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3 **Unnecessary anachronisms as ‘facts’ in Central**  
4 **European historical novels**

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8 **Abstract** The nineteenth century was the period of nation building in East-Central  
9 Europe. Historical novels played a role in the process, especially in encouraging the  
10 development of national identity by looking for the national essence in the past, or  
11 rather creating ideas about a national essence in the medium of history. This paper  
12 analyses several late-nineteenth-century historical novels from the region (by Alois  
13 Jirásek, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Ferenc Herczeg, and Géza Gárdonyi) to show the  
14 ways fictitious traits of a supposedly reliable historical background served con-  
15 temporary political and ideological needs. These traits, which can also be described  
16 as anachronisms or author’s mistakes, both contribute to characterising national  
17 ancestors as us and also historical enemies as the other.

18  
19 **Keywords** Historical novel · Anachronism · Jirásek · Sienkiewicz · Herczeg ·  
20 Gárdonyi

23 It is a postmodern truism that the past exists in present narratives, therefore  
24 historical literature cannot represent the past as it was (since it cannot be known);<sup>1</sup> it  
25 rather has to create the past, or a past. In periods when literature has an impact on  
26 the social, political, and historical development, however, the past created by  
27 literature can also influence the future.<sup>2</sup> Historical novels contributed to the  
28 development of national identity in many cultures of Central Europe in the  
29 nineteenth century, and also at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was the

1FL01 <sup>1</sup> Hutcheon (1989), 58–88.

2FL01 <sup>2</sup> Cf. Bisztray (2002).

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30 period of nation building in that region, which also means the retrospective creation  
 31 of national history. And when developers of national identities were looking for  
 32 national characteristics, or the national essence, they naturally turned to the past to  
 33 try to distil some. Throughout the nineteenth century scholarship, historiography  
 34 and the developing discipline of national literary history played important roles in  
 35 the process, though art might have been more effective in advertising the new ideas.  
 36 Apart from historical painting, music, and architecture, literature also contributed a  
 37 great deal. Poetry, especially ballads and epics, could reach a limited audience, but  
 38 historical drama and novels, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century,  
 39 had better chances to influence the trends. We can see a vicious circle here: the past  
 40 is supposed to legitimise the present aims, but the past is created (or at least the  
 41 narratives of the past are rewritten) on the basis of current ideological goals.  
 42 Historical novels more frequently than not encourage allegoric interpretation of the  
 43 past to give solace or advice in the present. This kind of allegory shows the past as  
 44 similar to the present, but if the image of the past has always already been  
 45 preformed by the questions the present asks about the past, this similarity is also a  
 46 biased feature of the present rather than the past.

47 According to György Lukács, a historical novel is a realist novel, which in the  
 48 life of the protagonists mirrors the crucial problems of the people.<sup>3</sup> Actually such a  
 49 definition already implies that a historical novel can never get rid of the Walter  
 50 Scottian archetype, namely that the protagonists are fictitious, ordinary characters  
 51 (at least from the viewpoint of social stature or career, and never rulers or those who  
 52 actually make the historical decisions), otherwise they could not represent “the  
 53 people.” This may be one of the reasons why Linda Hutcheon had to coin a new  
 54 term to denote the not-so-realist postmodern historical novels, namely historical  
 55 metafiction, which fact suggests that when historical novels cease being Scottian  
 56 realist novels, they cannot easily be identified as historical novels.<sup>4</sup> The topic of the  
 57 following discussion, however, will not be the interplay of fictitious foreground  
 58 story and supposedly correct historical background, which is characteristic of the  
 59 genre, but some examples of fictitious intervention in the historical background.  
 60 These examples can sometimes also be described as mistakes on the part of the  
 61 author, mostly anachronisms. Lukács also spoke about the “necessary anachro-  
 62 nism” in historical novels, which should be situated on the linguistic-stylistic level:  
 63 a novel should not be written in the language of the past, nor should the characters  
 64 speak that way, because it would be a major obstacle to understanding. What I will  
 65 be speaking about is unnecessary anachronism from this viewpoint, but one that  
 66 may be necessary to make the past similar to the present, in this way making it  
 67 understandable and useful for the reader. Not only are modern concepts of the  
 68 nation recreated in the past (as if nation meant the same before the coming of  
 69 nationalism), but the nation’s whole past can be transformed in a way that it can be  
 70 used in the present (mostly ideological) struggles.

3FL01 <sup>3</sup> Lukács (1963), 61ff.

4FL01 <sup>4</sup> Another consequence of the widely accepted definition of Lukács may be that the history of the genre is  
 4FL02 seldom traced back to times previous to the 1814 publication of *Waverley*.

## 71 Alois Jirásek

72 In the second half of the nineteenth century, when Central-European nations were  
 73 struggling towards their nation states and developing their identities, historical  
 74 novels may arguably have had the task to “display the essence of the nation.”<sup>5</sup> If a  
 75 novel shoulders this task, the essence a reader encounters must be reassuring and  
 76 attractive. Who would wish to belong to a nation that is essentially repulsive? And it  
 77 is also logical that the nation can be best represented in conflict with other nations.  
 78 The national independence is a core issue in many of such novels.

79 Alois Jirásek’s (1851–1930) novel *Against everyone (Proti všem)*, published in  
 80 1893, narrates the first, glorious years (1420–1421) of the Hussite wars, in which  
 81 religious, social, and ethnic aspects mingled. The title suggests that it is the Czechs  
 82 who wage a defensive war against everyone, and the national aspect of the opposition  
 83 is emphasised throughout the story. The Taborites, of course, have a war against the  
 84 Czechs too, but their violence appears as a necessary lateral effect of conversion. In  
 85 the first scenes of the novel they visit a village, attack the resisting troops of the local  
 86 gentry, destroy the church, and bring all the people they can to their new utopian city,  
 87 Tábor, where there is no money or social difference. Their proposed religious reforms  
 88 are opposed by the clergy (whose secular power is challenged and their riches are to be  
 89 lost) and some members of the gentry. Many of the rich, however, who support the  
 90 Calixtines and allow the celebration of the Communion under both kinds (therefore  
 91 can truly be called Hussites), may dislike the Taborite vision of a classless society.

92 The war of religion, as represented in this novel, has a strong national aspect, which  
 93 is probably slightly anachronistic. One of the Hussites’ proposed reforms was the use  
 94 of the vernacular to replace Latin in the liturgy. This makes a difference between those  
 95 who practice their religion in Czech and those who do not. Bohemia, however, had a  
 96 mixed population: Germans are represented as traitors, unreliable pretenders. Even if  
 97 they celebrate the communion under both kinds, they are regarded as waiting for the  
 98 defeat of the Hussite’s cause to return to the practice they would secretly prefer. It is  
 99 more interesting that the monarch Sigismund of Luxembourg, the king of the Holy  
 100 Roman Empire, Hungary, and Bohemia always appears surrounded by foreigners, his  
 101 troops are German and Hungarian, and the narrative depicts the cruelty of his  
 102 Hungarian troops in the most vivid detail. The main historical source Jirásek used for  
 103 the composition of the novel, František Palacký’s monumental *History of the Czech*  
 104 *nation in Bohemia and Moravia* in five volumes, never mentions during its very  
 105 detailed narrative any cruelties committed by Sigismund’s Hungarian troops.<sup>6</sup> We  
 106 should therefore regard this as Jirásek’s own invention. His Hungarians regard all the  
 107 Czechs as heretics; hearing the language is enough reason for them to torture and kill  
 108 the speaker with a special joy of superiority. Cruelty, however, is not the unique  
 109 privilege of the anti-Hussite Hungarians: the Hussites are not merciful people either.

5FL01 <sup>5</sup> Belge (2009), 19.

6FL01 <sup>6</sup> Szalatnai (1954), ix. He also finds it a telling feature that Jirásek always calls Sigismund of  
 6FL02 Luxembourg a *king*, and never an *emperor*, which makes him a Hungarian ruler in the narrative.  
 6FL03 However, in 1419 Sigismund became the king of Bohemia, therefore it is his legitimate title which allows  
 6FL04 him to take any action in that area. In addition, he took the title of emperor in 1433, previously he was the  
 6FL05 king of the Holy Roman Empire.



110 But the Hungarians carry it to extremes. The linguistic dimension seems to convert  
 111 religious differences into national ones, advertising Czech patriotism, and hostility  
 112 against Germans and Hungarians. It is not difficult to see the importance of Jirásek's  
 113 tendencies for contemporary politics; Czechs were living in the dual monarchy of  
 114 Austria-Hungary, and Czech nationalism had to challenge the national power of  
 115 Germans and Hungarians. Jirásek creates a past in which the national antagonism is  
 116 more important than the religious one, or at least the religion can be interpreted as a  
 117 pretext for national conflicts. This past is designed both on the basis of present  
 118 experience and to influence the present ideological movements.

119 The novel contains, however, a thread of events that seems to warn against  
 120 religious fanaticism. There is a millenarian group among the Taborites that refuses  
 121 all the sacraments including communion and matrimony. They do not support Jan  
 122 Žižka's military campaign to help the Calixtines of Prague, because they think  
 123 Tábor is the only pure place which God will protect, and they actually despise the  
 124 Calixtines as secular people and not true believers. The lack of national solidarity is  
 125 a strong feature of their moral degradation. Later they also organize wild orgies as a  
 126 consequence of the rejection of the sacrament of matrimony.<sup>7</sup> Ctibor z Hvozdna, a  
 127 fictional character who is closest to what we can call a protagonist in this novel,  
 128 finally ejects them from the town of his jurisdiction and they end up in the woods as  
 129 wild animals excluded from human society. The moderate Taborites and the  
 130 Calixtines in all Bohemia, however, make up a cohesive religious society, which is  
 131 able to fight a successful war against everybody, namely the non-Czech errant ones.

132 At the first glance, Ctibor z Hvozdna seems a typical Scottish, hesitating hero,  
 133 who has links and commitments to both sides. Waverley is an Englishman who  
 134 gradually learns the ways of Scots and from his family inherits a double commitment  
 135 to the Jacobite and the Hanoverian cause. Ctibor is a gentleman, but he is able to  
 136 make himself at home in a classless Taborite society, although refusing every  
 137 extreme. But after a long hesitation he finds his ways and makes his decision. We will  
 138 see similar heroes in several Central-European historical novels. However, there is a  
 139 basic difference between them and Waverley. In Scott's novel the protagonist makes  
 140 his peace at the end, able to mediate between both sides and accepting the status quo.  
 141 The Central-European heroes, once they make a decision, do not hesitate any more,  
 142 but rather show absolute commitment to the cause they have chosen. And there does  
 143 not seem to be any middle ground, any chance to mediate between the confronting  
 144 sides, which are completely antagonistic. The heroes do not understand both sides,  
 145 but gradually accept that one of them is completely right.

## 146 Henryk Sienkiewicz

147 Religious antagonism appeared in Jirásek's novel within Christianity. History has  
 148 taught us that very small differences can be enough for people to kill each other. But  
 149 a nation's moral superiority can be better demonstrated if it is confronted with a

7FL01 <sup>7</sup> Sexual promiscuity has been an evergreen accusation against heretic groups throughout western  
 7FL02 religious history.

150 completely different religion. This is evident in novels that represent Central-  
 151 Europeans fighting against the Ottoman Empire, like *Fire in the Steppe* (Pan  
 152 *Wołodyjowski*, 1888) by Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916), the Nobel-prize winner  
 153 of 1905. It is the third part of his *Trilogy*, which narrated seventeenth-century  
 154 Poland's wars against consecutive, surrounding enemies of different religions. The  
 155 first part, entitled *With Fire and Sword* (*Ogniem i mieczem*), tells the story of a war  
 156 against the Cossacks, followers of the eastern Orthodox Church, the second, *The*  
 157 *Deluge*, (*Potop*) narrates the invasion of the Protestant Swedes, and in the third part  
 158 the Muslims are the enemies. This last novel avoids national essentialism by  
 159 continuously emphasising the inclusive, multinational character of the Rzecz-  
 160 pospolita. Not only the coexistence of Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians, and  
 161 Ukrainians contributes to such an impression, but also the figure of Hassling-  
 162 Ketling of Elgin, a Scotsman who achieves Polish nobility through martial  
 163 achievement and adoption, and who sacrifices his life for his chosen homeland. The  
 164 protagonist Wołodyjowski and Ketling are close friends, examples of self-  
 165 sacrificing chivalry and Polish patriotism.

166 This inclusiveness, however, has its religious limits: Muslims cannot really be  
 167 integrated into the state. Although there are many troops in the Polish army that  
 168 belong to the Muslim groups of the so called Lipka Tatars, whose ancestors were  
 169 settled in Lithuania several centuries earlier, they are unreliable, suspicious people,  
 170 easily tempted to commit high treason. Their troops actually join Polish or Ottoman  
 171 sides depending on the current situation and their current interests. When the chief  
 172 villain of the novel, Azja Tuhajbejowicz makes an offer to Jan Sobieski that he can  
 173 bring all the Lipki Tatars to the Polish side, if they are given land and the privileges  
 174 of nobility while being allowed to keep their religion, Sobieski refuses this precisely  
 175 on religious grounds: "I am not only a Polish, but also a Christian hetman"—he  
 176 says in Chapter 31, declaring that he will never use Muslims against Christians.  
 177 Azja gains the Poles' trust through pretending to be a Christian, but he is secretly a  
 178 Muslim. Islam, however, is not a religion someone can practice furtively. If he  
 179 drinks alcohol in Chapter 28, and he never performs his daily prayers when his  
 180 Muslim soldiers probably do, that cannot be counterbalanced by a lonely prayer to  
 181 Allah in a standing position, looking through the window, as at the end of  
 182 Chapter 28. All this may suggest the Muslims' complete immorality rather than  
 183 religious devotion, but we can also interpret such features as mistakes on behalf of  
 184 the author, who was not interested in the Other's religion in any detail. However,  
 185 this secret, lonely prayer to Allah is the only scene of the novel where a Muslim  
 186 practices his religion. It is completely inaccurate, and it makes Islam a morally  
 187 inferior version of Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

188 The main characteristic of the Muslims in the novel is their terrible cruelty,<sup>9</sup>  
 189 while the ideals hailed as supreme for Christians are military discipline, clever

8FL01 <sup>8</sup> Azja's main intention is to get Wołodyjowski's wife Baška by any means. He thinks if he rapes her as a  
 8FL02 de facto ruler of a part of Poland, Wołodyjowski will have no chance to take her back. Uncontrolled  
 8FL03 sexual desire could be his main characteristic, but later it becomes clear that his desire is confined to  
 8FL04 Baška. In the case of other women he finds his pleasure only in physical and psychological cruelty.

9FL01 <sup>9</sup> Although the most brutal scene is when Christians torture and execute Azja. This is probably supposed  
 9FL02 to be interpreted as justified retaliation.

190 preparation<sup>10</sup> and determined self-sacrifice. The last seems a bit problematic at the  
 191 end of the *Fire on the Steppe*, since Ketling and Wołodyjowski decide to blow up  
 192 the fortress of Kameniec with themselves rather than surrender, but the castle is  
 193 already abandoned by the Poles. The novel contains an epilogue on the events of the  
 194 next year when Poland becomes able to strike back. Several characters speak of how  
 195 much Wołodyjowski's martial skills are missed this time. The self-sacrifice does not  
 196 seem to really contribute to the nation's later success or to be meaningful in any  
 197 way.

198 The connection between the Christian ethos of endurance or self-sacrifice and  
 199 future success of the community is quite clear in Sienkiewicz's most popular novel  
 200 *Quo vadis* from 1896. Here the mental strength of the Christians to endure the most  
 201 terrible pain becomes a convincing and important tool in the evangelisation to come.  
 202 The martyrs not only aim at otherworldly reward, but also contribute to the better  
 203 future of their society. This can provide a viewpoint from which Wołodyjowski's  
 204 self-sacrifice can be better interpreted: even if you cannot see at the moment how  
 205 your self-sacrifice can help your community, it will.

206 Petronius, probably the most attractive character in the novel, represents aesthetic  
 207 individualism; he is also willing to die any time, but after a life in which he refused  
 208 to make any effort for the well-being of the society, his death must be meaningless  
 209 too. His intelligence and mental force, just like his supreme understanding and  
 210 appreciation of art, is useless for the community. Sienkiewicz advertises social  
 211 commitment, which—in the turn of the century Polish context, when Poland as a  
 212 country did not exist, and Poles were living in three different empires—is easy to  
 213 interpret first and foremost as national commitment, but the Poles' Catholic religion  
 214 is a prime feature in it. The novel also can be interpreted as telling the foundation  
 215 story of the papacy.

216 Sienkiewicz invested a lot of energy in creating an accurate representation of the  
 217 Roman past, for example through the use of excessive Latin vocabulary to denote  
 218 objects not existing in the modern world, which, however, does not exclude some  
 219 harsh anachronisms (the most striking is that those very early Christians use the  
 220 cross as their symbol). The conflict of paganism and Christianity in Nero's time can  
 221 be imagined in several ways, therefore it would be unfair to say that the novel makes  
 222 mistakes here. But there is a third religion in the novel, which is not really  
 223 represented, yet nevertheless plays a role, namely Judaism. Nothing is said about the  
 224 religious practice of the Jews, but the Jewish community plays a very negative role.  
 225 They give Nero the idea of blaming the Christians for burning Rome, and the most  
 226 disgusting fictional villain of the novel, Chilon, is also a Jew, actually an apostate,  
 227 or a secularised, assimilated Jew, who usually describes himself as a Greek. It is  
 228 hard to find any other explanation for the role the Jews play in *Quo vadis* than that  
 229 nineteenth-century Polish anti-Semitism is projected (or retrojected) onto the canvas  
 230 of the ancient historical tableau.

10FL01 <sup>10</sup> Sienkiewicz makes clear the martial superiority of the Poles over the Ottoman enemy, therefore he has  
 10FL02 to explain the frequent and enduring success of the latter. According to his explanation the Turks can win  
 10FL03 because there are more of them, and because the Christians are usually not united or cautious enough.

231 **Ferenc Herczeg**

232 *Quo vadis* contrasted Christianity with Roman paganism. The situation is more  
 233 complex in Ferenc Herczeg's (1863–1954) *Pagans* (*Pogányok*, 1902), in which  
 234 Christianity is represented as the inferior foreign religion of westerners, contrasted  
 235 with the original paganism, namely the shamanistic religion of the free Hungarians.  
 236 The setting is Hungary in 1046, the year of the so-called pagan uprising against  
 237 Peter Orseolo, the second king of Hungary, who was of Italian origin. The  
 238 protagonist, Alpár, the son of a Pecheneg prince, who grew up in a cloister to  
 239 become a Benedictine monk, has to make a choice between Christianity and  
 240 paganism, which also appears as a choice between urban and steppe life, but also as  
 241 a question of nationality. At one point he says: "In your heaven there are only  
 242 Germans and Italians. But my father along with Prince Árpád and all the Hungarian  
 243 chiefs are in hell."<sup>11</sup> And when he refuses to suffer penitence in the monastery he  
 244 tells his provost: "Being whipped suits you, because you are a bloody foreigner. But  
 245 I am the son of Prince Thonuzoba."<sup>12</sup> The pride and freedom of early nomadic  
 246 Hungarians is contrasted with the decadent, abject, but still overwhelming West. At  
 247 the end of the novel it becomes obvious for him that the resistance to Christianity is  
 248 futile, and its apparent weakness covers an unstoppable force. And here again,  
 249 martyrdom is an unbeatable tool of propaganda.

250 The triumph of Christianity is also symbolised by the protagonist's choice  
 251 between two women, Seruzád, "the woman of the steppe", the queen of a tribe, an  
 252 amazon on horseback, who represents a dominant, threatening challenge of  
 253 sexuality, and Zenobia, a weak girl from the big city (Byzantium), who always  
 254 needs help and protection, and is rather asexual. When it comes to women, the  
 255 protagonist regards the pure nomadic energy as a revolt to be suppressed, while he is  
 256 attracted to female vulnerability.

257 **Géza Gárdonyi**

258 My last example of unnecessary anachronism can be found in *Slave of the Huns* (*A*  
 259 *láthatatlan ember*, 1902), a Hungarian novel on Attila the Hun by Géza Gárdonyi  
 260 (1963–1922). This historical figure has been adored in Hungary as an ancestor of the  
 261 nation, while he is usually represented as a bloodthirsty barbarian in the western  
 262 tradition. (There is a Turkish example of a friendly image of Attila in twentieth-  
 263 century novels outside Hungary, though.) The Hun-Hungarian continuity was a false  
 264 construction of Medieval chronicles, which were not proven wrong until the  
 265 beginning of the twentieth century (although it is still cherished by some lunatics  
 266 and the uneducated masses). In his historical novels Gárdonyi tended to use children  
 267 as focalising agents, therefore readers are introduced into the alien world of the past  
 268 through a child learning about his own world with inexhaustible curiosity. In this  
 269 case, the witness-narrator is Zeta, a Byzantine slave boy who happens to join a

11FL01 <sup>11</sup> Book 3, Chapter 4.12FL01 <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

270 legation to the Huns, and this combines natural childish curiosity with an  
 271 ethnographer's glance. This technique makes it possible to overwhelm readers with  
 272 details about objects and lifestyle in the represented world without stopping the  
 273 storytelling for a minute, and without any need of educated (or educating)  
 274 digressions.

275 The abundance of detail combined with the reliable narrator appears to guarantee  
 276 correct historical representation.

277 Anachronisms, however, are abundant. The story makes it clear that the Hun  
 278 language is identical with a not too old Hungarian (something like from the  
 279 eighteenth century), and Hun ornamental art is very similar to Hungarian folk art.

280 I have never seen such elaborately decorated chests. *We* leave chests their  
 281 natural colour, just as they are-carved and shaped out of cedar; we cover them  
 282 with a rug or cloth, but the chests themselves have no ornaments whatever.  
 283 These barbarians, however, cover theirs with painted roses, tulips and peacock  
 284 designs. Peculiar idea, I thought.<sup>13</sup>

285 Zeta is surprised to see a painted wooden chest, which does not exist in the  
 286 Roman or Byzantine Empire, but Hungarian readers are supposed to remember the  
 287 Tulip chests, characteristic objects of Hungarian folk art, and especially the wedding  
 288 ceremony. This suggests that Hun art has a continuity with Hungarian folk art, just  
 289 like the Hungarian language continues the Hun. However, the motive of the tulip  
 290 appeared in Hungary as late as in the seventeenth century, when it also appeared in  
 291 Austria, Switzerland, and South-Germany.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the tulip was bred as a  
 292 bedding plant in Central Asia in the Middle Ages. All we may know about  
 293 linguistic, natural or art history we should forget, because what we are given here is  
 294 an alternative history, based on the Hun-Hungarian continuity, where many things  
 295 are different. In such an example it is rather obvious that the past is created on the  
 296 basis of present experiences (the Hun art is imagined as the present Hungarian folk  
 297 art) and for current ideological purposes: to prove the Hun-Hungarian continuity to  
 298 support Hungarian claim for the land and for "historical" supremacy in the area.

## 299 Conclusion

300 In the Walter Scottian model of the historical novel, readers experience a tension  
 301 between the overtly fictional foreground and the historical background, which is  
 302 supposed to be real, and seems unreal or fictitious only in the light of some  
 303 postmodern insights. The fictional traits in the supposedly reliable representations of  
 304 historical background in the four nineteenth century Central-European novels I  
 305 analyzed in this paper are too important to be regarded as mistakes or minor  
 306 inaccuracies. They should not be regarded as such because the purpose of these  
 307 novels is not a historically accurate representation of the past, but the construction  
 308 of the nation's past to serve its present needs. For that purpose the invention of new

13FL01 <sup>13</sup> Gárdonyi (2000), 23.

14FL01 <sup>14</sup> "tulipán" in Ortutay (1977–1982), <http://mek.oszk.hu/02100/02115/html/5-848.html>.



309 features of the past, which sometimes may contradict the findings of academic  
310 historiography, was an extremely useful means. The past is thus transformed to  
311 serve the historical present. A historical fact or what can be regarded as fact in  
312 history is more or less a (maybe temporary) consensus of the historians. The  
313 historical fiction I was speaking about not only adds fictitious elements to those  
314 “facts”, not only plays with them or builds an imaginary story world on that  
315 foundation, but also creates new “facts” or transforms the old ones to create exactly  
316 that past which the present needs.  
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