

LATE FOURTH MILLENNIUM BCE

أواخر الألفية الرابعة قبل الميلاد

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LATE FOURTH MILLENNIUM BCE

أواخر الألفية الرابعة قبل الميلاد

Marcelo Campagno

Spätes viertes Jahrtausend v. u. Z.

Fin du quatrième millénaire AEC

In ancient Egypt, the late fourth millennium BCE corresponds to what is known as the late Predynastic Period (Naqada IIIa-b). It was a crucial time for the constitution of Egypt as a single political entity. In Upper Egypt, earlier tendencies towards social differentiation and functional specialization intensify during this period, mainly in Hierakonpolis and Abydos. From this time on, similar tendencies are also apparent in Lower Egypt, in centers such as Buto, Tell el-Farkha, and Minshat Abu Omar. The process of political unification of Egypt takes place during this period. Authors differ with regard to specific events, but most agree that the process began in Upper Egypt and then continued outwards, to ultimately encompass the territory from Elephantine to the Nile Delta. The earliest known examples of writing (Abydos Tomb U-j) date back to this period, as well as the earliest serekhs, both anonymous and with kings' names. These names are usually grouped under the label "Dynasty 0," a term that only indicates the existence of kings in the Nile Valley before the advent of Dynasty 1.

تتوافق نهاية الألفية الرابعة قبل الميلاد مع ما يعرف باسم نهاية عصر ما قبل الأسرات بمصر القديمة (نقادة IIIa-b)، حيث كان هذا الوقت محوريا في تشكيل مصر ككيان سياسي موحد. وفي صعيد مصر ازدادت خلال هذه الفترة التاريخية الميول نحو بدايات التمايز الاجتماعي والتخصص الوظيفي وتحديدًا في هيركونبوليس وأبيدوس. وفي نفس الوقت، يمكن رؤية أنماط واضحة مماثلة بمصر العليا بمراكز مثل بوتو وتل الفرخة ومنتشاء عمر، حيث بدأت عملية التوحيد السياسي لمصر خلال تلك الحقبة التاريخية. يختلف الكتاب (الباحثين) فيما يتعلق بأحداث محددة، لكن معظمهم يتفق على أن التطور بدأ بمصر العليا واستمر شمالاً ليشمل في نهاية المطاف المنطقة ما بين إلفنتين ومنطقة الدلتا. إن أقدم نماذج الكتابة بمصر (مقبرة U-j بأبيدوس) تعود لتلك الحقبة التاريخية، بالإضافة إلى أقدم نماذج السرخ سواء التي لا تحمل أسماء أو التي تحمل أسماء ملوك، وعادةً ما يتم إحصاء هذه الأسماء تحت مسمى «الأسرة صفر»، وهو مصطلح يشير فقط إلى وجود ملوك بوادي النيل ما قبل ظهور الأسرة الأولى.

The last part of the fourth millennium BCE in the Nile Valley is generally known as the late Predynastic Period, that is, the time immediately prior to Dynasty 1. The epoch has received a variety of names, due to diverse periodization criteria. W. Flinders Petrie

(1901a, 1920) originally proposed, in the framework of his system of sequence dates, the name Semainean for the last Predynastic epoch (SD 60 - 75). Later, the existence of a clear difference between the Semainean and the preceding Gerzean Period was brought into question, and both periods were

Dates BCE	Period	Subperiod	Phase	Dynasty	Lower Nubia	Hierakonpolis	Naqada	Abydos	Lower Egypt	Southern Levant
3600										EB IA
3500		NAQADA II	IIC						Buto-Maadi Culture	
3400	PREDYNASTIC	(Gerzean)	IID		Middle A-Group	Tomb 100	Tombs Cem. T	Tombs Cem. U		Early EB IB
3300				Local/regional rulers						
3200	PROTODYNASTIC	(Semainean)	IIIA1 IIIA2 IIIB	"Dynasty 0" Iryhor Ka Scorpion	Late A-Group Sayala Qustul	Tombs Cem. Hk6		Tomb U-j Scorpion? Tombs Cem. B	Ny-Hor? Hat-Hor? Ny-Neith? Crocodile?	Middle EB IB Late EB IB
3100										
3000	EARLY DYNASTIC		IIIC1 IIIC2	Dynasty I				Royal Cemetery	Memphis	EB II
2900			IIID	Dynasty II						(EB=Early Bronze)

Table 1. Late fourth millennium BCE: Chronological chart.

subsumed under the name of the latter (Kantor 1944). Werner Kaiser (1957) proposed a new chronology based on evidence found in Upper Egypt (Naqadan culture), which he classified into three main phases (*Stufen*). According to this chronology, refined later by Stan Hendrickx (1996, 1999, 2006), the late fourth millennium BCE generically corresponds to Naqada IIIa-b. In Lower Egypt, the beginning of Naqada III coincides with the latest (“transitional”) phase of the so-called Buto-Maadi culture, whose later incorporation into Naqadan culture (see below) means that, beginning with Naqada IIIb, the chronology of Upper and Lower Egypt is unified under Naqada’s name. Beyond these specifically chronological criteria, in recent times the period is also referred to as Protodynastic (Adams and Cialowicz 1997), since the earliest royal names are registered during this time. This meaning of the term Protodynastic ought not to be confused with a previous use (Trigger 1983), referring to the Thinite Dynasties 1 and 2 (nowadays called the Early Dynastic Period, see Wilkinson 1999). As for the early royal names, they used to be grouped under the

label “Dynasty 0,” a rather equivocal name, as it does not refer to a sequence of kings of the same lineage, but merely to the set of known late Predynastic kings, whose names are not unanimously accepted by researchers.

Regarding the absolute chronology of the period, there are some discrepancies among specialists, mainly due to the limited number of radiocarbon dates and to the difficulties of correlating this kind of data with the “historical” chronologies of later periods (Hendrickx 2006: 90 - 92). Several authors have accepted approximate dates between 3200 and 3050 BCE for Naqada IIIa-b (Bard 2000; Midant-Reynes 2003; Wilkinson 2000). However, more recent works (Hassan et al. 2006; Hendrickx 2006) suggest earlier dates for the beginning of the period (around 3350 BCE), differing with regards to when it ends (3060 and 3150 BCE, respectively), and thus implying greater disagreement about the total duration of the period.

History of Related Research

Before the pioneering excavations in Upper Egypt in the late nineteenth century, the

Predynastic history of the Nile Valley—including, certainly, its final phase—was completely unknown. Speculations about the time prior to the mythical king Menes were based on the supposition that two ancient kingdoms existed, one in the Delta and the other in the Valley, whose kings would have worn, respectively, the red crown and the white crown—typical of later Pharaonic kingship. Though these speculations continued to draw the attention of many Egyptologists well into the twentieth century (especially in conjunction with a reading of the conflicts between Horus and Seth as remote historical events, see Gwyn Griffiths 1960; Sethe 1930), a new picture began to emerge following the archaeological work carried out principally in Naqada, Abydos, and Hierakonpolis. These excavations would greatly enhance the knowledge of the first dynasties, and also the understanding of the preceding periods. In particular, regarding the late Predynastic Period, some of the royal tombs found in Cemetery B at Abydos (Petrie 1901b, 1902), as well as a decorated macehead found at the Hierakonpolis Main Deposit (Quibell 1900), suggested the existence of kings before Dynasty 1 (Irihor, Ka, Scorpion), quickly grouped under the new label “Dynasty 0” (e.g., Petrie 1912: 1 - 9).

The significance of the findings at these sites, in combination with racial and diffusionist theories popular at the time, led Petrie to propose that during the late Predynastic Period, a “dynastic race” could have invaded Upper Egypt, bringing to the Nile Valley all the attributes of civilization (Petrie 1912: 3 - 4, 1920: 49 - 50). In subsequent years, the excavation of sites in the Memphite region—particularly Tura and Tarkhan—with evidence comparable to that found in the south, allowed the researcher to assume that this “dynastic race,” after settling in Upper Egypt, initiated a progressive conquest of the regions to the north, a task that would be finished by the time of Menes (Petrie 1912: 2; Petrie et al. 1913: 1).

The theory of two Predynastic kingdoms in Upper and Lower Egypt, and that of a single

dynastic race, would for decades continue to be the primary explanatory models for the last Predynastic centuries. From the end of the 1950s, Kaiser (1964, 1986, 1990) proposed a reassessment of the archaeological record, according to which the diffusion of Upper Egyptian cultural characteristics in the north would appear to involve a double process of unification: first, a cultural integration between the Delta and the Valley on Naqadan cultural parameters, which assumed some type of migration from south to north; and second, a process of political unification, which would have ended eight to ten generations before king Narmer. Though some aspects of Kaiser’s theory were later questioned, especially his proposal of such an early date for political unification, his model was one of the main factors leading to the reconsideration of late Predynastic history.

Another significant factor was no doubt the extraordinary expansion of the period’s archaeological record in recent decades. In the 1960s, rescue campaigns in Sudan promoted knowledge of Lower Nubia at the end of the fourth millennium BCE, especially the site of Qustul (Seele 1974), comparable to contemporary Upper Egyptian centers. In the early 1970s, excavations in Hierakonpolis were relaunched and have continued uninterrupted since then (Adams 1995; Fairservis et al. 1972; Friedman 2005; Hoffman 1982), providing valuable information on Naqada III regarding both mortuary practices and the complex organization of the urban settlement. Excavations in the Umm el-Qaab necropolis at Abydos (Dreyer 1992, 1998; Dreyer et al. 1993; Kaiser and Dreyer 1982), also uninterrupted since their beginning in the late 1970s, have included the re-excavation of the elite Cemetery U (contiguous to Cemetery B and the Royal Cemetery of Dynasties 1 and 2). In particular, the rediscovery of Tomb U-j (see below) has been decisive for the present-day understanding of the late Predynastic Period.

Recent archaeological work has also been of great importance in northern Egypt.

Excavations at a large number of sites—Buto, Mendes, Tell el-Farkha, Tell Ibrahim Awad, Minshat Abu Omar, Kafr Hassan Dawood, Helwan, among the most relevant (see Hendrickx et al. 2004; van den Brink 1992)—have given qualitatively different information from that available only a few decades ago, particularly in relation to the remarkable and previously unknown social dynamism of this region during late Predynastic times. In addition, excavations carried out in recent decades in the southern Levant (for example, Tel Sakan, En Besor, Tel Halif, Tel Malhata, Tel Arad, Tel Ma’ahaz, Tel Erani, Tel Lod; see van den Brink 1992; van den Brink and Levy 2002), have contributed to this understanding, revealing evidence of Egyptian presence in that area prior to Dynasty 1.

The expansion of the archaeological record in the last decades has been accompanied by an increasing use of interpretive models, mainly derived from anthropology, reflecting some of the general trends in vogue in current archaeological studies. Thus, the history of the period has been considered in the light of various theories about the state origins (Hoffman 1979; Wenke 2009), cross-cultural comparative approaches (Maisels 1999; Trigger 2003), or analytical perspectives arising from post-structuralist studies (Wengrow 2006), all of which show a great theoretical diversity that has helped weaken the traditional “isolation” of Egyptology regarding other areas of social sciences.

Social and Cultural History

From a socioeconomic point of view, the increasing concentration of a great number of exotic and highly elaborate goods in few burials in Upper Egyptian cemeteries points to the presence of elites engaged in long-distance trade with control over craft production. At some sites, there are clear indications of a remarkable vertical (hierarchical) and horizontal (functional) differentiation. Among the main centers at the end of Naqada II (Abydos, Naqada, Hierakonpolis), evidence of social differentiation only diminishes in Naqada,

where the use of the elite Cemetery T declines (Bard 1994). On the contrary, this evidence is strong in Hierakonpolis, where the elite Cemetery HK6 is reused and a massive building (HK29A) for ceremonial purposes remains in use (Friedman 2008, 2009; Hikade 2011). Evidence of hierarchical organization is even stronger in Abydos, where the pre-existing elite Cemetery U continues to be used; in particular, the Tomb U-j—9.10 x 7.30 m, with twelve brick-lined chambers, hundreds of imported vessels, an ivory *beka* scepter, and the earliest known examples of writing—clearly suggests the existence of a state-like elite, capable of obtaining vast quantities of prestige goods and of controlling craftsmen and scribes (Dreyer 1998; Hartung 2001; on the origin, problems, and early implications of Egyptian writing, see Baines 2006; Cervelló Autuori 2005; Kahl 1994; Vernus 1993).

Beyond Upper Egypt, there were different situations. To the south, two early Naqada III sites in Lower Nubia showed marked social differentiation, judging from mortuary evidence: Sayala (Cemetery 137) and Qustul (Cemetery L) (Firth 1927; Williams 1986). To the north, sites in Middle Egypt such as Mostagedda and Matmar—similar to other sites in Upper Egypt, such as Armant and Adaima—provide evidence indicating the existence of village organizations, with moderate social differentiation (Castillos 1998; Crubézy et al. 2002; Wilkinson 1996). Further to the north, the situation in the Memphite area and the Delta seems to have been characterized by pronounced social differentiation, as suggested by the large size of some tombs and the quantitative and qualitative expansion of prestige goods (see Chłodnicki and Ciałowicz 2007; Ellis 1996; Köhler 2004; Kroeper 2004; Tassie and van Wetering 2003), as well as by large buildings that point to both the existence of elite residences and different forms of labor specialization (Buto, Tell Ibrahim Awad, Tell el-Farkha; see Ciałowicz 2004; Eigner 2000; Tristant 2005; von der Way 1997).

Late Predynastic material culture in both Upper and Lower Egypt shows more homogeneity than in previous periods. Such homogeneity seems to reflect the influence of the south on the north, since many of the findings in Lower Egypt (pottery types, shapes and contents of tombs, mud-brick architecture, *serekhs*) have precedents in Upper Egypt. However, specialists do not agree on the scope and implications of this process. Kaiser's already mentioned theory of an expansion of Naqadan culture that took place before political unification—what Th. von der Way (1992: 4) has called “cultural assimilation by superimposition”—is the most generally accepted criterion for interpreting the changes in Lower Egypt's archaeological record. More recently, Christiana Köhler (1995, 2008) has questioned the assumption of a marked cultural contrast between Upper and Lower Egypt before Naqada III, a contrast she explains as a difference in the levels of craft specialization (household production in the north as opposed to a workshop industry in the south, stimulated by the ecological advantages of the region as well as the demands of emerging elites). On this basis, the influence of the south on the Delta might be viewed as the result of changing consumption patterns of northern elites rather than evidence of the total replacement of one culture by another. The same change may have taken place in Lower Nubia, where the A-Group elite burials at sites such as Qustul and Sayala contain imported goods and objects with iconographic influences coming from Upper Egypt. Thus, the “cultural expansion” during late Naqada II and early Naqada III might be largely due to local elites in neighboring regions emulating the practices and symbols of prestige of the powerful Upper Egyptian elites.

Political History

The decline of the Naqada site (at the end of Naqada II or the beginning of Naqada III) suggests that this center could have fallen to one of its neighbors and rivals, either Hierakonpolis to the south or Abydos to the north. Rock carvings recently discovered at

Gebel Tjauti (Darnell 2002)—in an overland path that may have connected Hierakonpolis to Abydos, allowing them to avoid passing through Naqada—with scenes including early kingship symbols (falcons, individuals holding scepters and maces) and depictions of violence (capture of prisoners) support this possibility. In particular, the depiction of a scorpion similar to those represented repeatedly on Tomb U-j's vessels—considered by some authors to be the name of the tomb owner (Dreyer 1998: 86)—may also provide a link to Abydos. After this point, hypotheses about the processes of political unification multiply. Some authors have suggested that Hierakonpolis' leaders commanded the expansion, eventually moving the royal seat to Abydos (Hoffman et al. 1986: 184 - 185; Vercoutter 1992: 244). Others believe that Abydene rulers led the process (Baines 1995: 103). According to still another proposal, both centers could have expanded their authority over time in opposite directions (Hierakonpolis towards Nubia, Abydos towards the Nile Delta), remaining independent up to the time of Narmer (Wilkinson 2000: 390, 393). Alternatively, they could have converged early in Naqada III, given the presence of Naqada as an enemy common to both, in order to forge a political alliance that would have accelerated the pace of expansion (Campagno 2002a: 183; Hendrickx and Friedman 2003: 104 - 106).

In any case, events in Upper Egypt would drastically influence the neighboring regions, though in different ways. In Lower Nubia, the decoration of some burial goods at Qustul's Cemetery L (especially, an incense burner found in Tomb L24, where an individual with a white crown appears to be depicted) suggests the existence of local or regional rulers, who may have symbolized kingship in terms comparable with those of Upper Egyptian centers. Bruce Williams proposed in the 1980s that Qustul could be the original core of Egyptian political unification (Williams 1986, 1987); nevertheless, the preexistence of Upper Egyptian centers, and their continued existence after Qustul's collapse, seem to point in the opposite

direction: in fact, it is probable that Qustul's demise was related to Upper Egyptian attacks on Nubia, possibly depicted in the rock-carvings of violent scenes in Gebel Sheik Suleiman (Murnane 1987). However, these attacks would not pave the way for an incorporation of Lower Nubia into Egyptian territory proper, whose southern frontier seems to have been established at Elephantine (Seidlmayer 1996).

In contrast, expansion to the north seems to have resulted in increased political integration. Before this process, there appears to have been a variety of political scenarios in the regions to the north of Upper Egypt. In Middle Egypt, as pointed out above, some social differentiation occurred; however, there are no specific traces of political-administrative leadership. On the other hand, in the Memphite region and the Delta, the situation may have been much more heterogeneous. Aside from the aforementioned indications of socioeconomic differentiation, some sites in these regions show evidence of what were probably recording systems (seals and other small devices in Tell el-Farkha, potmarks in vessels from many northern sites; see Cialowicz 2004; Chłodnicki 2008; van den Brink 2008), and *serekhs* with features and names only known in the north (*serekhs* with two falcons, with three vertical maces, and others with hypothetical names such as Ny-Hor, Hat-Hor, Ny-Neith, Crocodile; see Jiménez Serrano 2003; Raffaele 2003; van den Brink 1996, 2001). Given this evidence, different political scenarios are possible in Lower Egypt, including sites with some Upper Egyptian presence (as distant trade outposts), as well as certain politically autonomous centers, which may have adopted symbols of leadership from the south (Campagno 2008b).

The pace and specific dynamics of the political unification process are difficult to determine. Although the expansion to the north may have begun in early Naqada IIIa, the process seems to have reached completion only in late Naqada IIIb, in the transition between “Dynasty 0” and Dynasty 1, since it

is only with Ka and Narmer that objects related to a single king have been consistently found at sites ranging from Upper Egypt to the southern Levant. Regarding the nature of the expansion, traditional Egyptology, relying on a historicist reading of a set of ceremonial objects decorated with scenes of combats, walled settlements, and prisoner executions (among them, the Gebel el-Arak knife-handle; Battlefield, Cities, Bulls, and Narmer palettes; Scorpion and Narmer maceheads), assumed that expansion was mainly achieved by systematic military conquest (Monnet-Saleh 1986, 1990). This approach has been questioned, both because of the nature of the message expressed in these documents—symbolic rather than “realistic”—and because of the lack of unequivocal archaeological evidence indicating such conquest (e.g., Baines 1995: 110; Bard 2000: 65; Köhler 2008: 520). In any case, iconography of the period suggests that the expansion was carried out in a context that was at the very least discursively violent; this kind of symbolic violence is totally compatible with the prerogatives of an elite capable of exercising coercion on the territories that were being included under its rule.

Beyond the Delta, Egyptian influence would also be projected into northern Sinai and the southern Levant. In particular, Early Bronze Ib sites in the southern Levant include increasing quantities of Egyptian pottery as well as other objects, both locally made and imported from the Nile Valley (Andelković 1995; van den Brink and Braun 2003). Egyptian influence is already evident in Naqada IIIa, but it is stronger during Naqada IIIb, when there are some sites—likely outposts—with predominant Egyptian presence. The process reaches its peak by the end of the period, when Egyptian style seals and *serekhs* of Ka and Narmer are registered at different sites of the region (such as Tel Sakan, En Besor, Tel Lod; see Gophna 1995; Miroschedji et al. 2001; van den Brink 2002). From that point on, Egyptian presence in the Levant would rapidly decline, and the northern frontier of Egyptian territory would

be established in the Nile Delta (Anđelković 2002; Campagno 2008a).

The direction of the expansion, as well as the iconographic motifs related to its violence, both provide clues about the reasons behind this process. The expansion followed the routes to the principal regions from which prestige goods consumed by Upper Egyptian elites arrived (e.g., ivory, ebony, incense, or animal skins coming from the south and intermediated by Lower Nubia; wine, oils, timber, copper, precious stones, and even Mesopotamian artifacts coming from the north through the Delta and the Levant; see Guyot 2008; Hendrickx and Bavay 2002). Thus, the expansion may have suppressed the competition of potential rivals, avoiding intermediaries and securing the obtaining in situ of the exotic products desired in Egypt. Regarding the depictions of scenes of violence, they make known one of the core attributes of the Egyptian king, a figure who imposes cosmic order against the threat of chaos (Baines 1995: 119 - 120; Frankfort 1948: 7 - 9). Throughout Egyptian history, the king would have been seen as the divine guarantor of order imposed through violence, as the ritual massacre of the enemy, depicted both before (Hierakonpolis Tomb 100) and after (palette of Narmer) the late Predynastic Period, symbolizes. In this respect, the expansion may have been seen by the Egyptians as the royal task par excellence, a cosmic matter rather than a strictly political one.

Significance and Main Phenomena

The epoch that modern Egyptology identifies as the late Predynastic Period would be included, according to the way ancient Egyptians understood the past, in the timeframe that preceded the first union of the Two Lands, forged by Menes, the first king of Dynasty 1. That understanding of time prior

to his rule would be evoked in different ways: the Palermo Stone (Dynasty 5) indicates the existence of earlier kings, who wore the red crown traditionally linked to Lower Egypt; the Canon of Turin (Dynasty 19) indicates the rule of dynasties of divine spirits. In either case, two features would remain in the Egyptians' "cultural memory" (Assmann 2002: 20 - 21): the fact that there were rulers before Dynasty 1; and the fact that they were different from later kings, since they belonged to a different era.

Present day scholars consider the late Predynastic Period as a crucial phase in the history of ancient Egypt. Its theoretical characterization remains problematic, given that a rather uncritical acceptance of evolutionist theories has produced a multiplicity of terms whose conceptual status remains vague or scantily discussed (chiefdoms, proto-kingdoms, proto-states, early states, etc.; see Anđelković 2004; Campagno 2002b). Another disagreement exists around the very nature of the state. In general, those authors whose definition of the state highlights the existence of a political-administrative apparatus ruling over a large territory, as it is known from Dynasty 1 on, tend to consider the late Predynastic Period as a formative phase; on the other hand, those authors who place more emphasis on social stratification and coercive practices tend to attribute state origins to earlier periods (mainly, Naqada IIc), so that Naqada IIIa-b is seen as a phase of strengthening for state dynamics. Be this as it may, most researchers would agree that this is a decisive period for the constitution of a new mode of social and political organization, an order radically different from that which prevailed in previous eras—based on kinship practices—which would predominate in the Nile Valley during the following three millennia.

Bibliographic Notes

The late Predynastic Period has been considered both as a final chapter in Egypt's Prehistory (Hoffman 1979; Midant-Reynes 1992) or as an introductory chapter in Egypt's early history (Kemp 2006; Wilkinson 1999). Recent books partially related to this period also include Spencer (1993, 1996), Bard (1994), Cervelló Autuori (1996), Wilkinson (1996), Gundlach (1998), Campagno (2002a), Midant-Reynes (2003), Ciałowicz (2001), Brewer (2005), Wengrow (2006), and Wenke (2009). Among the many recent articles on late Predynastic are Hassan (1988), Wenke (1991), Menu (1996), Bard (2000), Savage (2001), and Köhler (2010). Some important books with articles on the late Predynastic are the volume dedicated to the memory of Michael Hoffman (Friedman and Adams 1992) and the proceedings from various symposia held in Poznan on later Prehistory of northeastern Africa (Series "Studies on African Archaeology"; e.g., Krzyżaniak et al. 1996, 2000, 2003). Also, the proceedings of three international colloquia devoted to Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt are excellent collections of papers (Friedman and Fiske 2011; Hendrickx et al. 2004; Midant-Reynes et al. 2008). Additionally, these topics are considered in a recent volume published on the occasion of an exhibition of Predynastic objects in the Oriental Institute of Chicago (Teeter 2011). The French journal *Archéo-Nil*, under the direction of B. Midant-Reynes, has been published annually since 1990 and is entirely dedicated to the same subject. For an extensive listing of publications regarding this period, see Hendrickx (1995), with periodical updates in *Archéo-Nil*.

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