

AN EARLY ROMANO-BRITISH INHUMATION CEMETERY AT WEST WYCOMBE, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

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Summary

An inhumation cemetery discovered at West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire during building work is discussed. Of the thirteen burials observed directly, all were orientated north-west to south-east. No grave goods were recorded. Radiocarbon determinations suggest a second century A.D. date for the group and the implications of the date are considered. Description of the skeletal material and of the radiocarbon determination is by R.W., the remainder by M.E.F.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Summit Homes Ltd. for encouraging investigation of the discovery and in particular to Messrs. Butcher, Harmer and Pickles; also to High Wycombe Police for their assistance, and to members of the County Museum Archaeological Group who provided the excavation labour force. Mrs. J. Taylor in addition continued observation of the site after the main work had been completed. Mr. Herbert Green provided much information about the locality and local records. The radiocarbon dates were provided by the Sydney University Radiocarbon Laboratory, with funds provided by the Department of Anthropology. Mr. P. Herbert kindly checked a number of references for us relating to inhumation cemeteries.

Circumstances of Discovery

In June 1978, human skeletal remains were discovered whilst digging footings for a new housing estate south of the West Wycombe road (Fig. 1). The Police were informed, and subsequently the County Museum. The discovery was fortunately made at a weekend and so it was possible, within the constraints of the footings trenches, to investigate without hindering building work. A watch was kept as construction continued on the site.

Location of the Site

The cemetery lay in the Wye Valley, a short distance north of the river which runs through West Wycombe Park at this point (Fig. 1). Immediately adjacent on the south and between the site and the river, is the course of the old road linking West Wycombe to High Wycombe – originally part of the main road from London to Oxford¹ and also part of a significant natural routeway through the Chilterns as has been demonstrated by Mr. J. Head (1974). The old road, for which a Turnpike Act was passed in 1719, was replaced by Sir Francis Dashwood in the mid-eighteenth century with a new road which abuts the site on the north.² The cemetery described here was discovered on the slope between Sir Francis's road and the old road at SU 836945, on what was formerly open land.

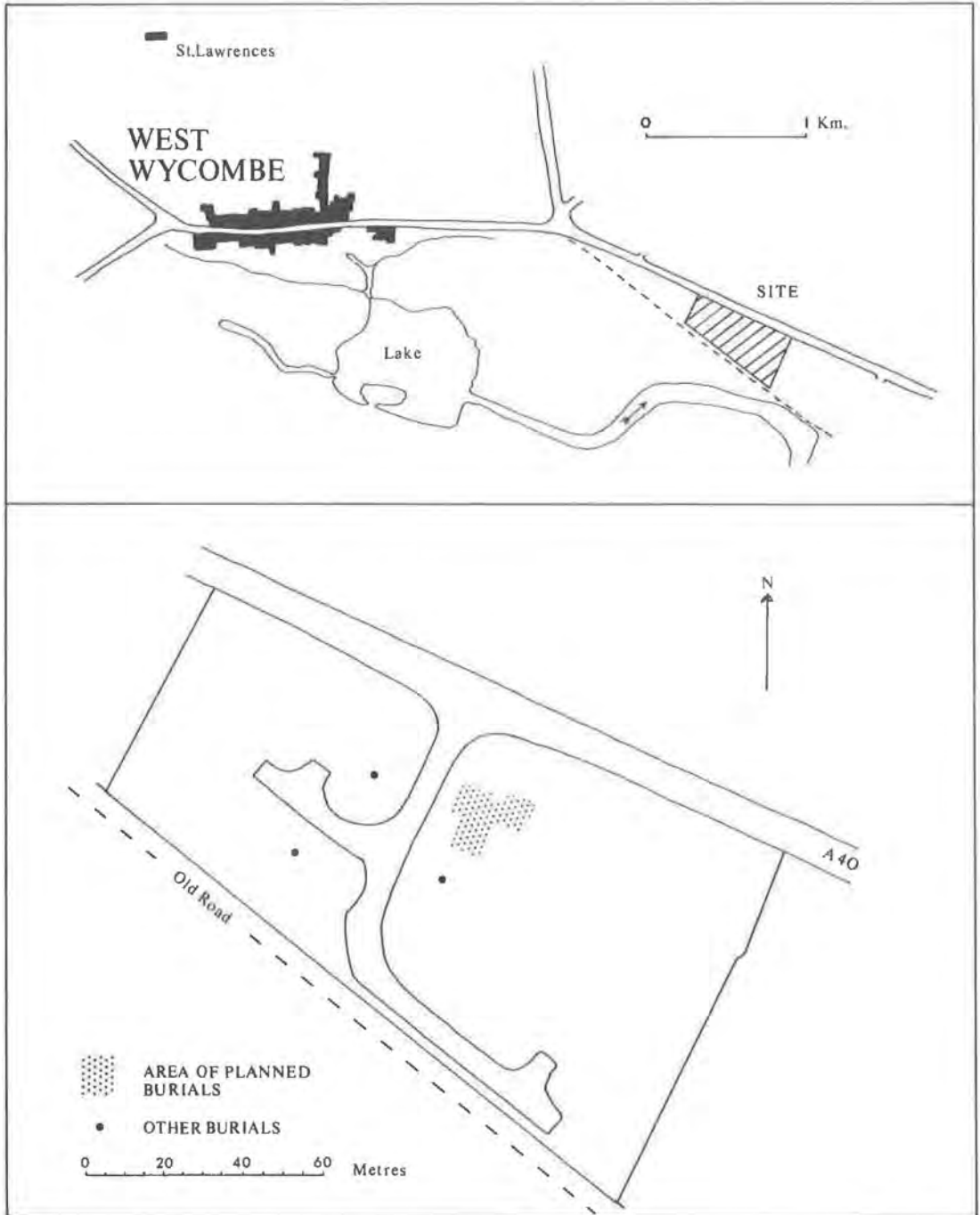


Fig. 1. West Wycombe cemetery. Location.

Nature of the Burials

Thirteen burials were recorded first hand, although it was only possible to excavate a few fully. Some had already been damaged by trench digging, and others were inaccessible beneath mounds of spoil. In addition to the thirteen recorded, two others were reliably reported to have come to light during earlier footings digging, and a typical grave shaped feature was seen in section later in 1978, giving a certain total of sixteen burials.

All of the burials were cut through stiff brown clay into the underlying weathered chalk – the backfilling normally being of clay. They were dug to a depth of between 0.80 m and 1.30 m, the mean being 1.02 m. Numbers 11 and 15, which were adjacent, were markedly deeper than the rest. All were aligned north-west to south-east, with heads to the west, and respected each other. Only one, number 11, had been disturbed in antiquity. All were interred on their backs: the hands of two resting on the pelvic region. Four had faces turned towards the south. No personal ornament or possession of any kind was included in the graves, with the possible exception of number 2, which had traces of a short charred stick lying parallel to his right shin. Three were certainly interred in wooden coffins (7, 8 and 11). The coffins had sides which sloped in gently towards the base, giving a truncated wedge section. Although no timber survived, in Grave 7, a dark organic line along the length of the south side confirmed the 'parting line' between fill and coffin which was evident during excavation, and a short timber stain about 15 cm deep was also seen in Grave 11. At the foot of Grave 8, which had a truncated wedge section, were 2 small nails, both showing traces of mineralised wood.

It is certain that the full extent of the cemetery on the north, and probably also on the east and west, was recovered. It is unlikely to have extended much farther to the south due to the presence of the river and perhaps also of the old road, which seems likely to have been in existence.

Near the foot of Grave 7 and adjacent to Grave 3 had stood a post (P on Fig. 2), set 1.08 m into the ground. The post was 10 cm in diameter, and stood in a D-shaped post-hole filled with clay and large flints. There was no dating evidence in the fill. Since it was the only rock-cut feature recorded on the site apart from the graves themselves, it may be of the same period, the contained post perhaps forming a focus for the cemetery, although the nature of the focus obviously cannot be certainly determined.

The Radiocarbon Dates

Charcoal was found with skeleton number 2 but too little to be used for radiocarbon dating, so bone was utilised. Postcranial bones of skeleton number 13 were selected, the bones of this individual being coherent and easy to clean. The dating was done by the Sydney University Radiocarbon Laboratory.

Dates can be obtained from both organic and inorganic carbon fractions of bone. A general problem with bone dates is post-depositional contamination by younger carbon, which of course gives dates which are too young. Different contaminating processes in the soil affect the two datable fractions, so it is a sensible strategy to reduce the chance of error by dating both fractions. Where the counts of both fractions agree considerable confidence can be placed in the dates.

Both fractions of skeleton number 13 were dated, that is the calcium carbon fraction bonded to the bone apatite and the bone collagen itself. In the laboratory the

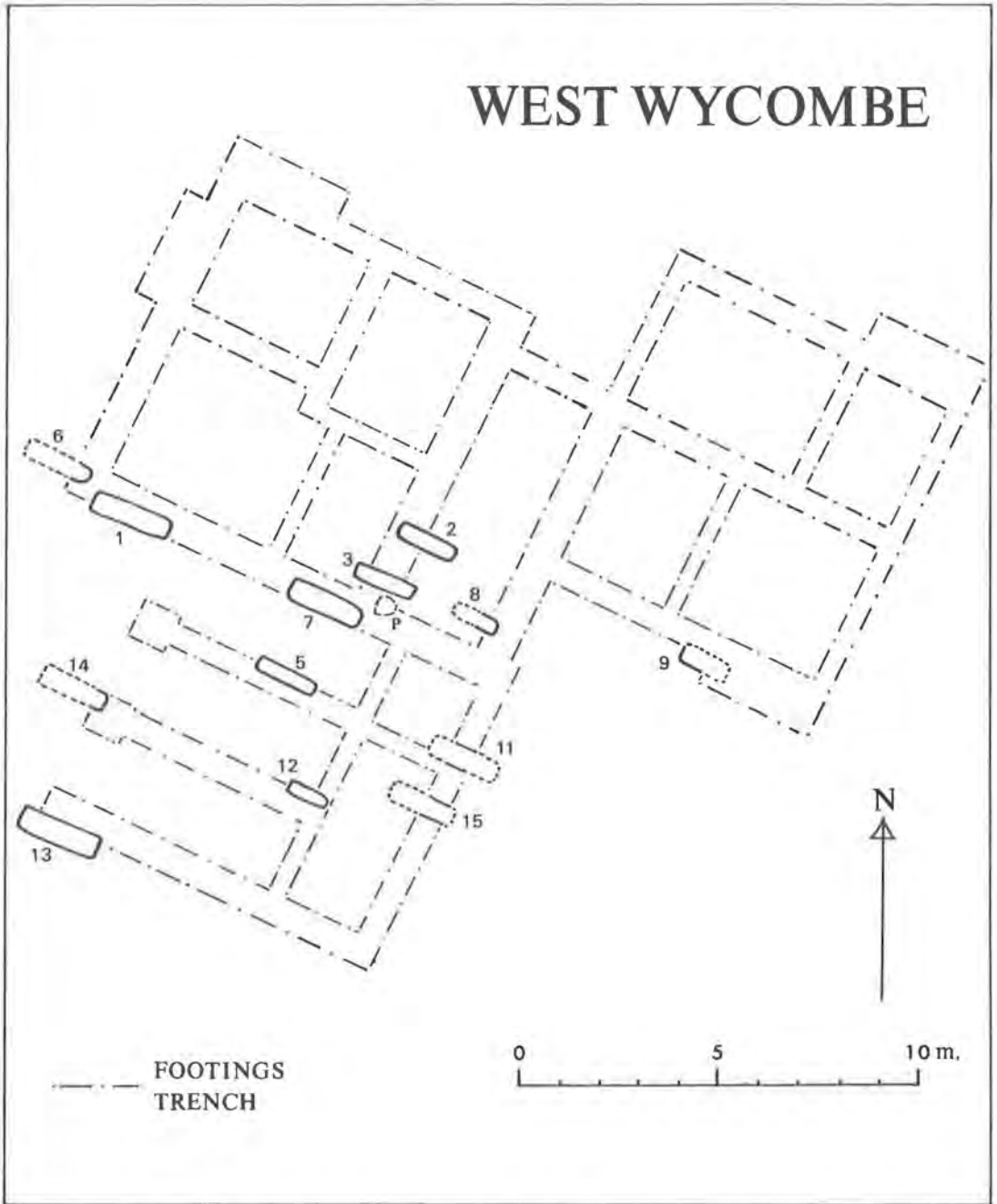


Fig. 2. West Wycombe. Burials exposed in house footings. Post setting at P; National Grid North.

comminuted bones were soaked for five days in 20% acetic acid, washed, and the CO₂ for dating the apatite fraction (SUA-115A) evolved with hydrochloric acid. The residue was washed and dried for combustion of collagen (SUA-115B).

The dates reported by the laboratory are:

SUA-115A (apatite)	1920 ± 110 BP
SUA-115B (collagen)	1875 ± 85 BP

which are, respectively, A.D. 30 ± 110 and A.D. 75 ± 85. The dates for the two fractions do not differ from each other statistically, an agreement which encourages confidence in the dates obtained.

When calibrated according to Clark (1975) the dates become: A.D. 95 ± 110 (apatite), and A.D. 150 ± 85 (collagen).

Given the usual effects of contamination it is safer to interpret bone dates as too young rather than too old. Therefore it would be particularly difficult to argue that an early second-century A.D. date was too old for this skeleton. Skeleton number 13 is an integral part of the cemetery. Therefore, in summary, these radiocarbon dates provide a strong case for a second-century A.D. date for the cemetery, with a preference for a date which is early in the century rather than late.

The Graves

The original numbering of features on the site has been retained in Table 1, the gaps in the sequence being features subsequently shown not to be graves. All of the skeletons were extended and supine, with heads to the west and normally facing upwards unless otherwise stated. The figure given for depth is the best that could be gauged allowing for surface disturbance by construction work. Where the presence of a coffin is indicated, there was firm evidence for this. Others may have been confined, but no trace survived.

The methods used to derive the conclusions about sex and age, in Table 1, are influenced by R.W.'s analyses of the Romano-British skeletons from Poundbury (Dorset), housed in the British Museum (Natural History). Sex is diagnosed by means of the diameter of the femur head related to maximum length of the femur and by attributes of the pelvis such as the preauricular sulcus and angle of the greater sciatic notch. Age of juveniles is judged by tooth eruption; age of adults by degree of molar attrition and ante-mortem loss of molar teeth. Stature is estimated by the methods of Trotter and Gleser (see e.g. Brothwell 1972, 102).

Disease

The only signs of disease are of slight arthritic lipping of joints in two individuals; on the proximal end of the right ulna of number 1 and on both the right acetabulum and the left femur head of number 13.

Affinities with Skeletons of Known Historical Age

Not enough is systematically known about Romano-British, Anglo-Saxon and Medieval skeletons for us to use anatomical characteristics to assign the small West Wycombe collection to a particular historical period. The Archaeological evidence of the West Wycombe graves hints at an age not younger than Romano-British and this is supported

by the radiocarbon dates. In terms of their moderate robusticity the West Wycombe skeletons are similar to the fourth-century Romano-British skeletons from Poundbury, though the males and the females of West Wycombe are tall by the norms of Poundbury. There appear to be no traits at West Wycombe which run counter to a Romano-British age.

Objects in the Grave Fills

The items listed below all occurred in the backfill of the graves, except the charcoal in Grave 2, which appears to have been deliberately placed, and the nails from Grave 8.

Grave 1: Rim sherd of bead-rim jar in sandy fabric, Belgic?

Grave 2: Small length of charcoal rod parallel to right ankle, 15 cms. long.

Grave 6: One sherd hand-made jar, soapy fabric containing finely divided organic matter, probably Belgic. One sherd sandy Romano-British, two oyster shells.

Grave 8: Two iron nails in four fragments at foot of grave. Traces of mineralised wood were observed by D. Parish during conservation. The largest fragment was 25 mm long and 6 mm thick; one piece had a flattened head. It is probable that these were coffin nails, although they are very slender. Also in the backfill of this grave were the mandible and metacarpal of a bovine.

Grave 13: One flint gritted sherd, Pre-Roman? Four sherds, soapy texture, grogged, Belgic/Romano-British. Three thin cordoned sherds, joining, Romano-British. Three sandy Romano-British sherds, one with traces of white slip.

In addition, two other unstratified Romano-British sherds, one with a reduced colour-coat.

Discussion

Although the extent of the cemetery is roughly known, there is obviously no firm indication of the total number of bodies it contained. Any of the unexcavated 'islands' isolated by the house footings could have contained further burials. However all of the sections and trench bases were carefully searched and it seems likely that had the burials been regularly interred in any kind of rows, such as at Queensford Mill, Dorchester, Oxon, (Durham and Rowley 1972), this would have been apparent. Although lateral distribution appears to be without clear arrangement, this is certainly not so for individual grave orientation, for all lay roughly north-west to south-east with heads to the west.

After considering the evidence of grave fill, the physical anthropology and the lack of historical records for a cemetery the writers had inclined to the view of a Romano-British date. Nevertheless when the radiocarbon dates turned out to be as early as the second-century A.D., they were something of a surprise. It has been argued above that the date is likely to be a good one, but it has for long been the conventional wisdom that cremation was the normal rite in early Roman Britain, giving way to occasional inhumations only in the later second century and becoming common place in the third (e.g. Wenham 1968). Yet here at Wycombe we have a pure inhumation cemetery apparently of second-century date and although the dates derive from one skeleton only, there is no reason to believe that it was atypical or that the cemetery was in use for more than a few generations.

In fact very few unaccompanied inhumations though to be of the Roman period have been subjected to radiocarbon dating. Those known to the writers are a date of a.d. 420 ± 100 for the Queensford Mill cemetery (Durham and Rowley 1972); dates of 305 ± 100 , 340 ± 105 and later for Cannington, Somerset (*Radiocarbon* 11, 1969, 268 and 13, 1971, 153), and several dates from cemeteries at Stretton-on-Fosse, Warwickshire, which range from the second to fifth centuries, although the two earliest at 150 ± 190 and 250 ± 180 , have large standard deviations (*Radiocarbon* 16, 1974, 296 - 7). One of two dates from a cemetery at Curbridge, Oxon is also early at a.d. $110 + 80$, the other being a.d. 310 ± 70 (Chambers 1976 and 1978).

Despite the dearth of radiocarbon dates for inhumations of Romano-British date, probable second-century dates have been claimed for one or two cemeteries largely on the grounds of associated settlement evidence, such as at Orton Longueville, Cambs, (Dallas 1975). Collis suggests that his second phase cemetery at Oswlebury, Hants containing ten inhumations may also be of second-century date (in Reece 1977, 26 - 34), but such claims are rare. Nevertheless inhumation burials of this date need in general occasion no surprise since Whimster (1977) has shown that inhumation was the commonest rite for most of the country in the pre-Roman period. It is however more surprising to find them in Buckinghamshire, which has both 'Belgic' cremation cemeteries, such as Wards Coombe (Dunnett 1972), as well as first - second century cremation cemeteries, for example Thornborough (Johnson 1975) and Great Brickhill (Allen 1979).

Traditionally, inhumation cemeteries aligned roughly east-west and without grave goods were considered to be Christian. Rahtz, however, has made a strong case for the influence of sunrise on grave alignment in both pagan and Christian contexts and clearly arguments from alignment alone are no longer valid (Rahtz 1978). The alignment of the West Wycombe burials may owe much to the presence of the valley routeway previously mentioned. The utilisation of boundaries in this manner seems to be a common phenomenon in Romano-British cemeteries, a good example being at Lynch Farm, Peterborough, where third to fourth-century burials aligned both north-south and east-west, clearly relate to two sides of one particular field (Jones 1973 and 1975). Nevertheless as Greene has pointed out (in Reece 1977, 46 - 53), there are in fact few traits which can be used to reliably distinguish between Romano-British Christian and pagan burials, and there is conversely no inherent reason why the Wycombe burials should not be second-century Christians. Clearly a wider programme of radiocarbon dates on unaccompanied inhumation cemeteries is called for.

Finally, brief mention should be made of the context of the Wycombe cemetery. Branigan (1967) showed some years ago that the valleys of the Chilterns were favoured areas for Romano-British settlement, but the only certain villa in the Wye valley is the well known villa on the Rye. One local historian (Harman, 1934, 15) has claimed that there was a villa within West Wycombe village itself, although his grounds for this belief are not clear, and there are also hints of a building within the town of High Wycombe (Parker 1878, 5 - 6). Two other small settlements set back from the main valley have been identified in recent years (Cauvain 1978). Finally, there are hints of a settlement not far from the cemetery under discussion, discovered after earthmoving, although unfortunately the threat of looting by metal detector users means that its location must remain vague.

Table 1

Grave No.	Age	Sex	Est. Stature (cm)	Est. age in yrs.	Posture	Depth of grave	Coffin	Items in Fill	Skeletal Detail
1.	Adult	M	164	c. 35+	Head looking South	1.12 m	—	Yes	Left hand missing.
2.	Juvenile	?	—	13	Left hand on abdomen.	1.07 m	—	Yes	Cranium removed by workmen, but mandible left in situ.
3.	Adult	?M	—	19	Head tilted back, looking SSW	0.96 m	—	—	Top of body only remaining
5.	Adult	F	167	c. 35+	Head looking South, left hand on abdomen.	0.94 m	—	—	Right arm missing.
6.	Adult	?	—	adult	—	1.0 m	—	Yes	Feet only exposed.
7.	Adult	M	174	c. 35+	Head separated from vert. and looking W.	0.98 m	Yes	—	Cervical vertebra twisted but articulated. Mandible beneath vertebra, ?post-deposition disturbance.
8.	?	?	—	—	—	1.02 m	Yes	Yes	Part of leg only exposed, much decayed and not collected.
9.	Juvenile	?	—	5	—	0.80 m	—	—	Lower portion of trunk destroyed.
11.	Adult	M	—	c. 35+	—	1.30 m	Yes	—	Post-mortem disturbance, lower jaw and vertebra missing. Feet left in situ.
12.	Juvenile	?	—	3	—	0.86 m	—	—	—
13.	Adult	F	163	c. 35+	Head slightly inclined to South	0.90 m	—	Yes	Two radiocarbon dates on this skeleton.
14.	Adult	?	—	adult	—	1.10 m	—	—	Feet only exposed.
15.	Adult	M	175	adult	—	1.28 m	—	—	Pelvis to knees only exposed.
X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	Reported by builders.
Y	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	Reported by builders.
Z	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	Yes	Grave-shaped feature only recorded.

FOOTNOTES

1. Mr. Green points out that the route is shown on the Gough map of c. 1364.
2. According to the diary of Thomas Phillibrown, which is in private possession, it was under construction in 1752. I am grateful to Mr. Green for this information.

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