

THE BIRD OF PREY HUNTS A HARE / QUADRUPED

A NEW MOTIF IN THE FRAME OF A BELT FITTING OF A BYZANTINE-LATE AVAR KHAGANATE TYPE FROM SOUTH MORAVIA, CZECH REPUBLIC

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE FIND AND ITS DESCRIPTION

One unique belt fitting with a preserved pendant comes from the south-eastern part of the Czech Republic, i. e. from South Moravia (probably hill-fort Brno-Líšeň [okr. Brno-město/CZ] or area between the nos 2 and 4 in **fig. 1**). There are no detailed circumstances of its finding, unfortunately, and it is not in a museum collection. The fitting was found in 2010 or 2011¹, but was only documented and analysed in 2021. The publishing of this rare type of fitting is necessary despite its unfortunate and problematic background because the find constitutes an important connecting link between the decorations from Eastern Europe and the Carpathian Basin and shows the contact of Moravia with the Byzantine milieu in the 8th century.

The fitting is of the heater shield shape with a bit of a tip on the top and a simple fluting border and a preserved smaller pendant forming a rectangular shape with a central leaf, four spirals and a rhombic opening in the centre (**fig. 2, 1**). On the fitting, a massive openwork bird is depicted in profile with a pronounced neck and a massive tail, a folded wing and extending its talons into a smaller four-legged animal also shown in profile, more precisely into the top of its back, just behind its neck. At the same time, the beak pecks at the open mouth of the hunted animal. The prey has disproportionately large legs, stylised as in the cases of older quadrupeds and gryphons of the Late Avar Khaganate period I (LAP I). The bird has a round punched eye, the wings are alluded to by thickly carved arched lines and straight deeper lines which segment its tail (four feathers).

On the reverse of the fitting is a pair of attachment hitches/eyelets in a horizontal line, one of which is slightly damaged at the position of the hitch/eye. The pendant is still movable. The fitting has a noble bronze patina. The height of the fitting without the pendant is 27 mm, with it around 47 mm. Its width is 30 mm and it weighs 11 g. It is made of an alloy of copper and zinc and tin-plated with a mixture of tin and lead. The sample for analysis from the reverse came from the place of the eyelets and shows a significantly smaller proportion of the tin (XRF made 26.5.2021 in the Nuclear Physics Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences [CAS] in Řež near Prague, M. Fikrle, **tab. 1**).

THE ANALYSIS OF THE MOTIF AND THE DATING

The pendant of the fitting is similar to the fitting itself and is more or less unique; in size and proportions it corresponds to the shield-shaped cast fittings with other pendants and by comparison it is quite high with a rhombic opening in the middle, similar to a pendant from the hillfort of Tismice (okr. Kolín/CZ) (Profantová et al. 2020, fig. 19, 7). The division with four small volutes was more commonly used in the Carpathian Basin; the pointed leaf in the middle of the lower side is right where usually a bunch of grapes is found (again

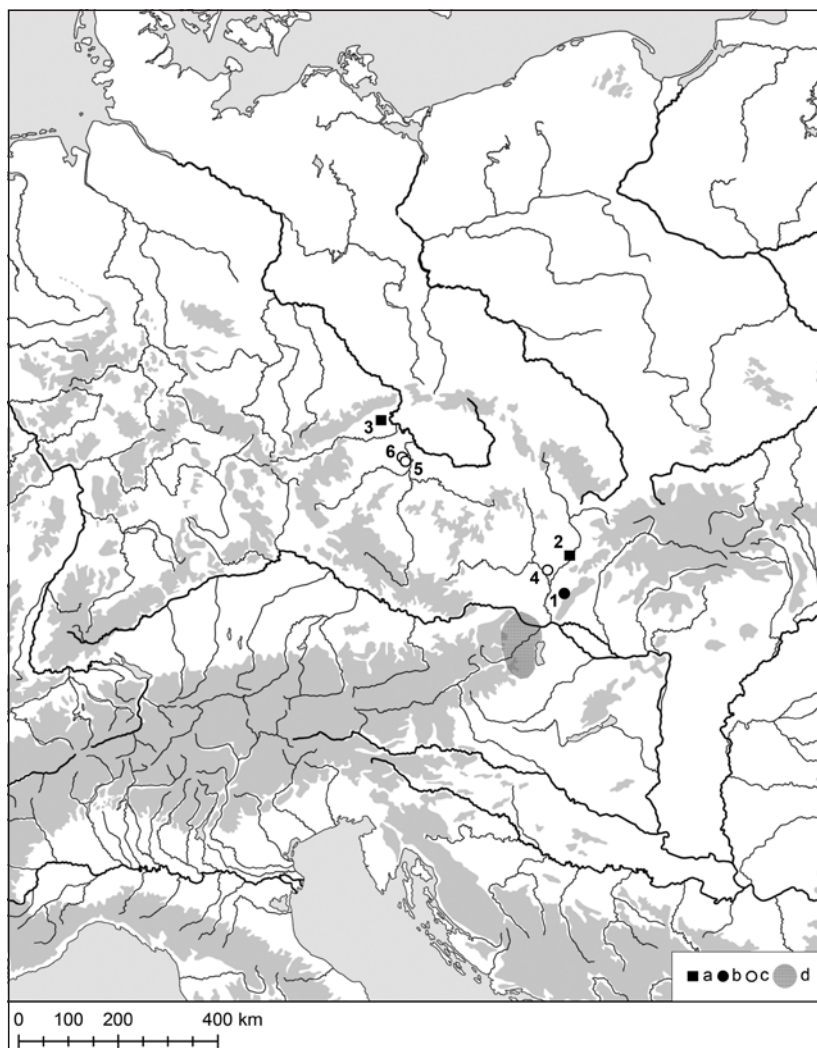


Fig. 1 Central Europe with depictions of human and prey/raptor or only raptors from 8th-early 10th century: **a** grave find. – **b** depot find. – **c** only raptor. – **d** only from the region. – Sites: **1** Moravský Svätý Ján (okr. Senica/SK). – **2** Staré Město (okr. Uherské Hradiště/CZ). – **3** Želénky (okr. Teplice/CZ). – **4** Břeclav-Pohansko (okr. Břeclav/CZ). – **5** Praha-Střešovice/CZ. – **6** Žalov-Levý Hradec (okr. Praha-západ/CZ). – The new find was found between **2** and **4**. – (After Profantová 2020, fig. 1).

e. g. Tismice). The fitting belongs to the Late Avar Khaganate period I and could have been made also in LAP II – i. e. in the first third of the 8th century. The Byzantine type of hitch on the reverse – known mostly from Byzantine buckles – shows that it could have been made in the workshop of a Byzantine craftsman or one on the edge of the area with Byzantine fashion, one who likely also knew the taste dominant in the Carpathian Basin. Such an area is not only in the south of the Carpathian Basin, in Dalmatia and other places. Products with strong Byzantine influence from the 8th century or even Byzantine originals were even found directly in Mikulčice (okr. Hodonín/CZ) in the south of Moravia (fig. 3; Daim 2000; Profantová 2008, fig. 5, 4-7 photos 13-14), where the same influence strongly manifested itself again in the second half of the 9th century (Profantová 2008, 85 fig. 5A-B [A with solidus of Michael III] photo 2 tab. 4; Ungerman 2018). In its precise make-up the fitting is unique, however, it belongs to the group of finds with analogous motifs. The most famous is the silver set from the hoard of Fotovizh (Sumy obl./UA), discovered in 1914 (fig. 2, 3-4). This site is often classed as belonging to either the Volyntsevo culture (often linked to Slavic inhabitants: Komar/Strelnik 2011, figs 2-3) or to the Saltovo-Mayaki culture linked to the nomadic ethnically mixed milieu (Bulgarian tribes, associated with the Khazar Khaganate) (Bagautdinov/Bogačev/Zubov 1998). The hoard is always dated to the middle of the 8th century and illustrates the Byzantine or occasionally direct Crimean-Byzantine influence². However, the eagle there is more dominant than the animal and has its



Fig. 2 A fitting with the motif of the hunting predator (all 8th century): **1** South Moravia, unknown locality. – **2** Hungary and Burgenland/A, unknown locality. – **3-4** Fotovizh (Sumy obl./UA). – (1 photos and drawings L. Raslová; 2 after Heinrich-Tamaska 2005, fig. 36, 3; 3-4 after Komar/Strelnik 2011, figs 2, 1-2; 3, 3). – Scale 1:1.

element dimension	Fe (%)	Ni (%)	Cu (%)	Zn (%)	As (%)	Ag (%)	Sn (%)	Sb (%)	Pb (%)	Bi (%)	Au/Hg for gilding
Ptak_jizni_Morava	1.5	0.06	45.1	1.7	0.5	1.40	24.9	0.30	23.90	n/d	n/d
Ptak_jizni_Morava_rub	0.2	<0.05	75.8	2.5	0.3	0.50	7.1	0.10	11.90	n/d	n/d

Tab. 1 XRF analysis of the find. – (© M. Fikrle, Nuclear Physics Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences [CAS] in Řež near Prague).

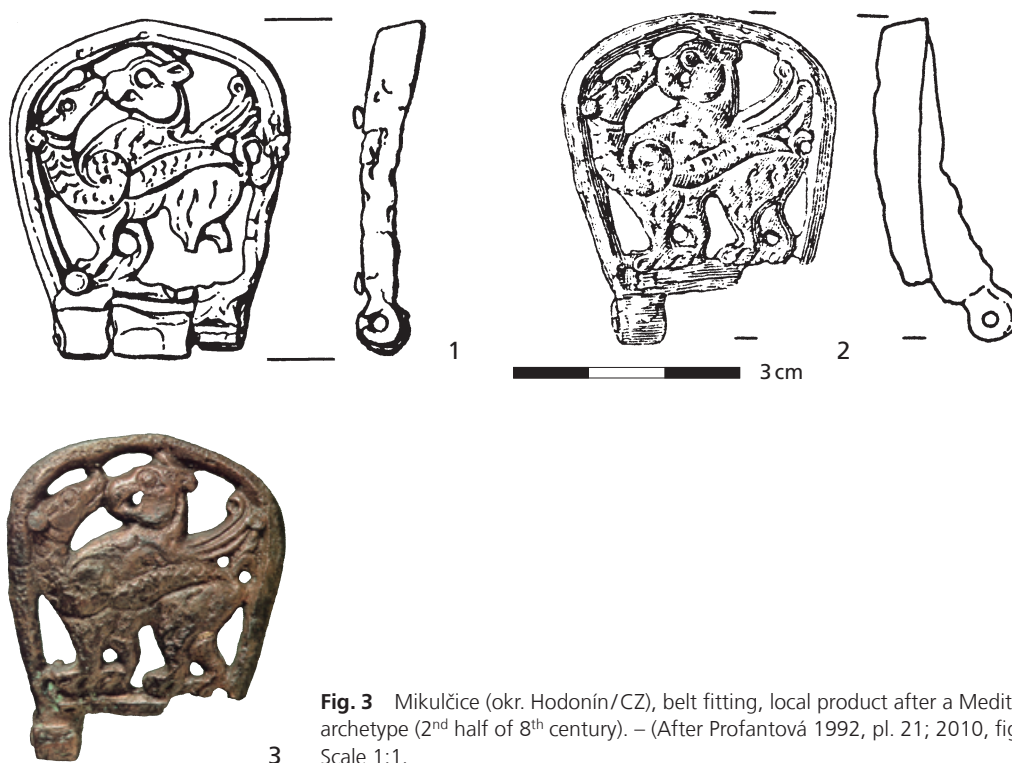


Fig. 3 Mikulčice (okr. Hodonín/CZ), belt fitting, local product after a Mediterranean archetype (2nd half of 8th century). – (After Profantová 1992, pl. 21; 2010, fig. 28, 7). – Scale 1:1.

wings spread open; the pendant is semicircular, its shape is the same as on the fitting referred to (fig. 2, 3-4; Bálint 1989, 123 fig. 56; László 1970, fig. 27; Komar/Strelnik 2011, figs 2-3). The prey, in contrast to the one from our fitting, is running and has longer ears, it is, therefore, a hare or a rabbit³. The eagle has a set of dips/dots on his chest, the neck is completed by deeper horizontal grooves that give it more depth (of the relief). Even though it is a set, the strap-end is missing and there is only one hole protector, which points to the incompleteness of the set. Judging by the decorative frame and prong of the clasp, the product could originate from a Crimean workshop. The Byzantine origin of the belts or their adaptation under Byzantine influence, as also ascertained in the case of earrings from the hoard, connects with some other elements in both regions – Carpathian Basin and Eastern Europe – in the corresponding period.

The motif of all the fittings referred to belongs to type V: »bird of prey attacking an animal« according to the typology of M. Valor (2020, 635); she considers a visual metaphor for the monarch's power. It is the same in the Al-Andalus as in Byzantium and probably similar in the Avar Khaganate and Moravia.

The closest analogy of the discussed fitting, however, was published in 2005 in *Slovenská archeológia* (fig. 2, 2; Heinrich-Tamaska 2005, 256 fig. 36). It is the main fitting with a rounded back but without a preserved pendant. It comprises the same composition, with the same concept of the hunted animal and details of the wings of the bird. Unfortunately, the fitting is also without a precise provenance (present-day Hungary and Burgenland in Austria), ended up at least in the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Hamburg, where it was purchased in 1949 (cat. no. B. 5. 4 inv. no. 1949, 41d). The detail on the reverse is the same, i. e. a pair of eyelets in a horizontal line in the middle of the fitting. Their size is also similar (see fig. 2, 1-2). It has been tin-plated analogous to the find from Moravia. According to O. Heinrich-Tamaska, it is unique in its motif. However, even she states that it is based on a Byzantine product, although she does not specify any further.



Fig. 4 1-2 Moravský Svätý Ján (okr. Senica/SK). A strap-end. – 3 Eastern Austria. – All 8th century. – (After Profantová 2020, fig. 3). – Scale 1:1.

Both latter mentioned fittings were made after the same model, the openwork planes are however of different shapes (cf. the reverses of both pieces **fig. 2, 1-2**)⁴. The absence of the metal sheet on the reverse is another difference from the Crimean production. Its quality is maybe a little better in the newly described piece. There is no point in comparing it to other depictions with other birds. We could only mention the fitting from Szeged-Öthalom (Kom. Csongrád-Csanád/H), on which the eagle eats a fish, but that is a much bigger decoration (Fancsalszky 2007, tab. 48; Dekán 1972, fig. 103). These hunting scenes appear also on the frescos in the Samarra Palace (gouv. Salah ad Din/IRQ) from the 9th century (after it became the capital in 836) and they made their appearance in the lives of the local aristocracy already in the 8th century (Daiber 2020, fig. 3). More often is their depiction in, for example, ivory carvings or inlays from the 10th-11th century from Italy and Fatimid Egypt (Daiber 2020, figs 17-18). The evidently Byzantine roots of the scene, at least from the 5th or 6th century, is proven, among other things, by the mural from the Vandalic period of Borj Djedid (gouv. Jendouba/TN) (Rueda 2020, fig. 10)⁵. They spread further into Europe via Islamic Sicily. This hunting scene most likely also had a symbolic significance or at the very least demonstrated the privilege of falconry in the frame of social elites or alternatively in the frame of a certain ritual (a falconer on a lion, **fig. 4, 3**). Another cast strap-end from the hoard from Moravský Svätý Ján (okr. Senica/SK), i. e. from the same region despite the site today being in Slovakia, also depicts a man releasing a bird of prey (**fig. 4, 1-2**; Profantová 2020, fig. 3).

The new type of fitting allows us to more confidently supplement the range of products that were inspired by the motifs of the Eastern Mediterranean or even more distant lands and made in the Carpathian Basin or even directly in Moravia (a stay of a foreign craftsman?). For example, two fittings from Mikulčice with the depiction of a fight between a peacock-dragon (which sometimes looks like a bird of prey, **fig. 3**) and a snake belong to the Byzantine group of decorations. These have analogous shape: the snake is depicted naturalistically and, coupled with its general stylisation, this all points to the plausibility of a local origin (cf.

Profantová 1992, pl. 21; 2008, figs 5a; 13), especially as at least one of them was a reject⁶. To the same circle also belongs a gilded silver strap-end with the motif of birds near the tree of life in a medallion (the frame was decorated by stamps), and another with a floral decoration and a wide relief frame (Daim 2000, fig. 46b, 101; Profantová 2010, fig. 28, 7. 9). Its decoration is based on the decoration of the golden vessels from the treasure of Nagyszentmiklós/Sânnicolau Mare (jud. Timiș/RO) that had been hidden before the end of the 8th century (see Bálint 2010 for more information about the treasure).

We present a wide range of these hunting motifs on the edge of the »civilized« world (including a nobleman releasing a falcon, a highly stylised man riding on a wild cat, perhaps a lion [or a mythical animal] and holding a bird of prey/falcon on his left hand/a falconer riding on a mythical beast, **fig. 4, 3**), even if it is still not as extensive as that of the Mediterranean. Of course, the decorations cannot tell us how much of their symbolic content was understood in Moravia or adjusted to the local situation. Certainly, among the decorations with narrative motifs were the ones closer to the local elite in the majority. Also, on a strap-end from the hoard from Moravský Svätý Ján, there is a scene of a man from the local elite wearing a tunic with a distinct collar, a knee-length kilt, hunting with a bird of prey (**fig. 4, 1-2**; Profantová 2020, fig. 3). The strap-end can be dated to the middle of the 8th century; the whole hoard was deposited in the earth at the end of the same century. Moravský Svätý Ján lies upon the River Morava that forms the modern-day border between the Czech and Slovak Republic (**fig. 1**), in other words, close to the site from which our find comes. So, we have to consider centres like Mikulčice, Lány (okr. Břeclav/CZ) (see Macháček et al. 2021), a later centre from the 9th century (Břeclav-Pohansko stronghold) in the vicinity and other lesser known places. It is therefore truly unfortunate that, due to acquisitive collectors, we shall not learn more about the sites of both fittings discussed in this paper.

The most famous depiction of the rider with a falcon in a circle jewel comes from a grave from Staré Město-Špitálky (okr. Uherské Hradiště/CZ) (Profantová 2020 with figures) and its motif associates it with the described set, even though it comes from the 9th century and shows the viability of such scenes.

CONCLUSIONS

It is well known that falconry was widespread in the Byzantine Empire as well as among the steppe nomads, but only a few finds could demonstrate it for the 8th century, all found outside Byzantium (three variants in Central Europe).

The luxurious fitting was made as a Byzantine product, most likely somewhere on the edge of the Carpathian Basin or a member of the elite brought it in Moravian territory. The conclusion is always similar: the local elite was actively looking for more luxurious artefacts affirming its position in society and in the 8th century when this type of belt was fashionable and using self-affirming symbols of either Byzantine or Late Avar period types. The territory of the Czech Republic had thus become a part of the wider enclave of Southeast and Central Europe using these symbols. This orientation did not last long, as in the second quarter of the 9th century by the latest it was replaced by the symbols of the West and so the products of Byzantine style were exchanged for those of Carolingian style or their imitations (for example Profantová 2011; 2014), especially in male attire and military equipment⁷. The art of falconry was already practised in Moravia (Svatopluk I »going hawking« in 870, † 894) and Bohemia in the last third of the 8th and 9th century, as evidenced by bones of birds of prey found at contemporary fortified strongholds and in villages in their hinterland (Mutěnice [okr. Hodonín/CZ])⁸.

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Notes

- 1) It passed through the hands of at least two private owners/collectors, probably sometime before 2016. Now it is in the collection of D. B., Prague.
- 2) A similar motif is also adapted in Sasanian toreutics from the 6th-8th century depicting the so-called royal hunt. The hunted animal is represented by a gazelle, alternatively a doe (Central Asia, Bálint 2010, 412 fig. 165).
- 3) In reality, the image from Fotovizh is closer to the natural proportions of a raptor and a hare: cf. Grimm 2020, 2/1, fig. 5, where it is a white Siberian goshawk and a hare.
- 4) A similar, more schematic motif in the rectangular shape cast fitting is newly published also from Bulgaria (Türk et al. 2021, 132-133 with photo).
- 5) A bronze coin from the turn of the 4th/3rd century BC (338-287 BC) among others provides evidence of even earlier antique roots: a bronze coin of Acragas (prov. Agrigento/I) with the head of Zeus on the avers and eagle with spread wings holding a hare in its talons and about to tear open the prey's belly, symbol of super-human power and manifestation of the god (Nollé 2020, fig. 12).
- 6) A lot of crucibles and maybe also remains of a workshop were found there; cf. Profantová 1992, esp. fig. 4, 6.
- 7) The female types of jewellery (earrings) of Byzantine inspiration were used during the whole of the 9th and the 1st half of the 10th century.
- 8) Mutěnice: Klanica 2008. The oldest depiction of a hawking scene in Bohemia in the western part of the Czech Republic is known from a female grave from the 9th century (also »a bird of prey/eagle attacking an animal«).

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Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

Der Raubvogel jagt einen Hasen/Vierbeiner. Ein neues Motiv im Rahmen eines Gürtelbeschlags eines byzantinisch-spätawarischen Khaganat-Typs aus Südmähren, Tschechische Republik

In diesem Artikel wird ein neuer Fund eines Gürtelbeschlags aus Weißmetall mit dem Motiv »Raubvogel jagt Hasen« aus Südmähren analysiert. Der Beschlag byzantinischen Ursprungs (mit byzantinischen Schließen?) hat nur eine Analogie im Karpatenbecken, und eine ähnliche Darstellung befand sich auf der silbernen Gürtelgarnitur aus Fotovizh (Sumy obl./UA). In diesem Depot befanden sich acht Stücke von Hauptbeschlügen, die in die Mitte des 8. Jahrhunderts datieren. In derselben Region wie unser Fund, in Moravský Svätý Ján (okr. Senica/CZ), wurde ein Hort/Depot mit einer Riemenzunge mit der Darstellung eines Mannes und eines Raubvogels – wohl eines Falken – aus derselben Zeit gefunden. Es handelt sich um ein lokales Produkt. Die lokalen Eliten nutzten Selbstbestätigungssymbole byzantinisch-spätawarischer Art, wobei sie die byzantinischen Originale kopierten oder imitierten.

The Bird of Prey Hunts a Hare/Quadruped. A New Motif in the Frame of a Belt Fitting of a Byzantine-Late Avar Khaganate Type from South Moravia, Czech Republic

The paper analyses a new find of a white-metal belt fitting with the motif »bird of prey hunts a hare« from South Moravia. The fitting of Byzantine origin (with Byzantine clasps?) has only one analogy in the Carpathian Basin, and a similar depiction was on the silver belt set in Fotovizh (Sumy obl./UA). In this depot were eight pieces of main fittings, dated to the middle of the 8th century. In the same region as our find, in Moravský Svätý Ján (okr. Senica/CZ), was found a hoard/depot with a strap-end with a depiction of a man and a bird of prey, probably a falcon, from the same time. It is a local product. The local elites used self-affirming symbols of Byzantine-Late Avar type, whereby the Byzantine originals were copied or imitated.

L'oiseau de proie chasse un lièvre/quadrupède. Un nouveau motif dans le cadre d'une ferrure de ceinture de type khaganate byzantin-avar tardif provenant de Moravie du Sud, République tchèque

L'article analyse une nouvelle découverte d'une ferrure de ceinture en métal blanc avec le motif »l'oiseau de proie chasse un lièvre« en Moravie du Sud. Cette ferrure d'origine byzantine (avec des fermoirs byzantins?) n'a qu'une seule analogie dans le bassin des Carpates, et une représentation similaire figurait sur la garniture de ceinture en argent de Fotovizh (Sumy obl./UA). Dans ce dépôt se trouvaient huit pièces de la garniture principale, datées du milieu du 8^{ème} siècle. Dans la même région que notre trouvaille, à Moravský Svätý Ján (okr. Senica/CZ), a été découvert un trésor/dépôt avec un embout de ceinture avec une représentation d'un homme et d'un oiseau de proie, probablement un faucon, de la même époque. Il s'agit d'un produit local. Les élites locales utilisaient des symboles d'affirmation de soi de type byzantin-avar tardif, les originaux byzantins étant copiés ou imités.

Traduction: J. Chamero

Schlüsselwörter / Keywords / Mots-clés

Mähren / Frühmittelalter / Eliten / Raubvogel / byzantinisches Produkt / Gürtelbeschlag

Moravia / Early Middle Ages / elites / bird of prey / Byzantine product / belt fitting

Moravie / haut Moyen Âge / élites / oiseau de proie / produit byzantin / ferrure de ceinture

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