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Comparative Studies and Dating Questions between Nepalese Sculpture and Painting: the Case of Nepalese Buddhist Ritual Crowns*

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to present a comparative stylistic study of the ritual crowns of Nepalese Buddhist priests, and explore how this type of study can contribute to dating such ritual objects. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate whether the comparison of different media is a credible method. We have chosen the crowns (sanskrit, *mukuta*; newari, *mukhab*) as our research topic for several reasons. First, few studies have been conducted on these objects in the past. Second, their characteristics relate both to the field of sculpture and the field of jewellery. Finally, they are connected to the ritual and symbolism of esoteric and tantric Buddhism, and more specifically to the different headdresses worn by the divinities.

The first crowns found in Nepal have been dated back to the 12th century at the end of the Transitional Period (c. 879–1200). However, most Nepalese crowns were made during the second Malla Period (1482–1769), while others have been traced to more recent periods, i. e. the 19th or 20th century. The study of ritual objects has only recently begun to attract academic interest in the field of art history, especially in Nepal, and hence, little research has been conducted on this subject. The oldest Nepalese crowns are to be found in museums and collections all over the world. At this point, we have identified approximately twenty, but we expect to discover more in the future¹.

We have chosen to focus our study on four crowns. With the exception of one crown, the dates referred to above are those provided by the respective museums, rather than the outcome of our research:

- The crown from the Guimet Museum in Paris, dated 1145 (N.S. 265) by inscription – the oldest example known (fig. 1)²,
- The crown from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 12th century (fig. 2)³,
- The crown from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, 12th century (fig. 3)⁴, and
- The crown from the Zimmerman Collection in New York, 12th century (fig. 4)⁵.

After placing the crowns in their historical and religious context as well as discussing design and production techniques, we seek to determine more precisely the periods during which the crowns have been made, first through stylistic comparisons of the crowns, secondly by comparing the crowns to sculptures and paintings from the same period. This article presents preliminary findings from our initial research in this regard.

* We would like to thank J. Zimmerman who gave us access to photographs and allowed us to use the crown for this article. We would also like to thank M. S. Slusser, G. Béguin and I. Charleux for their advice and help. And we would like to thank K. A. Paul and C. Pohl-Thiblet who drew our attention to the existence of other crowns in different museums.

¹ We have so far listed the following crowns: Guimet Museum, (MA 4929), Paris, 1145; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, (M.81.67), Los Angeles, 12th century; the Zimmerman Collection, New York, 12th century; Virginia Museum, Richmond, 12th century; Victoria and Albert Museum, (I.S. 5–1946), London, 16th century; The Society of Cincinnati, Washington, 1610; Norton Gallery and School of Art, West Palm Beach, 17th century; Art Institute, The James W. and Marilyn Alsdorf Collection, (236.1997), Chicago, 1654; Naprstek Museum, Praha, 17th century; Victoria and Albert Museum, (I.S. 4–1946), London, 18th century; Jacques Marchais Collection, New York, 18th century; Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin; Museo Missionario Ethnologico, (AS 3294), Vaticano, 19th century; The Rijksmuseum voor Volkerkunde, Leiden; Natural History Museum, New York; Natural History Museum, New York; Musée de l'Homme, (no. 65.78.49), Paris. One crown that is mentioned in Béguin 1984 has not yet been located.

² Crown (MA 4929), dated by inscription to 1145 (N.S. 265), copper with gilding and semi-precious stones; H. 0,272 m, W. 0,215 m; Guimet Museum, Paris, acquisition in 1982.

³ Crown (M.81.67), 12th century, copper with gilding and semi-precious stones; H. 0,280 m; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the Ahmanson Foundation.

⁴ Crown, 12th century, repoussé gilt copper with semi-precious stones; H. 0,292 m, W. 0,196 m; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.

⁵ Crown, 12th century, copper alloy with gilding and semi-precious stones; H. 0,305 m; Zimmerman Collection, New York.



Fig. 1. Crown, copper with gilding and semi-precious stones, Guimet Museum, Paris, dated by inscription 1145.



Fig. 2. Crown, copper with gilding and semi-precious stones, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 12th century.

THE CROWNS IN ASIA

In Nepal, the Jinas are not only represented on the priests' crowns but also on the headdresses of certain divinities⁶. Crowns depicting the Jinas can be seen in the rest of the Buddhist world, mainly as headdresses of different Buddha illustrations in sculpture and painting. This is the case for two statues in North Pakistan and Sri Lanka from the 8th and 9th century that are amongst the first known examples⁷. During the same period, crowns with Jinas appeared in China, as illustrated on the paintings from Dunhuang⁸. In China, the priests still wear headbands with five prongs depicting the Jinas. The representations of the Jinas are also found in Tibet on sculptures⁹ or on the priests' headdresses¹⁰, in the form of tiaras composed of five mobile plates that are sculptured or painted. It is difficult to explain the origins of these variations in form and material compared to the Nepalese examples. In India, these crowns are extremely rare. The only examples we have identified are those from the northern regions, more specifically from Ladakh. These crowns reflect Tibetan influences; indeed, they may well be Tibetan¹¹.

The Nepalese crown is above all a ritual object. It is still used today by Vajrācārya priests when performing Buddhist rituals. They only wear the crown after the tantric initiation (*dikṣā*) called *ācā luyegu* in Newari. During a consecration in this ceremony, the novice receives the Vajrācārya cer-

⁶ As illustrated on a bronze sculpture of Buddha carrying out a particular *mudrā*, Nepal, Guimet Museum, (MG 17476), Paris.

⁷ Klimburg-Salter 1982, 96 and sculpture of Samantabhadra or Vajradharma, bronze, Colombo Museum, Sri Lanka, 2nd period of Anuradhapura, 8th-9th century in Schroeder/Okada 1991, 80f.

⁸ Painting with tantric ceremony in the honor of the five Jinas, Dunhuang, China, 9th century, Guimet Museum, (MG 17780), Paris and *maṇḍala* of Avalokiteśvara, Dunhuang, China, 9th century, Guimet Museum, (EO 3579), Paris.

⁹ For example on a Maitreya statue of the Ri-bo-k'ang temple and on a Jokang statue, Lhasa.

¹⁰ Sino-tibetan Tiaras, 18th century, reserve at the Guimet Museum, Paris.

¹¹ See representations of Buddha Śākyamuni from the Hemis monastery and of Maitreya from the Tikste monastery, both in Ladakh.



Fig. 3. Crown, repoussé gilt copper with semi-precious stones, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, 12th century.



Fig. 4. Crown, copper alloy with gilding and semi-precious stones, Zimmerman Collection, New York, 12th century.

emonial crown (Locke 1985, 12f.; Gellner 1992, 266ff.). The crown is subsequently worn by the priest during different ceremonies and becomes a crucial part of the liturgy (for example at the Kumāri festival during Indra Jātrā, where five Buddhist Vajrācārya priests walk in the procession wearing these crowns).

When the priest wears the crown during tantric rituals, he temporarily incarnates the divinity. The crown reinforces this identification with the divinity through its conical shape which is similar to the tall chignons or the tiaras worn by certain Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. This leads to speculations about which divinity the priest identifies with, as the iconography of the crowns is slightly modified. There are several indications that the divinity in question might be Vajrasattva. During different ceremonies¹² we have observed that the priest only reaches out for other ritual objects, the handbell and the *vajra* (typical Vajrasattva emblems), immediately after placing the crown on his head. Another point supporting the Vajrasattva identification is the fact that it is written in the *Nispannayogāvali* that Vajrasattva must wear a crown whose prongs are decorated with the five Jinas and a *vajra* at the top (Mallmann 1975, 419f.).

DESIGN AND PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES

The conical shape is made of metal and composed of three levels that progressively decrease in size¹³. Over time, the crowns have retained a similar layout, even though certain aspects have undergone slight modifications (the inferior band; the protective ear-flap; the organisation of the leaf-like structures protecting the divinities) but the topological differences are minor. The placement of the divinities around the crown or arranged on the front part may indicate a stylistic evolution, but we have not been able to reach any definitive conclusions at this stage.

A half *vajra* is placed on the top of most of the crowns in our study. The leaf-like structures or prongs are ornamented with openwork, and fastened with rivets or metallic pieces on all three

¹² One taking place at the Matsyendranāth temple in Kathmandu, another at the Vajra Yogini temple, both in November 2001.

¹³ Certain researchers, Zwalf 1985, 126 point out that each of the three levels may be perceived to resemble the dome of a *stūpa*.



Fig. 5. Vairocana, detail of stone inlay of the crown from the Guimet Museum, dated 1145.

levels of the conical object. The prongs of the crown, whose size can vary, generally protect a divinity, at times a symbolic motif or an ornament. The five Jinas of tantric Buddhism represented in these prongs are easily recognisable because they are part of the iconographic scheme of the crowns.

However, there is one exception – the Zimmerman crown (fig. 4) – where different aspects of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, and goddesses or gift-bearing goddesses are depicted on the object. This iconographic scheme is completely different to our other examples, and perhaps it is related to a specific ritual that is unknown to us. Other subtle variations are noticeable such as the presence or absence of Vairocana or Akṣobhya and their different placements. This is also true for Vajrasattva who at times appears placed above the Jinas¹⁴. These variations in the organisation of the divinities around a central axis, the *vajra*, which reminds us of a *maṇḍala*, is a subject for further research.

The Nepalese crowns in our study are all fabricated using the repoussé technique, apart from the *vajra* adorned on the top which is made by applying a lost wax cast. The copper or copper alloy sheets are hammered out on to a wax or resin surface in order to achieve a raised decorative design. The application of a fine layer of blended mercury renders the gold result. Coupled with that are the semi-precious stone inlay (crystal, ruby, turquoise, lapis lazuli or coloured glass). The repoussé technique requires dexterity and leaves no room for mistakes. Using this technique demanded great skill, and the newar artists were renowned for their high quality work. The older crowns represent the repoussé technique at its best, as exemplified by the meticulous execution of the Jinas.

COMPARISON OF THE FOUR CROWNS

In the second part of this article, we use an original method to date Nepalese non-dated crowns by stylistically comparing the items in question, as well as drawing parallels to sculptures and paintings¹⁵. In order to validate these comparisons, we will support them with examples dated by inscription.

The crown at the Guimet Museum in Paris dated 1145 is one of the rare crowns which carries an inscription with a date. This crown has been extensively researched, and its date is viewed as confirmed. Although dates were sometimes added to the crowns after their consecration, G. Béguin has informed us that the crown's inscription refers to the original production date, and the writing style corresponds to the 12th century. It would be difficult for an engraver to imitate this style, and it would certainly be noticed by modern researchers specialized in early scripts. Thus, the Guimet crown is our starting point. We will compare this crown with three others (from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; and from the Zimmerman Private Collection, New York). The choice of these crowns was dictated by the dates given by the museums.

By using our dating method, we will attempt to determine, if these dates are accurate, and

¹⁴ See Victoria and Albert Museum crown, (I.S. 5–1946), London, 16th century and Musée de l'Homme crown, (no. 65.78.49.), Paris.

¹⁵ This research method of dating items through stylistic studies has been developed in Meahl 2002; as well as in Bautze-Picron 1995.

explore ways to obtain more precise delimitations of the fabrication periods. To this end, we will focus our study on the stylistic appearance of the Jinas. Four criteria have been applied in order to judge whether the crowns are from similar periods. These criteria are: body shapes, clothing, jewellery, and decorative elements, i. e. stone inlays (fig. 5).

Body Shape

The divinities illustrated on the Guimet crown retain well-modelled forms with sober contours, large rounded shoulders, a barely indicated torso and a thin waist. The almond shaped eyes with slightly bulging eyelids are set off by a thin but continuous superciliary arcade indented at the bridge of the nose, itself rounded. The lips are full. The Los Angeles and Virginia crowns present similar features to those of the Guimet crown. The Zimmerman crown remains an iconographic mystery. In order to draw stylistic comparisons to the Jinas of other items, one has to study the secondary divinities of the Zimmerman crown¹⁶. On this basis, we can conclude that the origins of all crowns can be traced back to the 12th century, with the exception of the main divinities on the Zimmerman crown.

Clothing

The Jinas on all four crowns are in ankle length garments, apart from the main divinities on the Zimmerman crown. A piece of pleated clothing fans out between the two legs on all the divinities, with the exception of the crown from Los Angeles. The same appears to apply for the Zimmerman crown. There are no decorations on the clothing. The floating scarves are chiselled with fine curvy strokes accentuating their movement. However, this is not the case for the Zimmerman crown. The garments worn by the gods follow a similar stylistic pattern with attention to details such as the scarves. As with the body shape, the clothing styles indicate that the crowns are from the 12th century, again with the exception of the main divinities on the Zimmerman crown.

Jewellery

The jewellery primarily consists of pearl necklaces, sometimes with a jewel in its centre. The three-leaf crowns on the Jinas' heads are represented on all four examples with minor variations. For example, some of the divinities on the Virginia and Zimmerman crowns do not have a rosette on either side of their tiara. All the crowns depict divinities wearing simple earrings, some with inserted stones. In general, the jewellery is sober with no presence of different length necklaces, bracelets, ankle bands or rings. Only very few of the Jinas actually possess inlaid stones. The level of workmanship

of the jewellery on the four crowns is largely similar. As with the body shapes and the clothing, we can surmise that these crowns are part of a similar stylistic trend characteristic of the 12th century.

Decorative elements

The last stylistic criterion is the decorative elements on the crowns, i. e. stone inlays. The four central divinities on all the crowns are surrounded by lapis lazuli or turquoise inlaid stones. The Guimet crown is the least ornate in terms of stone inlays; only the tips of the flames and the top of the mandorlas have inserted stones. The Los Angeles crown follows the same ornamentation as the Guimet crown, apart from the fact that certain medallions have additional inserted gems. The Virginia crown is similar to the crowns mentioned above, but it contains supplementary stone inlays. Finally, the Zimmerman crown exposes by far the highest amount of inlays, and contrary to the other crowns it has a decorated top band at the bottom of the half *vajra*.

With the exception of certain elements on the Zimmermann crown, we have found that the crowns all exhibit stylistic similarities with regards to body shape, clothing and jewellery. Meanwhile, we have observed striking differences in the quantity of stone inlays. During later periods, the workmanship became more elaborate, in sculpture as well as in painting. While the Guimet crown has few stone inlays, suggesting that it is the earliest of the four crowns, the Zimmerman crown has the highest number of stone inlays, suggesting that it is the most recent¹⁷. Could the increased use of gems therefore represent a stylistic turning-point in the 12th century? In order to further investigate this, a comparison with sculptures and paintings may prove useful.

COMPARISON WITH THE SCULPTURES

We will briefly compare the four crowns with a set of contemporaneous sculptures. Their dates have been provided by the museums but have not been confirmed. We will use the four criteria mentioned above in order to analyse the style of the sculptures. Crowns and metal sculptures are more easily compared; they are made of the same type of material, often by applying identical techniques for the artwork. Furthermore, as the crowns are decorated with sculptures, they themselves may be considered as sculptures.

¹⁶ We would like to thank H. Neumann for pointing this out to us.

¹⁷ See Meahl-Blöndal 2002 and Bautze-Picron 1995.



Fig. 6. Vasudhārā, copper alloy with traces of gilding; inlaid with gemstones and glass, from the Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, Museum Associates Purchase, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, c. late 12th century.

Body Shape

The first two sculptures illustrate Avalokiteśvara, 12th century (private collection¹⁸) and Vasudhārā, 12th century (Heeramaneck Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, see fig. 6¹⁹). On these sculptures, the body shapes are well balanced and the facial features have heavy eyelids with continuous eyebrows. This also applies to the four crowns. The body forms are more rounded and better modelled on sculptures from the 13th century. The shoulders are not as broad and the facial features have become more refined, for example Avalokiteśvara, 13th century (Heeramaneck Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, see fig. 7)²⁰.

Clothing

Our comparison of statues is inconclusive with regards to clothing. Some statues from the 12th century do not appear to have designs on their garments, as is the case with the Jinās on the crowns, whereas some statues do have floral motifs. Furthermore, some sculptures from the 12th century (see Avalokiteśvara, 12th century, L. Fournier

Collection²¹) have pleated cloth between their legs, as exemplified by the Jinās on the crowns. In the 13th and 14th century, the pleats have become more stylised and the motifs are more elaborated, as is the case for a 14th century goddess (Zimmerman Collection, New York²²), and hence they no longer follow the same stylistic pattern as the crowns or the sculptures from the 12th century.

¹⁸ Heller 1999, pl. 53; H. 0,65 m.

¹⁹ Vasudhārā (M.81.8.2), c. late 12th century, copper alloy with traces of gilding; inlaid with gemstones and glass; 48,3 × 39,4 × 28 cm; from the Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, Museum Associates Purchase, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

²⁰ Avalokiteśvara, 13th century, from the Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, Museum Associates Purchase, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. On stylistic evolution, see Klimburg-Salter 1998.

²¹ Heller 1999, pl. 54; H. 0,21 m.

²² Goddess, copper alloy with gilding, H. 0,330 m (Pal 1996, 58).

Jewellery

In general, the jewellery on 12th century sculptures remains sober as in the case with the jewellery on the Jinas of the four crowns. Some Jinas have several necklaces with or without stone inlays. However, the three-leaved crowns on the sculptures are slightly more sophisticated than those of the Jinas, and the rosettes remain (Vasudhārā, 12th century, see fig. 6).

Decorative elements

The use of decorative elements in the 12th century are greater on sculptures than on crowns as exemplified by three of the four crowns in our study (excluding the Zimmerman crown)²³.

Contrary to the generally sober 12th century sculptures and the four crowns, the motifs on the jewellery on the 13th and 14th century sculptures are more intricate and display more stone inlays. However from the 13th and 14th centuries, the use of stone incrustation is applied to sculptural elements such as bracelets. This supports our earlier conclusion that the Zimmerman crown is the most recent of the four. We estimate that this crown was fabricated in the late 12th century to the early 13th century. Meanwhile, at this point, we are unable to draw final conclusions, as few sculptures have confirmed dates and none of the ones mentioned here. It does, however, support the general orientation of the dating²⁴.

COMPARISON WITH PAINTINGS

A brief comparison will be made between the four crowns and a set of paintings, some of which we have confirmed dates for.

Body Shape

The body shapes depicted on 12th century paintings are similar to those of the divinities on the four crowns (Prajñāpāramitā manuscript and covers, dated 1100, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, see fig. 8)²⁵. The waists are slim, the shoulders are



Fig. 7. Avalokiteśvara, from the Nasli and Alice Heerama-neck Collection, Museum Associates Purchase, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 13th century.

²³ For comparison, see a sculpture of Indra, 12th century; H. 0,25 m; in the John D. Rockefeller the 3rd Collection (ref. Pal 1975, 116).

²⁴ For comparison, see the 13th century Bodhisattva; H. 0,475 m; from a Private Collection (ref. Pal 1975, 76).

²⁵ Note: only the covers are illustrated; not the manuscript.



Fig. 8. Prajñāpāramitā, courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art, dated 1100.

broad, and the torso is slightly indicated. The facial features are somewhat more refined on the paintings, but still show a continuous eyebrow, heavy eyelids and thin lips as on the crowns.

The 13th and 14th century paintings have bodies that are slender with more delicate facial features – indicating another stylistic pattern than on the 12th century sculptures and crowns. Two examples illustrate this stylistic change: the Śiva covers and manuscript (dated c. 1200, in the National Library, Kathmandu) and a thang-ka of Avalokiteśvara (dated c. 1300 in the Lionel Fournier Collection)²⁶.

Clothing

The clothing on two 12th century paintings, with confirmed dates from 1100 (fig. 8) and 1148 (Bodhisattva in the Cambridge University Library²⁷), respectively, have floral decorations. This is not the case for any of the four crowns. However, the pleats in Prajñāparamitā's scarf accentuate the floating movement as in the scarves worn by the Jinas. By the 14th century, these motifs become more complex, indicating another stylistic trend in clothing, as can be seen on the thang-ka of Avalokiteśvara in the L. Fournier Collection mentioned above.

The 12th century clothing in the painting is similar to that of the crowns despite the simple motifs that decorate some of the garments, as was the case for 12th century sculptures. The crowns, although they do not have motifs on their clothing, display a similar simplicity. This is especially noticeable when compared to the elaborate motifs on the 14th century paintings.

Jewellery

The jewellery depicted on both the paintings and the crowns is simple: three-tiered crowns, rosettes, simple necklaces decorated with a central jewel and armbands. We can thus infer that the 12th century crowns and paintings both possess a certain simplicity in their execution (as can be seen in the Pañcarakṣā manuscript dated c. 1160 in the British Library²⁸), contrary to the 13th or 14th centuries paintings, where the workmanship has become more complex. As with the clothing, the jewellery becomes more intricate in later centuries. We can now point out that these two criteria reinforce the 12th century date for the crowns (for example, a Pañcarakṣā manuscript, dated 1247, a confirmed date from the Bir Library, Kathmandu, 1967²⁹).

Decorative elements

In the paintings, it should be noted that the artists decorated the mandorlas with touches of blues and reds before the breaking of the flames. This also resembles the mandorlas of the main divinities on all four crowns, who are surrounded by stone

inlays before the fringed flame motif. In our study of the 12th century sculptures, we have not yet come across this stylistic representation.

To sum up, the comparison between 12th, 13th and 14th century paintings and 12th century crowns indicates that the crowns follow a similar stylistic trend as the 12th century paintings. This is noticeable with the body shapes, the clothing (especially the floating scarves) and the jewellery. The 13th and 14th century paintings have evolved into a more sophisticated style. Does this help us date the crowns? To a certain degree it does, for we were able to compare the crowns to at least three dated manuscripts (1100, 1148 and 1247), which was not the case for the sculptures. However, this succinct comparison also requires a great deal of research before drawing firm conclusions regarding the dates of the four crowns.

CONCLUSION

This study has tried to determine whether stylistic comparisons may resolve the dating problem. Using a dated crown from 1145 as our baseline as well as examples of sculptures and paintings from the same period, we have been able to establish that the three other crowns are from the same stylistic period. We were also able to point out that the Los Angeles and Virginia crowns are from the second half of the 12th century, and that the Zimmerman crown originates from the end of the 12th century or early 13th century. However, we must tread carefully when drawing our conclusions, because none of the sculptures are dated, nor do they carry inscriptions. Only a few of the paintings have confirmed dates.

The relevance of comparative stylistic studies of different works of art – sculptures, crowns, paintings, manuscripts – is hence supported by these initial findings: such comparisons help establish the dates of non-dated items (which in this study represent the majority of the works subject to our research). Meanwhile, the conclusions which can be drawn based on comparative stylistic studies are constrained by limitations related to the differences between the works of art and the techniques. For example, details apparent on one item may not have been preserved on another object, or they may have been treated differently. In the same way, older styles may be preserved on paintings longer than on sculptures.

Another objective of this study has been to constitute a set of core objects from the same

²⁶ See Béguin 1990a, no. 24; 5,8 × 57 cm and 5,8 × 57,1 cm; ref. Béguin 1990b, 172, 174; 0,65 × 0,53 m.

²⁷ See Pal/Meech-Petarik 1988, fig. 39.

²⁸ See Béguin 1990a, no. 24; 5,5 × 6,5 cm.

²⁹ See Petech 1958, 88.

period, as few works of art carry inscribed dates. It should be noted that, apart from the paintings mentioned above, our research does not include items made of other materials, such as for example wood carvings³⁰. Stylistic comparisons alone are not sufficient to draw final conclusions; an iconographic analysis should be undertaken as well.

Various texts (such as ritual handbooks and prayer books) as well as oral sources describe the different stages of the rituals carried out by the priests. They are essential for further research in this area. While this article reflects the first efforts at conducting the type of research that this subject requires, further studies are currently being carried out on a wider corpus of crowns.

³⁰ Even if wood carvings from the 12th century are very rare.

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