



# **Batavia's Graveyard: The True Story of the Mad Heretic Who Led History's Bloodiest Mutiny**

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In 1628 the Dutch East India Company loaded the Batavia, the flagship of its fleet, with a king's ransom in gold, silver, and gems for her maiden voyage to Java; the ship itself was a tangible symbol of the world's richest and most powerful monopoly.

The company also sent along a new employee to guard its treasure. He was Jeronimus Corneliszoon, a disgraced and bankrupt man with great charisma and dangerously heretical ideas. With the help of a few disgruntled sailors, he hatched a plot to seize the ship and her riches. The mutiny might have succeeded, but in the dark morning hours of June 3, 1629, the Batavia smashed through a coral reef and ran aground on a small chain of islands near Australia. The captain and skipper escaped the wreck, and in a tiny lifeboat they set sail for Java—some 1,500 miles north—to summon help. More than 250 frightened survivors waded ashore, thankful to be alive. Unfortunately, Jeronimus and the mutineers had survived too, and the nightmare was only beginning.

## Batavia's Graveyard: The True Story of the Mad Heretic Who Led History's Bloodiest Mutiny Details

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# From Reader Review *Batavia's Graveyard: The True Story of the Mad Heretic Who Led History's Bloodiest Mutiny* for online ebook

## Jim says

If I ever wonder what life was like on a seventeenth century ship bound for the Far East, then this is the book to consult. Serious history, but written to be read instead of consulted, *Batavia's Graveyard* makes a time, a place and a cast of characters come alive off the page. The story, as it unfolds, becomes harrowing and somewhat depressing, as a community of shipwrecked survivors descend into a true life "Lord of the Flies". It's also a gripping narrative, and could as easily slot into a "True Crime" tagging as an "Historical" one. I often feel let down by historical accounts that promise to read like a best-selling thriller, but this book really does, serving both to educate and entertain as you plough through it.

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## Jan-Maat says

Where to begin.

Non-fiction story of a shipwreck. A Dutch East India company ship carrying over 300 people, chests of silver coins and the prefabricated gateway to the fort at Batavia (Jakarta) ran aground on a coral reef 50 miles west of Australia. Most of those onboard survived. Only after they disembarked on Houtman's Abrolhos, a misery inducing collection of low coral islands did it all start to get much worse, eventually very few manage to survive and make it to the Dutch East Indies and not because they ran out of wallabies or sea lion to eat either.

Reading I thought of *Lord of the Flies*, but also of *Rites of Passage*, perhaps Golding was aware of the story, the wreck site was rediscovered in June 1963 (view spoiler) and then comprehensively stripped over for a second (view spoiler) the salvaged canon and the gate to the fort at Jakarta are apparent on display in Fremantle(view spoiler), later a replica of the ship was built in the Netherlands - this took a team of modern craftsmen ten years from the mid 80s through to the mid 90s, their predecessors knocked the original out in a few months, but then they had practise and a wharf and slipway designed to facilitate the rapid construction of such a vessel. Anyway if you can imagine the crew and passengers of *Rites of Passage* with their class distinctions, hierarchies, sexual tensions(view spoiler), habituation to casual violence, shipwrecked with little hope of rescue one might imagine that what *Lord of the Flies* teaches us above all is how sweet and innocent even schoolboys are compared to that more mixed group.

I also thought that it was a surprise that nobody had made a film of the story(view spoiler), as a film it would never be a summer blockbuster because the film classification would restrict viewing pretty sharply based on the content, it would be the kind of film only on late at night, that you'd sit through, regretting having done so afterwards and resolving to always sleep with a rolling pin by your side there after. I don't want to say much more about the actual story than that for fear of spoiling the events if you haven't been comprehensively warned off by now, let me say the reading experience is far less graphic than the action of the imagination.

Dash starts out with the outward voyage of the *Batavia*, there are the familiar problems of Longitude and scurvy (view spoiler) he lead the ship on to the coral reef and the evacuation and then with three hundred odd people faced with the prospect of running out of water waltzes off on the back story of the Dutch East India

company and the biographies of some of the main people on board as far as they are known, he takes a leisurely hundred or so pages to get back to shipwrecked people which I felt rather careless seeing as they were thirsty and facing exposure and a not very hopefully future. Only of course when he does get back to the story that is when things really start to go wrong.

(view spoiler)

and then of course (view spoiler)

but there is also mercy in the world (view spoiler) and one or two of the sentences were commuted to being marooned on the western coast of Australia. There follows some speculation as to the fates of the men so treated, some writers considering the tragic propensity of men of the Nanda people to baldness as proof definite of partial Dutch ancestry (view spoiler), but what mere doubt can stand in the path of a receding hairline when nothing stops that tide from going out. Though dash goes on to mention some more Dutch shipwrecks off that coast so the gentlemen so punished in this story didn't necessarily get to become a pater patriae.

With a critical hat on (view spoiler)

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## Nancy Oakes says

read 2/04/2004

If you are planning on reading this, let me give you a heads up. What's between the covers of this book is NOT for the squeamish...I thought the story of the wreck of the Essex was bad but this takes the cake.

Batavia's Graveyard was the name given to a small island off the western coast of Australia, now known as Beacon Island. I first became aware of this story, which is true, through a wonderful program on the History Channel about recent finds on that island by archaeologists hoping to solve some of the mysteries of what exactly happened there in 1629 and the years during which the islanders, survivors of the shipwreck of the Batavia, were literally being held captive by a group of mutineers under the command/control of one single psychopathic individual. This book most definitely measures up to my rigorous standards for reading history. It is excruciatingly well documented (this author has notes & sources for every little detail).

Synopsis:

In June, 1629, a ship filled with goods, money & jewels on its way to Java (the ship belongs to the Dutch EIC) is wrecked on a reef on an uninhabited island. To his credit, the captain managed to get all of the civilians traveling on the ship off of the ship and onto the island; there were in all about 250 survivors. He left them under the charge of one Jeronimus Cornelisz, certified nutcase who believed that anything a person did, including the taking of life, was sanctioned by God.

The group divided itself onto three small islands all closely linked. What happens under his "leadership" was an outright tragedy and massacre. I won't go into specifics, but suffice it to say the Cornelisz and the gang that followed him reminded me a lot of Kurtz in Heart of Darkness. I've even seen this book called the Lord of the Flies for Adults...it wasn't that bad, but it was close.

Throughout the story, the narrative of events on the islands is interspersed with details of history of the EIC; of the spice trade in general; of the process of shipbuilding in the Netherlands; of Java; pretty much anything at all connected with the story historically is brought up in here. Some parts I found to be a bit dull, but only because I'm not really interested in the history of shipbuilding. However, there's enough to keep you focused and indeed riveted when he gets around to the events on the islands and their aftermath.

I would definitely recommend this book to those who are interested in shipwrecks or maritime history. Read this book slowly (or skim through the stuff you don't really like but savor the rest), because there is a wealth of information here. The author is thorough and the writing is good.

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### **Margaret says**

A very interesting book on the sinking and mutiny on the Dutch East India company ship the Batavia in the 17th century.

The result was murder, destruction, and the first known Europeans in Australia.

Fascinating, horrifying, and compelling in equal measures.

Highly recommended.

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### **Jon Turner says**

Interesting story, but it suffers considerably from its author's propensity to wander off on tangents.

My impression of about half of the book:

"Finally, the governor-general was ready to deliver his sentence. Legal records show that there was one additional mutineer at the questioning, about whom all we know is that he had two missing teeth.

Missing teeth were very common among 17th-century sailors, especially lower-ranking ones, who could have lost their teeth in many ways. Missing teeth would have been an inconvenience for a sailor, especially when chewing on salted meat and hard biscuits, and would have given him an appearance considered somewhat fearsome by ordinary townsmen, who would have kept their teeth clean by scraping them with forked twigs and salt paste.

Regardless of the cause of these missing teeth, however, the scribe clearly felt that they were important enough to record in his summary of the proceedings. The fact that this particular mutineer's state of dental hygiene was considered remarkable says much about hygiene standards in general at a time when scurvy was

exceptionally common on long voyages..."

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## **Kay says**

### **A School for Sociopaths**

When the Dutch merchant ship *Batavia* ran aground on a barren coral atoll off the northwest coast of Australia in 1662, the passengers and crew found themselves in a near hopeless plight, with scant water and little hope of rescue. What sets this shipwreck tale apart is not the depiction of the harrowing conditions that followed, although harrowing they were, but of the survivors' "Lord of the Flies"-esque descent into savagery, led by a psychopathic Svengali figure, one Jeronimus Cornelisz, a failed apothecary and heretic.

Dash does a fine job of painting background -- not only of what impelled Cornelisz to accept a job as "under merchant" aboard the *Batavia* but also of describing life aboard the ship (unsanitary and gruesome in the extreme) and of the practices of the Dutch East India Company. A mutiny is already afoot when the shipwreck occurs, and the pacing quickens as Cornelisz seizes control of the band of sailor/soldier mutineers and bends others to his will, often making them kill others to gain entry into the group he forces to pledge fealty to him.

Reading this account of Cornelisz' "Heart of Darkness"-like sadism and madness, as he oversees the killing of 115 people, is nightmarish, almost hallucinogenic, despite (or perhaps because of?) the author's dispassionate tone. Perhaps even more disturbing was what happened when Cornelisz increased his ranks by means of a "kill or be killed" scenario -- almost all those he summoned unhesitatingly chose the former option. Once the killing began, I read compulsively on to find out what would ultimately happen to the dwindling number of sane and civilized people left on the chain of islands.

Two things marred the book for me, however. One was what seemed like a random usage of first and last names. In one sentence, the author would refer to "Jeronimus" but in the next "Cornelisz," for example. There were dozens of figures to keep track of throughout the narrative, and this random first- and last-naming only made the book that much harder to follow. I couldn't discern any reason why Dash would refer to the captain of the *Batavia* as "Ariaen" in one context but "Jacobsz" in another. Weren't these names not difficult enough without essentially doubling their number? It felt almost as if I were being randomly tested.

The other, perhaps more serious, objection has to do with the steady stream of conjecture that Dash employed to posit events, motives, and the fates of various persons. There obviously was scant documentation to support much of what he felt occurred, which led to a surfeit of expressions such as "It seems likely that..." or "One can conjecture...." or "So far as can be ascertained." This hedge-like language stands in stark contrast to the undeniably dramatic and undisputed events. Couldn't Dash have let his footnotes explain his hypotheses in such cases?

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## **Alison says**

Brilliant. The historical detail was fascinating and the human drama mesmerizing. I understand why Simon Leys felt there was nothing more to say after this book. Thanks, Carol! Besides the account of the horrifying shipwreck and mutiny, there's a mass of detail about life in 17th century Holland, the growth of Amsterdam into a city, history of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), shipbuilding and so on, but it was never boring or dry. Mind you, I do have a soft spot for Dutch history and travel literature after our sojourn there in 1995. After reading about the cramped and unsanitary conditions aboard 17th century VOC ships, I'm surprised anyone survived those journeys. What a contrast with Cook's voyages just over a hundred years later, and the pride he took in maintaining the health of all on board.

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## **J.S. Green says**

I've read a number of books that deal with shipwrecks and the exploration of the seas, and with summer approaching I wanted something that would be a bit of fun and adventure (of the armchair variety). I'm not sure this was the best choice for that!

The story of the maiden voyage of the Dutch East Indies (VOC) ship Batavia as the Dutch were still beginning their exploitation of the spice trade. Although a mutiny was being planned by the ship's skipper Ariaen Jacobsz and Jeronimus Cornelisz, the 2nd highest ranking VOC company man, the ship ran aground on an unknown reef (Houtman's Abrolhos) and was rapidly destroyed. With most of the crew and passengers landed on a barren island, the skipper and the top company man Francisco Pelsaert (who outranked the ship's skipper) set off with a crew in a small boat to attempt to reach Java. In the meantime, Cornelisz spread the soldiers and sailors among the three nearest islands to better put into effect his mutinous plans, and thus began an orgy of killing and mayhem leaving about 120 men, women, and children murdered.

As I said, this is not a seafaring castaway yarn about survival on desert islands. It's not for the faint of heart or the squeamish, and may even be harder to read in some respects than *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex*. Nonetheless, it's a fascinating and well-told story of the tragedy of the Batavia and its survivors. Dash presents a lot of detail and information in an exceptionally readable manner. He tells us not only of the backgrounds of the principal characters (Cornelisz, Pelsaert, and Jacobsz) but many others - and yet it never feels like you're drowning in information. He also includes what became of each of the survivors, or at least what was known of them, and the latter efforts to locate the exact location of the shipwreck. And the "Notes" are often every bit as interesting and compelling as the story itself. Overall, a great read - just beware that the Batavia was a pretty sad story.

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## **Veeral says**

After reading this book, I think that under favorable circumstances, height of human cruelty could far surpass the physical height of Olympus Mons. Twice.

Because if not for the hyperinflation and the Versailles treaty, Adolf Hitler would have been a shitty painter and Hermann Göring would have been an exceptionally shitty ballet dancer.

But I never felt more confident about my assumptions (although they were derived after many complicated

calculations and permutations) until I read Mike Dash's *Batavia's Graveyard: The True Story of the Mad Heretic Who Led History's Bloodiest Mutiny*.

**\*\*Minor Spoilers Ahead\*\***

*Batavia* was a ship of the Dutch East India Company built in 1628 to procure spices from the East and as was the kind-of norm in the era, it was shipwrecked on her maiden voyage.

But what made this incident different from others was the horror that followed owing to the mutiny and massacre that took place amongst the survivors stranded on the reefs of Abrolhos Islands off the coast of Western Australia.

*Batavia* sailed under commandeur and upper-merchant Francisco Pelsaert and was captained by Ariaen Jacobsz. But the main villain of this tragedy was one frustrated under-merchant (working under upper-merchant Francisco Pelsaert), **Jeronimus Cornelisz**, who was a bankrupt apothecary (pharmacist) from the Netherlands who had left his wife behind forever in the Netherlands in order to escape from his creditors and find himself a comfortable life somewhere in the East, by any means. But what made Cornelisz truly dangerous was his mad belief in **antinomianism: the theological doctrine that by faith and God's grace a Christian is freed from all laws (including the moral standards of the culture). Even murder. Or rape.**

Mike Dash has provided detailed and interesting background information on all the major characters which mainly includes Francisco Pelsaert, Ariaen Jacobsz and Jeronimus Cornelisz. The book could be considered to be divided in two major parts. The shipwrecking is described in the first chapter and then Mike Dash delineates the chain of events that eventually led to *Batavia's* doom. The second half deals with the massacre committed by Cornelisz and his fellow mutineers on the islands and its aftermath.

There was some previous history between Francisco Pelsaert and the captain of *Batavia*, Ariaen Jacobsz who had previously encountered each other in Surat, India. The encounter had left a bitter taste in the mouth for Ariaen Jacobsz as he was publicly reprimanded, and that too quite sternly by Francisco Pelsaert regarding disciplinary issues.

So during the voyage, Jacobsz and Cornelisz (driven by his greed and beliefs) conceived a plan to take the ship by mutiny, which would allow them to start a new life as the ship contained lots of silver and moreover they also decided to get more rich by becoming pirates.

Jacobsz deliberately steered the ship off course, away from the rest of the fleet (There were more than half a dozen ships with the “*Batavia*”). The ship struck Morning Reef, part of the Abrolhos islands off the Western Australian coast. Of the 322 passengers aboard, 40 people drowned in the initial disaster. **They were luckier than those who were to die on the islands.** The survivors were transferred to nearby islands which contained no fresh water and only very limited food in form of birds and some sea-lions.

No rescue was coming as they were way off course, so Captain Jacobsz alongwith Francisco Pelsaert, senior officers, a few crewmembers, and some passengers left the wreck site in a longboat, and headed north to the city of *Batavia* (Jakarta). This journey, which they completed successfully, was a feat in itself.



But on the other hand, in the absence of his two superiors, Jeronimus Cornelisz was left in charge of the survivors. He was afraid that Pelsaert might discover his mutinous plans. Therefore, he made plans to hijack any rescue ship that might return and use the vessel to seek another safe haven.

With a dedicated band of murderous young men, he began to systematically (at first) kill anyone he believed would be a problem to his reign of terror, or a burden on their limited resources. The mutineers became intoxicated with killing, and no one could stop them which led to a splurge of random killings.

But Cornelisz had also left some soldiers on another island who were led by one Wiebbe Hayes, and to their good fortune, they had found abundant sources of water and food on the other island. With his own supply dwindling, Cornelisz decided to take over Hayes' island (by killing everyone there, of course).

The events that ensued were nothing sort of dramatic, so I am not going to ruin it for anyone. But the naked truth is that that of the original 341 people on board the Batavia, only 68 made it safely to the port of Batavia (Jakarta).

So know this, although this book is well written, I am not recommending it for everyone as the second half is extremely graphic and gruesome. You will have to decide for yourself on this one.

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### **Kaethe says**

There's no point telling what the book is about, because the whole thing is too unlikely. But the Spouse saw a documentary on the subject, which was excellent, and my response to hearing about a great narrative is always to read a book. And then, there's nothing like reading about a shipwreck to put your own troubles into perspective.

So, seventeenth-century shipwreck off the coast of Australia turns into a scenario that makes Lord of the Flies look civilized. Read it because Dash gives you enough of the background to place the historical events into context. Read it because the whole time you'll be yelling out "no WAY." If you read this first you'd understand why the European stories of the day were full of unlikely incidents and implausible timing. The subtitle points to the narrative focus and I disagree with the author's conclusion of "mad", but at least they're upfront about the body count.

When they say "worse things happen at sea" I always thought the meant slowly starving as a castaway on a desert isle, I never realized it was in reference to other people. Way.

Library copy

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### **Michael says**

Life on a Dutch East India Company ship in the 1620s was pretty awful and nasty in the best of

circumstances - but add shipwreck, mutiny, and murder to the mix and you have a particularly grim but fascinating story, exceptionally well-written. A quick and very entertaining read - best Mike Dash book that I have read to date.

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## **'Aussie Rick' says**

*Batavia's Graveyard* what a name for a book! I could not resist picking this book up as soon as I saw it and I am so happy that I did. It was one of the best historical tales I have read for some time. Being an Australian I knew something of the Batavia but not the full story. In fact I had examined in detail the re-constructed Batavia at the Maritime Museum in Sydney. I walked through the ship, checking out every nook and cranny on the upper and lower decks. However that was way before I read this book. I never knew of the murder and mayhem that took place off the Western Australian coastline.

This book not only gives you the full story of the voyage of the Batavia, its shipwreck, the fate of the survivors and the subsequent fate of the mutineers under Jeronimus Cornelisz. It also offers the reader a complete and compelling picture into the background to this disaster and at the same time it offers interesting stories on all the participants. By the time I was half way through the book I was furious that the mutineers had carried out their terrible deeds. The book had me caught up in the story so much it was like reading about a current disaster in the newspaper. I wanted Cornelisz and his followers to suffer untold pain and misery for their acts.

The story is well told and gripping and the author has done his research well. The author supplies the reader with numerous tidbits of information regarding this period and this never detracts from the story but adds to it. It would have been nice to have some photographs of the Islands concerned to help paint the picture of desolation and even some photos of the recently re-constructed Batavia. Regardless of these very minor criticisms this book is a great historical story and I am sure that anyone who enjoys a good history will love this book.

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## **Esteban del Mal says**

"We have just come out of such a sorrow that the mind is still a little confused." -- Gijsbert Bastiaensz

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Commerce.

Psychopaths.

What do the two have in common?

If I were asked that before I read this book, I'd be glib and respond with something like "trajectory." But no. I've learned it's something called antinomianism.

If you don't know what that means, don't get discouraged. I didn't either. Not right away, at least. Oh, I'm sure I'd read it before somewhere, probably years ago when I was knee-deep in Karen Armstrong and had a more particular interest in the monotheistic religions that have informed civilizations for thousands of years. But, as the irreligious say, I've slept since then.

Before I get to antinomianism, though, let me tell you a story. When I was a kid, I knew this other kid. We shall call him Sicko, so as to preserve his anonymity. Sicko was the first person my age I met upon moving to a new town. With adolescence looming, I was overjoyed to find myself just a few houses away from a fellow pre-teen traveler. But it soon dawned on me that age, gender and geography were poor rationales for friendship -- the two of us were completely different. I was an awkward and shy kid, but nevertheless independent, an only child who had just the year before lived in a single-parent home in Los Angeles County; contrariwise, Sicko was athletic and confident, yet oddly deferential, having been home schooled and subjected his entire life to a severely patrician Christian orthodoxy.

When my family moved again, this time within the town, Sicko and I lost touch. It wouldn't be until we were both nineteen that we found ourselves in the same social circles. By this time, Sicko's family had moved to Alaska, leaving him the solitary occupant of their 2400 square foot home. He extended an invitation to me to roommate with him and I quickly accepted. Over the next few months, I saw firsthand how manipulative and slyly sadistic he had become. Especially toward women. Sicko was a handsome guy, much more handsome than me, and there were young women at the house on various occasions. Most, however, never visited more than once. Then one night I had to rescue one of those young women from Sicko when she called out my name in distress. Soon after this incident, I moved out. I wouldn't see Sicko again for several years, whereupon I learned that he worked as a pharmaceutical sales representative, had married into a fairly prominent banking family and had developed a taste for bestiality films.

What's that saying about water seeking its own level?

Anyway, antinomianism. It is defined by wikipedia.org as "belief originating in Christian theology that faith alone, not obedience to religious law, is necessary for salvation." Jeronimus Cornelisz, the fellow at the center of this story of bloody mutiny, took this to mean that he wasn't bound by the same laws as other homo sapiens. He aspired to a life of piracy and manipulated several people into committing all manner of atrocity, the most chilling being the hanging of an infant. Then he was butchered and himself hanged.

I give this book five stars because it is meticulously researched, very well-written, and because I will remember the name *Batavia* for the rest of my life.

If you'd like to read more about the actual mutiny itself, the information available on Wikipedia is not contradicted by the book.

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## **Gary Brecht says**

Not even the most sanguine of Shakespeare's plays or the goriest of Ancient Greek dramas can match the horror of this true life tale. Mike Dash vividly retells the story of a 17th Century Dutch East Indiaman's collision with a coral reef off the west coast of Australia. Unbeknownst to most of the 270 passengers aboard the ship, a psychopath of high rank survived the crash. It was he, Jeronimus Cornelisz, a failed apothecary from Haarlem in the Netherlands, who eventually was responsible for the murders of 115 men, women and

children who initially survived the shipwreck.

Narrated in novelistic fashion and replete with carefully researched authenticity, this fascinating story is told with such grisly detail that it is difficult to put the book down, even for a moment's respite from the discomfiture it engenders.

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### **Jane says**

Fascinating true account of the mutiny, shipwreck on what is now known as Beacon Island near Australia and subsequent blood-filled killings. This involved a Dutch East India [VOC] ship *Batavia* on its way to Java in the 17th century. The mutiny was led by a half-crazed charismatic ship's officer with horrendous results. Conditions on shipboard as described were terrible. The epilogue described present-day archeological expeditions that found the results. The author researched very well, with both extensive primary and secondary material.

Highly recommended but the reader should have a strong stomach.

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