"Night-time Slave Meetings in Saint-Domingue (La Marmelade, 1786)" by Gabriel Debien

Translated from *Annales historiques de la revolution française* 44, (April-June 1972): 273-284, by <u>John Garrigus</u>. Author's note: It is my pleasure to thank my friend M. Jean Fouchard who carefully read this manuscript and added notes, and Dr. M. Chatillon, of Abymes, Guadeloupe to whom I owe a number of suggestions. Edited for the web by <u>Sue Peabody</u>.

As in France, magnetism had its moment of stylishness and success. [Translator's note: "Magnetism" refers to the controversial but wildly popular theories of Dr. Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), a German physician whose claims to be able to cure all diseases by manipulating the body's electrical fields caused a sensation in late eighteenth-century France and in Saint-Domingue. Mesmer's theories were strongly opposed by many scientists of his day. From this craze we take the expression "to be mesmerized" meaning "to be hypnotized."] This was at the time when the Count and Countess de Puysegur were in Cap Français, in June 1784. At the charity hospital, the Count de Puysegur organized sessions around Mesmer's tub, calling forth all willing invalids. A multitude of the handicapped came forth and a few of them returned cured, for a while, at least. Beginning in its edition of June 23, 1784 the Affiches americaines, Saint-Domingue's gazette, describes the furor around the magic tub. [Author's note: A certified copy signed by Puysegur (at Le Havre, June 29, 1786) claims that one Jean Rousseau, on September 23, 1784, signed the following agreement at Cap with Antoine Mesmer: out of philanthropy and for the benefit [bonheu] of virtuous men, Mesmer agreed to teach his theory to Rousseau on the condition that Rousseau not prepare any student nor publish any treatise on magnetism for any prince or government, Mesmer reserving this right. He would not perform any public treatment without Mesmer's authorization. If Rousseau violated these terms, he promised on his honor to pay a fine of 150,000 livres. (Document auctioned at the Hotel Drouot March 2, 1967, lot number 16) Rousseau accepted. This agreement suggests that Mesmer had a fairly regular correspondence with Saint-Domingue.]

Did this movement affect the free people of color and free blacks or not? There is reason to believe that charlatans claiming to cure by electric charges were able to profit from the public's gullibility and earned quite a bit of money. This led to an increased practicing of witchcraft, but it especially produced a number of large gatherings; however, all slave gatherings were strictly forbidden because they posed a risk of disorder and rebellion.

As soon as possible officials put a stop to these practices. The Supplement des Affiches americaines of June 3, 1786 summarizes a recent decree from the Superior Council of Cap Francais which expressly forbids all blacks and mulattoes to practice or exercise "Magnetism" or "bila." This decree was enacted the day after a series of night-time gatherings which some saw as a grave danger. Arrests had just been made and a trial was being prepared which would end in July of the following year before the Cap Francais Council. This was the case of Jerome, or

Stake [Jerome dit Poteau], a mulatto from the canton of Marmelade in the North province of the colony.

It is rare to find documents on the nocturnal comings and goings of the slaves, or on their meetings. These gatherings needed to be secret. Few colonists talked about them, although they were usually the ones who intervened in these cases, which combined voodoo, witchcraft, magic and certain African dances. But since these colonists acted as judges, no record remains of their reactions. The administrative and judicial authorities only got involved in the most important of these cases. They saw them as a cover for the practice of witchcraft. It is therefore in the records of the district courts [sénéchaussées] and Superior Councils that we must first look, though without much hope of making any significant discoveries.

This time we have several documents about what the police believed involved magnetism or "le bila," providing the date and location of some of these gatherings and describing them, although what they offer is neither complete nor even clear.

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Marmelade, where these gatherings occurred, was a district of high mountains where plantations had only recently been established. "The establishment of Marmelade as a parish dates only to November 25, 1773. The region had been made profitable by coffee planting and was in full development. The workforces of these coffee estates were populated by slaves newly brought from Africa, the majority of them Congos.

Moreau de Saint-Méry is the first to speak to us about the Marmelade affair. He summarizes it in the sarcastic tone of an Enlightened man of the period who knows exactly what he thinks about Mesmerism, about spirit possessions, about prophets, and especially about swindlers and superstition. He will not provide us an explanation of what happened. One would surely not expect to learn that Marmelade was the place chosen to bear forth [fructifier] the ideas of magnetism, variously described, as in Europe, according to the views of those who propagate it. They appeared in Marmelade accompanied by the charades of the Prophets [Illumines], by the disgusting scenes of spirit possession and by excesses of desecration, for they wanted to profit by this fraud. The Superior Council of Cap Frangais had vainly warned the sectarians of this dangerous doctrine in a decree on May 16, 1786. One so-called,

Jerome, known as Stake, mulatto, assisted by Telemaque, negro, nevertheless continued to extort money from the slaves by introducing them to false mysteries in night-time gatherings, held in remote places, which brought about an enormous participation by these weak and superstitious men.

Superior to them because of their gullibility, Jerome sold them "mamen-bila" (little limestone rocks) contained in sacks called "fonda"; the red and black seeds of a type of locust tree, that he called "poto" but especially sticks or clubs called "mayombo" into which the powdered "maman-bila" has been poured by means of a gimlet, giving them the power to defeat another

negro whose stick did not have the "mayombo," at no risk to themselves.[Translator's note: Stick-fighting was common among Saint-Domingue slaves.] Jerome would take a *gourde* [about five colonial pounds] for a "poto," but he charged four for a mayombo." He had assistants who taught on their own, giving him half their profits, and all preached independence. Jerome was sent to the galleys for life, by decree of the Council of Saint- Domingue on November 13, 1787 and it was thought that his disciple Telemaque would be sufficiently punished by staying at his side while in the stocks in Cluny market in Cap Francais, providing a striking example of the inability of his practices to help him escape the punishment that justice must always exact for such daring quackery.

The source that Moreau de Saint-Méry used to present the case of Jerome in his manner can be found in his papers at the French National Archives [Colonies, F3 192]. This is an extract from an affidavit made by Sieur Gressier de la Jalousière, a colonist of the Marmelade district and given to M. Baratte, another colonist of the district. It dates from May 26, 1786 and shows us better than Moreau de Saint-Méry does, how Jerome practiced and formed a religious sect among the slaves. It shows some of the punishments that threatened those who revealed the secret of the sect and of the night-time gatherings. The testimony. of Gressier de la Jalousière suggests that these were directed against the whites.

In the canton of Corail, in Marmelade, Jerome, who belonged to Sieur Bellier, a resident of the district, held gatherings of slaves in the banana groves and in other distant places, especially at night. These gatherings brought together as many as 200 slaves. All participants were held to secrecy.

Jerome brought a sack of pebbles, a powder horn, a round iron and small pieces of paper. From his sack called "fonda" he removed "little rocks, round and flat," the "maman-bila," to put in a glass of cane liquor. He poured the cannon powder in the liquor "to rouse them to a fury." If he put in pepper and white powder it was for those who had a fever. He sold little red and black seeds--"poto"--which revealed those who were "macandals" (poisoners) and those who stole chickens. The little pieces of iron or "nabots" ["the ball," one of the punishments used for inveterate runaways and those suspected of poisoning] were presented, to be attached to the foot to denounce the first who revealed the secret of these gatherings. This iron represented the whip and the cells that were being built then on many plantations to punish those believed to be guilty of poisonings. The little pieces of rolled paper signified the lashes that the traitors would receive. The "mayombos," filled with powder, brought a high price when they had several nails and a large "fontange" [probably a ribbon] they brought 2 *Portugueses* [a Portuguese was worth 66 colonial pounds]. Their case sold for a *gourde* [5 1/2 pounds].

If one wanted to know those who were in charge and determine if they had the means to kill themselves if necessary, one had only to inspect the sticks of the slaves and remove the nails. The white power and pepper that were found there said it all. Those who carried the sack could be recognized from their stick which had five or six nails. These were the leaders.

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A third document rounds out Moreau de Saint-Méry's summary and Gressier de la Jalousière's affidavit. This is the closing speech given by the acting royal attorney before the Superior Council of Cap Français when the case came before this tribunal. This closing speech is found in the papers of Français de Neufchateau, at that time the attorney general of the Cap Français Council. It must be noted that he was one of the founders of the Circles of Philadelphes which had been organized at Cap Français during the summer of 1784, just after the Mesmerizing sessions of the count de Puysegur, and to oppose them [Translator's note: This Circle of Philadelphes or of "Brotherly Love" was a learned society founded in 1784 by Moreau de Saint-Méry and others in the colony's legal and medical professions who were interesting in disproving the Mesmerism that had recently been imported from France].

Trial conducted before the Court at the request of the royal attorney general about the nightly gatherings held in the Marmelade district by the negroes with the goal of giving and account and exposing bila or the supposed magnetism.

As you have seen, Sirs, by the recent reading before you of all the trial documents, Monsieur the Attorney General- presented you in his remarks to the court on May 16 with a denunciation of the numerous night-time gatherings held by the negroes for the purposes of magnetism or bila on several plantations in Marmelade.

This fact was important enough for us to bring it to your attention; consequently you ordered in a decree that same day that I would investigate this by virtue of the request of the royal attorney general.

In his second remarks to the court on June 23, Monsieur the attorney general denounced to you the two leaders of these gatherings, namely Jerome, mulatto and Telemaque, negro, both belonging to Sieur Belier residing at Horn Island.

You indicted these two suspects in a decree of the same day. Both are fugitive and charges have been inscribed against them in absentia.

A third suspect, namely Jean, negro slave of Sieur Molliers [Michel-Alexis Molier, coffee planter at Ennery, then still a canton in the Marmelade district], resident of Souffrière, was arrested August 29 on the plantation of Monsieur the Chevalier de la Rivière in Ennery canton and is held in your prisons by virtue of the warrant of arrest you issued against him in your decree of October 7 rendered after the royal attorney general's third remarks to the court that same day.

This suspect, interrogated the next day, 9, firmly and obstinately denies the deeds attributed to him. Authorized by your decree of October 7 to travel with Monsieur the attorney general to the district of Marmelade to carry out an investigation, we therefore did so at this place October 12 and the following days.

This investigation based on 27 witnesses proves unanimously by all depositions the constant fact of these numerous night-time gatherings [National Archives, 27 AP/12].

Several depositions testify to the nature of these same gatherings and provide details of the bizarre playacting and the ridiculous ceremonies practiced there.

The others name the leaders: five charge the said Jerome, two charge the said Telemaque, eight charge the said Jean, held in prison, one single deposition charges the said Julien, also in custody.

Charges against the said Jean, negro, suspect. The charges against Jean are found in the depositions:

- 1. of Sieur Henry Esteve, first witness in the continuation of the investigation
- 2. of his negro valet named Jasmin, 2nd witness
- 3. of Sieur Jacquin, managing the plantation of M. Esteve in the Souffrière district, 2nd witness
- 4. of Sieur Lagarde, surgeon of the Fouquet plantation, 11th witness
- 5. of Sr. Molliers, owner of the said negro suspect, 17th witness
- 6. in the Marmelade district, of the so-called Scipion, negro slave of the LaLanne plantation [the coffee estate of Jean Lalanne, which seems to have been a small plantation], 6th witness
- 7. Philippe, negro slave of Sieur Desplas in the Souffrière district, 9th witness
- 8. Dimanche, negro slave of Monsieur Esteve in the Souffrière district, 21st witness

All these witnesses, after having reviewed their depositions, were confronted with the said negro Jasmin [Translator's note: This may be Debien's eror, "Jean" would be more logical] as well, except for M. Molliers, 17th witness, unable due to illness.

Let us analyze a little the text of their depositions.

Last August 29 Sieur Henry Esteve and his negro valet Jasmin stopped the negro Jean on the plantation of Monsieur the Chevalier de la Rivière in the Ennery canton. The said negro was armed with a hunting knife and a stick at the end of which was a little iron in the form of a bayonet. Moreover, he had around his neck a little sack in which was a case with a passport signed Brule carrying the inscription: to the so-called Simon Lafleur. The said Jean believed that he was free [That is to say, free to roam, unofficially free].

Monsieur Esteve adds that the said negro, once in the stocks, admitted that he was the one who held the gatherings on the plantation of Monsieur Esteve his brother and at the place of Monsieur de Saint-

Martin in Marmelade [Bernard de Saint-Martin, senior member of the Cap Français Council in 1789, who owned a coffee estate in Marmelade and a house in Cap Français] and his negro Jasmin adds that the said Jean came on the plantation of Monsieur de la Rivière where he was arrested to hold other such gatherings, that he had even already sent his emissaries for this purpose to find branches of avocado bushes and others.

M. Jacquin, overseer of Monsieur Esteve, says that in the course of the month of last July, he saw clearly through the cracks in the hut of the negro Jean Lodot, the negro Jean in the middle of a considerable gathering, the said negro on his knees before a table covered with a cloth and lit by two candles, rasing to different heights a "fetage" [fetish], and that he was not able to clearly identify the negroes silent on their knees during this ceremony, he adds that he found two "manchettes" [machetes, or large cutlasses, farming tools and sometimes weapons, generally carried by slaves and which, it seems, they kept permanently, without having to turn them in at night when the day of work was over] crossed on the ground [Voodoo symbol], at the spot where the negro Jean had been.

The said Dimanche, negro slave of the plantation of M. Esteve, says that he was several times at the gatherings held by the negro Jean on the plantation of M. Esteve, his master; that these gatherings were called "mayombe" or "bila." he adds details of the ceremonies practiced there, such as putting strawberry, orange or avocado leaves in their hands, having them kneel and in this posture having them drink cane liquor into which pepper, garlic, and "blanc d'Espagne" had been mixed and that when this drink made them fall, the said negro would raise them up with a blow from a machete [using the flat of the blade, another symbol]. He adds that the negro Jean carried with him in a bandolier a little sack in which was a crucifix, some pepper, some garlic, some gunpowder, pebbles, nails and a case. Furthermore he adds that he took money from the negroes to spare them from these ceremonies, and telling them that that would save them from any punishment [Author's note: If "spare" eviter is the word, it would mean to be excused from the ceremonies; it is far simpler to believe this was an error and to read "invite" inviter instead. Translator's note: In this case the sentence would read, "invite them to these ceremonies"].

The so-called Scipion, negro slave of the LaLanne plantation in the Marmelade district, says that he knows the negro Jean very well from having seen him often come to the plantation of his master in the company of the mulatto Jerome to hold gatherings there. The details that he gives of what happened at these gatherings are the same as those already given, except he adds some new aspects, like saying that they put powder in their hands and lit it [In Voodoo, this is called making someone "canzo", i.e., impervious to fire] and that they drenched them with cane liquor. He adds, like the other witness, that they took money from them for these ceremonies and for the cases that they sold them.

The so-called Philippe, negro slave of Sieur Desplas, planter in Souffrière, says he had often seen the negro Jean at the house of the mulatto Jerome, that he also witnessed several times the gatherings held there and the details that they [sic] give of them are very close to the same as those preceding.

Sieur Lagarde, surgeon, 14th witness, says only that he had hunted the negro Jean at different timesduring his escape; that the said negro was armed with a machete and a stick.

Sieur Moliers, owner of the suspect negro Jean, says only that the negro was missing from his plantation several times, that among other instances, during one of these escapes he stayed on the lands of Sieur Belier, master of the mulatto Jerome.

These, My Lords, are the charges brought against the negro Jean, which contain the proof that this negro was joined with the mulatto Jerome and like him held gatherings that are the subject of this trial.

Charges against Jerome -- The charges against the mulatto Jerome, in absentia, are contained in the depositions: of the so-called Benoit, 1st witness; of Sieur La Jalousière, 2nd witness; of Sieur Duhournit, 3rd witness; of Sieur Brejon, 5th witness; of Sieur Charette, 13th witness. All these witnesses, having reviewed their depositions, were not able to confront the suspect, since he is absent.

All unanimously testified that they know perfectly well the night- time gatherings that were held by the negroes on the different plantations on which they live, and are not unanimous to testify that the leader of these gatherings was the so-called Jerome, slave of Sieur Be1iers.

Charges against Telemaque -- The charges against the so-called Telemaque negro of Sieur Beliers and his slave driver, accused in absentia, are found in the depositions: of Sieur Desplas, Sth witness; of Sieur Charette, commander of Marmelade, 3rd witness.

Sieur Desplas testifies that being a close neighbor of Sieur Beliers he was convinced that numerous gatherings were held on his property, that one time in particular there was one so tumultuous that he was constrained to go there, that, his arrival having dissolved the gathering, he found several "gourdes" strewn at the place where it had been held; that after the reproaches that he, the witness, made to the negro Telemaque, slave driver of the said plantation, this negro told the witness's house servant: "Toi, voire toi Gonaïves encore, mais toi va conné nègre de Ilslet à cornes" [In creole: "You think that you are still in Gonaïves (a part of the colony), but you will soon know the power of the Negroes of Horn Island"]. That the next day this same servant of the witness was taken by a violent colic that was soon followed by his death.

Sieur Charette in his deposition after having described in detail the disorders caused in the district by the frequent gatherings there led by the mulatto Jerome, [added that the negro Telemaque (Translator's Note: These words added to make sense of the sentence as transcribed by Debien)] belonging to Sieur Beliers also figured in these gatherings as the valet of the said mulatto, his associate and as dangerous as he.

The fact that they fled must be considered as additional proof of these charges against the negro Telemaque and the mulatto Jerome.

Charges against the suspect negro Julien -- Finally, against the 4th suspect in the trial (the so-called Julien, negro slave of the LaLanne plantation in the Marmelade district), we found only one charge which is contained in the deposition: by the so-called Goma, negro slave of the Cappe plantation of the Marmelade district [Pierre Cappe, who owned a coffee plantation in Marmelade. He was a second lieutenant of the grenadiers in the Quercy regiment and became a colonist when this regiment was garrisoned in Saint-Domingue (National Archives, Colonies, E 62)], 22nd witness in the investigation. This witness, having reviewed his deposition, confronted the suspect. He said that it was the negro Julien who held gatherings at Mme de Tremais's place [Her coffee estate neighbored the Cappe property. Mme Kerdisien de Tremais was the widow of a general navy commisioner who had been comptroller in Cap Français and, in 1763, subdelegate of the intendant of Saint-Domingue and member of the Superior Council of Cap Français. (Archives Nationales, Colonies, #234].

Having established the facts and revealed their authors, My Lords, we have only to weigh the first and determine the legal penalties for the latter.

As for us, we admit that if the gatherings of negroes in a country like that we inhabit, where their number so far exceeds that of the whites ... did not inspire well founded fears and dangerous consequences, we would not find that there is much of crime in all this. This is just what happens elsewhere, a gullible and moronic multitude, seduced and deceived by skilled performers or clever charlatans, who take their stupid belief and use it for their own profit; but what elsewhere should only be considered a scrupulous swindle [sic], and punished as such, is something very different because of the regime of the country in which we live. Thus the laws made for these colonies see such gatherings as serious crimes and inflict capital punishments against them. We will cite you two that seem very applicable to the present sort: the edict of 1685, first, known as the Code noir, and your decree of April 7, 1758 (these are read).

These two laws, as you just heard, My Lords, authorize judges to order the death penalty for repeat offenders and in aggravated circumstances. Now these two cases come together and regrettably draw from us the severe interpretation of the law. First of all, there were repeated offenses. You have seen that these gatherings were held in different places and at different occasions; secondly, the circumstances are aggravated. The depositions testify to several disturbances that these gatherings have caused among the slaves. Moreover, the leaders of these gatherings practiced fraud and swindling, one of them is an armed escapee and the two others are still fugitives.

Therefore, my advice concerning the so-called Jerome known as Stake, mulatto and the so-called Telemaque, negro, both slaves of Sieur Be1iers, residant of Horn Island, is to declare them convicted in absentia of having held night-time and disturbing meetings on the different plantations of Marmelade and neighboring places, under the name of magnetism, "mayombo" or "bila," there to have made up and sold to negroes amulets in reparation for which they will be hung by the neck and strangled to be executed in effigy; we declare the negro Jean similarly convicted of the same facts, similarly condemned to be hung by the neck and strangled until

dead; as for the negro Julien, we condemn him to attend the execution and then be returned to his master.

Decree of the Superior Council of Cap Français on slave control

Article 1. -- All planters are forbidden to tolerate gatherings and superstitious ceremonies that certain slaves have continued to hold so that one has died and that they improperly call prayers, on penalty of a 900 pound fine against the masters and a whipping of the slaves who attend for the first time and greater penalties for repeat offenders.

Article 2. All freedmen and slaves are forbidden to make up, sell and distribute or buy amulets and "macandals" on the pain of prosecution for desecration and tempting to the full extent of the edict of 1682 [sic].

Article 3. -- All slaves belonging to different masters are forbidden to gather in churches after sundown, to assemble day or night for any reason on a plantation or elsewhere, on pain of corporal punishment, not to be less than the whip or branding with the fleur de lys, in cases of frequent repeat offenders or other aggravating circumstances, such slaves may be punished by death.

Code Noir or Edict of 16 March 1685.

Article 16. -- Similarly we forbid slaves belonging to different masters to gather, either day or night, for marriages or otherwise, on the property of one their masters or elsewhere, and even less in the highways or remote places, on pain of corporal punishment which will not be less than whipping or branding with the fleur de lys, and in case of frequent repeat offenses and other aggravating circumstances, will be punished with death, which we leave to the decision of the judges. We urge all our subjects to pursue all offenders, to arrest them and take them to prison even though they themselves are not officers and there have been no decrees issued against these slaves.

Selection from the statement of the king concerning crimes committed by venoms or poisons

From December 30, 1746.

Article X - we similarly forbid any slave of either sex to make up and distribute any remedy in powder or any other form or to try to cure any illness with the exception of snake bite, on pain of severe punishment, even death if the case requires. We desire even that the slaves who on the pretext of making snakebite remedies have made up or distributed substances not fit for this and which serve only to cure other illnesses, be condemned to the punishments described by this article....

In all these versions of Jerome, we are far from the Count de Puysegurs tub and it is not at all easy to understand what these assemblies where, according to these texts.

Although Moreau de Saint-Méry and the Superior Council of Cap Français spoke of magnetism, nothing in the vague descriptions that we have here allows us to connect these night-time gatherings with Mesmerism. These are two unconnected phenomena. These gatherings were, rather, of African origin, involving bewitchment and spell-casting. Moreau de Saint-Méry speaks "of excesses of desecration." Does this word suggest an echo of voodoo, still far off? The testimony of Jacquin, the overseer on the Estève plantation, who described "a negro kneeling before a table covered with a cloth and lit by two candles," that of the slave Dimanche from the same coffee estate who used the word "ceremony," -- do they suggest voodoo? There are no examples of trances.

It is indeed difficult to conclude; for the word "magnetism" is only there because of the reaction against the craze for the supposed miracles of Chastenet de Puysegur, and against those practices seen as frauds and swindles. It is obvious that the closing trial remarks present a different perspective from that of Moreau de Saint-Méry, who protests here against the acts of superstition and magnetism. In the attorney's remarks, these gatherings are not considered high drama and did not appear to the acting royal attorney [undoubtedly Auguste-Jean Bruiley, famous for his attempts to grow nopol cacti for raising cochenille beetles, to make red dye. He became mayor of Marmelade in 1790. His coffee plantation was in Ennery canton (National Archives, E 54)] to be directed against the whites. Nevertheless, the workings of the colonial mind are in evidence,- the acting attorney speaks of dangerous consequences and demands the death penalty. Moreau de Saint-Méry follows closely the testimony of Gressier de la Jalousière, his only witness. The attorney takes a wider view, synthesizing a number of testimonies.

Finally, were these gatherings really secret? They were so non-secret, at least those that were held on the Despas coffee estate, that the colonist claims to have been obliged to intervene -- or have his slave driver intervene -- to impose silence. Undoubtedly this was not the case everywhere and these noises were exceptional. Perhaps the assemblies were called secret in the sense of "mysterious," or "incomprehensible." [Author's note: Generally when an outsider enters the place where a secret ceremony is being held, that ceremony is suspended and resumed after the intruder's departure. Though it appears secretive, this may instead reflect the belief that the presence of an outsider will inhibit the coming of the "loas" (spirits or saints) who are being summoned.] They appeared to be frequent, rather familiar to the slaves and not unknown to their masters.

The word "mayombo" or "mayombe" which appears several times suggests teh Congo. This was a mountainous district of coffee plantations where the slaves were mostly Congos. Did their dominance leave this mark?

⁵⁴ This acting attorney was undoubtedly Auguste-Jean Bruiley, famous for his attempts to grow nopal cacti for raising cochenille beetles, to make red dye. He became mayor of Marmelade in 1790. His coffee plantation was in Ennery canton. (French National Archives, Colonies, E 54).

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