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MOTITI ISLAND, HOKIANGA HARBOUR:
ITS HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Motiti Island, N14/248, is situated in the upper reaches of the Hokianga Harbour at the convergence of the Mangamuka and Waihou Rivers (Fig. 1). Superficially it is nothing more than a grass-covered strip of sand and rock, just visible above the water at high tide. But its apparent insignificance is deceptive. Visitors to the Hokianga in the early 19th century noted that this tiny island contained a thriving Maori settlement, and oral history indicates that its importance pre-dates European colonisation by several centuries.

Over the last 150 years the island has suffered intensive erosion. Historian Jack Lee and a number of local residents are concerned that it could disappear entirely in the near future. Consequently it was visited on 25 January 1988, to assess whether evidence of early occupation still exists and to record any visible archaeological features.

Description

The island lies about 800 m north-east of Kohukohu. It forms a thin sliver of land barely 100 m long, .9 m across on the south-western end and only 2m wide at the north-eastern tip. It is covered in kikuyu grass with a few young pohutukawa recently planted to help retain the sparse soil (Plates 1 & 2). At present it provides a roosting place for seabirds and an excellent source of oysters.

On a land claim plan of 1856 it is described as encompassing an area of 8¼ acres (Fig. 2). This may be an exaggeration, for the survey quite possibly included part of the intertidal zone. However the plan defines a central area covered in vegetation which logically must have been above high water mark. This alone comprised almost 3 acres of land - at least ten times the present size of the island.

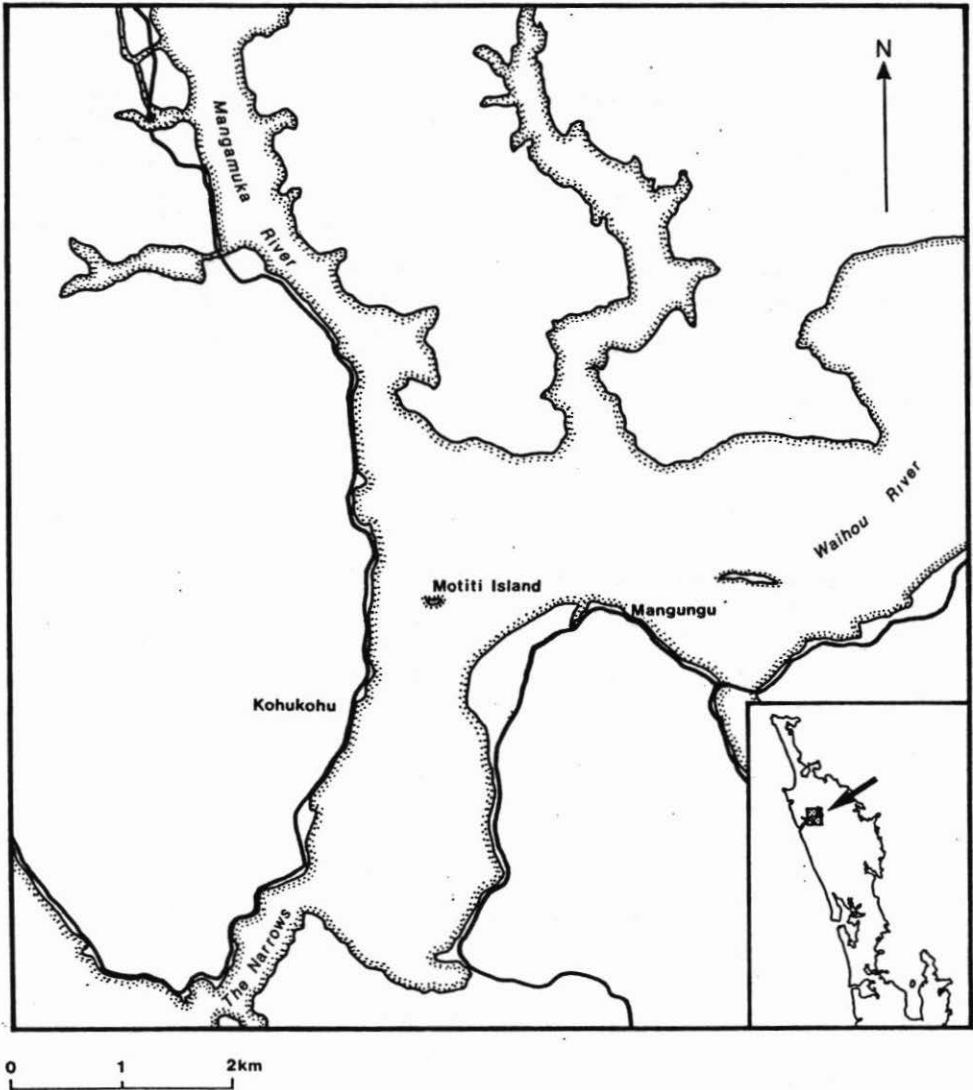
Historical Records

For such a small island Motiti has had a turbulent history, possibly owing to its strategic position at the confluence of two major rivers.

This is emphasised by oral traditions which relate that in the distant past a large area of the North was occupied by Ngatiawa people. They were driven out of the Hokianga by the

LOCATION MAP OF MOTITI ISLAND, HOKIANGA HARBOUR.

FIG.1



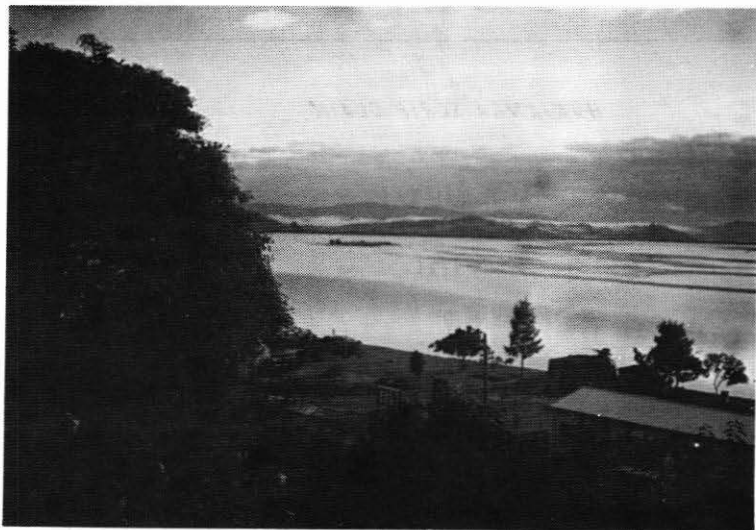


Plate 1. Motiti Island from Kohukohu.

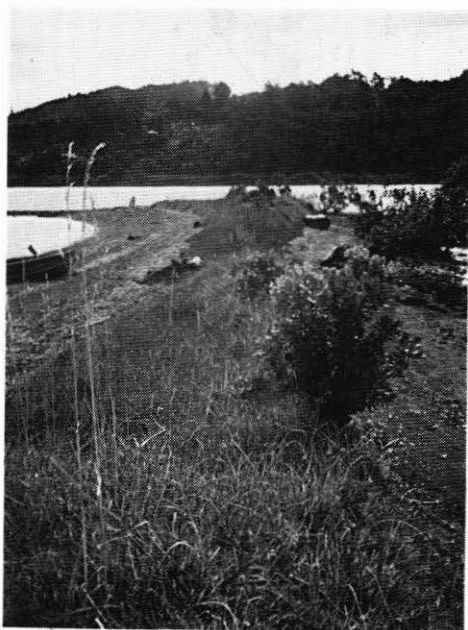


Plate 2. Motiti, looking southwest.

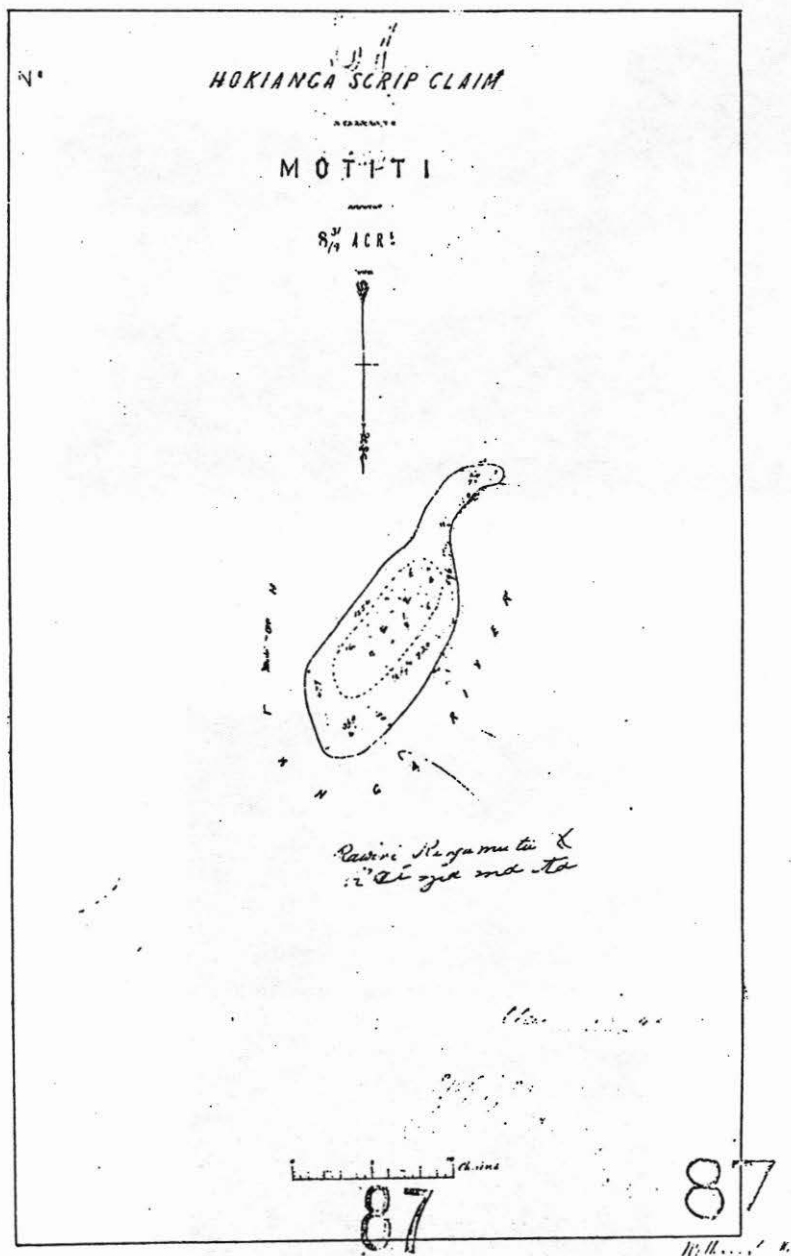


Figure 1. Land claim plan of Motiti, 1856.

famous Ngapuhi chieftain Rahiri and, according to Yarborough, Motiti was involved in their exodus. He states: "The migration of Ngati-Awa from Whanga-pe, or a small part of it, came down the Manga-muka to the island of Motu-iti, where they took refuge, were surrounded and massacred" (Yarborough 1906:222). (Motuiti, meaning "small island", was almost certainly the original Maori name.)

In contrast to this violent episode, reports from the first European visitors suggest that there was a peaceful and prosperous settlement on the island at the beginning of the 19th century.

It must have been Motiti that Marsden described in 1819 as "a small island of little more than half an acre. This island is formed by the meeting at a certain point of the tide from two rivers - the main river Shokee Hanga, and a river that falls into it on the north-east side. On this island stands a little village of inhabitants. The chief is a very old man. We stopped to speak to him. He appeared to have his children and his children's children around him. He was much pleased to see us. I presented him with a plane-iron. He would not let us leave shore till he had presented us with about 300 lbs of potatoes" (Elder 1932:188). A generous gift from a small island where there was neither space nor potential for cultivation.

Marsden's account is supported by McCrae who sailed past a year later and noted: "We had now reached a little island called Moetoo-itte, it was very flat and apparently very populous from the number of houses thereon" (McCrae 1928:21).

There is no suggestion in either report that the island was defended at this time. But somewhere within the next decade Motiti became a fortified site as well as an intensive storage area. Exactly how and why this occurred during the intervening years is not documented, but in 1827 Augustus Earle provided both a written account and a detailed painting of the island.

His painting shows a dense mushrooming of whata (elevated storage platforms), and whare over the whole area (Fig. 3). It offers no clearly visible evidence of defences but his written description leaves no doubt of their existence.

He had ample time to record the scene while his ship was grounded on the opposite shore and reported: "It was a curious and interesting spot, being a native pa and depot, and was entirely covered with store houses for provisions and ammunition. The centre was so contrived that all assailants might be cut off before they could effect a landing; and we were all much gratified by the judgement and forethought displayed in this little military work" (Earle 1909:25).

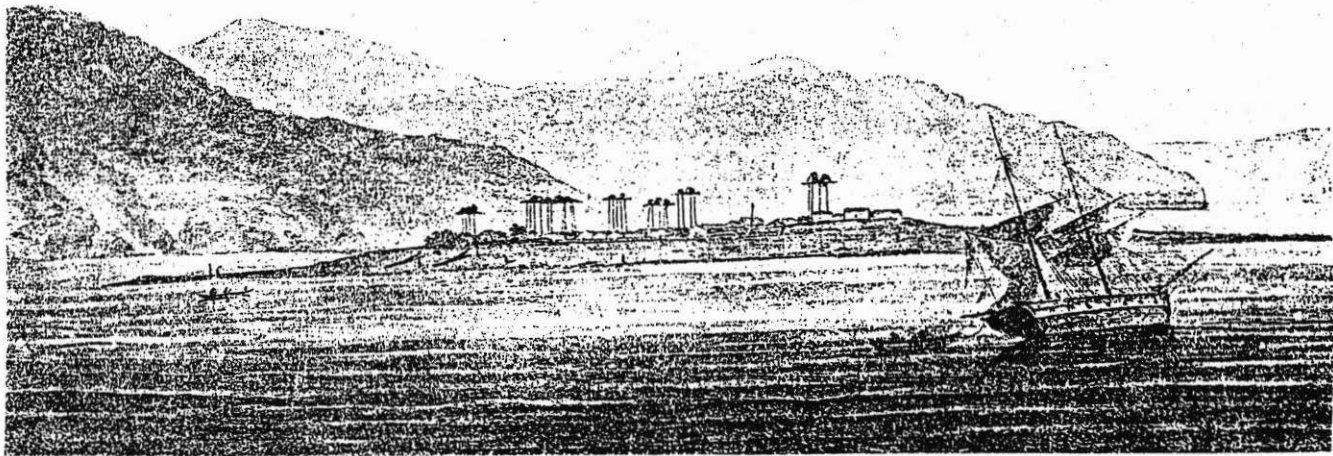


Figure 3. "A FORTIFIED ISLAND IN E-O-KE-ANGHA RIVER, NEW ZEALAND"
by Augustus Earle, 1827.

But however ingenious the defences, they were not proof against European weapons. A few years after Earle's visit the island settlement was attacked and destroyed by the Ngatikorokoro chieftain Moetara. Markham, a local resident, reported the incident in his journal of 1834. "Moyterra cannonaded them (the inhabitants of Motiti) for three days, some years back. He has three 12 pounders, and got some sawyers to mount them, and build platforms in his War Canoes" (Markham 1963:38). It must be assumed that the assault was successful for he adds later that "Moutelietie ... is now a deserted Parr" (Markham 1963:55). (Moetara was a direct descendant of Rahiri, who is said to have decimated the population of Motiti in prehistoric times (Lee 1987:296)).

The pa and storage depot may have been destroyed but the island was not entirely deserted. By the end of 1832 a mission building had been erected to serve as both a school and chapel, and one of the Methodist missionaries spent two days here each week teaching 15 pupils (Gittos 1982:63). The location no doubt provided a relatively central meeting place at a time when travel in the Hokianga was largely confined to the water.

The missionary William White purchased Motiti in 1835. There appear to be two versions of his land claim which show a number of discrepancies. The first is from a biography of White by Gittos, who states that this is the original claim prepared for submission to the Governor of New South Wales. The second is from the 1863 volume of the Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives.

1. Date of purchase 8.6.1835.
 Venors Matu, Tiro, Potae.
 Price £ 50.
 Area 1 (8?) acre(s).
 Description. Island of Motiti, Hokianga (Low rock, little soil).
 Result. Claim allowed. Transferred to F. White.
 File 512 Claim 243.
 (Gittos 1982:128)
2. Claim no. 512; refers to old claims 243.

William White, acreage originally claimed	1
acreage surveyed	8
acreage awarded/granted	8.3.0

Motiti Island; purchased 1835
 Payment to natives £ 23.12.6
 Grant recommended but not issued. Claim preferred by Francis White, and Grant issued to him for 8 acres, 10 June 1862.
 (A.J.H.R. 1863 D:39).

In addition to the discrepancies in area referred to previously, the claims show a considerable difference in purchase price. However as the second version specifically states "payment to natives £23.12.6", it may be assumed that this was the amount that changed hands. In either case a considerable sum was involved considering the size of the island, and comparing this with 250 acres in the Mangamuka area sold for only £15 (Gittos 1982:129).

The price suggests that Motiti was still considered of importance in this final stage of its occupation.

Archaeological Evidence

Only a narrow strip of Motiti is left today but this contains extremely rich archaeological evidence in the form of midden, hangi, numerous stone flakes and the stubs of substantial wooden posts (Fig. 4).

Midden and hangi

Shell midden is exposed intermittently along the northern shoreline. A particularly clear cross-section, marked A on Fig. 4, is at least 30 cm deep and contains mainly small cockle with a few rock oyster, stone fragments and chert flakes.

Fragments of heat-fractured stone are distributed throughout most of the exposed midden but there are also two well-defined hangi scoops, marked B and C on Fig. 4.

B is 2 m long and 20 cm deep. In addition to hangi stones it contains shells of small mud snail, a few cockle, pieces of sandstone and chert flakes.

C is 60 cm long and 23 cm deep. Hangi stones are embedded in a matrix of very dark sandy soil with thick deposits of charcoal. Shell inclusions are sparse, crushed and appear to be mainly cockle.

Stone flakes

Motiti contains natural deposits of yellow and grey banded chert, similar though somewhat finer in texture to deposits at Onerahi, on the Whangarei Harbour (see Nevin 1984:31).

Flakes, cores and nodules of chert are distributed around the whole perimeter of the island with particular concentrations in the intertidal zone at the south-west and north-eastern ends. A surface collection of flakes made on this visit includes several tools showing distinct evidence of use-wear (Plate 3).

Other types of stone were also collected from the foreshore - pieces of jasper and sandstone, flakes of gabbro and basalt,

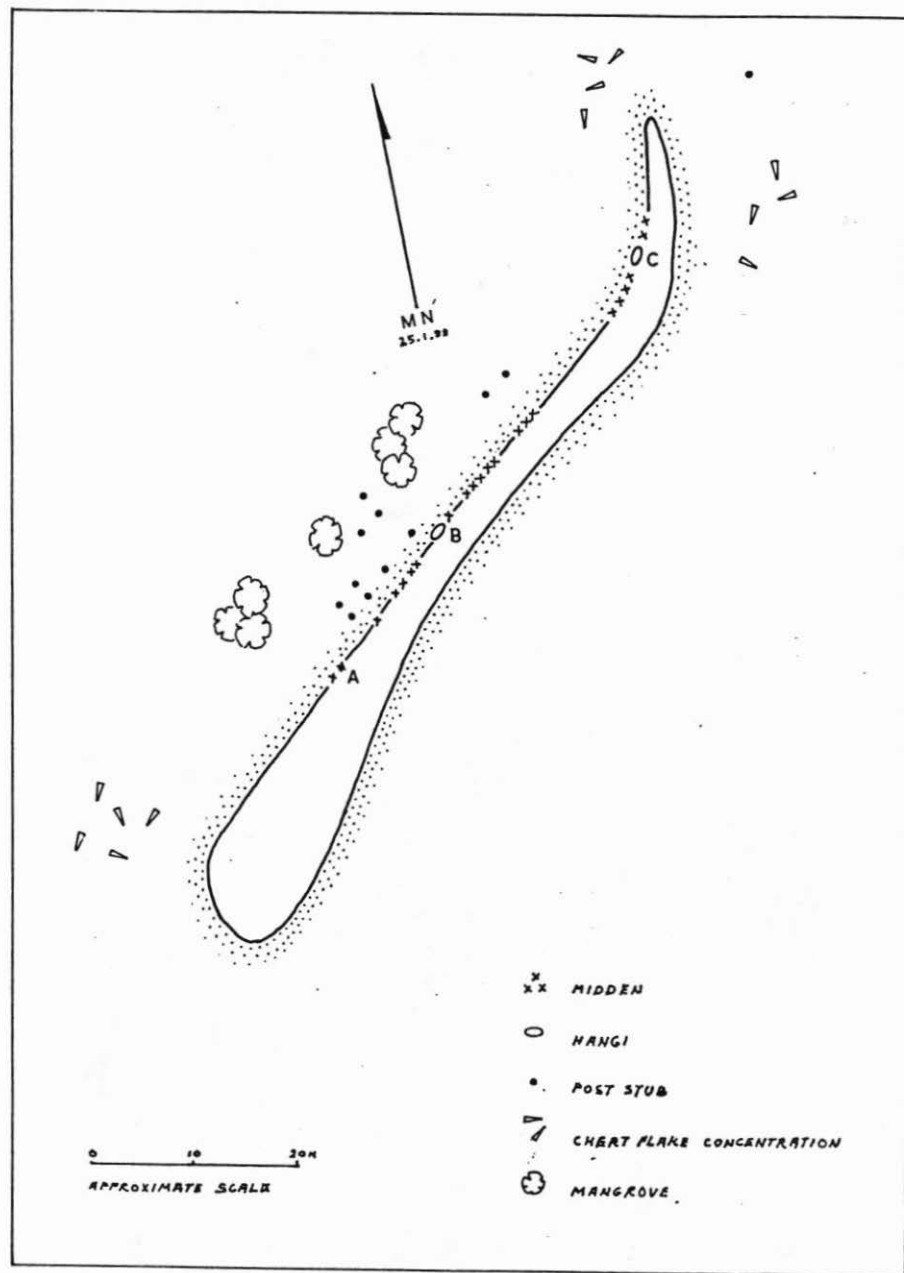


Figure 4. Motiti Island 1988: archaeological evidence.



Plate 3. Chert tools from the shoreline, Motiti.



Plate 4. Post stubs in the intertidal zone.

and two flakes and one large core of obsidian. Two pieces of obsidian are an opaque grey, the other a clear olive-green in colour. These varied stone types are all far less abundant than the chert and must have been transported to Motiti from diverse sources.

Post stubs

Substantial posts stubs are visible at low tide on the northern side of the island. One group of these forms a well-defined rectangle (Fig. 4, Plate 4). It seems probable that they represent the remains of storehouses shown on Earle's painting of 1827.

Their location below high water mark, combined with the marked exposure of midden on the same side of the island, indicates that the northern shoreline has suffered by far the greatest erosion over the last 150 years.

European artefacts

In addition to the evidence of Maori occupation there are also artefacts from the European period scattered along the beach. These include fragments of old glass, china and copper nails.

Overall the archaeological evidence substantiates historical accounts of a prolonged period of occupation.

Discussion

Early records and oral traditions indicate that Motiti was an important site with a long and varied history. This is reflected to some degree in even the surface archaeological evidence.

A chert deposit in such a readily accessible location would have provided a valuable prehistoric resource. The distribution of numerous chert flakes and tools around the shoreline suggest that this was exploited over a considerable period of time.

A relatively permanent rather than transitory occupation of the island is supported by the presence of extensive midden and hangi, imported stone, and the numerous post stubs of whata. These post stubs are of particular interest. It is seldom that clearly defined surface features coincide with details of an early 19th century painting, to provide an immediate interpretation of archaeological data. It may be assumed that sub-surface evidence in combination with Earle's painting would offer significant information concerning this era of Hokianga's history.

In New Zealand the period of initial contact between Maori and Pakeha is considered to be of primary historical importance but it still receives relatively little attention from archaeologists. Potentially Motiti contains a microcosm of Hokianga's history. It could provide a sequence of change from the prehistoric, through the proto-historic, to the early historic period.

Unlike many coastal areas of Northland the island is threatened by natural rather than cultural disturbance but the damage is just as irreversible. It seems improbable that any long term control of erosion can be effected, especially if sea levels continue to rise as currently predicted. Indeed the island could virtually disappear in a heavy storm or unusually high spring tide.

There is little doubt that Motiti contains valuable though highly vulnerable archaeological evidence. This should be retrieved while it still exists.

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