

Horse-Sacrifice and Kingship in the *Secret History of the Mongols* and in Indo-European Cultures

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The horse-sacrifice, with Indic, Roman, Celtic, Scandinavian, and Hittite examples, has been regarded as an important Proto-Indo-European ritual used to inaugurate or affirm kingship. This article presents a 13th-century Mongol analogue, and somewhat more distant Turkic analogues, that support an alternative view: that regnal horse-sacrifices may have an Eurasian geographical distribution, rather than a specifically Indo-European genealogical one.

In A.D. 1201, the year of the hen (*taqiya jil*), the tenth year according to Mongol duodenary reckoning, some twenty or more clan leaders, representing twelve clans, assembled at the Alqui-bulaq ('Sarsaspirilla Spring'), near the river Ergüne-müren (= Argun), upstream from the point where that river meets its eastern tributary, the river Kan-müren (= Gan), and, having agreed to form a military confederacy in opposition to the growing power of Chinggis Qahan, elected the most powerful chieftain of their numbers, Jamuḡa of the Jajirad clan, as their leader (*Secret History* 4.141; de Rachewiltz 1974:64-65 [notes pp. 78-79]; Cleaves 1982:68-69). The confederate chiefs call Jamuḡa their *gür qa[n]* 'Ruler of All', a title that they confer on him in order to match the one that Jamuḡa's rival, Temujin, had received from his allies, viz. "Chinggis-qahan" (3.123), a Turkic epithet meaning 'oceanic' or 'all-embracing' Qan, implying an ideology of world-kingship (Pelliot 1959, 1:296-303; cf. de Rachewiltz 1973). Jamuḡa's inaugural kingship ceremony is described very briefly: "these [twelve] tribes, assembling themselves at Alqui Spring, saying, 'Let us raise up Jamuḡa the Jajirad as *qa*', together cut in twain a stallion and a mare and made covenant with one another. Journeying from there down along the Ergüne River at the corner of the island where the Ken River poureth into the Ergüne, they then raised up Jamuḡa as *gür qa*. Having raised [him] up as *gür qa*, they said unto one another, 'Let us set forth against both Chinggis Qahan and Ong Qan'" (4.141, trans. Cleaves 1982:68-69).

The Indo-European practice of horse-sacrifice, used to inaugurate a king or to renew or guarantee his continued reign, is, of course, well-known through a vast scholarly literature, but so far as I am aware, Indo-Europeanists have not been aware of this Mongolian analogue. Most scholars writing on this topic assume that the horse-sacrifice, as a ritual of kingship, is distinctively Indo-European (viz. Puhvel 1970; Talley 1974:163-64). Some have said so explicitly: Benveniste cites royal sacrifices, along with trifunctionalism and a patriarchal social structure, as distinctively Indo-European (*Revue de synthèse*, in *Synthèse historique* [1939], after Haudry 1985:125); Watkins, seconding Benveniste, cites the horse-sacrifice in its Indic form, the *asvamedha*, as "the principle Indo-European kingship ritual" (1995:265). Koppers (1927; 1936), to be sure, was aware of Indo-European and Altaic horse-sacrifices dedicated to the Sky-god; Toporov (1972:159, 190) noted the association of the horse with the Cosmic Tree, which has mythic significance for many cultures besides Indo-European ones; and Eliade compares the *asvamedha* to shamanistic horse-sacrifices among the Turkic and Mongol peoples, but stresses their role as fertility rituals rather than as kingship dedications (1972:80). The *Secret History of the Mongols* provides an Altaic example of horse-sacrifice specifically associated with kingship. I shall attempt to reconstruct it as fully as possible, and then compare it with its Indo-European counterparts.

In analogous horse-sacrifices presided over by a shaman, the shaman's objective was to accompany the sacrificial horse's spirit to the Sky-god, where he could obtain divine favor for his clients, or, perhaps, return with knowledge about their destinies (Boyle 1972). We should probably expect to find similarities between Jamuqa's horse-sacrifice and the one observed by a Christian missionary in 1840 among the Altaic Turks, reported by Radlov (1884, 2:20-50), and used as the primary source for Eliade's (1972:190-200) and Chadwick's and Zhirmunsky's (1969:244-51) reconstructions of shamanistic horse-sacrifices in central Asia. According to Eliade's and Chadwick's and Zhirmunsky's analyses, the horse-sacrifice could serve a variety of purposes such as treating an illness, accompanying a deceased person to the underworld, purification of a house, or inauguration of a new shaman. In the ceremony reported by Radlov, a light-colored horse was selected for sacrifice, and the shaman's objective was to ride the *pura*, the sacrificial horse, into the presence of Bai Ülgen, the Sky-god. The ceremony also includes cutting the horse in pieces, cooking and eating parts of the sacrifice, exhibiting part of the sacrifice on a birch tree, imitation of the movements and bricking of a horse by the shaman, and prophecies about the weather and harvest, indicating that the horse-sacrifice was meant to ensure fecundity. The

weather would be the province of the Sky-god, and harvest would be the province of the Earth-mother.

The image of the shaman riding to heaven on a sacrificial horse is attested, as well, among the Yakut (Czaplicka 1914:238) and among the Mongols (Köprülüzade 1929:17). The Altaic ritual was intended for ancestor-worship, or, alternatively, to evoke fertility, in horse-rituals preceded by erotic pantomimes by three young men wearing mock wooden phalli (Zelenin 1928). Early in the twentieth century, Jeremiah Curtin (1909:44-52; 108) observed a Buriat-Mongol horse-sacrifice used to inaugurate a new shaman. In the Buriat example, the horse-sacrifice takes place in the presence of a large pole or tree, symbolically, the "cosmic tree" along which the shaman travels from earth to heaven or to the underworld. Pieces of the sacrifice are hung on the tree, or on poles. The Mongol practice of impaling horses' hides on poles above a grave was reported by Vincent of Beauvais (in Ruysbroek, ed. Rockville 1900:80 n. 2), by Ricoldo da Montecroce [ca. 1243-1320] (1948, 10.8), by Kirakos of Ganjak (Boyle 1963:204-7), by Ibn Battūta (1929:299-300), and by Willem van Ruysbroek [13th cent.], who describes the grave of a person recently deceased, possibly a Coman or a Qipčaq rather than a Mongol, canopied with the skins of sixteen horses hung on long poles (1900:22). According to the 10th-century Armenian historian Movsēs Dasxurancī, the Khazar Turks in northern Daghestan sacrificed horses to oak trees, dedicated to Tengri, the Sky-god, and they would pour horses' blood over the trees and hang their heads and skins from the tree branches (1961:99). These and similar practices were witnessed, as well, by Europeans who were variously traveling or held captive among the Turkic and Mongol peoples from the 18th century onward (Boyle 1965). The *Secret History* makes no mention of pieces of sacrifice hung on trees or poles, nor of the sacrificed horse flying to heaven, but the image of horses flying to heaven is used in a simile that the saga-writer attributes to Chinggis Qahan during his warfare with the Merkid clan. He describes three young Merkid warriors, Qudu, Qal and Čilia'un, who had fled from battle, as "like a lassoed wild horse, like a stag with an arrow *in its body*. If they grow wings and fly up into the sky, you, Sübe'etei, will you not fly up like a falcon and catch them?" (8.199, de Rachewiltz trans.).

Cooking and eating horsemeat is also attested as part of Altaic horse-sacrifices. Giovanni da Pien del Carpine mentions this (cap. 3.3, in Dawson 1955). The *Secret History* describes an important ancestor-sacrifice, held in the spring, that includes eating a sacrificial meal as part of the ritual. When Temujin's widowed mother, Hogelun, and her four sons, were still living with Ambaya Qan's people, his two wives, Örbei and

Sagatai, prepared a sacrifice, called *ajaru inerü* ('burning of food in the ground and making sacrifice'), and in Hogelun's absence, on the pretext of her arriving late, they divided the sacrificial meal between them, leaving none for her family (2.70). Mother Hogulun upbraids them for excluding her and suspects that they intend to move their encampment, leaving her behind. After this incident, she goes into exile in the wilderness with her sons; they subsist on birds and fish. From our perspective just now, what is interesting about this episode is the fact that Örbei's and Sagatai's exclusion of Mother Hogulun from the sacrificial meal was interpreted as a sign that she was not a member of their clan, and therefore should have no part in the important ancestor-ritual.

In Jamuša's kingship sacrifice, a stallion and a mare are cut apart. This has a two-part significance. First, cutting apart the sacrificial victim is a cosmogonic ritual, imitating the creation of the world out of the body-parts of a primordial man or dragon or other animal creature. Bruce Lincoln has made this clear in his analysis of Indo-European human sacrifices, which included dismemberment as a cosmogonic allegory (1991:170-74). Second, the pairing of a stallion and a mare symbolizes the fecundity of the world through the mating of the Sky-god (the stallion) with the Earth-mother (the mare). The association of the mare with the Earth-goddess has its counterpart in the Celtic horse-sacrifice (described below), according to an interpretation by Meid (1989): the Celtic mare is *Epona*, or, rather, in its earliest Celtic form, **Ek*onā* the Horse Goddess, the representative of the Earth, the equivalent of Gaulish *Rigantonā* the Great Queen, and of British *Matrona* the Earth-mother. Throughout the *Secret History*, it is clear that the Sky-god (*de'ere tengri* 'Heaven Above' or *möngke tenggeri* 'Eternal Heaven') and the Earth-mother are the co-sponsors of divinely ordained kingship. When Temujin, with the aid of his allies Ong Qan and Jamuša, succeeds in defeating the Merkid clan, he attributes his victory to his having been "Called by Mighty Heaven, / Carried through by Mother Earth" (3.113). Elsewhere, in a prose formula, the *Secret History* represents Temujin as crediting "Heaven and Earth," that is, the Sky-god and the Earth-mother, for protecting him and increasing his military and political power (3.125; 11.260). The *Secret History* attributes this formula to the shaman Qorchi, as well, in his reaction to an incident in which a cow attacks Jamuša's tent-cart with its horns, then butts Jamuša, too, breaking off one of her horns. The cow then paws the ground, raising up dust, and bellows. The shaman interprets the cow's bellowing as an omen, declaring (3.121),

Together Heaven and Earth have agreed:
Temujin shall be lord of the land!

Therefore, laden with the land
I bring it to him!

The symbolism of world-kingship, as an aspect of Jamuqa's horse-sacrifice, is explicit in the title that he is awarded, *gür qa* [sc. *qan*] 'Lord of All', intended to equal the title given earlier to Temujin, viz., Chinggis Qahan 'Oceanic Lord', meaning 'Lord of All'. Underlying this theme is a deeper myth of world-kingship, according to which kingship was instituted by a particular mythic or heroic personality, who was, therefore, the world-king, or cosmic king, whose social order is an extension of the cosmic order. Marduk, the Babylonian god of kingship and civilization, plays this role in the creation epic, *Enuma elish*: he institutes kingship and the benefits of civilization, and provides for the establishment of the city of Babylon at the world's center (Heidel 1951: tablet VI). In the same work, Ashurbanipal, the king of Assyria, is called by the epithet "king of the world" (tablet V, colophon). In ancient Hebrew tradition, Nimrod, "mighty hunter, . . . the first on earth to be a mighty man," "founded his kingdom in Babel, Erech, and Akkad, embracing the land of Shinar, symbolically, the civilized world (Gen. 10:9-10). Ferdowsi's *Shahnamah* describes Keyumars as the primordial world-king, a role continued by his successors, his grandson Hushang, then Tahmuras and Jamshid (1967:5-13). Each of these kings possessed *Farr*, a refulgence or aura that provides for the world's fertility and prosperity, and advances in civilization, which emanate from the person of the cosmic king. Near the beginning of his epic, Ferdowsi states that his source for this material was an earlier epic by a member of the Dehqan ('landed gentry'), who had collected traditional stories about "primeval days," and especially about "the kings who had once possessed the world and about other famous and illustrious men" (1967:3-4). Ferdowsi, then, in the early eleventh century, attests to a traditional myth of world-kingship that he incorporates into his epic.

If my analysis of the evidence seems balanced and fair, the Mongol horse-sacrifice in the *Secret History* has the following elements: (1) it was used to inaugurate a kingship; (2) a stallion and a mare, symbolic of the Sky-god and the Earth-mother, were selected for the sacrifice; (3) the choice of a stallion and a mare suggests that the sacrifice evokes fecundity and prosperity, which are extensions of a divinely-ordained kingship; (4) the sacrificed animals are sundered in imitation of a cosmogonic myth, according to which the world was created from the parts of an animal creature; (5) the sacrifice takes place near a spring or river or other body of water; and (6) the sacrifice invokes a myth of world-kingship. Other possible elements of the sacrifice, not mentioned explicitly in our text, but known to be part of Mongol ritual practice, were (7) cooking and eating parts of the sacrifice in a ritual meal, and (8)

suspending parts of the sacrifice from poles or trees, either as an offering to the Sky-god, or, possibly, in homeopathic imitation of the stars in the sky.

We turn now to the Indo-European examples. Koppers (1936) reconstructed the Proto-Indo-European horse-sacrifice, based on its Indic, Roman, and Celtic examples, as having the following elements: in the spring, a young white stallion was selected for sacrifice; it was ritually washed, dedicated to the most important god (the Sky-god), and slain by strangulation. It was a "long-bone" sacrifice, meaning that its bones were not broken. There is, of course, considerable variation among the historical examples (Hittite and Scandinavian as well as Indic, Roman, and Celtic). The Proto-Indo-European reconstruction might well include Cosmic Tree symbolism, sundering the horse as a cosmogonic ritual, cooking parts of the horse and eating them in a ritual meal, and hanging parts of the sacrifice on one or more trees or poles: all details that have Altaic counterparts. To evaluate the Indo-European-Altaic connection, then, we shall consider the Indo-European examples separately.

(1) Indic: the *asvamedha*

The Indic horse-sacrifice, the *asvamedha*, is known from Rig-Vedic hymns 1.162 and 1.163, from the White Yajur-Vedic *Vājasaneyi Samhitā*, *Śatapatha Brāhmana* book 13, and *Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra*, from three texts in the Black Yajur-Vedic *Śrautasūtra* (viz. *Āpastamba*, *Baudhāyana*, and *Vādhāla*), from book 14 of the *Mohābhārata* ('*Āsvamedhikaparvan*' [ed. Matkari 1980]) (Dumont 1927), from book 7 of the *Ramayana* (King Rama's horse-sacrifice), and from three Black Yajur-Vedic variants of the *Taittirīya Brāhmana* (Bhawe 1939); for summaries: Gonda 1960:168-73; Campbell 190-97). In this ritual, which takes place in the spring, the king observes a night of chastity with his favorite wife; then, a sacrificial stallion is selected, sprinkled with water in a pool, allowed to roam freely for a year, but prevented from contact with mares. Thus, a homeopathic link is established between the king and the stallion. A year later, the stallion and three other horses are sacrificed at an *asvayupa* ('horse pillar'), the symbolic equivalent of Sanskrit *asvathā* 'horse tree', both manifestations of the Cosmic Tree at the center of the world (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1995, 1:467). The stallion is killed by smothering, and the king's favorite wife joins the dying or dead stallion under covers and enacts a ritual imitation of cohabitation. The stallion is cut into pieces; parts of it are cooked and eaten in a ritual meal, and other parts are used for further blood sacrifices. The sacrifice is presided over by priests, is dedicated to Prajāpati, the Lord of Creation, and is intended to

guarantee that the king will continue to be free from sin, victorious, prosperous, and fertile. Prehistorically, the horse-sacrifice most likely was dedicated to Varuna and to Dyaus, the Sky-god (Eliade 1972:199).

(2) Roman: the sacrifice of the *October Equus*

The Roman sacrifice of the *October Equus* has been reconstructed from allusions in various Latin sources, viz. Ovid's *Fasti* [4.731-82], Propertius [5.1.19 sqq.], Polybius, Plutarch, Festus, and Paulus Diaconus. The ceremony began in the Ides of October, with a horserace on the Campus Martius on the Tiber river, midway between Rome and Suburra (Coarelli 1983:72-77). The right-sided horse pulling the winning chariot is killed with a spear, in dedication to Mars. The people of Suburra and of the Sacra Via engage in a mock-battle over the head of the horse. If the Suburrans capture it, they fasten it to the wall of Turrus Mamila; if the people of the Sacra Via capture it, they fasten it to the wall of the Regia, and ancient palace of Rome's second king, Numa. The tail is taken to the Regia, where drops of its blood are sprinkled on the hearth. Blood from the October horse is distributed to herdsmen to sprinkle on their flocks to ensure fertility and a plentiful supply of milk (Frazer 1935, 2:229 and 326; Ampolo 1981). Dumézil, in his influential comparison of the *October Equus* to the *āsvamedha* sacrifice, regards Mars as the equivalent of Indra as war-gods and gods of kingship, and stresses that both are kingship ceremonies (1966:216-24). Polomé (1994a:356-57; 1994b:47), to be sure, has questioned the supposed equivalency of the *October Equus* and the *āsvamedha*, and of Mars and Indra. However that may be, the symbolic association with kingship is apparent in the role that the Regia plays in the sacrifice of the October horse.

Details from other horse-sacrifices support the selection of a white or light-colored horse, and sacrifice at a spring near a sacred grove. Strabo, for instance, describes an annual sacrifice at a "sacred grove of Diomede, at the spot where many springs burst forth from the foot of a lofty cliff, forming at once the broad and deep river Timaeus," where the Veneti sacrifice a white horse (5.1.4.8-9; Frazer 1935, 1:27).

(3) Celtic: a horse-sacrifice from Ulster

A kingship inauguration from Ulster, described in Geraldus Cambrensis' *Topographia Hibernica*, cap. 168 'De novo et enormi regni et domini confirmationis modo' (ca. 1185), was brought into the dossier of Indo-European horse-sacrifices by Schröder (1927). A white mare is selected for the sacrifice and is brought into the presence of all the people. The one who is to be king steps forward and, playing the role of a stallion, performs a simulated or actual act of copulation with the mare (literally).

bestiam profiteur 'offers [himself] as a beast'). The mare is then cut into pieces, and the pieces are boiled in water. The new king bathes in the water, eats of the horsemeat and drinks of the broth. By means of this ceremony, the new king's reign is established (*dominium est confirmatum*). There is some evidence for a pan-Celtic horse-sacrifice invoking kingship: Jaan Puhvel has shown that the Gaulish Arvernian royal name 'Epomeduos' is synonymous with the royal name *Aśvamedha* in the *Rig Veda* [5.27.4-6] (1955). Further, the Irish king-name 'Eochaid', based on Old Irish *ech* 'horse', recalls the connection between kinship and horse-sacrifice (Ford 1977:10). Geraldus Cambrensis makes no mention of a horserace, but Dexter, alluding to the myth of a chariot race between Conchobar and the goddess Macha, in which the goddess was victorious, speculates that the Celtic version of the horse-sacrifice included a horserace, just like the Indic and Roman ones (1990:293).

It should be noted that the horse-sacrifice described by Geraldus Cambrensis is not the only example of a royal inauguration ritual that has Indic analogues: Disterheft (1997) has called attention to the narrative sequence of a chariot race followed by a cattle raid, which comprised the Vedic *rājasūya* (Heesterman 1957), a ritual kingship inauguration, and is present, as well, in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ['The Cattle-raid of Cooley']. According to Disterheft's analysis, the Celto-Indic parallels are to be explained as derivative from an Indo-European kingship ceremony in which the newly inaugurated king dramatized his dominion over his subjects by leading a mock cattle-raid. The point of this analysis would be that Indo-European kingship inauguration is a complex problem and the horse-sacrifice is not necessarily at its prehistorical center, since the chariot race and the cattle raid also surface as ritual activities that are associated especially with kingship.

(4) Hittite: a bull-sacrifice with ritual copulation

The Hittite example, a large relief vase from Inandik (Özgüç 1988) depicts a couple, interpreted by Watkins (1995:266-67) as king and queen, engaged in a public, ritual copulation *more ferarum*, imitating beasts, in the context of a bull-sacrifice or in the presence of a bull-statue. Scenes on the vase include images of the preparation of foodstuffs by cooks, and a procession of musicians moving toward a temple. The Indo-European horse-sacrifice has been displaced by a bull-sacrifice in the Hittite context, but there may be some fossilized remains of horse-sacrifice in the Hittite Law Code, which prescribes the death penalty for bestiality with cattle, sheep, and pigs, but exempts bestiality with mules and horses (Puhvel 1970:171; 1987:276).

(5) Scandinavian horse-sacrifices

The horse-sacrifice in the sacred grove of Uppsala is known from Adam of Bremen's *Descriptio insularum Aquilonis* (*Patrologia Latina* 146:642-44, cap. 26). According to this account, every nine years at the time of spring equinox, in the sacred grove at Uppsala, in the vicinity of a sacred spring near the great temple the priests sacrifice nine male horses, dogs, and human beings. They cut the sacrificial victims into pieces, which are hung on trees in the grove, as in the Altaic ceremonies described above.

Horse-sacrifices dedicated to Odin and possibly to Freyr are mentioned in the Old Norse *Hrafnkels saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, and *Oláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. Although these texts do not give additional details, they do confirm the Scandinavian use of such sacrifices. It is not clear whether or not the horse was sacrificed at a sacred tree or pillar, but Old Norse names for the Cosmic Tree were *Ygg-drasill* 'place where Odin's horse is tied' and *askr Yggdrasils* 'ash tree of Odin's horse' (de Vries 1956-1957, 2:380), comparable to the Indic *asvatthāpā* 'horse-pillar' where the *asvamedha*-horse was sacrificed. There is good evidence, moreover, that the Scandinavian horse-sacrifice, like the Indic, Celtic, and Altaic examples, included ritual eating of parts of the sacrificial victim. In the *Hákonar saga goða*, the Norwegian king, Hákon, is compelled to eat horsemeat by his pagan countrymen. Then, in the year 1000, when the Icelandic Allthing decided to accept Christianity, one of their conditions was that they be allowed to continue to eat horsemeat, which otherwise was forbidden in Christendom (Rosén 1913; Höfler 1934; Koppers 1936; Gjessing 1943). The Christian ban on eating horsemeat was an issue, as well, in medieval Irish texts that have been adduced as evidence for horse-sacrifices in Ireland (Chatháin 1991).

The horse-sacrifice in the *Secret History of the Mongols*, then, is a cultural practice whose distribution is geographic rather than genealogical, represented throughout Eurasia by Turkic, Mongol, Indic, Hittite, Roman, Celtic, and Scandinavian examples. The rituals included in horse-sacrifices across these cultures constitute a pool of variant details, no one of which is found in every attested example of a horse-sacrifice, but all of which are represented in both Altaic and in Indo-European cultures: these are set forth in Table 1 (following the list of references in this article). The association of horse-sacrifice with kingship is attested in the Mongol, Indic, Hittite, Roman, and Celtic examples. I am inclined to agree with Polomé (1994a-b) that the evidence for a Proto-Indo-European horse-sacrifice, as an inauguration of kingship, is rather ambiguous: certainly the argument for a PIE source is attenuated by the example of a horse-sacrifice

Table 1. Content-analysis of Altaic and Indo-European Horse-sacrifices

* indicates evidence for a particular feature of the horse-sacrifice. [?] indicates that there is no direct evidence for a feature, but analogy or indirect evidence suggests that the feature might be present. Blank squares indicate that there is no evidence for a given feature.

Aspects of horse-sacrifice	Mongol	Turkic	Indic	Hittite	Roman	Celtic	Scand.
Horse(s) sacrificed	*	*	*	[bull]	*	*	*
Kingship ritual	qan	shaman or ancestor	kingship	king & queen	kingship	kingship	[?] Odin or Freyr
Time: in spring		*	*				*
Place: at a river, spring, or pool	*		*		*		*
Cosmic Tree symbolism		*	*				*
Presided over by priest(s)	[?]	*	*	*	*		*
Preceded by horse-race			*		*	[?]	
White horse is selected		*	*		*	*	
Sex or gender symbolic	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Ritual copulation		*	*	*		*	
Agrarian fertility evoked		*	*		*		
Imitation or simulation of the movements of a horse		*	*	*		*	
Dedication to Sky-god &/or Earth-mother	*	*	*				
Horse is cut in pieces	*		*		*	*	*
Eating a sacrificial meal	[?]	*	*			*	*
Pieces of sacrifice hung on poles or trees	*	*					*

in the *Secret History of the Mongols*. The kingship horse-sacrifice might have had a Proto-Indo-European origin, possibly, but we cannot rule out the possibility that it was an Altaic or other non-Indo-European ritual that had migrated east toward Mongolia and west and south toward Indo-European lands.

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