
On the Alleged Letters of Honorius to the Cities of Britain in 410

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Writing at Constantinople during the early sixth century, Zosimus preserves some important fragments of information concerning events in Britain during the early fifth century which he derives from the lost history of Olympiodorus of Thebes composed sometime c.425-40⁽¹⁾. In particular, he reports that the western emperor Honorius (395-423) sent letters to the cities of Britain in 410 instructing them to take care of their own defence, and he is the only source specifically to record this event. Curiously, he only mentions this event in passing during a lengthy account of the activities of the Gothic leader Alaric as he tried to win Italian support for his puppet emperor Attalus in Rome against the legitimate emperor Honorius based in Ravenna⁽²⁾:

Alaric for a time wished to abide by the oaths he had given Attalus. Valens, the *magister equitum*, was suspected of treason and killed. Alaric then attacked all those cities in Aemilia which had refused to accept Attalus as emperor. After easily bringing over the others, he laid siege to Bononia, but it held out for many days and he could not take it. So he went on to Liguria to force it to recognise Attalus as emperor. Honorius sent letters to the cities in Britain urging them to defend themselves (Ὁνωρίου δὲ γράμμασι πρὸς τὰς ἐν Βρεττανίᾳ χρησαμένον πόλεις φυλάττεσθαι παραγγέλουσι), and rewarded his troops with gifts from the moneys sent by Heraclianus. He was now completely at ease, having won the goodwill of soldiers everywhere.

The sudden description of the despatch of these letters to Britain during a section of text otherwise devoted to events in Italy has occasionally aroused suspicion that the reading Βρεττανία may be corrupt. Godefroy (1587-1652) sug-

(1) On Olympiodorus, see R. C. BLOCKLEY, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire I*, Liverpool, 1981, p. 27-47. The ecclesiastical historians Philostorgius and Sozomen used him as their main source for events in the West also. A version of this paper was first presented at University College Cork on 21 November 2006 as part of the Insular Studies Seminar.

(2) *H.N.* VI, 10. Trans. R. T. RIDLEY, ed., *Zosimus. New History: a Translation with Commentary*, Canberra, 1982 (Byzantina Australiensia 2), p. 130, slightly amended. For the Greek text, see F. PASCHOUD, ed., *Zosime. Histoire Nouvelle: Tome III, 2^e Partie: Livre VI et Index*, Paris, 1989, p. 13. For a full account of the military history of this period, see e.g. J. MATTHEWS, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court AD364-425*, Oxford, 1975, p. 284-306; T. S. BURNS, *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome: a Study of Roman Military Policy and the Barbarians ca. 375-425AD*, Bloomington, 1994, p. 224-46.

gested that it should be corrected to read Βρουττία in reference to Bruttium in southern Italy, and some modern commentators have declared their support for this suggestion, although strengthening it somewhat by noting that Bruttium was more normally spelled Βρεττία in Greek ⁽³⁾. This provoked a detailed defence of the manuscript reading by Thompson ⁽⁴⁾. He offered three main arguments against the proposed amendment of the text.

The first was contextual. In the context of the events being described, it makes no more sense that Honorius should have sent letters to the cities in Bruttium than that he should have sent them to the cities in Britain. Since Alaric was in Liguria in northern Italy when Honorius sent the letters, and Liguria is about equidistant from southern Britain and Bruttium in the toe of Italy, he no more threatened Bruttium than he did Britain. So Honorius cannot have been warning the cities of Bruttium to defend themselves against Alaric. Indeed, there is no evidence that there was any military threat at all to the cities of Bruttium before Alaric finally marched southwards following his sack of Rome in August 410. In contrast, Britain seems to have suffered a serious invasion by the Saxons in 409, and faced a continuous threat of similar attacks from across the North Sea. Hence if one must choose between the cities of Britain or Bruttium in this matter, Honorius is likely to have had far more cause to write as he did to the former rather than to the latter.

The second argument was procedural. Thompson interpreted the fact that Honorius wrote to the cities rather than to the governor of the relevant province as a sign that the territory in question no longer possessed an imperial administration. Since Bruttium remained subject to imperial control at this time, but the people of Britain seem to have expelled their imperial administrators only the previous year according to Zosimus himself ⁽⁵⁾, Honorius must have been writ-

(3) On Godefroy, and other early commentators, see PASCHOUD, *Zosime. Histoire Nouvelle* [n. 2], p. 57-58. In apparent acceptance of the reading Βρεττία, see e.g. A. L. F. RIVET and C. SMITH, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, London, 1979, p. 102, n. 1; P. BARTHOLOMEW, *Fifth-Century Facts in Britannia* 13, 1982, p. 261-70, at 261-63. MATTHEWS, *Western Aristocracies* [n. 2], p. 320, n. 7, was careful not to commit himself to the amended reading when he mentioned it in passing. However, it continues to receive some support. E.g. G. HALSALL, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West 376-568*, Cambridge, 2007, p. 217-18, states in its defence: "The proposition that *Brittia* is Bruttium has never been convincingly rejected". The occasional agnostic refuses to commit himself either way. See e.g. A. WOOLF, *The Britons: from Romans to Barbarians* in H.-W. GOETZ, J. JARNUT, and W. POHL, eds., *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, Leiden, 2003 (*The Transformation of the Roman World* 14), p. 345-80, at 347, who states: "We should perhaps reserve judgement on this issue The letters were sent, wherever they went, in the early summer of 410".

(4) E. A. THOMPSON, *Zosimus 6.10.2 and the Letters of Honorius* in *CQ* 32, 1982, p. 445-62, at 445-49.

(5) ZOS., *H.N.* VI, 5, 3.

ing to the cities in Britain rather than to those in Bruttium. Or so the argument goes. Unfortunately, it rests on two equally erroneous assumptions. The first is that the emperor could only communicate with the cities through his provincial governors. The magistrates and councils of cities had always enjoyed the right to petition the emperor directly themselves, that is, to send embassies to the imperial court, and the emperors had been accustomed to reply directly to them⁽⁶⁾. Indeed, this direct communication between the emperor and the cities had served as an important check on the worst excesses of the local imperial administration. It would have been by no means unusual, therefore, had Honorius decided to write to any group of cities directly rather than through their local provincial governor. The second problem lies in the tacit assumption that Zosimus, or his source Olympiodorus, must preserve a complete technical description of any event which they describe. This is obviously false. Neither was writing a technical legal or administrative handbook with due attention to a full and detailed description of any procedures described therein. On the contrary, they were classicizing historians who deliberately eschewed such technical language or descriptions. Hence when one follows the other in saying that the emperor wrote to some cities one cannot assume that they necessarily mean by this that he wrote to them directly rather than through the local provincial governor. Nor can one assume the opposite. All one can safely say is that the emperor sent letters to the cities, but the exact means by which he accomplished this must remain unclear. More importantly, one cannot one say to whom exactly in the cities he addressed his letters. Since the provincial governors were based in the cities, he may well have written to them. It is particularly important to note here that Zosimus was of the belief that the bulk of Roman soldiers had been stationed in cities rather than camps on the frontier since the time of Constantine I, whom he had bitterly criticized for this fact⁽⁷⁾. Hence when he states that Honorius wrote to the cities in 'Britain', he may assume his reader to understand that he means by this that Honorius wrote to the army in 'Britain', the bulk of whose members hap-

(6) In general, see C. KELLY, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, Cambridge, MA, 2004, p. 121-27. The epigraphic evidence is particularly important in this respect. See e.g. S. MITCHELL, *Maximinus and the Christians in AD 312: a New Latin Inscription in JRS* 78, 1988, p. 105-24, for a reply by Maximinus II to the relatively obscure town of Colbasa in Lycia and Pamphylia. Again, the emperor Julian (361-63) addressed letters to the people of Athens, Sparta, and Corinth during his attack upon the territory of Constantius II in order to defend his actions (Zos., *H.N.* III, 10, 4; cf. Lib., *Or.* XII, 64), and, during his subsequent reign as sole emperor, to the people of Alexandria (*Ep.* 21, 24, 47, 48) and Bostra (*Ep.* 41).

(7) Zos., *H.N.* II, 34. He seems to be referring to the creation of a permanent field-army or central reserve, the *comitatenses*, to be distinguished from the frontier troops proper, the *limitanei*. See M. J. NICASIE, *Twilight of Empire: the Roman Army from the Reign of Diocletian until the Battle of Adrianople*, Amsterdam, 1998, p. 1-22.

pened to be stationed in the cities as had been the norm since the time of Constantine.

Thompson's final argument was that no amendment was in fact necessary because the sixth-century British author Gildas provides independent confirmation of the text as it currently stands, that Honorius sent letters to the cities in Britain, in his *De Excidio Britonum* ⁽⁸⁾. Unfortunately, any attempt to cite Gildas in support of the current reading of Zosimus' text must fail, first, because it misrepresents Gildas' actual words and assumes the very point under discussion, and second, because it ignores the context within which these words occur, a fantastic account of post-Roman Britain which clearly owed more to Gildas's imagination than to any genuine historical tradition. In respect of the first point, it is important to quote the relevant passage from Gildas in full ⁽⁹⁾ :

Igitur Romani, patriae denuntiantes nequaquam se tam laboriosis expeditionibus posse frequentius uexari et ob imbelles erraticosque latrunculos Romana stigmata, tantum talemque exercitum, terra ac mari fatigari, sed ut potius sola consuescendo armis ac uiriliter dimicando terram substantiolam coniuges liberos et, quod his maius est, libertatem uitamque totis uiribus uindicaret, et gentibus nequaquam sibi fortioribus, nisi segnitia et torpore dissolueretur, inermes uinculis uinciendas nullo modo, sed instructas peltis ensibus hastis et ad caedem promptas protenderet manus, ...

The Romans therefore informed our country that they could not go on being bothered with such troublesome expeditions ; the Roman standards, that great and splendid army, could not be worn out by land and sea for the sake of wandering thieves who had no taste for war. Rather, the British should stand alone, get used to arms, fight bravely, and defend with all their powers their land, property, wives, children, and, more important, their life and liberty. Their enemies were no stronger than they, unless Britain chose to relax in laziness and torpor ; they should not hold out to them for the chaining hands that held no arms, but hands equipped with shields, swords and lances, ready for the kill.

(8) THOMPSON, *Zosimus* 6.10.2 [n. 4], p. 448-49. He is followed by e.g. M. E. JONES, *The End of Roman Britain*, Ithaca, 1996, p. 250, although his language betrays less certitude : "A passage in Gildas seems to link up with the letter of Honorius mentioned by Zosimus". E. J. OWENS, *Zosimus, the Roman Empire, and the End of Roman Britain* in C. DEROUX, ed., *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History VIII*, Brussels, 1997 (Collection Latomus 239), p. 478-504, at 498, n. 107, distances himself a little further : "This is possibly connected with Honorius' letter to the British advising them to look after their own defence". Most recently, and more firmly, I. WOOD, *The Final Phase* in M. TODD, ed., *A Companion to Roman Britain*, Oxford, 2006, p. 428-442, at 433, claims, in defence of the traditional reading of Zosimus' text : "An account of an appeal and a similar response from the emperor is, however, to be found in Gildas". The exact date of Gildas' composition of the *De Excidio* remains unclear, but there is a strong case for dating it to 536. See D. WOODS, *Gildas and the Mystery Cloud of c.536-37* in *JThS* 61, 2010, p. 226-34.

(9) GILDAS, *De Excidio* 18, 1. Translation and text by M. WINTERBOTTOM, *Gildas : the Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, London, 1978, p. 22 and 94.

One notes that it does not mention Honorius by name. It does not even refer to an emperor as such. Instead, all one has is a vague statement that it was the Romans who sent this message to the *patria*, that is, to Britain. One cannot even identify the emperor concerned from the chronological context, if, that is, one could assume that any emperor was actually involved in this event, since this passage occurs within a section of text noticeably devoid of firm chronological indicators. This event apparently occurred sometime between the execution of Magnus Maximus in 388 and the alleged despatch of a letter by the British to the Roman general Aëtius when he was consul for the third time in 446, or shortly thereafter, but one cannot date it any more precisely than that ⁽¹⁰⁾. Hence there is no reason why one should attribute this action to Honorius (395-423) rather than to John (423-25) or even to Valentinian III (425-55). Next, the text does not actually mention any letters. All one has is a vague statement that the Romans informed 'the fatherland', that is, Britain, of their decision, with no implications as to how this was accomplished, whether by oral report or written message. Finally, one notes that the text does not mention the cities of Britain. No clue is vouchsafed as to whom exactly the Romans delivered their message, or where they did so. It is particularly noteworthy that this alleged message had told the British to defend their land, property, and relatives, but not their cities ! Hence anyone who attempts to discover confirmation of Zosimus' apparent report that Honorius sent letters to the cities of Britain in this particular passage is indulging in *petitio principii* of the worst type.

In respect of the second point, the context, one notes that this passage occurs in the middle of a long description of how the British failed to defend themselves against the Scots and Picts following the removal of the Roman army from Britain, so that they had to appeal to Rome for help on three separate occasions ⁽¹¹⁾. On the first occasion, the Romans sent a force to aid the British, defeated their enemies, and then advised them to build a wall from sea to sea across northern Britain. The British did this, but built it of turf. On the second occasion, the Romans sent aid again, defeated their enemies once more, but then advised them, as recorded above, that they would have to learn to defend themselves henceforth. However, they helped the British build a new defensive wall from sea to sea, but of stone this time, before they left. Finally, when they were

(10) GILDAS, *De Excidio* 13, 2 and 20, 1 respectively. However, severe difficulties surround the date of the alleged letter to Aëtius so that it is clear that Gildas' text conceals some serious error here also. See e.g. M. E. JONES, *The Appeal to Aëtius in Gildas in Nottingham Medieval Studies* 32, 1988, p. 141-55 ; P. J. CASEY and M. G. JONES, *The Date of the Letter of the Britons to Aëtius in Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 37, 1990, p. 281-90.

(11) GILDAS, *De Excidio* 14-20. In general, see N. J. HIGHAM, *Gildas, Roman Walls, and British Dykes in Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 22, 1991, p. 1-14, esp. 6 : "The entire tale is a fundamentally fictitious construction undertaken for rhetorical purposes".

attacked again, but failed to defend their wall properly, the British sent a letter to Aëtius requesting aid, but he sent none. It is clear, therefore, that this whole account, up to the alleged letter to Aëtius, derives solely from the observation of the continued existence in Gildas' day of two massive archaeological features, the walls built during the reigns of Antoninus Pius (138-61) and Hadrian (117-38) respectively, and represents no more than an attempt to explain the origin and purpose of the same. If Gildas did not invent this nonsense himself, he was only too happy to use it to in his work in order to describe the history of a period for which he clearly had no little or no reliable information, at least as far as Britain itself was concerned ⁽¹²⁾. There is no reason why the claim that the Romans told the British that they would have to defend themselves should be assumed to derive from a source any more authoritative or reliable than the rest of this nonsense, not least because it is so vague as to be almost meaningless, as already noted above. It derives from the simple observation that the Romans had left Britain at some point, since they were no longer there in Gildas' day, and that they would not have been able to defend the British once they had gone ⁽¹³⁾. So what did they say to the British as they left ? Defend yourselves !

Thompson's arguments have triumphed, not least because he tells students of post-Roman Britain that which they so desperately want to hear, and provides them with an invaluable fixed reference point. The most recent commentators to touch upon this topic have nearly all declared in favour of the manuscript reading as it stands, that is, if they have even admitted that there has been any debate in this matter at all ⁽¹⁴⁾. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that, as indicated

(12) On Gildas' literary sources, see N. WRIGHT, *Gildas's Reading : a Survey in Sacris Erudiri* 32, 1991, p. 121-62. He seems to have relied upon the histories of Rufinus of Aquileia and Orosius for such genuine historical information as he did possess concerning Roman Britain. His only firm piece of evidence for post-Roman Britain seems to have been the alleged British letter to Aëtius, but it is arguable that he, or an earlier editor, has completely misunderstood this document.

(13) As P. SIMS-WILLIAMS, *Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons in Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 6, 1983, p. 1-30, at 17, states : "It implies no more knowledge about the end of Roman Britain than the fact that it did end and that the Britons were left to fend for themselves". Despite his efforts otherwise to rehabilitate the reputation of Gildas as a historian, even I. MCKEE, *Gildas : Lessons from History in Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 51, 2006, p. 1-36, at 20, concedes this issue : "The departure must therefore be seen as inferred rather than derived from a source".

(14) See e.g. BURNS, *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome* [n. 2], p. 251 ; JONES, *The End of Roman Britain* [n. 8], p. 249 ; OWENS, *Zosimus, the Roman Empire, and the End of Roman Britain* [n. 8], p. 501-02 ; C. A. SNYDER, *An Age of Tyrants : Britain and the Britons AD400-600*, Stroud, 1993, p. 24-25. Standard works of references and text-books commonly report that Honorius abandoned Britain in 410 without any indication that there is any doubt about the reading of Zosimus' text in this matter e.g. R. C. BLOCKLEY, *The Dynasty of Theodosius* in A. CAMERON and P. GARNSEY, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History 13 : the Late Empire AD337-425*, Cambridge, 1998, p. 132 ; A. CAMERON, *The*

above, most of Thompson's arguments are invalid, and that his sole valid argument, his first argument above, proves only that the surviving manuscript reading is preferable to the proposed amended reading. It does not prove that the manuscript reading is necessarily the correct reading. The challenge to discover an amended reading which better suits the context than either Βρεττανία or Βρεττία remains. Or perhaps the problem presented by this passage of text requires a somewhat more complex explanation and solution. Hence it has recently been argued that Zosimus confused the Italian Bononia, that is, Bologna, with the Gallic town of the same name on the English channel, that is, Boulogne, the main crossing point from Gaul to Britain, as he read and summarized his source text ⁽¹⁵⁾. The result was that when he read statements to the effect that Alaric left Bononia in order to continue his raids upon loyal Roman territory, he mistakenly assumed that Alaric must have been heading for Britain. So when he then read that Honorius sent letters ahead in order to warn the cities in the path of Alaric to defend themselves, he mistakenly assumed that Honorius must have sent these letters to the cities of Britain in particular. This is an ingenious, but unnecessarily complex solution which makes Zosimus seem even more careless or stupid than one would otherwise have thought him to have been. Certainly, Zosimus could sometimes get his geography very wrong, and perhaps even add extra detail to his source-material as a result of, and in apparent support of, some misunderstanding ⁽¹⁶⁾. However, if the problem can be solved by proposing an amended reading of one term alone, then that would seem to be the preferable approach.

It is my suggestion, therefore, that the reading Βρεττανία should be corrected to read Πατρία that is, that Honorius sent letters to the cities in Raetia ordering them to defend themselves ⁽¹⁷⁾. This is an excellent solution as far as the con-

Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD395-600, London, 1993, p. 37 ; P. J. CASEY, *The Fourth Century and Beyond* in P. SALWAY, ed., *The Short Oxford History of the British Isles : the Roman Era*, Oxford, 2002, p. 75-106, at 99. A. S. ESMONDE CLEARY, *The Ending of Roman Britain*, London, 1989, p. 138, is unusual in considering the proposed correction to Βρεττία to be "a reasonable piece of textual criticism". A. R. BIRLEY, *The Roman Government of Britain*, Oxford, 2005, p. 462, resolutely declares that "whatever the exact explanation, it is preferable to discount the 'letter to the cities in Britain' as a phantom event".

(15) B. BLECKMANN, *Honorius und das Ende der römischen Herrschaft in Westeuropa* in *Historische Zeitschrift* 265, 1997, p. 561-95, at 572-75.

(16) See e.g. ZOS., *H.N.* IV, 35, 6 where he describes how the emperor Gratian fled from Gaul through Raetia, Noricum, Pannonia, and Moesia before his pursuers finally killed him at Singidunum. In fact, Gratian was killed at Lugdunum. Hence the obvious conclusion is that Zosimus has added the description of Gratian's long flight through the Balkans as a result of misreading the name Lugdunum as Singidunum.

(17) On Raetia during the late fourth and early fifth centuries, see BURNS, *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome* [n. 2], p. 112-47.

text is concerned. Zosimus has just described how Alaric led his forces northwards from Aemilia to Liguria. So where would he have led them next? The key point here is that Raetia was situated immediately to the north of Liguria or, to be more precise, that the late Roman province of Raetia Prima was situated immediately to the north of the province of Liguria, and Raetia Secunda to its north in turn. There had been a very real possibility, therefore, that Alaric would proceed from Liguria into Raetia. In this context, it would have made good sense for Honorius to have warned the cities of Raetia (whatever Zosimus actually understood by this) of the possible danger, and to advise them that they would have to defend themselves, since he had no reinforcements to spare for them. The fact that Alaric does not seem to have attempted to advance into Raetia, but proceeded southwards against Rome once more, suggests that Honorius' letters may have had some effect, and that the *dux Raetiae Primae et Secundae* managed to gather enough forces so as to seem to be able to mount a credible defence of the Alpine passes from Liguria into Raetia Prima against him⁽¹⁸⁾.

Next, as far as the palaeography is concerned, there can be no strong objection to identifying Βρεττανία as a corruption of Παιτία. Zosimus uses this name several times throughout his work⁽¹⁹⁾, and the type and degree of corruption required to transform Παιτία into Βρεττανία is no more than has already been discovered in the same book which is notorious for its corrupt readings and errors. For example, the addition of the extra syllable – αν– parallels his apparent transformation of the name of one of the generals of Constantine III from Justinus (Ἰουστίνος) to Justinianus (Ἰουστινιανός)⁽²⁰⁾. Similarly, the corruption at the beginning of the name is not much worse than that which saw his apparent transformation of the name of another general of Constantine III from Gerontius (Γερόντιος) to Terentius (Τερέντιος)⁽²¹⁾. In our case, an original alpha was transformed into an epsilon, and the first iota was transformed into a tau. But the main argument must remain that the new reading perfectly fits the context. The only doubt, perhaps, is whether it is right to blame Zosimus himself

(18) Sozomen (*H.E.* IX, 9, 2) says that Alaric captured the Alps (τὰς Ἀλπεῖς), but since he also says that they were a place about 60 stades from Ravenna, the place-name is obviously corrupt. R. C. BLOCKLEY, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire II*, Liverpool, 1983, p. 214, n. 28, notes that an early suggestion that the text be amended to read Κλάσσην, the port of Ravenna, about twenty-three stades distant, has not won acceptance.

(19) Zos., *H.N.* I, 71, 4; II, 14, 1; IV, 35, 6. Raetians mentioned also at III, 10, 2 and V, 46, 2.

(20) Compare Zos., *H.N.* VI, 2, 2 to OLYMPIODORUS, *frg.* 13 (BLOCKLEY, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire II* [n. 18], p. 170) = PHOTIUS, *Bibl. Cod.* 80.

(21) Zos., *H.N.* VI, 4, 2. However, he gets the name right at VI, 2, 4 and VI, 5, 1.

for these errors rather than a subsequent scribe. One could, of course, reject this whole approach and argue that no amendment is necessary, whether Βουττία, Βρεττία, Παττία, or anything else that someone might propose, on the basis that Zosimus has performed such a clumsy and abrupt summary of his source that he conceals the fact that it had sandwiched a description of events in Britain between two sections dealing with events in Italy. One cannot deny that this is possible. However, given the fact that the only apparent evidence for this change of topic consists of a single mention of the name of Britain itself, and this in a book notorious for the corrupt reading of names, then it is better to prefer the simpler solution offered by the amendment of this name. This is not to deny that the language of the surviving text readily reveals that it is a clumsy paraphrase, but to distinguish between language and content, and to affirm that one should not exaggerate this problem. Poor grammar does not in itself prove that the content of the original source has been even more severely treated.

In conclusion, painful though it may be for them because of their severe shortage of literary evidence already, students of late Roman Britain must now relinquish any claim that they felt that they had over Zosimus VI, 10, 2. It describes how Honorius sent letters to the cities of Raetia, not Britain. The emperor did not formally abandon Britain in 410, and any reconstruction which builds upon this assumption must be revised accordingly.

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