

## A MICRO-STUDY OF ARAB VILLAGE IN PALESTINE/ISRAEL: THE CASE OF SUBA—NEW METHODOLOGIES AND SOURCES

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### Introduction

This article is a partial presentation of a micro-study of the former Arab village of Suba, and describes, inter alia, research methodologies that combine traditional with new approaches. It serves as a case study, the intention being to utilize it in future research comparing Suba with other villages that have been the subject of detailed study.

Since the beginning of the 19th century, the Arab village in Palestine has been the subject of descriptions and research by travelers and scholars of various disciplines. They have concentrated on different aspects such as buildings, population, village life, and more, but there has been almost no micro-research of individual villages. The research methodologies applied depended on the period and disciplines of the researchers, and on the availability of different types of sources. Geographers, for instance, including Moshe Brawer and David Grossman, who published extensively on this topic, combined theoretical study with field work (Brawer, 1977; Grossman, 1992). The latter included field surveys and oral documentation that would enable synthesis and arrival at conclusions. However, most of the research material has dealt with central villages, those that were located near urban centers and major highways. Most conspicuous among these were villages of historical and religious interest, such as Ein Karem (Oren-Nordheim 1985), Abu Ghosh (Ben-Dov 2003), and their likes. Peripheral villages (distant from urban centers and major highways) have not been the subject of individual study and detailed descriptions. The present article is an attempt to somewhat fill that lacuna, and to examine how a peripheral village in the modern age differs from its more central counterparts in building style and the time period of its development.

In earlier ages, such as the period of Crusader rule in Palestine, the site of Suba was of great importance as Belmont—a castle and administrative center. In later centuries it was an agricultural village located in the Judean hills, the majority of whose residents were Muslims. Suba ceased to exist as an Arab village when it was abandoned during Israel's War of Independence in 1948, and in October of that year a kibbutz, Zova (first named Palmahḥ-Zova), was established on its land. Over the past few centuries, the site has aroused much interest among travelers, pilgrims, and researchers, who were particularly interested in its identification with the biblical Zoba (2 Sam 23:36) and in the remains of the Crusader castle. The Arab village, however, some of whose ruins are still visible, attracted almost no attention. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, it has been continuously exposed to destruction and dilapidation, much of it having been demolished. Today, the remains of the village are in the process of being declared a national park, part of a nature reserve that is being planned for the area (Barak 2002: 27–30).

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### Research Topics and Methodology

One of the objectives of our study was to examine the characteristics and patterns of change in a peripheral village in the modern age (1800–1948). To this end, we chose to concentrate on the village of Suba in its geographical and historical contexts, and to study it by means of the surviving houses. Basing ourselves upon the combined use of field study, oral documentation, archival documents, printed sources, maps and other visual sources, we posed two research questions: What was the nature of the development of the built-up area of the village?; What were the factors that influenced this development? In our study we employed a combination (from the point of view of quality and quantity) of research methodologies based upon a variety of source material, listed below, including newer material unknown to earlier scholars.

- \* Original historical documents, in various languages, found in several archives.
- \* Other archival material in archives such as those of the Public Works Department, the Israel Antiquities Authority (Shai 2002), Kibbutz Palmaḥ-Zova, Kibbutz Kiriyat Anavim, and more.
- \* Reports and descriptions by pilgrims, travelers, and researchers who visited Suba prior to 1948 (Canaan 1927).
- \* Historical and contemporary reports in European languages (Khalidi 1992), Arabic (Muslah-Ruman 2000), and Hebrew (Califon 1989).
- \* Relevant maps and aerial photographs (Hatzubai 1964).
- \* Drawings, etchings, and photographs of the village and its surroundings in various periods.
- \* Intelligence reports and village files prepared by the Haganah and Palmaḥ \$ para-military organizations (Salomon 2001).
- \* New data published on the Internet, primarily in Palestinian Arab websites ([www.Palestineremembered.com](http://www.Palestineremembered.com) 2006).
- \* Field survey of buildings and remains—public buildings and private dwellings in and around the core of the village.
- \* Survey of the landscape, open spaces, and trees (Barak and Gibson 2002).
- \* Interviews with residents of Ain Rafa, an offshoot village of Suba, who lived in Suba until 1948, and with members of Kibbutz Zova (Hassidian 1995).

### Historical Background

#### *From the Crusades to the Late Ottoman Period*

Pilgrims who came to the Holy Land during the Crusades identified Suba as the site of ancient Modi in, the village of the Maccabees, due to its proximity to Abu Ghosh, in that period identified as Emmaus (Guerin 1982: 177–85; Califon 1989: 15–20). The Crusader era was a formative period in the history of this village. At this time the hill on which Suba is located was called Belmont (Beautiful Mountain), and it lent its name to the castle built by the Order of the Hospital in ca. 1170 as the administrative center of their estate that covered extensive areas including Colonia (present-day Moza and Mevasseret Ziyon), Castel, Aqua Bela, and Abu Ghosh. To this very day one can discern remnants of the wall that surrounded the castle, of its corner towers, of the moat, and other remains of the Crusader period. (including many unhewn stones employed in secondary usage by residents of Suba when they built their houses). About twenty years after the castle's construction, it was partially destroyed during the conquest of the area by Saladin (Harper and Pringle 1999).

Like many other villages in Palestine, Suba arose on the ruins of the castle and the ancient settlement. There is very little information about the village until the 19th century. The Arab geographer Yaqut mentions it in 1225 (Califon 1989: 42). An important source of information for the end of the 16th century are the Ottoman tax lists (1596). Suba is listed there as a village in the Jerusalem *nahiyah* populated by 60 Muslim and 7 Christian families. The staple crops raised were wheat and barley (Hütteroth and Abdulfattah 1977: 115).

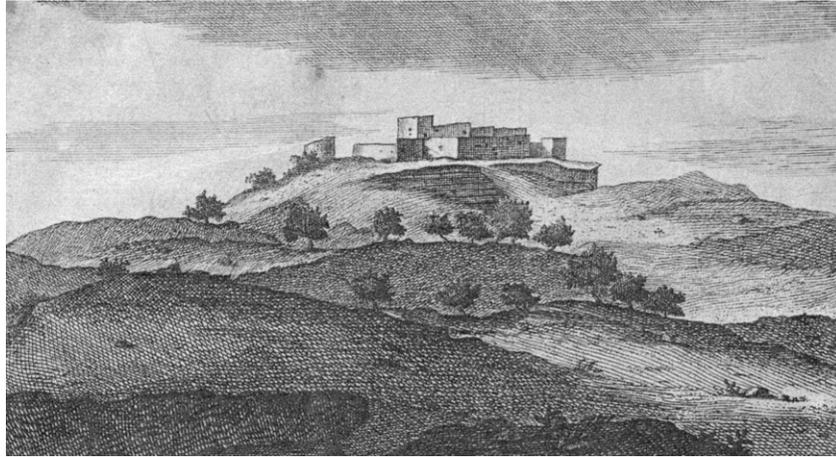


Fig. 1 Drawing of the village of Suba, 1698 (de Bruyn 1698).

In a drawing of the village (Fig. 1) executed by Cornelis de Bruyn ca. 1698 it is called Modi in (de Bruyn 1698). The village is depicted as situated atop a hill, with square dwellings having small windows close one to another. If this drawing is a faithful representation, we have before us a village with a traditional design—an irregular nucleated village whose houses are built next to each other (Brawer 1977). Only in the 19th century did Suba begin to figure in the works of various researchers and travelers, most of them Westerners. Though these descriptions did not focus on the village itself, but rather on its identification with the biblical Modi in, it is nonetheless possible to extract some information from them about the village and its population. Several travelers and pilgrims, on their way from Jaffa to Jerusalem, noted the conical hill atop of which Suba was located, even if they did not enter the village. This generally happened after they had passed Abu Ghosh, but before reaching the spot from which they could view Jerusalem (Gibson *et al.* 1999).

Administratively, in the late Ottoman period Suba was part of the *nahiyah* of Bani Malik, then a subdivision of the *sanjak* (district) of Jerusalem. The most important village in this *nahiyah* was Qaryat-el - Anab which was under the control of the Abu Ghosh family (Ben-Arieh 1985). This family built its own fortified structure within the walls of the ancient castle in Suba. The fortress and the walls were destroyed, like other villages, during the revolt by local fellahin (peasants) in 1834 against the Egyptian military force and its commander Ibrahim Pasha, which had conquered the country a few years earlier.

John Paxton, who was in Palestine from 1836 to 1839, described Suba as a cluster of buildings atop the hill and also expressed his opinion about the strongman of Abu Ghosh:

A cluster of buildings on the top of a hill, called the tomb of the Maccabees. It looked like a fort, or a place of defense, and was, so I am told, not long since, the residence of Aboo Goosh, who used to make free with the property of other people; in other words, was a notorious robber. But Ibrahim Pasha has taught such gentry a good lesson (Paxton 1839: 111).

Paxton mentions the role of Ibrahim Pasha in “reshaping” the village’s appearance. The destruction of the castle is an important event, one that apparently left its mark on Suba’s built-up area.

This episode was also recorded by Victor Guérin, a French scholar of classical literature, geography, and archaeology. His study, summing up eight visits to Palestine, was published in French in 1886. His interest in Suba focused on its biblical past, but he also imparted to his readers information about the village in his own days:

At the top of this hill, isolated and conical-shaped, was formerly located a town, of which today all that



Map 1 Map of the Suba area, 1878 (Conder and Kitchener, 1878)

remains is no more than a village, also called Suba. Before the invasion of Ibrahim Pasha this was a castle surrounded by walls well built out of wonderful unhewn stones. But in 1834, after very fierce opposition, Ibrahim stormed and took it and almost completely destroyed its walls (Guérin 1982: 176–77).

The ruins of the castle, as Guérin saw them, were first dated as Crusader remains in the 19th century by the expedition of the Palestine Exploration Fund, which arrived in Palestine in May 1875. The descriptions and findings of this expedition were published in a series of volumes and maps during the 1880s, in which they documented every permanent settlement in the land (Map 1). The following is the description of their visit to Suba:

Sôba. A stone village of moderate size, in a very conspicuous position on the top of a steep conical hill. It has a high central house. [...] There are rock-cut tombs on the north and on the south. The hill stands up 700 or 800 feet above the valley on the north. There is a good spring in the valley on this side, and another (Ain Sôba) in the valley to the south-west. There are remains of a Crusading fortress, which was destroyed by Ibrahim Pasha. The place was at one time a fortress of the Abu Ghôsh family. [...] The village or the district appears to have been called Belmont in the twelfth century; and Sôba was apparently a fief of the Holy Sepulchre... (Conder and Kitchener 1883: 18–19).

### ***The British Mandate Period*** (Map 2)

From diverse sources consulted, we concluded that until the end of the British Mandate period in Palestine (1918–1948) Suba was a village with traditional characteristics (Kark and Oren-Nordheim 2001, 262) These included agriculture as the pursuit of the majority of its residents, division of the population into clans, administration of the village by *mukhtars*, Muslim religious education for the children, traditional means of transport, and the absence of modern means of communication. The first vestiges of modernization appeared in the village during the period of British rule, particularly in the 1940s, a process that was accelerated by the paving of a road to the village—to be more exact, to the school in Deir Ammar (the site today of the Eitanim Mental Hospital).



Map 2 Map of the Suba area in the British Mandate Period, 1944 (*Survey of Palestine*, Sheet: Jerusalem and Ramallah, 1:20,000)

Laying down that road made the village accessible by motor transport such as buses that began to serve the village on a daily basis. In addition, some of the villagers began working in non-agricultural occupations, and there were commercial relations between Suba and Jerusalem, as well as with neighboring villages. All these, in addition to frequent visits to Jerusalem, opened up the

village and its residents to modern influences and innovations (Barak 2002: 83–86).

### *Conquest of Suba in 1948 and the Israeli Period*

The Harel Brigade took control of Suba on the night between 12 and 13 July 1948, as part of “Operation Danny.” It seems that the villagers had fled prior to the attack, most of them taking up residence in al-Eizariya and Abu Dis (just to the east of Jerusalem, and then under Jordanian control) and in Amman. A small minority moved to Ain Rafa, an offshoot village of Suba that had not been abandoned. After 1948, additional former residents of Suba settled in Ain Rafa, most of whom we interviewed. With the establishment of Kibbutz Palmah-Zovain October of that year this sentence seems unfinished. At first they lived in the abandoned houses of the Arab Village but soon the settlement was transferred from its historical site atop the hill to the saddle to the west.

Since then the historical site of Suba and the core of the Arab village has remained deserted, and much of it has been destroyed (Barak 2002: 30).

Further damage was caused over the years by the dismantling of stones and other building materials from the abandoned structures in the village. From correspondence in 1951 between the Custodian of Abandoned Property, the Jewish National Fund, and Kibbutz Zovait can be established with all certainty that the Ministry of Labor used building stones (and other construction materials) from Suba when it built the nearby Castel *ma'abara* housing project for Jewish new immigrants. In addition, such materials were also taken by the Even va-Sid (Stone and Lime) quarrying company, the Jerusalem District Engineer, and others—from whom Kibbutz Zovademand financial compensation (Barak 2002:53). The destruction was documented in an archaeological survey of Suba conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority in 1965 as part of a national survey of abandoned Arab villages (Yeivin, 1966).

### **The Villagers**

Traditions preserved by the Arab residents of Suba maintain that the first to build in the village were the members of one founding family which settled there during the reign of Saladin. According to these traditions, they moved into buildings that had survived within Castle Belmont. Additional families which followed in the footsteps of the original settlers were al-Nasrallah (out of which sprung the Barhum family that resides in Ain Rafa), Ruman, Fiqiya, and Cabariyya. The origin of all these families is in the village of Raba in Jordan (Shifman 1994: 3). As noted above, the tax census of 1596 listed 67 households in Suba, 60 of them Muslim and 7 Christian.

From interviews conducted by the authors during recent years with residents of Ain Rafa we learned that during the British Mandate period there were four Muslim clans in Suba, most of whom are connected with the ancient tradition noted above: the clans of al-Ruman, al-Nasrallah, al-Fiqiya, and al-Jubran (Barhum and Abu Hazan 2001; Rizak and Rizak 2001). Support for this information is provided in an intelligence report prepared in the early 1940s for the Haganah para-military force by Ya'akov Lisser, a member of Kibbutz Kiryat Anavim, who noted the presence of four clans in

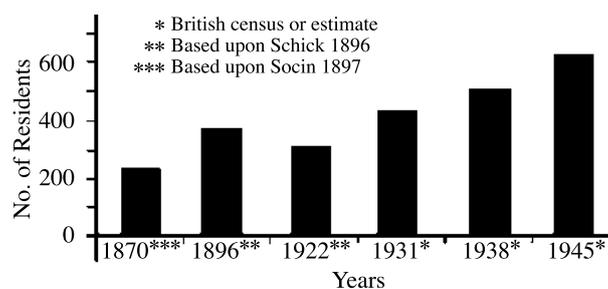


Fig. 2 Development of the Population of Suba, 1870–1945 (Source: Kark and Oren-Nordheim 2001).

Suba belonging to the extremist Arab camp (Lisser 1940). The development of the Arab population of Suba from the last decades of the 19th century until the final years of the British Mandate is presented in a graph (Fig. 2). Population growth in these years amounted to almost 300 percent, which was also common for other villages in the Jerusalem area during that period (Kark and Oren-Nordheim 2001: 196). As we shall see immediately, the increase in population had important implications for the development of Suba's built-up area.

### Development of the Built-up Area

Until the beginning of the 20th century most Arab villages in Palestine were built as irregular nucleated villages in a haphazard manner, there being no order to the houses which were erected very close to one another. This is a village type of the highest density, known by the geographic term *Haufendorf* (Brawer 1977). This held true for Suba as well. In 1863 Guérin described the walled village in the following manner:

“The wall that encircled this city, despite the fact that until then it had suffered from the passing of time and even more so at the hands of men, was still preserved in a good enough condition to provide the residents of Suba with enough protection” (Guérin 1982: 176–177).

However, Suba underwent substantial changes from the late Ottoman period to the end of the British Mandate in Palestine. The built-up area increased, spread out, and changed the traditional layout of the village. With the help of a variety of sources (British maps, aerial photos and maps included in the Suba village file prepared by the *Palmaḥ*) we were able to gather much information on the development of its built-up area. Fig. 3 presents the increase in the number of buildings outside the old core of the village (Barak 2002: 44, 45).

From the information in this graph it is obvious that the early signs of modernization also left their mark on construction in Suba, but unlike descriptions in the literature, these were no more than early signs, not a sweeping change. Until 1917 Suba followed the pattern of traditional villages—buildings were concentrated towards the center in a haphazard manner and surrounded by the remains of the Crusader walls. From 1917 to 1948 there was a significant growth of the built-up area, many buildings being erected outside the ancient walls, particularly towards the south along the road that led towards the Castel and Jerusalem. This development led to Suba being transformed from an irregular nucleated village into a “street village” in which the houses are built along the roads and at some distance one from the other (see Fig. 4).

Another development was the transformation of the offshoot village of Ain Rafa into an independent village about two km north-west of Suba, near the spring which bears that name.

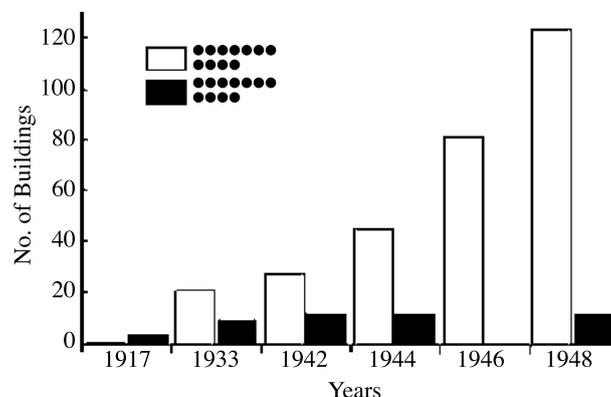


Fig. 3 Development of the built-up area outside the core of Suba, 1917–1948 (Source: Barak 2002, 44).



Fig. 4 Aerial photo of Suba, 1946 (Haganah Archives, file / 14 *kefar* /8).

Residents of the village told us that it was established by a founding family, descendants of the al-Nasrallah clan of Suba. It began as an *azba* (seasonal settlement) in which residents of Suba used to live in the summer, during harvest time, out of which the village of Ain Rafa developed from 1924 onwards. In 1936 it was given the status of an independent village and the right to appoint a *mukhtar* of its own, the first being Mahmud Ali Musa Awal (Lisser 1940; Barhum 2000).

### **Types of Structures and Building Styles**

Ron Fuchs has defined the architectural character of buildings in traditional Arab villages as being founded on two basic attributes: 1) a single-space structure that served all the needs of its dwellers; 2) the internal space of the house was divided into two levels—a raised upper level served as living and sleeping space, while the lower level was set aside for the household animals and everyday use (Fuchs 1998a & b). It is noteworthy that this definition treats both of the house's architectural style and how it was used by its dwellers. Yizhar Hirschfeld summed up the latter aspect: "The attribute that more than anything else makes traditional Arab buildings unique is that the dwellers are prepared to share them with animals" (Hirschfeld 1987: 60).

The first impression we gained from our visits to the remains of Suba was that the village had been built in a traditional and uniform manner. Most of the structures contained components that

have been described and classified in the professional literature as belonging to the traditional village style of construction. However, when the survey of Suba was completed and the surviving structures documented in detail, it turned out that this was not a precise conclusion. In effect, three types of buildings were found among those that survived the events of 1948 in Suba.

#### ***Traditional Single-Space Houses***

These are houses that were built using traditional techniques—a single space, with thick walls and vaults to support the ceiling. Only three of this type were found among the surviving buildings. The entrances of such houses faced a courtyard, and they were clearly divided into two levels. Furthermore, in these structures we found evidence that humans lived in them side-by-side with animals—there were rings in the wall to which the animals were tied, and feeding stalls. We believe that this combination of a single-spaced structure with a two-leveled interior in these three structures indicates that they are traditional village houses.

#### ***Multi-Spaced Buildings***

These buildings are of a transitional type, between traditional and modern—they too were built of stone using traditional technologies. Most of the surviving houses in Suba are of this type, comprising several halls or rooms with entrances generally facing a common courtyard. There are two sub-types: with and without a passageway between the rooms. Thus these homes do not comply with the definition of a traditional village house. They lack the single space in which the family carried on its daily life and in many cases they also lack the division into two levels, or at best there was a small and low raised section just within the entrance.

It may well be that there is a connection between the multiple interior spaces and lack of a raised second level and the domestic lifestyle that was common towards the end of the British Mandate period. From our conversations with residents of Ain Rafa we learned that in those years living together with animals was generally only the lot of the poorer villagers. In most houses in the village, rooms for members of the family were separate from the space set aside for the animals (Abu Aji and Barhum 2001). This may account for the variations we found between several rooms in the same house: a different quality of the final touches (plaster, paint, and flooring); the size and type of windows (double windows with a bench, as compared to very small apertures); and various fixtures that we found in the rooms (an alcove for bedclothes and a fireplace, as compared to rings affixed to the wall and feeding stalls). What we have in this case is that each room has its own defined purpose, a state of affairs that differed completely from the concept of the traditional house. Ron Fuchs describes a similar phenomenon. He maintains that part of the development and establishment of the traditional rural household included adding rooms to make life more comfortable for the family. He is of the opinion that such houses can be considered a type unto itself (Fuchs 1998a & b). Both these types—single-spaced and multiple-spaced houses—were built of local building materials and using conventional technologies.

#### ***Structures Constructed Using Modern Technologies and Materials***

Though no structures of this type have survived, from various sources (photos, physical remains, interviews with former residents of Suba, and documents referring to the sale of building materials from the abandoned village after 1948) we may imply that there were a few buildings that had been built using modern technologies and materials: concrete, and ceilings constructed of steel and concrete girders.

### **Character of Construction: Analysis and Conclusions**

As noted earlier, the literature dealing with buildings in the Arab villages points to a sweeping tendency towards the introduction of changes in the layout of the traditional village and the structure of its houses from the late 19th century onwards. These descriptions mention construction using modern materials and with components of an urban building style. All this, however, does not hold true for Suba, not from the point of view of time period, and even not as to the extent of the changes. True, there

was some development in the house types of Suba, but when compared with what was described in the literature and with developments in other villages in the area, what happened in Suba was not an extreme development. In larger villages such as Ayn Karem and Lifta, located much closer to Jerusalem, there were many buildings which had been constructed with the use of modern technologies and materials. In these villages one could also find structures of a more advanced, urban architectonic style (such as the *iwan* house or the central hall house). In addition, they contained elements of urban construction that were either completely lacking in Suba or found there very sparsely, such as ceramic flooring, balconies, staircases, and entrances of the “triple aperture”—a door flanked by two large windows (Oren-Nordheim 1985; Moshe 2001; Cana’ane and al-Hadi 1991).

One reason for the absence of substantial expansion of construction in Suba until the 1940s may be its semi-isolation due to the lack of transportation facilities, which probably was an obstacle to the transport of modern building materials to the village, and also made them more expensive. In addition, the fact that Suba was cut off from the Jerusalem–Jaffa road was detrimental to economic conditions in the village—a lack of materials and the absence of modern construction methods reflect an economic situation that does not allow for such a development. This assumption can find some support from a comparison of Suba with other villages in the area which were located near the main road or were connected to it at an earlier date—Ayn Karem and Lifta—that have been the subject of detailed research. These studies have shown that construction developments in these two villages took place earlier and on a greater scope (Oren-Nordheim 1985; Moshe 2001). Suba, as a case study, raises a question concerning the development of building styles in other villages in the area. There may have been other such villages in which, just as in Suba, no sweeping change occurred until the last years of the British Mandate period.

### Epilogue

The abandoned village of Suba is a picturesque nature preserve, a remnant and reminder of the architectural and technological history of rural Arab building styles in the Judean hill country. Unlike other villages in the Jerusalem area, Suba was not razed to the ground, nor was it repopulated with new settlers after 1948. Part of it has remained standing, i.e., some of its abandoned houses have maintained their original shape and form while others were destroyed. The surviving buildings serve as an “historical document” testifying to the planning, technologies, and lifestyle of traditional villages.

Examination of the remaining houses and of their geographical-historical context has brought to light new information about traditional construction patterns and the changes they underwent. As we have shown, detailed, inter-disciplinary research of this peripheral village, a study that makes use of new and diverse sources to reach a synthesis, can throw new light on a few issues in the study of traditional Arab villages. We intend to devote a future article to the topic of “village and commemoration”. We also believe that our study can have important implications for the future planning and development of the site, physically and also in from the aspects of museology and tourism.

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