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Secure Enterprise Applications Through REST APIs and Cloud Services

Dimitris Ivan[1*], Adam Mballa[2]

[1] National Technical University of Athens, GREECE
[2] University of Zagreb, CROATIA

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REST API Security, Cloud Services, OAuth 2.0, Zero Trust Architecture, Access Control, Credential Management, API Gateway

ABSTRACT

Enterprise REST APIs increasingly serve not a single, predictable caller but a growing population of internal services, partner integrations, and cloud-hosted components, each of which must be authenticated, authorized, and held accountable for what it requests, often without a human user anywhere in the call path to drive a conventional login flow. Much of the applied literature on securing such APIs treats authentication and authorization as something embedded directly in each service's own code, following whatever convention that service's team adopted, an approach that scales poorly once the population of callers extends beyond a small, stable set of trusted internal clients to include partner integrations and elastically scaled cloud-native services whose identities and credentials change far more often than a human user's would. This paper proposes WARDEN, a Workload-Authenticated, Rotated-credential, Delegated-authorization Enforcement Network for securing enterprise REST APIs and the cloud services that call them, synthesizing delegated-authorization protocol research with zero trust architectural principles classical and contemporary access control models, service-mesh-based policy enforcement, and credential lifecycle management guidance. Rather than embedding authentication and authorization logic separately inside each backend service, WARDEN centralizes policy decision and credential verification at a gateway positioned at the boundary of the enterprise's cloud-hosted API surface, issues short-lived, automatically rotated credentials to every calling workload rather than long-lived static keys, and evaluates each request's attributes against an explicit, centrally administered policy rather than a permission check hand-written into each service. The architecture is through a control-plane and data-plane split diagram showing a disguised order-management API scenario, a comparative table contrasting WARDEN-guided access control against a static-API-key design and a service-embedded-authorization design, and an case scenario tracing a partner integration's request through credential issuance, gateway evaluation, and a rejected request from a rotated-out credential. All quantitative figures are explicitly labeled as estimates constructed to demonstrate the framework rather than measurements from a production deployment. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limits of gateway-centralized enforcement, including how an enterprise might phase in that enforcement across a mixed legacy and newly built caller population, and directions for empirical validation.

Introduction

Enterprise organizations have steadily moved core business functionality behind REST APIs hosted in cloud environments, and the population of callers those APIs must serve has grown correspondingly varied: an internal fulfillment service calling to reserve inventory, a partner's logistics system calling to retrieve shipment status, and an internal reporting service calling to aggregate order data, none of which is a human user authenticating through a browser, and each of which the API must authenticate, authorize, and hold accountable on its own terms. [1] foundational analysis of REST architectural principles establishes the stateless, uniform-interface style most of these APIs are built on, but says little about how an API populated by many independent, non-human, cloud-hosted callers should establish and continuously verify each caller's identity and permissions, a question this paper argues has become at least as consequential for enterprise API

security as the request-validation and traffic-shaping concerns an earlier paper in this line of work addressed for mobile client integration specifically (not reproduced here).

Much of enterprise practice still answers this question by embedding authentication and authorization logic separately inside each backend service, a static API key checked in one service's middleware, a hand-rolled permission check in another, following whatever convention each service's engineering team happened to adopt. This approach scales poorly once an enterprise's API surface is called not by a small, stable set of internal clients but by an elastically scaled population of cloud-native services and external partner integrations whose identities, and the credentials that represent them, are created, rotated, and retired far more frequently than a long-lived human user account would be. [2] zero trust architecture reframes the underlying problem usefully: no caller, internal or external, should be trusted merely because of its network location, and every request should be evaluated against explicit policy regardless of where it originates, a principle that applies with particular force to the machine-to-machine, workload-to-workload traffic that dominates a cloud-hosted enterprise API's actual call volume.

This paper makes three contributions. First, it proposes WARDEN, a framework that centralizes credential verification and policy decision at a gateway positioned at the enterprise API surface's boundary, rather than distributing that logic separately across each backend service, explicitly combining delegated-authorization protocol research with zero trust principles, access control models, and credential lifecycle management guidance. Second, it WARDEN's core mechanism, short-lived credential issuance and gateway-enforced policy evaluation, through a disguised enterprise order-management scenario spanning an internal service, a partner integration, and a rejected, rotated-out credential. Third, it offers a comparative analysis of WARDEN-guided access control against a static-API-key design and a service-embedded-authorization design, on dimensions tied to credential exposure risk and policy consistency. Throughout, quantitative figures are explicitly and repeatedly labeled as estimates constructed to demonstrate the framework's reasoning, not as measurements drawn from a production system.

Literature Review

REST Architectural Principles as a Foundation

[1] analysis of the modern Web architecture established the stateless, resource-oriented style most enterprise REST APIs still follow, a style that assumes each request carries whatever context, including identity, it needs to be evaluated independently, without relying on server-side session state. This statelessness principle is directly relevant to WARDEN's design: because a REST API cannot rely on an established session to vouch for a caller's identity across multiple requests, each request's credential must itself carry sufficient, independently verifiable evidence of who is calling and what they are permitted to do.

Delegated Authorization and Its Formal Security Properties

[3] specification of the OAuth 2.0 authorization framework established the now-dominant pattern for delegated authorization, in which a caller presents a token issued by a trusted identity provider rather than a credential it manages itself, a pattern well suited to machine-to-machine API calls through its client-credentials grant, which issues a workload a short-lived token without requiring a human user's involvement at all. [4] comprehensive formal security analysis of OAuth 2.0 identified specific conditions under which the protocol's security properties hold and specific misconfigurations under which they do not, a finding this paper's WARDEN framework treats as a reminder that correctly implementing a delegated-authorization protocol, not merely adopting one by name, is what determines whether an API's access control is actually sound.

Zero Trust as an Architectural Stance

[2] describe zero trust architecture as a shift away from assuming that traffic originating inside an enterprise's network perimeter is inherently trustworthy, requiring instead that every request be authenticated and authorized against explicit policy regardless of its origin. This paper's WARDEN framework adopts this stance specifically for the internal, service-to-service traffic that an enterprise's own cloud-hosted microservices generate among themselves, treating an internal fulfillment service's call to an order-management API with the same gateway-enforced scrutiny as an external partner integration's call, rather than exempting internal traffic from policy evaluation on the assumption that it originates from a trusted network segment.

Access Control Models: Role-Based and Attribute-Based

[5] formalization of role-based access control established a durable model for expressing a caller's permissions in terms of assigned roles rather than permissions enumerated individually per caller, a model well suited to a relatively stable population of internal services with clearly defined responsibilities. Chandramouli, [6] extend this reasoning to a microservices context specifically, describing how attribute-based access control, evaluating a request against a richer set of attributes, caller identity, requested resource, request context, than role membership alone captures, can be enforced at a service mesh's policy enforcement points. WARDEN draws on both models, expressing coarse-grained caller categories, internal service, partner integration, through role-based policy while allowing finer-grained, context-sensitive decisions, such as a partner integration's permitted request rate or the specific order fields it may read, through attribute-based policy evaluated at the same enforcement point.

Gateway- and Service-Mesh-Based Policy Enforcement

[7] guidance on security strategies for microservices-based application systems describes moving security-relevant decisions, authentication, authorization, traffic policy, out of individual services and into shared infrastructure components positioned at a service's boundary, an architectural pattern Chandramouli and Butcher[8] develop further specifically for service-mesh architectures, in which a sidecar or gateway proxy enforces policy consistently across every service without requiring each service's own code to implement that enforcement logic independently. This centralization is the architectural core of WARDEN's gateway, which is positioned to evaluate every request against policy before it reaches any backend REST API, rather than relying on each backend service to re-implement equivalent checks correctly and consistently on its own.

Credential Lifecycle Management and Rotation

[9] guidance on cryptographic key management establishes that a credential's security properties degrade the longer it remains unchanged and the more broadly it is exposed, a principle this paper's WARDEN framework applies specifically to the API credentials issued to calling workloads: a credential valid for a short, bounded period and automatically replaced before it expires limits how much damage a single leaked credential can cause, compared to a long-lived static API key that, once issued, may remain valid and unmonitored for months or years. WARDEN's rotation mechanism, discussed in the Development of the WARDEN Architecture subsection below, is the architectural response to this principle, treating credential rotation as a scheduled, automatic property of every workload's access to the API surface rather than a manual remediation step taken only after a suspected compromise.

Methodology

Research Approach

This paper follows a design-science approach: it synthesizes delegated-authorization, zero trust, access control, and credential-management literature into a single named framework, WARDEN, and that framework's reasoning using a disguised, enterprise order-management scenario rather than a production

deployment. No claim is made that the quantitative figures presented below were measured from a real system; they are constructed to be representative of patterns the cited literature reports and are labeled as estimates throughout.

Development of the WARDEN Architecture

WARDEN is organized around four coordinated mechanisms, each addressing a distinct part of the access-control problem for enterprise REST APIs:

Workload-authenticated identity. Every calling workload, an internal service, a partner integration, or an internal batch process, authenticates to a central identity provider using a workload-specific credential rather than a shared or generic API key, following the delegated-authorization pattern Hardt[3] specifies, so that every request can be traced to a specific, individually identifiable caller.

Rotated credentials. The identity provider issues short-lived tokens on a fixed rotation schedule, following Barker's[9] key-management principle, so that a credential's usable lifetime is bounded and a workload that stops rotating correctly, rather than being silently trusted indefinitely, is required to re-authenticate before its next request is accepted.

Delegated, policy-evaluated authorization. Rather than each backend service independently deciding whether a caller is permitted to perform a given action, the gateway evaluates every request against a centrally administered policy combining role-based categories[5] with finer-grained attribute-based conditions[6], following Rose *et al.*'s[2] zero trust principle of evaluating every request on its own merits regardless of its origin.

Enforcement at the gateway. Policy evaluation and credential verification occur once, at a gateway positioned at the boundary of the enterprise's API surface, following the centralized-enforcement pattern Chandramouli[7] and Chandramouli and Butcher[8] describe, rather than being re-implemented separately inside each backend REST API, so that a policy change takes effect consistently across every service behind the gateway without requiring each service to be individually updated.

Construction of the Evaluation Scenario

To WARDEN's reasoning, this paper constructs a disguised enterprise order-management scenario, assembled from patterns reported across the cited delegated-authorization and zero trust literature rather than drawn from a specific company's deployment. The scenario centers on a cloud-hosted order-management REST API called by three distinct workloads: an internal fulfillment service reserving inventory, a partner logistics integration retrieving shipment status, and an internal reporting service aggregating order totals, each presenting a short-lived token issued by the identity provider and evaluated against policy at the gateway before any request reaches the order-management API itself. This scenario deliberately spans both internal and external callers, in contrast to a scenario confined to a single trusted internal service, because the comparative risk of a static, unrotated credential is most visible precisely when a caller population includes external partners whose own credential-handling practices the enterprise cannot directly control.

Quantitative Estimates

Because no production measurement data accompanies this scenario, every quantitative figure presented in the Results section, including credential exposure window and policy-consistency gap, is explicitly labeled an estimate. These figures are constructed to be directionally consistent with the patterns Barker[9] and Chandramouli and Butcher[8] report, not as a substitute for empirical measurement of any specific system.

Scope and Assumptions

WARDEN is scoped to enterprise REST APIs whose callers are themselves software workloads, internal services, partner integrations, and automated processes, rather than APIs whose primary callers are end-user-

facing applications authenticating individual human users through an interactive login flow, a related but distinct problem this paper does not address. WARDEN assumes the identity provider and gateway themselves are deployed with the availability and integrity guarantees appropriate to security-critical infrastructure, following the cloud-native deployment patterns Deng *et al.*[10] describe as increasingly standard for enterprise backend components, and does not itself specify the identity provider's internal implementation.

Validity Considerations

Two threats to the usefulness of the scenario deserve explicit acknowledgment. First, because the order-management scenario is constructed rather than observed, any numeric pattern it exhibits is a demonstration of WARDEN's intended reasoning rather than evidence that the reasoning holds under a real enterprise's specific caller population, credential-rotation cadence, and partner-integration practices; the construction was deliberately kept consistent with directional findings in Barker[9] and Chandramouli and Butcher[8], but consistency with prior findings is not independent confirmation of them. Second, a three-caller scenario is small enough to be fully legible in a single control-plane and data-plane diagram but correspondingly smaller than many enterprise API surfaces, which may serve dozens or hundreds of distinct internal and partner workloads; the scenario should be read as the credential-issuance and gateway-enforcement mechanism WARDEN applies, not as a claim about how straightforward policy administration remains at that larger scale.

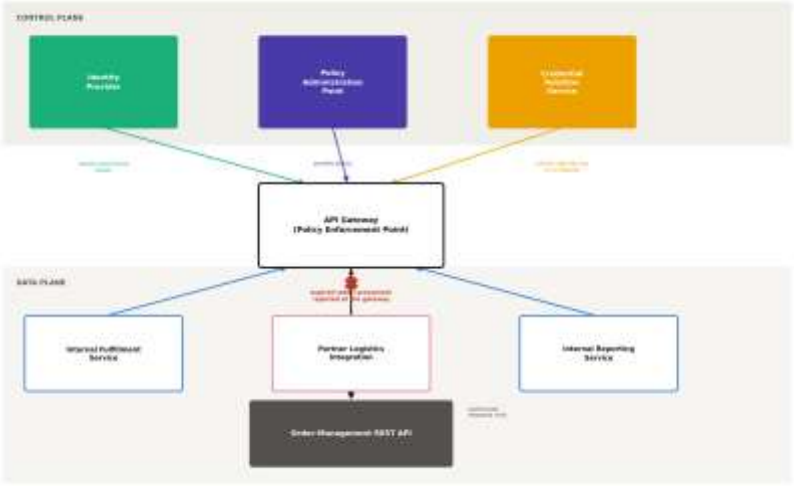
Results

Architecture Overview

Figure 1 renders the order-management scenario as a control-plane and data-plane split diagram: a control-plane band showing the identity provider, policy administration point, and credential rotation service feeding the gateway, and a data-plane band showing the three calling workloads presenting tokens to the gateway, which forwards authorized requests to the order-management API and rejects one caller's request presenting a rotated-out credential.

Figure 1: WARDEN architecture: control-plane credential issuance with gateway-enforced policy evaluation for an enterprise order-management scenario.

Figure 1 *WARDEN architecture: control-plane credential issuance with gateway-enforced policy evaluation for an enterprise order-management scenario.*



Comparative Analysis of Access-Control Architectures

Table 1: comparison of API access-control architectures.

Dimension	Static-API-Key Design	Service-Embedded-Authorization Design	WARDEN-Guided Design
Credential lifetime	Long-lived, manually rotated if at all	Varies per service, inconsistently enforced	Short-lived, automatically rotated on a fixed schedule
Where policy is evaluated	Not applicable; key grants broad access	Independently, inside each backend service	Once, centrally, at the gateway
Consistency across services	Not applicable	Low; depends on each team's own implementation	High; a single policy change applies to every service behind the gateway
Exposure risk from a single leaked credential	High; credential often valid indefinitely	Moderate; scoped to one service's own checks	Low; credential expires quickly and is traceable to one workload

Case Scenario

Consider the moment the partner logistics integration's short-lived token, issued six minutes earlier, expires just as the identity provider's rotation service issues a replacement, and the partner's integration, due to a brief delay in adopting the new token, presents the now-expired credential in a request to retrieve shipment status. Under a static-API-key design, this situation would not arise at all, because the key would simply remain valid regardless of how much time had passed, which is precisely the property that makes a leaked static key dangerous for as long as it remains unrevoked. Under a service-embedded-authorization design, the order-management service itself would need to have implemented token-expiry checking correctly and consistently with however the reporting service and fulfillment service each implemented the same check, an assumption not guaranteed to hold across independently developed services. Under WARDEN, the gateway rejects the request immediately, before it reaches the order-management API at all, returning a response the partner's integration can use to trigger an automatic re-authentication against the identity provider, obtaining a valid token and successfully retrying the request moments later, with the rejection and subsequent successful retry both centrally logged at the single enforcement point rather than scattered across whichever backend services happened to be involved.

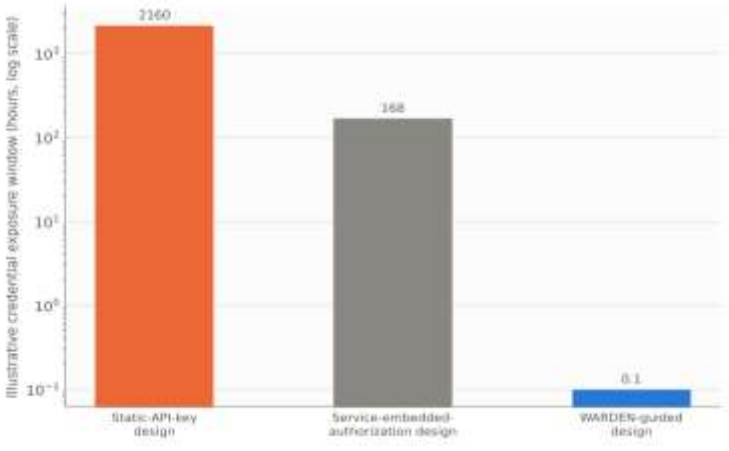


Figure 2 *estimate of the credential exposure window, how long a single leaked credential would remain usable before expiring or being revoked, under each design for the scenario described above, synthesized to*

demonstrate that WARDEN's short rotation interval substantially bounds the usable lifetime of a leaked credential compared to the long-lived keys a static-API-key design relies on.

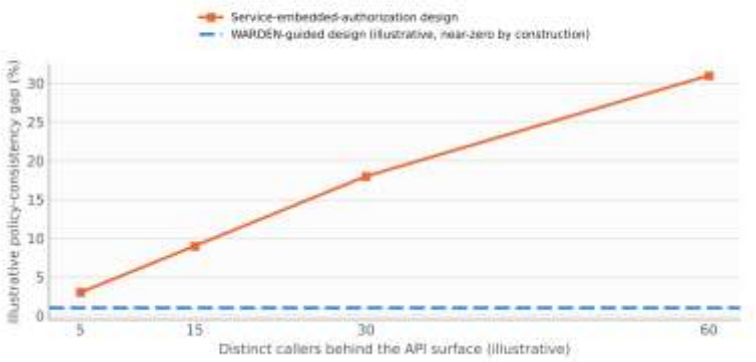


Figure 3 *estimate of the policy-consistency gap, the proportion of caller-facing services found, on audit, to be enforcing access policy inconsistently with the enterprise's intended rules, as the number of distinct callers behind a service-embedded-authorization design grows, synthesized to demonstrate that centralizing enforcement at a gateway, as WARDEN does, avoids a consistency gap that otherwise tends to widen as the caller population grows rather than remaining fixed.*

Discussion

Implications

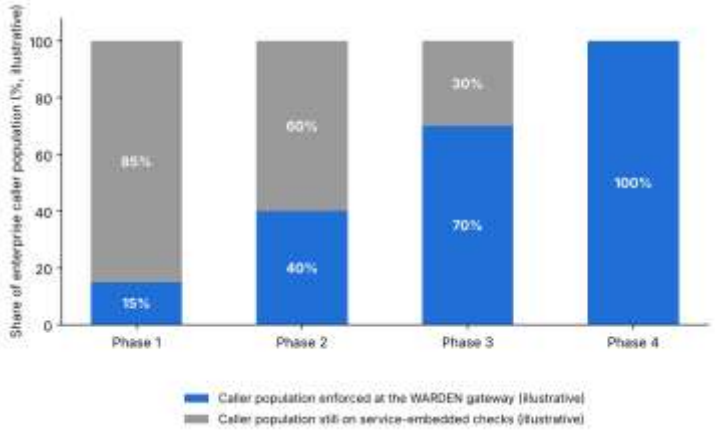
The evidence assembled here, read alongside Barker's[9] and Chandramouli and Butcher's[8] findings, suggests that enterprise REST API security benefits more from centralizing credential verification and policy evaluation at a single, consistently maintained gateway than from asking each backend service's own team to implement equivalent checks independently. This has a practical implication for enterprise API governance: a security policy change, tightening what a partner integration is permitted to read, for instance, can be deployed once at the gateway and take effect immediately across every service behind it, rather than requiring a coordinated, service-by-service rollout whose completeness is difficult to verify.

This has a second implication specific to how enterprises manage the risk a growing caller population introduces. The policy-consistency-gap estimates in Figure 3, while , suggest that a service-embedded-authorization design's risk does not stay fixed as an enterprise's API surface is called by more distinct workloads; it grows, because each additional service represents another independent implementation that may drift from the enterprise's intended policy. A gateway-centralized design such as WARDEN does not eliminate the need for careful policy administration, but it confines the consequences of a policy-administration mistake to a single, auditable enforcement point rather than allowing the mistake to be duplicated, inconsistently, across an expanding set of independently maintained services.

These first two implications assume a single cutover point at which an enterprise's entire API surface moves behind the WARDEN gateway at once, but the Scope and Assumptions subsection's own boundary, that WARDEN is scoped to software-workload callers rather than the end-user-facing login flows a related but distinct problem addresses, does not by itself say anything about how an enterprise with a substantial existing population of legacy, service-embedded-authorization backends should get from its current state to a gateway-centralized one. The Limitations subsection's observation, that the gateway becomes a single component every caller's access now depends on, counsels against a single all-at-once migration for exactly this reason: an enterprise moving its entire caller population behind an unproven gateway deployment in one step concentrates the gateway-availability risk the Limitations subsection identifies at precisely the moment

that risk is least understood. A phased rollout, bringing a bounded set of lower-risk internal callers behind the gateway first, retiring their service-embedded checks only once the gateway's own availability and policy correctness have been exercised under real traffic, and extending coverage outward to partner integrations and higher-risk callers in subsequent phases, lets an enterprise accumulate confidence in the gateway's behavior before the consistency gains Figure 3 extend to the full caller population.

Figure 4: phased-rollout timeline: share of the enterprise caller population enforced at the WARDEN gateway versus still relying on service-embedded checks, across four migration phases.
Figure 4 *phased-rollout timeline: share of the enterprise caller population enforced at the WARDEN gateway versus still relying on service-embedded checks, across four migration phases, constructed to demonstrate the transition this subsection describes rather than measured from an actual migration.*



This phased approach does leave a mixed state, some callers enforced at the gateway and others still relying on their own service-embedded checks, for as long as the rollout takes, a transitional cost the comparative advantages described above do not fully materialize until the rollout completes.

Limitations
WARDEN's gateway-centralized enforcement introduces a single, consistently enforced policy point, but also a single component whose availability and correctness every caller's access now depends on; a gateway misconfiguration or outage affects every service behind it simultaneously, a different and arguably more consequential failure mode than a single backend service's own authorization check failing in isolation. The framework also assumes the identity provider and credential-rotation service themselves remain available and correctly configured, an assumption that holds comfortably under ordinary operation but that, if violated, could leave legitimate workloads unable to obtain a valid credential at all, a risk a static-API-key design, whatever its other weaknesses, does not share in quite the same way.

Future Research
Future work should test whether gateway-centralized policy enforcement, applied to a real enterprise's full caller population rather than the three-workload scenario in the Results section, actually produces a policy-consistency gap smaller than Figure 3's estimates suggest for a service-embedded-authorization design of comparable scale. A further direction is examining how WARDEN's single-gateway enforcement point should be made resilient to its own failure, potentially through a redundant, independently deployed gateway instance evaluating the same centrally administered policy, without reintroducing the consistency risk a second, independently implemented enforcement point could create if it drifted from the first, as well as empirically tracking a real phased rollout of the kind outlined above to test whether the mixed-state transitional cost is as bounded in practice as this discussion assumes.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that enterprise REST APIs serving a growing, varied population of internal services and partner integrations are better secured by centralizing credential verification and policy evaluation at a gateway than by asking each backend service to implement equivalent authorization logic independently. Building on Hardt's[3] delegated-authorization framework, Rose *et al.*'s[2] zero trust principles, Sandhu *et al.*'s[5] and Chandramouli *et al.*'s[6] access control models, and Barker's[9] credential lifecycle guidance, this paper has proposed WARDEN, its workload-authenticated, rotated-credential mechanism through a disguised order-management scenario, and compared it, through estimates explicitly labeled as such, against a static-API-key design and a service-embedded-authorization design on dimensions tied to credential exposure and policy consistency. The central claim is not that any particular exposure-window or consistency-gap figure is representative, but that moving credential verification and policy decision out of individually maintained backend services and into a single, consistently enforced gateway, adopted through a deliberately phased rollout rather than a single cutover, is itself the primary lever available to enterprise organizations seeking to secure REST APIs and cloud services reliably as their caller population grows.

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