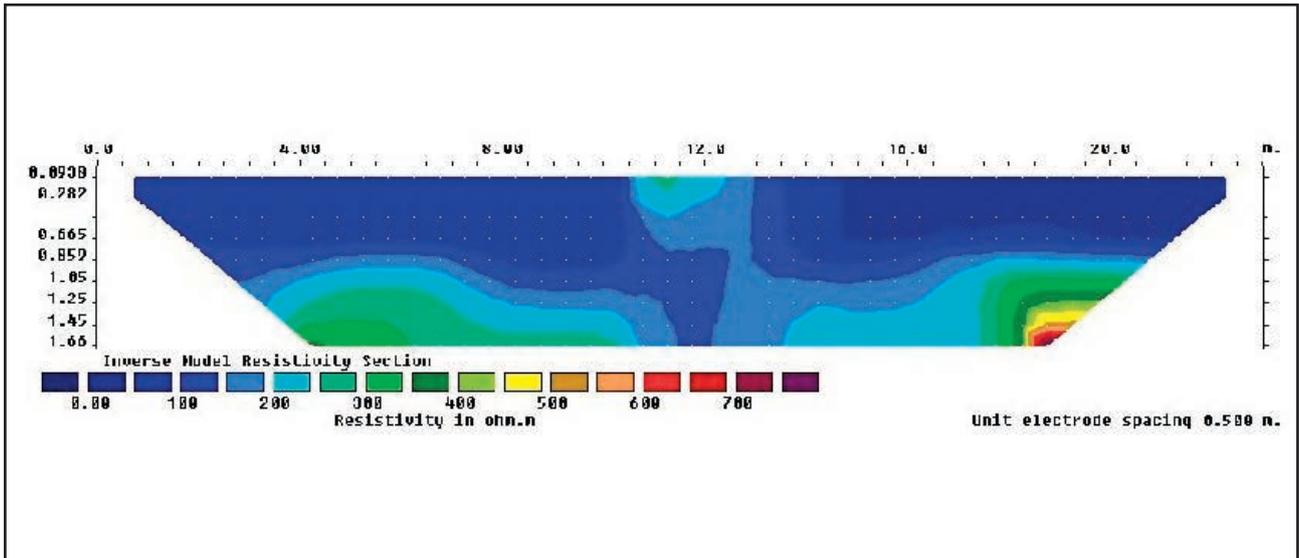
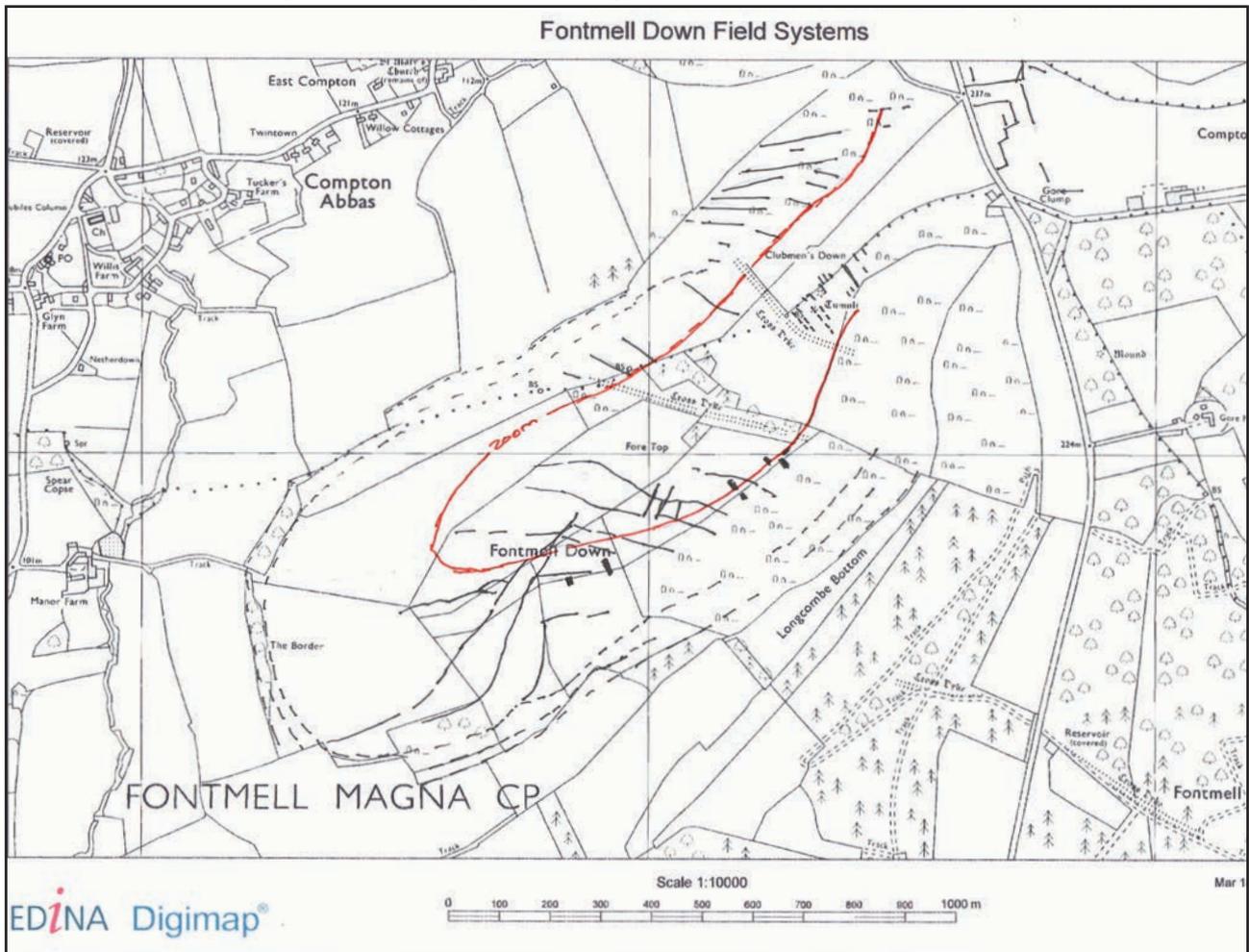


Figure 4
 The Depth Profiler has produced a vertical section across the break. This was set up to run along the course of the ditch, but it needed to tie in with our original baseline which was just off 90° perpendicular to the ditch line. This profile touches the sides of the banks flanking the ditch. The ditch drops abruptly down from the bank sides. The lighter line leading vertically to the top is a water pipeline, with the track on top. It is clear that the ditch runs under the track. Either the original ditch depth was greater than 1.66m below current ground level or the profiler is recording a layer of wet deposit. Prepared by BACAS.

Figure 5
 Field systems mapped from historic aerial photographs and field survey. Pathways from the southern spur end lead up to the Down. The dotted lines around the base represent lynchets still in use in the nineteenth century. Map – Courtesy of Edina Digimap.



Profile (see Figure 4). It is obvious from the results that the ditch is continuous under the track and therefore no entrance was incorporated into its construction. Therefore, it is a later feature. With no suggestion of an original entrance in the East dyke and no associated activity, the conclusion is that there was no prehistoric settlement on Middle Down.

Field Systems

There was no evidence of settlement, but the project still required an explanation of the role of cross-dykes in the late prehistory of the Cranborne Chase. Much of the prehistoric archaeology on the West spur-end has been effaced by intensive arable farming, the golf course and shallow quarrying. However, historic aerial photographs indicated a system of parallel banks across the West end of the spur, orientated on the West cross-dyke. The West dyke itself is unrelated in position and construction to the East cross-dyke, suggesting a discrepancy in date and function (see Figure 5). This discrepancy in morphology is also witnessed along other ridges of the Northern Chase escarpment.

The field survey identified a small area of banks at right angles with the alignment to the South side of the spur (see Figure 5). These remains suggest a system of small fields orientated North-West/South-East, perhaps to alleviate soil erosion. Dating such systems is not straightforward; this palimpsest probably represents agricultural systems which have been used and adapted across the centuries. However, there was some evidence to indicate that the spur-end had been a focus for agricultural modification since the Later Bronze Age.

Environmental samples from the West cross-dyke indicated that, following its construction the prevalent lank pasture and scrubby woodland was replaced by more intensively grazed grassland (Allen, 1999). The construction of the dyke was one element of a system facilitating a more intensive and managed pastoral landscape, with the dyke possibly marking the edge of this pasture. Intensive grazing is usually associated with the extensive coaxial field systems of the Late Bronze Age. Artefactual evidence from the Down (a sherd of Middle Iron Age pottery and two Middle Iron Age palstaves) may indicate the possibility that this spur had been utilised as a field system since that period.

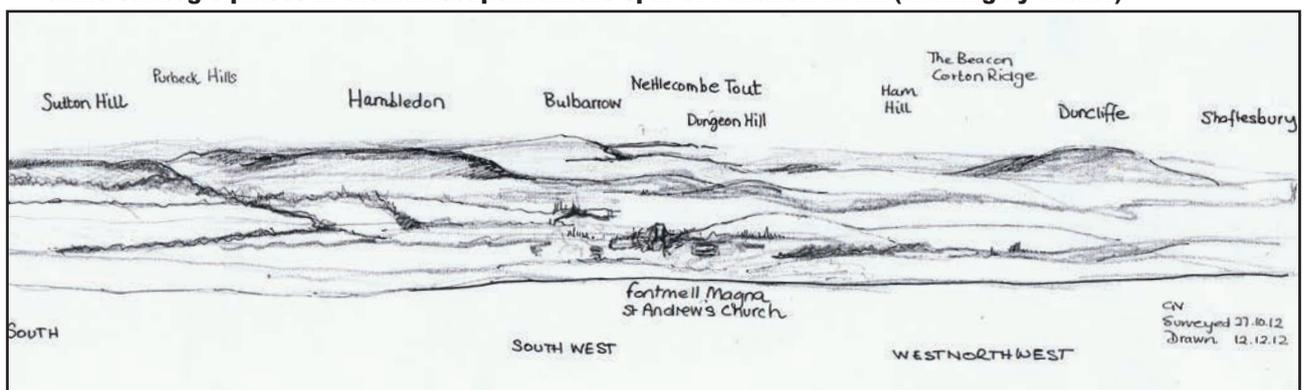
There is no dating evidence for the East dyke. I could only attempt to date it by analogous comparison with bank and ditch profiles on the Oxdrove ridge and Salisbury Plain. Such deep V-shaped dykes, with a bank and counterscarp, are attributed to the Iron Age. The profiler was particularly successful in describing the bank and ditch profile.

Discussion

As part of continuously-used agrarian systems, the dykes' meaning and purpose may well have changed over time. I based my argument on Oosterhuizen's (2013) article on common pasture as a vital element of Iron Age intensive pastoral systems, operating under tribal controls. Isotopic analysis of animals from Danebury hillfort suggested they had been reared across the hinterland, indicating an integrated and managed pastoral regime (Stevens et al 2013). Areas of prime pasture would have been maintained across time, and may be identified by lack of settlement archaeology. There is little evidence of prehistoric settlement in this corner of the Chase.

Figure 6

Some strategic places in the landscape from the spur of Fontmell Down (drawing by author).



Corney (1989) suggested that a sub-Durotrigian tribe based at Gussage Cowdown (a system of multiple ditches and banjo enclosures) was strategically placed to control trade from the coast and agricultural produce from the productive Cranborne Chase. Papworth (2011) hypothesised that the Northern ridges of the Chase could have been within the territory of these non-hillfort dwellers.

Melbury Hill, north of Fontmell Down, is one of the highest points of the Chase. It is a prominent, outstanding, landmark and Tim Lunt kindly prepared a viewshed map showing its sightlines from the Mendips to Hengistbury Head, a known trading route of the Durotrigians.

To the East is the highest point of the Chase, Win Green. I argue that these prominent Downs were dedicated to pasture. There are a number of dyke systems running around the North-West corner and small banked enclosures such as Boosey Stool, Winkelbury and, perhaps, the undocumented earthworks at Hatt's Barn, Ashmore. These enclosures may have been corrals for vast numbers of cattle grazing across the high spurs and ridges around Fontmell Down. The cross-dykes may have been substantial physical and psychological landscape barriers enclosing communal and enduring pasture-lands, vital to the economic and social wealth of the tribal group.

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