

Altar Barrier from Dranda Church: New Facts

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Abstract

The present article deals with a decoration of the altar barrier from the medieval church of Dranda village (Abkhazia), which has not retained its original form. Two slabs with figurative compositions have been published by Countess P. S. Uvarova at the end of the 19th century; they have been lost since then. Modern researchers know them only from the photo prints made by Uvarova. Some fragments from Dranda church are preserved in the collection of the Abkhazian State Museum in Sukhum. A new fragment (not known before) with a representation of Jonas prophet devoured by the sea monster has been discovered in the collection of the Archaeological Museum of Saint Metropolis of Abkhazia (New Athos). There are four further fragments of the architectural decoration of Dranda church, their dating being disputed by researchers. The authors of the article propose the X century for all the fragments of the shattered altar barrier.

Keywords: architectural decoration, Abkhazia, altar barrier, outer facing, Christian iconography, sea monster, Prophet Jonas.

Fragments of the architectural decoration and of the altar barrier from Dranda church (Republic of Abkhazia) have been known since the 1860s, being published and dated. In spite of some disputes among the scholars, most of them agree upon Paleo Christian or medieval times; another problem being discussed as well: if all the fragments of the altar barrier have been created simultaneously or they belong to different periods of the decoration of the church. The present research focuses on some fragments of the architectural decoration from Dranda church, not known before, preserved in

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the funds of the Archaeological Museum of the Holy Metropole of Abkhazia (New Athos). Their analysis helps researchers to date and reconstruct the altar barrier from Dranda church.

Being a Swiss traveler, ethnographer and archeologist, F. Dubois de Montpéreux was the first to see the altar barrier in Dranda church. Having traveled to Crimea and Caucasus, the scholar published a 6-volume work titled “Voyage autour du Caucase, chez les Tcherkesses et les Abkhases, en Colchide, en Géorgie, en Arménie et en Crimée”¹, mentioning Dranda church in the first volume. He described the altar barrier in detail and its losses². A well-known archeologist and traveler S.

Sablin provided another description of the barrier³. Later, Countess P. S. Uvarova published photo types of two slabs of the altar barrier that have been lost since⁴, being the first to date it. One more fragment of the structure is published by L. Khroushkova⁵, who proposes two hypotheses for dating diverse fragments of the barrier⁶, these versions being contestable. A. Yu. Vinogradov analyzed a style of the compositions of two slabs, proposing his own conjecture⁷. Besides, a previous year a new study⁸ on the medieval sculpture of Georgia has been published, mentioning a fragment of the altar barrier from Dranda church (one with an image of Jonas), dating it back to the 10th century. Unfortunately, this publication gives an incorrect piece of

¹ Dubois de Montpéreux F., *Voyage autour du Caucase, chez les Tcherkesses et les Abkhases, en Colchide, en Géorgie, en Arménie et en Crimée*, Vol. I / F. Dubois de Montpéreux, Paris, Libr. de Gide, 1839.

² *Ibidem*, p. 318.

³ Sablin S., “Drevniy genuezskiy kham v ukrepleni Drandy [Ancient Genoese church in Dranda fortress]”, *Kavkaz*, 1846, № 8, p. 32.

⁴ Uvarova P.S., “Khristianskie pamyatniki [Christian monuments]”, *Materialy po arkheologii Kavkaza* [Materials on the Archeology of Caucasus], 1894, Vol. 4, p. 30. Tav. XII.

⁵ Khroushkova L.G., *Rannekhristianskie pamyatniki Vostochnogo Prichernomor'ya (IV–VII)* [Early Christian monuments of the Eastern Coast of the Black Sea of the IV–VII Centuries], Moscow, Nauka Publ., 2002, p. 270–273, Tav. LXIII, 1, Tav. LXII, 1.

⁶ Khroushkova L. G., *Skulptura rannesrednevekovoy Abkhazii V–X vv.* [Sculpture of Early Medieval Abkhazia of the V–X Centuries], Tbilisi, Metsniereba Publ., 1980, p. 38. Khroushkova L. Les monuments chrétiens de la côte orientale de la mer Noire. Abkhazie IV–XIV siècles / L. Khroushkova. – Turnhout: Brepols, 2006, p. 77–78, pl. 51 a.

⁷ Vinogradov A. Y., *Dranda, Pravoslav'naya entsiklopediya* [Orthodox encyclopedia]. Vol. 17, Moscow, Tserkovno-nauch. tsentr «Pravoslav'naya entsiklopediya», 2007, p. 129–131.

⁸ Dadiani, T., Khudadze T., Kvachatadze E., *Medieval Georgian sculpture*. Tbilisi: George Chubinashvili National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation, 2017, p. 111.

information on the actual location of the object, its photos are very scanty and of a poor quality, no analysis of technical and stylistic characteristics being attempted.

Dubois de Montpéreux was the first to describe in a very detailed way the altar barrier in question and its state of preservation at the time of his visit. The researcher noted that it was composed of “the columns of white marble and of entablature, its pieces being united with metal ties”⁹. He saw a templon being ruined, with only an upper part of the construction (without metal elements) *in situ*¹⁰. S. Sablin noted in a description of Dranda church published in 1846 that its altar barrier was decorated with six big marble columns whose fragments could be found inside the church and near it¹¹. He went on mentioning that the window openings of Dranda church were “framed with marble and reliefs of fine work”¹². Countess Uvarova noted, after having seen the fragments of the altar barrier (its carved columns) in the churchyard mixed with construction waste¹³, while two limestone slabs were stored at the time by Mr. Vvedensky, the head of Sukhum department¹⁴, their actual location being unknown. In summer 2018, one of the authors has seen two fragments of it (a small part of an angel’s wing on one slab and a part of the decorative arcade on the other) among the pieces of architectural decoration gathered by the abbot of Dranda church in its narthex. Uvarova made photo types of the above-mentioned slabs, publishing them. One more fragment of the templon has been published by L. Khroushkova¹⁵. It is made of limestone (the researcher mistook it for marble) decorated with an arcade motif. According to her, “it lied on the line of the altar barrier, being its possible original location”¹⁶. The analysis of stylistic and technical properties of the most representative parts of the templon (slabs with figurative compositions) is thus hampered, being possible only through its photos published by Uvarova, the exact measurements of both objects remaining unknown, unfortunately. A reconstruction of the altar barrier is likewise impeded.

The first slab represented the blessing of the enthroned Jesus amongst the angels approaching Him¹⁷ (only two on the right side being preserved). The figure of Christ was monumental; His head was shown frontally, framed

⁹ Dubois de Montpéreux F., *op. cit.*, p. 318.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Sablin S., *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Uvarova P.S., *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Khroushkova L.G., *Rannekhristianskie pamyatniki ...op. cit.*, p. 270-273. Tav. LXIII, 1, Tav. LXII, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 272.

¹⁷ Uvarova P.S., *op. cit.*, p. 30.

with the crossed nimbus. The folds of His clothing were shaped in deep parallel fissure modeling body, naturalistic enough to determine Christ's position. The clothing and wings of two preserved angels were carved in the same technique as a vestment of Christ. Both angels were shown frontally as well, their right hands being uplifted and turned to Christ; their left hands were on their breasts.

The second slab must have represented the Deesis, the images of Christ and Virgin (in profile) being preserved only. Each figure was in a richly decorated niche topped with a triangular pediment. The niches were separated from each other by ornamental pilasters. Christ standing, the crossed nimbus surrounded His head. The folds of His tunic and himation defined His posture similar to the first slab. The right hand of Christ was uplifted like those of the angels of the first slab, His left hand being covered and bent at the chest level. The figure of the Virgin was in profile, being lower than Christ, Her covered hands turned to Christ. The pilasters supporting the pediments of the preserved parts of the arcade were richly decorated with a deepening of triangular form made of plant motifs. The capital of the principal pilaster separating the figures of Christ and the Virgin was additionally decorated with a motif of two leaves in profile turned to one another. Its base was composed of a further decorative element: a row of three arches with semicircular endings. The extreme pilaster (on Virgin's side) was covered in four ranges of rectangular arches arranged by two. Different hypotheses concerning the date of the two slabs exist. Uvarova insisted that the two slabs were carved at different moments, considering the first to be a work of the Paleo Christian artisans, the second dated by her to a later period¹⁸. Khrushkova dated the first slab as being from the 5th¹⁹ or the 6th²⁰ century, the second slab together with a fragment with an arcade motif by the 10th century²¹. Vinogradov objected that the style of both reliefs was "identical... the treatment of the folds, the head type and the nimbus of Christ, the ornaments with keeled endings were the same in both cases"²². He proposed to date both slabs as part of the 9th – 11th centuries²³.

Five fragments of architectural decoration from Dranda church are stored in the funds of the Ecclesiastical Archaeological Museum of the Holy

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Khrushkova L.G. *Rannekhristianskie pamyatniki...*, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

²⁰ Khrushkova L. G. *Skulptura rannesrednevekovoy Abkhazii...*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
Khrushkova L. *Les monuments chrétiens de la côte orientale de la mer Noire. Abkhazie IV–XIV siècles*. Turnhout, Brepols, 2006, p. 78.

²¹ Khrushkova L., *Les monuments chrétiens...* *op. cit.*, p. 78.

²² Vinogradov A. Y., *op.cit.*, pp. 129–131.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

Metropole of Abkhazia in New Athos monastery²⁴. The first of them (fig. 1), a limestone block of rectangular shape (a frontal part is 220×18 cm; lateral parts are 23×18, 16×15,5 cm, 16×16 cm), probably made a part of the altar barrier. Its frontal part is decorated with a stylized plant ornament. It reminds us of the motif that decorates the capital of the pilaster separating Christ from the Virgin on the second slab published by Uvarova.



Fig. 1. Fragment of carving from the funds of the Church and Archaeological Museum of Holy Metropolis of Abkhazia (New Athos). Limestone.

The second block made of limestone as well (fig. 2) (the frontal part is 47×19; lateral parts are 21,5×15,5; 21,5×18; 15,5×21,5; 21,5×16; 21,5×14) is decorated with arches alternating with double semi-columns.



Fig. 2. Fragment of altar barrier from the funds of the Church and Archaeological Museum of Holy Metropolis of Abkhazia (New Athos). Limestone.

This fragment could make a part of the altar barrier as well. It reminds us of the block published by Khroushkova in 2002²⁵. Five further fragments of limestone blocks decorated in the same way have been stored in

²⁴ <https://anyha.org/drandatwy-anyha-dekor-afragmentkua/>. (Retrieved on the 25th of October, 2018).

²⁵ Khroushkova L.G. *Rannekhristianskie pamyatniki... op. cit.*, Tav. LXIII, 1.

the funds of the Abkhazian State Museum in Sukhum before its reconstruction in 2010–2012 (inventory ## 81–96)²⁶.

The third fragment (fig. 3) represents double semi-columns with sheaf-like capitals (the frontal part is 26×24; an upper face is 25×16; lateral faces are 25×18 and 26×18).

The fragment with a similar decoration has also been stored in the Abkhazian State Museum before its reconstruction²⁷. Furthermore, three identical fragments are exposed in the narthex of Dranda church.



Fig. 3. Fragment of architectural decoration from the funds of the Church and Archaeological Museum of Holy Metropolis of Abkhazia (New Athos). Limestone.



Fig. 4. Marble item from the funds of the Church and Archaeological Museum of Holy Metropolis of Abkhazia (New Athos). Limestone.

The fourth block (fig. 4) is unlike the others by its style and material. It is the only one carved in marble (the frontal part is 27×16; the lateral faces are 27×16 and 16×17), decorated with a stylized plant ornament resembling the ornament carved on the capital of the semi-column of the lost Deesis slab.

The last fragment is the most interesting (fig. 5). It has been published for the first time in 2017 by Georgian researchers²⁸. However, its

²⁶ The authors are grateful to M. K. Inal-Ipa for a permission to see the funds in 2008.

²⁷ ## 81–96.

description has been done negligently (the authors erroneously identified it as a capital), its whereabouts given incorrectly as well. The fragment's measurements have not been indicated, the photos being of a very poor quality and scanty. The iconographical sources of the composition have not been analyzed²⁹.

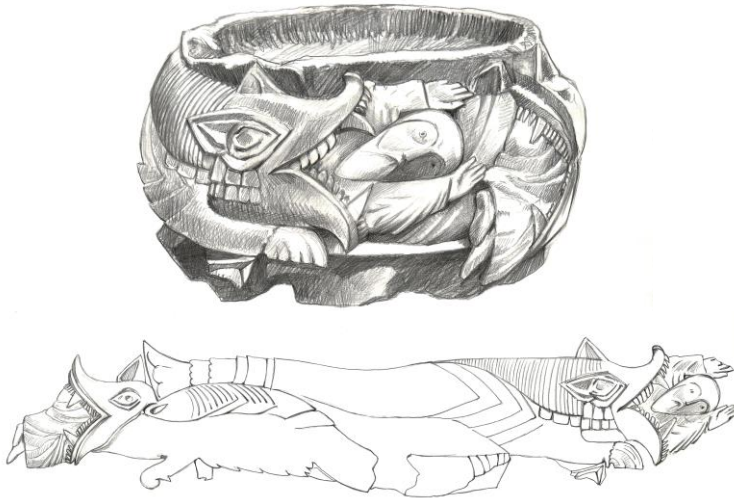


Fig. 5. Drawing of a scene with the prophet Jonah, absorbed by the whale, on a fragment from the funds of the Church and Archaeological Museum of Holy Metropolis of Abkhazia (New Athos).

An iconographically quite rare scene of “the prophet Jonas devoured by the sea monster” is represented in series (the inner diameter is 27 cm; the outer diameter is 32 cm; the height is 23 cm) in a circular form in the cross section limestone block (it may have been a column's base). The whale is shown twice, its body encircling the block. One whale's tail finishes by the head of the other. Once the prophet's torso with uplifted hands is shown in the jaws of the whale, the second time his legs disappear there. The head of the prophet is shown frontally with a high forehead and bald patches, a tapering face, a pointed beard, big amygdaloidal eyes with drilled pupils, and semicircular massive eyebrows. The clothing that covers the uplifted arms is represented in parallel fissures. (The clothing of Christ and of the angels on the first slab as well as the tunic and the himation of Christ and Virgin on the second one were carved in the same manner.)

²⁸ Dadiani T., *Medieval Georgian Sculpture... op. cit.*, p. 111.

²⁹ The provenance of the photos is not given although it is clear that they are taken from the internet site of the New Athos monastery (<https://anyha.org/drandatwy-anyha-dekor-afragmentkua/>, Retrieved on the 25th of October, 2018).

The whale is shown as a hybrid creature. It resembles a fish with its scaly body and tail (scales are shown in big diagonal step-like lines, forming an acute angle on the imaginary middle line, marking the whole length of the whale's body). It has toothy jaws with canine teeth, pointed ears, big round eyes, stylized wings, clawed lion's paws. Such hybrid creatures are widespread on the façades of medieval churches in Transcaucasia. For example, a similar whale is represented in the scene of the devouring of Jonas the prophet on the southern façade of the church of the Holy Cross on Akhtamar island³⁰. The relief from the church Kvansa–Dzvari (10th century)³¹ is among the closest iconographic analogies as well. A two-headed toothy serpent is curled up on the rectangular limestone slab. There is a torso of the prophet Jonas with uplifted hands in the mouth of one of the heads; his legs are in the mouth of the other. Unlike Dranda image, the monster is evidently represented here as a serpent. It has no pointed ears, canine teeth, wings, and clawed paws.

The upper part of the composition in question (the torso of the prophet with the uplifted hands in the mouth of a whale) reappears on the southern façade of Hahuli church (second half of the 10th century)³². The hybrid creature similar to Dranda whale is also shown on the relief from Thaba-Erdi church (10th century)³³ and on the relief from Kasagina³⁴. It also has toothy jaws, clawed paws, pointed ears, and stylized wings. However, in the two latter cases, it seems not to be a whale, but a creature that is closer to a gryphon³⁵. It is of note that the scene with the prophet Jonas devoured by

³⁰ Hakobyan Z., *The Sennmurv and Other Mythical Creatures with Sasanian Iconography in the Medieval Art of Armenia and Transcaucasia. Fabulous Creations and Spirits in Ancient Iran*, University of Venice / Z. Hakobyan, L. Mikaelyan (forthcoming).

³¹ Aladashvili N.A., *Monumentalnaya skulptura Gruzii. Figurnye releyfy V–XI vekov [Monumental Sculpture of Georgia. Figurative Compositions of the V–XI Centuries]*, Moscow, Iskusstvo Publ., 1977. p. 81–86. Fig. 69.

³² *Ibidem*, Fig. 118.

³³ Kazaryan A.Y., Beletskiy D.V., “Thaba-Erdi K voprosu o datirovke tserkvi i eyo meste v srednevekovom zodchestve Kavkaza [Thaba-Erdi: To the Dating of the Church and its Place in the Medieval Architecture of Caucasus]”, *Vestnik arkhologicheskogo tsentra* [Science Journal of Archaeological Centre]. 2009. III. p. 59.

³⁴ Mepisashvili R. S., Tsintsadze V., *Arhitektura nagornoy chasti istoricheskoy provintsii Gruzii – Shida Kartli*. [Architecture of the Mountain Region of Georgia – Shida Kartli], Tbilisi, Metsnierba, 1975, p. 82.

³⁵ Endoltseva E.Y., “Sinkretizm khristianskikh i dokhristianskikh verovaniy na primere arkhitekturnoy plastiki Severnogo Kavkaza [Syncretism of Christian and pre-Christian Beliefs by the Example of the Architectural Decoration of the Northern Caucasus]”, *Istoriko-kulturnoe nasledie yuga Rossii (Nauchno-prakticheskaya konferentsiya, g. Stavropol, 9 fevralya 2015 g.)* [Historical and Cultural heritage of the

the sea monster appears on the earliest Christian monuments (3rd – 4th centuries). From the very beginning, two different iconographic types of the subject may be distinguished. The first one (cf. the Roman sarcophagus from the end of the 3rd century³⁶) tells a story of the prophet Jonas in two consequential scenes (the prophet is thrown from the ship and the prophet is inside the womb of the whale). This iconographic type was quite widespread, being found on numerous monuments of not only the Paleo Christian period, but also of the Middle Ages (for example, many Roman sarcophagi of the IV century³⁷, Ravenna diptych of the 6th century, the south façade of the church of the Holy Cross on Akhtamar island and others).

The second iconographical type (the one that is on the fragment of the altar barrier from Dranda church) shows the moment of the devouring of the prophet Jonas by the sea monster and his extortion from its womb. The earliest representation of this type dates back to the 3rd century as well (Asia Minor, 280–290, paired sculpture from the Cleveland Museum of Art)³⁸. Thus, the iconographical origins of the representation of Jonas the prophet on the fragment of the altar barrier from Dranda church go back to the Paleo Christian art of the Hellenistic type.

As for the stylistic analogies, a figurative composition that originates from the district of Abkhazia neighboring to Dranda should be mentioned. It is a slab that was discovered by Uvarova in a church near Oliginskoje village³⁹. During the exploration of the church, the researchers found traces of the altar barrier, four carved columns and three limestone slabs⁴⁰. Unfortunately, the columns unlike the three slabs were not published. One of the slabs with an image of the Liturgy is preserved in the S. Dzanashia National Museum of Georgia⁴¹. On the photo type of Uvarova⁴², three full-

South of Russia (Scientific-Practical Conference. Stavropol. 9th February 2015)]. Moscow, Nauch. o-vo kavkazovedov Publ.; Knizhnyy mir Publ., 2015, p. 271–280.

³⁶ Bovini G., Brandenburg H. *Repertorium der Christlich-antiken Sarkophage*. Bd. I. Rom und Ostia, Textband und Tafelband, Wiesbaden, F. Steiner, 1967. # 35.

³⁷ *Ibid.* # 11, 44, 77, 770.

³⁸ Dudochkin B.N. „Ob izobrazhenii «kita» proroka Ioni v rospisi Andrey Rubleva i Daniila 1408 v Uspenskom sobore Vladimira i v miniaturakh Evangeliya gruppy Khitrovo [On the Representation of the Prophet Jonas’ „Whale“ in the Paintings of Andrey Rublev and Daniel of 1408 from the Cathedral of Dormition in Vladimir and from the Miniatures of the Gospel of Khitrovo group]“, *Neizvestnye proizvedeniya. Novye otkrytiya. Sbornik nauchnykh statey k yubileyu muzeya imeni Andrey Rubleva* [Unknown Works. New Discoveries. Collection of Papers for the Anniversary of the Andrey Rublev Museum], Moscow, Muzey im. A. Rubleva Publ., 2017. p. 123.

³⁹ Uvarova P. S., *Khristianskie pamyatniki... op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁴¹ Burchuladze N., ed. *Medieval Georgian Ecclesiastical Art in Georgian National Museum*, Tbilisi, Cezanne, 2012. p. 38.

⁴² Uvarova P. S., *Khristianskie pamyatniki... op. cit.*, p. 21. Fig. 10.

size figures in the arcade-like architectural decoration are visible. There is a motif of arches similar to the one on the slab from Dranda church (the base of the pilaster that separates Christ from Virgin) in its lower part. The upper part of the arcade is composed of vegetal ornaments. A figure of angel in the extreme left niche is seen on the photo type of Uvarova (only the lower part of angel is being preserved). The angel blesses the holy hierarch represented frontally in the central niche in orans posture; in the right niche, the deacon with a censer is shown. The treatment of the folds of the holy hierarch's clothing is similar to those of Christ and angels on the first slab from the altar barrier in Dranda church. The face of the holy hierarch, his uplifted hands are very close stylistically spaking to the representation of the torso of the prophet Jonas devoured by the whale on the fragment from the Ecclesiastical Museum of the Holy Metropole of Abkhazia. Like Jonas, the holy hierarch has a high forehead with bald patches, a big tapering face, a pointed beard, big amygdaloid eyes with drilled pupils, semicircular massive eyebrows. The folds of the clothing on the uplifted hands of the holy hierarch and of the prophet Jonas are identical as well. Uvarova dated three slabs from Oliginskoje village by the 12th-13th centuries⁴³. G. Alibegashvili dated the slab with the holy hierarch as belonging to the middle of the 10th century⁴⁴. Georgian scholars were mistaken as for the origin of this slab, thinking it is from the neighborhood of Sukhum or from Bedia⁴⁵. R. Shmerling dated this slab as being part of the 10th century⁴⁶; Khrushkova accepted this date⁴⁷.

To conclude, the relief with a scene of the devouring of prophet Jonas by the sea monster from the funds of the Ecclesiastical Archaeological Museum of the Holy Metropole of Abkhazia (New Athos) can be evidently dated back to the 10th century. Accepting the hypothesis of Vinogradov concerning the simultaneity of production of the two limestone slabs published by Uvarova, it is possible to suppose that all the known fragments of the altar barrier from Dranda church had been carved within the same historical period. Taking into consideration the analysis of the scene with the prophet Jonas and the sea monster, the whole altar barrier may be dated back to the 10th century. The presence of a marble detail does not contradict this

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ Alibegashvili G.V., "Relefnaya plita iz okrestnostey Sukhumi [Carved Slab from the Surroundings of Sukhum]", *Soobshcheniya Akademii nauk Gruzii* [Reports of the Academy of Sciences of Georgia], 1951, XII. #8, p. 511–515.

⁴⁵ Aladashvili N.A., *Monumentalnaya skulptura Gruzii. Figurnye releyfy V–XI vekov* [Monumental Sculpture of Georgia. Figurative Compositions from the V–XI Centuries], Moscow, Iskusstvo Publ., 1977. p. 88.

⁴⁶ Shmerling R.O. *Malye formy v arkhitekture srednevekovoy Gruzii* [Minor Forms in the Architecture of Medieval Georgia], Tbilisi, Izd-vo AN Gruzii Publ., 1962, p. 76.

⁴⁷ Khrushkova L. G. *Skulptura... op. cit.*, p. 86-96. Khrushkova L. *Les monuments chrétiens... op. cit.*, p. 108.

proposal since the scholars, who had seen the temple in a better state of preservation, noted both limestone and marble details in the construction of this altar barrier.

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