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**United Nations Group of Experts on  
Geographical Names  
Second session  
New York, 3 – 7 May 2021  
Item 13 of the provisional agenda \*  
Exonyms**

**The fiftieth anniversary of the working group on exonyms  
of the Netherlands**

Submitted by the Netherlands\*\*

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### Early beginnings

On October 17 in the year 1960, two members of the board of the Cartographic Section of the Royal Netherlands Geographical Society (KNAG), Jan-Erik Romein and Fer Ormeling (Sr.) deliberated how to enlist the support of the KNAG in order to establish a permanent commission for geographical names in the Netherlands. Such a commission would take measures to combat the current, seemingly permanent, chaos in the writing of geographical names in Dutch.

As the Netherlands was not the only country where Dutch was spoken, it cooperated with Belgium in the Netherlands-Belgian Vocabulary Commission (*Nederlands-Belgische woordenlijstcommissie*). Spelling reforms promulgated for the Dutch language in 1946 were applied to geographical names too in Belgium, but not so in the Netherlands, where these reforms were shelved, after strong regional opposition to a tentative suggestion regarding place name spelling reform.

In the past, the KNAG had taken the lead in attempts to reform and standardize place names in the Netherlands, by publishing a list of geographical names in the Netherlands with over 40 000 entries (Beekman 1936), spelled according to the then official orthographic rules. The two aforementioned gentlemen now proposed that the KNAG would again take the lead and publish a new list of place names, now spelled according to the new spelling rules. And the spellings in this list should be prescribed by the government for official use in administration and in education. The letter by Romein and Ormeling Sr to the board of the KNAG, in which they sought its support, ended as follows: “As is especially the case for a country like the Netherlands, with its multitudinous economic and scientific foreign relations, it cannot permit itself anymore to, on the one hand, misrepresent and misspell the geographical names of other countries and, on the other hand, fail to standardize its own geographical names and publish these standardized forms, as well on behalf of other countries as of itself.

Now that the spelling of geographical names, and especially its standardization, has become a subject of permanent international consultation, and that we even may expect the establishment (at the initiative of the ECOSOC) of an international commission on geographical names [UNGEKN], it would be propitious if the Netherlands did not lag behind.”

The KNAG reacted by instructing one of its members, Dr. W.H. Vermooten, who next to being a geographer also was a member of parliament, to ask written questions in the House of Representatives (nr 2044, sent in February 8, 1963), of which the following are most relevant:

“3. Can the Minister of Education tell us what progress has been made in the production of an official list of geographical names of the Netherlands? [an item called for in the 1947 spelling reform act]

4. Don't the ministers agree that – now that the spelling of geographical names and especially their standardization has become the subject of permanent international consultation - it would be about time too... that the Dutch spelling of foreign geographical names be officially and uniformly determined?

5. Wouldn't the ministers agree that the production of a list of foreign geographical names [exonyms] could best be executed by a (permanent) commission for the spelling of geographical names, such as is already the case in...[many other countries]?”

The minister of Education answered these questions by claiming that the Dutch delegation in the Netherlands-Belgian Vocabulary Commission would come up shortly with a draft regulation for the spelling of geographical names in the Netherlands [which was actually incorrect]. But regarding the other questions she asked the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences for advice regarding the advisability of Dutch contributions to the discussions in a UN conference on the standardization of geographical names. The Academy established a committee (with Romein and Ormeling Sr. as KNAG appointees), and this committee advised the minister to cooperate in UN context. As nothing happened however, Dr. Vermooten again asked questions in Parliament, in 1964 and 1965, and, thus encouraged,

on June 7, 1968, the minister of Education set up a commission for foreign geographical names (CBAN – *Commissie Buitenlandse Aardrijkskundige Namen*).

### **The Commission for Foreign Geographical Names (CBAN)**

According to the ministerial decree of June 7, 1968, the assignment of the CBAN was to: “propose guidelines for the use and spelling in the Netherlands of modern foreign geographical names, with due regard for the guidelines for international standardization of geographical names that would be elaborated under the terms of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, and to produce an inventory of the customary Dutch versions in general use of foreign geographical names for a number of international geographical objects.

The CBAN convened for the first time in September 1968 (so in 2021 we actually celebrate its 53rd anniversary). It was composed of three geo-cartographers (Ormeling Sr., Romein and Prof. Dr. M.W. Heslinga), two linguists (Dr. B.C. Damsteegt and Dr. D.P. Blok) and three representatives of ministries (the ministries of Education, of the Interior and of Transport and Water Management), and it was chaired by Ormeling Sr., who meanwhile had been nominated professor of economic geography at the University of Amsterdam.

CBAN’s (and more particularly Romein’s) work consisted mainly of the collection of exonyms. These were collected from several sources: world atlases, encyclopedias, dictionaries, newspapers, gazetteers of the Postal Union and of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The spellings in use by the various government institutions for country names, and their derivatives (for the language, the names for its inhabitants and the adjectives concerned) were recorded. Belgium, South Africa and Suriname were contacted about the common spellings of foreign names there, and the minister was suggested to ask his Belgian counterpart to add a Flemish observer to the committee. The decisions and underlying considerations of the Commission were registered. The basic assumptions of the commission were, on the one hand the greatest possible reduction of the number of exonyms, for the benefit of international communication (also inspired by UNGEGN resolutions) and, on the other hand, cherishing the existing exonyms, as part of Dutch cultural heritage.

Rationalized decisions were made, and in 1973 the Commission had completed a list of country names and their derivatives. Directions for use of the list were written too as well as a justification in which the general basic principles were formulated, such as regarding the use of articles and of the formation of the name for female inhabitants. Well established Dutch name forms were not changed. After completion of the work the commission urged the minister to have the list published. But at that moment the minister of Education realized that consultation with Belgium would be advisable (a few years after the CBAN had suggested this to him). Two Flemish linguists were consulted (Prof. Dr. K. Roelandts and Dr. M. Hoebeke), and these agreed with the basic principles and the resulting list of geographical names.

By the time this hurdle had been cleared and the list had been circulated among the various government departments for comments and had been adjusted, it was 1980 when the minister released it for publication. To the commission’s dismay, and contrary to previous agreements, the spellings used in this List of Country Names (*Lijst van Landennamen*) were not officially prescribed for use in government and education, but just recommended by the minister. The List of Country Names was printed in January 1981 and distributed by the Ministry of Education (see figure 1).



Figure 1: The 1980 List of Country Names.

In the meantime, the Commission had also defined its position regarding the first part of its assignment, the formulation of general guidelines for dealing with foreign geographical names: customary Dutch exonyms would not have to follow the new (1947) spelling rules; foreign names in Roman scripts were to be adopted integrally and names from countries without Roman scripts were either to be transliterated or transcribed, preferentially according to relevant UNGEGN resolutions.

### **The Dutch Language Union: BAN 1 (1988-1993)**

Meanwhile, on September 9, 1980, the Dutch Language Union (*Nederlandse Taalunie*, hereafter called *Taalunie*) was set up, with the authority to legally regulate the spelling and the grammar of the Dutch language (for Belgium and the Netherlands). As the relevant Dutch ministries transferred their linguistic authority to the *Taalunie*, the CBAN came to find itself in an administrative vacuum, and its activities on behalf of a list of Dutch exonyms gradually stagnated. When in 1988 the *Taalunie* established a working group on foreign geographical names (*Werkgroep Buitenlandse Aardrijkskundige Namen* or BAN) the CBAN officially still survived; the transfer to the new dispensation was eased by the appointment of CBAN secretary Dr. D.P. Blok, nominated Professor of History and Onomastics in the meantime, as chair of the BAN. The new working group further consisted of linguists (Dr. R. Rentenaar and Prof. Dr. K. Roelandts), representatives of Dutch and Belgian press agencies (J.P. van Groesen, B. van de Voorde), of Dutch and Belgian foreign affairs ministries (J.J. Jonker Roelants and F. Hintjens), the European Commission (H. Ladage) and a cartographer (Prof. Dr. F.J. Ormeling, son of his aforementioned namesake).

The BAN working group set out according to the following terms of reference:

- Production of a list of country names and its derived adjectives, names of inhabitants and capitals of the countries concerned. Starting point for this list would be the CBAN-produced list of country names (1980);
- Study of the desirability and possibility to produce a more extended list of exonyms, as an extension of the list of country names.

While executing its tasks the WG had both to conform to existing spelling laws and to preserve a balance between the wish to safeguard the Dutch linguistic cultural heritage and the international trend to decrease the use of exonyms. It also would have to formulate standpoints regarding the conversion of names to the Roman alphabet.

The BAN WG had a flying start, as all the documentation material collected over the years by the CBAN (its list of exonyms included) were transferred to her. Preconditions were formulated acceptable to all WG members: “The donor principle would be adhered to as much as possible, but the acceptance and familiarity with specific name variants were not to be disregarded”, and: “diacritical marks may not

be omitted in the proposals of the WG, because technological developments increasingly eases their incorporation”.

In July 1989 the BAN handed in its new List of country names to the Taalunie. In January 1990 it added a memorandum how to deal with foreign geographical names. In December the Taalunie made the list available for inspection to a number of linguistic advisory bodies: the Committee of Ministers of the Taalunie, the language commission of the Council for the Dutch Language and the cooperative for Dutch language terminology. Its linguists heavily criticized the application of the donor principle and the use of diacritics unfamiliar with the Dutch language. This criticism was induced by insufficiently familiarizing oneself with the preconditions stated, and by failing to do so the variation in the use of either *oe* or *u*, or of either *c* or *k* would come across as illogical. The systematics of the list were insufficiently immersed into. Despite the fact that, based on the criticisms, the list was adjusted in a number of aspects, it was rebuffed by the Taalunie and the Committee of Ministers. The major obstacle for them had been the principle to accept the endonym unless a well-established exonym was available. The authorities wanted to reverse that: the Dutch exonym should be the starting point, and if no exonym was available, the local endonym would be used.

Blok and Ormeling Jr. dissented – in their opinion the Taalunie modified the original WG assignment. They could not adhere to the newly formulated preconditions, also because of their positions in UNGEGN, where they advocated a decrease in the use of exonyms in order to boost international communication. They left the working group. Rentenaar took over the chairmanship, and in 1993 a modified List of Country Names, conforming to the wishes of the Committee of Ministers, was published (see figure 2). Apart from a number of controversial name changes its results were to a high degree comparable with those in the CBAN list, the main difference being that in the new list the names of capitals had been added as well. The BAN working group with this publication fulfilled the first part of its assignments. Despite its adjustment to the wishes of the Committee of Ministers the use of the spelling in this list was still not officially prescribed but only recommended.

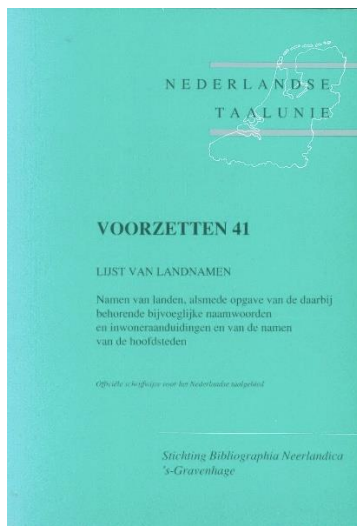


Figure 2: The BAN List of Country Names (1993), published as nr. 41 in the series *Voorzetten* of the Dutch Language Union.

### **BAN II (1993-1996)**

In order to elaborate the second part of its assignment, a new working group was composed to execute the more extended inventory of all Dutch exonyms: “The working group has the task to compose a list of important cities, other than capitals, as well as regions, islands, mountains, seas, lakes and rivers and other geographical entities that do not figure in the List of country names (*Voorzetten 41*).” Rentenaar again chaired the working group. As BAN II officially had to conform to the principles originally stated for BAN I this allowed Ormeling Jr. to be involved again. Other members were representatives of Dutch and Flemish ministries, university linguists, translators of the European Communities, and Dutch and Belgian press agencies. The guidelines for BAN II stated it would be

reluctant in the use of exonyms, and only propagate customary exonyms in present use, the remainder being considered historical exonyms. The list was expected to be completed within a year, but that target couldn't be reached. The work was only completed in 1995 and in 1996 the publication *Dutch Foreign Geographical Names (Buitenlandse aardrijkskundige namen in het Nederlands)* was published (see figure 3).

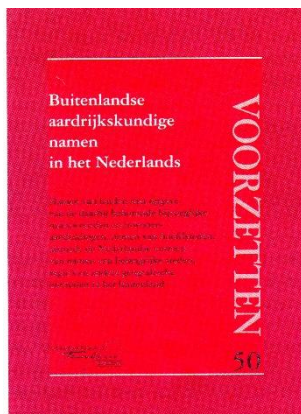


Figure 3: *Dutch Foreign Geographical Names*, published in 1996 as nr. 50 in the series *Voorzetten* of the Dutch Language Union

This new list contained not only the data mentioned for the previous edition, but also the remaining current Dutch exonyms, together with their endonyms. They were arranged per continent and per country, an explanatory glossary had been added as well as a list of translations of foreign generics (such as *lake, baie, proliv, teluk* and *arcipelago*) and an index of all names, both endonyms and exonyms. At the beginning a list of country name changes since the previous edition was inserted. In separate lists the Dutch versions of place names in Wallonia (the French-speaking part of Belgium) and in the historically Dutch-speaking part of France (French Flanders) were contained. With this publication the BAN II working group ended its activities, as it had fulfilled its terms of reference. For all that, neither were the spellings in this list officially prescribed.

### Ban III 1997-2018

Half a year after its dissolution, the former members of the BAN II working group received a letter from the secretary-general of the Dutch Language Union, stating that she considered it necessary to have a permanent advisory body in the field of foreign geographical names. The former members were therefore asked to continue their work. Evidently the need for maintenance of the list had become apparent. So a permanent body was set up, with the task to collect and communicate changes in the field of names of foreign geographical entities, as compared to the names in the 1996 publication 'Dutch Foreign Geographical Names'. Additional tasks were the spotting of developments abroad in the field of geographical names orthography, that could have an impact on the BAN list, as well as advising both the government and the general public on the spelling of foreign geographical names.

A new, independent development was the creation of a digital list of exonyms, to which a Taalunie website would provide access. Ormeling proposed such a list. In 1999 Rentenaar took early retirement and the Taalunie asked Ormeling to take over the chairmanship. With Rentenaar still present, the finishing touches were added to a revised version of 'Dutch Foreign Geographical Names', to be published in the year 2000, with a world map showing the location of all Dutch exonyms. At that moment it became apparent that the Taalunie had changed its course, intending to go digital. A new portal was envisaged, from which commercial parties might derive paper editions. The BAN III list was envisaged to become part of this portal, preferably with a pronunciation module for the geographical names added. The BAN III working group kept arguing for a paper version but, as the list would be incorporated in the website, no prospective publishers of a paper edition could be found.

The creation of a website with the BAN list took some doing: first the problem of adding diacritical signs had to be surmounted, then the facilitation of the required functionality, and finally the realization of the pronunciation module. The working group members recorded the names under the

supervision of Prof. Magda Devos. The pronunciation module was operational for a short period, but when a number of flaws were detected that needed correction as well as some necessary updates, this appeared to be impossible and the module was disconnected. Only in 2013, after the insistence of the WG members and a hunt for the audiotapes produced in 2003, the pronunciation module was again placed on the agenda.

Box 1: The composition of the BAN III working group around 2010

Prof. Dr. Ferjan Ormeling (Utrecht University), chair  
 Prof. Dr. Magda Devos (Ghent University)  
 Ms Frieda De Vos (European Union)  
 Ms Coos 't Hoen (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Hague)  
 Ms Stephanie Krebel (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brussels)  
 Prof. Dr. Willy van Langendonck (Catholic University of Leuven)  
 Ms Helga van der Mijl (Dutch Public Broadcasting)  
 Ms Kristien Spillebeen (Flemish Parliament)  
 Mr Tjeerd Tichelaar (Noordhoff Publishers)  
 Mr Mark Eelen (Belga Press Agency)  
 Mr Jeroen Tjepkema (Dutch Broadcasting Foundation)

In 2014 Prof. Dr. Arjen Versloot (University of Amsterdam) joined the working group.

The executive or daily committee of the working group consisted of Magda Devos, Frieda De Vos and Ferjan Ormeling.

The term of the working group was regularly extended by means of decrees of the Taalunie of 2004, 2008 and 2012. The aim of the working group remained to keep the list of foreign geographical names in Dutch up-to-date, and to provide advice for questions that reached the Taalunie about the spelling of foreign geographical names.

After many teething troubles, around 2005 a well-functioning website 'Foreign Geographical Names' could be accessed as part of the Taalunie portal (*Taalunieversum*). Changes in the list of exonyms were implemented and visualized quickly on the website. However, when around the year 2010 the Taalunie portal was restyled and the BAN list was relocated to another, related homepage, this didn't pass smoothly at all. For some years complaints about the difficult access abounded and it took years for changes (reported in order to keep the site up-to-date) to be implemented. But by the year 2017 most of the complaints of the working group had been addressed and the website functioned as it should.

In the meantime, offline, a lot of work was shifted. A section on historical names was added, making the list also relevant for historians. To meet the need for a world map, an external company was brought in, but the product was full of mistakes, seemingly impossible to redress. Thanks to Prof. Versloot geographical names in Friesland were added (Friesland is the province in the Netherlands where the Frisian minority language is spoken), showing which name versions are Frisian and which versions Dutch, and which of these is the official one. The Toponymic Guidelines for the Netherlands, produced for UNGEGN and regularly updated, were added to the BAN website. In a clarification the use of articles was explained, as were the adjectives pertaining to state capitals around the world and the designations of their male and female inhabitants. The sources for the interscriptural conversion systems accepted by UNGEGN were indicated, and it was also made clear to which languages the endonyms in the BAN list belonged. Much effort was spent in order to explain seemingly inconsequential spelling choices and a scheme was developed to provide insight in the procedures followed to opt for specific name variants or spelling choices (see figure 4).

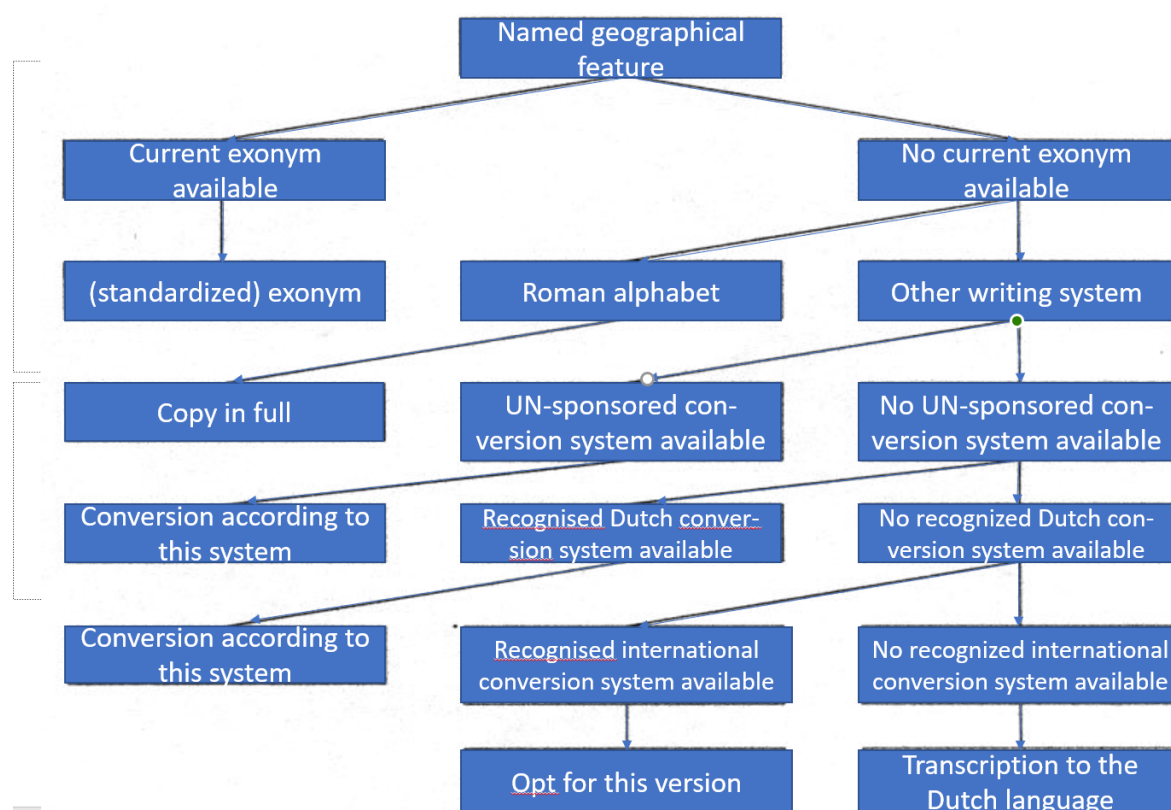


Figure 4: Scheme for the processing of foreign geographical names. © Ormeling

In addition, the Daily Committee also devoted a lot of energy to other activities: responding to public questions, advice to the Land Registry, the EuroGeoNames project (indicating the plural forms and gender of the Dutch exonyms), contacts with NEN and ISO and with Wikipedia.

The abovementioned restyling of the website with the foreign geographical names and the corresponding conversion led to accidents. It took the working group members an immense amount of time to return the much nicer looking result with the same functionality as the old version. At one point (at the end of 2014) a desperate letter was written to the Taalunie secretary-general urging to finally deploy the necessary IT human power to implement in the website the changes requested by the working group. Most working group complaints were resolved in 2017, and by then the website was functioning properly.

The Dutch Language Union kept pace with new developments, as for instance with speech-processing technologies with which consecutive secretaries-general hoped to score and with which commercial companies promised the moon. Another development was the scientific research into translation technology. Developing software for the automated transfer of names for non-Roman script languages into Dutch was supported by the Taalunie, as this seemed to be an essential contribution. On closer inspection, if for every language area all names (and not just the exonyms) would be adapted to the pronunciation in the receiver language area, this would result in as many versions of personal and place names as there are different languages, and that would exactly result in the chaos that the UN is trying to prevent in the international context (Chroesjtsjof / Chruschtschow / Khrushchev / Khrouchtchev / Jrushchov, or Jerevan / Jerewan / Yerevan / Erevan). It would be contrary to the principles of the United Nations which strives for ‘univocity’, the principle that for every place name in each alphabet only one name version would be the official one.

The intention of the Taalunie’s secretary-general to establish a commission on names from other languages (*Commissie Anderstalige Namen* or CAN), responsible for both foreign place names and personal names, led Ormeling to stand down as chair. However, the terms of reference of the CAN, as



established in consultation with his successor, Prof. Versloot, had two separate sections, one for personal names and one for place names, the latter a direct continuation of BAN III, and these sections cooperate harmoniously. With this development a new era started at the end of 2017.

### **But what about standardization of place names in the Netherlands?**

Although the Spelling Act of 1947 so required, the Dutch delegation in the Netherlands-Belgian Vocabulary Committee did not devote itself to the standardization of place names until the early 1960s, after those mentioned in the first section had encouraged them to engage in this task. This Dutch delegation, either called the Van Haeringen Commission (1962-1970) or the Damsteegt Commission (1970-1974), after its chairpersons, met more than 60 times between 1962 and 1974. Some of the players familiar from the CBAN can be seen here as well: Dr. D.P. Blok, and Dr. J.E. Romein, who first acted as advisor and documentalist 1960-1973, and subsequently as a member.

The results of the committee's work were laid out in a report released to the Minister of Education in 1974 with an introduction which justified the principles for adapting the place names to the new spelling, and a list of 40 000 names of geographical objects in the Netherlands spelled in accordance with the new spelling.

The committee noted “that by transitioning from the De Vries and the Winkel Spelling to the Marchant Spelling [as the rules of the 1947 Spelling Act were called], there were a number of eccentric spelling differences in the Dutch toponyms that were only acceptable in the context of the transitional state created by the Spelling Act of 1947 with regard to geographical names within the Netherlands. From a practical point of view, these differences had to be eliminated and the uncertainties and errors that resulted from the archaic spellings had to be terminated. In addition, there was the principled desirability of spelling the Dutch geography names according to the rules that also apply to other Dutch words. It is therefore by no means an exaggeration to say that the current system, which was designed under Article 6 of the 1947 Spelling Act and put an end to the transitional situation, has already been waiting too long.”

However, the Minister appeared to be concerned about the reactions of the regional press to the proposals made in the report to adjust the spelling of the place names to the new legal spelling, and left the report in his drawer. That was almost 50 years ago.

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