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ASSESSMENT OF THE TOURIST POTENTIAL OF THE CULTURAL-NATURAL RESERVE "ORHEIUL VECHI"

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Abstract

In the last decade, virtually no other branch of the cultural field, not even the tourism sector, has developed and specialized as much or as fast as cultural tourism. It is one of the few growth areas to reflect an important 'megatrend': culture-oriented travel is mainly focused on visiting cultural sites and ethno-cultural events, so that visitors become acquainted with the culture of their own country and also with the cultures of foreign countries. The motivations that lead a person to plan and undertake a trip or holiday are a complex function, with variables ranging from the natural characteristics of the destination to infrastructure and facilities, from historical and cultural value to financial considerations.

Key words: *cultural tourism, tourism potential, nature reserve*
JEL*: F44, M51*

Introduction

Cultural tourism is closely linked to the historical past of the locations chosen as tourist destinations. Elements of the past are intensively used in the construction of tourism products for an increasing number and variety of target markets. The rural environment, or more recently the rural space, is presented in specialized literature as an inland area including villages and small towns, in which most of the land is mainly used for: agriculture, forestry, aquaculture, fishing; economic and cultural activities of the inhabitants of the area (crafts, industry, services, etc.); non-urban and recreational areas (or nature reserves); other uses, apart from residential. Today, tourist destinations are more and more determined to build a unique and competitive identity in the mind of the consumer.

Results and discussions

The cultural-natural reserve "Orheiul Vechi" is located 18 km southeast of Orhei, in between the villages of Trebujeni, Butuceni and Morovaia. The Orheiul Vechi complex was inhabited and urbanized in the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras. On the surface of the promontory there are traces of Geto-Dacian (4th-3rd centuries BC) and medieval towns - Sehr al - Djedid, which was built by the Tatar-Mongols (14th century) and Orhei, which was built by the Moldavians (15th-16th centuries). The limestone cliffs are home to Christian cave monasteries and religious inscriptions carved in stone by medieval monks. The archaeological landscape of Orheiul Vechi is currently on the UNESCO tentative list.



Figure 1. The cultural-natural reserve "Orheiul Vechi"

After several attacks from the east, the town moved to a quieter location, away from the major trade routes and Tatar attacks. The first documented record of Orhei on its present location dates back to 1554, when a dam was built at the confluence of the Cula and Răuț rivers, forming a lake in front of the village. Since 1599, Orhei has been referred to in official documents as a town with a prosperous commercial life. In 1835, Orhei became the center of the uezd (administrative unit), the population increased and commercial activity intensified. In 1902, the town's population stood at 14,800. Mineral extraction, trade, handicrafts, tanneries were the main occupations. During the interwar period, the town served as an important administrative and educational center.

The history of Orhei covers three periods. The first one is the period that preceded the Golden Horde (late 13th century - first half of the 14th century). During this period, Orhei was defended by a log wall with watchtowers. Following the conquest of the city in the 40s of the 14th century by the Tatars, the Golden Horde period began, during which the entire construction was carried out under the guidance of craftsmen from the East. In those years, Orhei, which received the name Shehr al-Jadid, had the appearance of an oriental city, with two caravanserais, a mosque, public baths and other facilities being built in the center and in the east.

The Butuceni Promontory essentially completes the landscape and scenery of Orheiul Vechi. It is located to the south of the Cave promontory, together forming a whole complex that is harmonious from all points of view. The Butuceni Promontory has an extraordinary geological layout, with dozens of limestone patches aligned perfectly horizontally, lots of spacious caves and smaller grottoes carved into the rocky walls. In Appendix 4 you will find the General Plan of the Orheiul Vechi site. Moreover, the promontory is also wonderful in terms of its unique landscape, the obvious archaeological pond, which denotes ancient earth and stone fortifications at every turn, the complex of sacred underground caves, other ancient vestiges that impress and overwhelm any visitor who comes to Orheiul Vechi, leaving him/her with an extraordinary memory of the places he/she has seen. As far as the cave monastery is concerned, it can be mentioned that in the first century of our era, the first Christians settled in the area of Orheiul Vechi, as in other places in the Carpathian-Nistrian area. The cave complexes of Orheiul Vechi have partially evolved in the medieval period. Following the multi-century evolution, the complexes in question are defined in their current form by the 15th-17th centuries. These constructions are located in the following sectors: on the northern bank of the Butuceni promontory as well as on the southern side of the Mășcăuți terrace. From an archaeological point of view, there are two cave complexes in the region, covering an area of about 200 meters. These two complexes located in the northern part of the Butuceni promontory (the Peștera Hermitage, the Monastery of the Bosiă Fathers) represent a well-defined monastic complex with rock churches with adjacent chapels for monks.

Within the archaeological complex of the Orheiul Vechi several monumental stone constructions can be identified, presenting a particular interest, both from a scientific and a museographic point of view. Five of them are worth mentioning: the Gothic fortress, the medieval fortress, the fortress, the inn and the church; in addition, the steep banks of the Răut have formed a multitude of smaller and larger caves dug into the limestone rocks.

The first cave complex at the northern end of the cave chain, about 500 meters east of St Mary's Church, is the Bosi Monastery, situated at an altitude of 20-30 m above the water of the Răut River. It is a very archaic complex, with a carefully designed architecture, consisting of galleries arranged in several rows, a rock church with an altar and nave, spacious cells, inscriptions from the 16th-17th centuries, etc.



Figure 2. View of the Bosi Cave Monastery, Orheiul Vechi
Source: https://www.itinari.com/old-orhei-discover-moldova-s-ancient-roots-rho6

The second complex of caves, located about 30-60 meters above the water level of the Răut, is located west of the Bosi Monastery, below the foot of the Geto-Dacian fortress, near the church of St. Mary, further west. The complex comprises about 30 caves, some of which are not accessible without special equipment, spread in several horizontal rows in the limestone rock over a stretch of about 250 meters. Various incised marks have been preserved in the limestone cell walls, which, in some cases, closely resemble Early Medieval marks seen in similar complexes in different regions on pottery, bricks or stone.

The third cave complex is the Cave Monastery, located about 60 meters above the river, following on from the previous cells, about 50 meters further west. The monastery consists of a splendid rock church with an altar, nave, and porch, an impressive group of monastic cells, a partially collapsed staircase corridor to the Raut, and a superb, newer tunnel, dating from 1820, which crosses the cliff from the village of Butuceni, and is crowned above the entrance by a bell tower, placed on the surface of the cliff later, in 1890, and which is an inalienable symbol of the underground holy place. Next to the bell tower, just above the rock church at the steep edge of the promontory, stands a massive stone cross dating from the 18th century, which blends organically into the sacred landscape of this rock monastery.

The Orheiul Vechi Museum Complex, is currently a state institution subordinated to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Moldova. The complex is staffed by a team of sharp specialists who are responsible for organizing and running the tours. The museum complex has archaeological and ethnographic collections. The Orheiul Vechi museum complex can certainly be seen as a true scientific center for informing and educating young people in the spirit of knowledge and protection of natural and cultural heritage.

Next to the museum complex you can find a hotel with a restaurant. The hotel can accommodate 20 people. It has a conference room with 160 seats and a restaurant with 200 seats. It is worth mentioning that in the area of the complex there are 5 tourist hostels with a capacity for up to 400 visitors. The museum complex is capable of organizing tours and visits for 180-360 visitors per day, however, the current demand for organized tours is much lower.

The historical-cultural complex "The Medieval City of Orhei" is one of the most beautiful sites in the republic, which enjoys great success among foreign visitors. The complex is likely to be included in the list of World Heritage Sites and in the strategies to support it.

The Orheiul Vechi archaeological complex has been referred to by people of culture since the 18th century. The great scholar and scientist Dimitrie Cantemir, the poet Constantin Stamati, are among the illustrious personalities who have drawn attention to the antiquities of Orhei Vēchi. However, the first identification of the ruins near the villages of Trebujēni and Butucēni with the medieval town of Orhei was made by the historian Vladimir Kurdinovskii, who in 1906 pointed out: ...it was precisely at this place, where the Raut descends sharply from Trebujeni to Butuceni, that Orhei was settled... Since 1947, under the leadership of Gheorghe Smirnov, archaeological excavations were initiated within the Orheiul Vechi complex, which, through the efforts of several researchers, have continued for decades, even to the current stage.

Museum tours are traditionally offered by travel agencies. Usually, these tours are divided into urban ones and those linked to places associated with certain outstanding personalities (or in combined versions). National travel agencies offer 4 museum circuits in the Central RD, which include (apart from Chisinau and 21 rural localities) 8 museums, house museums and open-air museums, 3 monasteries and important churches, as well as 18 other tourist attractions.

Between the beginning of 2021 and May, the "Orheiul Vechi" Reserve recorded the highest profit in its history - 170 thousand lei. The new complex administration believes that the performance was possible thanks to the visitor charging system, implemented back in 2012, but not properly executed until now. The money raised is used for development, which includes access routes for people with disabilities. Tourists are also required to pay for car parking. For this purpose, an eco-friendly car park has been set up with a capacity of about 40 spaces.

Particularly worth mentioning is the international open-air classical music festival "DescOperă", organized within the Orheiul Vechi cultural-natural reserve, which has achieved the desired inclusion of the heritage site in the national and international tourist circuit. This festival, which is unique in the Republic of Moldova and in the South-East European region, annually attracts about 5000 participants/visitors and involves 500 artists who perform on 3 stages at each edition.

Unfortunately, in 2020, the festival was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The craft of artistic stone working has become a significant occupation in some localities. The artistic achievements of the craftsmen can be seen in the architecture of the houses and their annexes. Their work is recognised by scholars and appreciated by visitors. Orheiul Vechi's stone folk architecture decoration is the only exception in the Romanian world, pointed out the architect Eugen Bâzgu.

The landscapes are the monuments of material culture, such as the archaeological sites turned into open museums (the Turkish baths of Orheiul Vechi); the architectural monuments (Soroca Fortress, Tighina Fortress); the ethnological sights and ethnographic achievements (the traditional houses with vernacular stone architecture in the Orhei area, the wooden gates in the villages of Codru).

There are already several examples of tourism products with the inclusion of Moldovan villages in the national tourism market, such as [3]:

• accommodation in farm hostels (over 260 locations throughout the country);
• rural excursions (20 national trails, 7 wine trails);
- • visits to specific ethnographic areas (Orheiul Vechi, Beșalma, Soroca);
• holidays for children in rural destinations (over 200 summer camps);
• hosting thematic meetings in the country;
• overnight stops on a monastery tour in Moldova;
• themed workshops and introduction to folk crafts (ceramics, pottery, wood carving, stick weaving);
• participation in the cultural events calendar in rural localities (fairs, festivals, celebrations), etc.

For instance, in Orheiul Vechi guests can find the Butuceni Agro-pension (Eco-Resort), which is located in the village of the same name in Orhei district, close to the most important archaeological and historical monument in the Republic of Moldova, with the status of a historical-cultural reserve and open-air museum - Orheiul Vechi. It is located 47 km from the capital and about 18 km from Orhei.

Leisure activities are the set of means and forms capable of providing tourists or social groups with a state of well-being and pleasure, providing a feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment, leaving a pleasant impression and memory. The Butuceni Agropension offers tourists [3]:

- hiking and cycling. The main motivations are: the desire to admire the outstanding landscapes around the town, photography, the desire for movement, recreation. Bicycles are available for tourists to explore the surroundings;
- horse-drawn carriage rides, sleigh rides, horse-drawn carriage rides;
- fishing. Although this type of leisure is less popular in the area, if there is a demand, tourists can go fishing by the river;
- folklore performances by a group of children from Trebujeni village. Tourists can enjoy folk songs, dances and various cultural customs;
- the beach and the well-equipped swimming pool are provided free of charge;
- table tennis, volleyball or football court.

The "Casa din Luncă" Agropension offers guests an attractive package of services that includes, besides the typical hospitality of the local people, village specialties, as well as wagon rides, egg dyeing and blanket weaving lessons, as well as traditional songs, being the leader of the "Mărgăritarul" ethno-folkloric ensemble.

Within the cultural-natural reserve "Orheiul Vechi", visitors can also visit the "Casa Șărănească" (Ethnographic Museum) in the village of Butuceni, which has been welcoming guests since 1979. The house has preserved untouched the archaic architectural forms typical of the houses in this area from the 19th and 20th centuries. The enduring and defining element of the household is the stone wall, which marks the boundary between the 'peasant's universe' and the rest of the world. The interior of the rural household includes: the house, the basca, the cellar, the lodge, the mill and others. An example of vernacular stone architecture is shown in Appendix 5.

The Orheiul Vechi complex represents a system composed of cultural and natural elements: archaic natural landscape, biodiversity, exceptional archaeological setting, historical-architectural variety, traditional rural habitat and ethnographic originality.

Tourism is the only branch that diversifies the local economy through the sustainable use and exploitation of the natural potential and historical, cultural and artistic heritage. The importance of tourism resources as production factors can only be justified by the originality or uniqueness of their character, in which case the country in possession sometimes achieves a 'monopoly' position within a specific specialty or destination.

The tourism development concern is responsible for the full exploitation of the natural and man-made tourism resources of the Republic of Moldova, and the tourism activity must be oriented towards satisfying the requirements and references of domestic and foreign tourists.

An extensive marketing and promotion program includes several activities: acquaintance tours among foreign tourists, organization of the country's stand at international exhibitions, online promotion chambers, promotion support for local cultural-tourist events, technical assistance to the private sector for the development and diversification of the tourism offer.

A new impulse in the increasingly active involvement of the local community in the support process of the Orheiul Vechi Reserve has been the visit in May 2005 of the Director-General of UNESCO Koïchiro Matsuura to Orheiul Vechi and the decision of the Government of the Republic of Moldova to propose the cultural-natural Reserve "Orheiul Vechi" for inclusion in the World Heritage List.

In accordance with the decision of the Trebujeni Municipality dated August 2007, the local community supports the process of restructuring the Orheiul Vechi Reserve and submitting the Orheiul Vechi Cultural and Natural Reserve for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Furthermore, Moldova is awaiting the response of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre on the application for the inclusion of the "Orheiul Vechi Archaeological Landscape" in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Finally, following Lonely Planet's 2013 declaration of Moldova as "the second least visited destination in the world", the year 2017 brought good news in terms of the country's fascinating evolution, moving up 28 positions in the Adventure Travel and Trade Association (ATTA) rankings, being declared the second most improved tourist destination in the world, especially in the Hospitality and Safety category, thus increasing the country's global tourist attractiveness.

Meanwhile, the tourism marketing of the locality is nearly unknown in Moldova, although, where practiced, it brings results for local merchants, accommodation and catering establishments, local carriers, craftsmen, guides, museums and artistic groups. Each rural locality with tourism potential can develop its own marketing strategy for the development of agri-tourism, promoting the distinctiveness of the place with the ingenuity and creativity of the local people.

Public partners could be tourism management organizations: museums, nature reserves, churches, cultural centers. After all, the church has a centuries-old tradition of promoting rural tourism as well as hospitality services, making its emergence as an active partner in the present day unsurprising. Further collaborations might include various folk craftsmen or ethno-folklore groups. For example, various works by local painters, sculptors and other folk craftsmen can be exhibited in the guesthouse's lounge, which tourists can purchase.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the "SalvaEco" Youth Organisation, which periodically organizes ecological expeditions to enhance the cultural and natural heritage through

tourism, are also taking useful actions to promote nature tourism, together with the public administration authorities of the republic. Over the years "SalvaEco" has organized several expeditions in this sense, notably at Orheiul Vechi in May 1999. The aim of the expedition was to evaluate the historical monuments of national cultural heritage value in Trebujeni. In 2000, the Organisation carried out an expedition along the Tsipova - Saharna route in the Rezina district to assess the condition of natural, architectural and historical monuments, along with other expeditions. Together with other NGOs, "SalvaEco" has also been involved in cleaning up the banks and lakes of the Chisinau municipality.

In April 2015, 20 national tourist trails were approved. The technical data sheets of these trails are published on the official website of the Tourism Agency and can be used free of charge by all individuals and legal entities (Figure 3).



Figure 3. National tourist route no. 1 "Orheiul Vechi - place of interference of multi-secular cultures"; National tourist route no. 6 "Monasteries of mystery and spirituality"
Source: http://www.turism.gov.md/index.php?pag=trasee&opa=view&id=33&l=, accessed on 17.08.2022

Tourism development in rural areas between 1995-2015 has also been addressed in other documents of public interest, also repealed in 2012: the National Programme for the implementation of the "Rural-Tour" project (Government Decision No 347 of 15.04.1997) and the National Programme "Moldovan Village 2005-2015" (Government Decision No 242 of 01.03.2005). Another programme that is viable only on paper (considered obsolete in the new "Tourism 2020" Strategy) is the National Tourism Programme "The Wine Road in Moldova" (Government Decision No 554 of 24.05.2004), one of whose tasks included the encouragement of the local (especially rural) population to provide additional tourist services, such as accommodation, catering, souvenir production, folklore performances, demonstration of rural life and homesteading.

The Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation on 16 November 1972, has been ratified by the Republic of Moldova by Law No 1113-XV of 06.06.2002. The

Convention promotes cooperation among nations in the protection of their common heritage. It aims to maintain joint protection of natural and cultural landscapes. This has been reflected in practice in the Republic of Moldova by the establishment of Orheiul Vechi as a cultural and natural landscape. The reactions to the necessity for ratification by the Republic of Moldova of international conventions and treaties were in line with the direction of foreign policy, namely European integration. Consequently, the direction of European integration on the cultural dimension became even more important.

We can evoke the success of the " Orheiul Vechi Cultural Landscape" dossier in the World Heritage waiting list. This has led to positive reactions in the academic and administrative environment of the Republic of Moldova. It is more and more often observed that legislative acts concerning cultural and natural heritage assets are being updated. An increasing number of topical issues are being addressed in the academic environment as a result of the requirements promoted by cultural policies at European level, which have direct tangents at local level. Thus, research is increasingly being carried out on subjects that update the place and importance of the concept of cultural identity in an ever more diverse world and the need to cultivate respect for memory and cultural heritage among the younger generation.

The development strategy of the Cultural-Natural Reserve " Orheiul Vechi" for 2009-2020, approved in 2009 by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Moldova and the Orheiul Vechi Museum Complex, provided for the establishment of Orheiul Vechi as a Cultural Landscape - expression of national and universal values represented by the historical-cultural and natural heritage. The mission of the strategy is to preserve and enhance the historical-cultural and natural heritage of the Orheiul Vechi area for cultural-scientific, educational and tourist purposes, for the benefit of humanity in general and the local community in particular.

In the following years, researchers and cultural officials prepared a new dossier entitled "Archaeological Landscape of Orheiul Vechi", which was finalized and submitted to the World Heritage Centre - UNESCO for examination in January 2015.

Regrettably, after studying the implementation of the recommendations regarding the cultural-natural complex "Orheiul Vechi", the Commission of the World Heritage Centre - UNESCO, in June 2017, temporarily refused the inclusion of the historical-cultural objective in the list of monuments protected by it , due to non-compliance of the national public authorities with the requirements set by the Organization. Among the irregularities found were unauthorized constructions that appeared in the area of the cultural-national reserve, the improvisation by priests of a parking lot on an ancient sanctuary, the start of several constructions without authorization, etc.

In fact, during the discussions with UNESCO experts, it was concluded that the application for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List should be withdrawn, without questioning its inscription for examination. Meanwhile, the dossier will be further improved until all shortcomings have been eliminated.

In March 2018, during the meeting of the Minister of Education, Culture and Research of the Republic of Moldova, Monica Babuc, with Mechtild Rössler, Deputy Director-General for Culture of UNESCO, which took place in Paris, the Moldovan official reiterated the firm commitment of the Government of the Republic of Moldova to promote the Orheiul Vechi Archaeological Landscape in the UNESCO World Heritage List, assuring that the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research is making every effort to strengthen its protection capacity.

In the context of the 2030 Agenda, the promotion of sustainable and responsible tourism, in terms of local, natural, social and cultural resources and the well-being of local communities, especially those

in less developed areas, will be crucial, on the basis of permanent cooperation and exchange of information.

As an example, we can suggest an idea for a public-private project, which could focus on the development of the "Moldovan village - tourist village". This involves the construction of tourist villages (initially 1-2 in number) adequately equipped, capable of arousing the interest of economic agents to invest in rural tourism. There are a variety of tourist villages which, if approved, could awaken the interest of tourists: climatic and landscape tourist villages, handicraft tourist villages, ethnographic-folkloric villages, etc. We believe that the villages of Butuceni and Trebujeni could be approved as landscape tourist villages through public-private investment.

Therefore, in the future, the strengths of the stakeholders, also considered pillars of the development of cultural-tourist relations, as example [4]:

1. Central public administration: providing the destination's infrastructure, visitor safety and security, favorable policies and plans to promote socio-economic development, revenue collection and management, destination marketing.

2. Private sector: marketing of the heritage site and destination, supply of goods and services to support tourism in the heritage destination, advice, guidance and support in product development and capacity building.

3. Local residents: influencing decisions on the management and use of the heritage site, on-site employment/human resources, operating tourism or cultural enterprises, contributing to cultural heritage research, planning and development, cultural ambassadors and volunteers.

4. Development agencies: technical assistance for physical development, funding for restoration/research, cultural heritage capacity building.

5. For the process to be more effective, it is necessary to involve stakeholders at an early stage (e.g. in cultural mapping and identification of tourism development options); as well as to promote joint stakeholder input by organizing various public meetings, which will create a sense of ownership.

By contributing through qualitative public services, the objectives that make up the country's cultural heritage could become much better known and attractive both nationally to the local population and internationally.

Officials and state institutions in the Republic of Moldova should be better aware of the role that cultural policies can play when responding to the distinct needs of different community groups in society.

The key public document that reveals the priority areas and directions of development of the tourism sector until 2020 is the Tourism Development Strategy "Tourism 2020". The overall objective of the Strategy is to stimulate tourism activity in the Republic of Moldova through the development of domestic and inbound tourism.

The definition of cultural tourism relevant to the state policy of the Republic of Moldova will include three fundamental axes: values, vestiges and lifestyle (cultural events) of the people as challenges to knowledge, experimentation and multilateral development. As a newer element in the generally accepted definition, creativity is difficult to address, given the multitude of socio-economic factors that hinder actions to promote tourism development. Pillars for the development of cultural tourism relations have been identified, considering the people/stakeholders in the field, and as each of these groups has its own well-established objectives, it is considered appropriate to create clusters to optimize their activity. An effective tool for their synergistic activity could be the Cultural Heritage-Tourism Management Plans, which are particularly necessary to identify all the cultural relics of the

Republic of Moldova, which unfortunately have not been included in the national tourist routes for various reasons.

Conclusions

Modern day tourists are much more demanding, they want service of a certain standard and quality leisure time. Many tourists are no longer satisfied with merely visiting tourist attractions, but want to take part in activities that are representative of the places they visit, as well as taking part in events that are characteristic of these places.

Unfortunately, many tourist offers are centered on cultural attractions in large urban centers, which has gradually led to the deterioration of the cultural infrastructure in small towns and marginalized rural areas. Admittedly, this is due to a rather poor infrastructure, sometimes compounded by poor management of public funds and disinterest on the part of local authorities. Cultural tourism, by promoting the ethnographic and folklore elements which make up part of the 'Orheiul Vechi' Cultural and Natural Reserve, can represent an important step in the economic development of the localities in the reserve area. This may also be supported by European funds allocated for the restoration of monuments, the development of hotel infrastructure or the support of local entrepreneurship. Given the large number of cultural tourist attractions that can be found within the reserve, tourist packages can be designed to be as diverse as possible, while simultaneously attracting as many visitors as possible.

Tourism evolves under the influence of many factors that contribute to the development of tourism in varying proportions, depending on the contents, but also on the tourist's preferences, the time and place of consumption of the tourist act. The research results show that tourism in the area of Orheiul Vēchi Cultural-Natural Reserve is undergoing a broad process of continuous development, attracting a large number of tourists, both domestic and foreign. On the other hand, the results show that the tourist potential of the given destination, which is so vast, is not sufficiently exploited, and the development of tourism in the area is hampered due to several reasons.

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