A Turning Point in the Study of Eileen Gray's Modern Architecture

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A full analysis of Eileen Gray's approach to architecture and design is now necessary for any thorough presentation and discussion of modern architecture, specifically in architecture history textbooks. This argument is based on three main points. One, Gray's work was initially omitted from surveys and the modern "canon" because she was a woman. Two, scholarship has reached a turning point in both the attribution of her work and in the discussion of its historical importance. And three, her work provides case studies for student learning that expose key contributions to the discourse on modernity not offered by other architects at the time. While Joseph Rykwert argued for the significance of Gray's work in 1971, a review of thirteen history of architecture survey texts available through 2019 shows only six mentioning Eileen Gray or her work. The number implies a largess that doesn't actually exist. In one case only her last name is given in a footnote. In another two, her name is only included within a list of other names. It's time to make room for her architecture and design positions in how we talk about modern architecture in our histories, anthologies, surveys and sources: in our textbooks and course readers. What's at stake is the canon. And it's

time for Eileen Gray.

INTRODUCTION

Eileen Gray's architecture exists where experience, time and space interact. She contributed distinct positions to modern movement discourse and, through her theoretical projects, built work and writing, offered new conceptualizations of architectural design. This historiographic sketch demonstrates a turning point in how her work is credited and in the acknowledgement of its historical importance. Two types of texts form the basis of this sketch: architecture history and theory textbooks and monographs of Gray's work. Discrepancies between the two sets are noted and additional resources inform the larger arguments. Both types are examined for word use, attribution and the extent to which the work is discussed in terms of its design and the design's relationship to larger discourse within the profession.

The turning point in scholarship on Gray's architecture is signaled by documentation of her architectural training, changes in the attribution of her work, and the growing critique of her work offering meaningful conclusions on par with that of other modern architects. These shifts take place from one monograph to the next and, tied to the ongoing renovation of *E.1027*, create new criteria in the assessment of texts used in teaching history of architecture and architecture theory courses that cover the development of modern architecture.

From this review, what's the singularly most important thing missing in how we teach and talk about Eileen Gray's contributions to Modern Architecture? Her work in textbooks.

A full analysis of Eileen Gray's approach to architecture is now necessary for any thorough presentation and discussion of modern architecture, specifically in architecture history textbooks and anthologies. This argument is based on three main points. One, Gray's work was initially omitted from surveys and the modern "canon" because she was a woman. Two, scholarship has reached a turning point in both the attribution of her work and in the discussion of its historical importance. And three, her work provides case studies for student learning that expose key contributions to the discourse on modernity not offered by other architects at the time.

ARCHITECTURAL TRAINING

Documentation of Eileen Gray's architectural training has emerged alongside new understandings of her career. Joseph Rykwert reintroduced E.1027 and Tempe à Pailla to the profession in 1968¹ and 1971². At the time, full documentation of Gray's architectural training was not available, leading him to note "it is the sophistication and assurance of her work which seems most surprising: her very first building...already displayed a full and original understanding of the language of the modern movement up to that date, and gives it an original interpretation."³ This statement refers to E.1027 and is echoed by her biographer, Peter Adam, in his text first published in 1987⁴ with a 2008 update. In the later, he offered that "Today it still seems unbelievable that an untrained person could almost single-handedly build a house that has become a classic of modern architecture, anticipating many tendencies adopted by later generations."⁵ Two related points have come to light since these statements were made: Gray was trained and E.1027 was not her first building.

Over time, the scholarship Rykwert initiated filled in the "surprising" and "unbelievable" gaps in her training. As he noted in 1968, "Eileen Gray, like Van de Velde and Behrens, started as a painter."⁶ Gray directed her education from art school to private tutoring⁷ to professional furniture production to architectural

training through practice. Her training and practice in developdesign (and sometimes develop-design-build) projects began with her own house in 1921⁸ and continued through the decade with a series of four house projects in the town of Vézelay, France. Goff explained that "It is now known that three of the houses at Vézelay during the 1920s are attributable to Gray as they have previously been considered a collaborative project between Badovici and Gray" and that the projects "further facilitated Gray's architectural education, providing her with ample experimental ground to perfect techniques which she later used in *E.1027.*"^{9 10}

Gray was always engaged in direct production. She worked synthetically and directly with materials in painting, lacquer, furniture design, textiles and architecture. With the rediscovery of her earlier practice experience, her expertise and authoritative work at *E.1027* no longer seem aberrant or mysterious.

ATTRIBUTION

During her career, Gray did not receive credit for her built projects at Vézelay. But by far, the most contentious struggle for credit revolved around her first masterwork: *E.1027*. At the time, her authorship of the house was clear. She designed and directed the construction of the entire house and site with both herself and Jean Badovici as clients.¹¹ The house was presented by both of them in a special issue of *L'Architecture Vivante*¹² in 1929 and then, subsequently, over time Gray's authorship of the project was eroded and erased by Badovici, Le Corbusier and others in the profession.^{13 14 15}

Since the reintroduction of her work by Joseph Rykwert in 1968, historical accounts have moved in the opposite direction, oscillating over time, but resolving toward the clear attribution of the project to Gray. In his first article "Un Omaggio a Eileen Gray-Pioniera del Design" from 1968, Rykwert described *E.1027* as "designed in collaboration with Badovici".¹⁶ But by 1971 his account changed. In "Eileen Gray: Two Houses and an Interior, 1926-1933" he refered to the house as part of her "architectural oeuvre"¹⁷ and described Badovici as a client, not a collaborator. Full design credit was given to Gray for the project and he further argued that Tempe à Pailla was an advancement in the application of her design approach and "a much more accomplished exercise".¹⁸ The 1987 version of the biography Eileen Gray Architect | Designer by Peter Adam also described Badovici's role in E.1027 as that of a client and gave clear credit to Gray for the design and construction of the house.¹⁹ In the updated text Eileen Gray: Her Life and Her Work from 2008 he gave a more detailed account of her work at Vézelay and underscored that at Badovici's residence "Badovici only finished the ground level façade. He took most of the credit for the whole house, although the plans are clearly in Eileen Gray's hand."²⁰

In both the 1987 and 2008 versions, Adam chronicled the erosion of proper attribution for the house beginning with Le Corbusier, in "It is almost as if he wanted the world to believe

that the house was not built by her."²¹ He noted that "Eileen's name disappeared increasingly from texts whenever E.1027 was mentioned."²²

After such a thoughtful display of Gray's erasure from the project, the tide shifts again with the next monograph on Gray's work by Philippe Garner. In his 1993 text he found a masculine role for Badovici stating that he "acted as collaborator, bringing his technical knowledge to the project".²³ Eileen Gray's work had always been consciously technical in its material craft, programming and mechanical details and the seamlessness with which she synthesized the technical with the poetic in her work is one of its salient hallmarks. Garner's expansive and richly illustrated exhibition of her work testified to her technical expertise, but his words did not. He repeated this claim later in the text reiterating that Badovici "provided essential technical support, for she had no formal training as an architect."24 This role for Badovici as "essential technical support" was not referenced and did not come from Rykwert or Adam, nor from Gray and Badovici in L'Architecture Vivante.

In her 1996 chapter "Battle Lines: E.1027" Beatriz Colomina reasserted Badovici's role as client for *E.1027*, clearly attributing the project to Gray with "It was designed and built between 1926 and 1929 by Eileen Gray for Jean Badovici and herself."²⁵ She continued Adam's chronicle of misattributions and documented that "the confusion continues, with many writers attributing the house to Badovici alone or, at best, to Badovici and Gray, and some still suggesting that Le Corbusier had collaborated on the project."²⁶

The next large-scale monograph of Gray's body of work was published in 2000. In it Caroline Constant examined the significance of Gray's architecture and expanded the account of Gray's architectural projects from three²⁷ to nine²⁸. Her account credited Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici jointly for *E.1027* and provided an appendix with "A Note Concerning Attribution of E.1027." She highlights the project name *E.1027*, that parenthetically situates Badovici's initials within Gray's, and the fact that the edition of *L'Architecture Vivante* was coauthored, and the project co-presented, by them. Constant saw Badovici's collaboration as "fact" stating that the design for the house "grew out of the creative interaction between two individuals".²⁹

But the house did not passively grow; it was designed with detailed intention, expert craft and concerted effort and that intention, craft and effort was made by Gray. Badovici's influence in Gray's career as an architecture critic, sounding board, publicist, instigator and client is not in doubt. But that doesn't mean that he jointly designed *E.1027*.

The turning point in attribution of *E.1027* came from the next major monograph: *Eileen Gray: Her Work and Her World* by Jennifer Goff. Published in 2015, the text coincided with the reopening of the house to the public after an extensive first phase

of restoration. Goff made distinctions between partnership and authorship and clearly credited Gray for *E.1027*. Badovici's role as client was presented again as Goff explained "Eileen Gray's first independent, fully-realised, domestic architectural project was *E.1027*, which she created for Jean Badovici."³⁰ She continued the discussion with "Gray gave Badovici credit as being a collaborator on the project but significantly all of the extant plans are solely in Gray's hand. Despite inspiration being drawn from various architectural sources, notably Le Corbusier, Gerrit Rietveld and Adolf Loos, it is important to make clear that Gray was the sole designer of *E.1027*."³¹

Of the many subplots of authorship concerning *E.1027*, one additional shift serves to demonstrate a turning point in the study of Gray's work. Constant provided a detailed analysis of Gray's shutter and window system for the house and placed it within the context of contemporaneous debates between Auguste Perret and Le Corbusier.³² Goff built on this critique while pointing out that "Though Gray designed the system, Badovici held the patents."³³ She explained that both the design studies and final detailed drawings of the system where all drawn by Gray.³⁴ In her own account when interviewed by Adam, Gray responded that Badovici "had ideas for the roof and the staircase."³⁵

The discovery of Gray's collaborative and solo designs at Vézelay and the restoration of credit for her design of *E.1027* set the stage for an unencumbered discussion of the significance of her work in histories of architecture.

THEORY OF DESIGN

Gray's projects can be discussed in terms of the medium of time, the integration of building, landscape and environment, flexible program, and within all of these, experiential design and multivalency.

Time. Gray carefully diagrammed the interactions of circulation and activity with time and daylight for both *E.1027* and *Tempe* à *Pailla*. Time was a dimension of designed experience that she drew into her work, using it as a poetic medium and the interaction of activity, time and light created experiential resonances.³⁶ Goff provided a detailed discussion of the "Fourth Dimension" in Gray's work and underscored its importance as both a theoretical approach to architectural design and its impact.³⁷ The medium of time was further exposed through interaction with both built-in and loose furniture across daily habits and events.³⁸

Integration of Building, Landscape and Environment. Gray's architecture created a direct dialog between interior and exterior, building and site, not only through the extension of interior space into gardens and terraces but also through the landscape and design of environmental systems.^{39 40 41} The northern window-shutter system and southern multilayered envelope assembly in *E.1027* were multifunctional and allowed

for separate control of privacy, solar heat gain and ventilation.⁴² ⁴³ Using this system, interior views could be reoriented from sea to garden.⁴⁴

Flexible Program. Grey's Programmatic flexibility was intended to provide freedom of choice, independence and a sense of well-being for inhabitants and was achieved in multiple, overlapping scopes—that of the building, of the human body, and of the project's details. The glass panels of the southern envelope assembly could pivot to be completely retracted, transforming the interior living space into an open-air belvedere.^{45 46} For the inhabitant, individual choice, activity and body posture informed the disposition of interior spaces and the deployment of furniture integrated into the architecture. The adaptable, mechanical operations of her built-in furniture followed through to the fittings and details.^{47 48 49}

Experiential Design. Direct and poetic experience of the senses was ingrained into both *E.1027* and *Tempe à Pailla*. The haptic experience of materials, operable fittings and adaptive furnishings worked in concert with sound, views and thermal experiences—from the warmth of the sun on ceramic tile flooring⁵⁰ to the cool touch of shaded aluminum⁵¹, from the colors of the sunset to the cooling ocean breeze. Her environments not only responded to reach, range and postures but were completely synthesized with the experiential qualities of the environment and its effect on well-being.^{52 53 54}

Multivalency. Eileen Gray was an architect and artist whose work achieved poetic experience through technical means and expressed technicity through poetry. Her work often asserted the position of "both/and", breaking down boundaries between artificially constructed absolutes and offered a theory of multivalent design that imbued an engagement with time, interiority and exteriority, and programmatic flexibility with interpretation. She posited *E.1027* itself as both a fully realized environment and a treatise to guide design thinking.⁵⁵ It was both practice and theory.

GENDER BIAS

In 1979 as he curated an exhibition of Gray's work at the Museum of Modern Art, J. Stewart Johnson wrote "it must be remembered that she was a woman working almost entirely alone on the edge of a profession that was both highly organized and almost exclusively male."⁵⁶ In 1996, Patricia Conway prefaces *The Sex of Architecture* by demonstrating that "women continue to encounter obstacles created by gender prejudice at defining moments in their careers."⁵⁷ Two decades later and the profession still struggles to include, benefit from and acknowledge the contributions of women. From the start of her career to the present, Gray's architecture and the scholarship on her work cannot be understood apart from the extent to which they were produced within a larger social environment of gender harassment, discrimination and bias. Speaking broadly, Agrest, Conway and Weisman assert that "an analysis of gender

in modern architectural criticism reveals a social system that has historically functioned to contain, control, or exclude women."⁵⁸

Eileen Gray's work exists within this struggle. Women won the right to vote in the United States in 1920 and in Gray's home country, the Republic of Ireland, it was 1922.⁵⁹ In France, the adopted site of her career, women did not have the right to vote until 1944. Both *E.1027* and *Tempe à Pailla* were designed and built within this liminal space, suspended between personal identity and the rights of personhood. Scholarship on Gray's work presents a unique case in that the project of acknowledging her work—her authorship of it and its importance—has developed concurrently with the women's movement. Today society is increasingly armed with the language and conceptual instruments to articulate both pervasive and acute accounts of gender bias, prejudice, harassment, discrimination and the associated dimensions of their enactment.⁶⁰

LANGUAGE

Gender bias is a broad social construction not constrained to any specific or differentiated identities of gender or gendered interactions. And it is often exposed in language. The field of study examining linguistic processes and how they relate to, expose and reproduce gender bias offers another approach to understanding shifts in scholarship on the work of Eileen Gray. In their overview, Menegatti and Rubini explain that "Language is one of the most powerful means through which sexism and gender discrimination are perpetrated and reproduced."61 Language based on gendered stereotypes can be seen in word choices associating women with "communal/warmth traits" and men with "agentic/competence traits". Menegatti and Rubini emphasize that biased language affects the audience's thinking and behavior and that such word choices concretize stereotypes and "can produce actual discrimination against women."62 In this case the audience includes students of architecture, who will become the profession.

Drawing from this field, scholarship can be examined for:

- The extent to which word choices categorize content according to stereotypic-consistent dimensions of agency or communion and further by dimensions of logic & action (agency) or emotion & passivity (communion)⁶³
- 2. The frequency of positive and negative adjectives in association with stereotypical traits⁶⁴
- The expression of either "hostile sexism" or "benevolent sexism"⁶⁵
- 4. Terms that infantilize women⁶⁶

 Variations in levels of abstraction: to interpret facts as either concrete and "transient" (not a personal quality) or abstract and "durable" (associated with intrinsic ability)⁶⁷

Research on the relationship between language and gender bias has developed over time and continues to offer increasing clarity into stereotypic-consistent word choices and patterns of language not previously accessible to analysis. This brief discussion tests these assessment tools against the three large-scale monographs of Gray's work to expose how shifts in the use of stereotypic-consistent language can be identified in order to mitigate the transmission of gender bias through language in future texts. As Menegatti and Rubini suggest, "the use of stereotypic-consistent words operates beyond people's awareness and could play a particularly powerful and insidious role in perpetrating gender inequality."⁶⁸

Adam's biography of Gray often used positive agentic language to describe Badovici and communal or non-agentic language to describe Gray.⁶⁹ This inscription of gender bias was exposed when he described Gray's choice to work independently though the use of terms such as "she was unable" or Badovici was "hovering over her". Badovici in this passage is described as having "expertise".⁷⁰ "Unable" conveys failing and being "hovered over" conveys weakness—both are negative agentic descriptions, but "expertise" is a positive agentic description conveying competence. Later Adam explained Gray's relationship with Badovici by saying that she was "infatuated with the very persuasive" Badovici.⁷¹ "Infatuation" is a term associated with adolescence and serves to infantilize Gray. The adjective "persuasive" promotes a sense of agency for Badovici that is simultaneously eroded for Gray. He described the production of her two masterworks as "endearing" and as "a record of disastrous professional ineptitude."72 "Endearing" falls squarely into the communal dimension of gender bias, which is then contrasted by negative descriptions in competence dimensions. While Adam's descriptions used stereotypic-consistent terms, his text gave agency to Gray in his detailed accounts of her work and in the inclusion of her voice, directly in the text.

A look into Constant's *Eileen Gray* presents a sharp contrast between the words used to describe Gray's work and those used to describe Gray herself. In the text, as a person, Gray was often framed in a weak position, lacking in agency or competence, or as deserving blame. Her career was referred to as an "involvement in architecture," where "involvement" is a communal term that communicates tentativeness.⁷³ Blaming language was used to communicate a shortfall in the stereotypic expectation of communal traits, described as "her reluctance to participate"⁷⁴ again she was blamed with a shortfall in competence in both "her designs attracted only sporadic attention"⁷⁵ and "Through these omissions".⁷⁶ Sociability and morality are subsets of the communal dimension of gender bias in language⁷⁷ and the assignation of blame points to the subset of morality. The description of how she developed conceptual instruments used terms that communicated dependence, such as her "reliance on certain leaders," that she "distilled ideas from," and "her architecture drew upon".⁷⁸

Badovici was consistently treated with agentic terms such as, for *E.1027* "Badovici delegated much of the design responsibility to Gray". The term "delegate" communicates hierarchical structure and prominence, whereas previously in the same passage, Gray is described as "taking prime responsibility for both design and construction".⁷⁹

In contrast, the text consistently offered an elevated critique of Gray's architecture and used strong, agentic language that did not follow the same patterns of gender stereotypicconsistent terms. In the assertion that "Gray's focus on the kinesthetic, tactile, and sensual potential of architecture and furniture in both E.1027... was unprecedented in Modern-Movement discourse", "unprecedented" was not equivocated and presented a position of strength in the dimension of competence. In the same section, her approach to architecture was presented with terms such as "Gray challenged", "adapting", "sought to overcome" and "by engaging"—each descriptive term conveyed a sense of agency in her work.⁸⁰

Another shift in language and word use took place in Goff's monograph. Descriptions of both Gray and her work exhibited patterns of word choices not based on gender stereotypes. In opening the discussion of Gray's architectural career, statements described that "she took the role of architect", "she completed", "Gray expressed" and "She acquired", repeatedly using positive agentic language.⁸¹ The projects at Vézelay were described with the positive agentic/competence terms "facilitate", "education", "perfect", and "techniques".⁸²

As in Constant's analysis, Goff's discussion of Gray's work offered an elevated critique with the use of agentic/competence language not reflective of gender bias. Gray's *House for an Engineer* was described as her "first unique architectural project which…reflects Gray's interest in…."⁸³ "Unique" speaks to competence, as does "interest" to agency. Throughout the text, Gray's ownership of her actions was clearly communicated along with the impact of her design approach.

TEXTBOOKS

Rykwert's article asserted that "In the particular case of Eileen Gray the modest quantity is in sharp contrast to the extraordinary quality: quality high enough to set her among the masters of the modern movement".⁸⁴ And while he argued for the significance of Gray's work in 1971, a review of thirteen survey texts widely available through 2019 shows only six mentioning Eileen Gray or her work.⁸⁵ The number implies a largess that doesn't actually exist. In one of those texts only her last name is given in a footnote and the attribution of her work is unclear.⁸⁶ In another two, her name is only included within a list of other names.^{87 88} William Curtis gives clear credit to Gray for the design of *E.1027* in *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. Design principals of her work are generally discussed and *E.1027* is specifically mentioned but not analyzed in detail. A large image shows the interior of the project, but no exterior view accompanies it. Curtis prefaces a discussion of Gray's furniture with that of Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand's, although Gray's furniture came much earlier.^{89 90}

In Harry Francis Mallgrave's 2005 text, Gray is given credit for *E.1027*, but her work is couched within Le Corbusier's theories—theories that she openly challenged.⁹¹ The actual positions underpinning her design approach are not mentioned.⁹²

The 2018 edition of *Buildings Across Time: An Introduction to World Architecture* includes a large photo of the renovated *E.1027*, situated in the site. The authors do not call Gray an architect, but they do clearly credit her for having "built" the project along with *Tempe à Pailla*, and *Lou Pérou* (although none of the projects are mentioned by name). An account is made of architectural components at *E.1027*, but like Curtis and Mallgrave, the authors position Gray's work following Le Corbusier's, in this case her work is located in the section titled "Le Corbusier's Five Points".⁹³

MOVING FORWARD

We now have a clear picture of the theoretical positions underpinning Gray's architecture and design work. Increasingly, critiques and analyses of her work offer meaningful conclusions about her theories of design, the impact of her design decisions and the unique contributions she made to the discourse on modernity.

Current scholarship provides a clear history of her training in architecture and of the attribution of her work. Her projects and design approach provide case studies for student learning on designing with time, experience, human activity, multivalency and the integration of building, site, and environmental systems that create agency and experience. Moving forward, entries in histories and textbooks can avoid the transmission of gender bias to students of architecture and the profession.

Eileen Gray's projects exist where experience, time and space interact. It's time to make room for her architecture and design positions in how we talk about modern architecture in our histories, anthologies, surveys and sources: in our textbooks and course readers. What's at stake is the canon. And it's time for Eileen Gray.

ENDNOTES

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- 6. Rykwert, "Un Omaggio," 33[23].
- 7. Jennifer Goff, *Eileen Gray: Her Work and Her World* (Irish Academic Press, 2015), 256.
- 8. Goff, Eileen Gray: Her Work and Her World, 257.
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- 18. Rykwert, 70.
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- 20. Adam, Eileen Gray (2008), 117.
- 21. Adam, (1987), 335; Adam, (2008), 148.
- 22. Adam, (1987), 335, sim.; Adam, (2008), 149.
- 23. Philippe Garner, Eileen Gray: Designer and Architect (Taschen, 1993), 29.
- 24. Garner, Eileen Gray, 140.
- 25. Colomina, "Battle Lines," 167.
- 26. Colomina, 173
- 27. Rykwert, 67.
- 28. Caroline Constant, Eileen Gray, 2007 ed. (Phaidon, 2000), 5.
- 29. Constant, Eileen Gray, 246.
- 30. Goff, 255.
- 31. Goff, 262.
- 32. Constant, 107-109.
- 33. Goff, 265
- 34. Goff, 312, note 53.
- 35. Adam, (2008), 97.
- 36. See Goff, 268.
- 37. See discussion, Goff, 278-282.
- 38. Goff, 279, 290.
- 39. Goff, 280, 351-352.
- 40. Constant, 144, 153.
- 41. Adam, (2008), 98-99, 121.
- 42. Constant, 107.
- 43. Goff, 265-266.
- 44. Adam, (2008), 102.
- 45. Constant, 107.
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- 47. Adam, (2008), 102, 116.
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- 62. Menegatti and Rubini, "Gender Bias," under Introduction.
- 63. Menegatti and Rubini, under *The Origin of Gender Bias in Language: Gender Stereotypes.*
- 64. Menegatti and Rubini, under *Research on the Content of Gender Stereotypes in Job-Related Language.*
- 65. Menegatti and Rubini, under Origin.
- 66. Leskinen and Cortina, "Dimensions of Disrespect," 114, 115.
- 67. Menegatti and Rubini, under *Recent Developments: Subtle Gender Bias and Linguistic Abstraction.*
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- 69. The 2008 biography is an update to the 1987 version and much of the original text remains. For the purposes of this "test" the updated version is used that includes text from both dates.
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- 81. Goff, 255.
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- 90. See also, Adam, 63; Goff, 150.
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