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# New and Old Histories: The Case of Hölderlin and Württemberg Pietism

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PRISCILLA HAYDEN-ROY

## New and Old Histories: The Case of Hölderlin and Württemberg Pietism

Literary opinion generally concurs that Friedrich Hölderlin, whose writings abound with Christian references, was in some manner influenced by the pietist milieu of his native Württemberg. The precise nature of this influence is still in the process of being clarified, and results of the research vary widely depending on how Württemberg pietism is defined, what sources are consulted, and to what extent social or institutional factors are considered.<sup>1</sup> Much of the literature addressing this topic is informed by historiographical assumptions which tend to flatten both Württemberg pietism and Hölderlin's writings into a historical teleology. I would like to examine here one body of this literature, the significant group of studies

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1. Space prevents a complete list of this literature: most significant among the more recent studies include: Martin Brecht, "Zum sozialen und geistigen Umfeld von Hölderlins Jugend," in *Bausteine zur geschichtlichen Landeskunde von Baden-Württemberg* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1979), 347-56; Reinhard Breymayer, "Hölderlin—Majer—Spittler—Bahnmaier," *Blätter für württembergische Kirchengeschichte* 82 (1982):254-328; R. Breymayer, "Ein unbekanntes Gedicht Friedrich Hölderlins aus dem Jahr 1793 in einer Sammlung württembergischer Familiengedichte," *Blätter für württembergische Kirchengeschichte* 78 (1978):78-145; Walter Dierauer, *Hölderlin und der spekulative Pietismus Württembergs: Gemeinsame Anschauungshorizonte im Werk Oetingers und Hölderlins* (Zürich: Juris, 1986); Ulrich Gaier, *Der gesetzliche Kalkül: Hölderlins Dichtungslehre* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1962); Peter H. Gaskill, "Hölderlin's Contact with Pietism," *Modern Language Review* 69 (1974):805-20; P. H. Gaskill, "Meaning in History: 'Chiliasm' in Hölderlin's 'Patmos,'" *Colloquia Germanica* 11 (1978):19-52; Meinhard Prüll, *Bürgerliche Alltagswelt und pietistisches Denken im Werk Hölderlins. Zur Kritik des Hölderlin-Bildes von Georg Lukacs* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1983); Jürgen Scharfshwerdt, "Die pietistisch-kleinbürgerliche Interpretation der Französischen Revolution in Hölderlins Briefen. Erster Versuch einer literatursoziologischen Fragestellung," *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schilergesellschaft* 15 (1971):174-230; Jochen Schmidt, *Hölderlins geschichtsphilosophische Hymnen "Friedensfeier"—"Der Einzige"—"Patmos"* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990).

working out of an intellectual-historical tradition,<sup>2</sup> which generally has taken up and enlarged upon certain assumptions regarding pietism as formulated by Wilhelm Dilthey. I will examine how this approach has conditioned the interpretation of Hölderlin's relationship to Württemberg pietism, and then discuss how the New Historicism offers an alternative interpretive strategy in treating this problem.

Beginning with Wilhelm Dilthey's path-breaking study of Schleiermacher, intellectual historians typically have found in pietism's emphasis on personal religious experience the seeds of individualism and secularism. This view presupposes an inevitable historical development toward secularization and individualism. Dilthey argued that pietism contributed to this process by turning away from dogma and to the heart, thereby elevating the subjective experience of grace above "positive" religion, i.e., the rites and dogma of the institutional church.<sup>3</sup> Because this experience (*Erlebnis*) rested within the individual rather than in positive doctrine, it could be transferred from a specifically religious context to include any profound intuition of the wholeness of reality. Thus pietism served to mediate between doctrinally specific Christianity and the development of a secular religiosity. However, insofar as pietism continued to maintain doctrine within its more subjectively apprehended Christian faith, it lost, according to Dilthey, its intellectual vitality and became an obstacle in the path of historical progress.<sup>4</sup> Dilthey hypostatized this value judgment by projecting an inside/outside, or essence/non-essence opposition onto pietism: positive articles of faith, dogmas, and confessions constitute "exoteric" religiosity which "devalues life," while he valorizes an inward religious experience that apprehends the "full-

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2. This group includes studies by Dierauer, Gaier, Gaskill, and Schmidt.

3. Of the pietism of Count Zinzendorf's Moravian Brethren, which had a formative influence on Schleiermacher through his upbringing and schooling, Dilthey writes, "Pietism and . . . the Moravian Brethren merely transformed dead dogma into a believing process of the mind, and accordingly turned rigid fundamental concepts into experienced intuitions": *Leben Schleiermachers*. *Gesammelte Schriften* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 13:30. All translations of German are mine.

4. "The weak point of the Brethren's organization is that here a kind of piety is cultivated from whose depths science and art and all ideal powers of existence do not receive strength and direction; this form of Christianity devalues life by drawing the fullness of human existence into the narrowness of an exclusively religious process of the mind; this is no longer that Christianity whose deep inwardness found expression in the figures of Raphael, in the sounds of Bach and Händel, in the thought of an Augustine, a Meister Eckhart, a Pascal. The Christianity of the conventicle, hiding timidly from what it called 'the world'—this Christianity had to gain the upper hand here" (23).

ness of human existence.”<sup>5</sup> Within this scheme pietism has “essence” insofar as it encourages religious subjectivity and tends toward mysticism and ecumenism. Its “regressive” side—its doctrinal and institutional conservatism—is of little interest to intellectual historians, who thus overlook the inner logic of pietism’s conservatism and how it relates to later religious movements in the nineteenth century.

Scholars attempting to define Hölderlin’s relationship to Württemberg pietism have tended to assume this intellectual-historical teleology with its valorization of a subjective or aesthetic religiosity. I quote a typical example from Ulrich Gaier’s study of Hölderlin’s poetic theory:

Thus it is never Hölderlin’s aim to reject Christianity. He only attempts to have and understand it as a living religion.

But here Christian faith is subsumed under a higher principle, that of religion itself, of the living relationship to the divine itself, which must be present in every religion, to the extent that it is living, and which merely appears as a specific representation. (282)

By suppressing the subject in the first sentence of the new paragraph in this quotation, Gaier detaches what follows from the subject, Hölderlin, allowing it to take on the appearance of a statement of general fact: every “living” religion has at its core a universal principle that transcends doctrinal boundaries. The passive construction thus obscures the presence of a Diltheyan teleology of secularization, at the same time also obscuring the polemical thrust of Hölderlin’s religious views and their historical contingency within eighteenth-century religious and philosophical discourse. By suggesting that this notion of a “living religion” is universally acknowledged, Gaier also implicitly imposes the Diltheyan essence/non-essence opposition onto pietism. Insofar as pietism is “living,” it must affirm this universalizing “higher principle.” All of what might be opposed to the higher principle in the form of dogma and confessions is ascribed to the particular, historically conditioned, and therefore transient character that the Christian tradition necessarily possesses, insofar as it is merely a limited representation of the universal. Guided by these assumptions, Gaier looks for universalizing tendencies within the Württemberg pietists without discussing the extent to which their theology remains circumscribed by the dogmatic boundaries of

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5. Speaking of Schleiermacher’s intellectual development away from the strictures of Herrnhut to a philosophical religiosity based on Leibniz and Kant, Dilthey writes: “In this development [Schleiermacher] shed the exoteric aspects of the Brethren’s religiosity. At the end of this development he found he had become ‘a Herrnhuter of a higher order’” (35).

the Lutheran Church. While he finds very interesting affinities between Württemberg pietism and Hölderlin, his assumptions regarding the “higher principle” of religion allow him to minimize the differences between the poet and the pietists having to do with attitudes toward Christian dogma and institutions.

The assumptions of intellectual history tend to make Hölderlin’s relationship to pietism easy and unproblematic: being further along in the inevitable historical development of secularization, Hölderlin simply appropriated those “most essential” or “living” elements present in pietism, which, because they are common to a “true religion” of universal principles, can be worked into the poet’s philosophical-aesthetic religion without a hitch. This approach flattens pietism and Hölderlin into a monolithic historical development, rather than addressing the tensions, contradictions, and ruptures between them in terms of multiple “histories” or competing discourses. While affinities do exist, the differences should not be overlooked, particularly as they bear upon the interrelationship between theological ideas and social institutions.

A second problem arises in the attempt to define Württemberg pietism as the “context” of Hölderlin’s “texts.” Critics tend to reduce pietism to a transparent, stable, and much-simplified phenomenon, failing to recognize the broad range of theological positions, even the considerable acrimony, that existed among its various representatives. Within Württemberg itself we find a significant split among the pietists between the speculative wing (including Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, Johann Ludwig Fricker, Philipp Matthäus Hahn) and the more orthodox, Spenerian wing (including Philipp David Burk, Magnus Friedrich Roos, Carl Heinrich Rieger).<sup>6</sup> The Württemberg Consistory closely monitored and restricted the activities of both groups, but was particularly critical of the speculative wing, whose views deviated significantly from orthodox dogma. In several instances the Consistory censured their writings and severely curtailed their pietist activities, particularly those associated with pietist meetings or “conventicles.”<sup>7</sup> This complicated theological setting, with

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6. For a discussion of the various currents within Württemberg pietism and how they interacted with the political sphere in Württemberg, see Hartmut Lehmann, *Pietismus und weltliche Ordnung in Württemberg vom 17. zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1969), 94-134.

7. Gunther Franz, “Bücherzensur und Irenik. Die theologische Zensur im Herzogtum Württemberg in der Konkurrenz von Universität und Regierung,” in *Theologen und Theologie an der Universität Tübingen: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Evangelisch-Theologischen Fakultät*, ed. Martin Brecht (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977), 178-83, discusses the censorial measures taken against Oetinger and Ph. M. Hahn.

its attendant socio-political dimensions, makes it very difficult to generalize about "Württemberg pietism" or to define what constitutes "influence" from this widely disparate group. Much of the literature concerning Hölderlin's relationship to Württemberg pietism has taken its most speculative adherents as representative of the group, arguing that their ideas constituted an "Alltagswissen"<sup>8</sup> in Württemberg that Hölderlin would have imbibed as inevitably—and unconsciously—as his mother's milk. But in light of the tenuous political position of the speculative pietists, the mediation of their theology becomes much more problematic.

The New Historicists' criticism of an over-simplified notion of context, by means of which older historical approaches could establish a mimetic relationship between context and literary text, bears directly on this problem. However, before we address how a New Historical approach might avoid these errors, let us first examine a specific instance where the assumptions of intellectual history lead to interpretative distortions both of Württemberg pietism and of Hölderlin's writings.

It is generally accepted that Hölderlin's eschatological vision was inspired by the chiliastic views predominant in Württemberg pietism. This view has been argued convincingly and in some detail by P. H. Gaskill and Jochen Schmidt (86-105). But in constructing a narrative of secularization, scholars have tended to deemphasize the differences between the eschatological language of the Württemberg pietists and Hölderlin. In fact, considerable tension exists between them, and the social conclusions both drew are radically different.

The Württemberg pietists' fascination with eschatology and chiliasm began with Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752), whom the following generations of pietists in Württemberg, both speculative and orthodox wings, viewed as an authority and model. Bengel was a proponent of radically biblicistic views, according to which the Bible contained a comprehensive, unified and systematic outline of the entire divine plan of history.<sup>9</sup> Led by this belief, he engaged in speculative exegesis of the book of Revelations, which culminated in

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8. This is the term Meinhard Prill (*Bürgerliche Alltagswelt*, 13, *passim*) uses. Both Martin Brecht and Reinhard Breymayer have begun to clarify Hölderlin's relationship to Württemberg pietism by investigating specific biographical connections between them, rather than appealing to an unspecific pietist "context" in Württemberg.

9. A good introduction to Bengel's Biblical hermeneutics is given by Martin Brecht, "Die Hermeneutik des jungen J. A. Bengel," *Blätter für württembergische Kirchengeschichte* 66/67 (1966/67):52-64.

the sensational prediction that the millennium would begin in 1836.<sup>10</sup> Bengel's eschatology is inextricably bound to ecclesiastical institutions of authority: from the Bible, to the Lutheran Church, to the state. His chiliastic views were tolerated in Württemberg only because, unlike the radical chiliasts of the sixteenth century, he in no wise advocated revolutionary activity, nor did he pronounce judgment on the existing political institutions. According to Bengel, the coming of the millennium was strictly a divine prerogative, the role of the pious restricted to passive "watching and waiting" and interpreting the signs of the times. This political quietism was typical of the pietist pastors in Württemberg, and explains to a large extent why their chiliasm was tolerated, as Hartmut Lehmann has shown (79-80).

Let us call to mind now the young Hölderlin of 1793: the newly graduated seminarian was highly critical of the political and ecclesiastical institutions in Württemberg. With his friends Hegel and Schelling, he sympathized with the French Revolution, and like them he chose to avoid pastoral service within the Duchy by obtaining tutoring positions outside its borders. All this stands in sharpest contrast to the political views and behavior of the Württemberg pietists. Yet when the poet took leave of Hegel in 1793, their final parting words were "Reich Gottes," a password of sorts which, with its obvious reference to Christian eschatology, immediately suggests an influence from Württemberg pietism. But Hölderlin's appropriation is anything but easy and direct. Frought with irony and ambiguity, it competes with the traditional meaning of the Kingdom of God and subsumes it under what the heady young seminarian and his friends believed was a more universal, truer religion. By defining the term apart from the specifics of historical Christian dogma, Hölderlin was able to envision for himself a theological mission apart from the institutional Church. Indeed, in the Tübingen poems, Hölderlin links his chiliastic vision with zeal for moral education, dissolution of institutional religion (put forward also in *Hyperion*), and political emancipation, all themes foreign to the Württemberg pietists. The social implications of Hölderlin's eschatology highlight the ten-

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10. Bengel put forward his chiliastic speculations in three commentaries on Revelations: *Erklärte Offenbarung Johannis oder vielmehr Jesu Christi . . .* (Stuttgart, 1740; 2d ed. 1746); *Gnomon Novi Testamenti . . .* (Tübingen, 1742) (this work is a commentary of the entire New Testament, including Revelations); *Sechzig erbauliche Reden über die Offenbarung Johannis oder vielmehr Jesu Christi . . .* (Tübingen, 1747). The *Gnomon* was among the books in Hölderlin's possession at his death: Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart, 1943-1985), 7,3: 390. References to this edition hereafter as *StA*.

sions and ruptures between it and the pietist version. The intellectual-historical model of progressive secularization, with pietism serving as a mediating point along the way, does not adequately describe this tension.

A similar case can be made for the late hymns, where Hölderlin increasingly incorporated Christian references into a syncretistic philosophical-historical program. Certainly it is legitimate to argue, as Gaskill and Schmidt (193-94) have, that the Württemberg pietists' fascination with the book of Revelations resonates, for example, in "Patmos," with its explicit reference to the Apostle John and to the Greek island on which, according to legend, John received his apocalyptic vision. But as Schmidt shows (185-288), Hölderlin wished to incorporate aspects of the Johannine tradition—particularly its pneumatic emphasis, the privileged prophetic role, and an eschatological view of history—into a universal philosophy of history that would supersede the "positive" religion of dogma, rite, and institution. By appealing particularly to the Gospel of John, the German Idealists argued that the process of spiritualization had begun already in the Christian tradition itself; with the tremendous flexibility of the word "Geist," they could then absorb Christian diction and theology into a philosophical-historical system of progressive spiritualization free from any confessional specificity (a strategy the German Idealists inherited from Enlightened religious criticism). In "Patmos" this process of spiritualization constitutes the eschatological framework of the hymn: Christ, the last of the "Halbgötter" in Hölderlin's syncretizing view of Greek and Christian tradition, departs from his disciples in order to usher in a new age of mediation through the spirit, an age dependent on the word rather than sight (i.e., the physical presence of the god). Again one is tempted to recall the biblicism of Bengel in Hölderlin's closing lines: "But the father who reigns above all loves most that the firm letter be maintained, and the lasting things well interpreted" (*StA* 2,1: 172). The Württemberg pietists did indeed hold that knowledge of history was mediated by the "good interpretation" of the Word; in order to justify their views toward Biblical chiliasm vis-à-vis the position taken in the Lutheran confessions, some even put forward a view of progressive revelation. But while they stretched the boundaries of orthodoxy, their adherence to Biblical authority, the continued presence of a christological center (salvation dependent on the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice) in their theology, and finally their "condescension" to the institutional church clearly delineate the point of departure between themselves and a thinker such as Hölderlin. By contrast, Hölderlin's "Patmos" culminates in the eschatological crowning of the words of the poet-



prophet, whose spirit, having retraced the path of universal spirit in history, ushers in the new age with his song: "This is followed by German song" (*StA* 2,1: 172). This degree of semantic flexibility is not to be found in the eschatology of Württemberg pietism, and one must exercise caution in creating a narrative where pietism mediates between "positive" orthodoxy and a secularized philosophy of history.<sup>11</sup>

Advocates of the New Historicism have criticized precisely this tendency of the "old historicism" to construct monolithic historical narratives. Drawing on Michel Foucault, the New Historicism has worked against this tendency to construct narratives of continuity, looking instead for the breaks and ruptures between historical epistemes. Stephen Greenblatt's notion of cultural negotiation also calls into question the notion of a stable, mimetic relationship between literary text and its "context." Literature is not simply a passive receptor of context—the exchange is not, as Greenblatt has said, "uni-directional from social discourse to aesthetic discourse."<sup>12</sup> Literature is one of many agents in the cultural market of dialogue and exchange. As Jean Howard writes: "Rather than erasing the problem of textuality, one must enlarge it in order to see that both social and literary texts are opaque, self-divided, and porous, that is, open to the mutual intertextual influences of one another."<sup>13</sup> The New Historicism attempts to examine, says Greenblatt, "the points at which one cultural practice intersects with another, borrowing its form and intensities, or attempting to ward off unwelcome appropriations or moving texts and artifacts from one place to another."<sup>14</sup>

The model of cultural negotiation is helpful in adequately representing the heterogeneity of discourses in the late eighteenth century, and in the case of Hölderlin and Württemberg pietism, the competitive

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11. Jochen Schmidt's insightful and careful interpretation of "Patmos" avoids, for the most part, overstating the continuity between pietism and Hölderlin. But at points he, too, tends to fit pietism a little too smoothly into the secularization narrative, as in the following passage: "For the church represents the realm of the fixed, of dogma, rite, image, sacrament, and established forms of prayer; pietism, on the other hand, tends towards detachment from these things and towards the 'spiritual.' With one exception: pietism upholds the Bible, though certainly in a 'spiritually' freer sense. From this constellation of problems arises the particular meaning of 'Scripture' in the Patmos hymn" (238).

12. Stephen Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," *Southern Review* 20 (1987):12.

13. Jean E. Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," *English Literary Renaissance* 16 (1986):25.

14. Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990), 169.

or agonistic relationship between their language. Hölderlin appropriated pietist and Christian ideas in order to subsume them under an aesthetic philosophy with universal claims. He and the German Idealists, Hegel and Schelling, were attempting to define a philosophical system that would supplant confessional Christianity as an absolute discourse. While it is true that their every appropriation of Christian or pietist language demonstrates their indebtedness to this discourse, at the same time it also signals their intention to break this discourse from its confessional specificity. Theirs is an agonistic, hegemonic appropriation.

Consider, for example, Hölderlin's letter to Johann Gottfried Ebel of November 9, 1795, where he asks his friend to communicate (*mittheilen*) to him something of his literary projects:

You know the spirits must communicate everywhere, even where a mere breath is aroused; they must unite themselves with all things that need not be cast out, so that from this union, from this invisible militant church, the great child of time, the day of all days shall go forth, which the man of my soul (an apostle, whom his present day worshippers understand as little as they do themselves) called "the coming of the Lord." (*StA* 6,1: 184-5)

The apostle to whom Hölderlin refers here is Paul, who in his epistles makes numerous references to the "coming of the Lord" or parousia. To the degree that Hölderlin takes up elements of this New Testament tradition, he shares the eschatological orientation of the Württemberg pietists. But his eschatology is not joined to an orthodox view of salvation history. With secularizing emphasis he refers to the new church as the great child of *time*. The parousia of this secular church proceeds from communication among spirits quite apart from any confessionally bound content. The bonds of love and friendship as materialized in communication share in and anticipate an eschatological community of total unity. The contrast between this interpretation and the orthodox view is not lost on Hölderlin. But he disqualifies the latter by maintaining that Paul's present-day worshippers have failed to understand the apostle, even as they have failed to understand themselves. Hölderlin appropriates Biblical language and pietist eschatology here in order to disrupt orthodoxy's monopoly over Scriptural interpretation, supplanting its confessionally specific understanding of truth with a philosophical understanding of truth with claims to universality.

As Greenblatt has noted, cultural negotiations are not uni-directional, and we find the pietists engaged in the same agonistic, hegemonic appropriation of other discourses as a way of doing battle with what they considered to be threatening forces in their society:

especially the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. In a circular correspondence of Württemberg pietist pastors written in the second half of the eighteenth century, we find a letter written in 1794 by Johann Christoph Bahnmaier, quoting a sermon that purportedly was delivered by a Catholic clergyman driven out of Mainz by the French on Good Friday. A Prussian officer had heard the sermon and sent a copy of it to a clergyman in Württemberg, who had relayed it on to Bahnmaier, who then shared it with the roughly fifteen members of the circular correspondence. It is a particularly good example of agonistic appropriation, now from the pietist side:

Now we have spoken of liberty and equality—not of that liberty and equality with which the world, or rather Satan, wishes to deaden and deceive people; but rather of the lovely liberty and equality which Jesus Christ won for all the world on this day. For today on Golgatha he won true freedom for us eternally: freedom from sin, death, the devil and hell. There I showed you the true freedom-tree, Jesus on the cross, as he gave up his life for us there. . . . There he also brought about true equality. Since Adam we were all equal sinners and equally lost people. But on that freedom-tree equal forgiveness of sin has been accomplished for us and all nations. So come with me to Golgatha, and swear with me the eternal oath of eternal liberty and eternal fidelity beneath that high freedom-tree, so that the evil world will recognize that only under this eternal freedom-tree can one find and enjoy true peace.<sup>15</sup>

The references to the callwords of the French Revolution—liberty and equality—are obvious, as well to the “freedom-tree,” around which revolutionary enthusiasts danced and swore their support to the cause. But here the pious clergyman has appropriated this language in order to replace its secular, revolutionary content with Christian content. The negotiation involves exchanging one discursive sphere for another, at the same time disqualifying the socio-political sphere as the proper locus of “liberty” and “equality.” This the clergyman does by demonizing the agents of the socio-political sphere: they are “the world, or rather Satan,” and their words “deception.”

These examples illustrate something of the tension between the Württemberg pietists and writers such as Hölderlin, a tension that was acted out in hegemonic assaults on each other’s language in attempt to assert their own as true and valid. The New Historicism’s model of cultural negotiation can provide a corrective to the overly-determined narrative of progressive, continuous secularization put

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15. Pietistic circular correspondence, unpublished manuscript in the Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart, Cod. Hist. 4° No. 519, Fasc.4, 918-19.

forward by intellectual historians, and is useful in discussing the complicated interaction of religious and philosophical discourses in the late eighteenth century.

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