

'His Eminence Mírzá 'Abbás Effendi ... Has Reached the Shores of Alexandria' by Betsy Omidvaran

Abstract

Century of Light, the review by the Universal House of Justice of the key developments of the twentieth century, contains a short description of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sojourn in Egypt. This paper starts from the information contained there and follows its leads to investigate the contacts 'Abdu'l-Bahá had with a wide variety of influential people in Egypt, and the impression he made on them.

Background

In the period between 1910 and 1913, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited, Egypt was at the centre of a revival in Arabic intellectual, political and cultural life. It was nominally a part of the Ottoman Empire as it had been for centuries, but its political situation was complicated by two nineteenth-century developments. First, soon after the French occupation of Egypt under Napoleon ended in the first decade, practical control was taken by an Albanian officer in the Ottoman army, Muhammad 'Alí, whose descendants acquired the title Khedive and ruled in one form or another for one hundred and fifty years until Egypt became a Republic in 1953. Second, in 1882, the British invaded, mostly to protect European financial interests and their path to India.

Muhammad 'Alí began the process, which continued over subsequent decades, of closer contact with Europe, initially in order to learn new military techniques, but expanding to include European literature, and social and political ideas. This combined with and stimulated a revival of Islamic education and reformist thought. By 1910, there was a well-established education system, many newspapers and other publications, and a vibrant intellectual and cultural atmosphere: as *Century of Light* describes it, a 'cosmopolitan and liberal atmosphere', which allowed 'frank and searching discussions' with 'prominent figures in the intellectual world of Sunni Islam, clerics, parliamentarians, administrators and aristocrats.'¹

Impressions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Egypt

Abdu'l-Bahá was in Egypt for about one year and nine months altogether, comprising three distinct periods. This was part of his three-and-a-half year journey to Europe and North America. The first time He left Haifa at the end of August 1910 and arrived in Egypt in early September.² He stopped in Port Said on his way to Europe, but ill health led to His remaining for almost a year. After a month he moved to Alexandria; then in May of 1911, he moved to Cairo. On 11 August 1911, he left for Marseilles to spend four months in Britain and France. The second period in Egypt was the months from 2 December 1911 to 25 March 1912, before He left for North America, where he spent nine months and crossed the continent. Then he returned to Europe and spent six months travelling again in Britain and France, then to Germany, Hungary and Austria. The third period in Egypt was at the end of his trip, when He spent the months from 17 June to 2 December 1913, first in Port Said and then moving to Ramleh, a suburb of Alexandria on 17 July. His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and His sister, Bahiyih Khánum, joined Him on 1 August and He left for Haifa in December.³

The description of His sojourn in Egypt contained in *Century of Light* focuses on the first year: '... the months that followed were a period of great productivity whose full effects on the fortunes of the Cause in the African continent especially, will be felt for many years to come.'⁴ It explains that the first year provided the opportunity for His first proclamation of the Faith and also contributed to His success in Europe, as the many Europeans resident in Egypt were able to meet Him and observe the warm reception he received from Egyptians.

The following passage from an Egyptian newspaper is partially quoted in *Century of Light* as part of its description of the importance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Egypt: 'His Eminence Mírzá 'Abbás Effendi, the learned and erudite Head of the Bahá'ís in Akka and the Centre of authority throughout the world, has reached the shores of Alexandria.'⁵ Like most of the material in *Century of Light* related to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Egypt, this was taken from Hasan Balyuzi's biography of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which gives more of the quotation, as follows:

Whosoever has consorted with Him has seen in Him a man exceedingly well-informed, whose speech is captivating, Who attracts minds and souls, Who is dedicated to belief in the oneness of mankind ... His teaching and guidance revolve around the axis of relinquishing prejudices: religious, racial, patriotic.⁶

The article makes other statements which were common in newspaper articles about the Faith in this period, for example, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was very knowledgeable on theology and the history of Islam, and that the Bahá'í Faith had millions of followers all over the world.

This was written by Shaykh 'Alí-Yúsuf (1863-1915) in his daily newspaper *al-Mu'ayyad*. *Al-Mu'ayyad* had been founded in 1889, the first major newspaper owned and edited by an Egyptian Muslim. Before that, the Arabic language newspapers and magazines had been mostly owned and edited by Syrian Christians who had immigrated into Egypt. Shaykh 'Alí-Yúsuf was educated at the al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, the major centre of Islamic education, and his newspaper had been immensely popular. By 1910, it had lost its first position, partly because he remained intensely loyal to the Khedive of the time, 'Abbás Hilmí II, and partially because in the first decade of the twentieth century many other popular newspapers arose in Egypt. According to Balyuzi, Shaykh 'Alí-Yúsuf had previously written derogatorily about the Bahá'í Faith, but changed his mind when he met 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In 1900, 'Alí-Yúsuf had given a positive review to one of the books by Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl, a Bahá'í, but in 1903 had published news of persecutions of Bahá'ís in Yazd, accusing them of slandering the prophets. This may have been the negative article Balyuzi was referring to.

Century of Light also mentions the important role of Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), who had met 'Abdu'l-Bahá, possibly on several occasions, in Beirut in the 1880s. There have been several articles written about this relationship. Muhammad 'Abduh was trained at al-Azhar, where he was closely associated with the well-known and influential Iranian activist Jamál al-Dín al-Afghání (1839-1897), who taught at al-Azhar from 1871 and was exiled from Egypt in 1879. Under al-Afghání's influence, 'Abduh

participated in the 'Urábí revolt which was suppressed by the British invasion in 1882. 'Abduh was then exiled to Beirut in January 1883. After a year in Beirut, he went to Paris, with al-Afghání, where, for six months in 1884, they published the influential journal *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqá*.

Al-Afghání is a ubiquitous figure in discussions of the Middle East during this period. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh refers to him in the *Lawh-i-Dunyá* (Tablet of the World), revealed in 1891, translated into English and published in the *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, as follows:

One wondereth why those who have been the symbols of highest glory should now stoop to boundless shame. What is become of their high resolve? Whither is gone the sense of dignity and honour? ... The aforesaid person [Jamál al-Dín] hath written such things concerning this people in the Egyptian press and in the Beirut Encyclopedia that the well-informed and the learned were astonished. He proceeded then to Paris where he published a newspaper entitled '*Urvatu'l-Vuthqá* [The Sure Handle] and sent copies thereof to all parts of the world. He also sent a copy to the Prison of 'Akka, and by so doing he meant to show affection and to make amends for his past actions. In short this Wronged One hath observed silence in regard to him⁷

Shoghi Effendi also describes him in *God Passes By*, his review of the first hundred years of the Bahá'í Faith, as 'The scheming Jamálu'd-Dín-i-Afghání, whose relentless hostility and powerful influence had been so gravely detrimental to the progress of the Faith in Near Eastern countries ...'⁸

'Abduh then spent the years 1885 to 1888 in Beirut, after which he returned to Egypt. He later became a prominent reformer in Egypt, and was Grand Muftí, the highest Islamic judicial post, from 1899 up to his death in 1905. He was no longer alive when 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited Egypt, but they had kept up a correspondence and, as *Century of Light* points out, his admiration for 'Abdu'l-Bahá 'paved the way' to a degree for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reception there.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá had been invited to Beirut by Midhat Pasha (1822-1884), an Ottoman constitutional reformer, who, from November 1878 to August 1880, was governor of Syria. Hasan Balyuzi, in his book on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, published in 1971, says the visit was in 1878 and quotes from a letter written by Bahá’u’lláh for the occasion.⁹ It begins: ‘Praise be to Him Who hath honoured the Land of Bá [Beirut] through the Presence of Him round whom all names revolve.’¹⁰ However, in his book on Bahá’u’lláh, published in 1980, Balyuzi says the journey was in June 1880, quoting from the same Tablet, which he dates 9 June 1880, and mentions that Midhat Pasha visited Haifa in May 1880.¹¹ Balyuzi also says that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá met ‘Abduh during a visit to Beirut.¹² However, in 1880 ‘Abduh was living in Egypt, and there is no evidence that he travelled to Beirut before 1883, so it is more likely that he met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá at a later date.

A great deal of the evidence for the contact between ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Muhammad ‘Abduh comes from the three-volume biography of ‘Abduh written by his disciple Rashíd Ridá (1865-1935), who had been his student in Beirut as a young man. Ridá was a Syrian who moved to Cairo in 1897 to study with ‘Abduh, and in 1898 he started the journal *al-Manár*, in which he published several articles against the Bahá’í Faith over the years. In *World Order* magazine in 1981, Juan Cole published a report of a conversation in 1897 between ‘Abduh and Ridá about ‘Abduh’s attitude to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which is reported in Ridá’s biography of ‘Abduh. In this conversation Ridá maintains that ‘Abduh had been favourable toward the Bahá’ís and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá but that he had not understood what the Bahá’í Faith really was. He maintains that ‘Abduh’s positive opinion changed when he found out. According to Cole, Ridá says that when ‘Abduh was in Beirut, “‘Abdu’l-Bahá more than once came to Beirut from Haifa and would make a point of attending some of Muhammad ‘Abduh’s study sessions.”¹³

Ridá’s biography of ‘Abduh shows that his time in Beirut was narrated by three sources, Ridá himself, Sayyid ‘Abd al-Básit and Shakíb Arslán, two other students of ‘Abduh. The three accounts are similar, describing lectures at the Sultaníya School, dialogues with religious leaders, his secret society to reconcile the three major monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and

Islam) and the constant stream of visitors. Arslán particularly includes descriptions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visits.

None of the notables or his acquaintances journeyed to Beirut without coming to greet him [‘Abduh]. He honored and exalted each one and, even if he conflicted with him in belief, he did not cease to respect him. Foremost among those he honored was ‘Abbás Effendi al-Bahá, leader of the Bábís, even though the Bábí way is different from what the Shaykh believes and is the creed that al-Sayyid Jamál ad-Dín refuted so strongly. But he revered ‘Abbás Effendi’s knowledge, refinement, distinction, and high moral standards and ‘Abbás Effendi similarly honored ‘Abduh.¹⁴

The reporter quoted here, Shakíb Arslán (1869-1946), was a member of a Druze family in Lebanon, and continued to be a close associate of Ridá. He was later drawn into Arab nationalism and activism for the Arabic language.¹⁵ He was a deputy in the Ottoman Parliament 1913-18, then lived for twenty-five years in Europe, mostly Switzerland, returning to Beirut just before his death in 1946. In Switzerland, he published *La Nation Arabe*, an influential periodical, in French. His influence declined in later years, as he maintained a pan-Islamist tendency after other nationalists had abandoned it.¹⁶ He spent a period in Egypt sometime during the last decade of the nineteenth or the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁷

Just before he moved to Cairo, Ridá had read an article on the Bahá’í Faith written by Mírzá Abu’l-Fadl and published in 1896 in *al-Muqtataf*, a scientific and literary monthly published by Ya’qúb Sarrúf and Fáris Nimr, two Syrian immigrants. It was founded in Beirut in 1876 and moved to Cairo in 1884 and was a leading Arabic publication up to its closure in 1951.¹⁸ Ridá and some of his companions in Beirut wrote a letter of protest to Abu’l-Fadl and received a reply.¹⁹ Ridá met Abu’l-Fadl after he arrived in Cairo in 1897, and had several discussions with him.

Mírzá Abu’l-Fadl had been sent by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Cairo sometime in 1894 or 1895. He began to teach at al-Azhar, was known as a Shí’i scholar and attracted a group of students. After about two years he was revealed to be a Bahá’í, which he did not

deny. Following this, he was free to write articles and books about the Faith. He published the above-mentioned article in *al-Muqtataf*, and followed this with two books. He published *al-Fará'id* ('Precious Gems') in 1898 in Cairo, whereupon some 'ulamá issued a declaration of takfír (unbelief) against him. His next book, *al-Durar al-bahíya*,²⁰ published in 1900, attracted favourable notices from Mustafá Kámil (1874-1908), a popular nationalist leader, in his newspaper *al-Liwa*, and from Shaykh 'Alí-Yúsuf, as previously mentioned, but was opposed by Ridá.²¹ Abu'l-Fadl lived in Cairo until 1900, when he was sent to North America for four years until 1904, when he returned to Egypt and remained until he passed away in Cairo on 21 January 1914.

The publishers of *al-Muqtataf* founded the daily newspaper *al-Muqattam* in 1889, encouraged by the British, who provided financial support. Nimr edited it, while Sarrúf ran *al-Muqtataf*. It offered high quality journalism, supporting the occupation and opposing the Sultan. Like its sister publication, it was secularist in outlook.²² Balyuzi mentions that *al-Muqattam*, in its issue dated 28 November 1910, published a positive article about 'Abdu'l-Bahá.²³

Another newspaper mentioned by Balyuzi as having published a positive report of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was *al-Ahrám*, which was founded in Alexandria in 1875 by two Greek Catholic brothers from Beirut, Salím and Bishára Taqla. It was a weekly newspaper until 1881, when it became daily. It included pure news reportage, plus commercial, scientific and literary items, but avoided controversy and ideology. After the British occupation in 1882, it became more partisan and gained an image as a French mouthpiece.

Balyuzi mentions another newspaper by the name of *Wádí al-Níl*. A newspaper by this name was published from 1867 to 1874. It may have been started again or this may have been a new newspaper or there may be another explanation for Balyuzi's saying that it published an article during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit. *Wádí al-Níl* is a logical name for a newspaper in Egypt, as it means 'valley of the Nile.'

Balyuzi discusses Jurjí (George) Zaydán (1861-1914): 'The eminent writer and celebrated editor of the magazine *al-Hilál* was another leading figure in the public life of Egypt who visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá.'²⁴ Zaydán founded *al-Hilál* in 1892, having moved to

Cairo from Beirut in 1886. It was a direct competitor of *al-Muqtataf* and is still in existence. He also held a regular salon-type gathering in his home, described as follows by Thomas Philipp: 'Once a week, on Tuesdays a soirée was given at the Zaidan's, attended by people from the cultural elite of Cairene society: journalists, writers, historians and sometimes even a teacher from al-Azhar. European orientalist visiting Cairo would join.'²⁵ Philipp says that Zaydan's letters to his son from 1908 to 1912 give many of the names of those attending. This would be in the period of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit, so he may well have attended this gathering, but I do not have access to his letters to his son and have no actual evidence that he did so.

Juan Cole mentions another contact of 'Abdu'l-Bahá with the press in Egypt long before he travelled there. It is a letter that 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote to al-Afghání in response to an article the latter wrote in the newspaper *Misr* ('Egypt').²⁶ The letter is signed 'al-dá'í al-Bábí al-masjún fí Akká, 'Abbás' ('the Bábí missionary imprisoned in Akka, 'Abbás'), which Cole identifies as 'Abdu'l-Bahá. It is not dated, but *Misr* was published only from 1877 to 1879. The letter praises al-Afghání's article and encloses a treatise along similar lines by Midhat Pasha, but Cole does not describe the subject of the article except to say that *Misr* was part of the 'constitutionalist press.' *Misr* was published weekly in Cairo and Alexandria by Adíb Ishaq (1856-84), a Greek Catholic Syrian who arrived in Egypt in 1876 and was deported in 1879. He was a follower of al-Afghání.²⁷

Salím Qub'ayn, in his book, *'Abdu'l-Bahá wa al-Bahá'íya*, quotes two articles published in September and October 1913 by the Egyptian 'Abd al-Rahmán al-Barqúqí (1876-1944) in his monthly journal *al-Bayán*, entitled "'Abdu'l-Bahá afandi, za'im al-Bahá'íyin' ('Abdu'l-Bahá Effendi, Leader of the Bahá'ís):

Among us now and before our eyes and ears is one of the distinguished men of the twentieth century, even one of the distinguished men of the whole world. Suffice it to say that he is the leader of a large religious faith with million of members, spread throughout Egypt, Iran, India, Europe and America, and most of the places of the inhabited world venerate him as they venerate prophets and messengers. The

newspapers, magazines and books in Europe and America devoted to him pages which praise him, spread his call, glorify his heroism. That one is our friend 'Abbás Afandí entitled 'Abdu'l-Bahá, leader of the Bahá'ís and the champion of religious reform in this age, nay chief of the reformers.²⁸

In this article, al-Barqúqí also describes at length his contact with Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl, whom he met for the first time about 1904, presumably upon the latter's return from America. He expresses great admiration for him and says that he and his companions eagerly attended audiences with him. Al-Barqúqí was educated at al-Azhar where he studied with Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh and other reformers. Al-Ziriklí says that his style of expression was pure and beautiful, that he lost money on this journal, which was founded in 1910, and that many of the outstanding literary men of Egypt were contributors.²⁹ Saláma Músá is less complimentary, saying that the aim of *al-Bayán* was to revive 'the old-fashioned dead language' and that it was suspended after a short period of publication.³⁰ Interestingly, in his article, al-Barqúqí says that, if he were a believer in transmigration of souls, he would believe that Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl was the reappearance of Jamál al-Dín al-Afghání, which he intends as a compliment to Abu'l-Fadl.³¹

Interestingly, in his article about 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shaykh 'Alí Yúsuf compared him to al-Afghání:

... his conversation and opinions reminded us of the late Jamál al-Dín al-Afghání and in his grasp of subjects about which he spoke and his attractiveness to those with whom he conversed. However, his knowledge was even greater and he calmed those with whom he spoke and listened to them more than Sayyid Jamál al-Dín did.³²

In addition to meeting editors of newspapers, many of whom published articles, 'Abdu'l-Bahá met a number of other prominent people. One of these was Khedive 'Abbás Hilmí II, the great-grandson of Muhammad 'Alí. Balyuzi reports that 'Abbás Hilmí met Him for the third time on 17 August 1913, but he does not mention the first two times they met, whether they ever met again

or any more details of this meeting.³³ ‘Abbás Hilmí II took office in 1892 at the age of seventeen, following the death of his father, Khedive Tawfíq. He was educated at the Theresianum in Vienna, where he had close contact with the Habsburg court, under the Emperor Franz Joseph, who ruled in style for sixty-eight years from 1848 to 1916 and was among the rulers addressed by Bahá’u’lláh.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s meetings with the Khedive were organized by ‘Uthmán Murtadá Pasha (1865-1935), the Khedive’s head chamberlain. He was from a prominent Albanian family in Egypt and graduated from the School of Law. He served in the public prosecutor’s office and other legal and political positions, until ‘Abbás Hilmí II appointed him head chamberlain. At the beginning of World War I, when the Ottomans joined the Axis powers and ‘Abbás Hilmí II was deposed, ‘Uthmán Murtadá was arrested by the British and exiled to Malta. He wrote articles in newspapers and was active in the nationalist movement and in the freemasons.³⁴ According to Balyuzi, he was ‘devoted to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and was the intermediary arranging meetings between Him and ‘Abbás Hilmí Pasha.’ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addressed him a Tablet in October 1919.³⁵

Star of the West, a Bahá’í-published magazine, of January 1930 reported an interview by American journalist and traveller Martha Root with Prince Muhammad ‘Alí (1875-1955), the younger brother of ‘Abbás Hilmí II, who describes his meeting with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in New York on 22 July, 1912. The Prince said ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was

a great friend of my brother ‘Abbás Hilmí II, the late Khedive ... I met your beloved Teacher first early in 1912 on my way to Paris ... ‘Abbás Bábá has proved to Europeans and the entire West that great generals of the Spirit are still born in the East! ... I was very sad when I heard of His passing, for I considered Him the most important man in our century.³⁶

The Prince called on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in September 1913 in Alexandria.

According to Balyuzi, Shaykh Muhammad Bakhít (1854-1935) was another member of the clergy who called on ‘Abdu’l-

Bahá and received a call in return during ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s sojourn in Cairo in 1911. Balyuzi says he was Muftí of Egypt, but according to al-Ziriklí, Muhammad Bakhít was Muftí of Egypt from 1914 to 1921. Bakhít was educated at al-Azhar, then taught there and in about 1878 transferred to shari’a law. He was associated with Jamál al-Dín al-Afghání and was one of the strongest supporters of Muhammad ‘Abduh’s campaign of reform.³⁷

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also had contact with British officials. He had met Sir Ronald Storrs when the latter passed through Palestine in 1909 on his way to Egypt to take up the post of Oriental Secretary to Sir Eldon Gorst (1861-1911), the British agent and consul-general. Storrs had first gone to Egypt in 1904 as a young British official under Lord Cromer. In *The Chosen Highway*, Lady Blomfield quotes a letter from Storrs saying this, and also that when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited Egypt, he catered for Him and presented Him to Lord Herbert Kitchener (1850-1916), ‘who was deeply impressed by his personality, as who could fail to be?’ Lord Kitchener served as head of the British army in Egypt from 1892 to 1902, and was responsible for the British conquest of the Sudan. Then he went to India from 1902 to 1909, but returned as successor to Gorst in 1911, remaining until 1914. Storrs met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá again after Lord Edmund Allenby (1861-1936) took Syria during the First World War and appointed Storrs governor. Storrs says ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited him in Jerusalem and that he always called on Him when he visited Haifa.³⁸

An integral part of the vibrant intellectual and cultural atmosphere in Cairo were the many regular salons and gatherings. Jurjí Zaydán’s salon was mentioned earlier. It was in its heyday during ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit and may very well have been attended by Him. There were other salons as well, that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá may have attended, but I have no actual evidence that he did. Princess Názlí Fádil’s salon was well-known and brought together Egyptians with English people, including many of the people known to have contact with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Storrs describes it in his memoir, *Orientations*. Mayy Ziyáda (1886-1941) was a poet who had arrived from Beirut in 1911 and held a vibrant salon in Cairo until the late 1920s. Also, the offices of the *al-Jarída* newspaper were a regular meeting-ground from 1907-1914 of a wide variety of people. *Al-Jarída* published an article about the Faith in July

1910, translated from English, just before 'Abdu'l-Bahá's arrival and also Mrs. Jean Stannard, an English Bahá'í who knew Arabic, gave a lecture in its offices on the subject of psychology.³⁹

Conclusion

This paper has presented an overview of currently available information on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Egypt of almost two years, concentrating on His contacts with public figures outside the Bahá'í community, while also placing it in some kind of perspective in relation to the times. I have expanded on the short description given in *Century of Light*, to show the wide-ranging and positive contact that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had with leaders of thought in Egypt during His visit, and to reveal additional paths to further research this topic.

As we have seen, He met a wide range of people, of diverse backgrounds, Christian and Muslim, Syrian émigrés, reforming and more traditional, writers and publishers in the Egyptian press, the *de facto* and *de jure* rulers and prominent Europeans. From this basis of evidence, one can speculate that He may have met a much wider range of people and may have attended some of the vibrant salons and social gatherings of the time in both Cairo and Alexandria.

In the course of exploring these contacts, I have touched on some of His interaction with these people and how He influenced them. Those who met Him express their admiration for His personality and His breadth of knowledge. They were also impressed with the wide spread of the Bahá'í Faith and had a rather exaggerated impression of the number of Bahá'ís in the world at that time. There was some confusion over whether it was a new religion or a religious movement, but it was clear that it had the goal of bringing together all religions. More research remains to be done on this short but fascinating period of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry. It is hoped that this paper will provide historians of the Faith with the encouragement and the incentive to do so.

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