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Village *Kurban* as the Constructing of Local Identity and the Ritual Process in Post-Socialist Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia

Abstract. The paper deals with the specific use of collective rituals focused on the blood sacrifice among Orthodox Christians in the Balkans, known mostly as *kurban*. In studying a variety of *kurbans*, the analytical focus is on the collective feasts, which celebrates the small village community as a 'homeland', but also as a ritual community living under the protection of a patron saint. This paper pays particular attention to examples of the collective *kurban* in abandoned villages. *Kurban* is therefore understood as a ritual that helps produce and/or re-produce a group identity within a broader national framework, and also as a means of social cohesion for kinship-based and territory-based groups, beyond confessional attachment. In a selection of cases, the paper demonstrates how through a blood sacrifice, shared around a common table, as well as by the symbolic use of the saint-patron, the cohesion between the former members of a now deserted village is recreated. By concentrating on the celebrations of village communities that have been completely depopulated by the rural exodus, mainly due to socialist urbanization and industrialization, this article shows how every year, the mobilization of the symbolic capital of the community allows for the formation of its "real" or "virtual" boundaries.

Keywords: Balkans, cohesion, collective ritual, *Kurban*, Orthodox.

Introduction

Over the last twenty-five years, ethnology in Southeast Europe has become a discipline focused upon traditional beliefs, rituals, and folklore, and has been interested in the century-long traditions of its own people. In recent times, this study has faced the challenges both of new social processes and cultural phenomena, and of intensive changes in its scientific priorities. Even though rituals are supposed to be among the main topics of ethnologic investigation, after two decades of rigorous research in different regions of Southeast

Europe, the ethnology of post-socialism still pays insufficient attention to the analysis of rituals within the region (Creed 2002: 57). Authors investigating the process of transition from socialism to democracy have studied in detail the shift from a planned to a market economy, the agricultural sector and the "revival of tradition" during a period of economic crisis, but they have shown less concern for the peculiarities of ritual practice during the last two decades of the 20th century. In this context, my research demonstrates how, using the contemporary ritual process (according to Victor Turner's model), the village is constructing community cohesion and a "virtual" boundary.

In the Balkans, there is an important group of rituals associated with a blood sacrifice. These rituals express a certain social function, which even today serves to maintain identity within different social groups in the village (Assmann 1997: 143). Traditionally performed by different ethnic and confessional communities (both Orthodox Christians and Muslims), the ritual of blood sacrifice is well known among all Balkan populations (Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Macedonians, Turks, Serbs, Gypsies) under the name of *kurban*.[1] The *kurban* is performed on different social levels: as an individual sacrificial offering and as a collective[2] sacrifice for a kinship-based or territory-based community. My analysis is focused on the social aspects of this village ritual of a sacrificial offering (*kurban*) as a feast, supporting its connection to the Orthodox Christian community and to its patron saint, but also as a ritual reproducing community identity and cohesion. This phenomenon is especially interesting in the post-socialist village, where some parts of the ritual process have been revived, while others have faded away. Even though the *kurban* is a basic ritual in the Balkan Muslim communities (Blagoev 2004), this research is limited to its social functions among the Orthodox Christian communities in both the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria.

I observed this ritual in person during my fieldwork in the eastern regions of the Republic of Macedonia[3] during the autumn of 2001, as well as in the western part of the Republic of Bulgaria in the spring of 2003 and 2006.[4] Additionally, my notes have been corroborated by available descriptions and studies from other authors of the festive *kurbans* in the two countries.[5]

The collective *kurban* is inseparable from the *sabor* holiday, the most important feast of the ritual calendar of the village. Known under a variety of names: *sabor, sobor slava, sluzhba, panagjur, obrok, kurban,* the festive rituals are dedicated to the patron saints of the village, and are most often viewed in ethnology as being uniform, but performing various functions at different social levels within the social structure of the traditional village (Rheubottom 1976). I underline, that despite the sacred pretext, the function of the *sobor* is entirely a secular celebration (Rice 1980: 115). All authors on the subject point out that the South-Slavs' collective sacrifice rituals correspond to specific type of social community in the Balkan village.[6] Ethnographic research on this ritual process has emphasized the archaic origin of the village community feasts, as well as their integrative functions and significance as group markers for the different levels in the social structure.[7] Note that the term "village ritual" may refer to the ritual actions performed by all members of the village community (in a formal aspect), as well as to the ritual actions on behalf of the village as a whole unite (in its functional aspect) (Bandić 1978: 112, 117).

The *kurban*

The village *kurbans*, in the above mentioned areas of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia, are examples of the integrative function of rituals: they exemplify a way of fostering community consciousness and cohesion through intense social communication. We are faced with a cultural phenomenon common to the Abrahamic religions[8] and widely spread throughout the Eastern Mediterranean region. In the 19th century, the dioceses of Eastern Orthodox churches in the geographical region of Macedonia[9] attempted to replace village *kurbans* with bloodless rituals of Christian communion, unambiguously related to the ritual template of the *Eucharist*. The rationale behind this action was the church's rejection of the remnants of paganism. It was successful in some regions (Kitevski 2002: 27), but as a whole the practice of *kurbans* at the Orthodox Christian village feast is "alive" even today. Collective *kurbans* were also the most important, and necessary element of many annual village feasts (*sabors*) in Bulgaria during the 20th century. In both countries during the 1990s—the decade of post-communist transition and deep

social and economic change—there was a revival of the *kurban* ritual practice in the village, as well as in some towns.[10]

The Macedonian villages studied in 2001 presented a picture of relative stability in the naming of the feast: the denominations of *sobor* / *sabor* and village *kurban* were used for various feasts and religious practices devoted to the patron saint of the local church, or a local monastery. Such religious feasts contain one or both of the following elements: a common table for the relatives in the house; and a shared *kurban* "for success, well-being and health" (*za zdravje, kŭsmet i bereket*), held in the churchyard for all who belong to the village or parochial community.[11] These common tables are different from those for the feast of the patron saint held in individual homes, the *kukna slava*, as noted by British anthropologist D.B. Rheubottom.[12]

The denomination *slava* is a relatively recent name for this local tradition: according to respondents, it was imposed by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Up to the mid-20th century, the most used names were *sluzhba* and *kurban*; all village religious feasts related to the patron saint of the local church, a monastery, or to a specially chosen patron saint of the village, were called *panagyur* or *sobor*. Similar names can be found in the regions of Southeast Serbia and Western Bulgaria.13 Our respondents in Eastern Macedonia even use the term *sobor* today to denote every kind of village *kurban* held in the spring or summer and performed at the *obrochishte*—the village-wide sacred places marked with stone crosses.

Up until the mid-20th century, the ritual cycle of the village *kurbans* began on St. George's Day,14 when each household was supposed to offer a male lamb to the saint. The celebration of Saint George's Day was the first community ritual, "opening" the seasonal period of the village *kurbans*, after the home feast (*slava*- or *sluzhba*-type) period.[15] *Kurbans* were performed simultaneously in the house and in the village — at the church (if there was one), at the monastery or at the village fountain in the center of the village. In some villages[16] all of the lambs for St. George's *kurban* were brought together for consecration by the priest: upon which the sacrifice was performed at home, every lamb was roasted on a spit (*na rozhŭn*) and brought back to the place where the village celebration was to be

held, near a cross or around a "Saint George's" sacred tree. Each extended family (*rod*) had its own ritual stone located near the cross and its members took their places on (or around) it, according to the family-kin principle; the same system of ranking and the same type of ritual was also observed in the villages from the Bulgarian-Serbian border regions (Hristov 2003: 249—268). After World War II, the socialist government of the Republic of Macedonia tried to ban these common village gatherings as a "religious anachronism," so every household started offering a lamb to St. George at home, a practice which has continued to the present day.

On St. George's feast day, a common table was arranged at the sacred stone cross (*obrochishte*) with a ritually prepared *kurban*. People shared the meal of the *kurban*, as well as taking part in the ritual drinking and the eating of ritual bread, prepared by every housewife. Although the common village table was organized according to lineages, men and women sat separately, even when both genders took part in the consumption of alcohol (*rakiya* and wine).[17] This village kurban model, best delineated in the celebration of St. George's Day, applied to other village religious feasts that took place during the summer months. This principle was maintained until the 1960s, at which time industrialization and rural exodus led to depopulation in many mountain villages.

During the first half of the 20th century, *kurbans* also took place on the days devoted to St. Elijah the Prophet and the Holy Mother of God, in the villages included in the study in the Republic of Macedonia. Traditionally, St. Elijah's Day is dedicated to the health of the cattle, so the sacrificial *kurban* meal on that day was *"an animal with a big hoof"*[18] (a bull calf or an ox.—*P.H.*); however, within the last decades of the 20th century, the traditional calf or ox was replaced by several lambs.[19] Most often the offering was done on the night before the feast at the cult place on the village's lands, marked by a sacred tree or trees, which no one dared to cut. On the actual feast day, a common table for everyone in the village was laid; according to the respondents only people from the village were present there. The *kurban* (meat boiled with potatoes and beans) was distributed among the participants and some of it was taken to the sick and to old people at home, so that they could "taste it for health" (*"kusnat za zdravie"*).[20]

The collective village *kurbans* on St. Elijah's Day are known throughout Macedonia and in many places they are still practiced in the traditional manner, by sacrificing an ox.[21] Though abandoned after disasters in the village (including epidemics among people and cattle, as well as devastating hailstorms), the tradition of the kurban has been resumed with even greater zeal (for Yablanitsa, Struga region, see Filipović 1939: 111). In the last decade of the 20th century, these village *kurbans* have became an integral part of the celebration of St. Elijah's Day (*Ilinden*) as a national holiday of the Republic of Macedonia (related to the celebration of the *Ilinden* Uprising in 1903). The "use" of traditional feasts in the process of construction and consolidation of national identity has more or less been practiced in all East European countries, and was well attested during Socialist times when the state made efforts to homogenize and nationalize folk culture. As Gerald Creed notes, "the contemporary political potential of ritual is greatly influenced by former socialist practice". In this manner "the socialist emphasis on folklore enhanced the affiliation between ritual and national identity" (Creed 2002: 69—70). My field observations show that in the years of post-socialism, the *kurbans* on St. Elijah's Day are already an integral part of the national identification strategies for the population and part of the political vision in the Republic of Macedonia.

In the villages from the eastern regions of Macedonia, a big collective *kurban* was held also during the traditional celebration of the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God (15/28 August).[22] The common village *kurbans* on Assumption Day, as well as the cult to the Virgin, are especially popular among the Orthodox peoples in many parts of the Balkans, not only in Macedonia. In the villages of the Sandanski district (Southwestern Bulgaria), until the rural exodus in the 1960s, Assumption Day was the only day, apart from the patron saint's day when all village inhabitants organized a shared meal, for which every household brought its ritual food: the *kurban* (lamb soup) and bread. Adherence to the rule of the patrilineal base of the *kurban* and to the way seating was allocated at the village table was observed in this part of Bulgaria too: each *tayfa* (the local name for a patrilineal kin group or *rod*) took its place at its "own" sacred tree near the chapel or the cross devoted to the Virgin. The same rule governing seating arrangements at table is observed

to this day in these villages, at shared meals held to commemorate the dead (*zadushnitsa*).[23]

The patrilineal principle is also noted in the organization of shared village *kurbans* in Northeastern Greece: every kinship group has its own place (in some cases these are stone tables) in the church yard and its members sit there in accordance with their status and age (Georgoudi 1979: 286). Thus, the ritual practice and vocabulary relative to the *kurban* covers a broad area of the Balkans.[24] In Bulgaria and Macedonia, the feast honors the patron saint of the village church and is accompanied by a collective *kurban* and a shared meal for all of the villagers. Every household contributes (money, provisions, wheat) to the shared table; there is no fixed amount — everybody gives "as much as he wants to" (*"koy kolko miluye"*). These contributions are thought to be given for "the health and prosperity" of the whole village and its inhabitants. A specially elected group of men from the village (*"carkoven otbor"*) collects the gifts and prepares the *kurban*. They also call the priest who has to consecrate (*"da otpee"*) the sacrificial lamb, a service for which he is paid.[25] In many villages the representatives of the official church hierarchy have no decisive presence or participation in the common village feasts, except in the bigger monastery *kurbans*.

According to records from the end of the 19th century, in the past the priest not only consecrated the sacrificial animal, but also killed it with his own hands in order to keep its skin intact, since this traditionally belonged to him (Kitevski 2002: 26). However, in the last decade of the 20th century, in a number of villages in Eastern Macedonia (Piperovo and Ljuboten, Shtip region), the priest has not been invited even for the shrine feast. In some cases, the functions of the priest are performed by a man (*domakin* of the village feast) who is chosen by the organizers and who consecrates the sacrificial lambs. Before the sacrifice, he makes the sign of the cross with the knife over the lamb's chest, because *"Orthodox people are going to eat it"* (Piperovo, Shtip region). In the village of Laskarevo (Sandanski region, Bulgaria) the sacrificial ram is killed in the early morning of Ascension Day in such a way that the blood spills on the eastern part of the shrine's foundations (*temeli*) during the moment of sunrise. Everyone, villager or guest, gets a share of the festive *kurban* and

a loaf of the ritual bread. The shared consumption of ritual food, including the sacrifice, carries the meaning of communion and makes for the cohesion of the village community.

To summarize, the community feasts characteristic of the areas under study — and observed mainly at the village level—fall into two categories: the *sabor* and the *kurban*. The former illustrates the social function of the village as a birth place of local people, whose active life has drawn them elsewhere: this is why visits by emigrants, or relatives (and friends) from other places, is vitally important for the ritual. By participating every year in such celebrations, the villagers revitalize bonds with their native place and join in the symbolic wealth of their local community. In this sense, "the Macedonian *sobor* is a celebration in which the focus of interest is the village as a unit of social structure" (Rice 1980: 113). The latter, the village *kurban*, symbolizes local community as united through faith. Today, however, these two categories often intermingle: we find the feasts of monasteries (usually called *slava, sluzhba*) transformed into region-wide shared feasts with *kurbans*.

Feast in the deserted village

The function of collective *kurbans* as rituals for sustaining the identity of the local community is perhaps most clear-cut in the so called *kurban in a dead village* (*"kurban na pusto selo"*). The term describes the practice of giving a *kurban* on the patron saint's day in a village, even if it is deserted and its church is either in ruins or is no longer functioning.

Starting at the end of the 20th century, this cultural phenomenon is quite recent, so it deserves special attention. I have encountered such cases during my fieldwork in both the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria: for instance, natives from the village of Preseka (Kochani region), who left for Karaorman (Shtip region) during the 1960s, regularly return, even today, to their old village for the kurban given at the church on Holy Savior Day (*Spasovden*).[26] In the village of Badilen (Maleshevo district), people who have migrated to the region of Strumica return to their "old fireplaces" (*"stari ognishta"*) to offer a *kurban* to the Holy Mother of God. Nobody has lived in the village of Papavnitsa for more than 20 years, but every

year on St. Constantine's Day (the former patronal feast day), the natives of the ghost village who have been scattered throughout different parts of the Republic of Macedonia gather for the saint's *kurban*.[27] The villagers of Darzhanovo (district of Sandanski in Bulgaria) who migrated in the late 1950s, after their cattle were taken away by force due to collectivization, regularly return to their native village for the *kurban* on Assumption Day. During the rest of the year these villages are deserted.

Scattered throughout (or even outside) the country, all those born in the village who have been forced or chose to emigrate and build their lives elsewhere, return once a year to perform the ritual of *kurban* and share a common meal. In this way, they reassert the village's existence in time: "Though we have no village, we make the *kurban* as if the village were there."[28] In the past, when the village was "alive", every family offered a *kurban* and received relatives and friends from other places in their houses. The migrants that are natives of the deserted villages turn the collective *kurban* into a community marker, a ritual that helps to restore the symbolic bonds with "their" patron saint, while at the same time strengthening the relationship among themselves, and thus establishing the symbolic "boundaries" of the community. Thus, the common village *kurban* may be viewed as a means for promoting and reasserting the ideology of the place of origin.

The village of Popovo, district of Pernik (Bulgaria), offers another excellent example of this category of rituals. In the 1950s, the village was submerged under the waters of the *Studena* dam. In the era of quickened industrialization in Socialist Bulgaria, the villagers were forcibly turned into metallurgists working in the city[29] (Pernik), and some of them were scattered all over the country. All the land surrounding the village was turned into a communist residence; it became a "no entry" zone. After the democratic transition of 1989, the land was returned to its former owners. They come back once every year for the village feast (*sŭbor*), on Assumption Day, visiting their destroyed houses and gathering for a traditional collective sacrifice (*kurban*) on the bank of the reservoir. Everyone attending takes a share of the ritual food (*kurban*) to the foundations of his old house on the banks of the dam, where the family eats it together, "like

in the old times", "to show to everyone that they are still there and this is theirs"30. Thus the former villagers restore the connection with their predecessors, their link with the past and with the common memory of the local community, which was turned into a "virtual" community during the socialist era. The personal vow, which is a part of the group ritual relationship with the patron saint of the village, is realized, nevertheless, despite the spatial parameters of the community.

"Giving away" some of the sacrificial food (*kurban*) is an important part of the ritual actions: "If you don't give away some of the food to three houses, it is not a real *kurban*" (village of Laskarevo, Sandanski region in Bulgaria). Indicative is the example of a former villager from Papavnitsa, who now lives in Switzerland. Since he is not able to be present at the village *kurban* in his native village, he "takes it along" with him and every year makes his own *kurban* in Switzerland, giving away meat to three neighboring households (Botsev 2001: 117).

Conclusion

Collective ritual sacrifices, known in the Balkans as *kurbans*, can be subject to ethnological analysis using different interpretational models. The *kurban* may be viewed as a "symbol of the gift exchange", understood as "reciprocity" between this world and the beyond (Popova 2000: 91), and the sacrificial offering as a gift, tax or penalty, paid to God and the saints, or to demons. The sacred places of the sacrificial offerings could be interpreted as an "intermediary bridge", which allows the individual from traditional society to establish a relationship with the world "beyond" (Leach 1976: 71, 83). It is possible to search for the mythological-ritual roots of sacrificial practice as an ancient tradition in the Balkans (Tsivyan 1989: 119—131). It is important that the common village *kurban* in the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria represents a significant part of the ritual basis of collective communal consciousness, upon which local and national identity is built. In this way the ritual practice, conducted in the context of Orthodox Christianity, marks the boundaries ("real" or "virtual") of the community even today. In any case, the tradition of collective sacrifice, common among all the Orthodox

people in the Balkans, is still alive and reproduces the local identity every year.

Notes

1. The word *kurban* used in the Balkan languages is derived from Turkish, but its initial origin is in the Old Testament, from the Aramaic *korban* (in the Bible) (Rengstorf 1993: 860; Popova 1995: 145).

2. Sacrifices in the name of and with the participation of the entire community (see Tokarev 1983: 196—197).

3. The villages of Orashac (Kumanovo region), Dolno Gjugjantse (Sveti Nikole district), Ljuboten, Karaorman, Kozjak, Chardaklija (Shtip region), Kuchichino, Krupishte (Kochani district), Piperovo, Vrteshka, Gabrevci, (Radovish district). All materials are kept in the Archives of the Ethnographic Institute with Museum in Sofia, Bulgaria (AEIM № 513-III).

4. The villages of Laskarevo, Ladarevo and Ljubovka (Sandanski region, South-west part of Bulgaria) and Popovo, Kralev Dol and other villages in the region of Pernik (Mid-Western Bulgaria). The fieldwork was conducted together with Prof. Asia Popova from LACITO-CNRS in Paris and Tzvetana Manova from the History Museum in Pernik.

5. For Macedonia, see Nedeljković 1939: 5—9; Palikrusheva 1989: 57—62; Prokopek 1997: 229—244; Kotev 1999: 147—159; Botsev 1999: 76—85; Botsev 2001: 113—119; for Bulgaria cf. the bibliography in Hristov 2004: 53—73.

6. Cf. Pavković 1978: 54—56; Stamenova 1985: 154—158; Palikrusheva 1989: 57—58; Čapo Žmegač 1997: 69—82; Bajraktarović 1998: 37—41; Vlahović 1998: 23—32.

7. Regarding Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia and Serbia see Obrembski 1977: 2—3; Stamenova 1985: 157; Čapo Žmegač 1997: 75; Bandić 1997: 254; regarding Greece cf. Georgoudi 1979: 287.

8. For Abraham's sacrifice as an ideological background, see Popova 1995: 146-147, who shows the link between the Balkan bloody *kurbans* and the bloodless sacrifices with the biblical ritual template; for the connection with the sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple, see Katsis 2005: 158—186.

9. After the dissolution of the Archbishopric of Ohrid in 1767, the territory of Macedonia was consecutively under the ecclesiastical domination of the [Greek] Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Bulgarian Exarchate, and, after 1912, the Serbian Orthodox Church.

10. For earlier materials on Berovo and Pehchevo regions during the 1970s, see Palikrusheva 1989: 58—59.

11. Cf. Kotev 1999: 150, 154.

12. *"In Skopska Crna Gora,* [...] *four different types of slava were celebrated. Only one of these, the household slava, could possibly symbolise common descent. The others — the village slava, church slava, and monastery slava — have no association with lineage and the notion of descent."* (Rheubottom 1976: 19).

13. Here, I refer to my fieldwork in the areas of Zajechar and Pirot in Eastern Serbia and Godech in mid-Western Bulgaria, conducted in 2001 (see Hristov 2003: 249—268).

14. Hristov AEIM № 513-III. Today, in Bulgaria, St. George's Day is held on May 6 (according to the 'old style' or Julian calendar), even though the other fixed dates are celebrated according to the so-called "New" Julian calendar, synchronized with the Gregorian calendar. In the Republic of Macedonia, the Orthodox Church follows completely the Julian calendar.

15. In the winter period (in its traditional archaic understanding), it occurs between St. Petka's Day (October 14) and St. Athanasius *"Zimni"* Day (January 31).

16. Vrteshka, Radovish region; Preseka, Kochani region; Virche, Dramche and Kosevica, Delchevo region: data from fieldwork in 2001.

17. *"Everyone drinks, in our region both men and women drink..."* — respondent Vasil Jovevski, born in 1934 in Stantsi, region of Kriva Palanka (Hristov AEIM № 513-III).

18. Respondents: Vasil and Dobrina Jovevski, born in Stanci, region of Kriva Palanka, but moved to Chardaklija, Shtip region; respondent Lazar Dimov, born in 1939 in Piperovo, Shtip region (Hristov AEIM № 513-III).

19. These lambs must be male, *"since St. Elijah has a male name"*.

20. Village of Gabrevci, Radovish region.

21. See Palikrusheva 1989: 59, for the Maleshevo area; Kotev 1999: 151—153, for the Strumitsa district in the 1990s. In Yablanitsa, Struga district, a *kurban* in St. Elijah's honor was celebrated during *"Goljamata nedelja"* in September: see Prokopek 1997: 237; Botsev 1999: 79; a kurban with an ox was held in Strumitsa region: see Kotev 1999: 151—152.

22. In 1977, 250 lambs were sacrificed for the *kurban* in honor of the Virgin Mary in Berovo for the 6000 people present (cf. Palikrusheva 1989: 59); in 1996, 190 lambs were sacrificed for the more than 15,000 people present, and after lightning struck in the middle of the celebration, in the following year "more than 8000 from Berovo, citizens of the neighboring villages, and visitors from other towns in Macedonia" were present (Kotev 1999: 155—156).

23. According to Evdokiya Hadzhieva, born in 1930 in Laskarevo district of Sandanski: *"When the dead relatives come, they look for the person in their own place"* (regarding the ritual table at the cemetery on *zadushnica*).

24. About the territory of contemporary Greece, see also Varvunis 2001: 177—178; about the Bulgarian-Serbian border regions, see Hristov 2003: 249—268.

25. The "fee" was about 50 Deutsche Marks during the 1990s.

26. For the field work evidence, see Hristov AEIM № 513-III.

27. For Papavnica, see Botsev 2001: 115; see Kotev 1999: 153 for Badilen.

28. Recorded during the *kurban* in Papavnica; see Botsev 2001: 115.

29. The metallurgical factory "Vladimir Lenin" was built in 1953 on the plain near Pernik city. The first in Bulgaria, it was proclaimed as "a product of Soviet-Bulgarian friendship".

30. Respondent: Georgi Lazarov, born in 1934 in Popovo, is now an inhabitant of Pernik.

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