Chapter 13

Place

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Approaching Place

What could be simpler than place? The (stereo)typical "You are here" definition of the term indicates an unembellished punctuality that could hardly be more straightforward. Why then a whole chapter on place? By way of prelude and as Raymond Williams (1983) was fond of pointing out, there is quite possibly an inverse relationship between the apparent simplicity of a term (e.g., "nature," "culture") and its genealogical depth as well as complexity of current usage.

> "Place" (like space and time) also has an extraordinary range of metaphorical meanings. We talk about the place of art in social life, the place of men in society, our place in the cosmos, and we internalize such notions psychologically in terms of knowing our place or feeling we have a place in the affections or esteem of others. We express norms by putting people, events, and things in their "proper" place and seek to subvert norms by struggling to define a new place . . . from which the oppressed can freely speak. *Place has to be one of the most multilayered and multi-purpose keywords in our language*. (Harvey 1996: 208, emphasis added)

Though Williams failed to include "place" among his keywords, place's seeming simplicity obscures a multiplicity of meaning.[1] Inspired by Williams' deft approach to unpacking the density of meanings held within keywords, this chapter excavates the wealth of meaning in "place." Given the centrality of place to cultural geography – indeed, to human geography as a discipline overall – there could hardly be a more central task for this volume.

I begin with a working understanding of the word "place." Without overly belaboring the definitional task, Gieryn's (2000) tripartite definition of place as location, material form,

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and meaningfulness seems reasonable, as does his insistence that all three aspects of place remain bundled together.

> They cannot be ranked into greater or lesser significance for social life, nor can one be reduced down to an expression of another. Place has a plenitude, a completeness, such that the phenomenon is analytically and substantively destroyed if the three become unraveled or one of them forgotten. (p. 466; see also Agnew 2004)

To inquire into place takes us as far as written records on human musings about the world around us go. As philosopher Edward Casey (1997) has discussed at some length, notions of nothingness based in the absence of place play a central role in most theories of creation. From what Casey terms "the sheer void" – not just emptiness, but "*no-place-at-all*: utter void" (p. 3, emphasis in original) – arose the differentiation that defines place as the scission between heaven and earth, and the differentiation amongst places, whether in the cosmogonies of the Judeo-Christian Bible, Hesiod's *Theogony*, or Navajo creation accounts. When, according for instance to the Book of Genesis, God created dry land and light from the formless darkness, it was place itself that emerged, with its connotations of order, hierarchy, boundaries, specificity, and anchoring. As Casey (1997: 5) asserts, "[c]osmogenesis is topogenesis – throughout and at every step."

Not only is place central to accounts of how the world as we know it came to be, place is also central to historical accounts of how we came to know our world and our place in it. Humans are innately curious about the world around us and about those who occupy territories near and far. Travel writings of explorers from ancient empires are replete with musings about the strange lands and their inhabitants. The Greek geographer Strabo, traveling the circum-Mediterranean world from Egypt to Ethiopia to Rome in the first century CE, invoked the "different good and bad attributes" of place as a key area of inquiry about the world around us (quoted in Relph 1976: 1). Hippocrates' typology of the four bodily humors – phlegmatic, sanguine, choleric, and melancholic – was based upon the relative location of different lands (northern, southern, eastern, and western, respectively) and their influence on human temperament and health. Bernal Díaz del Castillo's (1996) narrative of the conquest of the ancient Aztec empire in the early sixteenth century recounts the astonishment of the Spaniards upon touring Tenochtitlan (Mexico City).

> [S]ome of our soldiers even asked whether the things we saw were not a dream. It is not to be wondered at that I here write it down in this manner, for there is so much to think over that I do not know how to describe it, seeing things as we did that had never been heard of or seen before, not even dreamed about. (pp. 190–191)

In short, human beings are not simply social animals; we are too *spatial* animals, inasmuch as territory – knowing it, owning it, exploring it – matters a great deal.

Space, Place, and Time

There is a notable tendency among scholars to typologize space, and to hold place as a type of space that has accrued meaning through symbolic investment and repetitive engagement.[2] Though often used interchangeably in everyday parlance, space and place are differentiated from each other in various ways that have implications for the connotations of both. Most

simple is a geometric distinction, whereby "Spaces have areas and volumes. Places have space between them" (Cresswell 2004: 8). This definition indicates that space and place are interrelated terms: they need each other in order to exist. A second sort of attempt to distinguish space from place invokes a distinct ontology whereby spaces *are* and places *are produced*; in other words, places are social products. While the "mere existence" of space has been productively interrogated (Lefebvre 1991; Casey 1997; Massey 2005; Harvey 2006), this second distinction between space and place assigns an abstract, smooth, limitless quality to space, while place – "human in scale and dense with feeling" (Tuan and Strawn 2009: 38) – is associated with specificity, immediacy, stasis, and uniqueness. Space is cerebral, place is experiential. Space is thus made into place through human intervention:

> Space is product, the geographical equivalent of the commodity; place, on the other hand, is product *and* work, with the uniqueness of the work of art of the craft of the artisan. Space and place stand in opposition to one another, as the opposition of different kinds of labor (and different stages in the production of space). (Dirlik 2001: 18, emphasis in original)

Or as Relph (1976: 29) notes, "[places] are sensed in a chiaroscuro of setting, landscape, ritual, routine, other people, personal experiences, care and concern for home, and in the context of other places." Thus place *qua* place, as opposed to particular places or certainly to space, is notoriously resistant to intellectualization.

Finally, and to add time to the dynamic, places can be approached as pauses of sorts in what would otherwise be an overwhelming, meaningless flow of space-time.

> [M]uch of what is traditionally discussed as "time" and "space" is to be understood ultimately in terms of place: time and space meet in place, through whose needle's eye they are densely threaded together and at once. (Casey 2001: 226)

Or, in the words of David Harvey (1996: 261), "The process of place formation is a process of carving out 'permanences' from the flow of processes creating spatio-temporality. But the 'permanences' – no matter how solid they may seem – are not eternal but always subject to time as 'perpetual perishing'." This continuous crumbling away of the seeming solidity of place is a question to which we will return in more detail later.

The distinction between the smoothness of space and the texture of place has in turn unfurled in multiple additional understandings of space and place, understandings which map onto the principal oppositional categories of modernity. Thus space is active while place is passive, space is cerebral whereas place is experiential, space is associated with male and place with female, space is the arena of capital and place that of labor, and so on. Typically, then, in this modern understanding space is privileged over place. The privileging of space over place is all the more evident when the space/place pairing is aligned with that of the scalar pairing of global/local (Dirlik 2001). In the discourse of globalization, the rapidity of mobility – bodily through travel, economically through trade and capital flows, and intellectually through the movement of ideas – is afforded by the nature of global space, which is hardly ever thought of as punctuated by places; rather, "the global" approaches the featurelessness of the idealized isotropic plane. The local, by contrast, is particularity and rootedness taken to the extreme.

Some have found the fluidity of the global exhilarating in its association with freedom, lack of recurring encounters, and the shedding of the accountabilities and obligations

associated with being emplaced. Loosening the bonds of place-based (place-bound?) solidarities, such as the village or the nation-state, can constitute an awakening of identity. On the other hand, some view the emergence of the global with deep trepidation, due to at least two related factors linked to place: (1) the perception of placelessness as a condition of globalization, and (2) the emergence of an inauthentic relationship between people and place. On the former, Marc Augé (1995) has labeled those sites associated with global transience – airports, train stations, hotels – *non-places* precisely to note the slipping away of place particularity under globalization. Places become emptied out of meaning, indistinguishable and interchangeable, and the self moving through them becomes lost – a condition that Fredric Jameson (1991) has likened to schizophrenia. As Harvey contends, capitalism reverses the equation whereby space is transformed into place, unraveling place back to space. As such, and under late capitalism in particular, place becomes more like space: abstract, smooth, masculine, cerebral, unanchored. It is important to note that this sentiment predates the late modern era, surfacing for instance in the work of J.B. Jackson (1970) decrying "other-directed places" (see also Relph 1976).

Indeed, mid-twentieth-century philosophical work is permeated with concern over the emergence of a profound sort of homelessness associated with modernity writ large, as well as modern capitalist relationships, in part because modernity is seen to sunder the previously authentic ties between people and place. In other words, economic, cultural, and/or political filters come to mediate what is (usually tacitly) understood to be formerly unmediated and basic relationships; in particular, the relationship between humans and nature, and the relationship of individual humans to one another. What Gaston Bachelard (1994) understands quite romantically in terms of the childhood home, or Martin Heidegger (1971) in terms of "dwelling," is prised open and a level of remove inserted that renders these primal relationships inauthentic. There is thus a profound sense of homelessness, of being adrift in the world – of displacement – which is associated with late modernity. And, to return to Jameson's notion of schizophrenia, this prising apart can also be seen to occur within the individual, who becomes alienated even from her (authentic) self.

Given the term's central status in the discipline of geography, there is a wealth of scholarship on place. To adequately discuss all of this would require a book of its own, and not surprisingly, such books exist (see for instance Tuan 1977; Adams, Hoelscher, and Till 2001b; Cresswell 2004). The relationship between place and landscape, for instance, reveals how the framing and representation of place in particular ways shapes how we value specific places, how certain patterns of power relations become normalized, how those with less privilege are erased from view, and underscores the centrality of the visual (Cosgrove 1998; contributions to Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003; Price 2004; Wylie 2007; contributions to Malpas 2011). The relationship between place and nature is another voluminous area of study, interrogating the limits of the human, the dynamic relationship between humans and nature as well as the flexible boundary between these two notions, and the whole issue of culture itself (Smith 1984; Jones and Cloke 2002; Castree 2005). In terms of what is seen as the central and driving characteristics of space, as well, there are wide variations within approaches by geographers. Those of a more Marxist-inspired bent centralize labor, capital, and production of place in their scholarship, while those of a more humanistic strain will, as humanists are wont to do regardless of disciplinary affiliation, focus on the redemptive power of the human spirit in their work. That humanistic scholars have worked so closely with place is unsurprising, as many have posited that place awareness, place attachment, and place-making are central activities of the human condition. "To be human is to live in a world

that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know *your* place" (Relph 1976: 1, emphasis in original; see also Buttimer 1993). Because of the author's own inclination toward a humanistic approach, the balance of this chapter will explore this in more detail with respect to place. This is more a matter of housekeeping than anything else, and is not intended to discount in the slightest the wide topical and political latitude as well as the contradictions amongst geographers in our understandings of place.

Crafting Place

Geographers and others working from a more or less humanistic perspective centralize place as a lived and dynamic entity. Places are made through human interaction over time with a locale and its elements; in turn, identities both individual and collective are solidified through human relationships to place. "In our inhabitation of places there is a looping effect between our identification of places and our identities" (Sundstrom 2003: 90). Seen through the lens of the individual, place is subjective and very much in the eye of the beholder. Indeed, the uniqueness of place is such that no two people will have exactly the same experience of place. Seen as a collectively generated entity, place is frequently portrayed as a weaving together of diverse individual experiences, and as such having a textural dimensionality. "If space is rather a simultaneity of stories-so-far, then places are collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power-geometries of space" (Massey 2005: 130). Metaphoric allusions to arts of all sorts – weaving, painting, writing, dance, and theater chief amongst them – prevail in humanistic understandings of place as an actively crafted entity.

Writing Place

That "text" nests within the term "texture" is no accident, for narrative plays an important role in the construction of place, just as places themselves play important roles in narratives. The human relationship to place is mediated symbolically, with our most important symbolic structure being language. As Relph (1976) notes, it is requisite that places be named, as opposed to spaces which are typically unnamed: place-naming is a way that "space is claimed for man [*sic*]" (p. 16). Beyond naming, there is an important relationship between narrative and place, for place-worlds are, fundamentally, story-worlds. Narrative is a primary approach to the carving out of the "permanences" invoked by Harvey to define the act of place-making. Narrative allows the flow of time-space to be arrested and shaped in ways that make deliberate sense of events' interlinkages to one another and to a broader trajectory of meaning, and that allows us to emplace ourselves in that flow of events in meaningful ways (Price 2010). In other words, narrative allows us to plot place. Thus "places not only feature in inhabitants' (and geographers') narratives, they are narratives in their own right" (Rodman 2003: 206).

Yet a tendency in place-narratives is to posit a romantic notion whereby places are timeless and unchanging, as are the pre-given identities seen to be rooted in those places. Perhaps the fiction of place and identity as permanent serves, religion-like, as a mental bulwark of sorts against the inexorabilities of time and space upon ourselves as ultimately impermanent, mortal, corruptible. "Since time and space are intangible and dauntingly infinite, we cling intellectually and emotionally to our experiences and memories of the material world that is so reassuringly solid" (Adams, Hoelscher, and Till 2001a: xiii). Yet the fictional permanence of places and identities as unchanging also serves to entrap people in the pre-given

notions about the places they are associated with, and to allow for defensive senses of place which are intolerant of difference and change. Doreen Massey has long cautioned about the regressive sense of place, arguing instead for an "extroverted" notion of places, which, rather than having boundaries around them, are more like nodes in open and multi-scalar networks of connectivity. Most recently, Massey's (2005) concept of the "thrown-togetherness" of place explicitly works against the romantic notions of timeless places and pre-given identities rooted in places. Massey notes that places have no inherent coherence; rather, it is we who construct that notion, through our stories about places and ourselves in relation to places. She notes that this is the case even when we are talking about the geological makeup of places, using the example of Skiddaw, a "massive block of a mountain, over 3000 feet high, grey and stony; not pretty, but impressive; immovable, timeless" (p. 131) in England's Lake District where Massey was staying with her sister. Viewed in the long span of geological time, even the massive Skiddaw – seemingly so fixed and emblematic of this place and people's relationships to it over the centuries – was on the move. "*Immigrant rocks*: the rocks of Skiddaw are immigrant rocks, just passing through here, like my sister and me only rather more slowly, and changing all the while" (p. 137, emphasis in original).

Massey's approach to the impermanence of place through geological time might be termed a place-biography. Biographies spanning a mere human lifetime are another way that place is shaped through what Hayden Lorimer (2003) calls "small stories." In Lorimer's approach, place is constituted as a nexus of intersecting biographies. He used the historical traces offered by notebooks, photographs, journal entries, personal accounts, and letters to glimpse into how a month-long winter residential field course at Glenmore Lodge, located below Scotland's Cairngorm Mountains, brought together biographies that shaped places at a particular moment in time. In 1951, 14-year-old Margaret Jack was invited to attend a month-long winter residential field course for girls at Glenmore Lodge. Robin Murray, a PhD student in Aberdeen University's Geography Department, was the girls' field studies instructor. The intersecting biographical experiences of Margaret and Robin, argues Lorimer, are every bit as important in understanding the construction of place – the place of the geography department where Robin studied and worked, the Lodge, the Cairngorm Mountains, and of Scotland itself – as the grander historical narratives that often encourage us to overlook these "small stories." "As unlikely subjects, Margaret Jack and Robin Murray do more than simply put this story *in place*: their presence, captured in a variety of forms, propels its narrative" (Lorimer 2003: 202, emphasis in original). And in turn, biographies provide a way (through narrative) of participating in place as a part of one's own history. It is to the participatory dimension of place that we now turn.

Place and Bodies in Motion

Humanistic understandings of place emphasize its sensory, experiential dimensions. It is through participating, over time, in a locale and with others who also inhabit that locale, that place emerges. This participation typically involves some sort of active engagement of the body. With respect to place, the body is important "as a physical and biological entity, as lived experience, and as a center of agency, a location for speaking and acting on the world" (Low 2009: 26). Phenomenology, a branch of philosophy that centralizes the role of intentional experience in generating knowledge of the world, has been employed by geographers who suggest that bodily engagement in the world around us creates an experiential

lifeworld and, thereby, an operational definition of place rooted in experience (Relph 1976; Seamon 1979; Tuan 1991). A phenomenological approach to place might well be a strategy for recovering the unmediated and authentic relationship to nature, other, and self, and as such reactionary in its stance vis-à-vis modernity (but see Rose 2010); alternatively, it can be seen as a way of highlighting the role of the human body in our experience of the world. Edward Casey (2009) goes so far as to assert that places can *only* be experienced through bodies, while place itself is scaled to the human body:

> A place cannot be too enormous or it ceases to be a place (i.e., it becomes a "region" in the usual sense of this term as signifying a large stretch of space), nor can it be too tiny (then it becomes a mere "spot"): it is scaled to the lived body, I would insist. (Casey 2001: 229)

The most common form of human bodily engagement with place, and certainly the most commonly remarked upon in writings by British geographers, is walking (Edensor 2000; Gray 2003; Wylie 2002, 2005; Murphy 2011). Our upright bipedal motion, variously purposeful and pleasureful, shapes our experience of place, as well as shaping place itself.

> Walking has created paths, roads, trade routes, generated local and cross-continental senses of place, shaped cities, parks, generated maps, guidebooks, gear, and, further afield, a vast library of walking stories and poems, of pilgrimages, mountaineering expeditions, meanders, and summer picnics. (Solnit 2001: 4)

Put more directly by the artist Andy Goldsworthy (1990: 1), "Place is found by walking." Walking generates a particular way of meditatively, deeply experiencing place, leading to what Adams (2001) has termed a "peripatetic sense of place."

The peripatetic sense of place is, however, becoming progressively eroded in a world where humans are ever more moved and informed by technologies rather than the power of two feet. Adams' (2001: 187) lament that the disappearing "stroll as a source of pleasure and the foot as a means of serious transportation, which together were for a long time at the root of a strong and deep sense of place," can surely be seen as part and parcel of the general regret at the loss of place in modern times discussed earlier. The experience of place is thinned as the experience of walking becomes less necessary, and less possible with the concomitant loss of public places through which to walk.

Other forms of bodily movement, as well, are the subject of geographers' musings about place. Dance (Thrift 1997), aeromobility (Cwerner 2009), automobility (Featherstone 2005), and cycling (Spinney 2009) provide some examples. As with walking, these modalities of bodily engagement with place go beyond the functional to constitute creative activities through which place and self are literally mobilized. Remarking on setting up camp, for instance, John Wylie (2002) asserts that the overnight stay leads to a different, not just an enhanced, experience of place, as compared to a day trip:

> The erection of the tent (the building of a dwelling) does not "add" to the experience, does not give "depth and texture" to an otherwise "shallow" or fleeting vision, does not make one feel "more connected" with the environment than a camera-toting tourist. Driving the pegs into the ground, muddying one's shoes and knees, does not bring one "closer" to the landscape "itself," rather it is a *creative* act which opens up a *new* spatiality and a *new* temporality. (p. 449, emphasis in original)

The non-representational view of place as dynamic and sensual in turn touches on debates with respect to the fragility of place and its ever-crumbling and reassembling nature (e.g., Malpas 1999) versus the perdurability of place (e.g., Casey 2001); in short, to the permanence or perishability of place and of self (see also Lorimer 2005). In addition, to view movement as constitutive of both place and self tacitly counters notions of place as pause in the flow of space-time. Movement of the self through space, rather than arrest through representation, catalyzes place, as for instance an asphalt road becomes a place "remade each time I walk down it" (Low 2009: 30; see also Macpherson 2010). In this view, which touches on non-representational theories in geography, place is dynamic and in tension with the self, rather than a structured (through the framing of landscape, narrative, or biography) pause amidst flow onto which meaning is layered over time. Thus walking and biography are two very different ways of being in-place.

The Intimacy of Place

Last but not least, there is an important emotional component to the relationship between self and place (Tuan 1991, Smith *et al*. 2009). Place is deeply felt in childhood, a time when the conventions encouraging socio-spatial distancing – respect, fear, suspicion, and restraint among them – do not have as strong a hold as they do on adults. "Children relate to people and objects with a directness and intimacy that are the envy of adults bruised by life" (Tuan 1991: 137). Yet place attachments deepen and strengthen as experience accumulates – indeed, the need for place is one of the most elemental of human needs. The formation of emotional, sentimental bonds between people and a place, and people with one another in place, is an important component of being human in the world. Place attachments play central roles in human biographies.

> Place attachments result from accumulated biographical experiences: we associate places with the fulfilling, terrifying, traumatic, triumphant, secret events that happened to us personally there. The longer people have lived in a place, the more rooted they feel, and the greater their attachment to it. (Gieryn 2000: 481)

The positioning inside versus outside of place is an important distinction with respect to identity, resting as heavily as it does on belonging and exclusion. Thus one of the most central emotional needs with respect to place is belonging; concomitantly, one of the most universally feared conditions is that of exclusion. This is surely evidenced in the fact that exile – the forceful removal of the self from place – is one of the most universally grieved plights.

> Place-making, by setting up boundaries, gives rise to the polarities of "in" and "out," "us" and "them." Being "in," an insider, is good; being "out," an outsider, is bad. And so it is a great misfortune to be exiled – as an outcast or only a little less so, to be a stranger or foreigner, raised in villages and towns beyond the pale. (Tuan and Strawn 2009: 30)

The removal from place, and even more so the removal of place, or even the prospect of an unknown place, can incite emotions of anxiety, dread, terror, and panic amongst humans, because it violates our elemental need for place predicated on experience, and leads to "the existential predicament of place-bereft individuals. That predicament is one of place-panic: depression or terror even at the idea, and still more in the experience, of an empty place"

(Casey 1997: 6). At best, exile accounts are replete with emotions of sadness, nostalgia, and longing.

Home, "the topography of our intimate being" (Bachelard 1994: xxxvi), is the site of our most intimate of relationships with place, as well as one of the first that we experience. Homes (places invested with meaning and experience) and houses (the physical structures within which most human homes reside) frame the family dynamics that are so central to shaping us as adults. They provide refuge from the outside world at times in life (infancy, illness, old age) when we are particularly fragile. They nurture us by providing a place for reproduction, regeneration, and respite. The houses of childhood are familiar territory, one to which we return in our memories as adults as we seek to stabilize our sense of self. "[B]y remembering 'houses' and 'rooms,' we learn to 'abide' within ourselves . . . the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them" (Bachelard 1994: xxxvii).

Homemaking, as with place-making more generally, is closely connected to boundaries and processes of inclusion and exclusion.

> "[H]ome" is often understood as a place within which only certain people and things belong . . . For example, a house or a flat where a person lives is made into "home" partly through their ability to spatially exclude certain people. (Holloway and Hubbard 2001: 77)

In turn, one of the hallmarks of an established place is the ability to articulate and enforce its boundaries. Over time, the coherence and solidification of distinctive places sharpen the boundaries between that place and others: "Social and cultural cohesion within each place gains at the expense of its people's sympathy for outsiders and the outside" (Tuan and Strawn 2009: 30).

Love is not a tremendously common theme in the scholarship on place attachments and emotions. Yet "love of place" – topophilia – is a well-recognized hallmark of the positive human relationship to place. Yi-Fu Tuan, whose book *Topophilia* (1974) provides a lengthy consideration of the affective bond between people and place, asserts that those with the most intimate connections to place, namely, children and farmers, have the strongest experience of topophilia. Gaston Bachelard (1994), who also employs the term topophilia, takes a more romantic approach to the affective connections to place through what he terms "the poetics of the house."

Rethinking Place

Without a doubt, the sort of unwavering, unconditional love of place expressed by Tuan and Bachelard is an idealized relationship, one that is quickly belied by the too often violent, tragic realities of the social relationships that occur in places. A more realistic treatment of love in relationship to place may be found in work that deals, for instance, with landscapes of memory, for such work is cognizant of the multiple emotions associated with love and place. In the case of the seaside memorial benches on Mullion Cove, for example, love works in tandem with other emotions: loss, melancholy, loneliness. Indeed, the openness presupposed by love invites fracture and distancing and loss, of the self from others, of the self from place, of the self from the self. "The constitutive fissure of the geographies of love thus becomes the ruination of any phenomenological sense of the 'world' " (Wylie 2009: 285). Emotions (and philosophical approaches) predicated on union of self and place instead reveal the impossibility of such a union, and of the self as precariously placed at best.

Thus questions about place, and the role of the self and the self's experiences, emotions, and movements as they relate to place, dredge up some of the most profound questions about human existence on earth. Can such a thing as a dis-emplaced self exist? Is there such a thing as place at all without the self? What is the nature of the human need for place – is it an innate component of the human soul, or a learned trait? Is an unmediated relationship to nature, others, and oneself possible? What does it mean to be in the world? How do we understand the balance between the permanence and the fragility of place, and of self?

Far from being a dead-end topic, place continues to encapsulate some of the deepest human desires and paradoxes.

Notes

1 Place is, however, a particular focus in many of Williams' novels.
2 Though see Casey (1996), who argues that in fact place precedes space, with the latter being a modern derivation of the former.

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