



JOURNAL FOR LATE ANTIQUE  
RELIGION AND CULTURE

E-ISSN: 1754-517X; Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/issn.1754-517X>

Journal website: <https://jlarc.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

Volume 17, 2023, 131-139; Volume DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.v17>

**PSEUDO-NILUS' *NARRATIONES*: A PRODUCT OF JULIAN'S *EDICT*  
AGAINST CHRISTIAN TEACHERS?**

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Article DOI : <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.139>

Date Accepted: 12 July 2023

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## PSEUDO-NILUS' *NARRATIONES*: A PRODUCT OF JULIAN'S *EDICT* AGAINST CHRISTIAN TEACHERS?

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### Abstract

This paper suggests that the *Narrationes*, which have been attributed to Nilus of Ancyra or an unknown Sinai monk, was composed as a result of the Emperor Julian's *Edict* prohibiting Christians from teaching pagan literature. This article begins by describing the *Narrationes* and how scholarship has identified its author and composition date. It then presents the evidence of the Sinai monastic communities as described in the *Narrationes* as indicative of a fourth century date.

**Keywords:** Sinai, Nilus, Saracen, *Narrationes*, Emperor Julian, *paideia*

Pseudo-Nilus's *Narrationes* has engendered much discussion among scholars regarding its author, date of composition, and intention.<sup>1</sup> Compared to other Christian texts from the period it is difficult to read, translate, and understand. It is heavily indebted to Greek novels of the Second Sophistic and employs a very high level of grammatical sophistication. It imitates Greco-Roman Romances and *IV Maccabees*, focuses on philosophical language, and avoids obvious Christian terms. Nothing like it has survived from antiquity. Why would a Christian write such a complex text that tries so hard to maintain the conventions of pagan literature, while avoiding quoting the New Testament and mentioning Jesus, Christ, or Christians? In this paper, I suggest that the author of the *Narrationes* (for convenience called Pseudo-Nilus) imitated educated Hellenic styles and avoided overtly Christian words because it was created as a reaction to Julian's famous *Edict* against Christians teaching pagan literature.

In June 362, Julian banned Christians from teaching pagan literature, arguing that those who did not believe in the pagan religion should not be allowed to teach the classic works of Greco-Roman culture.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, Julian was attempting to prevent the elites of the Mediterranean from studying under Christians, for the path to influence and power in the Roman Empire lay in education of a particular sort – Hellenic *paideia*, which could not be taught through Christian works.<sup>3</sup> Although his attempt was misguided and surely doomed to

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<sup>1</sup> The standard edition is Conca 1983. Link 2005 provides commentary. Caner 2010, 73-140 introduces and translates the text.

<sup>2</sup> Downey 1957; Hardy 1968; Browning 1976, 169-174; Banchich 1993; Germino 2004, 135-166. *C.Th.* 13.3.5 and Julian's *Ep.* 36 are the most important primary documents concerning this edict.

<sup>3</sup> See Elm 2012.

fail as a result of his short reign, it is known that several teachers were forced to resign.<sup>4</sup> In response, Christians wrote or re-wrote works to conform to Hellenic models. Some Christians attempted to re-write the books of Moses in dactylic hexameter. Others composed the New Testament as Platonic dialogues and wrote comedies like Menander, Odes like Pindar, and tragedies like Euripides. Rewriting Christian texts in these styles would have allowed the teaching of complex grammar and style through Christian themes when the originals were denied to Christian teachers.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, only small fragments of these known works survive today, possibly making the *Narrationes* an especially important work.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Narrationes*

The *Narrationes* concern the trials and tribulations of the Sinai monk Nilus and his son Theodoulus. The text is written in the first person, purportedly by the protagonist Nilus. The first *narratio* begins with Nilus arriving at Pharan after fleeing a Saracen attack at Mount Sinai.<sup>7</sup> Although Nilus begins to despair, the people of Pharan embolden him with praise of the monastic life. In the second *narratio*, Nilus begins to tell his life story. When he starts questioning God's will, the people of Pharan urge him to accept his fate and put his trust in God. Nilus continues his story in *narratio* three. This section contains an ethnographic comparison of the behaviors and customs of the Saracens and the Sinai monks.<sup>8</sup> *Narratio* four describes the Saracen attack and how Nilus's son was captured. In the fifth *narratio*, another survivor arrives at Pharan. This survivor tells how he and Theodoulus survived a Saracen attempt at human sacrifice. This *narratio* dwells on the cruelty and barbaric nature of the Saracens and describes a vicious attack on a number of ascetics throughout the Sinai. The sixth *narratio* describes a journey across the Sinai desert to seek recompense for the Saracen attacks from the chief Ammanes. Nilus participates in the journey to seek his son, but when the emissaries reach Ammanes, they learn that Theodoulus had been sold as a slave and was now living in Elusa. Nilus then travels to Elusa and finds his son serving in a church. In the final *narratio*, Theodoulus describes his adventures and concludes that he survived by placing his trust in God's providence.

By the tenth century, the *Narrationes* had become associated with Nilus of Ancyra largely because the *Narrationes* were believed to contain philosophical and narrative similarities to Nilus of Ancyra's letters.<sup>9</sup> Migne appended the *Narrationes* to the volume containing the works of Nilus of Ancyra, and the *Narrationes* continued to be attributed to Nilus of Ancyra until the beginning of the twentieth century. Most scholars now argue that Nilus of Ancyra was not the author of the text.<sup>10</sup> Not only do the *Narrationes* bear little resemblance to the

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<sup>4</sup> Banchich 1993 11; Watts 2006, 75-76. Even pagans like Ammianus Marcellinus (22.10.7) criticized the prohibition. Cribiore 2013, 229-237 argues that some non-Christians, such as Libanius, also opposed the measure for fear that they would also be excluded from teaching because they were not active pagans like Julian.

<sup>5</sup> Socrates *HE* 3.16. Sozomen *HE* 5.18.

<sup>6</sup> Browning 1976, 173.

<sup>7</sup> The text was divided into seven parts in the seventeenth century. This has become the standard convention, even though the divisions are "arbitrary" (Caner 2010, 83).

<sup>8</sup> On the Saracens, see Ward 2015, 17-41.

<sup>9</sup> Mayerson 1975, 107-108; Nilus Ancyranus, *Ep.* 4.6 mentions two Galatian monks at Mount Sinai. The son was kidnapped by later escaped from a band of Saracens.

<sup>10</sup> Though Caner 2010, 73-75 argues that we should not reflexively reject the possible authorship by Nilus of Ancyra.

writings of Nilus of Ancyra, but there is no evidence that Nilus of Ancyra ever visited the Sinai, which is a *sine qua non* for the geographical detail which can be observed in the *Narrationes*.<sup>11</sup> An analysis of the psychological statements suggests that the author was, in fact, an active monk who likely did not live in a coenobitic monastery.<sup>12</sup> Most scholars now attribute the text to an unknown inhabitant of the Sinai.<sup>13</sup>

Most of the scholarship regarding the *Narrationes* has focused on whether it can be trusted as a historical source. Heussi declared that the text contained many elements from Greek novels and, therefore, should be seen as a work of fiction.<sup>14</sup> Henninger examined the ethnographic accounts of the Saracens and concluded that the text was too prejudiced to be useful for an historian.<sup>15</sup> Devreesse strongly argued that the text is riddled with fictional details and narrative twists, and that much of the work lacked any historical value whatsoever. He concluded that the geographic details and the ethnographic accounts were used to disguise the fact that the work was a fantastic tale.<sup>16</sup> Ševčenko echoes Devreesse.<sup>17</sup> Gatier largely agrees with Heussi and Devreesse, but views the text as an interesting adaptation of themes from Greco-Roman novels into a Christian context. He did not accept it as factual, though he believed that it does provide some truthful evidence about the Sinai.<sup>18</sup> Link's commentary focuses on the influence of the Greco-Roman novels on the text to the exclusion of historical topics, suggesting that he rejected it as a historical source.<sup>19</sup>

Other scholars have argued that the text possesses greater historical value. Christides, for example, thinks that the ethnographic accounts of the Saracens are valuable even if the rest of the text was suspect.<sup>20</sup> While Mayerson concedes that Nilus and Theodoulus are probably fictional characters, he argues that the text itself provides many credible details. The mention of Sabaita and Elusa indicates that the text was created by someone familiar with the Sinai and Negev. He argues that the *Narrationes* were based on a plausible event: a Bedouin raid on the unprotected monks. Mayerson believed that Pseudo-Nilus had substantial knowledge of desert ascetic life.<sup>21</sup> Shahīd largely accepts Mayerson's arguments. He uses the text of the *Narrationes* to elucidate the "character" of the pre-Islamic Arab inhabitation of the Sinai.<sup>22</sup>

Solzbacher approaches the text differently. He dismisses the idea that the *Narrationes* should be located in the Greco-Roman novel genre. Rather, he argues that the text is intended to praise the ascetic life and to describe the fortitude of Nilus. He thinks that the anthropological descriptions of the Saracens were intended to mirror the Godly life of the monks. Overall, although Solzbacher recognizes that the text contains a number of historically accurate details (such as topographic identifications), he believes that the work is largely one of Hagiography with little value for the historian.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Heussi 1921, 6-10.

<sup>12</sup> Theodorou 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Nilus of Ancyra: Degenhart 1915, 25-26; Albright 1968, 239-240; Pseudo-Nilus: Devreesse 1940, 220-222; Gatier 1989, 518; Caner 2004; Link 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Heussi 1921, 6-10.

<sup>15</sup> Henninger 1955.

<sup>16</sup> Devreesse 1940, 220-222.

<sup>17</sup> Ševčenko 1966, 256.

<sup>18</sup> Gatier 1989, 517-519.

<sup>19</sup> Link 2005. For example, Link never mentions the Saracens by name in the commentary or introduction.

<sup>20</sup> Christides 1973.

<sup>21</sup> Mayerson 1963, 161-169, esp. 161-164.

<sup>22</sup> Shahīd 1989, 134-139.

<sup>23</sup> Solzbacher 1989, 216-222

Most recently, Caner and Ward are more interested in viewing the text as a literary construction created to illuminate the Sinai Martyr tradition. Caner sees the *Narrationes* as the lone exemplar of a new hagiographic genre. He argues that the *Narrationes* combines a fictional adventure suffused with a theological motive – to explain God’s providence. The text attempts to answer why God would allow the trials and tribulations of his holy warriors in the Sinai at the hands of the Saracens. For him, the *Narrationes* represent a Christian reshaping of Greco-Roman Romance novels.<sup>24</sup> Ward, on the other hand, read the *Narrationes* through a post-colonial lens. He did not make a judgement on whether the *Narrationes* described historical events, but rather focused on how it constructed a “mirage” of the Saracens, which combined with other sources, impacted early Christian views of Muslims.<sup>25</sup>

### *Dating the Narrationes*

Connected to the historical authenticity of the account, scholars are unsure about the date of the text. Heussi suggested that the text dates to the late fourth or early fifth century.<sup>26</sup> Mayerson believed that the text dates to the late fourth or early fifth centuries.<sup>27</sup> Shahīd argues that it originated in the early fifth century.<sup>28</sup> For Solzbacher, the text was compiled in the early fifth century. On the other hand, Gatier and Devreesse believed that the text was written in the sixth century.<sup>29</sup> Caner suggested that it was written in the early fifth century.<sup>30</sup>

The *Narrationes* provide no explicit year of composition. In fact, the only date given in the *Narrationes* is that the massacres occurred on January 14, eight days after epiphany.<sup>31</sup> According to the *Narrationes*, the attack occurred after the monks had gathered to sing hymns, which they would have done on a Sunday, as he states in the text.<sup>32</sup> By knowing the date of Easter in a given year, it is possible to suggest a number of dates in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries when January 14<sup>th</sup> was a Sunday.<sup>33</sup> One of these years was 361.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the memories of the martyrdoms described in *Narrationes* would have been fresh in 362 when the Julian forbid Christians from teaching pagan texts.

One possible way to test any putative date for the *Narrationes* would be to compare the description of the Sinai and its monastic communities with information known from other sources. Pseudo-Nilus describes the monastic community in the Sinai as being in an early stage of evolution. For example, there is no coenobitic monastery mentioned in his text. Rather, the monks live in individual cells. The largest concentration were based around the Burning Bush, but monks were also scattered throughout the Sinai. He stresses that the monks purposely lived at a great distance from each other to avoid distractions.<sup>35</sup> The only building

<sup>24</sup> See Caner 2004; 2010, 51-63, 74-82

<sup>25</sup> Ward 2015, esp. 92-108, 128-137.

<sup>26</sup> Heussi 1917, 154.

<sup>27</sup> Mayerson 1963, 161; Mayerson 1975, 105. Dahari 2000, 22 seems to have used Mayerson to date the *Narrationes* to the late fourth or early fifth centuries but does not provide a citation in the text.

<sup>28</sup> Shahīd 1989, 134-139.

<sup>29</sup> Devreesse 1940, 220-222; Gatier 1989, 520-521.

<sup>30</sup> Caner 2010, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Ps.-Nilus 4.14.

<sup>32</sup> Ps.-Nilus 3.12

<sup>33</sup> Caner 2010, 76. The dates of Easter appear in Lietzmann and Aland 1956, esp. 20-30.

<sup>34</sup> Lietzmann and Aland 1956, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Ps.-Nilus 3.11

that he mentions is church constructed near Mount Sinai; however, it is not described in any detail.<sup>36</sup> No bishops are mentioned in the account, and no technical names for priests either. The only word which might indicate a formal hierarchical structure is *hiereus*, but this could be an informal or honorific term for an elder monk.<sup>37</sup> As Caner points out, this term comes directly from IV Macc. 5-6, from which Pseudo-Nilus borrowed much of his language, especially the metaphor of monks and martyrs as athletes.<sup>38</sup> It should, therefore, not be taken as an evidence of an ecclesiastical hierarchy in the Sinai at this time.

The *Narrationes*, then, describes the monastic community at a very early stage in its development. It is unfortunate that we have so few sources about the early history of this community. The earliest description of the Sinai community appears in the journal of the pilgrim Egeria, who visited in 383/4.<sup>39</sup> She describes the Sinai and monastic communities at a later stage of development compared to the *Narrationes*. For example, she mentions several churches – one at Pharan, one at the Burning Bush, one on Mount Choreb, and one on the summit of Mount Sinai.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, she indicates that there were two priests who ministered to the monks and based at separate churches and mentions additional priests as well.<sup>41</sup> The community was not yet coenobitic, as she describes the monks as living in individual cells; however, her description suggests that there were large numbers of cells located in close proximity to each other, especially around the Burning Bush, its church, and associated communal garden.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the route to Mount Sinai from Clysma was fixed as Egeria's guides took her to the same resting points to and from Mount Sinai.<sup>43</sup> It therefore appears that by 383/4, pilgrimage to the Sinai had already been established. All of these features, therefore, suggest that Egeria was writing after the composition of the *Narrationes*.

### Conclusion

There are three potential objections to dating the composition of the *Narrationes* to 362/3. The first, I believe, is easily dealt with. This objection would be that the community could not have been as large as Pseudo-Nilus describes in 362/3. The first monk known to have visited the Sinai was Julian Saba, followed sometime later by Ephrem the Syrian, and another monk, Simeon the Elder, who visited at an unknown date.<sup>44</sup> Griffith suggested that Julian Saba visited the Sinai in 362, and this date was repeated by both Grossman and Caner.<sup>45</sup> However, Griffith presents no evidence that 362 was the correct date, just saying “[i]t was probably in the year 362...”<sup>46</sup> There is nothing in Saba's life that prevents an earlier visit to Mount Sinai. And the fact that Julian Saba would think to travel from Syria to visit Mount Sinai indicates that there was already a tradition of pilgrimage and possible monastic activity

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<sup>36</sup> Ps.-Nilus 3.11

<sup>37</sup> Ps.Nilus 4.2.

<sup>38</sup> Caner 2010, 103, n. 125.

<sup>39</sup> On Egeria, see Maraval 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Deaconus 15; Egeria 3.1, 3.3, 3.5, 4.1, 4.6.

<sup>41</sup> Egeria 3.1, 3.3.

<sup>42</sup> Egeria 4.7

<sup>43</sup> Egeria 6.1-3.

<sup>44</sup> Theodoret, *Historia Religiosa*, *vita* 2.3; *vita* 6.7; Ephram the Syrian, *Hymn* 14, 19, 20 (ed. Beck 1972).

<sup>45</sup> Griffith 1994, 191. Grossman 2001, 178; Caner 2010, 203.

<sup>46</sup> Griffith 1994, 191.

there. Finally, the first recorded monastic community was that of Silvanus, often dated to around 380, but this does not have to mean that there were no monks living around Mount Sinai around 380 – and furthermore, that date is just a guess as well!<sup>47</sup>

Even though there is little evidence of a monastic community in the Sinai prior to Egeria's visit, there is ample evidence that Christians were in the surrounding communities by this time. For example, there was a bishop of the port of Aila present at the Council of Nicaea.<sup>48</sup> There was also a church there, which was destroyed in the 363 earthquake.<sup>49</sup> As Aila was situated at one of the major entry points into the Sinai, the early Christian community there is quite relevant for also suggesting an early date for the monks at Mount Sinai.<sup>50</sup> In the nearby Wadi Arabah, there is also evidence of Christians prior to 363. Jerome described how many Christians were sent to the mines at Phaino during the Great Persecution.<sup>51</sup> Christian tombstones were also found at the tip of the Dead Sea commemorating victims of the 363 earthquake.<sup>52</sup> In summary then, an early monastic community in the Sinai cannot be ruled out.

The second objection is more serious. One could argue that the *Narrationes* was not written in a classicizing style because of Julian's *Edict*, but rather as a personal choice. This argument would argue that the author, perhaps Nilus of Ancyra himself, was merely adapting a writing style in imitation of his influences such as *Leucippe and Clitophon* and *Fourth Maccabees*.<sup>53</sup> This is entirely possible, but my theory makes solves several of the text's problems. For example, the language and style is so strange that Mayerson argued that the *Narrationes* represented a previously unknown Christian sect. There is very little evidence that the author of the *Narrationes* knew the New Testament, and Jesus or Christ is never mentioned in the document. The author wrote in an extremely ornate rhetorical style that implies a deep classical education.<sup>54</sup> As Caner put it, "[the] *Narrationes* is a highly stylized flow of words... it is clear that Ps-Nilus wrote his words simply to put them on display... his diction tends to be archaic, abstract, and vexingly vague."<sup>55</sup> Its attention to philosophy rather than "Christian" morality or doctrine suggests that it could have been written to replace pagan philosophical texts in a Christian curriculum.

The final objection to my theory concerns one strange line in the *Narrationes*. Caner translated it as, "[t]hey died in perfection on the eighth day after Epiphany, on the fourteenth of January. For pious men are always interested in learning the names and date because they want to participate in the remembrance of holy ones. But others were also slain, many years earlier. Their commemoration is celebrated on the same day, due to the length of the journey and number of people who attend."<sup>56</sup> This alludes to the Sinai martyr tradition that is reflected in an inscription in Saint Catherine's and another source, Ammonius's *Relatio*. As these

<sup>47</sup> Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.32; Ward 2015, 48-49.

<sup>48</sup> See Ward 2012, 293 with references.

<sup>49</sup> Parker 1998; Thomas, Parker, and Niemi, 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Ward 2015, 63.

<sup>51</sup> Jerome, *Onomasticon*, 145.1-5.

<sup>52</sup> Meimaris and Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou 2005, 116–21 nos. 22, 23, and 24.

<sup>53</sup> Caner 2010, 77-81.

<sup>54</sup> Mayerson 1975, esp. 109-113.

<sup>55</sup> Caner 2010, 83.

<sup>56</sup> Caner 2010, 109. *Narrationes*, 4.14: πάντως γὰρ τοῖς εὐλαβέσιν ἡ μάθησις καὶ τοῦ καιροῦ καὶ τῶν ὁμομάτων σπουδάζεται κοινωνεῖν τῆς μνήμης τῶν ἁγίων ἐθέλουσιν. ἀνηρέθησαν δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι πρὸς πλείονων ἐτῶν, ὧν καὶ αὐτῶν τὴν μνεῖαν τῇ αὐτῇ ἡμέρᾳ διὰ τὸ μῆκος τῆς ὁδοῦ καὶ τῶν συναγομένων τὸ πλῆθος ἐπιτελοῦσιν.

sources and the Sinai martyr tradition have been discussed extensively by Caner and Ward, I see no need to describe either at length.<sup>57</sup> This strange sentence indicates that there were two martyrdom events which impacted the monks of the Sinai, but that both sets of martyrs were commemorated on the same day because it was convenient to do so because of the number of visitors who came to the Sinai for their commemoration and because the journey to the Sinai was so long and arduous. Thus, there was no reason to expect that people would attend two commemorations of Sinai martyrs. This line stands out separately from the narrative; it was clearly written at some point distant from the martyrdoms themselves after a tradition of celebrating Sinai martyrs had become a pilgrimage attraction. Thus, one could argue that the author of the *Narrationes* was quite distant from the events described there-in. However, there is an alternate explanation: this line was an interpolation from a later monk who added it to the text to connect the *Narrationes* to the martyr traditions and to explain why the two sets of martyrs in the Sinai tradition were celebrated on the same day. This very thing happened in the other Sinai martyrdom account, the *Relatio* by Ammonius. The Christian Palestinian Aramaic version gives a date of December 28<sup>th</sup> for the Sinai martyrs, while two Greek manuscripts provide a date of January 14<sup>th</sup>. As Caner argues, a Sinai monk changed the date from the original December 28<sup>th</sup> to January 14<sup>th</sup> in order to conform with the *Narrationes*.<sup>58</sup>

It is therefore possible to argue against the three main objections to my theory that the *Narrationes* was composed in the wake of Julian's *Edict* forbidding Christians from teaching pagan texts. Placing the composition of the *Narrationes* into the context of Julian's reign explains several problematic features of the text. It explains the text's highly rhetorical and philosophical style by providing an example of a classicizing text for Christian teachers. It might also explain why the text never overtly mentions Jesus, Christ, or many of mainstays of Christian orthodoxy. For an author who feared a long reign by the Apostate, Pseudo-Nilus may have wanted to downplay obviously Christian connections. The text's focus on martyrdom and its emulation of *IV Maccabees* also fits into a world in which Christians felt as though they were being oppressed by Imperial power. The text also served as reinforcement for those Christians who were suffering under Julian by reminding them that they would eventually triumph over their persecutor. It thus seems plausible, if not likely, that the *Narrationes* was written in response to Julian's *Edict Against Christian Teachers*.

As for the author of the text, I agree with Caner who argues that the text was written in Elusa by an author trained in the literary flourishes of the Second Sophistic.<sup>59</sup> As indicated by Libanius's letters of recommendation, Elusa had a school of rhetoric in this period, which would have provided the education required to compose the *Narrationes*.<sup>60</sup> That the *Narrationes* end with Nilus and Theodoulus reunited at Elusa makes it a compelling place of composition for the work. One may even be tempted to argue that the *Narrationes* describes an actual historical attack on the proto-monastic community in the Sinai which occurred in 361, just in time for it to become a suitable topic for an educated Christian in the wake of Julian's edict against Christian teachers.

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<sup>57</sup> Caner 2010 and Ward 2015. Both collect an extensive bibliography.

<sup>58</sup> Caner 2010, 142.

<sup>59</sup> Caner 2004, 135-147.

<sup>60</sup> Mayerson 1983, 248-249.



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