

THE ROMANIAN MEDIEVAL PRINCIPALITIES BETWEEN ORIENT AND OCCIDENT. GEO-POLITICAL, ECCLESIASTICAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES¹

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Abstract: The article tries to analyse the perception of the Western regime of estates in the Romanian principalities in the Middle Ages. Since their foundation in the 14th century, the two Romanian principalities were under the strong political influence of Hungary and Poland. In spite of the Orthodox Christianity, Romanian feudalism had, during its first stage, a much wider sense than it had in the Byzantine Empire or in the Balkans, as it included components of a central-European senior-vassal relationship. When Stephen the Great (1457-1504) succeeded to the crown of Moldavia, the Slavic and Byzantine political influence, different from that of the central-European feudalism, got into the country. Stephen adopted a centralized policy, using the influence of the Orthodox Church, which had begun to hold a more significant role, not just in the religious, cultural and economic life, but also in the political regime. One century later, after the setting-up of the Ottoman hegemony, the Romanian countries were neither conquered nor integrated into the Ottoman Empire. They maintained a high degree of autonomy, but their political life was characterized by anarchy, caused by the lack of a solid legal system and of an old-standing succession-settlement. Two concepts on the government began to coexist: the absolutist concept (of Slavic-Byzantine and Ottoman-oriental origins) promoted by the voivodes and, secondly, the political program of the boyars, aiming to establish a regime of estates like in Poland and Transylvania. The

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history of the two principalities in the 16th and the 17th centuries is about the endeavours of the Romanian nobility to fight against the absolutism and to replace the anarchical fight for power with legality and estates-regime. At the beginning of the 18th century this fight seemed to be won by the Ottoman sultans, who transformed the two vassal Romanian principalities into provinces of the empire, rented to those who offered more money. As a result, the prebendal feudalism of the Ottoman Empire was embedded in the Romanian countries and resisted until the modernization of these countries in the middle of the 19th century.

Keywords: Romania, Ottomans, regime of estates, politics, feudalism

After the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia, Romania has remained one of the most multicultural states in Southeastern Europe. This is not due just to the 18 ethnic minorities (as together they make up just 10,5% of the whole population of Romania) but to the variety of political and constitutional traditions of this particular state. Part of the present Romania belonged to the Austrian Empire with its central-European political traditions. The other part of Romania was affiliated to the old Byzantine Commonwealth and fell later under the influence of the political system of the Ottoman Empire). The Byzantines and the Ottomans succeeded in achieving the last imperial synthesis of older East-Mediterranean civilizations. Although based on two different religions, the Byzantine and Ottoman civilizations have in common at least the lack of Western (Frankish) feudalism, particularly ideas like political contract and the right of resistance.

Nevertheless, the framework of the two Romanian countries, i.e. Wallachia (WL) and Moldavia (MD) was extraordinary and noteworthy. Since their foundation in the 14th century, they were under the strong and considerable political influence of its two Western neighbours – Hungary and Poland. Two centuries later, after the setting-up of the Ottoman hegemony, they were neither conquered nor integrated into the Ottoman Empire. They maintained a high degree of autonomy, which allowed them to become what Nicolae Iorga called to be the Byzantine after the Byzantine Empire. Yet, two centuries later, the Byzantine political tradition extinguished, being replaced with the Neo-Greek or the Phanariote one, which lasted until the beginning of the modern era, in the first half of the 19th century (Pippidi: 174-184).

As a result, the political and socio-cultural traditions and ideas in the Romanian countries had a particularly interesting evolution. The stages of this development can be systematized as follows:

- ✦ The era of the regime of estates and the noble (boyar) domains with immunity. It lasted from the beginning of the two Romanian countries until 1457 (in MD) and around 1500 (in WL);
- ✦ The era of the principality (voivodeship) centralization, according to the Byzantine model (1457/1500 – about 1550);
- ✦ The instauration of the Ottoman hegemony and the beginning of the anarchical strife for power between boyars and voivodes (the second half of the 16th century);
- ✦ The era of the struggle for the implementation of a regime of estates, according to the Polish and the Transylvanian model, and for establishing the boyar monarchy (1595-1655);
- ✦ The crisis of the regime of estates and the gradual integration into the political Ottoman area (the 2nd half of the 17th century);
- ✦ The Neo-Greek, Phanariote era (1711-1821/1829);
- ✦ The era of the constitutional reforms, enforced by the Habsburgs in Bukovina (northern Moldavia: 1775-1918) and by the Russian protectorate (in MD and WL 1830-1856);
- ✦ The union of Wallachia and Moldavia, the building of modern Romania according to the constitutional model of Belgium (1859-1918).

1. From the very beginning, the Romanian countries have been a place where the Western and Eastern-Mediterranean political cultures converged. Byzantine feudalism was widespread throughout the Balkan Peninsula, then in the Romanian Countries outside the Carpathians and later in Russia. However, in the two Romanian countries, the notion of feudalism has a broader and deeper meaning than what is shown to us by the Byzantine Eastern feudalism or by forms of domination not yet fully developed, as we see in Russia, in the Late Middle Ages. In the early days of the Romanian countries, feudalism included important elements of a senior-vassal relationship (Costăchel 1944: 83). During the 14th and the 15th centuries, people in these two countries lived the “international life of Western feudalism”, with tournaments and coats of arms. The frescoes found in the earliest Romanian monasteries, as well as the graves there, reveal these customs.

There are mainly two reasons for the existence of this Romanian feudalism, located between the Byzantine one and the Western one.

The two Romanian principalities came into existence through the unification of small political counties, ruled by a prince, called *cneaz* / pl: *cneji* (Stahl: I, 142). This unification was achieved through the recognition of one common lord, called *voievod* (Papacostea 1998: 152-159) by all princes. The gentry of the country (called boyars or *majores terrae*) preserved their privileges and the franchise of their estates (IDR: I, 241-243). Therefore, the voivode was not a *princeps legibus solutus*: he did not overlook the council of the great nobility (Brătianu: 22-26).

At the same time, the two Romanian countries were under the influence of Hungary and Poland. Not only voivodes were feudatories to the Hungarian and Polish kings, but the Moldavian boyars also confessed themselves as vassals to the main *suzerain*, i.e. the Polish king. Under these circumstances, voivodes tried to ensure their independence through their relationship with the Byzantine Empire and their recognition as “autocratic lords” by the Byzantine Court, particularly by the foundation of Christian Orthodox metropolitan seats. The voivodes adopted the Byzantine court titles and church organization, as well as the Byzantine political doctrine. Therefore, they believed that their princely dignity sprung from God’s mercy and did not derive from the boyars’ will (Pippidi: 24-31). Even so, this doctrine could not be enforced onto the boyars, who were aware of their old aristocratic privileges and who were also inspired by the models of the central-European feudal system from Poland and Hungary. Hence, the early Romanian feudalism had a much wider sense than it had in the Byzantine Empire or in the Balkans, as it included components of a central-European senior-vassal relationship.

2. When Stephen the Great (1457-1504) succeeded to the crown of Moldavia, the Slavic-Byzantine political influence, different from that of the central-European feudalism, took its first steps into the country. Stephen adopted a centralized policy, using the Orthodox Church, the small gentry and the free peasantry for this purpose. He defeated the great boyars and landowners. They were no longer part of the Voivodal Council, being replaced by Court officials (office-bearers). Then, Stephen granted domains and fiscal/juridical immunity to metropolitan/bishopric seats and to important monasteries. Consequently, a separate church estate (bishops and abbots) was brought into existence. Before the time of Stephen the Great

there were no church dignitaries, like the important boyars, on the official deeds to agree to the voivodal resolutions and sentences. However, under the rule of Stephen, the Church began to hold “a more significant role, not just in the religious, cultural and economic life, but also in the political regime” (Brătianu: 125). More than that, some prerogatives held earlier by the boyars were taken over by the clergymen (Costăchel 1947: 47). In Wallachia, the centralizing process took place 50 years later. It relied also on the Orthodox Church, with the contribution of Nifon, a former patriarch of Constantinople. During that time voivodes, particularly Neagoe Basarab (1512-1521), considered themselves restorers of the Orthodox Byzantine civilization. This is why they supported the Orthodox Church from the Ottoman Empire (Pippidi: 216-225).

The Byzantine autocratic and spiritual influences were also reflected by the legal books (called *pravile*), following the Byzantine model (written, of course, in Slavic, the official language), in 1474 and 1495, as well as by the earliest Moldavian chronicles (*Letopisețul de Bistrița*, or *The Chronicle of Bistrița*), which also included fragments from Byzantine and Slavic chronicles written in the countries south of the Danube.

3. During the Ottoman hegemony in Southeastern Europe (after the occupation of central Hungary - 1541) the process of centralization of the two Romanian countries ended. The Sultans began to appoint voivodes, thus breaking off the balance of power in the two countries. On the other hand, the Ottoman hegemony brought about an excessive tax system and the enslavement of the peasantry. At the same time, a new sort of nobility emerged, different from the old one, already extinguished. The ancestors of these new boyars of the 2nd half of the 16th century did not hold vast lands. They belonged to the small county-gentry. During the first half of the 16th century, voivodes leaned upon them and granted them court-offices. Many of these office-bearers knew how to use “wisely” their ascendancy, easily became rich and bought vast domains (Panaitescu: 477-478). They gradually began to elude the authority of voivodes, whose status became weaker. Thus the only support these could receive was that of the Sublime Porte. This assistance was not given for free, but in exchange for bribes. Each aspirant to be voivode had to buy this appointment. The amount was 10-15 times higher than the regular tribute of each country to the Porte. The aspirants borrowed money from Greek creditors from Phanar (a neighbourhood in Istanbul). These

followed the new voivodes in the Romanian countries and acquired offices to be able to retrieve the money. As a consequence, a ferocious struggle for power started. On the one hand, the insecure voivodes stifled real or even potential insurrections of the boyars. Sometimes these succeeded in murdering the voivodes. On the other hand, a ruthless competition between Romanian native boyars and foreign Greek creditors emerged.

In other words, the history of the two Romanian countries was characterized by anarchy, caused by the lack of a solid legal system and of an old-standing succession-settlement. Voivodes had short reigns, because the aspirants of the opponent boyar-groups replaced them. Most of the overthrown voivodes could buy the throne back. It stands to reason that these short and costly reigns led to the impoverishment of the people. This was not only because of the taxes. The situation of the normal people was all the more difficult because, not being under direct Ottoman administration (as *re`aya* of the sultan), they could be exploited by the Ottoman officials from the Southern Danube or by the Tatars. Having no reason to fear the sultan's punishment, the Tatars and even the Ottoman officials often fell into the territories of MD or WL and robbed cattle, sheep and even people. Therefore, vast regions became uninhabited (R. GR: II, 82).

It is useful to present four examples of voivodes whose actions prove the lack of legality and safety in the two countries at that time. Mircea Ciobanul, appointed voivode of WL in 1545, "cut" six boyars (who were loyal to his predecessor and brother, Radu Paisie). In these circumstances, many boyars took refuge in Transylvania. Seven years later they succeeded in obtaining the appointment of a new voivode by the Porte. However, it did not last, because Mircea Ciobanul bought the throne back in 1558. Once more, the adversary sought refuge in Transylvania. Mircea entreated them to return perjuring that he only wished for reconciliation. The boyars trusted his promise, came back and were slaughtered. 47 boyars, two bishops, all the abbots of the country and many monks lost their lives (L.C: 117-118). Another tyrant was Alexandru II Mircea. Appointed in 1568, he beheaded 200 boyars in just one day (Rezachevici: 261). In MD, in the beginning of his 2nd reign, Alexandru Lapusneanu invited to a banquet all those boyars he suspected to be his enemies and killed them: "He did not choose the guilty ones, but put them all under the sword one by one" (Ureche: 137).

Eight years later another voivode of Moldavia, Ioan Voda cel Cumplit (John III the Terrible) gave proof of a cruelty out of the common:

From the beginning he roared like a lion wanting to lick the blood of the innocent boyars. Some of them were beheaded, their properties seized, others were flayed like rams, others were cut in four, while others buried alive.

A former metropolitan bishop was burn at the stake. Moreover, the cruel voivodes confiscated many of the goods belonging to churches, used in a campaign against the Ottomans (Azarie: 317).

In the 2nd half of the 16th century, two concepts on government began to coexist. First of all, there was the absolutist concept promoted by voivodes: the Slavic-Byzantine concept of Alexandru Lapusneanul and the Ottoman-Eastern one of Mircea Ciobanul and Ioan Voda cel Cumplit (Brătianu: 141-142). Secondly, there was the political program of the boyars aiming to establish a regime of estates like the ones in Poland and Transylvania (Papacostea 1998: 204-212). The constitutional states of affairs of these two countries were very well known by the Romanian boyars, particularly by those from MD, because many Moldavian boyars possessed many domains in Poland, were naturalized in Poland (they received the *indygenat*), having the right to take part in the local *sejmiks* and even in the national *sejm*. Most of the important Moldavian boyars went to Jesuit colleges in Poland. The Movilas (Mohilas) were very famous for their pro-Polish attitude. Petru Movilă (Petro Mohila), metropolitan bishop of Kiev between 1633 and 1646, was the nephew and the brother of some Moldavian voivodes (Panaitescu: 579-588).

Being acquainted with the constitutional order of the Kingdoms of Poland and that of Transylvania, the Moldavian chronicler Gheorghe Ureche could only deplore the anarchy and arbitrariness of Moldavia:

*The nobility of Poland, called szlachta, does not obey so much the king but the law, which is made by the nobles themselves. They go to law to the judge's seat of their region. If they do not like the sentence, they have the right to demand justice to a higher court... There, if the king oppresses him, he can proceed against him without any fear... so that in the end he can find justice. Nobody can arrest a nobleman (not even the king) without a court verdict (*neminem captivamus nisi jure victum*).*

The Hungarian hears and determines a case with great justice and if you do not like the sentence of one court, you are free to demand your right in another one. If the king oppresses you or wrongs you, you have the right to summon him in court, in the presence of all great nobles... If you have been wronged, you will find justice. The king has not the right to kill a nobleman if he cannot prove the treason...

In Moldavia there is this practice that people perish without number, without trial, without guilt: the voivode himself preaches and acts as a judge. And Moldavia cannot get rid of this fortune because there are many who love to shed innocent blood. Then they say that the dwellers of the country are guilty and slyly. But who does not hate death and would enjoy living? (Ureche: 66-68, 80, 137).

4. Although these reflections were written at the beginning of the 17th century, they emerged at the end of the 16th century, accompanying the political program of the boyars. The geographical position of the Romanian countries compelled the boyars to use the support of the neighbouring states. Boyars and bishops in Wallachia made the first step in this direction. When they were sent to Prince Sigismund Bathory of Transylvania to conclude an alliance between Wallachia and Transylvania, they went beyond their competence and entered a contract with Bathory (1595, May the 20th). The main stipulations of the so-called *Pacta et Conventa* signed then were: a) the prince of Transylvania became the sovereign of Wallachia and its voivode was degraded to a simple *locumtenens* (so, WL was integrated into the Transylvanian Principality); b) This *locumtenens* had to administrate “in concordance with the old liberty and customs of this country and also of these *Pacta et conventa*.” Thus he was to follow the advice of a Council made up by 12 boyars; c) no “Greek” was to be allowed to receive office in WL (Hurmuzaki: III, 209-213; Brătianu: 75-76). “The treaty is the fundamental document for the knowledge of the medieval political thought of the boyars” (Stănescu: XXV). In fact, they adopted the most important elements of the constitutional order of central Europe: the *Pacta et conventa* (the “agreed pacts” from the Polish system) or *capitulatio caesarea* (from Germany and Hungary); the responsibility of the nobles for the government of the country (i.e. the adoption of the aristocratic monarchy) and the restriction to hold offices only to naturalized boyars (like the Polish and Hungarian *Indygenat*).

A similar treaty was concluded two weeks later between the Moldavian voivode Razvan and Bathory. But Poland could not accept the interference of the Transylvanians in what they considered the Polish sphere of influence. Consequently, the Polish army occupied MD and placed Ieremia Movila on the Moldavian throne (August 1595). With the agreement of the Porte, MD was considered just a palatinate of the Polish Kingdom. Thus the autonomy and the “customs” of MD were no longer respected. In addition, the Catholic Church received in MD the same prerogatives as the Orthodox Church. The Polish noblemen were granted permission to buy properties here (Brătianu: 147-149).

However, these political unions could not last in the difficult international context of the Low Danube region. Nevertheless, boyars constantly aimed to establish a regime of estates. The Wallachian voivode Radu Serban (1602-1611) was elected by the boyars with *pacta conventa* (Brătianu: 81). The Movila family remained on the throne of MD for more than one decade; the last member of this dynasty, Miron Barnovschi Movila (1626-29, 1633) strengthened the regime of estates and many boyars were granted immunity for their domains (Teodor: 256).

At the same time, the Sublime Porte promoted an authoritarian concept of government. It appointed the son of a former Wallachian voivode (converted to Islam), Radu Mihnea, as voivode of WL (1611-16, 1620-23) and MD (1616-1619, 1623-26). The masterminds of his reign were Greek “titular bishops” from the Ottoman Empire settled down in the Romanian countries, specifically the patriarch Cyril Lukaris. Together with them, many Greek merchants and academics came into WL and MD. All of them penetrated into the state machinery, in the church organization and in the economic life. They were stimulated by the Ottoman sultans with the aim of weakening the Romanian boyars (Pippidi: 278-284).

These became, of course, very angry with the competition created by the newcomers. Consequently, a powerful movement against them, part of a “program of xenophobe reforms”, emerged (Pippidi: 169). It lasted the entire century. Sometimes, the Romanian boyars tried to make use of a “right of resistance”, but without any favourable result, because they were overwhelmed by the voivodes. Finally, the boyars decided to adopt the fiscal strike and to leave the country together. Voivode Leon Tomsa begged them to return and summoned an “Assembly of the Country” composed of great and small boyars, bishops, abbots, public

servants, and militaries. All together, they compelled the voivode to issue a law sanctioned by oath (1631).

Seeing so much poverty and ravage, I and all the Council of the Country looked for the reason of all our needs. We found out that all poverty and misery started with the foreign Greeks, who machinate and mingle the reigns, sell the country without mercy, become rich through oppressive usuries. When they come here in our country, they do not intend to accept its customs, but they corrupt all the good things and bring into existence bad and vicious laws. They also increase the number of offices and taxes, in order to enrich their homes and to pay their creditors

Therefore, the voivode promised to leave the bad habits and to drive out “those foreign Greeks, like enemies of the country” (Mazilu 1999: 183-184). The regime desired by the boyars could be imposed one year later, when Matei Basarab was elected by the boyars and recognized by the Porte as voivode of Wallachia (1632-1654). Matei restored the old Romanian medieval traditions. He often followed the advice of the Voivodal Council (composed of the great boyars), the Assembly of the Country (made up of representatives of all boyars, of the high clergymen, of priests and public servants), and the Church Synod of all bishops and abbots (Brătianu: 87-88; Teodor: 248-250, 258-262). Moldavia had a different development. Vasile Lupu (1634-1653) did not accept to be elected by the boyars in exchange for *pacta conventa*. He obtained his appointment as a voivode from the Porte and he established an absolutist government, supported by the Greeks who came to form the majority in the Voivodal Council (7 Greeks and 3 Romanians). The Catholic Bishop Marcus Bandini wrote in 1646 that the rule of Vasile Lupu was an *absolutum dominium*, because the prince could punish and remove from office every boyar and could raise peasants to any rank (Bratianu: 161).

5. In the second half of the 17th century, the Wallachian regime of the estate entered a deep crisis. The reasons were of an economic nature. The great boyars used the regime of estates to extend their properties. The grandfather of the great voivode Constantin Brancoveanu (who was in 1714 sentenced to death by the Ottomans, because he refused to convert to Islam) had an estate of 200 villages, while he also possessed 200 herds of horses and thousands of sheep. Other boyars were also rich. But these properties were usually bought from the peasants and small boyars who

sank into poverty. Very often voivodes gained wealth by seizing the estates of the supposed disloyal boyars (R.P.: I, 452). Therefore, the solidarity between public servants and the boyar-oligarchy was torn apart.

Then again, a serious rivalry emerged between the main boyar groups, caused by the interest of each of them to mount the throne and to get rich rapidly. Each boyar group had its own chroniclers who wrote *pro domo*, showing in detail the crimes of the adverse faction. There were not only extortions under the threat of force, but also murders and dead sentences carried out without a trial. Eloquent for the terror and lack of safety existing in those days is the following quotation from a letter sent by one of the chroniclers, Radu Popsescu, to his cousin:

I do not need anything, but just a bit of life without fright and then we can live as God gives us life. When I look around in this woeful country, I can see just people exposed to danger... Really, I would be happier to be in the bottom rank and to have peace and not to bear this name and have constantly ice in my heart (Cartoian: 391).

In these particular circumstances it is no wonder that some boyars demanded the division of powers, so that the voivode could no longer be the denunciator as well as the judge (A.B.: II, 316).

What seems interesting to us is that the rivalry between the great boyar clans also had nationalistic connotations. Each party held itself to be the autochthonous one and considered the enemies to be foreign. The truth is that most boyars became related with Greek merchants, so that at the end of the 17th century no clan was completely Romanian or Greek. In spite of this, all boyars deplored the Greek influence. The regulation about the expulsion of the Greeks was enacted again in 1669.

At the end of the 17th century, the greatest problem of the Romanian countries was their deep political and economic integration into the Ottoman Empire. The Porte used the rivalry between boyars, because their weakness entailed a stronger absolutist government and an exploitation of the countries. Voivodes were treated as simple officials of the Empire and supervised by special emissaries. The regime of estates and the right of the boyars to elect voivodes disappeared entirely. After 1711 the Porte only appointed Greeks from the district Phanar from Istanbul as voivodes of the Romanian countries. Taking this into consideration, one can say that the last decades of the 17th century constituted a paradoxical period of transition: on the one hand, the Byzantine political traditions

were contested and despised; on the other hand, there was established what was called “the new-Greek or the Phanariote political doctrine”.

The idea and the desire for a regime of estates did not disappear. In 1684, Moldavian boyars asked the Polish king to liberate Moldavia from “the tyrannical and despotic regime” and to ensure the freedom of the estates, the juridical and fiscal immunities, as well as the endowment of all boyars with the same rights and privileges as those of the Polish aristocracy (Costin: 333). Three decades later, after the Sultans started to appoint Phanariote voivodes, the boyars from Oltenia (western part of Wallachia) entered into negotiations with the Habsburgs to incorporate their province into the Habsburg Monarchy, under the condition of preserving a regime of estates.

6. Oltenia was indeed incorporated into the Austrian Empire (1718). But, although boyars desired the establishment of legality, they could quickly experience that this legality could not be compatible with an oligarchic system. Soon they strived for the return to the Ottoman political space. Due to the international political situation, the Habsburgs were compelled to give up this province (1739). The whole Wallachia fell down into the darkest absolutism. An Austrian officer who travelled the countries and knew well the Romanian countries wrote that their constitution could be defined as:

Aut in caula, aut in aula or Aut capantur, aut capant. If you do not want to be put in the pigsty, you must have the power given to you by an office... In a despotic state, everything depends on times and circumstances (Sulzer: III, 83).

Taking this into account, should we give ourselves to pessimism, thinking that the despotic Ottoman political tradition has permeated so deep the mentality and the way of life that it would be impossible to found a real legality? Personally, I do not believe this. We know from the past of the Romanians that their countries which used to be under the Ottoman influence (the one in the South and the one in the East of the Carpathians) had two models of modernization. The first one is the Austrian pattern in Bukovina (the northern part of MD, incorporated into the Austrian Empire in 1775). The Habsburgs succeeded in bringing profoundly into force the lawfulness and the prosperity. The second model was adopted in the Romanian principalities before and,

especially, after their unification in 1859 and their independence in 1877. In fact, the Romanian policymakers copied and adopted, in 1866, the Belgian 1831 constitution and Western institutions. But, without a real implementation, without a control of the manner this implementation was done, the modern and democratic institutions became shapes without substance. The past bad habits remained because the new politicians, i.e. the old boyars, kept up their skills to use times and circumstances to preserve their ascendancy and to enrich themselves. On the contrary, the Austrians made such bad habits impossible, because they controlled the way the law was applied. Therefore, legality could not be done through half-measures but only entirely and as a matter of principle. As a consequence for our times, the complete integration of Romania into the European Union cannot be done without uprooting the evil, without implementing, like the Austrians did in Bukovina, the indisputable principles of legality, and finally without changing the system, permitting thus to eradicate corruption or the tendency of some people to gain wealth by taking advantage of times and circumstances.

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