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Abstract

Béla Bartók birthed the field of ethnomusicology as an academic discipline through his tireless pursuits of folk music, his exposition of the sound of the rural people, and his incorporation of folk-style into his own personal compositions. His work revealed to the world that folk music exists, is important, and stands as an independent academic discipline. I argue that Bartók's efforts established the field of ethnomusicology because he was one of the first musicians to branch into the study of ethnic music by travelling to collect samples of music, by aurally recording and transcribing folk-tunes, by re-writing these songs into understandable notation with new harmonization, and by then employing this folk-style in his own original compositions. His academic work re-shaped the music of his generation and opened a new field of study to the Western world.

Keywords

Bela Bartok, ethnomusicology, Hungary, folk music, ethnic music

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Béla Bartók: The Father of Ethnomusicology

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Internationally renowned musicologist Halsey Stevens said, “In every age there have been great innovators; but every period of musical history has been crowned with the work of composers who brought the practices of their own time into a homogenous and consistent flowering—the highest musical synthesis of the era. Impossible as it is to predict the ultimate verdict, it now seems likely that Bartók was such a composer.”¹ Béla Bartók birthed the field of ethnomusicology as an academic discipline through his tireless pursuits of folk music, his revelation of the sound of the rural people, and his incorporation of folk style into his own personal compositions. His work revealed to the world that folk music exists, is important, and that its study stands as an independent academic discipline. I argue that Bartók’s efforts established the field of ethnomusicology because he was one of the first musicians to branch into the study of ethnic music by travelling to collect samples of music, by aurally recording and transcribing folk tunes, by re-writing these songs into understandable notation with new harmonization, and by then employing this folk style in his own original compositions. His academic work re-shaped the music of his generation and opened a new field of study to the Western world.

Béla Bartók began his pursuit of ethnomusicology at a rather unruly time in Hungarian politics. The people of Hungary were still recovering from the effects of their loss in the War of Independence nearly fifty years earlier (1848-1849), which included years of oppression, hardship, and pressure from neighboring Austria. Amidst these crises, individual Hungarians in favor of Hungarian independence gained popularity, public support, and power. Members of this independence

¹ Halsey Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 307.

corps called for Hungarian nationalism that included openly displaying the Hungarian coat of arms, replacing the Austrian national anthem with a traditional Hungarian hymn, and the use of the Hungarian language in the Austro-Hungarian army. As Austrian oppression of the Hungarians increased, Hungarian nationalism rose to match it. Among the supporters of this nationalist movement was young Béla Bartók. In a letter he penned to his mother, Bartók argued that, “every man, reaching maturity, has to set himself a goal and must direct all his work toward it. For my part, I shall pursue one objective all my life, in every sphere and in every way: the good of Hungary and the Hungarian nation.”² This way of thinking shaped the course of his entire life.³

In an honorable effort to serve Hungary and discover where her truest heritage lay, Bartók began to search for Hungarian ethnic music and folksong. The climactic moment that brought about this specific goal took place in the summer of 1904 when he heard an eighteen-year-old woman named Lidi Dósa singing an authentic Transylvanian folk tune. This was his first experience hearing real Magyar (an ethnic name for the native Hungarian people) folk music, and it turned his heart toward its natural uniqueness and ethnic originality. Sparked by this tune, and interested in uncovering more such gems, Bartók wrote to his sister, “I have now a new plan: I shall collect the most beautiful Hungarian folksongs and raise them to the level of art songs by providing them with the best possible piano accompaniment.”⁴ With this intent purposed in his heart and mind, Bartók applied for and received an academic grant to begin studies of the folk music of the Székely people, an ethnic sub-group that settled in Hungary during the Middle Ages.

The mere existence of Magyar music shocked Bartók and his contemporaries. A colleague, Ferenc Liszt, credited a different ethnic group, the Bohemian gypsies, with the origin of Hungarian music, yet believed that this music was purely instrumental. He said that the Magyars stole these instrumental tunes from the Bohemian gypsies and then added words to them. Liszt’s attitude toward peasant music reflected the attitude of musicians at large. Sophisticated musicians considered peasant music to be simply a perversion or degradation of

² Amanda Bayley, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bartók* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27.

³ N.J. Szenczi, “Great Britain and the War of Hungarian Independence,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 17, no. 51 (1939): 561.

⁴ Bayley, *The Cambridge Companion to Bartók*, 27.

the glory of Hungarian gypsy music. Even composers in Western Europe overlooked Hungarian peasant music in favor of the more widely known gypsy tunes. Liszt wrote, “Hungarian songs, as they exist rurally, and Hungarian airs...are both too poor and too incomplete to produce any new artistic result, and cannot yet even pretend to the honor of being universally appreciated, still less to that of being ranked with lyrical works which have already attained to a high degree of repute.”⁵ Because the music of the Bohemian gypsies was well known in Hungary at the start of the twentieth century, Bartók followed Liszt’s philosophy in his musical upbringing.

However, Bartók’s accidental contact with Lidi Dósa permanently changed his view by showing him that Hungarian music existed beyond the prevalent gypsy tunes. “Peasant music was not, as Liszt had supposed, a crude simplification of the flamboyant music of the gypsy bands; it was, rather a natural indigenous culture, its freshness encapsulated in Lidi Dósa’s Dorian melody.”⁶ Hearing this folk song opened Bartók’s mind to the existence of a rich culture of peasant music in Hungary much deeper than the outward ornamentation of the gypsy music, and he began to search for it one step at a time. Eventually, his pursuit of folk music led him to study and classify the peasant music of not only the Hungarians, but also the Romanians and Slovaks, Walachians, Turks, and North African Arabs. His study completely altered his view of aesthetics in music, shifted the direction of Hungarian art music for years to come, and founded a brand new research field based on the existence of music created, preserved, and presented by the common, rural folk of the world.⁷ Bartók’s creation of this broad new field, I would argue, was the birth of ethnomusicology.

Bartók’s interest in folksong grew in 1905 when he met and became close friends with Zoltán Kodály, a fellow music student at the Music Academy in Hungary. Kodály was a graduate student working on a dissertation on Hungarian folksong. As part of his research, Kodály

⁵ Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók*, 23.

⁶ Paul Griffiths, *The Master Musicians: Bartók* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1984), 16.

⁷ Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók*, 23.

collected samples of folksongs on phonograph records, and he taught Bartók how to use the machine to capture what he heard as well.⁸

The phonograph had already become an indispensable piece of equipment for the collector of folk-songs. The first scientist in Hungary to collect folk-songs with the aid of a phonograph was the ethnographer Béla Vikár, who did so in 1896. With the help of this instrument it was possible to check the notes, and to process and store the material. The introduction of the phonograph and its use in research brought the period of semi- or completely amateur collecting to an end, and replaced the erroneous conclusions and misinterpretations made with accurately recorded material that could be used for scientific purposes.⁹ Kodály and Bartók both used the machine extensively beginning in the summer of 1906, as they set out through the Hungarian countryside to record and collect research in Hungarian peasant song.¹⁰ Together, Kodály and Bartók developed the concept of fieldwork—a method of actively traveling to pursue and discover ethnic music and to then record the findings. Fieldwork has become vital to modern ethnomusicology, and its establishment by Kodály and Bartók set lofty precedents for future ethnomusicologists to follow.

Their fieldwork during the summer of 1906 yielded a rich harvest. Bartók began his tour of Hungary by traveling to Fekete-Ér. Here he recorded swineherds, shepherds, farmers, and domestic servants singing both solo and group folksongs. In this district, he noted a total of eighty-three songs and recorded forty-seven of them with his phonograph. After more time in Hungary throughout the summer, Bartók also visited Slovakian villages in the countryside. While interacting with these people, he managed to collect over one hundred

⁸ The reader may wonder, then, why I do not consider Zoltán Kodály to be the Father of Ethnomusicology. My answer lies in the difference in extremes to which each man took his research. Kodály did indeed begin to study Hungarian folk music before Bartók, but he mainly limited himself to field research and academic study of the subject. Bartók, on the other hand, took the style of Hungarian folk music that he researched and incorporated it into his own musical composition, as I explain later in my paper. Bartók's furthering of the Hungarian folk style is, in my opinion, the key difference between his research and Kodály's research, and it is why I bestow the title of "Father of Ethnomusicology" to him rather than his famous contemporary.

⁹ József Ujfalussy, *Béla Bartók*, trans. Ruth Pataki (Boston: Crescendo Publishing Company, 1972), 64.

¹⁰ Paul Griffiths, *Master Musicians*, 17.

and fifty songs and to record eighty of them.¹¹ His travels finally led him to Transylvania in the summer of 1907. After tireless searching for several weeks, Bartók's quest produced fascinating results. In a letter to one of his students, he wrote, "I have made a rather strange discovery while collecting folk-songs. I have found examples of Székely tunes which I had previously believed to be lost."¹²

In Csík County, Transylvania, Bartók penetrated the heart of ancient Hungarian folk music and discovered folk tunes that were based on the pentatonic scale, which had previously been ignored in Western musical theory and training. According to Kodály's writings, Bartók discovered so many pentatonic melodies that he realized that the pentatonic scale was vital to folk music and invaluable more significant to music than previously thought. Bartók's collection proved that much knowledge about the pentatonic scale remained to be learned and that many pentatonic folk-treasures may be discovered elsewhere throughout the country. Throughout the course of his two-year expedition, Bartók discovered over one thousand folk melodies. "From that time onwards, he spent some time every year in collecting folk-songs. Transylvania proved to be a continuous and inexhaustible treasure-house, but Bartók extended his tours to other parts of the country as well...[and they] gradually evolved into a vast scientific project encompassing the whole of Eastern Europe, a field of study which Bartók cherished throughout his life."¹³ This lifelong project became Bartók's personal research in ethnomusicology.

In 1907 Bartók was appointed to be a professor at the Hungarian Academy of Music. Although his talent as a pianist would have given him several opportunities to live abroad, and he furthermore did not particularly enjoy teaching, Bartók still accepted the position because it gave him a secure foundation upon which he could build his research in ethnomusicology. In his autobiography, Bartók wrote, "In 1907 I was appointed professor at the Academy of Music, and I particularly welcomed this appointment because it gave me an opportunity to settle

¹¹ Janos Demény, ed., *Béla Bartók Letters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), 68.

¹² Ujfalussy, *Béla Bartók*, 66.

¹³ Ibid.

down at home and pursue my research in folk music.”¹⁴ Bartók’s continued research gave him a strong foundation in ethnomusicology.

Bartók no doubt attained scholarly knowledge of ethnic musical styles. There is an important difference, however, between merely understanding a fact to be true and being able to incorporate that truth into a new creation. Similarly, even though Bartók knew the folk musical style of Hungary, a period of time elapsed before he composed his own masterpieces in the folk style. The folk music that Bartók discovered was completely different from the Romantic, German idea of music with which he had been familiar since boyhood. He explained in his autobiography:

It was decisively important for me to study all this peasant music because it showed me how to be completely independent of the universally prevailing major and minor scale system. For the majority—and most valuable—of the melodies I collected during my research tours moved in the old church tonalities, that is in the Greek and certain other even more primitive (pentatonic) modes, and show the most varied and freely changing metrical and rhythmic patterns performed in both rubato and ‘tempo giusto.’ *It is now clear that the ancient scales, that are no longer used in our folk-art music, have lost none of their vitality. Their application has made possible new types of harmonic combinations.*¹⁵

Bartók explained that melodic intervals found in the pentatonic folk music of Hungary and the tonality of Hungary’s ethnic diatonic scale were condensed into the harmonies of modern Hungarian music. The process was not easy, he continued. He learned that it was difficult to know how to deal with a folk melody correctly—without distorting its original compositional beauty. Bartók claimed that discovering this balance was just as difficult, if not more difficult, than writing a large original piece. He added that folk melodies in particular are strange, which made the task of arranging them without obscuring them, even more challenging. In regard to arranging, he said that ultimately, “inspiration is just as necessary for the arrangement of folk music as for any other kind of composition.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹⁵ Ibid., 80, emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Bartók helped to initiate the academic discipline of ethnomusicology by widely travelling the Hungarian countryside to collect samples of folk music, by recording these examples with the phonograph, and by discovering the heavy dependence that these melodies placed upon the pentatonic scale and thus promoting its use. His greatest addition to ethnomusicology, however, was his incorporation of folk styles into his own personal compositions. The folk music that Bartók discovered consumed the entirety of his academic and professional career as a teacher, researcher, and composer. As ethnomusicology played an important role in his compositions, Bartók separated and defined the levels of influence that folk music could have upon a composer. The most important phase is in the composer's harmonization.¹⁷

Bartók says that in this phase, "the peasant melody is given an accompaniment or perhaps inserted between a prelude and postlude with only slight, if any, variations in the melody."¹⁸ To set folk melodies, Bartók would look at the character of a folk piece and then form a gentle accompaniment around the melody that already existed. He would custom this accompaniment and harmonization directly to emphasize the character of the folk tune. The folk tune affected his harmonization in composition. For example, in No. 6 of his *Twenty Hungarian Folksongs* published in 1906, Bartók relied heavily on the pentatonic scale in his harmonization in the accompaniment because the melody was built around it. Although the melody does include scale degrees 4 and 7, which are not used in the pentatonic scale, the most emphasized notes in the melody (Eb, C, and G) point toward the pentatonic scale. Bartók therefore wrote the accompaniment to highlight the pentatonic scale, as seen in his emphasis of these same notes and the progression of the bass notes outlining a minor seventh chord (C, Eb, G, Bb) [See Example 1].

¹⁷ Ibid., 81.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Example 1: Béla Bartók, *Twenty Hungarian Folksongs*, No. 6, mm. 1-6.¹⁹

Other prolific examples of Bartók's folk harmonization are found in the works, *For Children*, *Fourteen Bagatelles*, *Ten Easy Piano Pieces*, and *Sketches*. As Bartók continued to push away from traditional Western harmony, he found even more ways to harmonize folk melodies. "He found that the peasants, in their oral musical tradition, naturally tended to transform the elements of their music, giving rise to numerous variants of one or another melody."²⁰ These different variations exposed Bartók to even more ways of harmonizing folk melodies because he could draw from a combination of surrounding cultures, from traditional styles several centuries old to new harmonic sounds that combined the ideas of two neighboring ethnicities. Among his discoveries, Bartók classified three categories of diverse folk melodies: "Melodies in the old Hungarian peasant-music style; a group of melodies exhibiting no unity of style; and melodies in the new Hungarian peasant-music style."²¹

While the old Hungarian peasant style depended upon the Dorian, Phrygian, and Aeolian modes, it relied most heavily upon the pentatonic scale for its melodies. Bartók made the most of this

¹⁹ Elliott Antokoletz, *The Music of Béla Bartók: A Study of Tonality and Progression in Twentieth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 27.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

pentatonic scale and created several possibilities for harmonization based upon it, including a major triad, a minor triad, a minor-seventh chord, and their inversions. He argued that the minor-seventh drew its roots from the oldest of pentatonic scales and believed that it was an interval equally as important as the intervals of the third and the fifth in the pentatonic scale. He concluded, therefore, that because they were of equal value, it was only natural to give them equal sonority when used together in harmonization. This expansion in accompaniment under the melody gave way to an increase in the number of harmonic possibilities.

The simpler the melody the more complex and strange may be the harmonization and accompaniment that go well with it....It is obvious that we are much freer in the invention of an accompaniment than in the case of a melody of a more complex character. These primitive melodies, moreover, show no trace of the stereotyped joining of triads....It allows us to bring out the melody most clearly by building round it harmonies of the widest range varying along different keynotes....Thus, chords were freely used to harmonize melody notes that do not belong to them. This led to the use of traditionally dissonant intervals as consonances even within cadential chords.²²

An example of the importance of the minor-seventh chord in Bartók's music rests in his *Bagatelles for Piano*, Op. 6, No. 4 [See Example 2]. In this piece, the harmonic language does not rest on the traditional major or minor scale system whatsoever. Rather, it depends upon the D-Aeolian mode. In this mode, there is no leading tone (no C#), so the V chord does not push toward the tonic as it does in a traditional major harmony. Instead, this chord serves as a resting place for the accompaniment because it does not give a strong lead towards another chord.

Example 2: Béla Bartók, *Fourteen Bagatelles for Piano*, Op. 6, No. 4, mm. 1-4.²³

This use of the Aeolian mode and the lack of a leading tone represent an important point of departure from traditional Western classicism in Bartók's music and a point of progress toward composing in the style of rural folk tunes—an important representation of Bartók's contribution to ethnomusicology.²⁴

To continue, the opening statement of the following piece, *Bagatelle* No. 5, also harmonizes a minor-seventh chord. It is built on the Dorian mode with a tonic of G, making the chord G, Bb, D, F. This chord returns in the same eighth-note ostinato pattern again in the final chord of the work [See Example 3]. The use of this chord as the foundation for a large section of the work produces an even greater pause in the chord progression than the preceding work.

Example 3: Béla Bartók, *Fourteen Bagatelles for Piano*, Op. 6, No. 5, m. 5.²⁵

Another example of Bartók's folk-style harmonization is found in *Eight Hungarian Folk Songs*, a work for solo voice and piano. Four of these pieces are solely pentatonic, and the pieces that are not solely pentatonic contain prominent pentatonic segments in the vocal line. This pentatonic style promotes an expanded harmonic structure by providing an outlet for chromatic triads and seventh chords to create modal pitch collections. Particularly in the first song, Bartók created an E-Phrygian bass line built on the E-pentatonic scale. This counterpoint of the bass line in E-Phrygian against the vocal line in E-pentatonic creates a tonal center exclusively on E throughout the piece [See Example 4].

²⁴ Antokoletz, *The Music of Béla Bartók*, 28.

²⁵ Bartók, *Fourteen Bagatelles*.

Example 4: Béla Bartók, *Eight Hungarian Folksongs* No. 1, mm. 1-17.²⁶

Adagio (♩=88)

I intro.

pentatonic substructure within the E-Phrygian mode

III interlude

U.N.

The piece later shifts to E-Dorian, where it creates a unique contrast against E-Phrygian and expands the E-pentatonic tonal center even further. “Thus, the pentatonic structure of the folk tune is employed in this triadic context as a new means of harmonic and melodic unification, i.e., it serves as a common symmetrical segment between two larger heptatonic modal sets.”²⁷ As seen in the above three pieces,

²⁶ Antokoletz, *The Music of Béla Bartók*, 35.

²⁷ Ibid.

Bartók's music harmonizes traditional Hungarian folk-tunes by setting them over pentatonic progressions and minor-seventh chords that highlight the rural origin of the melodies.

Bartók's introduction of ethnomusicology is seen clearly in his original use of ethnic harmonization in a time dominated by use of Western traditional harmonies. His influence continued vicariously, however, through the lives of composers who imitated his folk-music processes in their own fieldwork, classifications, and compositions. For example, George Herzog, who studied at the Royal Conservatory in Budapest, regarded Bartók's approach to ethnomusicological research as "canonical, a methodology to be emulated in other areas of the world."²⁸ He employed pieces of Bartók's method in his own research of the music of American Indians. Bartók also left a legacy through his process of transcription. His transcriptions of Hungarian and other eastern European folk-song are complex and detailed descriptions of a melody that modern transcribers look to as a model. Scholars recognize that Bartók left "no note, however slight, no vocal slide, pitch inflection, rhythmic nuance, tempo or articulative detail" unnoted in his transcriptions, as evidenced in this portion of a 1936 transcription of a Turkish folksong [See Example 5].²⁹

Example 5: Béla Bartók, transcription of a Turkish folksong.³⁰

²⁸ Bruno Nettl, ed., *Nettl's Elephant: On the History of Ethnomusicology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.) 141.

²⁹ Bayley, *Cambridge*, 32.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Scholars argue that transcriptions like this one truly represent the complexity of folk music more so than simple transcriptions that can leave out parts of the music.³¹ Bartók contributed significantly to the growth of ethnomusicology through his fieldwork, classifications, transcription systems, and personal compositions.

Bartók's study of folk music allowed him to reach a compositional style that was "both logical and expressive, [and] of a significance equaled by very few in his time."³² His impact as a composer was understood and seen by younger composers in Hungary, America, and Western Europe. Bartók's creative ability was more obvious than that of many of his peers. Although he did not express any new compositional trends or developments in his style during his later years in America, his folk-style evolved from what it already was, as shown by comparing his American works to his previous works. Most of his works following the *Fourth String Quartet* displayed sharply defined tonalities, folk-like melodies that were increasingly structured, logical harmonies that were somewhat simple, and lively and varied rhythms. His works also stressed manipulation of polyphony, including an emphasis on canon, fugato, and free imitation. In regard to form, Bartók continually wrote in the classical structure of composers such as Haydn and Mozart. However, as time progressed, his forms chronologically reversed and he began to model his compositions after the forms of Bach, the baroque period, and the medieval period. He preferred these forms over the classical forms because the earlier forms offered continuity and a flexible closing to the piece, whereas the classical forms pushed an artificial closing after a prescribed number of measures even if the music was not ready to end. Regardless of his form, however, Bartók always allowed the form to be shaped by the music itself, rather than trying to force the music into a mold.³³

Looking at all of Bartók's compositions chronologically reveals the dramatic evolution of his compositional style. "In no other recent composer is there to be observed such an undeviating adherence to the same basic principles throughout an entire career."³⁴ Other composers

³¹ Rollo H. Myers, *Music in the Modern World* (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1948), 142.

³² Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók*, 305.

³³ *Ibid.*, 306.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

of the twentieth century changed their style over time. For example, according to Stevens, Schoenberg's atonality crossed against his earlier tonal works. Hindemith began in Bartók's footsteps but later stepped back and forth between composition and experimenting with acoustics. Stravinsky changed compositional styles and Honegger enjoyed experimenting with several different forms and arrangements. Bartók, though, rather than changing his style, continuously added to his same basic style throughout his career. Regardless of what he added to his pieces, he never lost folk song as the center of his compositional style. "With Bartók there were frequent additions to his creative equipment, but seldom subtractions; 'influences' were quickly assimilated, and no matter from what source, they became so personally a part of his style or his technique that their gravitation lost its pull and he continued undeviatingly in his own orbit."³⁵ Even though Bartók continually drew on new elements of style for composition, he never allowed one single style to transform his compositional process. Rather, he took bits and pieces of several styles and molded them all into one multi-faceted greater style. Bartók's incorporation of the Hungarian folk style into his own musical composition confirms both the importance of the folk musical style and Bartók's significance as an ethnomusicologist.

In conclusion, Bartók's academic and compositional success birthed the field of ethnomusicology. His fieldwork in Hungary revived an entire history of folk music. Further, his recordings of these songs on the phonograph produced some of the earliest records of folk music. His transcriptions and settings of these pieces with new harmonization showed the importance, impact, and power of the pentatonic scale—re-introducing it to the world after years of ignorance. And his original compositions took the influence of the Hungarian folk style and worked it into new pieces that honored the heritage of life in rural Hungary and created a new compositional style that was unmatched in its purity and originality by any of his contemporaries. All of these combined factors illustrate that Bartók's efforts established the field of ethnomusicology as a credible academic discipline that is still growing, evolving, and being studied by professional musicians and scholars to this day. Without Bartók's contribution, current ethnomusicologists would be lacking in their comprehension of music in rural Hungary and Eastern Europe, and they would possess fewer techniques of studying folk music in the rest of the world.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 307.

It is easy to lose sight of the direct line of his creative development: to take the manifestations of a given work or a given period as typical and to decide on that basis that Bartók was himself primarily an experimenter. But such an evaluation ignores the far more important synthetic aspect of his art. He himself said, 'I do not care to subscribe to any of the accepted contemporary musical tendencies....My ideal is a measured *balance* of these elements.' And that 'measured balance' is apparent in all of his later music, as it is in his own character and intellect.³⁶

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³⁶ Ibid.

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