

POTTERY VESSELS WITH *GRAFFITI* DISCOVERED IN THE FORT OF *ALA I BATAVORUM* IN DACIA¹

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Abstract

This paper presents *graffiti* discovered on a few plates discovered in a barrack from the fort of *ala I Batavorum milliaria* in Dacia. Typical for the Batavian troops, the onomastics is Latin and Greek. The *instrumenta* prove that the soldiers scribbled their names on every-day use vessels and offer us a glimpse of the very men that lived there together.

Keywords: *instrumenta*, onomastics, barracks, *vasa escaria*.

Introduction

The Roman fortress at Războieni-Cetate (Alba County), domicile of the *ala I Batavorum milliaria*, is situated 50 km north of the legionary fort of Apulum (Alba Iulia), and in the immediate proximity of the salt mines of *Salinae* (Ocna Mureş) (**Fig. 1**).² The *ala* was

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² Mihailescu-Bîrliba 2018; Mihailescu-Bîrliba – Asăndulesei 2019, 31–33.

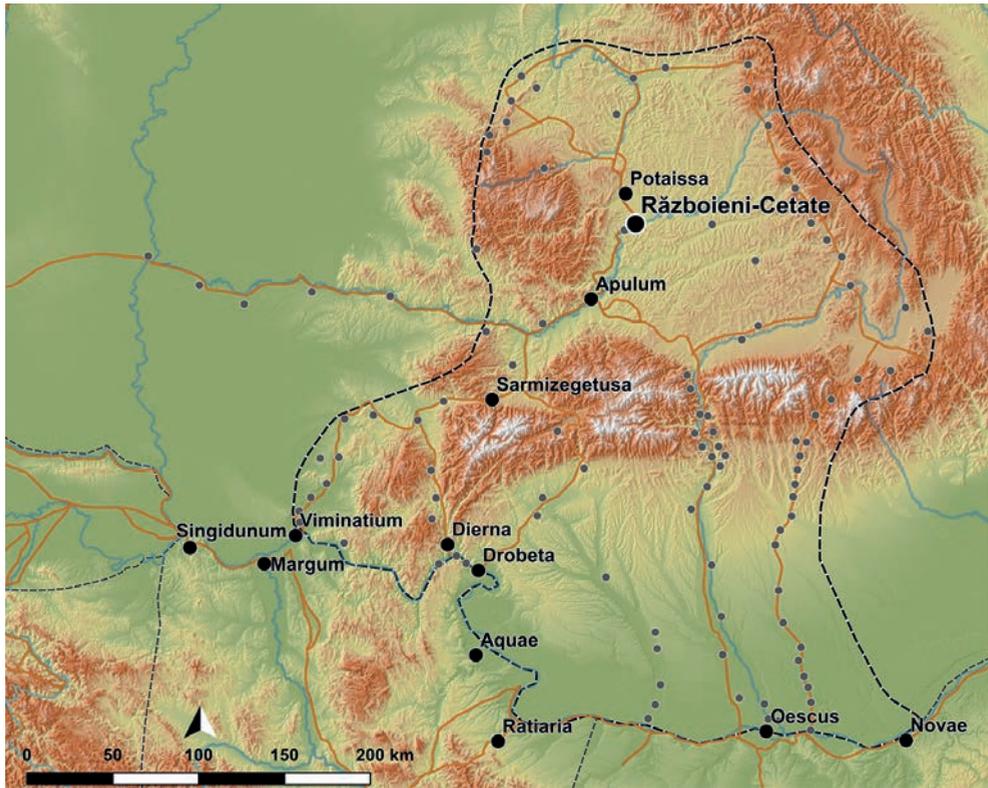


Fig. 1. Map of Roman Dacia (after Mischka, Rubel, Varga 2018, 377)

garrisoned here from 136/138,³ up until the abandonment of the province, during Aurelian's reign. In the last few years, the site has been systematically excavated.⁴ The enterprise offered plentiful data regarding its planimetry,⁵ pottery production and imports,⁶ epigraphy⁷ and numismatics,⁸ many of which have already been published or are in print. The artefacts discussed in detail in this article are four fragmentary plates bearing *graffiti*; they were found inside the fortress, in a *contubernium* of a stable-barrack, to be precise (Fig. 2.1–2 – barrack 16 is the one that has been excavated).⁹ Small finds like fragments

³ AE 1997.1782; Wagner 1938, 16; Mócsy 1962, 618; Piso – Benea 1984, 278; Petolescu 2002, 64; Bărbulescu 2012, 55; Piso 2014, 125–146.

⁴ Systematic excavations coordinated by with a team led by George Bounegru (National Museum of Alba Iulia) and Rada Varga (Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca).

⁵ Mischka – Rubel – Varga 2018.

⁶ Rusu-Bolindeţ – Onofrei 2010; Varga – Crizbăşan 2019; Bounegru – Varga 2020, 221–232.

⁷ Piso – Varga 2019; Rubel – Varga 2021.

⁸ Ardevan – Varga 2010; Găzdac – Bounegru – Varga 2020.

⁹ Excavated in the summer of 2018 by Alexander Rubel and a mixed team from Iaşi (Romania) and Erlangen (Germany): Lavinia Grumeza, Ştefan Honcu, Sever Boţan (Archaeological Institute Iaşi), Benedict Jung and Javier López (University of Erlangen).



Fig. 2.1. Geophysical layout of Războieni-Cetate (after Mischka, Rubel, Varga 2018, 382)

of weapons, fragments of a hand mill and items of everyday life like a bone sewing needle and the presence of a hearth, indicated that the northern room of this barrack-compartment was designed to accommodate presumably six horsemen of the two *turmae*, which had been garrisoned in this barrack building.¹⁰ Alongside typical pottery of the 2nd and

¹⁰ Detailed on this Mischka – Rubel – Varga 2018, 386–390.

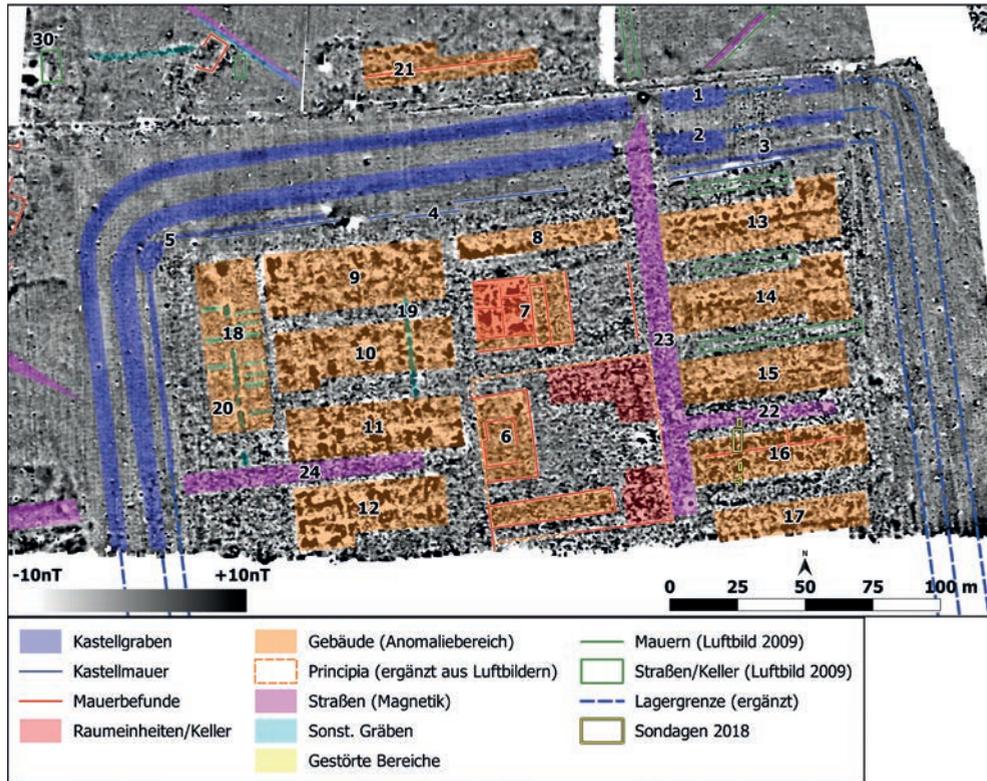


Fig. 2.2. Interpretation of the geophysical data (after Mischka, Rubel, Varga 2018, 383)

3rd centuries (we could distinguish between three different construction phases: two timber forts, followed by a final construction in stone in the middle of the 3rd century), we found the inscribed fragments of pottery presented here. According to the stratigraphy, the fragments with *graffiti* belong to the second construction phase, which can be dated approximately to 170–200 AD.

Graffiti on pottery in the Roman Empire

In the Roman army (but not only there) it was important for the men to mark their private property with owner's marks, mainly inscriptions, comparable to the name tags, which are used also today in modern armies or in boarding schools etc. Especially military equipment, until the 3rd century provided personally and at their own expense by the soldiers, had been thus marked with tags and inscriptions of all kinds, usually consisting of the name and unit of the owner.¹¹ But the *instrumenta* of daily use in a fort or in

¹¹ On this, MacMullen 1960; cf. Rubel 2008 with all relevant references.

its civilian settlement were often also marked by their owners to avoid confusion or pilfering. Thus, kitchen ware and all kinds of domestic pottery found in military contexts (but not exclusively) are sometimes inscribed with *graffiti*, denoting the owner or bearing signs to distinguish personal objects. Sometimes also *dicta* or slogans can be found on pottery fragments, also marks or signs of producers or makers (the latter often incised *ante cocturam*). In other cases, these *graffiti* represent price tags or denotes the quantity of commodities or the measure of capacity (e.g. of cups or amphorae). For our purpose here, the inscribed names on pottery are the most important.

In the wake of a general shift in epigraphical studies, which has led to a recent appreciation of so called “minor” inscriptions, *graffiti* in general and especially of *graffiti* on pottery, major results have been achieved in the study of *graffiti* on pottery at important sites.¹² After ground-breaking work on the *graffiti* collection of the Landesmuseum in Bonn by Bakker and Galsterer-Kröll, it has been Brigitte Galsterer with her survey of the inscribed pottery at the Roman fort of Haltern, and later Markus Scholz with his thorough monograph on the pottery at the Flavian fort Nida (Frankfurt-Heddernheim today) and its important civilian settlement, who have introduced monographic studies for specific sites as important contributions to this relatively new trend.¹³ Recent publications focus on Roman Gaul: Thousands of inscribed sherds have also been the material basis of the exhaustive books on *graffiti* on pottery by Féret and Sylvestre, who analysed the military and civilian site at Kaiseraugst (*Augusta Raurica*) in Switzerland and most recently also the *graffiti* from Avenches (*Aventicum*). The region of Lyon (*Lugdunum*) is covered in an important monograph by Andrieu. For the Lower Rhine see the very useful and meticulous corpora by Kütter for Neuss (*Novaesium*) and by Weiß-König on the inscribed sherds of Xanten (*Colonia Ulpia Traiana*).¹⁴ Recently, a collection of approx. 3.300 1st century AD *graffiti* from the Lower Rhine area was gathered by M. Zandstra,¹⁵ bringing together all identified inscribed pottery fragments from the military installations of the area. These major publications now offer important insights for studies on Romanisation and the use of ‘Roman’ or ‘indigenous’ (Celtic) names in Roman military forts and their civilian settlements (they are also important for the question of the literacy of the population).¹⁶ They also indicate that the social conditions in the forts (garrisoning in common *contubernia*) and the economic value of some *instrumenta* (especially of *terra sigillata*) made it necessary for the owners of domestic pottery to mark their property. In sum, the recent large publications of *corpora* of *graffiti* on pottery, as well as many papers on scattered inscribed fragments (like the one presented here), are *tesserae* for a larger mosaic depicting the society of the Roman Empire; in the words of Féret and Sylvestre: ‘Les graffites fournissent d’importantes données sur la société, l’économie et la culture, par le biais d’approches linguistiques, céramologiques, spatiales et chronologiques.’¹⁷

¹² On the importance of ‘minor’ inscriptions and *graffiti*, see generally Lohman 2018 and 2020. More specific arguments in Hainzmann 2012; cf. also Scholz – Horster 2015.

¹³ Galsterer 1983; Scholz 1999.

¹⁴ Féret – Sylvestre 2008; Kütter 2008; Weiß-König 2010; Sylvestre 2017; Andrieu 2017.

¹⁵ Zandstra 2019, 91–92.

¹⁶ On this, see the ground-breaking article by Evans 1987.

¹⁷ Féret – Sylvestre 2008, 16.

Graffiti from Roman Dacia in military contexts

The historiography of inscribed pottery discovered in Roman Dacia is neither vast, nor what we might call ‘traditional’, as the interest in this topic has not generally been very high. The only tentative *corpus* of inscribed pottery dates from 1992¹⁸ and collects 123 ceramic fragments from the whole Dacian province. The study also includes a short paleographic analyses and a table of the corresponding cursive letters found on the vessels.¹⁹ Another tentative paleographic analysis on inscribed *instrumenta* from Dacia was published in 2007,²⁰ including a synoptic alphabetic table, but not a catalogue of the objects taken into consideration.

Only recently the focus on these minor epigraphic objects increased and researchers began paying them more attention. Though far from spectacular and not rich in information, they offer a glimpse into every-day life, shed new light on literacy, and are a valuable tool for provincial palaeography and the history of cursive writing.

Many of the published pots and potsherds come from military environments, namely from forts. It is arguable if this fact is principally related to a Roman-era reality or to the current state of research. If we opt for the former, we could assume that soldiers, living in collective barracks, were more prone to writing their name on vessels, to indicate ownership, as probably most of their dishes looked the same. Besides this, the degree of literacy was high(est) among soldiers. Some of the *graffiti* we are aware of, discovered in fortresses, come from *Arcobara/Ilișua*,²¹ *Certiae?*/Brusturi-Romita,²² *Porolissum/Moigrad-Jac*,²³ *Buciumi*,²⁴ *Gilău*,²⁵ *Potaissa/Turda*,²⁶ *Orheiu Bistriței*,²⁷ *Cioroiu Nou*,²⁸ *Slăveni*,²⁹ *Berzovia*,³⁰ *Cumidava*,³¹ *Cătunele*,³² etc. While these are not all the *graffiti* discovered in the military environment in the province of Dacia, we hope that the overview covers a large proportion of them; as they are not published comprehensively, it is difficult to be sure that none have eluded us. Of course, artefacts coming from civilian centers have also been published, such as the inscribed fragments from *Napoca/Cluj-Napoca*,³³ *Apulum/Alba Iulia*³⁴

¹⁸ Gudea – Cosma 1992.

¹⁹ Gudea – Cosma 1992, 224.

²⁰ Voloșciuc 2007.

²¹ Dana – Gaiu – Zăgreanu 2012 = *AE* 2012.1201; Gaiu 2015, 74, no. 96.

²² Deac – Dana 2019; Deac 2015 = *AE* 2015, 1144; Gudea – Cosma 1992.

²³ Deac 2015 = *AE* 2015.1161, 1162; Gudea – Cosma 1992.

²⁴ Dana – Petruț 2015 = *AE* 2015.1165.

²⁵ Beu-Dachin – Isac 2019.

²⁶ Nedelea 2016, no. 8, 201; Nedelea 2017, 118, 251; Nedelea 2020.

²⁷ Zăgreanu – Deac – Moldovan 2019.

²⁸ Dana 2013–2014.

²⁹ Gudea – Cosma 1992, 211.

³⁰ Dana 2015.

³¹ Gudea – Cosma 1992, 208–209.

³² Dana – Marinoiu 2020.

³³ Rusu-Bolindeț 2007, 164, 592; Beu-Dachin – Cociș – Voișian 2013, 299, no. 1–2.

³⁴ *IDR* III,6, 352–358; Gudea – Cosma 1992, 213.

or *Tibiscum*/Jupa,³⁵ or even *villae rusticae*, as it is the case from Gârla Mare³⁶ or other rural contexts³⁷ – and again, most probably there are others too, which have not been published or which have not made their way into the ‘mainstream’ flow of publications.

Most of the minor texts we have referred to were inscribed after the pots were fired (*post cocturam*), and they generally record the names of the owners. There are also exceptions—besides the unreadable fragments—which present writing before the pot was fired (*ante conturam*) and record something else than an owner’s name.³⁸ There is a consistent difference, in essence, between these type of texts and the *fabri*’s markers, which are a production mark, sometimes even stamped on the soft clay and are standardized as writing type and aspect. The inscriptions we are dealing with are meant to mark personal property, they are not supposed to have esthetic value and reflect each owner’s personal handwriting.

The language is generally Latin (written in cursive, capitals or, quite often, a combination of the two), but once again, there are exceptions of inscriptions in Greek, combination of Latin and Greek scripts,³⁹ or even a rare text in Aramaic.⁴⁰

The inscribed pottery of Războieni-Cetate

The texts from Războieni-Cetate are written in Latin and were incised *post cocturam*. They record names, most obviously the owners’ names, in genitive and apparently one in dative, but we would rather opt, in this latter case, for a nominative ending in O. The writing is a combination of cursive and capital letters, basically reflecting the style of the soldiers’ handwriting, as well as the necessities of scribbling on rough clay. A is in both cases cursive, open, lacking the cross-bar; E is also cursive. and T is written in cursive manner, as well as (on one fragment) as a capital. The remaining letters are essentially roughly cut capitals.

The names, as much as they can be read and reconstructed are neither very common, nor absolute rarities. From the four artefacts we have, we were able to draw certain onomastic conclusions on two of the names. The first one (cat. 1, **Fig. 3.1**) is most probably CIILSI (Celsi, genitive), with a cursive E written as II. The second one (cat. 2, **Fig. 3.2**) ends in –(I)ONYSI (genitive), most probably belonging to a Dionys(i)us.⁴¹ The name, etymologically Greek, is an important addition to the onomastics of the site. Greek names became a tradition in Batavian military families, after the northern recruits from the

³⁵ Gudea - Cosma 1992, 213–214.

³⁶ Hamat 2018, 183.

³⁷ Dana – Tuțulescu 2017.

³⁸ The name of a deity, as it is the case of a pot from Romita (Deac – Dana 2019).

³⁹ Beu-Dachin – Cociș – Voișian 2013, 299, no. 1.

⁴⁰ Hutton 2019.

⁴¹ We thank our colleagues Dan Dana and Markus Scholz for endorsing this reading. We were initially inclined towards reading—ONESI on the shard, as we have an approximate analogy coming from Apulum, namely a vase wall, published in 1990 (Moga 1990, 204–205, no. 5; fig 4), having an incision on two lines: IUL(?) / NONESI. The name seems to resemble the one from Războieni, but, unfortunately, no pictures had been published and the fragment itself is no longer available.



Fig. 3.1–2. Vessels catalogue no. 1 & 2 (@the authors; RTI by Călin Şuteu)



Fig. 3.3–4. Vessels catalogue no. 3 & 4 (@the authors; RTI by Călin Şuteu)

Flavian Imperial Guard employed them, sometimes probably in order to replace unpronounceable Batavian names.⁴² Nonetheless, they later on became a mark of family military tradition. The third text (cat. 3, **Fig. 3.3**) ends in –ITO. Because a dative form is very unlikely, we assume it could be a nominative ended in –O (for a name such as Capito). The last fragment (cat. 4, **Fig. 3.4**) is badly deteriorated, but a few fragmentary letters are visible on it. At this point, we can read –VTVS, with a cursive S; there are many reconstructive possibilities for this termination, but what must be noted is that in this case we seem to have a nominative.

The names which can be reconstructed are Latin from an etymological point of view and we cannot state anything valid regarding their predominant area of use, as they are quite common.⁴³ Although it is maybe marginally relevant to talk about the juridical status of the names of men in this context, given the dating of the discovery context and their appurtenance to an *ala*'s required strength, we can assume they most likely were *peregrines*. Of course, the presence of a *gentilicium* on this type of *instrumenta* wouldn't have been common either.

The inscriptions cut after firing, ownership marks, are mostly common on *vasa escaria*, tableware and kitchen ware (plates, trays cups, etc.). In our case, they were the private property of each soldier, thus the inscribing of the name, on plates. This type of vessel, namely plates, are frequent in Războieni, discovered in both civilian and military contexts; their number was naturally high, as each individual needed an individual plate.⁴⁴ The inscriptions were made on the body of the plate, on the exterior—with the exception of fragment 3 (**Fig. 3.3**), where it is on the (very easily visible) interior. This could suggest that the vessels were stored in a rim-down position,⁴⁵ thus facilitating identification.

In this context, one must also mention an inscribed shard discovered in Războieni in the past by a local inhabitant and currently stored in the collection of the village school (**Fig. 4**). This fragment was previously published,⁴⁶ but without a context, as we do not know any details concerning its discovery. Nonetheless, it appears to be part of a plate as well, inscribed with the name of its owner. In this case, we are dealing with Sedatus, written in letters influenced by the cursive scripts; nonetheless, A lacks the cross-bar in this case as well.

Final remarks

The current enterprise highlights the importance of working on minor epigraphic texts and of publishing them in optimal conditions. Without having the impact of major, stone

⁴² Birley 2001; van Driel-Murray 2003, 201; Derks 2009, 243.

⁴³ The lack of ethnically relevant names is not a surprise, as the area of recruitment for the *ala milliariae* as elite troops might have been vast. A partial analogy can be found at Heidenheim (Scholz 2009, 141 sqq), home of the *ala II Flavia pia fidelis milliaria*, where the overwhelming majority of the *graffiti* onomastics is Latin and consists of very common names.

⁴⁴ Varga – Crizbășan 2019, 10.

⁴⁵ Dana – Petruț 2015.

⁴⁶ Popovici – Varga 2010, 82.



Fig. 4. The *graffiti* with the name of Sedatus (@the authors; photo R. Varga)

epigraphy, or the rich variety of information which the latter sometimes provides, they play their part in our understanding of Roman society. Unlike stone monuments, which has precise purposes and environmental settings, these pieces of inscribed pottery were literally part of their owners' everyday life. In the case of the *graffiti* from Războieni, they confirm that soldiers used to scribble their names on personal dishes, that plates were one of the most common *vasa escaria*, of which each man had one as property. They also give us clues into the writing style of the soldiers, their use of combined capitals and cursives.

The fact that the fragments come from a clear archaeological context, namely a small portion of the same barrack, offers us a glimpse of the very men that lived there together, most probably for years, individualizing them to a very high degree.

Catalogue

1. Fig. 3/1. Clay vessel with *graffito post cocturam*. Dimensions: 4.8 × 5 cm. Letters: between 0,5–1.4 cm

Storage: National Museum of Union, Alba Iulia.

Description: Plate. Ceramic fragment from the body of the vessel. Traces of reddish-brown slip on the interior and exterior (walls/surfaces) of the vessel.

Provenience: On the floor of the barrack, the first (wooden) construction phase.

Text: CIILSI.

Observations: Fragmentary, written with cursive letters and un-uniform letters. Name in genitive: Celsi.

2. Fig. 3/2. Clay vessel with graffito *post cocturam*. Dimensions: 11.5 cm (rim diameter). Letters: 1.2 cm.

Storage: National Museum of Union, Alba Iulia.

Description: Plate; fine pottery. Ceramic fragment from the upper side of the pot. Everted rim; traces of red slip.

Provenience: On the floor of the barrack, the first (wooden) construction phase.

Text: [---] (I)ONYSI.

Observations: Fragmentary text, written with a combination of cursive and capital letters. Name in genitive. Possible reading: Dionys(i)us.

3. Fig. 3/3. Clay vessel with graffito *post cocturam*. Dimensions: 12.3 × 5.7 cm. Letters: 3.2 cm.

Storage: National Museum of Union, Alba Iulia.

Description: Plate. Ceramic fragment from the body of the vessel. Traces of brownish-red? slip on the interior and exterior of the vessel.

Provenience: On the floor of the barrack, the first (wooden) construction phase.

Text: [---]ITO.

Observations: Fragmentary text, written with capital letters. Because a dative form is very unlikely, we assume it could be a nominative ended in -O (for a name such as Capito).

4. Fig. 3/4. Clay vessel with graffito *post cocturam*. Dimensions: 7.8 × 3.3 cm; Letters: 1.2 cm.

Storage: National Museum of Union, Alba Iulia.

Description: Plate. Ceramic fragment from the body of the vessel. Traces of brownish-red? slip on the interior and exterior of the vessel.

Provenience: On the floor of the barrack, the first (wooden) construction phase.

Text: [---]VTVS.

Observations: Fragmentary text, mainly unreadable, as the stroke is transversal, sectioning the letters. Traces of grazing on the inside as well, but most probably it wasn't writing.

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