

## Tell Abu Shijar, near 'Aqar Quf : Summary of Excavations

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### INTRODUCTION

This article summarizes three seasons of excavations at Tell Abu Shijar (تل ابو شجر), a site located near 'Aqar Quf and probably a part of or associated with the city of Dur-Kurigalzu. Excavations were conducted by Iraq's State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) in 1992-1993 and 2001. The first seasons at Tell Abu Shijar has been published by A. M. Hadithi (2000). Although some of the results from that season are discussed, this article is devoted mostly to the 1993 and 2001 seasons.

In 1992, SBAH was prompted to investigate Tell Abu Shijar after building activities and other incursions threatened to damage the site. During the first season, the decision was made that almost all of the archaeological work would be concentrated on the central part of the mound. Work continued for a second season in 1993, only resuming in 2001 for one season. In 2006, Dr. Altaweel collaborated with the Iraqi archaeologists who have excavated the site in order to assist in interpreting some of the archaeological data as well as prepare this publication. Although some original items and records from the excavations are now not available or were lost in the looting of the offices of SBAH in April 2003, notes on significant findings and much of the archaeological report in Arabic do remain. In fact, the data presented in the Arabic report are the basis of the presentation to follow. The excavations of this site have mostly focused on one building at the center of the mound. The article will summarize the architectural and material remains as reported by Iraqi archaeologists, provide interpretation of the data, and add some discussion on the relevance of the remains in relation to Kassite history and archaeology.

### SITE BACKGROUND

The site of Tell Abu Shijar is located roughly 1 km west of the well-known ziggurat and temenos of 'Aqar Quf and 500 m southwest of Tell Abaydh (تل ابيض), the site of the Kassite palace excavated by Iraqi archaeologists (Baqir, 1946) in the 1940s. An IKONOS satellite image of the area shows the well-known features of Aqar Quf and the appearance of Tell Abu Shijar today (Fig. 1). Tell Abu Shijar was surveyed and determined to be roughly round in shape, measuring nearly 300 m in diameter, with an elevation of 6 m. Only the central part of the mound, roughly 120 × 50 m, remains undisturbed; the rest of



Figure 1. IKONOS satellite image from 2005 showing 'Aqar Quf and its surrounding region. Tell Abu Shijar can be seen in relation to the other well-known areas excavated in the 'Aqar Quf region.

the mound has been affected by modern incursions. Figure 2 shows a more detailed view of the areas excavated during the three seasons that will be discussed. These areas have been shown to have Parthian/Sasanian remains as well as a major late Kassite presence. The following will summarize the remains and architecture.



Figure 2. This IKONOS image provides a more detailed view of the mound at Tell Abu Shijar, showing areas excavated. The two excavation squares (Squares 1 & 2) and the Kassite building are located at the center of the mound.

### SUMMARY OF THE LEVELS

Excavations at Tell Abu Shijar consisted of a primary operation and two 10 × 10 m squares (Fig. 2). Level 1, which was preserved only in traces in all areas investigated, was mostly found near the surface and had no architecture. Four graves could be associated with Level 1. The level was initially summarized as Parthian in date; however, some of the pottery types associated with the level are found in Sasanian period contexts as well. More likely, the level can be dated to the Partho-Sasanian period. Pottery found in Level 1 will be discussed below.

Level 2 remains were found in the main operation and in the two squares. In all of the excavations, architecture of this level was found, consisting of two building phases (A & B [upper and lower]), both datable to the Kassite period. All of Level 2 can be summarized as having typical late Kassite ceramics, with types that are similar to that at other Kassite sites in southern Iraq and the Hamrin. But there were some vessels found in the lower phase, B, that are unusual, having elongated forms. The provenances and styles of the Kassite wares will be discussed below.

### SUMMARY OF THE ARCHITECTURE AND FINDS

The Kassite building (Fig. 3) was first observed by Hadithi (2000) in 1992. By the end of the first season, two clear phases (Phases A & B) were determined for the building. Overall, excavations reached between 3-4 m in depth at certain parts of the structure. Although Phase A was well preserved, the plan and much of the data of this later phase

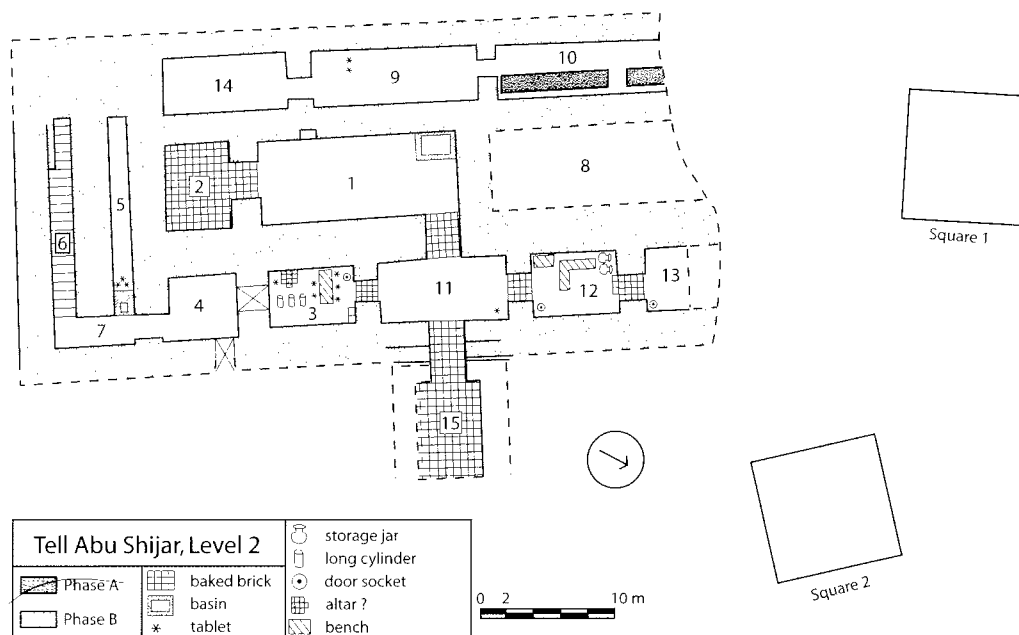


Figure 3. This figure shows the plan of the Kassite building, with most remains derived from the Level 2 Phase B building. Squares 1 and 2 are shown in relation to the building.

have not been preserved since excavation. Most of the information that will be presented, in fact, derives from the Phase B building. However, the loss of data is not total, and in places where some Phase A materials and descriptions have survived these will be mentioned. For both phases, walls in the structure ranged between 2.2-3.5 m in width and contained  $32 \times 32 \times 12$  cm mud bricks. Even though the ground plan of Phase A is missing, the buildings in the two phases were described as generally having the same plan, with some minor variations. Based primarily on the ground plan, the excavators initially interpreted the structure as a temple. Excavation data were recorded room by room, and each room with its data will be summarized in the following presentation. Figure 3 can be used as a guide for the finds in the rooms that will be discussed.

Two  $10 \times 10$  m squares (Fig. 3) to the north of the Kassite building were excavated. These squares were opened in order to delineate architectural details associated with the Kassite building, specifically outer walls and additional rooms. We will summarize the remains in these squares, although there are no surviving drawings or photographs.

#### 1. The Kassite building (Fig. 3)

Room 1: The excavators initially saw Room 1 as an “antecella” to Room 2, which was seen as the “cella” of a temple. Some perhaps unique, elongated Kassite jars were found grouped together above the baked bricks ( $32 \times 32 \times 9$  cm) in the doorway between Rooms 1 and 11, suggesting to the excavators some type of ceremonial or deliberate deposition (Fig. 4). In the debris of Room 1, blue and red painted plaster fragments, similar to wall painting observed at Tell Abaydh (Baqir 1946, Pl. 14, Fig. 5; Tomabechi 1983), were found above the floor of Phase B (Fig. 5). The fragments suggest that the Phase B building likely employed murals that were either on the walls or ceilings of the structure. Two features, a built-in basin or bin in the west corner and a niche in the southwest wall, survived into Phase A.

Room 2: Approached only from Room 1 was the room initially interpreted as the “cella” of the structure. The Phase B floor was paved with  $32 \times 32 \times 9$  cm baked bricks. The debris on top of the Phase B floor contained no cultural remains, indicating that at the time of burial the room was devoid of artifacts. A small  $50 \times 50$  cm probe was excavated underneath the Phase B floor, and within 6-8 cm, virgin soil was reached. Interestingly, evidence of fire and ash were found underneath the Phase B floor, but no cultural remains were observed in the debris. The evidence showing a fire was interpreted as a possible indication of some type of foundation ceremony for the entire building.

Room 3: Evidence of both Phases A and B have survived for this room. Near the south corner was a  $1.1 \times 1 \times 1$  m bench, initially interpreted as an altar when found in the upper phase, A. The feature was built with  $36 \times 36 \times 9$  cm baked bricks and incorporated bitumen as mortar. This feature was built upon an earlier bench/altar of the same size in Phase B. In this earlier phase, there was another long bench with one of its ends against the southwest wall and extending out into the room for more than half the space. This bench also incorporated bitumen as mortar. Beside the bench/altar near the south corner and



Figure 4. Image showing some of the in situ finds of Kassite wares in the doorway between Rooms 1 and 11. The pottery is associated with the Phase B building and was found directly on the threshold.

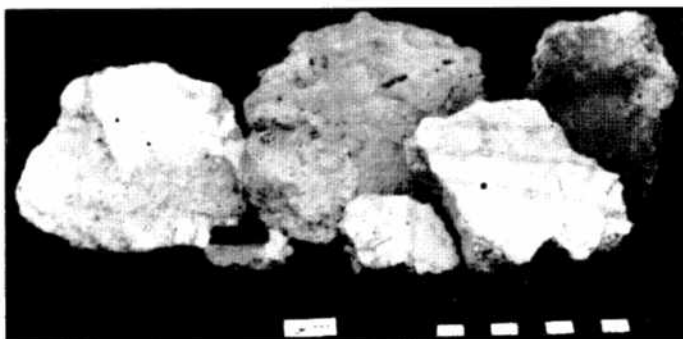


Figure 5. Fragments of wall paintings found in the Kassite building. These fragments are not identified as from specific loci.

above the floor of the Phase B room, the excavators found a tablet. In front of this bench/altar, the Phase B room had three cylindrical ceramic pipes that were parts for a stand; one of these objects was found standing. Beside the other long bench were five tablets. None of these tablets, including the one found beside the bench/alter, has been read. One large stone door socket, associated with Phase B, was found on the west side near the entrance between Rooms 3 and 11. The doorway between those two rooms was paved with  $32 \times 32 \times 9$  cm baked bricks (Fig. 6). The opposite doorway, between Rooms 3 and 4 was blocked at some time during Phase B. When this blocking was in effect, presumably the doorway from the exterior into Room 4 was open.

Room 4: The doorway leading from the east into Room 4 was blocked sometime in the history of the Phase B building. There were few cultural remains recovered in this room.

Room 5: Little is known about the Phase A room. In Phase B, the earlier phase, it was long and narrow and was, at some point, blocked at its eastern end. This phase yielded



Figure 6. Room 3 facing to the northwest. Note the height of the walls, which incorporate both phases of Level 2. In the left foreground is the larger bench in the room.

three clay tablets, which, although not fully transcribed and translated, were dated by Iraqi epigraphers to the reign of the Kassite king Nazimaruttaš, who ruled from 1307-1282 BC (Hadithi 2000, 57). This dating would give the Phase B room a *terminus post quem* of the late 14<sup>th</sup> or early 13<sup>th</sup> century BC. The tablets were found just above a stone basin. In a small pit in front of the basin, the excavators discovered a frit mask (Hadithi 2000, 57) that closely resembles a well-known mask of a lady from the site of Tell al-Rimah (Oates 1966, Pl. 34).

Room 6: Remains of a narrow room with mudbrick stairs were found in the Phase B room, suggesting that there was a second floor or access to the roof for the Phase B building. Most of the stairway resembled a ramp, due to erosion or wear. Near the top, the stairway was narrowed and individual stairs were more easily discernable. The narrowing was probably an addition some time after the Phase B building was first constructed.

Room 8: Although Room 8 was not excavated, the tops of its walls could be traced.

Room 9: Rooms 9, 10, and 14 form a set of rooms with no apparent entry, but presumably there was one in the unexcavated end of Room 10. Evidence of a large fire was found in Room 9, perhaps indicating that the structure was partially destroyed or heav-



Figure 7. Tablet with text inscribed in columns separated by vertical lines. Sometimes also inscribed on the side.

ily damaged by this event. Two tablets from Phase B in this room have not been read. The excavators also found an inscribed pendant, but no photograph or drawing of the artifact has survived. The pendant is described as having a bird-like head with a human body, arms lifted in the air, and the inscription is located on the back of the artifact.

Room 10: In this room the excavators found evidence of a change in the plan of the building at Phase A, consisting of a wall with a doorway. The earlier Phase B room was wider and similar to the other long rectangular rooms in the building.

Room 11: This chamber is the entry room for most of the rooms in the building. The entrance between Rooms 11 and 12 was paved with  $32 \times 32 \times 9$  cm baked bricks. In Phase B, the room yielded one badly worn black stone cylinder seal on the floor. In the north corner of the room, a clay tablet (Fig. 7) with inscribed horizontal and vertical rectangular lines was found. This inscription was not read. Based on the appearance of the tablet, this object seems to have been used as a register for record keeping. John A. Brinkman (personal communication), viewing the photograph, could not make out details, but could say that the tablet is important as evidence for large Kassite administrative ledgers that are known, thus far, in excavated context only from Nippur. He has anticipated finding such registers at other major Kassite cities.

Room 12: Most of what is known from this room, situated to the northwest of Room 11, is derived from Phase B. Here, as in Room 9, this phase ended with a fire. The thresholds at both doorways of the room are paved with baked brick  $32 \times 32 \times 9$  cm. A large door socket was placed in the east corner, to serve the door leading to Room 11. On the other side of that doorway, in the south corner, was a rectangular mudbrick bench. A larger, L-shaped mudbrick bench took up much of the middle and eastern part of the space. Between the L-shaped bench and the west corner, the excavators found buried under the floor two storage jars with animal bones inside. Also in the west corner on the floor were fragments of wall plaster painted in a whitish-blue color.

Room 13: This room was never completely excavated, and the Phase B floor was not reached throughout the room. The Phase B room was destroyed or damaged by a fire.

Walls were preserved up to 3 m in height, but this height likely includes both phases with the later phase constructed directly on the earlier wall. One door socket was found in the east corner, serving a door to Room 12.

Room 14: Little is known about this room, other than that it was entered through Room 9, and like that room, it had evidence of a fire associated with the end of Phase B. The floor of Phase B was never reached.

Room 15: This is one of the few loci in which Level 1 is documented in the notes. Two of the Parthian/Sasanian graves mentioned were found in the debris above Room 15. Despite the fact that the floor of Level 2, Phase B was reached, the walls in this room were never fully exposed. In the Phase B building, the room and the doorway to Room 11 were paved with baked bricks,  $32 \times 32 \times 7$  cm. In the debris of the Phase B room, were found white and blue colored plaster fragments, similar to those in Rooms 1 and 12. The walls between Rooms 15 and 11 show three repairs, indicated on the plan by an interrupted line on either side of the doorway. The walls of Room 15 did not bond into the building, but this would not be surprising since there is the abundant evidence of the abutting of major walls and modules in the nearby palace at Tell Abaydh. (Baqir 1946, Pl. 9).

## 2. Square 1

This  $10 \times 10$  m square (Fig. 2:1; Fig. 3) was excavated in order to find more features associated with the Kassite building. After excavating over 1 m in depth, large sections of fallen walls were observed. However, no intact architecture was observed.

## 3. Square 2

Excavations in this  $10 \times 10$  m (Fig. 2:2; Fig. 3) square reached the floor of the Level 2 Phase B building, approximately 2 meters below the surface. The floor of the square contained in situ  $32 \times 32 \times 7$  cm baked bricks. The paved floor was associated with a room that appeared to continue into the area beyond the limits of the balk. The drawing of these features, unfortunately, has not been preserved.

## FUNCTION OF THE KASSITE BUILDING

As stated, the Kassite building at Tell Abu Shijar initially was interpreted by the excavators as a temple. This was mainly due to the building's plan, which they compared to the Edublalmah at Ur, built by Kurigalzu I (Woolley 1965, Pl. 48) and the much earlier Ishtar-Kititum temple at Ishchali (Hill and Jacobsen 1989, Fig. 13), both of which had long narrow rooms flanking a cella and antecella. A group of extremely tall goblets, found in the doorway between Rooms 11 and 1, was seen as evidence of a ceremonial function. But looking at the Level 2, Phase B building more closely, the excavators must now conclude that the structure appears to have been secular in function and was most probably associ-



ated with Kassite government activities. Common religious architectural features are missing from the plan, including niches and buttresses. The closest architectural parallel is the nearby Kassite palace at Tell Abaydh (Baqir 1946, Fig. 1). The plan of that palace utilizes tripartite modular units composed of long corridors and rooms surrounding a central rectangular room. At Nippur, a badly disturbed module of a similar kind was excavated in the 1970s (Gibson *et al.* 1978, Fig. 46), and was argued to have been the Kassite governors' palace. The Abu Shijar building is on a much smaller scale than the Tell Abaydh palace, with its central room (Rm. 1) measuring about 15 meters in length, approximately the same size as the central room in the module at Nippur. Although the plan of Tell Abu Shijar is far from complete, a good part of one wing or module appears to have been exposed. Like the modules around Courtyard A at Tell Abaydh palace, Abu Shijar has a vestibule (Room 11), with doorways leading to a series of rooms on both sides as well as into a central room or courtyard (Room 1), with a smaller room at the end (Room 2). Just as at Tell Abaydh, a row of flanking rooms on the southwest (Rms. 9-10, 14) cannot be accessed directly from the central room. It is noteworthy that at both Tell Abaydh and Abu Shijar, there were staircases at one end of the modules. Both the palace at Tell Abaydh and the Abu Shijar building employed wall painting. To be completely certain of Abu Shijar's function, however, further excavation must be carried out. For now, based on all excavation results available, we are inclined to believe that this building did not serve as a temple but probably was used for administrative purposes.

#### POTTERY

As stated, Level 1 was initially dated to the Parthian period. Figure 8 shows forms that are similar in style to other wares that can be dated to some time within the Parthian and Sasanian periods (Venco Ricciardi 1970/71: Figs. 89-91; Venco Ricciardi 1967: Figs. 147 and 150; Oates and Oates 1959, Pl. 56). One of the vessels (not shown) had a stamped flower, suggesting a likely Sasanian date. Some of the other wares reported were considered to have classic Parthian forms. From the pottery that has been recorded, one can only conclude that the level is Partho-Sasanian.

Level 2 has numerous examples of clearly Kassite ceramics that were found throughout the Kassite building and in the two squares. Figure 9 displays forms that are similar to those found at Nippur, Tell ed-Deir, and at Kassite sites in the Hamrin (Armstrong 1989, Figs. 61-63: Types 1-2 & 5, Armstrong 1993; Minsaer 1991, Boehmer and Dämmer 1985, Pls. 114 and 131). These vessels are common for the period, particularly from late Kassite contexts, and do not represent anything unexpected for the site. The tablet with a Nazimarutšaš date further supports the likelihood that the vessels are late Kassite. Armstrong (personal communication), upon examining the pottery drawings agrees with a 13th Century date for the building.

In addition to the more common Kassite wares found in Level 2, a group of somewhat unusual jars and goblets was found at the doorway between Rooms 1 and 11 of the Kassite building. These ceramics (Fig. 10) are relatively unique in their exaggerated thinness

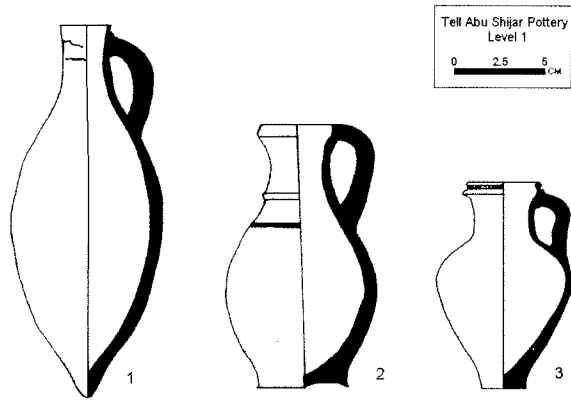


Figure 8. Figure showing Parthian/Sasanian pottery found in Level 1.

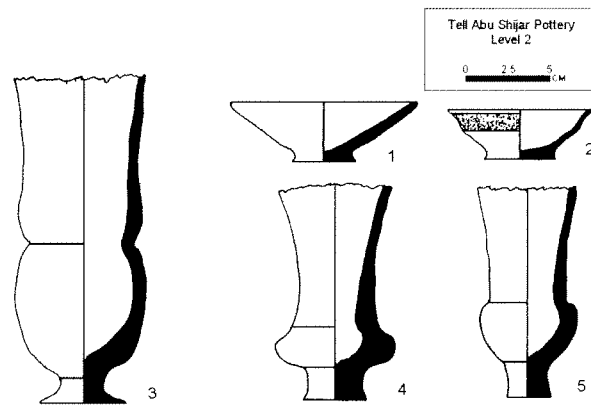


Figure 9. Kassite pottery from Level 2. These examples are from Phase B, but the wares are representative of the types found in both phases of Level 2.

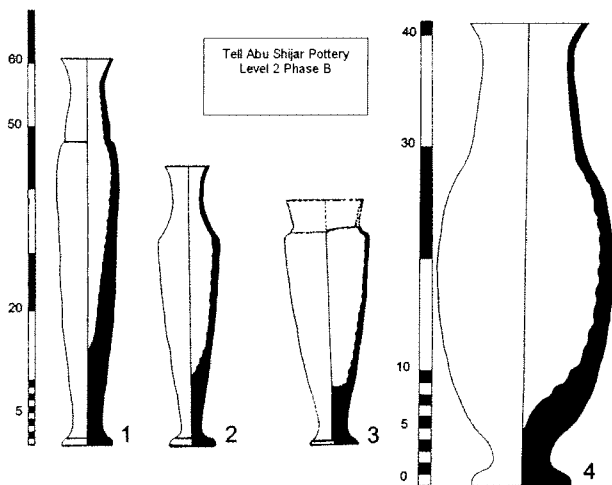


Figure 10. Elongated Kassite wares found together in the doorway between Rooms 1 and 11 in the Level 2 Phase B building.

and height, particularly the vessels indicated in Figure 10:1-2, and 4. The goblets shown are similar to Armstrong's (1989) Type 6, but are significantly taller than commonly observed. No other location in the building had any of the elongated wares. Given that these vessels were found in such a seemingly deposited state, they may have been used in some type of ceremonial function near the end of the Phase B building and prior to the Phase A construction.

#### CONCLUSION

Excavations at Tell Abu Shijar have revealed important Kassite remains, with some evidence of Parthian/Sasanian activity in the form of burials. Given the proximity of this site to Dur-Kurigalzu, Tell Abu Shijar was very likely incorporated within the Kassite capital, which may call for an investigation to redefine of the boundaries of that great site.

The excavations at this building have added significantly to our knowledge of Kassite architecture. Based on the plan, we conclude that the building of which it was part of must have been similar to the palace at nearby Tell Abaydh. The Phase B building's incorporation of wall paintings further suggests a similarity with the Tell Abaydh palace. The apparently deliberate deposition of a large number of rare elongated Kassite vessels creates further questions about this building's past function. From some of the data gathered in the various rooms of the structure, the Phase B building appears to have been destroyed or damaged by a fire, which may have necessitated a rebuilding of the structure. At that point, there may have occurred the deliberate burial of the elongated jars as a preliminary to the construction at Phase A. Within a relatively short period, as suggested by the similar ceramics of both phases, the building was reconstructed using virtually the same ground plan as in the previous phase. From what is known about the building of Phase A, there were some minor plan modifications, but most of the layout and even some of the minor installations in the Phase B structure were rebuilt. This building has great potential for giving new information on the architecture and history of the Kassite period. We hope that in the future there will be opportunities for archaeologists to further explore Tell Abu Shijar.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the Iraqi archaeologists involved in the excavation of Tell Abu Shijar and the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage for encouraging us to publish this report in English in order to make the work of the SBAH more accessible to Western scholars. The National Endowment for the Humanities' Recovering Iraq's Heritage program has provided generous funding that has made this cooperative effort possible. The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq (TAARII) has facilitated communication and logistics between American and Iraqi scholars involved in this project as well as provided funding to enable the publication. We would also like to thank Alexandra Witsell for redrawing the plan in digital form.

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