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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN/AND THE MIDDLE AGES

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The Middle Ages in International Relations

At first sight, looking at Historical International Relations literature on the Middle Ages would seem a rather simple endeavour. Although casual mentions to 'the medieval' are relatively common when compared to other topics or periods, the amount of literature is visibly smaller. Most International Relations (IR) scholarship that engages with the medieval does so in order to assess specific theoretical points, for the period is seen as a 'hard case' against which IR theories can be tested. Thus, for example, Markus Fischer focused on central medieval lords in order to test the neorealist idea that anarchy forces similar constraints on all political units, regardless of time period or cultural constraints (Fischer, 1992). From a Marxist perspective, Benno Teschke sought to understand the period through the evolution of social property relations, showing how these constituted different political units and created opposing strategies of reproduction for lords and peasants (Teschke, 2003). Most famously, Ruggie used the Middle Ages and the medieval-to-modern transition as a way of illustrating the historicity of political structures and thus of international dynamics against the timelessness of neorealism (Ruggie, 1993). While all these authors do indeed highlight a variety of dynamics about medieval international relations, the mode of historical engagement has been somewhat problematic (Hall and Kratochwil, 1993). Against this, a growing body of constructivist-inspired scholarship has sought to recover more historicised understandings of the period, pointing to the existence of distinctive patterns of order (Osiander, 2007; Phillips, 2010; Latham, 2012; see also Bruneau, 2021) and seeking to unpack distinctively medieval ideas and their lasting influence (Holland, 2010; Bain, 2017).

However, the importance of the medieval for IR is not limited to these historical engagements. On the contrary, the Middle Ages are arguably an ever-present, silent counterpart to much IR theorising, as they constitute a fundamental stepping stone in both the core historical narratives and the conceptual apparatus of the discipline. On the one hand, the oft-cited story about the emergence of International Relations across different IR traditions – from the English School, to constructivism, to standard textbook accounts that focus on the Peace of Westphalia – starts with the Middle Ages (de Carvalho et al., 2011; Bull, 2012). A heteronomous system, controlled by the competing universalisms of Papacy and Empire, gave way to the modern international system of sovereign states. Thus, the importance of the medieval in this view is not what it can tell us itself, but rather that 'it is the precursor to the Westphalian order that arose in Europe and was imposed from there onto the rest of the world' (Buzan and Albert, 2010: 332).

This derivative significance, however, is symptomatic of something important: the role of the medieval goes beyond its place in the self-narrative of IR, and extends to its foundational role in core concepts of the discipline (see also Kessler, 2021). As Kathleen Davis has pointed out, the historical formation of a concept as central for the IR imaginary as that of sovereignty, historically relied on the creation of a feudal and religious medieval past. First, in the sixteenth century, the battles over the notion of sovereignty and the location of authority led to the creation of the idea of 'feudalism' (see also Reynolds, 1994). Second, in the context of the colonial encounter, feudalism, slavery, and the medieval were 'grouped together and identified as a characteristic of Europe's past and of a non-European present' (in IR see Jahn, 2000; Davis, 2008: 8; also Herborth and Nitzschner, 2021). Thus, 'the "Middle Ages" as we know it today is a… reification of categories that emerged as a means of legitimising sovereignty and [colonial] conquest' and as such they are the 'narrative and conceptual basis of "modern politics"' (Davis, 2008: 9, 26).

If this is correct, the foundational conceptual apparatus of IR – be it sovereignty or colonialism, depending on the tradition – relies on, and is legitimated by, a particular (fictional) category of 'the medieval', and IR will therefore be conceptually limited as long as it does not undertake efforts to address this 'medieval' past. In this chapter, I focus on three ways of reimagining the Middle Ages that may potentially be fruitful in disentangling the medieval from its fixed connotations. First, I consider how to break with the notion of the singular, unified medieval by looking at alternative periodisations and breaks within what is conventionally considered to be the Middle Ages. Second, I challenge the isolation and locality of the period by looking into global connections and circuits at the time. Finally, I tackle the role of the medieval in reproducing a specific metageography of Europe by looking at how it can point to alternative spaces and spatial imaginaries.

Ruptures and continuities

A first starting point in order to challenge the imaginary of the medieval in IR is to problematise its unity. While a number of IR scholars have highlighted the important changes throughout the period (Teschke, 1998; but also Latham, 2012), the IR imaginary continues to be anchored in a notion of *the* medieval as singular. This is evident, for example, in the literature on neomedievalism, which, thinking that the imaginary of the sovereign state system is no longer helpful to understand our contemporary world, seeks to find a 'therapeutic redescription' (Deibert, 1997) or 'heuristic device' (Friedrichs, 2001) in *the* medieval system. This is problematic, for lumping together ten centuries of European history under a common label and under a homogenous imaginary is the core move that constitutes the medieval as the Other of modern politics (Davis, 2008). And yet, transcending this singular imaginary and unpacking different periods, ruptures, and continuities within the Middle Ages is not an easy task (see also Guillaume, 2021). However, it is one that not only can help us gain a better historical understanding, but also provide fertile ground to reimagine core concepts in IR. In this section, I point to this by critically examining debates over two interlinked ruptures: the medieval-to-modern break itself, and the so-called twelfth-century renaissance.

A core current in historiography problematises the mere existence of a big rupture between medieval and modern forms of politics in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, as is commonly assumed in IR (for a discussion in IR see Costa Lopez et al., 2018). Rather, one is to find a continuity between late-medieval and early modern political structures to the point that they would form a single period in terms of political language and practice. Indeed, insofar as there were changes, these were incremental (see, for example, Pennington, 1993; Bellomo, 1995; Bagge, 1997). Underpinning this challenge to the divide, as Cary Nederman notes, is the view that 'the

changes separating medieval from modern patterns of political thought were largely cosmetic and unworthy of sustained analysis' (Nederman, 2009: xvii). This tradition, thus, seeks to bridge the abysmal divide by which the modern founds itself anew through an association with antiquity, and unpack the fundamental role of the medieval in the constitution of modernity (Bain, 2017).

In pointing to medieval/modern continuities, this narrative ultimately proposes different moments of break. Specifically, it draws attention to what has historiographically been seen as a moment of fundamental transformation, but that has nevertheless received very little attention in IR: the twelfth century renaissance (Benson et al., 1987). The term refers to a series of fundamental transformations in the social and political organisation of Latin Christendom starting in the mid-eleventh century and continuing well into the thirteenth. Socio-economically, Europe underwent what some scholars have termed an 'economic boom' (Wickham, 2016: 121): a demographic explosion saw the population triple between 950 and 1300, urban centres increased in size and number, monetised exchange became more common, and trade – both local and long-distance – acquired progressively more importance. In conjunction with these changes, there were also wide cultural and political changes. The period saw not only the appearance of universities, but also an intellectual transformation, with the development of new understandings of reason, nature, community, the development of new scholarly and teaching techniques in scholasticism, an expansion of interest in reading and books beyond monastic centres, and a new relation to the classics (Maxwell, 1993; Southern, 1995; Le Goff, 2018).

Crucially for IR scholars, political authority also fundamentally transformed. On the one hand, closely entangled with the changes above, the Church underwent a process of reform in the late eleventh century. The so-called Gregorian reform involved not only the establishment of some fundamental principles – such as clerical celibacy – but also an attempt to gain independence from secular structures. The Investiture Controversy (in IR see Hall, 1997; Osiander, 2007; Grzymala-Busse, 2019) saw a conflict between Pope Gregory VII and future Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV for the control of bishop and abbot appointments, beginning what historians have called a crisis of Church and State (Tierney, 1964). Secular authorities – not only the empire and kings, but also a variety of other office holders – resisted this process, and in doing so rearticulated their basis for legitimacy and attempted to progressively assert more control. A case in point, this period saw the appearance of increasingly sophisticated bureaucracies and taxation systems that made use of the wealth and increasing monetisation to provide revenue for rulers, secular, and ecclesiastic alike, leading to an overall trend towards centralisation of rule (Watts, 2009).

The need to rearticulate the grounds for authority meant that this conflict was closely intertwined with the intellectual developments mentioned above, leading ultimately to a transformation in the vocabulary and imaginary that governed political dynamics. Within this centralising and urban society, for example, university-trained Roman and canon lawyers acquired a more prominent role (Bellomo, 1995; Brundage, 2008), with the *ius commune* becoming a crucial political language to articulate, manage, and also dispute political authority (Costa Lopez, 2020). The take-off of the intellectual environment, in a context where conflicts with Muslim polities in the Eastern Mediterranean and, especially, in the Iberian peninsula had led to an increase in intellectual exchange and connections, also brought about the reacquaintance, translation, and elaboration with classical authors such as Aristotle, heavily mediated by the interpretations of Muslim and Jewish scholars. This in itself introduced an additional political language – Aristotelianism – with distinctive understandings of politics, authority, and legitimacy that lasted well into the early modern period if not beyond (Black, 1992; Nederman, 1996; Kempshall, 1999).

The implications of this double reorientation – both challenging the medieval/modern separation, and the focus on the twelfth century renaissance – for Historical IR narratives are crucial, and yet far from clear. Indeed, although this literature has not yet gained much traction in IR, it

is worth noting that the two core attempts deploy it in entirely opposing ways. On the one hand, Osiander looks at late-medieval and early modern politics in order to show that 'the medieval-to-modern shift was… really much less of a "shift", than use usually implied, to the point that it was never even completed during the *ancient régime*' (Osiander, 2001a: 121). Linked to extensive work that also problematises Westphalia as a moment of rupture (Osiander, 2001b; de Carvalho et al., 2011), this perspective understands that the late-medieval and early modern world were characterised by the non-identification of society and rulers. Indeed, this system included both the articulation of a joint Christian society and its government by a multiplicity of rulers who, in material terms, struggled to project power. It is thus not until the nineteenth century that we would be able to see an international system of corporately-understood states. The second strand in IR, exemplified by Andrew Latham, takes an opposing understanding, while also situating the end-break of the period sometime in the nineteenth century. In this view, however, it is the beginning of the period that deserves our attention. Starting in the end of the thirteenth century, and certainly by the beginning of the fourteenth, the shift in political ideas (and disputably in political practice) led to an articulation of supreme political authority that would enable us to speak of sovereignty at least two centuries before we usually think. Paired with this, the development of specific, corporate notions of political community allows us to meaningfully talk about the beginnings of statehood, and thus a true (medieval) system of states (Latham, 2012).

Towards a global Middle Ages?

A second component of the IR medieval imaginary is its local character. At one level, when compared to later periods, and particularly to an IR imagination that takes the post-nineteenth century world as its starting point (Buzan and Lawson, 2015), there is a core of truth to the idea that communication, transportation, and power projection were significantly more challenging, and thus to the idea that by-and-large politics took place on a more local scale (Osiander, 2001a). At the same time, however, this works historiographically to reinforce an image of medieval Europe as a unit evolving somewhat in isolation and – at most – relating to other parts of the world only through war (Costa Lopez, 2016). Indeed, most IR works on the period only focus on intra-European dynamics, with the idea that IR-relevant contacts beyond this not only begin after 1492, but are distinctively what constitutes the advent of modernity (Buzan and Lawson, 2014). Alternatively, a number of works do mention interactions beyond Latin Christendom, but in that case, these are patently limited to war. For Teschke, for example, the internal dynamics of reproduction of the feudal system created a need for more land, which led to outward movements in the form of external conquest (Teschke, 1998: 332). More commonly, the violence of the external relations of medieval Europe is reinforced by the emphasis on the crusades.

The crusades is the generic term for a series of military campaigns that started in the eleventh century and were legitimised, and in some cases also coordinated, by the Church through ideas of defence and expansion of the Roman Christian faith.[1] Although the common idea for a crusade portrays it as a holy war against Muslim polities, crusades were also called against a variety of other groups. The Albigensian crusade (1209–1229), for example, was declared against the Catharist heresy, which had its strongholds in the Languedoc region in modern France (Sumption, 2011). Interestingly, and rather underexplored in IR, the crusades in the Eastern Mediterranean led to the establishment of distinct, new polities – the so-called Latin Crusader states (Barber, 2012). In IR, the crusades have been seen as expressive of the fundamentally religious and intolerant nature of the period, which pitted Latin Christendom against most of its others (Alkopher, 2005; Latham, 2011). An important literature relativises this overarching view. For starters, thinking that religious devotion and structural antagonism constitutes the basis of the crusades exhibits a form

of religious reductionism that portrays the Middle Ages as an era of religious fanaticism (Davis, 2008). Rulers could undertake take part in a crusade for a variety of reasons, only some of which religious. Crusades not only allowed for special taxation, but, as some IR scholars have started to point out (Blaydes and Paik, 2016), crusading could be an effective tool for rulers to legitimise themselves and assert control within their territories.

Beyond highlighting the multiple motives and dimensions of the crusades, however, an even wider body of work brings to the fore the fact that war was by no means the only mode of interaction (Costa Lopez, 2016). For starters, even within a war context such as the late-medieval Iberian Peninsula, alliances between Christian and Muslim polities were not only possible, but also frequent, as were members of different faiths fighting together (Catlos, 2014). But not only this, relations within and across the borders of Latin Christendom were much more varied, including collaboration, exchange, conflict, and strategic interaction. The point is not to counter the dramatic image of interfaith violence that usually characterises the crusades with an equally idealised notion of enlightened cooperation – *convivencia* in the traditional historiography of medieval Iberia (Soifer, 2009). Rather, border areas and exchanges offer a complex picture of coexistence and living together of different religious communities, characterised more by pragmatism and convenience: trade, collaboration, friendship occurred daily, as did conflict, and on occasion, violence. This violence moreover, cannot be reduced merely to the dimension of religion: economic conditions, political anxieties, and communal relations all played a part (Catlos, 2014). In a discipline like IR with an increasing interest in understanding communal violence (Balcells, 2017), exploring and recovering these varied lineages beyond reductionist notions of medieval religious violence is imperative.

And yet, the problem with the portrayal of the medieval as externally war-like in IR is not only solved by pointing to the multiple modes of interaction even in a crusading context. On the contrary, it is important to start by recognising that this notion of the medieval is imbricated in the construction of a common macro-historical narrative of IR: that of a progressively globalised world. The standard version of the narrative is well captured by Buzan and Lawson. In their well-known article, they set 1500 as the first primary benchmark date of IR, as it 'marked the expansion of the international system to planetary scale' and 'paved the way for the huge intensification of the global economy… during later periods' (Buzan and Lawson, 2014: 453). The point here is not to deny the significance of the opening of trans-Atlantic and Indian Ocean routes, nor is it to deny later intensifications of interaction. Rather, it is to interrogate – and challenge – how this leads to a particular understanding of the medieval in IR: a view of medieval Europe as isolated.

This narrative is increasingly being countered by a wealth of literature that, under the banner of the Global Middle Ages, highlights the crucial importance of cross-regional connections and influences in the period (Bentley, 1993; Holmes and Standen, 2018). With little reception in IR, this literature points to two important arguments: first, Latin Christendom was not isolated, but rather maintained a number of important and constant connections with various other parts of the world. From long-distance trading routes such as the medieval Silk Roads (Beckwith, 2011; Hansen, 2012) to contacts with African polities (Weber, 2015), to the broad circulation of travel narratives (Muldoon, 2010), medieval Europe neither was nor thought of itself as existing in isolation. Second, and of crucial relevance for IR, not only did these connections exist, but they were crucial for political, social, and economic evolution to the point that we cannot understand medieval Europe without unpacking its global embedding (Hobson, 2004).

The Black Death provides a case in point (see Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2015). We mentioned above the twelfth-century renaissance and the important socio-economic changes and demographic expansion that accompanied it. And yet, in conventional periodisations, this flourishing

is said to stop in the fourteenth century, not only due to the Hundred Years' War, but also due to the devastating effect of the Black Death. An epidemic of bubonic plague between 1347 and 1353, it killed over a third of Europe's population, which did not recover until the early sixteenth century. The spread of the plague points to the fundamentally connected nature of the Medieval world. The plague originated in Mongolia, where the largest outbreaks took place. The Mongol empire was a large polity that in the thirteenth and fourteenth century controlled large portions of the Eurasian steppe (Neumann and Wigen, 2018). Contacts between Medieval Europe and the Mongols started in the thirteenth century (Jackson, 2005), both violent and diplomatic, so by the time the plague emerged, there were established trade routes and regular contacts that facilitated the transmission and spread of the epidemic. Indeed, the plague started with arrival in Venice of a fleet of merchant ships returning from trading with Mongol-connected ports in the Black Sea. This is just a brief illustrative example, but it points to the fact that the continued reproduction in IR of the locality, isolation, and war-proneness of the Middle Ages is not only historiographically untenable, but also conceptually problematic for Historical IR.

Where was the Middle Ages?

The consideration of the Global Middle Ages above highlights how the Middle Ages is not just a temporal category but also a spatial one. In what constitutes one of the clearest exercises in Eurocentrism, when we refer to the Middle Ages, we usually mean 'medieval Europe'.[2] This highlights the extent to which 'the medieval' is imbricated in the reproduction of what Lewis and Wigen call metageography: 'a set of spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world' (1997: ix). The problem here is not (only) the elision of Europe as the underlying unmarked category, but rather the extent to which this works to reproduce and naturalise Europe itself as an entity throughout history, both spatially and politically (see also Herborth and Nitzschner, 2021). And yet, precisely because metageographies are historical devices, historical study of past times is something that can help us challenge these underlying spatial assumptions. In what follows, I illustrate this point through two potential areas for IR to explore: the international relations of Byzantium and of the Mediterranean.

Byzantine International Relations

Byzantium constitutes an interesting case in the IR imaginary. While above we focused on debates about the end of the Middle Ages, Byzantium provides an interesting perspective on IR disciplinary narratives about the end of antiquity and the beginning of the medieval period. Indeed, as has been noted, IR texts that adopt a long-historical view most commonly start with Greece and Rome, and then jump directly to the Renaissance and the beginning of modernity. The fall of the Roman Empire is what marks the start of the Middle Ages. And yet, it is worth noting that what fell is the Western Roman Empire, for the Eastern Roman Empire, with capital in Constantinople, remained as a polity until the fifteenth century. For the first few centuries, until the rhetoric of Empire was recovered in the Latin West through the coronation of Charlemagne, the Eastern 'Greek' Roman Empire was the only part rhetorically associating itself to the classical empire. And not only this, but at least until the ninth century, when relations between Latins and Greeks equalised, there was a clear hierarchy in relations between Byzantium and the Kingdoms of the West. And yet, despite this relevance, IR has for the most part failed to take Byzantium into account.

A brief example can help illustrate the importance of Byzantium for Historical IR. A crucial argument within some constructivist approaches to the Middle Ages is the so-called Roman

Law thesis. According to it, we owe the development of the modern notion of sovereignty to the rediscovery of Roman Law, for this would have provided a notion of either private property (Kratochwil, 1995) or representation (Holland, 2010) upon which sovereignty could be based. In doing so, once again, a direct link is established between modern politics and classical Antiquity that presents the Middle Ages as parenthetical period. A brief look at what is meant by Roman Law, however, reveals the ways in which this is founded upon a specific imagination of Europe: for 'Roman Law' in this narrative is nothing but a set of legal compilations ordered in the sixth century by Emperor Justinian I, who ruled the Byzantine empire from 527 to 565 A.D. The *Corpus Iuris Civilis* as used in the late Middle Ages[3] included three compilations commissioned by Justinian which put together the teachings of classical-age jurists (Digest), compiled the fundamental laws of the Empire (Codex) and summarised the Digest as a textbook (Institutes). The fourth book (Novellae) was compiled later, but also during Justinian's reign, in order to update the Codex. By eliding this history, not only does IR instantiate a specific spatial imaginary whereby only Western Europe counts in the evolution of international relations, but the fundamental role of Byzantine thought and political practice is elided: for these compilations both mediated the transmission of the thought of classical jurists – by selecting which excerpts were included – but they also contained a large amount of distinctly byzantine law, and thus political thought.

Realising this is important because it draws attention to the fact that by eliding these histories not only is IR creating a historically problematic narrative about its evolution, nor is it only reproducing a specific spatial imaginary, but is also missing the opportunity to explore an entirely different tradition of international thought and practice. Indeed, spanning over a millennium, the Byzantine empire was an entire, evolving political system, with a complex system of relations with a variety of polities (see Shepard, 2019) towards both East and West. Byzantium had a very developed diplomatic system, including distinct practices and a specific diplomatic corps, which is usually overlooked by standard accounts of the emergence of diplomacy (Mattingly, 1988; Shepard and Franklin, 1992). And as the example of Justinian's compilations shows, it had developed traditions of political thought that, while also drawing on the Roman imperial experience, constituted an independent tradition (Nicol, 1988). Historical IR would thus do well to explore this polity in its search for alternative historical imaginaries.

The Medieval Mediterranean

And yet, as Holmes and Standen note, 'the risk here is the acceptance of [other] regions into the Middle Ages only if they are demonstrably different from Europe, a position which paradoxically maintains the normative character of the European Middle Ages as the ones that really count' (2018: 18). Indeed, challenging the Eurocentrism in the notion of the medieval is not only about focusing on hitherto ignored locations, but also thinking spatially differently. There is indeed a long tradition in medieval history of thinking alternative geographies that has until now received little attention in IR. Starting with Braudel's *La Mediterranée et le Monde*, the history of the medieval Mediterranean is a burgeoning area of study.[4]

First, placing the Mediterranean centre-stage leads to an analytics of connections that can help us transcend substantivist approaches in Historical IR that have tended to focus on polities (Jackson and Nexon, 1999). Venetian and north-African traders and their networks and enclaves, missionary movements, or privateers are but a few of the groups that come to the fore if we analyse patterns of connection and exchange in the sea (Abulafia, 2011; Goldberg, 2012). From a cultural perspective, the Mediterranean constitutes an area of strong interaction, leading some to place the emphasis on patterns of 'mutual intelligibility' (Catlos and Kinoshita, 2017). Indeed, the frequent exchange led for example to the emergence of the *lingua franca*, a simplified

version of Italian with Arabic and Spanish influences that enabled communication and trade (Mallette, 2014). Finally, a distinctive strand takes the notion of environmental history seriously[5] and thinks the Mediterranean as a distinctive ecological system, where topographical features interact in historically-specific ways with human activity (Horden and Purcell, 2000). Doing so is interesting not only because it affords a completely different spatiality based on ecological features, but also because it serves to destabilise periodisations by adopting a wider, transhistorical view.

The medieval Mediterranean thus points to the potential for IR not only to discover new historical modes of relations, but also to further new analytics that through focus on different spatial imaginations, such as water basins, can help develop new conceptual possibilities and challenge the conceptual essentialisms that underpin the discipline (Phillips and Sharman, 2015; Guillaume and Costa Lopez, 2021).

Conclusion

This chapter started by pointing to the infrequent yet fundamental role of the Middle Ages in both the historical narratives of origin of IR and in underpinning the conceptual apparatus of the discipline. The 'medieval' functions as the constant, unified Other for modern international relations unto which a variety of images of what we are *not* can be projected. The fact that this goes beyond historical narratives and encompasses the core conceptual apparatus of IR makes this problem extremely difficult to tackle, for if Kathleen Davies is correct, and the core concepts of sovereignty and colonialism contain in themselves the exclusion of the medieval, how can the discipline even begin to tackle the period with its conceptual apparatus? It would seem that we should just conclude that attempting to unpack medieval international relations is an anachronism in itself, which historically minded people should stay clear of (Herborth, 2021). And yet, it is precisely because its role is at once so fundamental and difficult to tackle, that the historical and conceptual pay-off of the medieval for historical IR is so high.

Suggestions for further reading

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Notes

1 The literature on the crusades is vast. A good classical entry point is Riley-Smith (2005).

2 There are of course literatures concerning other places that also use the notion of the Middle Ages, most notably a Marxist-inspired sociological literature on Tokugawa society in Japan (Ikegami, 1995). Although this is usually done in an effort to decentre Europe (Guillaume, 2014: 4), it still reproduces the connection between the Middle Ages, Europe, and feudalism.

3 One would need to start by making the precision that, although IR has situated this process in the Early Modern period, Roman Law was 'rediscovered' in the Latin West in the twelfth century, in the context of the cultural changes mentioned above.

4 Approaches within Mediterranean History are extremely varied (for a critical review see Horden, 2017).

5 The theoretical sophistication of this strand of literature serves as a good corrective to any stereotyped notion of historians as merely doing ideographic work.

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