The Qur’ān itself contains references to the Byzantines. Indeed, Sūrat 30, Sūrat al-Rūm (‘Chapter of the Romans’, meaning Byzantines) is named after them. Verses 2–5 read:

The Byzantines (al-Rūm) have been vanquished in the nearer part of the land; and, after their vanquishing, (they) shall be the victors in a few years. To God belongs the Command before and after, and on that day (when the Byzantines are victorious) the believers shall rejoice in God’s help; God helps whomsoever He will.

(This translation follows the generally accepted reading)

Islamic exegetes placed this verse in the historical context of the great Byzantine-Persian war which led first to the conquest of Syria and Egypt by the Persians in the 610s and afterwards to Heraclius’ successful counteroffensive in the 620s. The Muslims’ fundamental affinity to the monotheistic Byzantines, whose conquest delighted them, in contrast to the Persians, who were initially not included in the group of People of the Book (ahl al-kitāb), is affirmed here and evidently reflects an early phase of the new faith (Crone 2013). Later Muslim literature presents quite a different picture, however. According to Ibn Isḥāq’s eighth-century hagiographical biography of Muḥammad, in 628 the Prophet wrote a letter to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius calling on him to convert to Islam. Heraclius, it tells us, was very impressed but did not dare to follow Muḥammad’s call in the face of his generals and the church (El Cheikh 2004: 21–54; Bonner and El Cheikh 2011: 265–9).

Ninth-century Arabic historiography records the battle of Mu’ta in 629 as the first military encounter between the two sides. (This is what is referred to in an alternative reading of Sūrat al-Rūm: that the Byzantines have been victorious in the nearer part of the land; but after their victories they will be vanquished in a few years.) Zayd ibn Muḥammad, the adoptive son and one of the first followers of Muḥammad, was sent to Mu’ta on a punitive expedition against the Ghassānids, Byzantine allies. Although faced with a hugely superior enemy force, he joined in battle and so became the first Islamic martyr to be killed by non-Muslims outside the Arabic peninsula. The consequent campaign of revenge led by Zayd’s own son against Palestine, on the other hand, was successful. It is recorded that Muḥammad expressly ordered that unbelievers should not be invited to convert, but each and every one killed (al-Wāqidī 1966: 3, 1117–27).
The Muslim conquest of Syria and Palestine was completed within a few decades. Damascus fell to the Muslims in 634, two years after Muḥammad’s death; in 636 the Byzantines were beaten decisively in the Battle of Yarmūk; in 638 the Patriarch Sophronius surrendered Jerusalem to the Caliph ʿUmar; and in 642 Egypt was conquered (McGraw Donner 1981; Kaegi 1992). Few contemporary Byzantine sources report these events; letters and sermons by the Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem (in office from 634 until his death in 638) call the ‘Saracen’ attacks at first unexpected and express the hope that the emperor will soon put an end to it all. Later, Sophronius describes the increasingly threatening situation until he is forced to surrender the city (Sahas 2009: 120–7).

The loss of these provinces, in addition to concurrent Slavic migration into the Balkans, caused an existential crisis in Byzantium which in turn led to a fundamental modification of the Byzantine state and ultimately to a religious controversy about the veneration of icons (Haldon 2003; Brubaker and Haldon 2011). It is noteworthy that it was an Orthodox theologian from Syria in the service of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705) who determined the basic outlines of the iconodule doctrine, John of Damascus (d. c. 750). His work De haeresibus, which describes all sorts of heresies, contains in its last, 100th chapter, the earliest Byzantine description of Islam:

There is also the superstition of the Ishmaelites which to this day prevails and keeps people in error, being a forerunner of the Antichrist. They are descended from Ishmael, [who] was born to Abraham of Agar, and for this reason they are called both Agarenes and Ishmaelites. They are also-called Saracens, which is derived from ‘Sarras kenoi’, or destitute of Sara, because of what Agar said to the angel: ‘Sara hath sent me away destitute’. . . . And so down to the time of Heraclius they were very great idolaters. From that time to the present a false prophet named Mamed has appeared in their midst. This man, after having chanced upon the Old and New Testaments and likewise, it seems, having conversed with an Arian monk, devised his own heresy. Then, having insinuated himself into the good graces of the people by a show of seeming piety, he gave out that a certain book had been sent down to him from heaven. He had set down some ridiculous compositions in this book of his and he gave it to them as an object of veneration.

(John of Damascus 1958: 153–4)

John begins with an explanation of the terms, derived from the Old Testament, which were used throughout the Byzantine period for Muslims: Agarēnoi and Ismaēlitai (Genesis 16; 17:20; as well as 21:9–21). These designations could be used for Muslims of different ethnic origin. Other terms, as for example Arabes or Sarakēnoi, had already been used in Ancient Greek literature and had then been defined ethnically but could now be employed synonymously with Agarēnoi (Todt 2013a: 35). John then proceeds to discuss Muḥammad’s teaching, beginning with the Islamic denial of Christ’s divinity. The Trinity and the person of Christ remained the most important field of theological dispute with Islam over the following centuries. Christian monotheism was under attack here, and it was important to pinpoint the differences in the understanding of Christ quite clearly, since Muslim veneration of Jesus as a prophet represented a real danger that Christians might convert to Islam, being thus able to continue in their veneration of Jesus as well as Mary. John then gives specific examples of Islamic doctrine, referring in each case to particular sūras, some quite accurate, some fictitious. Altogether he seems to have had sound knowledge of Islamic teaching, which he nevertheless considered to be an Arian heresy and not a new independent religion (Khoury 1969: 45–67; Glei 2013: 9–44; for the topics of Christian-Islamic polemic in general, cf. Khoury 1982; for the legend of Bahīrā, the ‘Arian monk’ with whom Muḥammad conversed, cf. Roggema 2009).
Contemporary historiographical sources concerning the further dissemination of Islam are by and large lost in the seventh and eighth centuries, the ‘dark centuries’ of Byzantine history, so that the first accounts come from Theophanes (d. 818) at the beginning of the ninth century. His portrait of Muḥammad had great influence on subsequent Byzantine views of the Prophet and of Islam. He takes up John of Damascus’ presentation of Muḥammad as being influenced by an Arian monk, and he then defames Muḥammad’s revelations as an attempt to cover up the epileptic attacks that allegedly affected him (Theophanes 1883: 333–4; Theophanes 1997: 464–5).

After overcoming the great existential crises of the seventh and eighth centuries and resisting Islamic attempts to conquer Constantinople itself, the empire was gradually able to counterbalance the power of the ʿAbbasid caliphate in Baghdad. Thus, by the middle of the ninth century two seemingly closed societies stood face to face, each driven by its need to demonstrate its own distinctive ideology and identity. In reality, however, there was a great deal of contact at various levels. Diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges with the caliphate intensified, as they did with the more or less autonomous emirates that emerged in the northern Syrian border zone as the caliphate fragmented (for diplomatic relations during the Umayyad period, cf. Kaplony 1996; Drocourt 2010: 29–72; Drocourt 2012: 243–71).

Theological thinking about Islam developed apace. The Qurʾān was probably translated in its entirety into Greek (Versteegh 1991: 52–68; Simelidis 2011: 887–913; Ulbricht 2012: 33–58), which enabled Nicetas of Byzantium, who lived and worked in Constantinople in the second half of the ninth century, to produce his ‘Refutation of the Qurʾān’, a major polemical against Islam in 30 chapters ( Förstel 2000: 2–152, Greek text with German translation). What makes this work so remarkable is Nicetas’ thorough examination of specific passages of the Qurʾān, which are presented in a Greek translation. Nicetas did not write without prompting; indeed, he composed two letters for the Emperor Michael III (r. 842–67) addressed to the ʿAbbasid court, which answer Muslim polemic against the Christian faith (Khoury 1969: 133–62; Rigo 2009: 751–6).

Clearly, the dispute with the Muslims was increasingly conducted not only on the military level but also ideologically. Further examples of the rivalry between Byzantium and the caliphate which permeated all spheres of life are, for instance, the lavish ceremonial displayed by both sides at receptions of envoys and attempts to surpass each other scientifically. While ʿAbbāsīd patrons sponsored the systematic translation of ancient Greek texts principally obtained from Byzantium (Gutas 1998), this rivalry contributed on the Byzantine side to an increasing interest in the ancient heritage, leading to the so-called Macedonian Renaissance of the ninth and tenth centuries (Signes Codoñer 2014: 429–48).

Byzantine-Islamic relations, however, not only took place at a ‘bi-national’ level but also most importantly within Christian or Muslim areas of rule. An account of Byzantine-Islamic relations must, therefore, include the Chalcedonian Christians who lived under Islam. Until the Muslim Arab conquest, these ‘Melkites’ had belonged to the Byzantine Imperial Church. It must be remembered that the emperors in Byzantium considered themselves Roman emperors. Despite all the upheavals and territorial losses in the course of the history of the Byzantine Empire, they continued to assert their claim to all former Roman territories. So Syria and Egypt were considered only temporary losses to the Muslims, and their recovery was fully justified legally, and not only theoretically but also practically whenever Byzantium had the necessary resources, as in the tenth and eleventh centuries when they conquered Antioch and established a new province in Northern Syria, the doukaton of Antioch ( Todt 2006: 33–88; Todt 2017). As dhimmīs, ‘protected people’ under Islamic law, the Melkites were accorded the right to exercise their religion and enjoyed extensive internal legal autonomy in the exercise of personal law, in particular in marital and inheritance matters. Since dhimmīs were defined as religious communities, leadership and
legal jurisdiction in both spiritual and worldly matters lay in the hands of their ecclesiastical head. As far as the Melkites were concerned, these were the Chalcedonian Patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. At the close of the eighth century and in the ninth century the Melkite link to the Byzantine Imperial Church seems to have loosened, probably because contact with Byzantium had become difficult due to continual hostility between the caliphate and the Byzantine Empire. At the same time, as the Melkites became more Arabised they developed their own Christian Arabic literature. This produced not only translations from Greek but also independent hagiographical and theological works, including apologetic and polemic writings against Islam. One of the outstanding authors was Theodore Abū Qurra (d. c. 820) (Lamoreaux 2005, 2014: 60–89). In Sidney Griffith’s view, by this period the Melkites had of necessity developed their own ‘Arabic-orthodox’ community with an independent cultural identity (Griffith 2008: 139, 2006: 173–202), although the so-called Letter of the three Patriarchs of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria to the Emperor Theophilus (r. 829–42), which is most probably authentic at its core, shows that as a result of the gradual stabilisation of the Byzantine Empire, relations with the Oriental Patriarchs intensified again as early as the ninth century (Signes Codoñer 2013: 135–87; Signes Codoñer 2014: 365–408).

The re-establishment of Byzantine rule in northern Syria through the foundation of the doukaton of Antioch in 969 and the treaties concluded between the Fāṭimid rulers and the Byzantine emperors in the eleventh century led to increased Byzantine influence and wider knowledge of Greek in Syria and Palestine. In the 1030s, the Fāṭimid rulers of Cairo acknowledged the Byzantine emperor as the ‘protector’ of the Orthodox Christians in the Holy Land. This meant that patriarchs were once again appointed by Byzantium and were regarded as representatives of the emperor and the Orthodox Church and that numerous Byzantine pilgrims travelled in the Holy Land and took up residence in monasteries in Palestine (Shepard 2012: 505–45; Pahlitzsch 2015c: 485–515).

As a result, the Melkite church was increasingly byzantinized. As part of a longer process which continued into the thirteenth century and even longer, the local liturgy in the Melkite Patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria was superseded by the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom that was customary in the capital. The existing Melkite collection of laws was supplemented, probably in the twelfth century, by a new Arabic translation of a Byzantine legal text, the Procheiros nomos (Pahlitzsch 2014a). This translation must be understood as an expression of the close Melkite affiliation to the Byzantine world, although it seems that the translation was made at the request of the Byzantine authorities, which obviously wielded considerable influence over the Melkite Church. At least, this is what is suggested by the answer of the Byzantine canonist Theodore Balsamon, from the end of the twelfth century, to a question of the Patriarch of Alexandria, whether it was reprehensible that the Basilika, the Emperor Leon VI’s law code, was unknown in Alexandria:

Those who pride themselves on an orthodox way of life, whether they come from the Orient, from Alexandria or somewhere else, are called Rhomaioi and must be ruled over in accordance with the laws.

(Theodore Balsamon 2014: 72–3)

Admittedly, relations between the Byzantine Empire and the caliphate and its successors in the tenth and eleventh centuries were characterised by military confrontations, the Ḥamdānid emirate of Aleppo being the most formidable adversary. However, alongside the constant raids and skirmishes across the border, personal relationships developed between the contending elites, who often shared common chivalrous ideals. The most famous example of this cross-border culture...
is the epic named after its hero, Digenes Akrites. The first written version is from 1135, but it is compiled from various older layers and disparate epic narratives from northern Syria which go back to the ninth century or even earlier. Indeed, the name Digenes Akrites says it all, referring to his origin 'the borderer (Akrites) of two races (Digenes)', because his father was a Muslim emir from Syria who abducted the daughter of a Byzantine general during a raid in Byzantine territory, eventually converted to Christianity and settled on Byzantine soil (Jeffreys 2011: 434–439; Muhammad 2010: 121–149).

The issue of abduction and Christian–Muslim marriages was not restricted to literary fiction, as the example of Abū Firās al-Ḥamdānī (932–68), known for his so-called 'Byzantine poems' (al-rūmiyyāt), shows. Abū Firās, a cousin of the famous Ḥamdānid ruler of Aleppo Sayf al-Dawla, was the son of a Byzantine prisoner of war who had been captured by his father. He himself spent four years as a prisoner of war in Constantinople, where it seems that he had Byzantine relatives. As a member of the Ḥamdānid royal family it is said that he resided in his own palace and even disputed religious issues and Muslim bravery with the emperor. Prisoners of lesser standing, who were forced to man workshops, occupied a section of the Praetorian Prison. In this location a mosque served the religious needs of the capital's Muslim population and was extensively regulated by Byzantine treaties with Muslim rulers (Reinert 1998: 126–30). Eventually, Abū Firās was released as part of an exchange of prisoners, as was common at this time (Kolia-Dermitzaki 2000: 583–620). Both mother and son, therefore, are good examples of the great community of people who crossed the borders of northern Syria in the tenth century, be it willingly, for instance as merchants, or unwillingly, as 'cultural brokers' between Byzantium and the Islamicate world (Pahlitzsch 2017; Eger 2014).

However, with Seljuk expansion in Asia Minor as a consequence of the Byzantine civil war in the 1070s and the establishment of the Crusader states in Syria and Palestine, Byzantium lost its dominant position in the Middle East. Byzantium’s most important Muslim adversaries were now the invaders of Turkish origin in Asia Minor, which had to this point been the core of the empire. Religious controversy appears to have played no great role in this military conflict initially, and the sources accord little insight into religious relations in this new Byzantine-Islamic contact zone. It was not uncommon for members of the Turkish military elite, such as the Grand domestikos John Axouchos, to defect to Byzantium, convert to Christianity and achieve high office if they proved themselves loyal to the emperor. But there was always the risk that their origin could be used against them by their opponents (Brand 1989: 1–25). Interestingly, the Turks are often called Persai, Persians, in the Byzantine sources, in imitation of ancient Greek historiography. In the course of time, however, they were perceived as part of the world of Islam (Beimhammer 2009a: 589–614, 2009b: 51–76).

From the twelfth century onwards a certain increase in polemical works on the part of the Byzantines can be detected, e.g. Euthymios Zigabenos and Euthymios the Monk. In his Epitomē historiōn ('Abridgement of history'), John Zonaras gives an account of Muhammad. According to what he says, Muhammad was not of noble descent but originally poor, and therefore he was not entitled to lead the people. Using magical powers, he seduced a rich widow. After meeting a heretical monk from Byzantium he presented this monk’s tales as revelations from the archangel Gabriel. Considered by his wife and his tribe as a prophet, he deceived some of the people through words and subjugated the others by force. Thus he became the leader, teacher, and lawgiver of the ‘Ishmaelites’. After subjugating the Arabs, he started plundering and conquering Roman territories. From this time on, a permanent state of war existed between the Ishmaelites and the Romans. John Zonaras’ narrative concurs completely with references in almost all other Byzantine historiographical works and theological refutations of Islam. It can therefore be considered as highly typical (John Zonaras 1897: vol. 3.214–15; Todt 2013a: 42–3).
In the twelfth century the Byzantines managed to reconquer parts of western Asia Minor. According to the historian John Kinnamos, writing in 1162, a treaty was signed during a visit by the Sultan Kılıç Arslan II to Constantinople. According to this, the sultan agreed to treat the enemies of the emperor as he would treat his own enemies and to consider the emperor’s friends as if they were his own, to conclude peace treaties only with the consent of the emperor, to support the emperor with auxiliary troops against any enemy in East and West, and to punish the nomads (Tourkomanoi) if they made any raids into Byzantine territory. It appears as though the sultan had become a vassal of the emperor (John Kinnamos 1836: 207–8, 1976: 157–258; Brand 1989: 11–2).

These conquests, however, posed new challenges for Byzantium. According to the historian Anna Komnena (d. 1154), her father the Emperor Alexios I (r. 1081–1118) had intended to convert not only the nomadic Scythians, referring obviously to the Turks, but also ‘the whole population of Persia and all those barbarians inhabiting Egypt and Libya and participating in the orgiastic rites of Muḥammad’ to Christianity, evidently filled with a priestly and apostolic sense of mission (Anna Komnena 2001: 199, 1969: 211–2; Beihammer 2009b: 77–8). The so-called Tomos of 1180, a decree issued by Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (r. 1143–80), clarifies the religious policy which the Komnenoi dynasty adopted towards their Muslim subjects. This decree was issued after a Turkish emir, who had defected to Byzantium and been adopted by a Byzantine, demanded that the ritual abjuration of the Islamic faith should be changed. According to the rule of the time, a convert had to anathematize the ‘God of Mahomet’, but since the Muslims who wished to convert to Christianity were not happy with this formula, the Emperor Manuel suggested in a long letter to the synod that this formula should be deleted, thereby avoiding slander of the true God. The emperor had a great many Muslim subjects after the reconquest of western Asia Minor from the Seljuk Turks, some of whom had converted to Christianity, and he evidently desired to placate them by not denying their faith in the one true God. Initially the synod consented, and a harsh condemnation of Muḥammad and his teaching was included instead, but the Church soon cancelled this amendment so that it had no impact (Zorzi 2011: 759–63). During this period a second mosque was also built in Constantinople at the request of the Ayyūbid Sultan Saladin (d. 1193), who was on good terms with Isaak II Angelos (r. 1185–95). This mosque was probably used by the capital’s Muslim merchants, who are recorded as having attended the opening. It was sacked by the Latins in 1203 shortly before the Fourth Crusade (Brand 1962: 167–81; Reinert 1998: 140–3).

With the collapse of the Byzantine state at the end of the twelfth century, the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204 and the progressive Turkish conquest of Asia Minor, the Middle East became a very remote region for the Byzantines and one of only minor political importance. Nevertheless, in general good relations existed between Byzantium and the Mamlūk sultans after the Byzantine reconquest of Constantinople in 1261 and the establishment of the Palaiologos dynasty. In the second half of the thirteenth century various treaties were concluded after a busy exchange of envoys. The Mamlūks were interested in securing the import of military slaves by sea, while Byzantium hoped to secure its contacts with the Golden Horde, who in turn were allied with the Mamlūks against the Ilkhāns of Persia (Amitai-Preiss 1995: 78–91). In conjunction with this, Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1259–82) ordered a new mosque to be built in Constantinople (Reinert 1998: 143–4).

In this connection, the oration given by the scholar and imperial official Theodore Metochites (d. 1332) in the 1310s or 1320s to the Emperor Andronikos II is particularly revealing. For one thing he describes the life of Saint Michael of Alexandria, who was abducted as a child from Smyrna and sold to Africa as a slave, converted to Islam and conscripted by the Mamlūk army,
before he finally turned to Christianity again and was consequently executed by the Muslims as an apostate. On the other hand, Metochites uses the oration to expound Andronikos’ eastern politics in a unique manner. He is pointing out that Byzantium sent envoys to Cairo on a regular basis. However, according to Metochites, the emperor does not act from necessity or to achieve a particular goal. Rather, he considers the welfare of the Christians entrusted to him as his first priority. This consideration also extends to Christians in distant countries living under non-Christian rule. Even though these communities are small and surrounded by crime of every kind which rises up against religion (obviously referring to Islam), thanks to the emperor’s solicitude and vigilance there are still monasteries, Christian worship and an ecclesiastical hierarchy to care for the faithful (Pahlitzsch 2012: 808–14; Kitapçı Bayrı 2016: 274–9).

Byzantium had lost its role as the protecting power of Oriental Christendom after the conquest of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204, and Andronikos was evidently determined to re-establish this. As is shown by the example of the Georgian monastery of the Holy Cross close to Jerusalem that had been expropriated by the Muslims in 1268, he seems to have achieved this goal to a certain extent, since the monastery was returned to the Georgians around 1305–6 at request of a Byzantine embassy. Diplomatic relations with the Mamlûks continued into the fifteenth century, even though Byzantine influence decreased with the continuing decline of the empire (Pahlitzsch 2005: 31–47, 2014: 127–44).

As far as western Asia Minor and relations with the Turkish Muslims were concerned, Byzantium was no longer capable of fending off the attacks of various Turkish groups from the end of the thirteenth century onwards. Two civil wars in the 1320s and in the 40s and 50s crucially weakened the empire, in the course of which the opposing parties sought the different Turkish rulers in Asia Minor as allies. In 1346 Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (r. 1347–54, d. 1383) even married his daughter Theodora to Orhân, the Ottoman Emir of Bithynia (1324/26–60); Theodora was not obliged to convert to Islam, and after the death of her husband returned to Constantinople. As a consequence of these military alliances, Turkish troops crossed to the Balkans, where they soon pursued their own interests, so that great parts of the Byzantine population in Thrace and Macedonia were plundered and enslaved (Pahlitzsch 2015d). In 1354 the Ottomans conquered Gallipoli, so that they now possessed their own bridgehead and could operate in the Balkans as they wished (Chrysostomides 2009: 6–50; for Theodora, cf. Trapp and Gastgeber 2001: no. 10940).

In Byzantium new debates concerning Islam were the result of these intensified conflicts. Two major works against Islam must be named here. The extensive Four apologies and orations by John Kantakouzenos, which he wrote after his abdication and entry into the monastic life, were probably the most widely used, and read, Byzantine refutation of Islam. Noteworthy is his view that Muslims (Sarakēnɔi) and Jews have many similarities. In fact, he calls the law of Muhammad nothing more than faulty Judaism. Thus, Muslims and Jews can be approached with the same arguments (Todt 2013b: 165–78). His grandson Manuel II Palaiologos (r. 1392–1425) was influenced by this work in his Dialogue with a Persian, which was based on talks held in the autumn of 1391 with a Muslim scholar in Ankara, during a campaign in which Manuel was required to take part as a vassal of the Ottoman sultan. Manuel argues very cogently, and his work is without doubt the culmination of the Byzantine theological debate on Islam (Todt 2013c: 314–25).

The increasing subjugation of Orthodox Christians under Islamic rule led, for one thing, to a reorganisation of the Orthodox Church. Although many bishops of areas dominated by the Muslims preferred to withdraw to Constantinople, it was possible for some to continue the care of their congregations under Turkish rule. When this was not possible, representatives took on the task. All in all, the situation seems to have been similar to that in Palestine and Syria in earlier
periods. In addition, from the fourteenth century onwards new cults evolved for so-called neo martyrs, new saints who often reconverted to Christianity after a conversion to Islam and were therefore executed. Evidently the propagation of the veneration of these new saints was intended to help Christians remain steadfast in the face of the temptation to convert (Krstić 2011; Pahlitzsch 2015b: 147–64, 2015a: 219–28; Kitaç Bayrı 2016).

In 1453 Constantinople was finally conquered by Mehmed II, and the Byzantine Empire was destroyed completely. Byzantine culture, however, continued, mainly through the Orthodox Church. Mehmed ensured that a new Patriarch was appointed in Constantinople in the person of Gennadios Scholarios. Soon the Orthodox Church accustomed themselves to the new situation, with the sultan in some respects taking on the role of the emperor (Konortas 1985; Apostolopoulos 2007: 241–53; Blanchet 2008; Papademetriou 2015).

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