

HOMER AND HEINRICH SCHLIEMANN: SEEING BEYOND THE ILLUSION

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Heinrich Schliemann's unearthing of Troy and Mycenae revolutionized the field of archaeology. His approach to excavating serves as a prime example of how, at first, it should not be done and, subsequently, the potential of archaeology if carried out in a systematic and scientific way. Besides his contribution to the field of archaeology, this paper also provides an assessment of Schliemann's character. My main argument is that there are parallels between Homer and Heinrich Schliemann. Both, unwittingly, provided us with a more concrete grasp on the past.

Keywords: Heinrich Schliemann; Homer; archaeology; Mycenaean; rationalizer; scientific.

A short biography of Heinrich Schliemann

Heinrich Schliemann was born on 6 January 1822 in the small town of Neubukow in the former Grand Duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (today part of Germany) where his father, Ernest Schliemann, served as a Protestant pastor. In 1823, the Schliemanns moved to Ankershagen, about 140 kilometres southeast of Neubukow, where Heinrich Schliemann spent the next eight years of his life. It is clear from his autobiography that haunted houses, ponds, burial places and medieval castles mesmerized his young mind.¹ It is necessary to point out a couple of childhood incidents because these shed light on the persona Schliemann created for himself. His father had a passion for ancient history and he introduced Heinrich to the Homeric heroes and to the events of the Trojan War. In fact, Schliemann fondly recalls how his father presented him with an engraving of Aeneas fleeing a burning Troy as a Christmas gift in 1829. The image of Aeneas, with his father Anchises on his back, made the seven-year-old Heinrich exclaim that he will one day excavate Troy.

Other literature scarcely mentions the young Heinrich Schliemann's "warm attachment" to Minna Meincke.² Not only did he and his "little bride" dance together in Henning's haunted castle, but they also vowed to one day explore and excavate Troy together. This was a dream Schliemann clung to until he later learned, in 1846, that she was happily married to someone else. Schliemann considered this moment one of the great misfortunes of his life; a moment that he mourned for several years.³ This picture he had in his mind – of him and his childhood love uncovering the mysteries of Troy – clearly shows Schliemann's deep romantic and idealistic side. To me it served as a reminder of Christopher Marlowe's quote in *Doctor*

¹ Although this biographical information is, in essence, obtained from Schliemann's "great" archaeological monologue, *Ilios* (1881: 1-20), some of his claims will be scrutinized in subsequent sections.

² Schliemann 1881: 4.

³ Schliemann 1881: 12.

Faustus, “Was this the face that launch’d a thousand ships / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?”⁴ It is necessary to point out that Minna’s family broke off relations with the Schliemanns following the death of Heinrich’s mother when he was nine years old. This raises the question whether her death was related to public accusations of adultery against Heinrich’s father.⁵ Nevertheless, the loss of his mother and Minna’s friendship must have left a scar on the impressionable psyche of young Heinrich.

What Schliemann lost in love, however, he gained in financial success. It was by no means an easy feat to become one of the richest men of his time.⁶ First off, his schooling was intermittent (or interrupted) because he attended three schools from age ten to 13 and, although he learned Latin and showed great academic potential, he was forced to leave school in April 1836 (at the age of 14) to take up an apprenticeship in a grocer’s shop. Here he was introduced to retail trading in products such as fish, butter, potato-whiskey and the like, from 5am to 11 pm, almost every day, for a period of almost six years. His most enduring memory of this time is a visit to the shop by the drunk miller, Hermann Niederhöffer, who recited “100 lines from Homer, three times over.”⁷ Schliemann’s health, specifically his suffering from tuberculosis, forced him out of retailing because he could no longer perform any heavy lifting.⁸

Some of Schliemann’s most taxing years were from November 1841 to March 1844. During this time, he accepted employment as a cabin boy, but no sooner did the ship leave Hamburg when it wrecked off the island of Texel in North Holland.⁹ Dependent on alms, Schliemann made his way to Amsterdam with the intention to join the army. However, this did not prove as easy as he had hoped and, again relying on acquaintances, he managed to secure a job as a post office delivery man. It was on this occasion that Schliemann set out to catch up on lost education. Through self-study, he learned both English and French in a matter of a year. This set the stage for Schliemann’s language acquisition and he would proceed to learn 18 languages, including Greek and Ancient Greek.¹⁰ In 1846, this outstanding linguistic ability provided Schliemann passage to St. Petersburg, Russia, as an agent for the Dutch company B.H. Schröder & Co. Within a year, Schliemann made a name for himself as an independent wholesale indigo (and later tea) merchant. His business received a further boost during the Crimean War (1853-1856) with the sale of “war materials” to the Russians.¹¹

However, St. Petersburg was also significant for reasons beyond Schliemann’s financial successes. He married his first wife, Katerina Lyshin in October 1852 and they would continue to have three children, one of whom died in childhood.¹² It is telling that Schliemann did not

⁴ Marlowe 1965: 34.

⁵ Turner 1990: 42.

⁶ When he died, Schliemann’s estate was worth 15 million francs, i.e. about 72 million dollars or more today (See Easton 1998: 338).

⁷ Schliemann 1881: 7.

⁸ Papadakis et al. 2007: 576.

⁹ Schliemann 1881: 8.

¹⁰ Scholars differ on the exact number of languages (“18 languages” according to Papadakis et al. 2007: 576 and “more than 14 languages” according to Turner 1990: 38).

¹¹ According to his autobiography in the *Ilios* these war materials included “salpetre, brimstone and lead” (1881: 14).

¹² Cline 2013: 81.

mention her in his autobiography. It was obviously an unhappy marriage because Schliemann went to great lengths to secure a divorce in 1868. It does not seem as if Katerina was very supportive of Schliemann's idea to give up the "lies and deception" of business to pursue archaeological excavations in Greece.¹³ It even seems as if Katerina publicly ridiculed him to this effect.¹⁴ This did not detract Schliemann from writing letters proclaiming his support for the "renaissance and flowering of the fatherland of Homer and Demosthenes" and his desire to be part of the "rebirth of a great people."¹⁵ However, his resignation from commerce only happened in March 1866, after a protracted lawsuit brought against him by a debtor, and it was not until August 1868 before his momentous meeting with the antiquarian, Frank Calvert, at the site of Troy-Hisarlik, that he devoted himself to his "beloved Homer."¹⁶

It is worth lingering on two other detours Schliemann took. His two American spells, and his time in Paris, as it relates to my efforts in separating the wheat from the chaff. On his first visit to the United States, he participated in the California gold rush (1851-1852), as a banker and intermediary located in Sacramento, and made a profit of about two million US dollars.¹⁷ Journal entries during this time, one in February and one in June 1851, make mention of a visit to Washington, DC to meet President Millard Fillmore and of Schliemann witnessing the great fire in San Francisco.¹⁸ Although he left the US under a cloud of suspicion, he returned in March 1869 to apply for citizenship, which he obtained within two days of his arrival.¹⁹ He also managed to acquire a divorce decree within three months by moving to the state of Indiana.²⁰ The time he spent in Paris (from spring 1866 to April 1868), however, was not marked with the same controversy as his American escapades, but with a sense of fervour and dedication to the study of archaeology. This academic pursuit included attending lectures at the *Société de géographi* where he read books on the topography of the plain of Troy and discussed the excavations of Georg von Hahn at Troy-Bunarbashi.²¹

The period of Schliemann's life as an archaeologist, from meeting Calvert on 15 August 1868 until his death on 26 December 1890, is the most relevant to this study. It is within the scope of these 22 years that Schliemann significantly shaped the discipline of archaeology and changed people's views on the historicity of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.²² In Schliemann's eyes, Calvert was the champion of the Troy-Hisarlik theory, i.e. the view that Homer's Troy was not located at Bunarbashi but at Hisarlik, and he immediately jumped at the opportunity to collaborate with Calvert to excavate the mound of Hisarlik.²³ Schliemann was so excited

¹³ Schliemann wrote a letter to this effect to his father on 9 April 1856 (see Turner 1990: 40-41).

¹⁴ Turner 1990: 41.

¹⁵ Turner also describes how Schliemann prepared for a visit to his "new fatherland" (Turner 1990: 41).

¹⁶ Schliemann 1881: 16-18.

¹⁷ Cline 2013: 80 (also see Papadakis et al. 2007: 575 who calls these profits "a second fortune").

¹⁸ Cline 2013: 80-81 (these entries are described as "invented episodes" by the scholars David Traill and William Calder III)

¹⁹ Papadakis et al. 2007: 575 and Cline 2013: 81.

²⁰ Normally, to obtain citizenship, one had to reside in the US for five consecutive years. In addition, even Indiana's lenient divorce laws required residency of at least a year (see Cline 2013: 81).

²¹ Turner 1990: 41 and Wood 1985: 46.

²² Numerous scholars, such as McInerney 2018: 63, Cline 2013: 109, Arentzen 2001: 181 and Wood 1985: 43, expound this view.

²³ As Eric Cline wrote, "Schliemann had the money and Calvert had the site" (Cline 2013: 82).

that he immediately announced his intention in his first book titled *Ithaque, le Péloponnèse et Troie*, which he published at the end of 1868 and which earned him a doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Rostock, in Germany.²⁴ Just before Schliemann started digging at Hisarlik, from April 1870 (initially without the required Turkish permit), he married Sophia Engastromenos (aged 17) who seemingly shared Schliemann's love for archaeology. Not only did they name their two children Andromache and Agamemnon (and their house Iliou Melathron), but Sophia would continue to fund excavations at Hisarlik after her husband's death in 1890.²⁵

Schliemann dug at Hisarlik, Turkey, from 1870 to 1873 and again in 1879 and throughout the 1880s. Although he committed himself to discovering Troy (and he claimed that much after finding Priam's Treasure), he also went searching for the other side (i.e. Agamemnon's Achaeans) at Mycenae in the Greek Peloponnese in 1874 and in 1876 where he unearthed the golden mask of Agamemnon inside a tholos tomb within the Cyclopean walls following the directions of the Greek geographer, Pausanias.²⁶ Schliemann was in uncharted waters, for the field of archaeology was still a fledgling finding its wings.²⁷ Initially, his methods were crude, digging his "Great Trench" at Hisarlik, and his confusion obvious, e.g. "begging other scholars for advice" in the first major publication of his finds in 1874.²⁸ He also captured the imagination of people all over the world when he published a photo of Sophia adorned with the "Jewels of Helen."²⁹ Whatever fame these discoveries brought, however, did not necessarily lighten the physicality nor decreased the cost of archaeological excavations. Schliemann endured it for twelve seasons over a period of almost twenty years, suffering disease (specifically malaria) and discomfort on various occasions.³⁰ He also spent about half a million dollars annually to carry out these excavations.³¹

Schliemann went on to become one of the most celebrated men of his day. As an archaeologist, he showed unwavering faith in the historical authenticity of the Trojan War as told in Homer's *Iliad*. It has been pointed out that Schliemann's autobiographies often "weave facts into a literary fabric" (i.e. it is not always possible to distinguish fact from fiction in the tall tales he told).³² In fact, Schliemann even admitted as much when he wrote that his biggest liability was being "a braggart and a bluffer," but that it served him well in the end.³³ Some scholars, like William Calder, went as far as calling Schliemann a "pathological liar," while others think that he "duped" the world.³⁴ Seeing that it is the aim of this paper to assess Schliemann's character

²⁴ Schliemann 1881: 20.

²⁵ Andromache (Hector's wife) and Agamemnon are characters from Homer's *Iliad* (Papadakis et al. 2007: 576 and Wood 1985: 69).

²⁶ Cline 2017: 148, 150 and 152, as well as Wood 1985: 55.

²⁷ Cline 2017: 48.

²⁸ Wood 1985: 51.

²⁹ In *Ilios* (p. 41), Schliemann recounts the dramatic story of how he and Sophia saved Priam's Treasure (and themselves) from an overhanging bank of earth busy collapsing. The treasure was later smuggled out of Turkey to their house in Athens to prevent it from falling into the hands of Turkish officials.

³⁰ See Wood 1985: 51 and Papadakis et al. 2007: 576.

³¹ In modern terms (Easton 1998: 339).

³² David Turner holds that this was Schliemann's way to give literary expression to his very real interest in Homer (Turner 1990: 42).

³³ Wood 1985: 40.

³⁴ See Easton 1998: 335 and Arentzen 2001: 169.

and scholarly contributions, I should unequivocally state that his excavations did much to unlock Homer's world and that he managed to create worldwide enthusiasm for archaeology. I am in agreement with Donald Easton who argued that Schliemann had an instinct for "the big question."³⁵ In a sense, there is a link between Homer and Schliemann. Both (without realization) expurgated our view of the world and made it more concrete. To conclude this brief biography; Schliemann died on 26 December 1890 at the age of 69, after suffering from severe ear pain during the last 30 years of his life and undergoing a failed operation to his left ear.³⁶

An assessment of Schliemann's character and his contribution to archaeology

Heinrich Schliemann contributed significantly to the development of archaeology as a field of study. Not only did he, in spectacular fashion, call world attention to the discipline, but his excavations grounded the myth of the Trojan War and unlocked the gates towards a better understanding of the Mycenaeans as a people and their role in the historical context of the larger eastern Mediterranean. Although it might be pushing it too far to honour Schliemann as the father of Archaeology, I will argue that he deserves some recognition for laying the groundwork for a more scientific approach to the study of the material remains of early Greek culture. His methods were initially crude, but what he lacked in technique (and tact), he made up for in drive, enthusiasm and endurance. There is no doubt that he was a romantic charlatan (he admitted that much), but his commitment to prove Homer right, and a genuine historical interest, would ultimately enrich our knowledge of Aegean prehistory. In the same way Homer brought the gods down from Mount Olympus, Schliemann shone the light of science on their faces.

Probably the most important question we can ask about Schliemann's contribution to archaeology is how he managed to attract so much attention to his supposed "discoveries" of Troy and Mycenae. He was definitely not the first to identify, or excavate the mound of Hisarlik, and that the Lion Gate of Mycenae had not been hidden from public view.³⁷ The photo of Sophia wearing the "Jewels of Helen" and Schliemann's words that he "gazed upon the face of Agamemnon" obviously sensationalised his finds. I would argue that he was able to capture the popular imagination, not so much because of his own tall tales (although that surely helped), but because of what the poetry of Homer meant to the Western world. This was particularly the case in post-independence Greece with the growth of philhellenism that would sweep across Europe in the 19th century.³⁸ In this regard, it is important not to overlook the influence of John Lubbock's book, *The Origin of Civilisation* (published in 1870), that looked towards ancient Greece for the intellectual and democratic roots of Western culture.³⁹ Schliemann, therefore,

³⁵ Easton 1998: 343.

³⁶ Schliemann presumably died of a postoperative brain abscess (Papadakis et al. 2007: 579).

³⁷ Heuck Allen 1995: 50 and McInerney 2018: 65 (Edward Dodwell's watercolor, painted in 1821, is titled *View of Mycenae* and clearly shows the Lion Gate).

³⁸ Michael Wood argues that Schliemann's excavations at Troy and Mycenae in the 1870s is the culmination of this "love of things Greek" (Wood 1985: 44-45).

³⁹ Lubbock actually visited Schliemann at Troy in 1873 (Wood 1985: 43).

did not just give the poems of Homer a tangible materiality, but he physically recovered the lost foundations of Western civilization.

Schliemann was indeed the first person to dig at Troy on the immense scale that he did.⁴⁰ One archaeologist, Eric Cline, described his technique as “an audacious attack on the mound” (of Hisarlik).⁴¹ Although Schliemann was a self-taught amateur archaeologist, whose theories required substantial revision, most scholars now agree that he did find Troy. However, this needs further qualification. It is still not clear at precisely which stratigraphic level Priam’s Troy was located, or whether he even existed.⁴² It is important to realize that archaeology can only provide us with a glimpse into the full extent of the story – a mere framework to flesh out the detail with. Hittite records, for example, have confirmed that numerous wars were fought at Troy during the corresponding period (i.e. around 1184 BC), but whether any one of these were fought over the love of a woman, is almost impossible to prove.⁴³ The same applies to Schliemann’s excavations at Mycenae, which confirmed the existence of an advanced Bronze Age culture on mainland Greece, but Agamemnon’s existence is only a summation.⁴⁴ As late as in 1964, some historians still held that the Trojan War was more fiction than fact, but with additional evidence, including new archaeological data from Troy, it has been concluded that “historical kernels of truth” underlie the epics of Homer.⁴⁵

Homer definitely inspired Schliemann’s hand at archaeology, but Hesiod, another famous Greek poet, also left his mark on this field of study. His reference to the “Five Ages of Man,” in his poem *Work and Days*, accounts for the use of “Iron Age” in archaeology.⁴⁶ This is relevant to show that archaeology has a long history, and to trace the “father of archaeology” is no easy task. Schliemann’s excavations at Mycenae were so impressive that historians still use the term “Mycenaean” to refer to the entire civilization of the Late Bronze Age in Greece.⁴⁷ I would imagine that Schliemann at least deserves the title “father of Mycenaean archaeology,” even if it is just for the large-scale enthusiasm he created for the subject. However, there is more to be said about his contribution to the field. For someone that started with a bang, Schliemann did evolve into something of an expert over time. For one, he realized the importance of stratigraphy and, with the help of Wilhelm Dörpfeld, identified seven cities built on top of one another at Troy. He was also one of the first to understand the chronological importance of pottery and objects that others, like Calvert, considered “mundane.”⁴⁸ In some circles, Schliemann has been described as the “father of scientific archaeology” for his initiative to have metal artefacts chemically analysed.⁴⁹ Schliemann surely missed a lot, but he

⁴⁰ Easton 1998: 342.

⁴¹ Cline 2013: 82.

⁴² This has been disputed by a succession of archaeologists, including Heinrich Schliemann, Frank Calvert, Wilhelm Dörpfeld, Carl Blegen and Manfred Korfmann (for a more detailed discussion, see Cline 2013: 107-111).

⁴³ Hittite records mentions the site of “Wilusa,” which is a Greek toponym for Ilion/Troy (McInerney 2018: 85).

⁴⁴ The outline of Homer’s story rings true, but the details are uncertain (Cline 2013: 110).

⁴⁵ Cline 2013: 113, as well as the comprehensive discussion in McInerney 2018: 84-85.

⁴⁶ Cline 2016: 3.

⁴⁷ McInerney 2018: 65.

⁴⁸ Turner 1990: 38, as well as Arentzen 2001: 181 (Arentzen mentions how Calvert referred to the “semi-barbarous relics” of Schliemann’s collection).

⁴⁹ Easton 1998: 341.

did compensate for his shortcomings in other ways, e.g. his breadth of reading and surrounding himself with a team of specialists. As Michael Wood puts it, “Schliemann’s search for Troy is inextricably bound up with the beginnings of archaeology as a science.”⁵⁰

Notwithstanding all the above praises in Schliemann’s honour, he did compromise his own credibility. There are many points of criticism levelled at Schliemann’s character, from being a seeker of fame and fortune to being downright deceitful. One just needs to read his biography to detect some of these distortions. One example is Schliemann’s childhood dream of excavating Troy. Scholars on the one side of the Schliemann divide, such as David Traill, call his dream a “romantic fabrication,” while those on the other side, like David Turner, see the dream as “a literary expression of his very real interest in Homer” or as a way to “expunge the family’s dishonour.”⁵¹ Some accusations are of a more serious nature, e.g. how he lied (or probably paid someone to lie) to obtain his US citizenship and his divorce decree.⁵² This double-dealing also extended to his archaeological digs. At Troy, he fabricated the story of Sophia hiding Priam’s Treasure in her shawl and, at Mycenae, he swapped golden masks before the arrival of King George of Greece who also wanted to gaze into the eyes of Agamemnon.⁵³ This pattern of deception has been interpreted, on the one extreme, as a possible sign of psychopathology or, on the more moderate side, signalling that Schliemann was just another flawed human being.⁵⁴ As a non-Schliemannologist (i.e. someone who could not yet consult all Schliemann’s private papers in the Gennadius Library in Athens), doing this research felt a bit like swinging on a see-saw plank every time I read another research paper.⁵⁵

One issue that does not seem as sensation seeking and trivial as the rest, is the criticism that he neglected to give Frank Calvert due credit for discovering Troy. Calvert was the first to identify the mound of Hisarlik as a possible site for Homer’s Troy and he offered Schliemann the opportunity to dig on the land that he had bought for the purpose of excavation.⁵⁶ They seem to have had friendly relations because Calvert, in a letter, referred to their relationship as “a friendship for life.” They had a fallout at one stage (probably because Schliemann began to dig at Troy without a permit), but Calvert never blocked Schliemann’s excavations. When Schliemann returned to Troy for his second round of excavations (after 1878), he did use his influence to assert more recognition for Calvert, who at this time turned his attention to geology and geomorphology.⁵⁷ Although I agree that Calvert needs to take his place as co-discoverer of Troy, this is probably what set them apart. While Calvert focused on adding to his collection of valuable antiques, Schliemann remained set on uncovering Trojan culture.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Wood 1985: 43.

⁵¹ David Turner refers to his exchange with David Traill as an ongoing “ping-pong match” (Turner 1990: 337).

⁵² Turner 1990: 335.

⁵³ The one mask was apparently more “kingly-looking” than the other one (Cline 2017: 150).

⁵⁴ William Calder went as far as describing Schliemann as “being ill, like a child-molester or a dope-fiend” (Easton 1998: 335).

⁵⁵ A term used by Donald Easton (Easton 1998: 337).

⁵⁶ For a more detailed discussion, see Heuck Allen 1995: 54.

⁵⁷ Heuck Allen 1995: 56-57.

⁵⁸ Arentzen 2001: 181.

Homer and Heinrich Schliemann: Seeing Beyond the Illusion

I want to circle back to my main argument that the significance of Schliemann's finds (and, by implication, his life) is tied to the place of Homer in specifically Western society. The controversies surrounding his character aside, he did show that there was something concrete and coherent to the supposed mythic tales told in the *Iliad*. In other words, Homer's words were not just fabrications, but grounded in history. In essence, through Schliemann's mediation, Homer's poetry attained a more realistic dimension.⁵⁹ I am not saying that he brought Priam, Agamemnon and Achilles to life, but he did prove that their world really existed. I believe this is a significant contribution because, through the science of archaeology, Schliemann made the early Greeks more relatable. I want to go even further and say that, in this regard, Schliemann continued the work of Homer, albeit in a different form. The philosopher, Bertrand Russel, described Homer as a "kind of rationalizer of ancient myths."⁶⁰ Homer's poems represent a transition from a worldview based on tribal-based fertility rites (in which human sacrifice occasionally featured) to one founded upon the seemingly "humane" Olympian gods (i.e. the gods might be immortal and have superpowers, but they too are bound by the force of fate).⁶¹ This is an important shift in Greek thinking because it showed that the gods were human creations and that there are inescapable laws of nature. Did Homer, thus, lay the foundation for scientific endeavour? I believe there is a strong case for this assertion.

Similarly, Schliemann showed that the discipline of archaeology could raise the curtain of mystery even further. Although he was not the best at "separating fact from interpretation," he did provide physical evidence for the Mycenaean and Trojan traditions on which later scholars could build.⁶² However, we should recognize that Schliemann was not alone in this pursuit. He might have been in the driver's seat with his "phenomenal ambition" and extensive financial wealth, but he needed others (from Minna to Calvert to Dörpfeld) to really make the experiment succeed.⁶³ What I am excited about is how later archaeological excavations added to our understanding of the early Mycenaeans and their connection to the world beyond the Aegean, e.g. Mycenaean engravings resembling those found in Egyptian temples or Mycenaean shaft graves dug in similar fashion to ones found in Albania or how Mycenaean pottery ended up in Philistine cities.⁶⁴ Maybe it is time to accept that Homer is not just a Greek tale, but part of humanity's story as a whole, and that it took the unorthodox methods of a Schliemann to unlock it for us.

⁵⁹ Andrew Szede-gy-Maszak (2002: 99) puts a similar idea forward.

⁶⁰ Russel 1946: 21.

⁶¹ This echoes Xenophanes satirical criticism of Homer's anthropomorphism in religion, "if horses and oxen had hands and could draw pictures, their gods would look remarkably like horses and oxen" (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy).

⁶² Easton 1998: 341.

⁶³ Papadakis et al. 2007: 579.

⁶⁴ McInerney 1998: 14.

Conclusion

For a fuller appreciation of Heinrich Schliemann, it is necessary to look beyond a mere appraisal of his character to an evaluation of his contribution to establishing the science of archaeology. In this respect, he follows in the footsteps of Homer who planted the seeds of science in the first place.

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