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REMARKS

ON THE

Principles of Gothic Architecture,

AS APPLIED TO

ORDINARY PARISH CHURCHES.

BY THE

REV. JOHN LOUIS PETIT, M.A.



READ BEFORE THE OXFORD SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING THE STUDY OF  
GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE, AT THEIR MEETING, FEB. 24, 1846.

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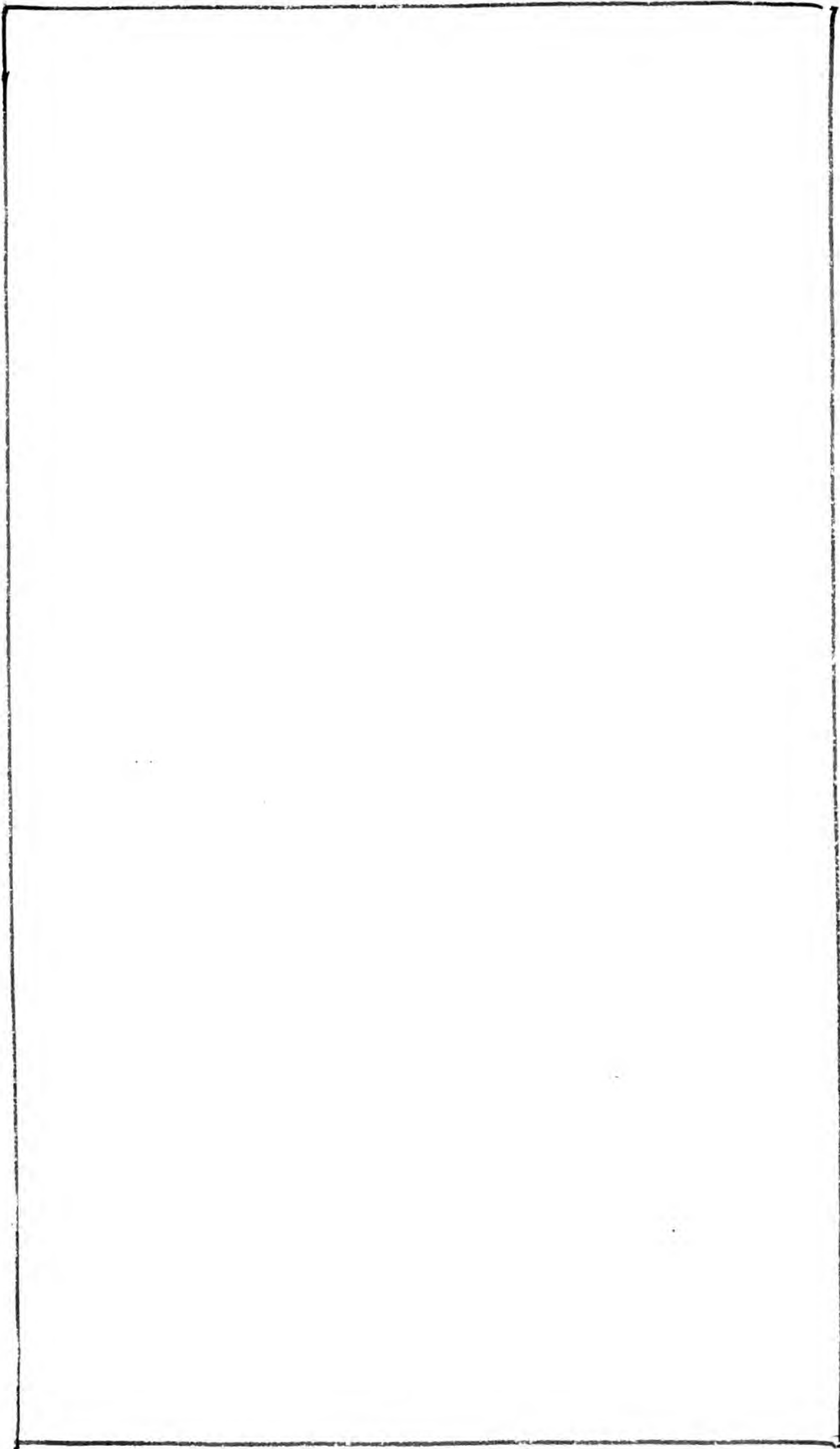
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ON THE PRINCIPLES

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**Gothic Architecture,**

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AS APPLIED TO ORDINARY PARISH CHURCHES.



It has often struck me, that in speculating on the impressions produced by works of Gothic architecture, we are apt to draw our inferences from observations on a certain class of buildings, namely, cathedrals, and churches which may rank with them in design and ornament; while we are at little pains to examine how far these inferences are applicable to structures of a very different kind, our ordinary parish churches.

Now if Church architecture has, or is intended to have, that effect upon the mind through the medium of the senses, which conduces to elevation of the feelings, to tranquillity, and devotion, this latter class of buildings is of more importance than the former; inasmuch as the cathedral is rare, and seen by comparatively few; while the parish church is found in every corner of the land, and hallows the home of almost every individual on its surface.

But if we content ourselves with the inferences we draw from the examination only of structures of greater magnificence, and more elaborate workmanship, we must of

necessity look upon these humbler buildings as imperfect developments of a principle that is fully worked out in none but the types we have studied; and as owing their whole interest to the relationship they can claim with them by the exhibition of certain common features.

This I conceive would be an erroneous and unworthy view. I look upon the beauty of our parish churches as consisting in some actual perfection of their own; of a nature common indeed with the cathedral, but not the less independent and inherent in themselves. I would not for a moment dispute either the truth or the importance of principles which have been already announced, and which only could have been arrived at by a careful observation of structures of the highest order. But I would examine to what extent these are carried out in the great mass of our Ecclesiastical works, and if we find an apparent deficiency, it is worth our while to enquire, whether the principle we have laid down be not too narrow and limited to form the basis of an art of such wide application, before we condemn a vast class of important buildings, as being faint and imperfect imitations of a few great examples.

Let us take for instance a principle, the best known, the most universally admitted, and the least controvertible of any; I mean, the predominance of the vertical line: this we may safely pronounce to be a great distinguishing characteristic of Gothic architecture; yet it may be well to consider whether it is in itself the grand principle, or a particular branch of some more extended principle. We should surely sacrifice truth to theory if we were to assert that the predominance of the vertical line is obvious, that it would have struck the eye of any one still in search of a leading principle, in by far the greater number of our parish churches of the pointed style. It is not suggested by

the low, plain octagonal piers, with their simple but well defined capitals, which are so common in churches of every period; by the wide, obtusely pointed arches, with their two chamfered orders; by the low clere-story, with its windows small and far apart; by the bays undivided by any shaft internally; by the windows, many of which, even in the Decorated style, are flat-headed, or segmental; by the plain, flat embattled tower, frequently without even pinnacles, and of proportions rather massive than lofty—yet a church with all these features, may be perfectly satisfactory to the eye, and have all the dignity and solemnity attainable in the style.

It is even possible for a building to be decidedly Gothic in character, while it has scarce a single detail which can be pronounced purely Gothic. I do not know what is the date of the tower and chancel of Hanley church, in Worcestershire, or what alterations it may have undergone, but the present details seem to be Elizabethan; and yet the character of the church as dependent on these portions, (for I have not made the Decorated nave a prominent object in my sketch,) can fairly be called Gothic, and capable of producing those impressions which we receive on the view of old Gothic buildings.

The predominance of the vertical line clearly does not present itself as a leading and obvious principle in such buildings as we have noticed; it could never have been discovered, had we not been able to refer to our cathedrals and the churches approaching to them in character; and hence, as I have observed, it seems reasonable to suppose that this principle, true and important as it is, may be but a certain application of one more widely extended, though perhaps less easily enunciated.

In discussing the subject, we are led to consider, what

is grounded upon natural propriety, and what upon conventional propriety. By natural propriety, I mean the accordance with rules which nature itself points out to us, whether we are enabled to receive them intuitively, or forced to work them out by strict investigation. Such are those depending upon mechanical laws, which clearly ought to be observed, both in reality and appearance; and beyond these, there are evidently laws of proportion, more difficult, even if not impossible, to be defined and investigated; which nevertheless we feel instinctively, and to which we are enabled to adapt our compositions. By conventional propriety, I mean that which regulates the adaptation of a work to the particular purpose for which it is intended; which also harmonizes it with certain preconceived ideas and associations; which adds to the natural and inherent principles of an art, others, by which its several works are appropriated and individualized. That the architecture of a nation should take a decided tone from its historical reminiscences, or religious views, is so natural, that the conventional propriety on the observance of which depends its peculiar distinctions and characteristics, seems almost to take its place upon a level with natural propriety. Yet influential as it is, it must in the foundation, and even in the development of an art, occupy a subordinate position. No great work can be based on conventionality; and therefore I am unwilling to admit that symbolism is in any way to be considered as the basis and groundwork of our architecture, however materially it may have influenced it during its progress. Those great and sacred truths which are the objects of symbolism, while their contemplation cannot fail to give a tone to the productions of art, are not calculated, as they were never intended, to take the place of its natural principles; and



to set them in this position, is, in my opinion, to misapply them utterly, both to their own disparagement, and to the prejudice of the art itself.

I will therefore turn at once to the consideration of natural propriety, and especially that branch which is more tangible and definable, mechanical propriety.

In compositions of classical architecture the mind is led to dwell fully as much on the weight of the part supported, as on the strength and sufficiency of the supporting part. The ponderous entablature is forced upon the eye by bold and deep projections, and a series of mouldings and ornaments calculated to give richness, rather than to relieve heaviness. To say the least, the composition suggests too nearly an accurate balance between the power which supports, and the weight which is supported, to give that idea of durability without which the mind cannot be satisfied in any architectural work. In fact, if the idea of durability is suggested at all, it is so rather by the gigantic size of the blocks employed, than by skilful mechanical construction. Now the mediæval architect calls attention rather to the firmness of the support, than to the weight of the part supported; at the same time he takes care that the latter shall appear worthy of its elevated position, and of the strength employed in upholding it; for he devises means by which both weight is relieved and richness increased.

For instance, the octagonal pier of the village church in most cases is not carried up continuously into the architrave, but divided into two orders, each chamfered off at the edges; the arch above the capital thus having a greater number of faces, and these diminished in size, than the pier below. This principle of ramification pervades every part of a rich Gothic building; and I cannot help thinking that on this ground the early Decorated windows, which,

beautiful as they were, somewhat militated against the principle, were so soon superseded by a more flowing kind of tracery.

Again, we shall observe that much of the richness in the upper parts of a Gothic building is obtained by subtraction, instead of addition of material. By far the greater number of mouldings are sunk within, not raised above the surface of the wall; and this will apply both to rich architraves, and ornament by panelling.

It was probably felt to be a beauty that the crown of an arch should be clearly marked—the ancient architect did this by a key-stone, which suggests weight; the mediæval architect, by a point, which certainly gives lightness.

The horizontal line is no less necessary to beauty in Gothic, than in classical architecture; but in the one it is marked by a heavy cornice, in the other, by a light string.

I remember being much struck with a remark made to me by Mr. Prout; namely, that the beauty of certain continental towers consists in the comparative plainness of their lower stages, while the interest of the building increases towards the top. The steeple of Freyburg Minster is a fine example. But we need not go further than to St. Mary's for a striking instance of the same arrangement. The lower part of the tower is plain, massive, and well buttressed, giving the idea of great strength; while the upper part sprouts out into that remarkable group of pinnacles, spire, and spire-lights which is perhaps unrivalled. How such a composition draws the eye upwards, while the mind is satisfied with the security of the foundation, I need not say; nor will I, by entering into the trains of reflection which it is calculated to excite, deprive any individual of the satisfaction of following them up in his own manner.

Simple and easy of discovery as this principle may ap-

pear, namely, of manifest firmness in the support, and combined richness and lightness in the part supported, it would require deep study, and involve much curious and profitable speculation, to trace it in all its branches. That the predominance of the vertical line, and the pyramidical aspiring form attained by the use of the receding buttress, the pointed gable, the canopy, pinnacle, and spire, in all their varieties, are suggested by it, is easy to perceive; but even where this particular form of development is less apparent, the principle itself may exist, and be very manifest. The pier of few mouldings is adapted to the arch of many mouldings. The wooden roof, not plastered over, but shewing plainly its light material, and rendered still lighter in appearance by its intersecting framework, enriched with mouldings and bosses, crowns the simple clere-story. The parapet of the plain tower, as the case may be, is adorned with sunk panelling, or lightened by open work, or by the indentations of a battlement. On the plan of multiplying the faces in number, and diminishing them in size as we ascend, we see the octagonal lantern, or spire, placed upon the square tower. In broach spires, where there might seem to be a certain heaviness at the point of junction, bold and rich spire-lights effectually relieve it. The addition of ribs, and crockets of foliage, is also in pursuance of the same idea. But it is impossible to enumerate all the applications of this principle; I merely contend that it is as fully, though in a different manner, developed in the simplest parish church, as in the most elaborate cathedral.

Another striking feature in Gothic architecture, and closely connected with the predominance of the vertical line, is one to which Mr. Freeman has adverted in the able and important essay he has lately read before you; that of continuity. This also depends on mechanical

propriety; for it is evidently formed upon a correct relative position between the supporting and supported parts. Here again is opened to us a large field of observation and research, and one which we shall not find to be limited, even if we select as the objects of our study the very simplest class of religious structures.

One remarkable point of distinction in the Gothic style, as contrasted with the classical, and which evidently demands the strictest attention to mechanical propriety, is what I will call its catholicity. I mean its perfect adaptation, without the sacrifice of a single characteristic mark, to every clime, position, or command of material. Vitruvius makes a very important observation, which is far more applicable to the style of architecture we are now considering, than to that of which he himself treats. "Distributio autem est copiarum locique commoda dispensatio, parcaque in operibus sumptus cum ratione temperatio. Hæc ita observabitur, si primum architectus ea non quæret, quæ non poterunt inveniri aut parari, nisi magno." The power of working with materials which are not costly, or difficult to obtain, and yet producing a rich and noble composition, is peculiar to Gothic. While classical architecture demands large masses of stone, and even marble, a Gothic building may be constructed, (and Mr. Pugin has shewn us that much of its beauty depends on such construction,) of comparatively small pieces, which are more easily procured and handled, and for which, if stone itself be inaccessible, other materials may be substituted. No doubt we should deprecate the use of an inferior material where a better can be obtained; and the example of those mediæval architects is worthy of imitation, who imported, at much cost and labour, stone of the best quality for the erection of their



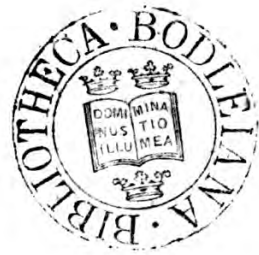
churches. Yet to pass a sentence of unqualified condemnation on the use of brick, shews an imperfect comprehension of the spirit of Gothic architecture, which adapts itself to every material we may be compelled to use. Many of the finest churches in Holland are built of brick; several in Italy; some in our own country. And any one who has studied English churches will have remarked how great a difference there is between the materials used in different districts, which, though it causes local varieties and modifications, in no case disturbs the generic character of the style.

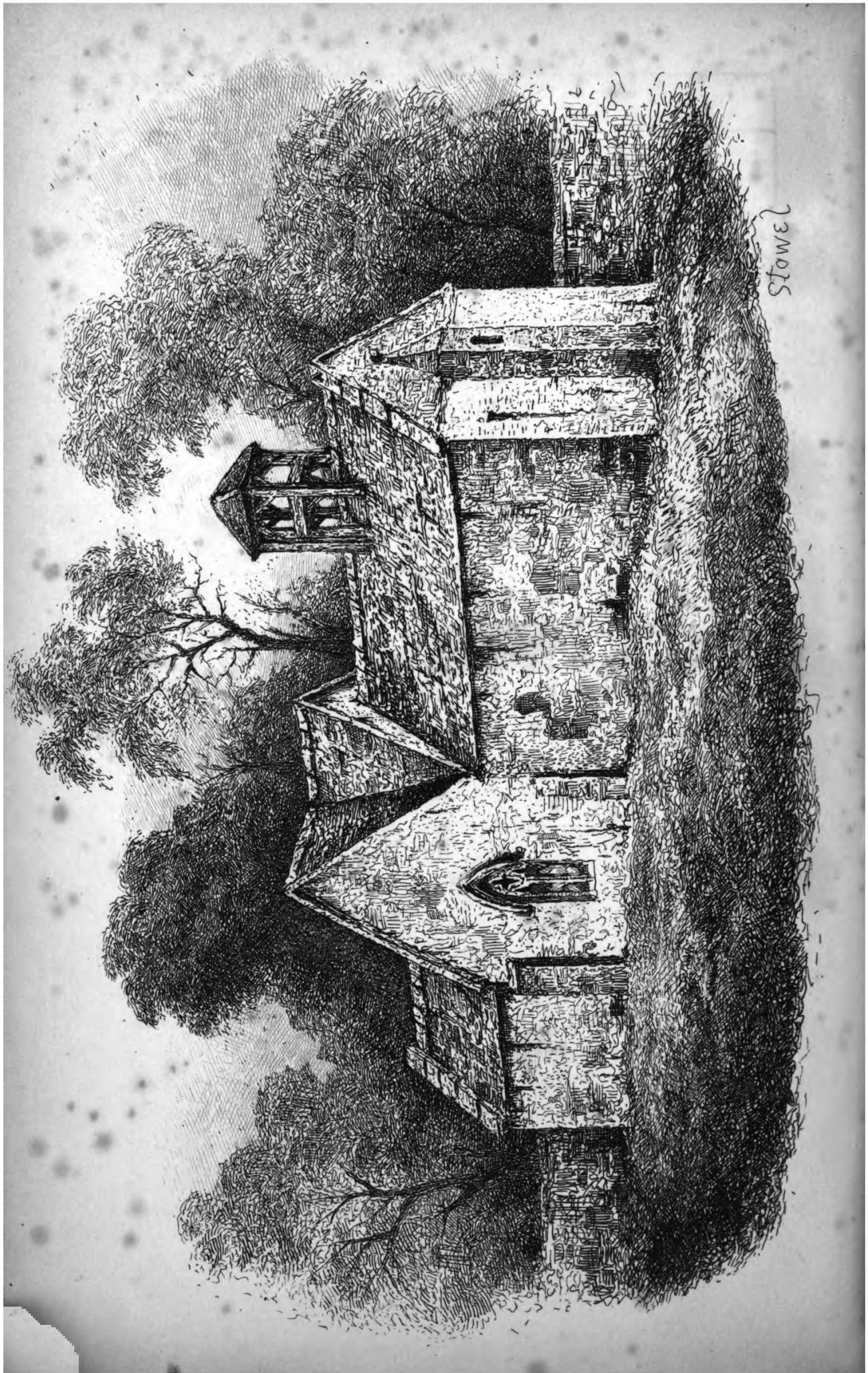
In regard to proportion, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to lay down any certain rule. The height of a tower, compared with its own breadth, as well as with the length of the church, appears to admit of every conceivable variety, and yet there may be within certain limits, so to speak, several maxima and minima of gracefulness. The length of the chancel, relative to the nave, seems to be guided by no definite rules. In some old churches I have observed chancels quite as small as those modern ones which are so justly condemned; and yet owing to some tact in the arrangement, whether a contrast in height, or a difference in gables, they are perfectly satisfactory to the eye. Some chancels have little or no perceptible distinction from the nave externally, as in the beautiful Decorated church of Bilton, near Rugby. And here I may notice a peculiar class of chancels, which appear to belong to one period, and have in some respects a common character. They are large in proportion to their naves, and have each four fine windows on the side; the tracery of which is different in each example, but they agree in being very dissimilar from all other Decorated windows of the same date. These examples are,



Checkley church, in Staffordshire, whose windows have plain intersecting tracery, without foliation, but the intersections are adorned with a kind of boss or rose. Norbury church in Derbyshire, which has tracery of a different description, with a bold foliation; the intersection however being ornamented, as in the former case, by a rose. Chartham, in Kent, which has a remarkable kind of tracery, a curious foliated quatrefoil, set diagonally, instead of vertically, being the predominant feature. Lawford church, in Essex, is another which has a chancel of a similar description; it is some time since I saw it, and I took no notes, but I can remember that the proportions of the mullions and the lines of the tracery struck me as being unlike any to which I had been accustomed in Decorated buildings.

Where the tower is central, it may be observed that a lofty steeple harmonizes best with a long chancel; a low tower with a short one; if the chancel be of less than the usual length, its deficiency may be compensated by large aisles or side chapels, as at Wrockardine in Shropshire; or by a difference in height from the nave; or by long transepts, as at Witney, in Oxfordshire. The apse of foreign churches has also a similar effect. At Tong, and Minster Lovel, the nave and chancel are nearly equal in length. At Shottesbrook the chancel is the longest. This is also the case at Etchingham, in Sussex, unless we are to consider this church as consisting of a nave and chancel of not unusual proportions, but having the tower raised upon the eastern bay of the nave. For its lower window ranges and assimilates with the clere-story, and the breadth of the tower from east to west is considerably contracted, so as to make it little or no wider than the other bays. At Hales Owen in Shropshire, the





Stowel

tower occupies the centre of the nave, there being a part eastward of it, to which the chancel as usual is attached<sup>a</sup>.

The only further remark I have to make upon the natural propriety so apparent in mediæval churches, is one which has frequently been made before ; but it cannot be too often repeated. It regards the actual size of the building. In the very smallest structures nothing has ever struck me as being a miniature, or model of some design intended to be executed on a larger scale. I cannot better illustrate this than by referring you to the curious little chapel of Stowel, near Northleach. It is a cruciform structure ; at least it has one transept, and was intended to have a corresponding one, if we are to judge from an arch in the interior, though the wall filling it up now contains a small Decorated window. The length of the building inside is about forty-eight feet, (few cross churches are to be found that are not nearly double that length.) The width of its chancel is about eleven, and its nave about twelve. Perhaps an ordinary tower in the centre would have given the whole too much the air of a miniature church ; but the composition which occupies that place, namely, four gables facing cardinally and raised a little above the roofs of the building, is perfectly in character with its small size. Whether it is original or not, I cannot tell, but its effect is very pleasing. It would be desirable to obtain working drawings (if none have been already executed) of this singular little edifice ; which presents some remarkable Norman features.

I will now trespass upon you no longer. My object has been, not to lay down new principles, or to shake those already established, but simply to throw out suggestions

<sup>a</sup> This is also the case in the Church of Rowington, in Warwickshire.



which may enable us to ground our judgment upon extended, rather than limited views. The pleasure we receive from the contemplation of works of art will thus be immeasurably increased, while our correctness of discrimination will be in no way diminished. By narrowing our views, we run the risk of exchanging a natural for a conventional taste; we shall be led to regret that we have no longer that tendency to unqualified and unquestioning admiration which we possessed in our childhood, when we see the noblest works disfigured, to our eye, by some fancied disagreement with notions which have been studiously inculcated. We shall sacrifice our sense of the majesty of such buildings as York and Gloucester, to the idea that they are defective, from the want of high pitched roofs and spires. By framing our ideas of fitness according to one arbitrary standard, we shall lose the perception of that beautiful variety which pervades the whole range of Church architecture; we shall learn to criticise fastidiously, where a correcter taste and a more just impulse prompt us to admire; we shall become insensible to the solemnity of some of our grandest Ecclesiastical structures, when we ought to be able to recognise, even in the simple village church, the development of an art, grounded on the firmest principles, devoted to the highest purposes, and taking a tone from the deepest and purest feelings of which the mind is capable.

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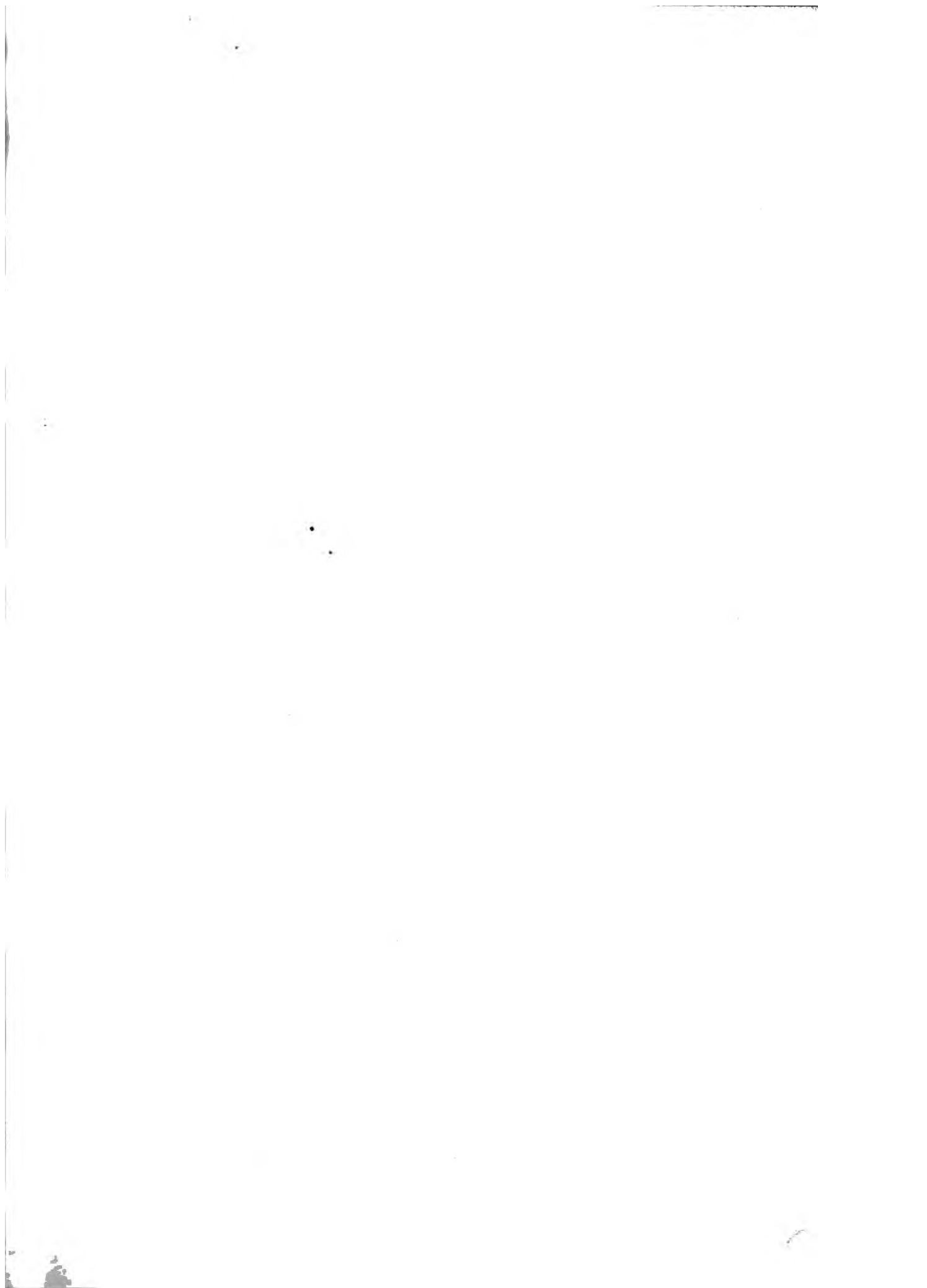
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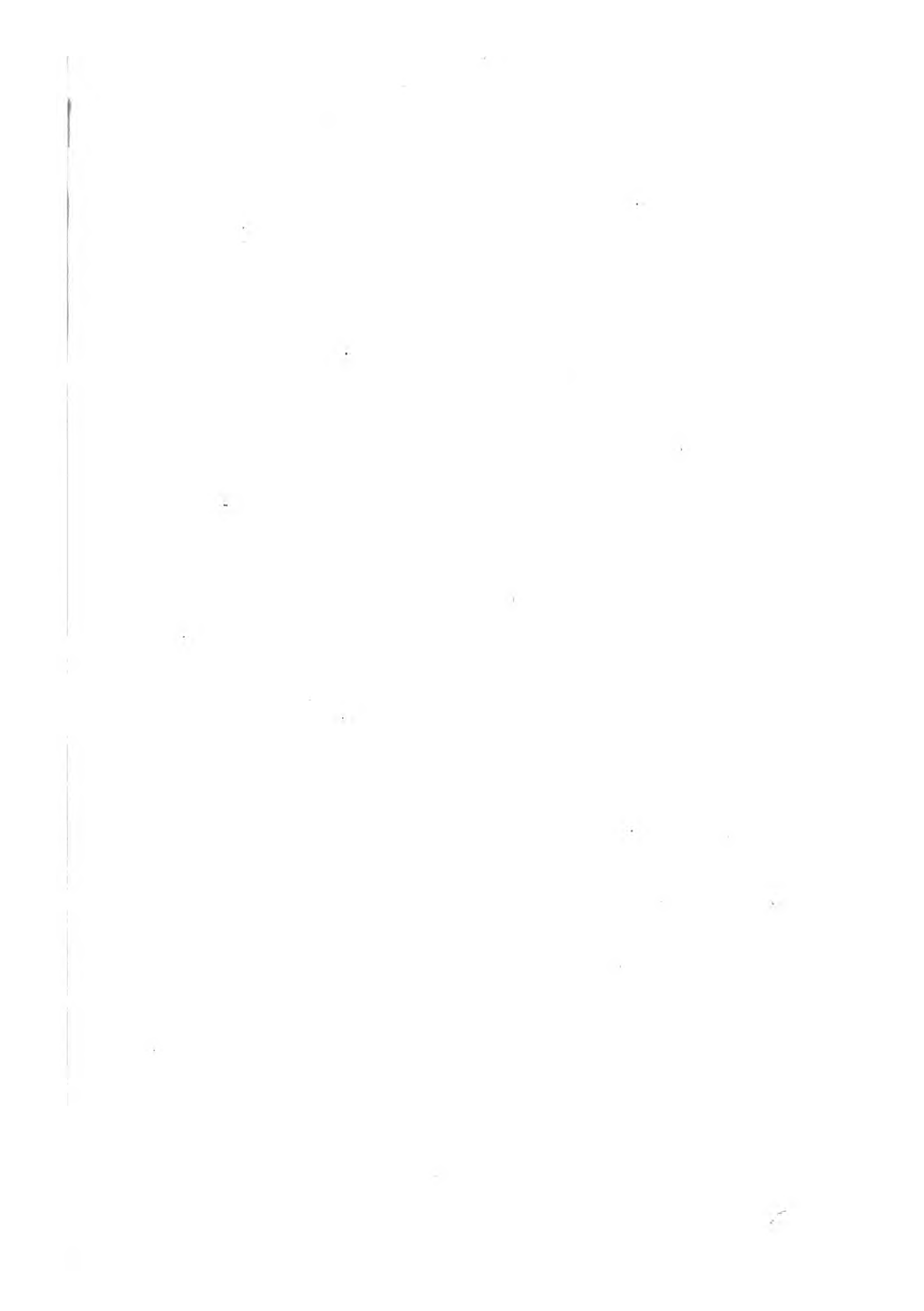
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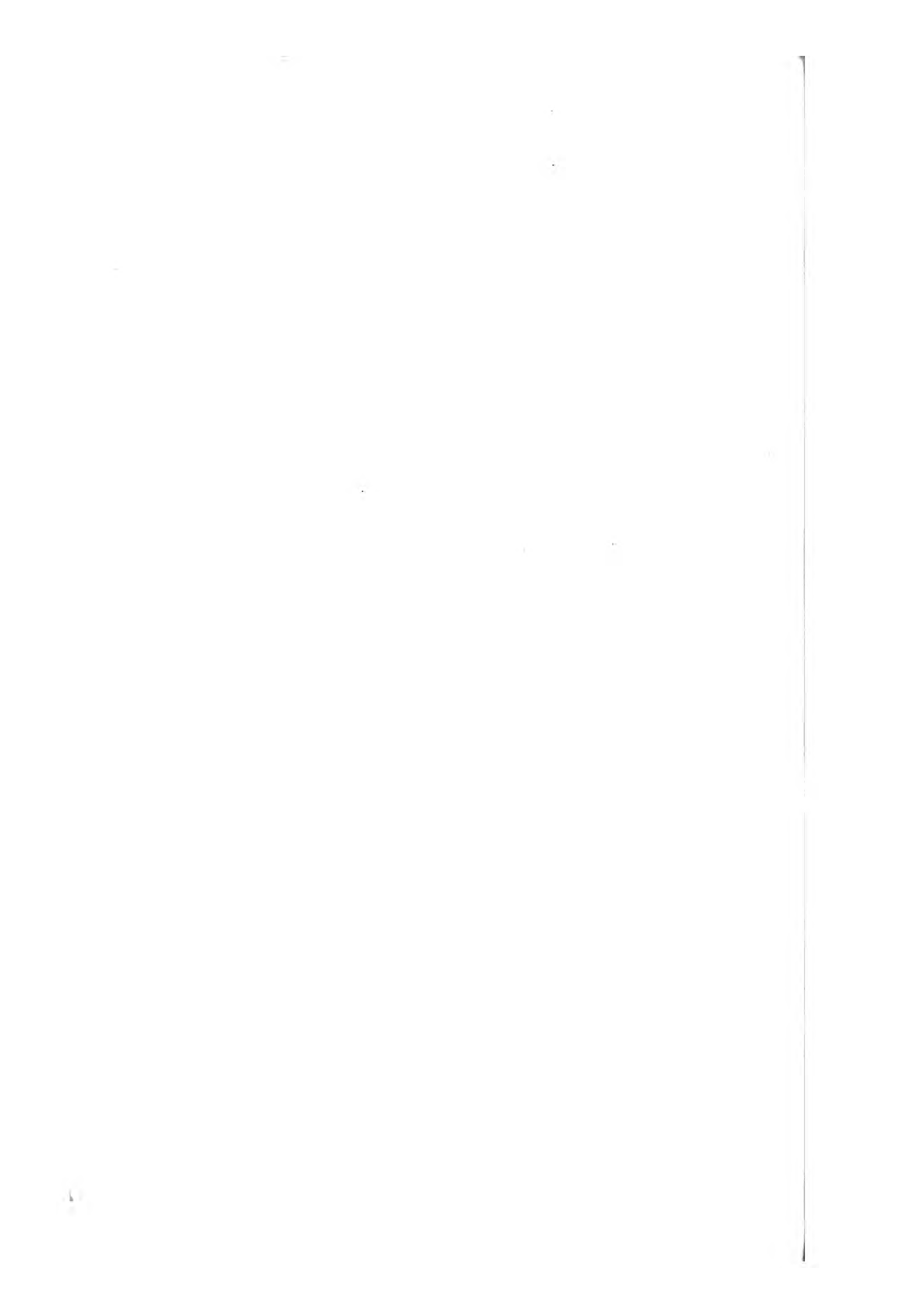




















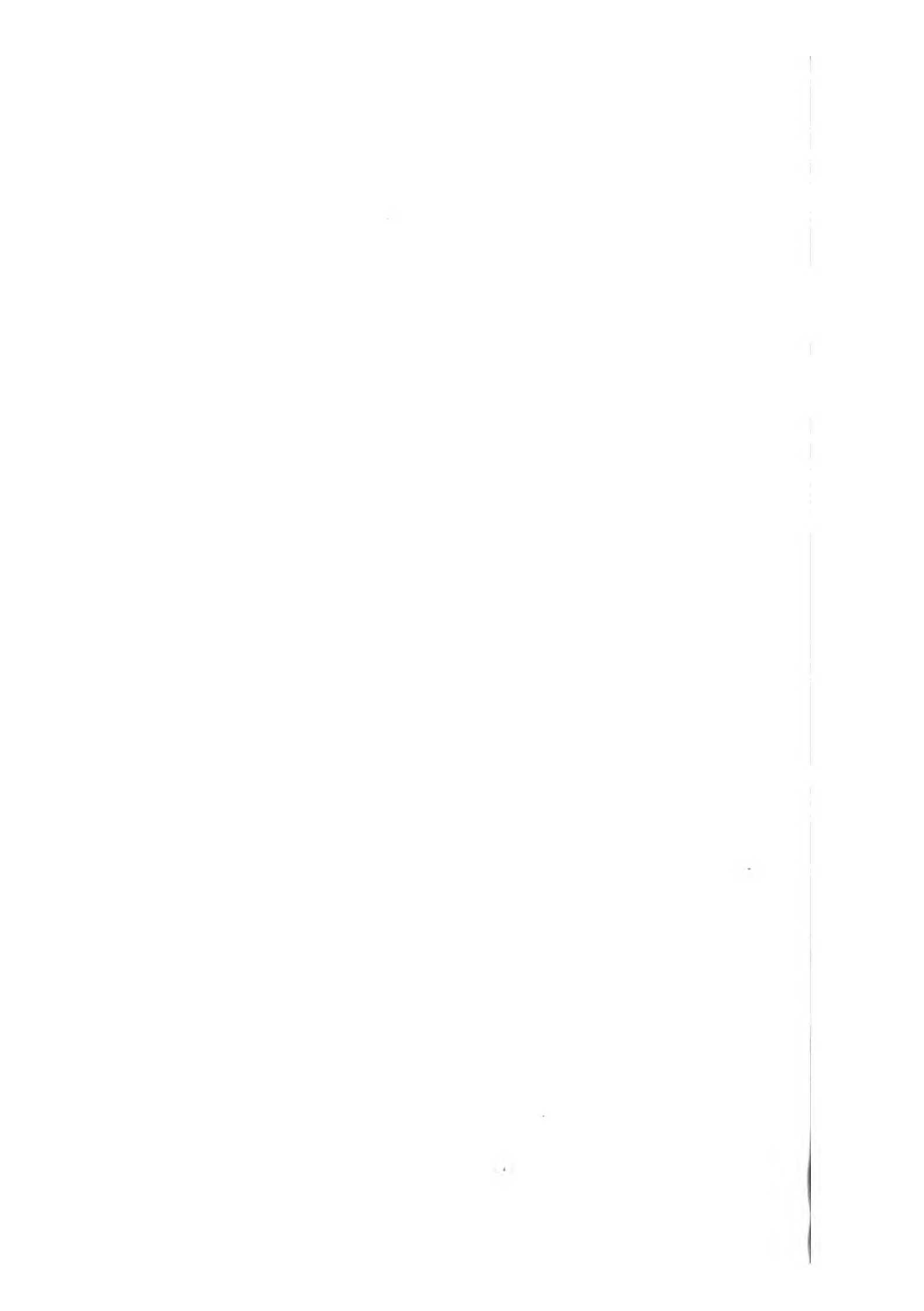










































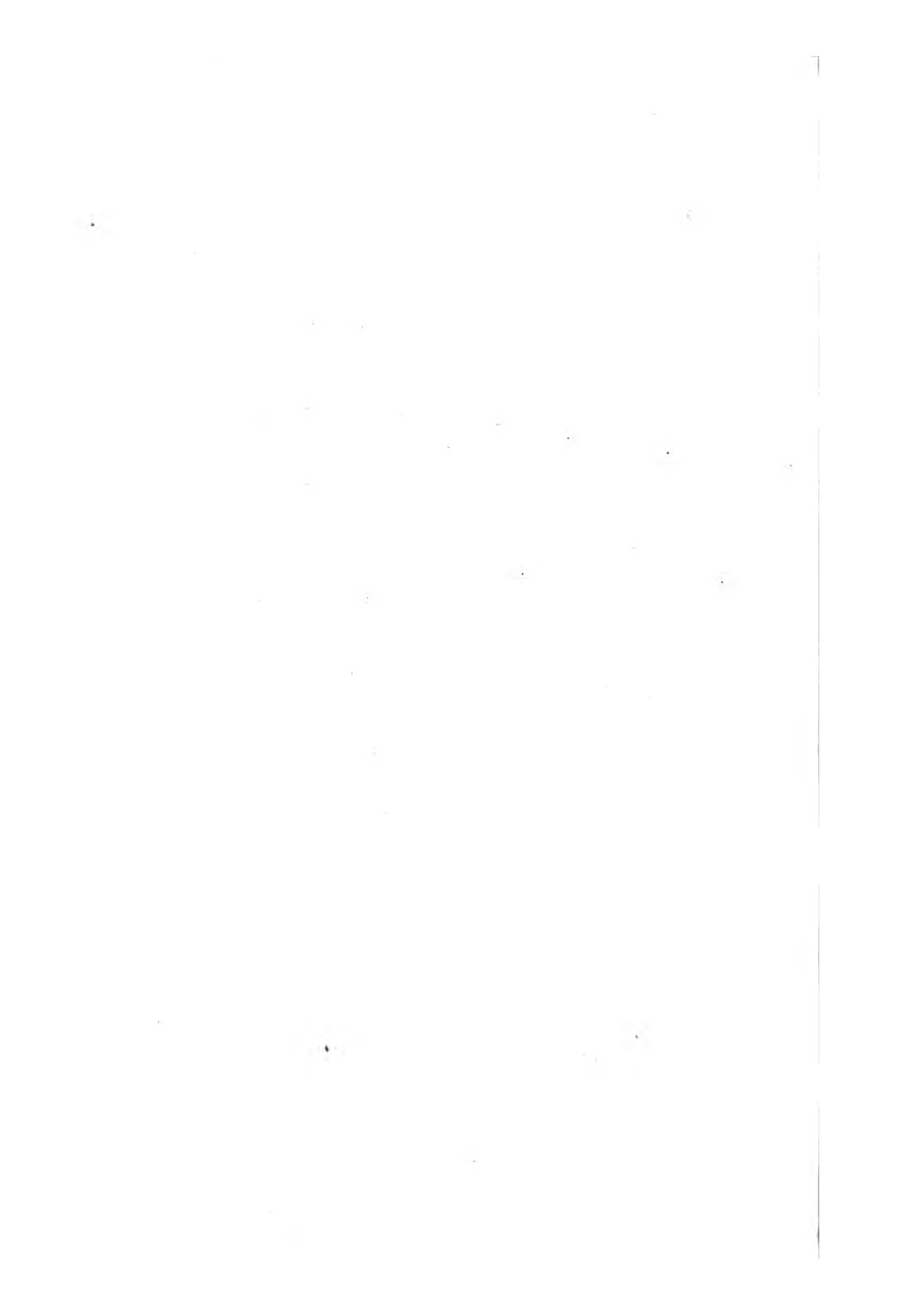




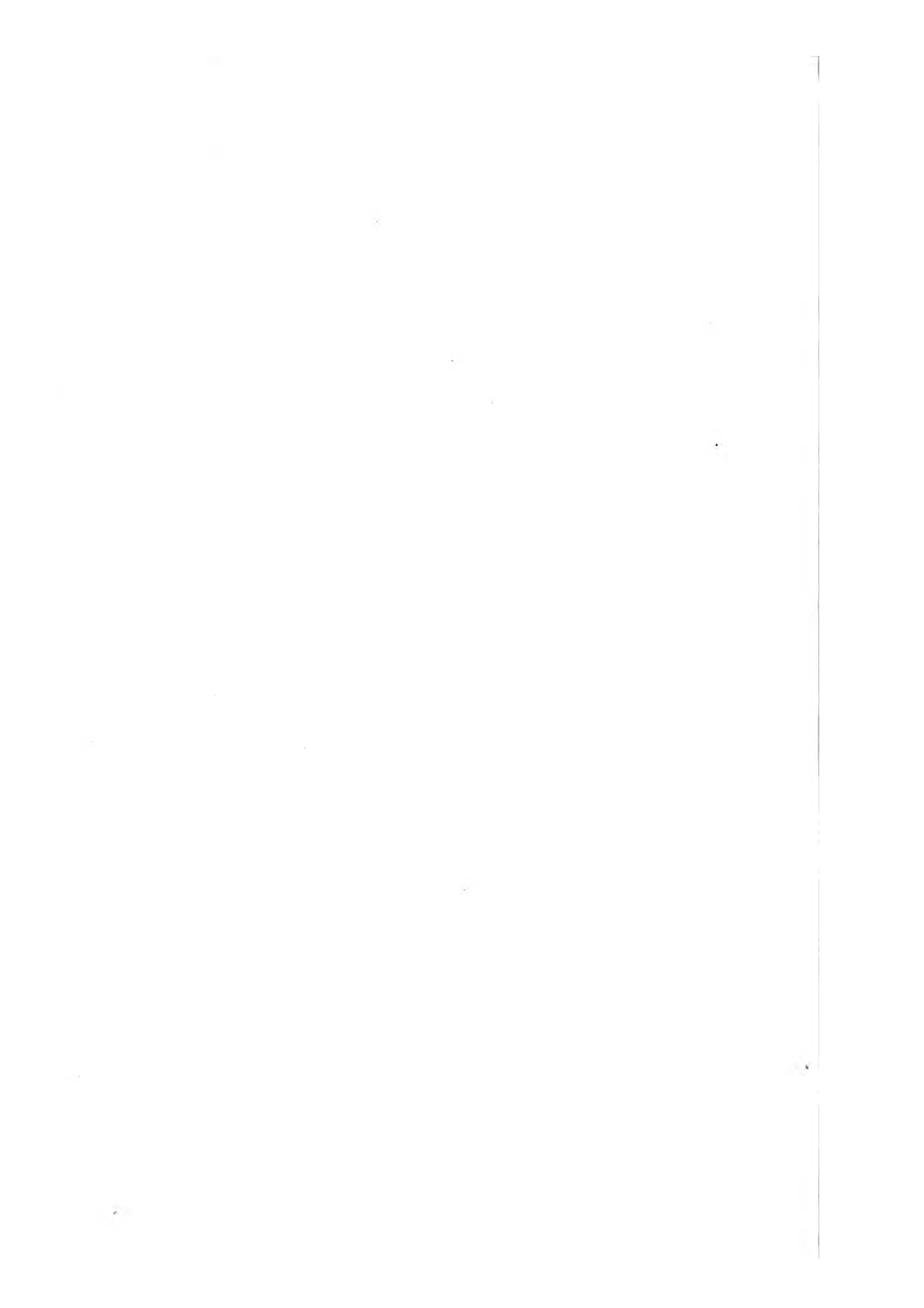
































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