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<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050545>

Article

An Imaginary Byzantium in Early Islam: Byzantium as Viewed through the Sīra Literature

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Abstract: This article examines the emergence of new representations of Byzantium in early Arabic literature, with a focus on the *Sīra*, the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad. This historical investigation leads to a dual conclusions that the Arab perception of Byzantium not only forged an “imaginary Byzantium” but also marked the emergence of Arab self-consciousness. This process significantly influenced the Arab historical and cultural narratives, framing them within the context of the Arabic identity that emerged in late antiquity. Nevertheless, this relationship between the early Islamic community and Byzantium does little to confirm accurate knowledge about Byzantium, rendering the emerging representations as not truly reflective of “reality”, but rather presenting us with an “imaginary Byzantium”. This applies whether related to events in the 1st/7th century or the transition from oral to written texts during the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries. Furthermore, these representations reveal more about the creators of this imaginary than the other itself, shedding light on the motives of early Muslim writers who used the *Sīra* as a vehicle for these imaginaries. Ultimately, the article identifies, through the textual analysis and historical contextualization of *Sīra*, two narrative layers therein that are related to the imaginary Byzantium. The first layer reflected a pervasive fear of Byzantium, while the second layer represented an attitude of challenge and rivalry.

Keywords: imaginary Byzantium; biography of the Prophet Muḥammad; Maghāzī; Sīra



Citation: Yahyaoui, Yassine. 2024. An Imaginary Byzantium in Early Islam: Byzantium as Viewed through the Sīra Literature. *Religions* 15: 545. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050545>

Academic Editor: Halim Rane

Received: 17 March 2024

Revised: 10 April 2024

Accepted: 25 April 2024

Published: 28 April 2024



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1. Introduction

In *the Imagined Orient*, Thierry Hentsch poignantly observed that “This book is not about the Orient, it is about us” (Hentsch 1992, p. ix). This assertion forms the basis of this article by guiding the investigation not into Byzantium itself but into Arab self-understanding as it navigated its representation of the Byzantine other. Through this perspective, the article clarifies the intricate process of identity and otherness that characterised Arab-Islamic cultural narratives in their formative moments.

Since Islam began, the Muslim community has engaged in the complex process of redefining its identity. This dynamic process unfolds through the delineation of the “other” and with the Byzantine Empire serving as the mirror through which Muslims reflected upon themselves and established the legitimacy of their own identity. From the outset, Byzantium was characterised as the antagonistic other, the only entity capable of posing a significant threat to the Muslim community, a perception that was notably intensified after the fall of the Sasanian Empire in the 1st/7th century.

By adopting a historical anthropology approach, this article delves into early Islamic writings to uncover the Arab-Islamic perceptions of Byzantium. This positions the study of the imaginary Byzantium in early Islam as an enquiry into the history of “mentalités” (Le Goff et al. 1978). Such a methodological approach is significant for understanding the processes behind the formation of Arab-Islamic identity following the Arab conquests. Furthermore, this approach delves into the complexities of religious thought by considering how the context of Islamic scholars is reflected in their works and manifested in the

imaginary or, as Le Goff so eloquently phrased it, “to study the imagination of a society is to go to the heart of its consciousness and historical evolution” (Le Goff 1992, p. 6).

The literature available on this subject is relatively scarce, with the majority of scholarly focus placed on the otherness from the 3rd/9th century onwards. Within this context, André Miquel’s work (1975) emerged as a seminal study on Arabic geography and the worldview of Arab scholars up until the mid-4th/11th century. Miquel’s section on Byzantium (ibid., pp. 381–481), offered an in-depth look at how the Arab world perceived and interacted with the Byzantine Empire. Through a detailed examination of Arab sources, Mohamed Tahar Mansouri (1995, 2009) endeavoured to understand the portrayal of Byzantium, focusing on the expressions employed by medieval Arab historians, geographers and travelers. Mansouri’s inquiry into the representation of the Byzantine other uncovered the complex ways in which Byzantium was perceived and described by the Arab world during the medieval period. Complementing this work, Nadia Maria El-Cheikh (2004) offered a profound examination of Byzantium as seen through the eyes of their Arab contemporaries. El-Cheikh demonstrated that the Arabs had a number of nuanced views of the Byzantines ranging from admiration for their administrative skills and artistic achievements to disdain for what were seen as decadent practices and religious heresies. However, it is notable that the bulk of El-Cheikh’s primary sources date back to the 3rd/9th century, with the exception of her analysis of the Qur’ān (30: 1–6), which deal primarily with the Byzantine–Persian conflict (ibid., pp. 24–33).

The attention these studies placed on Islamic–Byzantine relations, based on primary sources from the 3rd/9th century forward, stemmed from the significant emergence of what could be characterised as a form of humanism (Arkoun 1970) or a renaissance (Kraemer 1986) during that era. As a result, a vast array of primary sources emerged that encompassed a broad spectrum of subjects directly related to Byzantium or Byzantine–Islamic relations. These sources comprised various content types, including historical records (Al-Ya’qūbī 1955), geographical texts (Al-Ya’qūbī 1892; Iṣṭakhrī 1961) and general knowledge (*Adab*) works (Al-Jāhīz 1964–1979; Al-Tawḥīdī 1965). Conversely, the 1st/7th and 2nd/8th centuries marked an initial phase in the development of Arab–Islamic historical consciousness, with *Sīra* literature serving as the most notable example (Sezgin 1967; Khalidi 1994). This has resulted in a significant scarcity of scholarly research into Arab Muslim perspectives on Byzantium during this foundational period.

The evident lack of scholarly interest in the *Sīra* as historical documents that illuminate Byzantium is understandable from a historical point of view, if we consider the fact that *Sīra* was a work devoted exclusively to the life of the Prophet Muḥammad and that its authors were either eyewitnesses to events or, at least, belonged to the contemporaneous generation. However, despite *Sīra* literature’s focus on the life of Muḥammad, it is not a contemporaneous source as it was composed more than a century after the events took place. As a result, these sources display numerous anachronisms and contradictions. While the biographies of Muḥammad appear to be a compilation of narratives about Muḥammad’s life and preaching, they are better understood as later constructs marked by retroactive projections onto the earlier period. Therefore, the revisionist critiques that emerged prominently in the 1970s have emphasised this perspective (Crone and Cook 1977, p. 3; Wansbrough 1978, p. 143; Crone 1987, p. 203) and highlighted the inherent gap between the event and the narrative in the Islamic sources. This critique was notably directed toward the *Sīra* literature and the distinction between event and narrative became a focal point of scholarly investigation (Cook 1983, pp. 61–67). This critique relates to both the characteristics of the Islamic sources (Motzki 2017, p. 16) and the context in which they were composed, i.e., during a period that was marked by profound historical transformations across the Arabian Peninsula (Al-Azmeh 2017).

The conclusion that has been drawn from previous examinations of the *Sīra* literature was that the essential structure of early Islamic history retains its coherence (Donner 1998, pp. 28–29), the analysis confirmed that the key events did actually take place (Motzki 2017, p. 13). Therefore, the discourse surrounding these events is constantly shaped by

the motivations of apologetics, self-censorship and the combined accounts (Lecker 2010, pp. 61–62; Donner 1998, p. 256) that, together, form a kind of retroactive projection. This process “stressed the existence of a world not yet *in actu*” (Demichelis 2021, p. 47), a notion Demichelis has compellingly illustrated in his analysis of the the *Maghāzī* narrative and the *Ridda* wars as depicted in Islamic historiography.

This background has made retroactive projections an inevitable aspect of constructing narratives of Islamic identity (Hughes 2022). This process was not only central to defining the religious self in relation to the “religious other”, but also played a crucial role in drawing distinctions related to the “ethnic other”. Therefore, the construction of these narratives was deeply intertwined with the broader process of identity formation, necessitating a re-evaluation of these sources not only as historical records but also as vehicles for articulating a new identity and a new imaginary.

In contrast to these previous studies, the focus of this article is not on the reliability of the accounts in the *Sīra* but on the discourse surrounding the creation of this literary genre. By reflecting on this retroactive projection, this discourse provides a unique lens through which we can explore the imaginary Byzantium and identify the layers within which the associated narratives were framed. Indeed, it is these characteristics that make the narratives invaluable for tracing how the imaginary Byzantium was constructed through its inclusion in the Prophet’s biography. This is precisely what the process of identity construction does, by describing and imagining the “other”, it effectively legitimises the “self”. Thus, the *Sīra* literature played a crucial role as one of the primary centres for this construction process to unfold.

Despite the advantages of this approach, it is essential to acknowledge, at the outset, that it does have some limitations. Firstly, given this study’s focus on the “imaginary Byzantium” created within Arab-Islamic consciousness, my analysis centres on *Sīra* literature that dates to the early Islamic period, from the 2nd/8th to the 3rd/9th century and relies mainly on Mūsā ibn ‘Uqba (d. 141/758), Muḥammad ibn ‘Ishāq (d. 150/767), Muḥammad al-Wāqidi (d. 207/823) and ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām (d. 218/833). However, there are gaps in the historical narratives of this literature that need to be clarified using various external sources. The two main sources available that cover the events of the 1st/7th century in the Byzantine Empire are *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (d. 818 AD) (Theophanes 1997) and *the History of Nikephoros I of Constantinople* (d. 828 AD) (Nicephorus I of Constantinople 1990; Marjanovic 2018). Although these sources detail the conflict between Byzantium and the Muslims, with the Umayyad and Abbasid Dynasties in particular, they largely overlook the developments in early Islam that preceded the reign of Abū Bakr. In addition, according to Jawad Ali’s study of Byzantine historiography (Ali 1993), there is a gap in the works recording historical events that extends from the time of Theophylactus Simocatta (d. 640 AD) to Theophanes the Confessor (d. 818 AD). This means that the events of the seventh century, which marked the rise of Islam and the beginning of the conflict between the Arabic Empire and the Byzantine Empire, were not transmitted by eyewitnesses, but only through the accounts that were recorded a century later by Theophanes the Confessor in his chronicles. This gap in the sources may be explained by the fact that, in the seventh century, Byzantium endured many political crises including the murder and isolation of a several emperors in a brief period, which would have also affected the cultural movements of this period. Ali’s findings are complemented by those of James Howard-Johnston, who also presented an important study of 7th century Byzantine and Arabic histography (Howard-Johnston 2011). According to Howard-Johnston, this era, which began with Abū Bakr and continued throughout the reigns of his successors, marked the start of the early Arab conquests that targeted the Byzantine and Sasanian frontiers. The numerous Arab victories drew attention to them, and thus, for example, Theophanes the Confessor began to record events related to the Arabs starting from 630. Theophanes began in 630 as he considered this to be the year of Muḥammad’s death. He then continued to mention events related to the succession of Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and other caliphs focusing, in particular,

on the battles that the Arabs initiated against Byzantium in which they took control of Byzantine territories (Theophanes 1997, pp. 464–77).

Furthermore, rather than aiming to rewrite the Prophet's biography yet again, this study focuses on specific events related to the hypothesis that the *Sīra* literature perception of Muḥammad's call significantly influenced the reshaping of the imaginary Byzantium. Therefore, this analysis examines how *Sīra* provided a platform for producing this imaginary Byzantium. However, any historical investigation must contextualise events to a certain extent in order to understand how changes in the various political, social and economic structures affected the mental structure “la structure mentale”, particularly the imaginary.

In this regard, I refer to al-Ali's discussion, in particular, on the relations between the Arabs and the Byzantines before the rise of the Islamic Empire. At that time, the relations were specifically focused on trade, which is no surprise considering that Mecca was an important commercial station for caravans from India and Yemen en route to Byzantium (Al-Ali 2000, pp. 131–38). Montgomery Watt also acknowledged the importance of Mecca for trade when discussing the city's external relations in the pre-Islamic period (Watt 1956, pp. 11–16). However, in terms of political relations, the Arabs were not particularly active as they were limited by the conflict between the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. In his study of the period, Robert Hoyland highlights this among other significant political dynamics of the 6th and 7th centuries (Hoyland 2001, pp. 27–32, 49–57, 78–83). Concerning the military elements of the Northern Arabs, especially their recruitment, first, into the army of the Roman Empire and, then, into the army of the Byzantine Empire in the first four centuries, Irfan Shaheed's study on Arab–Byzantine relations is particularly well regarded (Shaheed 1984). Shaheed rounds out our understanding of the political and social context of this region and the factors that contributed to the conflict between the Arabs of Ḥijāz and the Arabs of the North during the emergence of Islam.

This article focuses on the period of early Islam because it was such a defining moment in the history of the Arabs. Djaït underscored this when he claimed that “what the Prophet Muḥammad did was unique and unprecedented in the long Arab history” (Djaït, chp. introduction, para. 10). This demonstrates that the Prophet's experiences and the establishment of the community of believers are cumulatively considered one of the rare events in the history of religions when a religious community effectively transformed into a political power. Even Patricia Crone considered Islam to be a successful example of what Christianity sought to achieve (Crone 2013, p. 560). This community not only extended its authority beyond the founder's lifetime, but did so rapidly and over a vast geographical area. Such expansion enabled competition with neighbouring empires and even their supplantation in some instances. A prime example is the defeat of the Sassanid Empire by the Islamic community, which then established its regime on the ruins of the fallen empire. During its evolution into an empire, Islam consolidated its authority by eliminating competing or threatening forces (Affaya 2000, p. 67).

As a result, the *Sīra* literature not only conveys the Prophet's biography, it also portrays Byzantium as an exemplar of “alterity”, marking this the earliest representation of this concept in Arab-Islamic writings. This proto-imaginary, which also reflected the problem of identity (ibid., pp. 45–50), was prominent in *Sīra* literature, unlike subsequent writings that contain a more detailed and accurate information about Byzantium, such as historical, geographical and literary writings in the Abbasid period (Al-Mas'ūdī 1966; Al-Ya'qūbī 1955; Al-Jāhīz 1964–1979). Thus, the significance of this imaginary stems from the part it played in shaping the Arab self-consciousness in tandem with this important change in the imaginary Byzantium. Therefore, I completely agree with Nadia Maria El-Cheikh's thesis, in which she states the following:

“From the very beginning of Arabic-Islamic historical consciousness, Byzantium served as one of the primary sites of otherness in contrast to which it constituted itself. In other words, Islam defined itself partly in relation to Byzantium's otherness [...]. A dependent correlation existed between the self-image of the

Byzantines and that of the Muslims: one was in reciprocal contrast to the other. A kind of mirror image gave rise to the need to postulate the other to define and legitimate what one is to oneself. In many ways, the self-definition of the Arabs was implicitly connected to their way of relating to the Byzantines and the Byzantines' own self-definition" (El-Cheikh 2004, p. 15)

Leaving aside the outlined of the current state of research, I turn now to my primary task of exploring the concept of "otherness" within the emerging Arab-Islamic culture. Revisiting these beginnings provides valuable insights into the dual process that underlies the development of "otherness" and the rise of Arab self-consciousness as a dominant empire.

In this context, I examined the scope of the knowledge about Byzantium from the within *Sīra* literature, focusing on two key determinants: The first concerns the commercial aspect, which had a long history before the rise of Islam and continued thereafter. The question here is the extent to which this dimension influenced the formation of an imaginary Byzantium during the period under study. The second determinant relates to military conflicts sparked by disruptions in trade routes between the Arabs of the Ḥijāz and the Arabs of the Levant. These conflicts spurred the development of an imaginary construct that was articulated in prophetic discourse and evolved through the wars against the Byzantine Empire during the Umayyad and Abbasid eras.

2. Beyond the Trade Caravans: The Prospects of Trade Relations with Byzantium in the Life of Muḥammad

In the 1st/7th century, Mecca emerged as a pivotal commercial centre within the Ḥijāz region. Its strategic location fostered robust trade relations, not only locally but also with distant Byzantine territories (Al-Ali 2000, pp. 132–33), including the Levant, an area under Byzantine political and cultural influence. This historical background prompts an investigation into the extent of Mecca's commercial connections with Byzantium during Muḥammad's lifetime as, before his prophethood, Muḥammad was a merchant and, thus, visited the Levant frequently.

However, while early biographies of the Prophet, such as those by Ibn ʿIshāq (d. 150/767) and Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833), mention Muḥammad's commercial activities, they often do so only tangentially (Ibn ʿIshāq 1976, pp. 59–62; Ibn Hishām 1955, vol. 1, pp. 187–204). Thus, these narratives omit the discourse on Byzantium in favour of concentrating on affirming Muḥammad's prophecy through external evidence. In particular, this was achieved through the testimonies of the rabbis and monks (Ibn ʿIshāq 1976, pp. 53–55, 90–91, 94) who encountered Muḥammad before he became a prophet. Thus, these narratives emphasise stories of theological importance over detailed accounts of his commercial interactions in the Levant, which would possibly also have included encounters with Byzantine merchants. This emphasis reflects the intent of the early Muslim historians to highlight the mythical aspects of Muḥammad's life, rather than its historicity.

Therefore, the focus will be on the period of Muḥammad's migration to Yathrib, the Medinan period, up to his death. This era marks a pivotal turning point that facilitates tracing the transformation of the imaginary Byzantium. Thus, it could be argued that this marginal event in the Ḥijāz significantly changed the imaginary Byzantium.

2.1. Moving to Yathrib and the Transition from Trade to Raid

The biographical sources on Muḥammad offered limited insights into the economic resources of the community of believers during the Meccan period. For instance, Al-Wāqidī (Al-Wāqidī 1984, vol. 2, p. 2) did not begin his work on the *Maghāzī* with the Meccan period, but with the expedition of Ḥamza ibn ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, which according to Islamic tradition was the first expedition sent out by Muḥammad after his arrival in Yathrib (Ibn Saʿd 1968, vol. 2, p. 6). Furthermore, in the *Maghāzī* of Musa ibn ʿUqba, the section on the Meccan period was lost, and the recently rediscovered manuscript starts from the second year after the Hijra (Ibn ʿUqba 2023, vol. 1, p. 112). In contrast, Ibn ʿIshāq and later Ibn Hishām provided few details about some of the early followers of Muḥammad who were

notable merchants, such as Khadīja bint Khuwaylid, who according to the sources was a successful merchant ([Ibn ʿIshāq 1976](#), pp. 59–60; [Ibn Hishām 1955](#), vol. 1, p. 187), and Abū Bakr, who, in addition to being a merchant, was reported to have freed slaves tortured by the Quraysh ([Ibn ʿIshāq 1976](#), pp. 121, 171–72; [Ibn Hishām 1955](#), vol. 1, pp. 250, 318).

However, economic details become more prominent in the Medinan period, a change that is markedly observed from the Battle of Badr onwards ([Ibn ʿUqba 2023](#), vol. 2, p. 18; [Ibn ʿIshāq 1976](#), p. 285; [Ibn Hishām 1955](#), vol. 1, p. 607). This significant battle and its historical background shed light on the economic circumstances of the community of believers in Yathrib, a city or urban tribal grouping situated strategically on the trade route linking Mecca with the Byzantine territories in the Levant.

During this period, Muḥammad significantly advanced his mission by founding a community in Yathrib that believed in his call and prophecy. This political transformation necessitated the identification of new economic resources to support the community, especially as most of the Muhājirūn that left Mecca were economically disadvantaged. The slaves benefitted from leaving Mecca by being emancipated from the Meccan aristocracy's bondage ([Belkziz 2005](#), p. 162). As for most of the merchants who moved to Yathrib, they were forced to leave all their property in Mecca ([Ibn Hishām 1955](#), vol. 1, p. 499). This predicament was often ridiculed by the Meccan aristocracy, who derided Muḥammad's following for comprising only slaves, the impoverished and the downtrodden (*ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 317). As a result, it was imperative to address the plight of the Muhājirūn in order to ensure that the arrival of the Prophet and his followers did not overburden Yathrib's people beyond their financial capacities, especially since the system of brotherhood (*ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 604) set up by Muḥammad did not allow the Muhājirūn to settle in Yathrib and stay there permanently and for the long term.

Given the situation in the Hijāz and Yathrib, the community had three main alternative options. The first option was to engage in an agricultural economy. Unlike Mecca, which was known for its commercial activity, Yathrib's economy was chiefly agricultural, given its status as an oasis. However, it was essentially a subsistence economy, barely sufficient for the settlement of the Aws and Khazraj, the principal tribes in Yathrib. This situation did not facilitate the long-term settlement of the new arrivals. Furthermore, the Muhājirūn from Mecca faced challenges in adapting to Yathrib's farming practices ([Belkziz 2005](#), pp. 163–64). Not only did they lack agricultural expertise, but there were also many obstacles to their acquiring farmland as this was already a limited resource.

The second option was to make Yathrib a commercial station connected to the trade routes leading to the Levant and Byzantine territories. However, realizing this option proved challenging due to Yathrib's limited geographical and economic prospects. Additionally, the Arabs of the north preferred to conduct trade with Mecca's wealthy families, which further complicated the situation, given the deep-rooted nature of the trade relations between the Quraysh and the Ghassanids. Al-Tabari mentioned the early beginnings of these interactions, stating that Hāshim ibn ʿAbd Manāf (d. 497 AD), the great-grandfather of Muhammad, "was the first to institute the two yearly caravans of winter and summer for Quraysh", and he was also the first to conclude a treaty with the Ghassanids on their behalf ([Al-Ṭabarī 1987–2007](#), vol. 6, p. 16; [1968](#), vol. 2, p. 252). Nevertheless, Muḥammad's directive to intercept Quraysh caravans might suggest that the initial strategy was to reposition Yathrib as a trade centre. While the primary sources remain silent on the long-term objectives of Muḥammad's raids on the caravans, the notion that he aimed to establish Yathrib as a commercial station is a credible hypothesis. However, ultimately, such actions strained Yathrib's relations with the Arabs of the north, the custodians of Byzantium's eastern frontiers, due to the heightened danger to caravan security.

Therefore, even if the Muḥammad's long-term plan was to establish Yathrib as a commercial station, he had to choose a third option, which was to redirect the trade route through Yathrib, thereby disrupting the secure route between the Levant and Mecca. Such a manoeuvre directly contested the Quraysh's dominance over these trade paths and the interests of the northern Arabs, which precipitated an unavoidable and inevitable conflict

in Ḥijāz (Djaït 2012, chp. 5, para. 22). As a result, the limited economic prospects in Yathrib can be said to have led to the strategic decision to raid trade caravans and Bedouin tribes in the vicinity, which explains why this activity became the basic pillar of the new community's economy. The ensuing military conflict provides us with valuable insight into the imaginary Byzantium as an image of "otherness".

2.2. The Impact of the Raid on Trade Relations with Byzantium

Based on this assessment, it appears that the third option, involving the initiation of raids and the obstruction of trade caravans from Mecca to the Levant, served dual economic and political purposes. The Battle of Badr is a prominent example of this dynamic, particularly when viewed through the lens of Islamic tradition. This tradition did not neglect to highlight the economic motivations behind the attempt to intercept a Quraysh trade caravan (Ibn 'Uqba 2023, vol. 2, p. 19; Ibn 'Ishāq 1976, p. 287; Al-Wāqidī 1984, vol. 1, p. 20; Ibn Hishām 1955, vol. 1, p. 607). In analysing these historical events, it is crucial to consider the influence of retroactive projections. Demichelis emphasised that the expeditions directed by Muḥammad, as well as the subsequent *Ridda* wars, were intended to retroactively legitimise the Arab conquests with an Islamic ideology, as they represent jurisprudential precedents (Demichelis 2021, pp. 45–46). While this interpretation has its merits, it is also important to consider the socio-economic needs of the emerging community of believers in Yathrib. These necessities dictated choices that would have a profound impact on the development of Arab identity, even if those at the time were not conscious of it (Djaït 2012, chp. 3, para. 16).

This approach also aligned with Muḥammad's primary goal following his move to Yathrib, which was to undermine Mecca's economic and political hegemony (Al-Jabri [1990] 2000, p. 100). Indeed, Marshall Hodgson has also suggested that Muḥammad may have planned to undermine Mecca's economic foundation noting that "it may have been that Muḥammad already had the aim of ruining their trade and reducing them" (Hodgson 1974, p. 175).

The economic dimension was central to this power struggle as the Quraysh aristocracy's opposition to Muḥammad's prophecy did not stem from a lack of familiarity with monotheism or biblical traditions. It was, in fact, the broader social implications of Muḥammad's mission that posed a threat to the economic interests of the merchant aristocracy (Shaban 1979, p. 26). Consequently, the success of Muḥammad's call inherently signalled the potential collapse of Mecca's economy, making conflict with the Quraysh aristocracy virtually unavoidable. In pursuing this objective, Muḥammad initiated the Battle of Badr, in which he directly challenged Mecca's principal economic lifeline and initiated steps to economically weaken it, thus setting the stage for its eventual demise. The conquest of Mecca symbolised not just Muḥammad's triumph over the Quraysh aristocracy, but also brought the most important religious centre in Arabia under his control.

However, conducting raids alone did not bring about political centralization nor the development of a stable economic system. Recognizing the need for additional sources of economic support to reinforce Yathrib's economy, Muḥammad sought ways to diversify its income streams by moving from voluntary charities to mandatory taxes based on religious grounds. This significant economic transition was achieved through the institutionalization of "zakāt", a religiously mandated tax on Muslims, that is, the community who believed that Muḥammad was a prophet, and "jizya", a tax imposed on non-Muslims, that is, on other people of the Book "ahl al-kitāb" who did not believe in Muḥammad's prophethood but lived under Muslim rule. Islamic charity taxation had an important role in determining how Muslims defined identity boundaries in early Islam. In addition to being a religious duty, taxation also had political implications (Salaymeh 2016, pp. 333–67).

Furthermore, in the early Islamic period, especially during the Prophet Muḥammad's life-time, distinguishing between different communities and drawing boundaries between them was a very challenging and highly anachronistic task, primarily due to reading the Prophet's biography through the writings of the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries. Never-

theless, in his work on the “community of believers”, Donner offers a unique perspective on this problem (Donner 2010). Considering, for example, the earliest historical document from the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, the Constitution of Medina, or *Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīna*, it is possible to delineate the community of Muslims, that is, the Meccans who believed in Muḥammad and were referred to as the Muhājirūn in Islamic sources. It is then possible to distinguish them from the community of believers, which not only includes those who believed in Muḥammad, but also those who believed in one God, specifically Jews, Christians, and even Zoroastrians. However, these definitions, as they appeared in the *Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīna*, completely disappeared as Islam became an empire and new categories were introduced that redefined who Muslims were and relocated Islam within the changing geopolitical context.

The transformation of Yathrib’s economy and its political consequences revealed changes in the imaginary Byzantium related to two main determinants. First, the economy based on taxes and the spoils from raids was naturally bound to foster a negative attitude towards trade with the Levant. Second, the centralization of economic and political power rapidly reinforced the power of the new community in Yathrib and prompted the establishment of an unprecedented military force in the Ḥijāz region. This was no longer an army of unorganised volunteers bound by simple tribal loyalty, but an organised army, structured on the principle of belonging to the “Ummah” (Al-Jabri [1990] 2000, p. 250), or what Hodgson more accurately referred to as a “neo-tribe” (Hodgson 1974, pp. 173–74), a new social organization grounded in the community of believers who followed Muḥammad. Consequently, the focus on military development became paramount for Muḥammad, a fact supported by various primary sources (Al-Wāqidi 1984, vol. 2, p. 523) that detail his allocation of a fifth of the raid spoils for procuring horses and weapons.

This situation, which accompanied the economic shift from trade to taxation and raids, marked a significant change that occurred during Muḥammad’s lifetime. It underscored the closure of the path to understanding the Byzantines through peaceful trade, trade that was once a conduit for exchanging knowledge and cultural imaginaries. Furthermore, these changes profoundly reshaped the new community’s imaginary of Byzantium, which had initially emerged as an existential enemy posing a real threat. Over time, this perception evolved, and Byzantium came to be viewed not merely as an adversary but as a rival to be surmounted. This shift coincided with the growth of Arabs’ self-consciousness and confidence, and was spurred on by the political unification of the Arabian Peninsula and the belief in their ability to confront the Byzantine army and win.

3. Swords and Imaginary: The Impact of the Arab Conflict in the Arabian Peninsula on the Formation of a New Imaginary Byzantium

The Arab’s interactions with their neighbouring powers, were predominantly based on trade dynamics. It was not a relationship of equals, as the Arabs simply acted as mediators between the empires and kingdoms around them. At the same time, the Arabs of the Peninsula had no unified bond, since the tribal affiliations were stronger than ethnicity. Therefore, comparing their condition with those of the neighbouring civilisations, such as the Sasanians and Byzantines, only resulted in self-abuse and contempt. Such comparisons underscored a profound sense of powerlessness against the major actors of late antiquity (Demichelis 2021, p. 42). However, the early Islamic period marked the beginning of a new identity formation, reshaping Arabs’ self-perception and their view towards others. Byzantium was no longer that venerable empire when Muḥammad, before his death, ordered an army to be sent to the borders separating the Arabian Peninsula from the Levant, as the Islamic narrative claimed.

Having analysed the influence of the new community in Yathrib on trade dynamics within the Ḥijāz region and its repercussions on the imaginary of Byzantium, we can now trace the sequence of historical events that catalysed the emergence of a new identity across the Arabian Peninsula. This exploration includes the initiation of conflicts with Byzantium

that gradually fostered a perception of the Arabs as counterparts equal to their Byzantine adversaries.

3.1. *The Arabian Peninsula in Transformation*

Islam would not have been victorious during the lifetime of its founder without the military force that supported his call and countered the Arabian tribes that opposed him. Upon his arrival in Yathrib, Muḥammad recognised the need for such a force to safeguard the new community after he faced existential challenges from the Quraysh and the Jewish tribes of Yathrib. Thus, from the second year of the Hijra, employing military action as a means to further the religious call emerged as the only viable strategy for unifying the Arabian Peninsula (Djaït 2012, chp. introduction, para. 20). This led to Mecca's peaceful surrender in 8/630. The outcome was a culmination of several key events, starting with the decisive Battle of Badr in 2/624, the first military confrontation between Muḥammad's followers and the Quraysh. This was followed by the participation of the ʿAnsār and the Muhājirūn in the Battle of ʿUḥud in 3/625, and the significant Battle of al-Khandaq and the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyya in 6/627. Together, these battles set the stage for the ultimate submission of Mecca to the emergent Islamic authority in 8/630 alongside the notable expansion in the economic resources of the new community that was paralleled by the augmentation of their military prowess and the allegiance of numerous Bedouin tribes in the Ḥijāz to Muḥammad's authority.

The conquest of Mecca as narrated in the sources for the Prophet's biography was particularly significant due to the symbolic importance of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula. The decisive victory by the Muslim forces not only represented a pivotal moment but also symbolised the ascendancy of Muḥammad's God over the traditional deities of Arabia. This point was further accentuated by the manner in which the Muslim forces entered Mecca, highlighting the critical role of their formidable military presence. This event was a show of strength and a warning to the rest of the Arab tribes that their fate would be the same as the Makkans' if they opposed the new power. Indeed, the conquest of Mecca was a step towards taking control of the Arabian Peninsula, a feat that was only achieved after having subdued the south of Ḥijāz and dismantling the tribal alliance between the Thaḳīf from the settled areas and the nomadic Hawāzin (Al-Wāqidi 1984, vol. 2, p. 802), making al-Taʿīf, the second most important city after Mecca, the next challenge.

Following this strategy, Muḥammad marched from Yathrib to Mecca and then moved on to al-Taʿīf. While on this new path, the Muslim army encountered a significant Bedouin coalition led by the Hawāzin, their first engagement with such a large alliance, in which they demonstrated their military prowess with a notable victory. Despite the Hawāzin coalition's formidable presence, it could not withstand the might of Muḥammad's organised and urbanised force. Although the subsequent siege laid on al-Taʿīf, following the triumph over Hawāzin, did not yield immediate success, the city recognised its inability to counter the rising power within the Ḥijāz. Consequently, al-Taʿīf opted to submit to Muḥammad without war just a few months after Mecca's capture in 8/630.

The conquest of Mecca, a pivotal commercial and pagan religious centre in the Ḥijāz, coupled with the defeat of the strongest tribal alliance in the region profoundly influenced the emergence of a new identity. At this juncture, the Muslim community successfully achieved political unification in the Ḥijāz region. It was only after a few years that the whole Arabian Peninsula experienced a politico-religious monotheism, under the reign of Caliph Abū Bakr. Then, the expansion of Islam in the regions of Iraq and the Levant led to a change in this concept of politico-religious monotheism, so that the Arabic ethnicity became a basic determinant of the political structure referred to as the ʿAṣabiyya by Ibn Khaldūn (2005). The strength of this overlap between the ethnic and the religious came into its strength with Umayyad rule. However, returning to Muḥammad's lifetime, it seems that the call to religious monotheism was preceded by a crucial step: political monotheism.

Nevertheless, despite the significance of these accomplishments, they necessitated further endeavours, both diplomatic and military in nature (Djaït 2012, chp. 14, para. 1),

which explains the emerging interest in the northern region and the Byzantine borders, which was the only region that could have posed a real threat to the Prophet Muḥammad's religious project and political achievements.

3.2. *The Other as a Threat: The North as an Existential Challenge to the New Community*

Establishing Yathrib as the focal point of Muḥammad's call necessitated constant vigilance against the Ghassanids. As clients of the Byzantine Empire and custodians of the Levant, these northern Arab tribes experienced considerable disruptions to their economic interests following Muḥammad's conquests of Mecca and al-Ta'if (Al-Ṭabarī 1987–2007, vol. 6, p. 16; 1968, vol. 2, p. 252). The relevance of the relation between the Yathrib community and the Ghassanids to the concept of imaginary Byzantium stems from Islamic sources, particularly the biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad, which often blur the distinction between the Byzantine Empire and the Ghassanids when addressing the northern threat. Written over a century after the events, these sources appear to prefer presenting the northern enemy as the Byzantine Empire, "Rūm" as they are referred to. Moreover, they tend to amplify the enemy's strength, whether in numbers or capabilities, aiming to underscore the Yathrib community's resilience and to highlight Muḥammad's stance against Heraclius (Ibn 'Uqba 2023, vol. 3, p. 99; Ibn Hishām 1955, vol. 2, pp. 375–82).

It is generally agreed, in line with the Islamic sources (Djaït 2012, chp. 13, para. 17), that the real threat to Muḥammad's call did indeed come from the north. The Ghassanids had already undertaken measures to constrain the rising power in Yathrib before these events took place, and this had resulted in several skirmishes between the two sides. Therefore, in this section, I explore the *Sīra* literature's narratives of two key events: the raid on Dūmat al-Jandal and the Battle of Mu'ta, as they are both significant in tracing the development of an imaginary Byzantium during this period, an imaginary that is characterised by a fusion of admiration and fear.

Dūmat al-Jandal, located in northern Ḥijāz and a vital trading hub within the region, gained significant strategic prominence at this time. This recognition was primarily due to its central role in the intensifying conflict between the emerging Islamic power and the Ghassanids. Historical accounts, notably those by al-Wāqidī, report that, in 5/626, the Muslims initiated a raid on Dūmat al-Jandal with the objective of weakening the stranglehold some of the tribes affiliated with the Ghassanids had on the vital trade route linking the Levant with Yathrib (Al-Wāqidī 1984, vol. 1, p. 403). This route was essential for transporting essential commodities including flour and oil (Al-Wāqidī 1984, vol. 1, p. 403; vol. 3, pp. 989–90; Ibn al-Athīr 1996, vol. 2, p. 282).

Although the raid concluded without any direct confrontation, its importance was highlighted by the response of the Ghassanids, who viewed any challenge to their dominance as an insult to Byzantine authority. This was made evident by Muḥammad's warning that venturing near the Levant would antagonise Heraclius. Al-Wāqidī captured this in the Ghassanids' warning that "if you approached the Levant, it would make Caesar angry" (Al-Wāqidī 1984, vol. 1, p. 403). Subsequently, rumours emerged about the movement of Byzantine allies toward Yathrib (ibid.).

Not long after this event, al-Wāqidī reported on an exchange (ibid., vol. 2, pp. 555–56) that involved a correspondence between Muḥammad and Heraclius that mentioned an assault on Muḥammad's envoy by the Judām tribe members, who were recognised as clients of the Byzantine Empire. On his return journey, Muhammad's envoy was stripped of all his belongings. The al-Wāqidī's silence regarding the details of the correspondence, given the prominence of both the sender and the receiver, is striking.

This sequence of events, starting with a raid on Dūmat al-Jandal, was followed by concerns that this foray into Byzantine's southern borders might provoke Heraclius. This culminated in the sending of an envoy to Heraclius some months later. Presuming this account is authentic, it bridges the narrative gap left by Islamic sources regarding the correspondence's content. However, the credibility of the account detailing the envoy's interception is subject perhaps questionable given the Judām were the guardians of the

Byzantine frontiers and it is, therefore, unlikely that they would have intercepted an envoy coming from Heraclius. Assuming the incident did occur, the envoy's confrontation likely happened before they reached Heraclius, considering the message's content could have potentially condemned them. Given this historical background, the letter seems to have been less about religious propagation and more a reassurance to Heraclius that Muḥammad had no intention to invade. Rather, it may have even portrayed the actions as defensive strategies against possible attacks from northern Arab tribes.

Assuming this hypothesis is valid, we can understand why the *Sīra* sources were silent about the content of this correspondence: they depict Muḥammad not as a prophet and a strong leader, but as a politician and negotiator cautious not to antagonise Heraclius. Considering the *Sīra* was compiled over a century after these events, its authors would have been less likely to draw attention to such a letter that presented Muḥammad in a manner contrary to the image they had created of him as Islam transformed into a vast empire.

Exploring the insight gained from considering the raid on Dūmat al-Jandal, the Battle of Mu'ta provides an additional perspective for analysing Arab perceptions towards Byzantium. The confrontation between Muḥammad's followers and the Ghassanids escalated in the seventh year after the Hijra. The hostility was triggered by the assassination of Muḥammad's messenger to the king of Busra by a Ghassanid leader ([Al-Wāqidī 1984](#), vol. 2, pp. 760–65) and intensified by the subsequent killing of fifteen Muslims in the Dhat Atlah region the following year (*ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 752–53). In response to these provocations, Muḥammad, as documented in the *Sīra* sources, dispatched an army of three thousand men to the Battle of Mu'ta in Jumada al-Awwal, 8/September, 629. This battle unfolded shortly after Heraclius and the Persian general convened at Arabissos in Cappadocia in July, 629 AD, to finalise peace terms between Byzantium and the Persians ([Vasiliev 1952](#), vol. 1, p. 197; [Kaegi \[1992\] 2005](#), pp. 72–73).

Despite indications that Muḥammad had aimed his military efforts at the Ghassanids ([Djaīt 2012](#), chp. 12, para. 9; [Demichelis 2021](#), pp. 43–46), prominent *Sīra* narrators like al-Wāqidī (vol. 2, p. 756) and Ibn ʿIshāq ([Ibn Hishām 1955](#), vol. 2, pp. 375–82) portrayed the confrontation as primarily against Byzantium, even going so far as to claim that Byzantine forces numbered over one hundred thousand men. In examining the historical narratives surrounding the Battle of Mu'ta, it becomes evident that the distance in time from the actual event correlates with an intensification of the exaggeration in and fictional aspects of the reports. A notable illustration of this phenomenon is found in the works of Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ḥalabī (d. 1044/1635), who introduced numerous details that were not present in Ibn ʿIshāq's earlier account, thereby enhancing the battle's legendary and epic elements. One striking example of this embellishment is the reported size of the opposing forces; according to al-Ḥalabī, the Byzantine army numbered two hundred thousand as it was supplemented by fifty thousand northern Arabs ([Al-Ḥalabī 2006](#), vol. 3, pp. 95–96). However, this exaggeration of the size of the Byzantine army, which is especially unlikely considering its presence in the Mu'ta area, diminishes the authenticity of the account. Furthermore, there is much evidence challenging the presence of the Byzantine army in this area. For example, according to Roman and Byzantine historiography, no regular army had been camped in this region since the third century ([Kaegi \[1992\] 2005](#), p. 72). Moreover, archaeological findings have indicated that the earliest signs of Roman presence date back to the first or second century, suggesting the forces confronted by the Muslims were the Byzantine border guards from northern Arabs (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, the Islamic narrative demonstrates that Byzantium was perceived as a dominant power that had instilled fear among the Ḥijāz Arabs leading up to that time.

The *Sīra* accounts of the raid on Dūmat al-Jandal and the Battle of Mu'ta reveal a substantial discrepancy between perceived notions and historical realities in the Yathrib community's view of Byzantium. This discrepancy underscores the evolution of the imaginary and its distortions over time that manifested as narrative layers. These accounts of Dūmat al-Jandal and Mu'ta exemplify such distortions by highlighting 1st/7th century events where the emerging Muslim community confronted northern Arab tribes under the

shadow of Byzantine apprehension. Despite these narratives being written in the 8th and 9th centuries, this underlying fear persisted as a profound layer, upon which other layers depicting Byzantium in varying lights would accumulate. As these layers built up, the tone of defiance became increasingly pronounced, a trend that will be further explored in the next section.

3.3. *The Expedition of Tabūk: The Equal Relationship between the Self and the Other*

After Muḥammad gained control over Mecca and al-Tāʾif, events that could be considered a political unification of the Ḥijāz region, rumours circulated that the Byzantine empire was preparing an army to annihilate the emerging new power. Islamic sources do not clarify the origin of these rumours—whether they stemmed from the Ghassanids, the northern Arabs whose interests were severely impacted by the developments in the Ḥijāz, or if Muḥammad himself spread these rumours to rally Muslims for a northern military campaign. Al-Wāqidī (vol. 3, p. 990) shed light on this uncertainty, positing that the dissemination of such rumours could have been a tactical manoeuvre by the northern Arabs designed to sow fear among Muslims and thwart further incursions into northern Ḥijāz. Regardless, the expedition of Tabūk did not advance deeply into the border regions between the Ḥijāz and the Levant, preferring instead to remain in areas where their presence would not be seen as a provocation. This decision came in the wake of the Muslim army's previous defeat at Mu'ta, suggesting that their approach was more about demonstrating power than seeking direct confrontation (Djait 2012, chp. 13, paras. 15–16).

Although the *Sīra* sources mention faith as a motive, emphasizing adherence to the Prophet Muḥammad's commands as outlined in Surah al-Tawbah (Q 9: 120–121; Al-Jabri [1990] 2000, pp. 122–28), they also highlight a materialistic aspect—the anticipation of gains and spoils for those participating in the expedition. This focus on material spoils not only painted a geographical imaginary of Byzantine territories that evoked visions of their affluence but also, more significantly, revealed the nascent realization among Arabs of their capacity to confront the neighbouring empires. This event marked a pivotal moment in the shaping of Arab self-consciousness and a significant shift in the community's identity.

However, there were dissenting voices within the community who resisted this transformation. For example, Ibn Hishām and al-Wāqidī mentioned a person's objection to the Tabūk expedition, saying the following: “Do you consider fighting against the Banu al-Asfar equivalent to fighting the Arabs? By God, tomorrow it would be as if you were chained with ropes.” (Al-Wāqidī 1984, vol. 3, p. 1003; Ibn Hishām 1955, vol. 2, p. 525). The objector referred to the Byzantine army as “Banu al-Asfar”, which literally means “sons of the yellow one.” Although the sources did not provide any answer to this objection, the historical context is a sufficient response, as the army would have been on its way to fight Byzantium/Banu al-Asfar, without any fear of being tied up with ropes.

This description is repeated in another episode, but in reference to the beauty of Byzantine women, “Banāt al-Asfar”. In this narrative, when sources mention that Muḥammad invited a noble from Yathrib to join the Tabūk expedition with the incentive of enslaving Byzantine women, he said “Do you not want to participate in the raid of the Banu al-Asfar? Perhaps you will take the girls of the Asfar as spoils” (Ibn ʿUqba 2023, vol. 3, p. 197; Al-Wāqidī 1984, vol. 3, p. 1023; Ibn Hishām 1955, vol. 2, p. 516). One of the most important texts establishing this link between beauty and richness on the one side, and between the yellow colour and Byzantium on the other, is mentioned in one of Nābigha al-Jaʿdī (d. 65/684) poems. In the poem, the beauty of the face is likened to the Byzantine dinar, when he writes:

Nadāmāya ʿinda almundhir ibn muḥarriqin . . . ʾarā al-yawma minhum ḡāhira al-ʾarḍi muqfirā

Kuhūlan wa-shubbānan kaʾanna wujūhahum . . . danānyru mim mā shīfa fī ʾarḍi qaysarā. (Al-Qurashī 1981, p. 619)

Arabic conceptions of Byzantine women were also influenced by the institution of slavery (El-Cheikh 1997, p. 239) as a significant number of newcomers to the Muslim

community were originally brought in as spoils of war. However, the status of this social group became distinct from other slaves, especially female slaves, as they were employed for pleasure or domestic service rather than for hard work (Ibn Buṭlān 1973, vol. 1, p. 352), either in the court of the caliphs and other elites or with their masters.

If the account of the Battle of Tabūk was one of only a few instances in the *Sīra* that mention the beauty of Byzantine women, subsequent sources abound with incidents, especially those which associate beauty with the colour yellow. This theme remained linked to the Byzantine woman in Medieval writings, particularly in works of literature, history and geography. Through this lens, the image of the Byzantine woman was stereotyped in a way that primarily revolved around sexual activity (Mansouri 1995, p. 478), simultaneously portraying her both as an object of pleasure and a figure of suspicion: a persistent and ongoing threat (El-Cheikh 1997, p. 240).

Although the expedition did not lead to direct confrontation between the two sides, given that the Muslim army did not advance into the northern territories as they had at Mu'tah, it still achieved its strategic objectives. On one hand, Muḥammad demonstrated his military capability to the northern Arabs. On the other, he succeeded in assembling the largest force in the history of his campaigns. This strategic manoeuvre not only showed the growing strength and readiness of the Muslim community but also reflected a particular discourse on Byzantium.

The notion that Muḥammad spurred his followers into joining the expedition by promising them Byzantine spoils aligns more with the dynamics of the early Muslim conquests than with Muḥammad's cautious approach to the northern threat. Although this initiative might have served as a demonstration of strength, the discourse surrounding it could have been seen as rash on Muḥammad's part. Therefore, although this event was the last engagement with Byzantium during Muḥammad's life, it more precisely reflected the prevailing mental structure at the time the *Sīra* was compiled, i.e., in the eighth and ninth centuries.

However, despite the anachronisms, these representations found their expression in the *Sīra*. This suggests that the conceptualization of Byzantium underwent a significant evolution that led to its perception as an equal and an adversary. It can be argued that this perception of Byzantium represents the highest layer that the imaginary attained as the Arabs, through political and religious monotheism, developed their great empire.

4. Conclusions

The construction of the imaginary other is essentially a construction of the self. This article has validated this hypothesis by examining Arab–Byzantine relations during the early Islamic period. The *Sīra* literature perception of Muḥammad's call significantly influenced the reshaping of the imaginary Byzantium. Therefore, this literature stands as one of the earliest Arab-Islamic writings to present the Byzantine image as an embodiment of otherness. This portrayal is not merely a description of how the past was in essence, but offered a reinterpretation that superimposes contemporary perceptions onto the past, thereby constituting a form of retroactive projection.

Byzantium was viewed by the early Muslim community as a formidable and fearsome power, an imaginary that was not grounded in direct encounters but inherited across generations. This imaginary found its first expression in the discourse of the Prophet's biographies, an initial layer that incorporated a narrative concerning Byzantium. Nevertheless, the concluding events of Muḥammad's life signified a pivotal moment in the region's history that fundamentally transformed Arab identity. During this transformative period, Arabs began to see themselves as a new power and a powerful actor in history. Simultaneously, the image of Byzantium as an imposing force began to wane and, ultimately, evolved into a narrative that presented the fall of Byzantium as a harbinger of Judgment Day. Thus, the second layer of the imaginary emerged in the narrative of *Sīra* literature.

This constant desire to conquer Byzantium not only highlighted a change in the Arab view of Byzantium but also marked a significant shift in self-identity before projecting its

expectations onto the other. Such a shift, from viewing Byzantium as an invincible empire to recognizing it as a territory that could be conquered, reflected a critical juncture in the historical and narrative shaping of Arab identity by redefining the Arab self in contrast to the imaginary Byzantium.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data generated. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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