

The Building of a Cult Through a Myth: The Case of St. James the Elder

Abstract:

Saint James the Greater, one of the Twelve Apostles, is the patron saint of Galicia, pilgrims, and all of the Kingdom of Spain. This paper attempts to trace the development of the cult of Saint James the Greater as James of Compostela in medieval Galicia, from Scripture and the mistranslation of Greek hagiographical sources to later legends written in the Middle Ages in Western Europe. Additionally, the paper presents and compares the martyrologies of various authors: thus, the works of Ado of Vienne, Usuard, and Florus of Lyon are included in the study. It is in the works of these authors that the first mention that the tomb and relics of Saint James are located in Galicia is found. In any case, this study represents an effort to compile all these rather scattered data in one place.

Keywords: Spain, Middle Ages, medieval, art, Saint James the Elder, myth, Bible, Golden Legend

James the Greater, son of Zebedee, Apostle of the Twelve, is a prominent figure in both the Catholic and Orthodox worlds. At the same time, in the religious life of Spain, James the Greater, or Santiago, holds a special role. In this paper, we will attempt to explore the emergence of the cult of James the Greater on the territory of modern Spain. Furthermore, we will try to trace the formation of the cult and, at the end of the study, provide stages of development of the apostolic cult in Medieval Spain.

The author faced the following tasks: first, a corpus of sources and studies dedicated to this problem was analyzed; second, a brief description of hagiographic legends associated with the Apostle was given. As for methodology, the article employed comparative and diachronic methods of analysis. Additionally, the geography of the study includes France and Spain, as these countries have had deep political, trade, and cultural ties since the Middle Ages.

Three of the four evangelists mention James by describing his origin and place among the Twelve Apostles. Examples include quotes from Matthew, Mark, and Luke: “And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them” (Matthew 4: 21), “And he suffered no man to follow him, save Peter, and James, and John the brother of James” (Mark 5: 37), “And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray” (Luke 9: 28). Christians believe that after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the Apostles were sent out to spread the Word of the Lord; however, the question arises as to exactly where and why each Apostle—particularly St. James the Elder—was sent. The sending of the Apostles to other parts of the world for the purpose of preaching was described in the apocryphal *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, which was compiled from various sources; each of the Apostles miraculously learned a foreign language, and Latin went to James the Elder—it was assumed that “his” region would be Western Europe. The accounts and records of St. James’ apostolic mission do not provide a definitive understanding of whether James the Elder was a preacher: arguments in favor are usually justified by the fact that James the Elder was sent to Spain, but it is also assumed that Paul or Peter were sent to Spain.¹ This can be confirmed by passages from the Apostle Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: “Whosoever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you: for I trust to see you in my journey, and to be brought on my way thitherward by you, if first I be somewhat filled with your company” (Romans 15: 24), “When therefore I have performed this, and have sealed to them this fruit, I will come by you into Spain” (Romans 15: 28). It is also worth noting that Paul’s visit to Spain is also spoken of by the Apostle of the Seventy, St. Clement of Rome²: “Paul (...) acquired noble fame for his faith, for he taught the whole world the truth, and reached to the border of the West, and martyred the truth before the rulers.” The “Border of the West” in this context is Spain. For a long time, the words *non plus ultra* (Latin for “nowhere further”) were carved on the Pillars of Hercules at the Strait of Gibraltar, which later became the motto on the coat of arms of the Kingdom of Spain as a warning to sailors, because it was believed that beyond the pillars lay a kind of “border of the world”. Furthermore, it is also mentioned by Strabo³, who referred to Gibraltar as being “at the end of the earth,” and Diodorus of Sicily⁴, who reported that present-day Cadiz was at “the end of the universe”. It should be noted that even now many pilgrims traveling to Santiago de Compostela to worship the relics of James Zebedee continue their journey to Cape

¹ Lisa Todd, “The Cult of Santiago: The Images and Legends of Saint James and Their Significance in Modern Spain” (BA thesis, Redlands University, 1998), 1–10.

² Климент Римский, Первое послания к коринфянам, 5. Citation: апостола Варнавы, П. Памятники древней христианской письменности [*Clement of Rome. Pervoe poslanie k korinfianam. 5. Tsitata: apostola Varnavy, P.*], 107.

³ Benedict J Lowe, “Strabo and Iberia,” 69–78.

⁴ Jan van Herwaarden, “The origins of the cult of St James of Compostela,” 1–35.

Finisterre (Latin *finis terrae* means “The end of the Earth”).⁵ Thus, Scripture does not say that St. James the Elder was sent to the Iberian Peninsula as a missionary; on the contrary, the cited Bible quotations indicate that it was the Apostle Paul who was sent to Spain. This is confirmed by St. Clement of Rome, who indicated that Paul went as far as the “border of the West”, i.e., to the Pillars of Hercules.

But was there a patron saint of Galicia before the emergence of the cult of Saint James of Compostela? Ferreiro notes⁶ the fact that on the territory of Iberia there was a cult of Saint Martin of Tours, confirming his words with the *Chronicon* of Hydatius, bishop of Iria Flavia. This document recounts the history of Iberia from 378 to 469. During this time, as the *Chronicon* reports⁷, Saint Martin the Merciful, bishop of the French city of Tours, was popular in Iberia. Furthermore, one of the five pilgrimage churches—earliest on the list—was named after Saint Martin of Tours.⁸

The replacement of the figure of Martin of Tours by James the Greater is connected⁹ with political changes in the Kingdom of the Suebi of Galicia in the 6th to 8th centuries. Thus, in 585, King Leovigild of the Visigoths destroyed the Suebi Kingdom, and, according to Ferreiro¹⁰, this marked the beginning of the rise of the cult of Saint James the Greater. In 589, Reccared, the second son of Leovigild, a converted Catholic, publicly condemned the Arian heresy and converted the entire Iberian Peninsula to Catholicism at the Third Council of Toledo.¹¹ The Islamic conquest of the peninsula, which began in 711, also played a huge role.

The question arises: was the development of the cult of St. James the Elder politically beneficial for Galicia? Joseph O’Callaghan notes¹² that Emperor Alfonso VII (Alfonso Raimúndez), crowned by the bishop of Galicia Diego Gelmírez, attempted to seize the Kingdom of León, but his efforts were thwarted. The southern lands were taken by the Almoravids, and the political situation forced Alfonso VII to return to his territories, leaving his daughter, Queen Urraca of Castile, in charge. Urraca, in turn, exempted Gelmírez from military service and court duties.¹³ The constant flow of pilgrims to Compos-

⁵ О. В. Ауров, *Mater Hispania: христианство в Испании в I тысячелетии*. Издательство «Алетейя», 2018.: translated from Latin [*Mater Hispania: khristianstvo v Ispanii v I tysyacheletii*], 608.

⁶ Alberto Ferreiro, “The Cult of Saints and Divine Patronage in Gallaecia before Santiago,” in *The Pilgrimage to Compostela in the Middle Ages*, ed. Maryjane Dunn and Linda Kay Davidson, 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Eleanor Vernon, “Romanesque Churches of the Pilgrimage Roads,” *Gesta* (1963): 12.

⁹ Ferreiro, “The Cult of Saints and Divine Patronage,” 10.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Joseph F. O’Callaghan, *A History of Medieval Spain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 217.

¹³ Ibid., 218.

tela contributed to the prosperity of his diocese. It was during Gelmírez's time that the *Historia Compostellana* was written—an important monument of that era.

Pilgrims returned home, the popularity of the holy Apostle grew, and pilgrimages to Compostela attracted more and more people. By the twelfth century, several established routes to Compostela had already emerged: the western route, from Paris, was called the "French Road", the "Starry Road", or the "Milky Way Road". In addition to the "Paris Road", routes to Santiago also ran from Vézelay, Le Puy, and Arles. Studies of microtoponymy, monastic documents, and even heraldry show that pilgrims came from Scandinavia, eastern Germany, England, and southern Italy. It is curious that in addition to male pilgrims there were also women—thus, according to the table given in the Appendix of a paper written by M. Dunn and L.K. Davidson¹⁴, in the eleventh century, Ita von Nellenburg, along with her husband, Count Eberhard V von Nellenburg, walked the Way, as did Empress Matilda, daughter of Henry I, King of England, and a century later – Countess Sophia of Holland and Saint Paulina of Italy.

As Adeline Rucquoi notes,¹⁵ the *Concordia* of 1077 mentions a tomb, which the authors of the document imply is the tomb of St. James the Greater. Alfonso VII immediately erected a church dedicated to the holy Apostle, and nearby, a church dedicated to St. John the Baptist, as well as a third church to house the monks associated with the cult of Santiago.¹⁶ Of all these buildings, only the tomb survives, as the crypt, located under the church's main altar, was sealed by bishop Diego Gelmírez after the altar's installation in 1105.

In the *Historia Compostellana*, there is also an anecdotal case dated to the "times of the Toledo law":¹⁷ while in Rome, one of the bishops of Compostela asked a cleric to show the papal legate arriving from Rome "the same respect that he showed you [the cleric] in Rome". This statement was heard by the legate, which greatly angered him. This case clearly shows that the papal throne was not interested in Compostela gaining autonomy as a Spanish apostolic church. In turn, when Diego Gelmírez arrived in Rome in 1104 to receive episcopal vestments from Pope Paschal II, the "Romans" said that the church of Compostela behaved arrogantly towards the Holy See, that Com-

¹⁴ Maryjane Dunn, Linda Kay Davidson, "Bibliography of the Pilgrimage: The State of the Art," in *The Pilgrimage to Compostela in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Linda Kay Davidson and Maryjane Dunn (New York and London: Garland, 1996).

¹⁵ Adeline Rucquoi, "13 Compostela: A Cultural Center from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century," in *Culture and Society in Medieval Galicia* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 512–542.

¹⁶ John Williams, "The Tomb of St. James: the view from the other side," in *Cross, Crescent and Conversion. Studies on Medieval Spain and Christendom in Memory of Richard Fletcher* (2008): 175–192.

¹⁷ Thomas Deswarte, "St. James in Galicia (c. 500-1300)," in *Culture and Society in Medieval Galicia. A Cultural Crossroads at the Edge of Europe*, ed. James D'Emilio, *The Medieval and Early Modern Iberian World* 58 (2015): 488.

postela regarded Rome not as a lord, but as an equal.¹⁸ As Deswarte notes,¹⁹ the papal throne feared the autonomy of Compostela, supported by James the Elder—like the Apostle Peter, one of the Twelve Apostles.

The cult of the Apostle James the Elder in Spain was linked to the Catholic tradition of honoring James in the eighth century. In 804 the Apostle's deeds were recorded in the *Martyrologium gellonese*, almost word for word with another work, *De ortu*. The earliest mention of James' tomb and his remains being in Galicia can be found in the *Martyrologia* of the Benedictine monk Usuard, who died in 877. Usuard's *Martyrology*, completed by 865, was dedicated to Charles the Bald around 875: "Huius sacratissima ossa ab Ierosilimis ad Hispanias translata, et in ultimis earum finibus condita, celeberrima illarum gentium veneratione excoluntur."²⁰ It may be possible that this inscription belongs to the Benedictine monk Ado of Vienne, who mentions the presence of the tomb of James the Elder in Galicia in his revision of the *Martyrologion* of Florus of Lyons, but there is a possibility that the author of the inscription is Florus himself.²¹

The original version of Florus' *Martyrology* has not survived until this day, only Ado of Vienne's revision remains. Ado mentions that the saint's feast day is July 25, and it coincides with the feast day of St. Christopher of Lycia, as well as with one of the patrons of Spain, St. Cucufas the Martyr: "In Hispaniis, civitate Barcinona, s. Cucufatis martyris, qui ex civitate Sillitana ordiundus fuit, et Barcinonae sub Galerio proconsule, et Maximiano, et Rufino passus."²² The *Chronicon* of Ado of Vienne states that it was the Apostle Paul who arrived in Spain: "Quo tempore creditur Paulus ad Hispanias pervenisse."²³ In the *Little Book of Festivals in Honour of the Holy Apostles*²⁴ Ado already says that, although St. James the Elder was not in Spain during his lifetime, his relics were transported to the Pyrenees and buried "contra mare Britannicum" and now the Apostle's birthday is celebrated by the "local peoples."²⁵ Also Ado of Vienne refers to Acts chapter 12, saying that James was killed by Herod Agrippa I. Ado's words are also quoted and Jean Bolland notes that the terms "contra mare Britannicum" and "ultimis earum finibus" are the same place.²⁶ The compiler of the *Acta Sanctorum* says that both Ado and Usuard, who echoes him, had before their eyes the *Martyrologium Romanum*, which states that James

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ His most sacred bones, transferred from Jerusalem to Spain and laid to rest at the farthest ends of their land, are honored with the most celebrated veneration by those peoples. (author's translation)

²¹ Herwaarden, "The origins of the cult of St James of Compostela," 1–35.

²² S. Adonis Archiepisc. Viennensis, "Martyrologium cum additamentis. - mens Jul," 305.

²³ S. Adonis Archiepisc. Viennensis, "Chronicon," 79.

²⁴ S. Adonis Archiepisc. Viennensis, "Libellus de festivitatibus ss. Apostolorum," 183.

²⁵ "Celeberrima illarum gentium veneratione excoluntur," 183.

²⁶ "(...) et in ultimis earum finibus, videlicet contra mare Brittanicum (...)"

the Elder, brother of John the Evangelist, died at the hands of Herod Agrippa I “shortly before Easter”.²⁷ Both the *Mosarabic Missal* and the *Mosarabic Breviary* also speak of the adoration of the holy Apostle on July 25—and if the feast of Sex Capparum falls on the day of St. James the Elder, the memory of the saint is celebrated together with the Mosarabic feast.²⁸

That James the Elder was not buried in Jerusalem is also reported by the compiler of *Acta Sanctorum*, Jean Bolland. According to the *Breviario Apostolorum*,²⁹ James the Elder preached in Spain (Latin *Hic Spaniae*) and in the “western regions”³⁰ and afterwards died by Herod’s sword. James the Elder was buried at *Achaia marmarica*;³¹ *Acta Sanctorum* also gives details of the saint’s burial place, Achaia or Acaia Marmarica. For example, Heribert Rosweide says that an anonymous Greek author wrote that James the Elder was buried in the “locality of Marmarica” (Marmarica is a historical area in Libya); Tellemuncius writes that James the Elder was buried “not in Caesarea, but in Jerusalem”.³² It is suggested that the Greek author was simply ill-informed in Western geography and spoke Latin poorly, and the words “requiescere in Marmarica” (Latin for “rested in Marmarica”) were taken by the anonymous author as “was buried in Marmarica”. Freulf of Lisieux wrote that James the Elder was buried in marble.³³ Other medieval authors are also inclined to the idea that James was buried in a marble coffin (or even transported to Spain on a marble boat).³⁴

The death of the saint is also mentioned by Eusebius Pamphilus,³⁵ saying that Herod Agrippa I ruled in the time of Claudius Augustus; Herod, in addition to killing James, John’s brother, also turned against other Christians—so Eusebius relies on the twelfth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles: “Eodem autem tempore misit Herodes rex manus, ut affligeret quosdam de ecclesia. Occidit autem Jacobum fratrem Joannis gladio.”³⁶ Along with this, Cornelius Lapede, a Jesuit who lived in seventeenth-century Italy tried to establish the exact date of the saint’s execution: thus, in the Commentary on the twelfth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, there are different opinions from many authors as to the year of the murder of James the Elder. Josephus Flavius, in the ninth volume, seventh chapter of the *Antiquitatum Judaicarum*, says that Herod died in the third year of Claudius’ reign, that is, in the year 40. On

²⁷ Ado Viennensis, Usuard et al, “De S. Jacobo Majore apostolo et martyre, Compostellae in Hispania,” 5–48.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ In Latin: *et occidentalia loca praedicat*.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ In Latin: *Sic Freculphus scribit, quod fuerit sepultus intra marmoricam*.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Acts 12:1 – 2. KJV version: “At that same time, King Herod sent forth his hands to afflict some from the church. But he killed James, the brother of John, with the sword. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.”

the ninth of February Caligula was assassinated by conspirators, and he was succeeded by Claudius, who extended Herod's administrative power by giving him Judea and Samaria in 41.

The *Acta Sanctorum* also speaks of the origin of the cult of the saint: for example, in the *Typikon of St. Sava* (Sabbas the Sanctified, who lived in sixth century) it mentions "the holy Apostle James, brother of John the Theologian"; in the *minaiæ* of that time one can find the following verse:

"Ut agnus, ensi sponte cervicem dedit
Jacobus, atque ruminans verbum Dei,
Occisus est trigesima Aprilis die."³⁷

(Greek to Latin translation by Heribert Rosweide)³⁸

All sources agree on one thing: James the Elder was murdered in Jerusalem on the orders of King Herod Agrippa I, but there is much less agreement on where the burial place of the discussed holy Apostle is. Some authors speak of the Mount of Olives (e.g., Antonio of Piacenza in the sixth century or Ado of Vienne in the ninth century). In some Greek sources, James was buried in Achaia Marmarica or in *arcis marmaricis*. However, Bishop Theodomir and King Alfonso II of Asturias-Galicia were confident in the authenticity of their find. Nowhere before the early ninth century is Spain mentioned as the burial place of James the Elder. Archaeological excavations around Compostela have uncovered Roman and Sveva burials, but researchers have been unable to find the tomb of James the Elder in Spain, although the sarcophagus of Theodomir has been found. Bishop Theodomir did live and was indeed Bishop of Iria Flavia, judging from the inscription on his tomb. Later sources say that Theodomir restored the sanctuary of Compostela, dedicated to James the Elder thus suggesting that the cult of Santiago was already present in Theodomir's time.³⁹ Anyway, this fact does not prove that the burial place of the Apostle was exactly in Compostela, but it shows that the cult of Santiago was gaining popularity in the eighth century.

From the ninth century, the legend of James the Elder began to include the story of the transfer of the saint's body from Jerusalem to Spain—the mere mention of Usuard was 'embellished' and organically incorporated into the legends of the saint's miracles; James the Elder was buried in a marble coffin, then forgotten, then his grave was found by means of signs from above, which led to countless miracles in places of pilgrimage.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, one of the first legends connected with St. James originated in the third or fourth century, or, according to another theory, in the fifth or

³⁷ Ado Viennensis, Usuard et al., "De S. Jacobo Majore apostolo et martyre, Compostellae in Hispania," 5–48.

³⁸ "Like as a lamb, of his own will he did yield his neck/James, who did ponder the Word of God/Was slain upon the thirtieth day of April." (author's translation)

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

sixth century, which was afterwards recorded in the *Passio Jacobi*, a text written in a place between Narbonne, Lyons and Marseilles. According to one legend, James' sermons were not a success among the Spanish pagans, and, puzzled, James the Elder walked along the banks of the Ebro River at Cesaraugusta, Zaragoza, northeastern Spain. Then Madonna appeared to James, standing on a jasper column, surrounded by a choir of angels. The Virgin Mary encouraged the Apostle to continue his missionary work and told him to erect a church in her honor. The church became known as Nuestra Señora del Pilar (Spanish for Madonna on a Column), and this image of the Virgin Mary is still honored by Spaniards as the patron saint of Zaragoza, Aragon and the National Guard. After meeting Madonna, James' sermons finally succeeded.⁴¹

The rest of the story was completed in the *Historia Compostellana*,⁴² which tells us that James' body was forgotten during the reign of the pagans and then the Saracens, and a forest grew up around the cabin with the sarcophagus inside. Then, in the ninth century, the locals saw angels and a bright light coming from the depths of that forest. A bishop went there, and when he found the sarcophagus, he reported it to the king. As time passed, more and more pilgrims travelled to the sarcophagus and the bishop decided to build a basilica.

The life of James the Elder is also retold in the Golden Legend;⁴³ thus, there are descriptions of the legends of Queen Lupa, famous to this day, and of Hermogenes and Philetus. It is also interesting that later versions of the legend appear to have been inspired by the legend of the Seven Husbands Apostles: for example, the names of Santiago's disciples coincide with the names of the first Spanish bishops (Saints Torcuato, Cecilio, Tesifone, Eufrazio, Indalesio, Esicuo and Segundo, according to the legend, were sent by the Apostles Peter and Paul from Rome to evangelise Spain).⁴⁴

In conclusion, we can name six phases of the origin of the cult of St. James the Elder in Spain:

- I. James preached in Jerusalem and Palestine and died at the hands of Herod Agrippa I.
- II. James preached in Jerusalem and Palestine, writing a letter to the Twelve Tribes, and later died at the hands of Herod and was buried in the 'Marmarica' (referring to the Greco-Byzantine *Breviarium apostolorum*, dating from the fifth to seventh centuries).
- III. James preached in Jerusalem and Palestine, writing a letter to the Twelve Tribes, and later died at the hands of Herod and was buried at Achaia Marmarica (*Breviarium apostolorum*, *De ortu*, *Martyrologium gellonese*, seventh century, up to 640).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "Golden Legend – Life of Saint James the More," *CatholicSaints.Info* <https://catholicsaints.info/golden-legend-life-of-saint-james-the-more/> (accessed July 27, 2025).

⁴⁴ Gemma Malé, "Iconografía jacobea en Cataluña," 153–176.

- IV. James preached in Spain (Beatus, eighth century) and is known in Asturias-Galicia as *tutor* and *patronus vernulus*.
- V. James preached in Spain, died in Jerusalem at the hands of Herod, and his body was carried from Jerusalem to Galicia and buried in Compostela (Usuard, ca. 860).
- VI. James preached in Palestine and Spain, died in Jerusalem at the hands of Herod Agrippa, his body later brought to Galicia (*Libellus* of Ado of Vienne and *Martyrology* of Florus of Lyons).

The exact location where James, the son of Zebedee and called the Elder, was buried is unknown. We believe that Compostela in Galicia is a highly questionable site for the Apostle's tomb, and all attempts to demonstrate Compostela's uniqueness as a burial place are doomed to fail due to lack of evidence. It is also futile to clarify what exactly is meant by in *arcis marmaricis* and where it is located, since this is a mistranslation from Greek. A firm stance regarding the Apostle's burial site and accusations of overly harsh criticism should be supported by logical assertions, while faith should not replace historical and archaeological finds.

We can say that the development of the cult of Saint James the Greater on the Iberian Peninsula, although it originated as a result, presumably, of a mistranslation of Greek hagiographic sources, was strengthening over many centuries. As for Santiago, or Saint James of Compostela, the patron of Galicia and the pilgrims who come to venerate the relics of the saint, there was undoubtedly room for numerous hagiographical legends surrounding the saint during the development of his cult in Galicia during the Early and High Middle Ages. Examples of such legends include both the life of the saint told in the "Golden Legend" by Jacobus de Voragine and local legends. Furthermore, the apostolic cult was undoubtedly very important for the political and religious independence of Galicia from the Roman Catholic Church. We can say that the holy Apostle was (and remains) a very important religious figure for Spain.

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Sažetak:

Sveti Jakov Zebedejev, jedan od dvanaestorice apostola, svetac je zaštitnik Galicije, hodočasnika i cijelog Španjolskog Kraljevstva. U ovom se radu pokušava opisati razvoj kulta svetog Jakova kao Santiaga od Compostele u srednjovjekovnoj Galiciji, od Svetog Pisma i pogrešnih prijevoda grčkih hagiografskih izvora do legendi u srednjovjekovnoj Zapadnoj Europi. Također, u radu se predstavljaju i uspoređuju martirologiji raznih autora: radovi Adona iz Viennea, Usuarda i Flora iz Lyona uključeni su u ovu studiju. Upravo u radovima ovih autora pronalazimo prve spomene grobnice i relikvija svetog Jakova te njihove lokacije u Galiciji. U svakom slučaju, ovaj rad predstavlja pokušaj kompiliranja ovih raštrkanih izvora na jednom mjestu.

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