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# FROM THE TREASURES OF SYRIA

## ESSAYS ON ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN HONOUR OF STEFANIA MAZZONI

*edited by*

Paola Ciafardoni and Deborah Giannessi



NEDERLANDS INSTITUUT VOOR HET NABIJE OOSTEN

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# MATERIAL EVIDENCE OF CULT AND RITUAL AT TELL ATCHANA, ANCIENT ALALAKH: DEITIES OF THE TRANSITIONAL MIDDLE-LATE BRONZE PERIOD

K.A. Yener

*It is both an honor and pleasure to have been invited to contribute an article to a Festschrift for Stefania Mazzoni; a pleasure because it is gratifying to have the opportunity to pay tribute to a scholar who played such an important role in the definition of the art of the eastern Mediterranean region and an honor because of her eminence as an archaeologist of such extensive background. In the course of a distinguished career, Professor Mazzoni touched on many aspects of the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age in general and in particular, the architecture, seals and pottery of Syria and Anatolia.*

## **Abstract**

*The topic of cult and ritual is an important one, and one that Tell Atchana, site of ancient Alalakh, is well suited to contribute to.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the numerous lines of evidence recovered from many years of excavations at Tell Atchana, there has been little comprehensive study of the material correlates of the religion and rituals of this Bronze Age city. With the new excavations, the body of evidence for cult spaces and practices are accumulating and the first steps have been taken towards a better understanding of local religion and ritual behavior both royal and common. The introduction of new cults and their associated rituals in the international Late Bronze Age are of great importance at Tell Atchana. During this time, many foreign contacts and eventually foreign overlords affected local society on many levels. This article will focus on a unique clay figurine from a newly excavated context close to the Level VII palace and temple.*

## TELL ATCHANA-ALALAKH

Tell Atchana, like its contemporary and likely politically related neighbor, Tell Afis (Mazzoni and Soldi 2013) is located not on the Mediterranean coast but rather about 50km inland. The size and navigability of the Orontes River led to such close connections to seaborne trade that the city can easily be considered part of the coastal realm. Possible

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Mara Horowitz, Murat Akar and Tara Ingman for their help and observations in the various aspects of this paper.

connections between Afis and Alalakh have emerged from a recent text mentioning a “country-lord” and according to Archi, the seat of this lord may be identified as Alalakh (Archi and Venturi 2013). Alalakh was the capital of a small Bronze Age principality called Mukish, situated on a crucial interregional communication route on the border between Anatolia, the Levant, and inner Syria. Access to the sea via the Orontes added Cyprus and the Aegean to Alalakh’s horizons. From its founding in the transition to the Middle Bronze Age, Alalakh was part of the Amorite cultural and linguistic horizon that extended from the foothills of Anatolia in the north to the area of Kadesh and Afis in the south and east into much of Mesopotamia. Also within this region was a complex matrix of Hurrian and Luwian cultural and linguistic elements which become predominant in the later phases (von Dassow 2007).

Tell Atchana was surveyed by Robert Braidwood as part of his Amuq Valley survey project in the 1930’s (Braidwood 1937). Sir Leonard Woolley excavated the site in 1936-1939 and 1946-1949 and identified it as ancient Alalakh (Woolley 1955 and references). The Amuq Valley Regional Project (AVRP) returned to the mound in 2000 under the author’s direction and excavations have been underway since 2003 (Yener 2005, 2010). Woolley excavated administrative and religious structures including the Levels VII and IV palaces in the Royal Precinct (Woolley 1955, 91-131). Woolley’s temple structures of the Levels VII-I were certainly in close proximity to, and in some phases physically interconnected with the palaces and administrative buildings known from the Middle Bronze II through the Late Bronze II periods (Lauinger 2008).

#### REPRESENTATIONS OF DEITIES AT ALALAKH

Material evidence for deities, cult spaces and ritual activities including funeral rites, can be found in numerous contexts at Tell Atchana. Certainly the largest and most conspicuous cult establishment yet found is the temple sequence excavated by Woolley in Area 1 (Fig. 1). In Levels VII-I, the large temple buildings and associated courtyard spaces contained abundant evidence of cult activity, including altars and caches of votive materials. Though no single inscription or statue was ever found to identify the patron deity of this temple, some clues do exist. The statue of Idrimi, found buried below the Level Ib temple, mentions “Ishtar, lady of Alalakh” (Greenstein and Marcus 1976, Greenstein 1995). This evidence prompted Woolley to posit that the temple he excavated was dedicated to this goddess. He also retrospectively applied this evidence to claim that the sequence of Ishtar temples built upon the same foundations stretched back to the very beginning of the MBI.

But the other deities of Alalakh are less well known or even what role they played in local society. Evidence comes from a variety of sources. Certainly the two crude basalt male and female sculptures (Figs. 2a and b) found flanking the entrances of the Level V palace administrative wing, “Castle”, point to other deities such as chthonic or ancestral

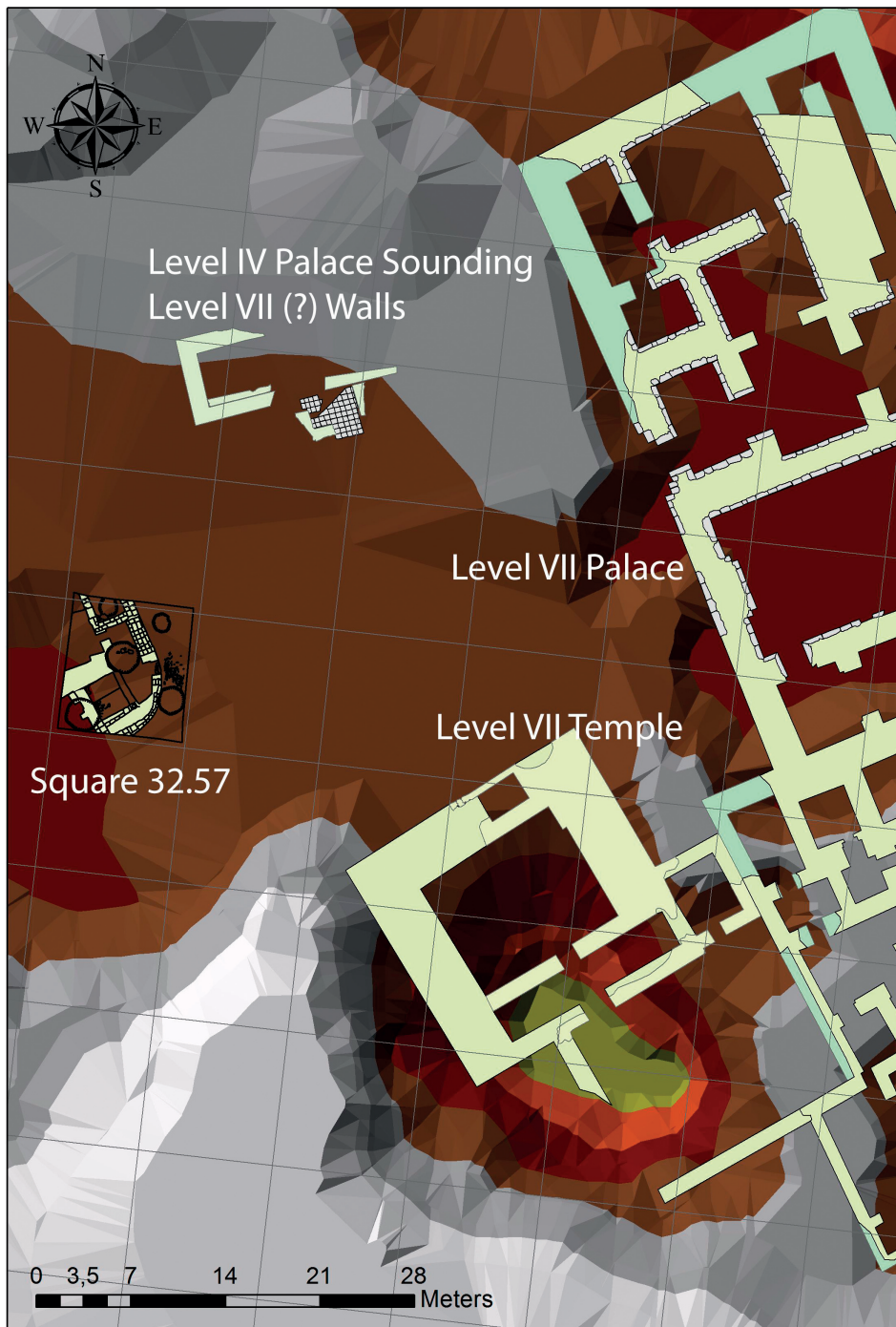




Fig. 2a: Male sculpture, basalt, AT/40/45/3.  
Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.



Fig. 2b: Female sculpture, basalt, AT/40/45.  
Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.

guardians (Woolley 1955, Plate 44 a and b). Other stylized stone figures (Fig. 3) were also found by Woolley, most especially near one of the double shrines from Level V (Woolley 1955, Plate 44: c, AT 39/119), situated close to the Ishtar temple related House 39c and its surrounding storage galleries. The new excavations (Yener 2005, 257, A04-R277) have also found one in contemporary LBA buildings south of the so-called “Private Houses”. While the buildings in proximity to the Ishtar temple and palace have been labeled “Private Houses” by Woolley, given their contents and location, I have argued elsewhere (Yener 2005, 109; 2010, 29) that they were most likely connected to the temple and its priests. For example in the Level IV ‘Private Houses’, next to the temple, there are signs of ritual activity, status objects (Akar 2012), and storage for liquids and food all of which would be expected in buildings associated with the temple. While a household analysis of the three additional buildings excavated during the 2003-2004 seasons in Area 2 is as yet not complete, it is possible that these buildings too represent a continuation of the temple precinct (Yener 2010, 29). Buildings, A, B, and C, are dated to local Phase 2 and radio-

carbon dates place them in fourteenth century BC (Yener 2010, Table 2.1), which would make them after the Mitanni overlordship and roughly contemporary with Woolley's Level II.<sup>2</sup>

Referred to as “guardian spirits” by Carter (1970) these crude basalt and limestone sculptures have a distribution in north Syria and southeastern Turkey to the Gulf of Aqaba. With an ancestry stretching back at least as early as the third millennium BC, these stylized stone figures have been related to a cult of the dead. Found in a gate context at Tell Bia-Tuttul (Hemker 1994, 93) and within a house at Tell Halawa (Meyer and Pruss 1994, Figs. 65-66) recent Middle Bronze examples have been found at Oylum Höyük, Munbaqa, Tell Amarna, Tell Sabi Abiad, and Girnavaz (Özgen and Helwig 2001, Fig. 23 and references). Another example was also found at Tell Afis and according to Mazzoni (1992) these figurines in general had an apotropaic character.



Fig. 3: Chthonic sculptures, basalt and limestone.  
Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.

Evidence of the variety of Alalakh deities come from the corpus of cuneiform texts recovered by Woolley. For example, the impression of King Idrimi's royal seal (Collon 1975, 99) and the inscription on his statue mention the deities Teššub and Hebat, the Hurrian mother goddess and consort of the weather god. Other Hurrian deities such as Kūbi and Kumarbi, the Hurrian father-god are mentioned in texts but have not been archaeologically identified with separate temples or sacred architectural features at Alalakh. Interestingly, the texts note an *eh elle* or attached specialist “in the service of the deity Kūbi” (von Dassow 2007, 319) and in AIT 156 refers to a temple of Kūbi (von Dassow 2002, 853-56). Recently a suggestion (Kulemann-Ossen and Novak 2000) that pot burials of children may have been viewed as the “womb” and may have been a ritualized mortuary practice of this deity often identified with the unborn child prevalent in Syria. Other deities are documented as well such as the text of tablet AIT 15 which records the elevation of Kabiya, priest of Kumarbi (the chief Hurrian god), and his descendants to the *maryanni* class ranking them equivalent to the priests of Teššub and Hebat, the Hurrian Storm God (counterpart to the Amorite storm god Hadad) and his consort (von Dassow 2007, 273).

<sup>2</sup> Room 2 in Building B (Yener 2010, 15) also had a plastered floor and possibly partially-plastered walls; it may have been another ‘lavatory’/ritual room according to Ingman (2013). Furthermore, she suggests that since the street running along Buildings A and B had a higher density of meat-bearing bones (Yener 2010, 15), this may be an indication that “this area was indeed part of the temple precinct, as the temple personnel would likely have had access to more, and better, meat than other segments of the population, even wealthy ones. The meat could have come from sacrifices being performed in the so-called ‘lavatories’.”



Fig. 4: Detail of cult stand, AT/47/128.  
Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.



Fig. 5a-b: Lapis lazuli figurine, AT/46/20  
(front and back views).  
Photos: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.

These late references to Hurrian deities demonstrate the influence of Hurrian culture on the city in the era when the Hurro-Mitannian Empire ruled the entire region from its capital at Washukanni, now identified as Tell Fakhariyah in the Khabur region of Syria (Bartl and Bonatz 2013).

In further pursuit of the deities of Alalakh, it is important to consider the range of small terracotta figurines representing both human and animal subjects found throughout the site. Usually placed in graves, the ‘bird-faced’ naked female figurine with pierced ears and flattened body is common already in the MBII period (Marchetti 2007, Tepedino 2010). In a rare appearance of the male, clay figurines were sometimes attached to cult stands (Fig. 4). This elaborate cult stand was found inside the Level VII Temple (Woolley 1955, 248, Plate 58: AT/47/128). In the LBA, however, other nude female figurine types complement these ubiquitous clay figurines. An exceptional example carved in imported lapis lazuli was recovered from the Temple II treasury by Woolley (1955, 81; Plate 69 AT/46/20) and depicts a goddess with a very Hittite face exposing her lower body (Fig. 5a). She has a flat nose, prominent ears and is depicted pulling back her garment with her left arm. The garment drapes over her shoulders like a cape. Three perforations have been rendered by a drill. Remarkable is the detail afforded by the figurine of the turban-like wrapped headdress seen on the reverse. Equally unusual is her stance with her right arm extending down at her side (Fig. 5b). This stance is also featured on several naked female figurines made of clay discussed below.

#### A CLAY FIGURINE FROM RECENT EXCAVATIONS

The context of the clay figurine (Figs. 6a and b) stems from new excavations in Square 32.57 which began in the courtyard of the Level IV Palace just in front of the monumental entryway and passed through 2.5 meters of accumulated LBI settlement into

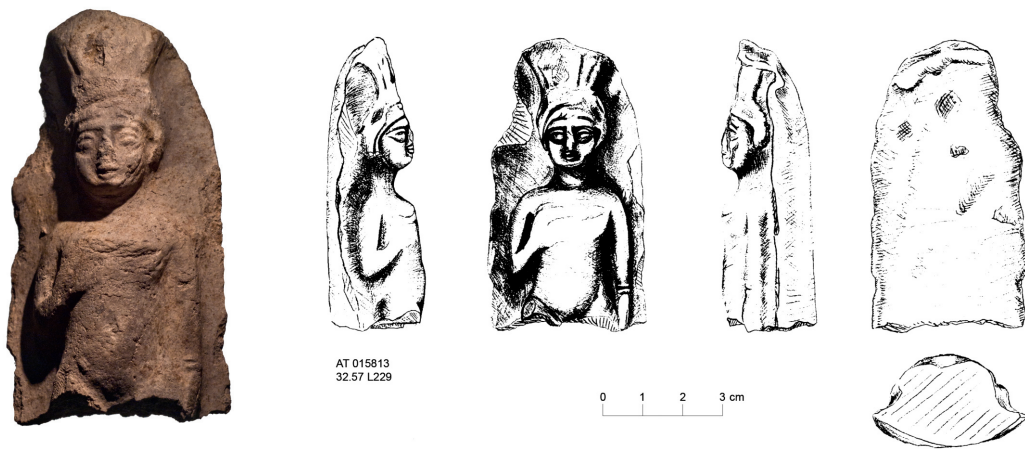


Fig. 6a: Naked female figurine from mold, AT 15813. Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.

Fig. 6b: Naked Female figurine from mold, AT 15813. Drawing: A. Sariönder.



Fig. 7: Apsidal sanctuary building, 32.57 Phase 5b. Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.



Fig. 8a: Naked female figurine from mold, AT/39/300. Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.



Fig. 8b: Naked female figurine from mold, AT/46/112. Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.

sealed MBII layers. The excavations revealed that contemporary with the Level VII Palace of the final MBII period, a smaller building with an apsidal short end stood about 15 meters northwest of the Woolley temple. The building is constructed of mudbrick and is bordered by a street on its east side (Fig. 7) which continued as an apsidal building in some of the phases into the LBI, albeit on a smaller scale. I have argued elsewhere (Yener in press) that the continuity of the apsidal style is an unusual architectural idiom and may indicate that it was a sanctuary to another god in the local pantheon. It was rebuilt within the same location over a timespan of perhaps 200 years which suggests a well-articulated set of relationships between the gods and their special “sacred space,” which is very strong at Alalakh as demonstrated by the Ishtar Temple sequence from Levels I- down to Level XVI.

Finds were sparse on all surfaces of the apsidal building in its six subphases, though several seals were found (see below). A pit associated with Phase 5c in 32.57 in this sanctuary building contained the unusual figurine with what appears to be a flaring feathered headdress and one arm at her breast, the other along her side. Made from a mold, which is common in the MBII, the stance of the figurine is unusual as noted above for the lapis figurine. She is naked except for bracelets on her left arm and the elaborate headdress. A band folds across her forehead. Her right arm rests on top of her right breast although the breasts are not delineated. The unusual stance of her arms is echoed by several other examples of votive terracottas (Woolley 1955, Plate 56: AT/39/75 from a grave spanning a date from Level VI-V), and several unpublished Woolley examples (Figs. 8a and b; AT/39/300; AT/46/112). Also present in other media, another naked female deity is depicted in a sealing from Level IV (Collon 1975, 102) with one arm hanging down her side and the other raised towards the ax carried by a male figure and may be related to our figurine.



Fig. 9a: Hematite cylinder seal from 32.57, AT 18414. Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.

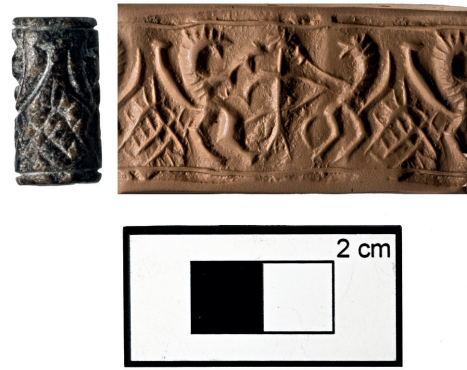


Fig. 9b: Hematite cylinder seal from 32.57, AT 18429. Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.

Curiously, the feathered headdress of the clay figurine is also unusual for Alalakh. Of the headdresses extant during this period at other sites, one example is striking in its possible affinity. The Hurrian goddess Hebat from the Hittite royal cult site of Yazılıkaya, seen in profile, sports a tall, columnar headdress (Bittel 1976, 209). Whether or not the vertical elements depicted on the highly stylized headdresses of the Yazılıkaya goddesses are feathers or folded pleats it is not possible to distinguish. However, the columnar headgear is markedly different from the MB/LBI Anatolian sun goddess Arinna depictions, who was usually shown with a beret-like or sun-disc shaped headdress (Bittel 1976, 162). During the MBA in Anatolia and north Syria other female deities were shown sporting conical horned headgear. For example a winged naked female deity on a mold found in Late Bronze Age Level III Alalakh (Woolley 1955, 54: AT/39/240) and even earlier, a copper based “Ishtar” figurine from Kültepe Ib contemporary levels at Karahöyük Konya (Alp 1974, Pl. 225; Bittel 1976, Fig. 91) all have multi-horned, conical headdresses.

It would not be surprising to find the Hurrian Hebat at Alalakh already present in Level VII, the final MBII, since texts from this palace reveal numerous citizens with Hurrian names (von Dassow 2007). Clearly the Hurrian presence in the western end of Syro-Anatolia predated the days of the Mitanni Empire. Closer to the coastal Levantine area and with Egyptian connotations are the depictions of a naked female goddess with a plumed headdress variously identified as Anat, Astarte, Qudshu, Asherah and other names. She is shown with feathered headgear and at Ugarit has various gory legends associated with her, such as revenge for the death of Baal on the battlefields (Smith 1994). The Alalakh feathered figurine may thus depict a Semitic goddess rather than the Hurrian Hebat. There is unfortunately no way to be certain whether this figurine is in the building because it was a cult space, it is simply one piece among a growing series of clues.

Other deities and their associated animals and supernatural creatures are depicted in the variety of seals and seal impressions found at Alalakh, some in proximity to the possible sanctuary in 32.57. A recent find is a seal with a composition of a presentation scene



Fig. 10a: Ritual dog burial favissa, square 32.57. Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.



Fig. 10b: Ritual dog burial favissa, square 32.57. Photo: M. Akar, Alalakh archives.

from Phase 5 (Fig. 9a, Level V) which is a common Near Eastern ritual motif. Imagery indicative of other idiosyncratic deities and supernatural creatures is evident in a seal which depicts a hunter and rearing lion-like figures (Fig. 9b). Particularly common at Alalakh is a type of dragon with elongated fanged jaws, where it appears on a huge double-headed birds on two cylinder seals (Collon 1982, nos. 8-9). The most striking feature of the dragons of Alalakh are the monster's head with long serrated jaws. The roaring dragon or winged demon seems to be particular to us and therefore, it might represent a god or myth specific to the city or Mukish area (Collon 2008). In Near Eastern mythology the motif of a dragon or sea serpent is often seen in connection with the strongest of the gods who slays the monster. The weather god Teššub is one such example of a dragon-slayer. Teššub's Hittite counterpart, Tarhunt (<sup>d</sup>IM), famously slew the dragon Illuyanka (Beckman 1982). Parallel linear embellishments on wings of a double headed eagle-dragon are also evident in 131 seal impressions on bullae from the Acemhöyük Sarıkaya palace which depict demons walking erect (Özgüç, N. 1983, Fig. 7). Double-headed heraldic eagle-lions carved in a similar style were also found at Ebla prompting Mazzoni (2000, 409; Figs. 24 and 25) to suggest a Syrian origin for the original seal used in the Acemhöyük sealings.

There are other hints of continuing ritual behavior in the LBI levels above the large apsidal building. While there are no traces of the cataclysmic fire that engulfed the nearby Level VII palace, ceramic evidence suggests that the apsidal building went out of use at roughly the same time. When the building was cut down and filled over, a clay-lined pit was dug into its ruins and, after the deposition of a good quantity of mixed broken pottery. Into this 'favissa' pit the body of a dog was placed (Figs. 10a and b), before the entire feature was covered and built over with the first LBI buildings of Period 6. This favissa feature might be considered some sort of closing ceremony or termination ritual for the old building or a foundation offering for the new. This feature might be considered some sort

of closing ceremony for the old building or a foundation offering for the new as was also suggested by Morandi-Bonacossi (2011) at Qatna and Ebla (Marchetti and Nigro 1997).

## CONCLUSIONS

Ongoing excavation and research are helping to elucidate the religious practices of ancient Alalakh across an epic sweep of six centuries. Changes in cult practices are an excellent barometer of local social and cultural developments, especially in an era of imperial ambitions. Some of the features of material culture have been presented here are related to ritual practices in the temples, palaces, and administrative households of Alalakh. What is certainly emerging from our team's interdisciplinary research is that despite the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires, be they Amorite, Hittite or Hurro-Mitanni, and the appearance of new commodities, artistic styles, and cult practices at the site, the people of Alalakh engaged in this milieu on their own terms and local expressions always endured.

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