

## **EARLY MYANMAR EDUCATION (FROM EARLY CHRISTIAN ERAS TO THE BAGAN PERIOD)**

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### **Abstract**

In the ancient period, indigenous peoples —the Pyu, the Mon and the Rakhine—rose to develop their civilizations in the early Christian period due to the impact of sea voyage in the Indian Ocean. They learned their writings and lunar calendrical system with the coming of Indianization in Southeast Asia. From that time, education—learning and teaching—opened into Myanmar, particularly some areas on the coastal and deltaic regions. Firstly, they learned southern Indian writings and invented their own writings. Therefore, early Myanmar indigenous civilization were indianized akin to other southeast Asian countries. Early Pyu, Mon and Rakhine people converted from animism to Buddhism and Hinduism and Hindu and Buddhist kingship system. Basing on their learning, they made attempts to describe their languages in script and used their calendars. Accordingly, Indo-Myanmar relations provided their education and thought. And then, they reformed their culture. When the prominence of Bagan kingdom during the reign of King Kyansittha, the three writings of Pyu, Mon and Myanmar peoples developed. Pali was also their sacred language of them. Therefore, early Myanmar education based upon dual intellectual properties, i.e. Hinduism and Buddhism or Sanskrit and Pali.

### **Introduction**

Education is such an intangible culture that is an implicit phenomenon in ancient society as like as art and architecture, explicit ones. However, an attempt was made to study in this paper about the education of the ancient Myanmar. This work was dependent upon primary sources as well as secondary sources. Epigraphy was the best material to learn about education. Inscriptions gave us reliable and informative data. In this study, there were two major parts: higher education for Buddhist monks, novice and laymen and basic education for all. Periodically, there were two periods: pre-Bagan period and Bagan period in this paper.

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## Education in the Pre-Bagan Period

Myanmar opened her historic period with the establishment of city-states in the first millennium CE. The city-states arose in the coastal areas and river valleys which provides cultivation, transportation and communication of native peoples. Basing on this idea, there were many numbers of old cities in Myanmar: Vesali in Rakhine, Sriksetra in north of the Ayeyarwaddy delta, Vishnu in Taungdwingyi, Halin in Shwebo, Suvannabhumi in Ayathama and Winka, Bilin, Mon State. Therefore, the peoples of proto historic Myanmar—the Pyus, the Mons and the Rakhines—begin to found the early civilization being dependent upon South India. The three peoples opened education with the establishment of Buddhism. It also gave us a light that formal education firstly developed when the people began to write letters. Geographically, Myanmar is situated beside India, mother of Southeast Asian civilization, so that her civilization fostered Indian characters. Coincidentally, learning provides literate people and then they know about the way of civilization. We can say that learning which we can call “education” is the mother of civilization.

Among the early city-states, Sriksetra was the most prominent one that a large number of inscriptions were discovered there. therefore, Professor Toe Hla states that Sriksetra was the first Myanmar during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C-9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The Pyus in Sriksetra left behind their cultural heritages, i.e. inscriptions, *stupas*, temples, town-wall, religious statues and reliefs, beads, terracotta wears etc. In the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Nan Chao army attacked them, collapsed and lost their dynasty. Some scholars believe that rather than the course of foreign invasion, their disappearance possibly cause due to struggle with one another in the land where is now called Myanmar. These struggle contained the Pyu in Sriksetra vs. the Pyus in Halin and the Caghaw (the Saghaw, Kayin tribe), the Old Mons in Mottama vs. the Pyus in Hanlin, the Kadus vs. the Chin etc. It caused chaos in the Upper and Lower Myanmar. However, sovereignty recovered in Myanmar centered in Bagan and its vicinity in the reign of king Aniruddha (A.D. 1044-1077).

## Education in Sriksetra

At Sriksetra, inscriptions—gold leaf manuscripts, stone inscriptions, inscriptions on the rim of silver casket and stone urns—remain. Inscriptions of Sriksetra give us their religion, their culture, their education etc. most of them belong to the Pali Buddhism. There was a book of twenty leaves of gold of old palm-leaf manuscripts which was found at U Khin Ba's field outside the wall of Sriksetra in 1926. Scripts written on the manuscripts was similar to the Telegu-Canara alphabet of the Kadamba and of the early Chalukyas of South India and since it dates back to about the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The manuscripts were extracts of Pali verses from Pitaka (Pali Texts):

1. The *Mijjhima Nikāya*, *Piṭaka*,
2. The *Samyutta Nikāya*,
3. The *Anguttara Nikāya*,
4. The *Vinaya Piṭaka*,
5. The *Dhammasamgaṇī*,
6. The *Vibhaṅga* of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*,
7. The *Dīgha Nikāya* and,
8. The *Udāna*.

The Pali verses include seven kinds of *vippasanā*, 37 *bodhipakkhiyeva dhamma*, *paṭiccasamuppa*, *dhammadāsa*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* etc.<sup>1</sup>

The findings at Sriksetra tell us Theravāda Buddhism reached there in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The Pyu Buddhist monks and laymen learned Pali texts brought from South India. They learned art of writing and invented their own characters. Therefore, Myanmar education dawned with the propagation of the Theravada Buddha Sasanā. We can guess that education centers certainly were monasteries which were resided by Buddhist monks. The *Old T'ang History*, a Chinese source, mentions about the Buddhism of Sriksetra.

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<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Superintendent, archaeological Survey, Burma, (1938 -39)*, Yangon: Government Printing, 1940, pp.12-13

According to this, there were over a hundred Buddhist monasteries with courts and rooms all decked with gold and silver, coated with cinnabar and bright colours, smeared with kino and covered with embroidered rugs. When they come to the age of seven, both boys and girls drop their hair and stop in a monastery, where they take refuge in the Saṅgha. On reaching age of twenty, if they have not awaked to the principles of the Buddha, they let their hair grow again and become ordinary townsfolk.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese source mentions that the Pyu and their education being dependent upon Buddhism. Moreover, Myanmar education opened in the first millennium A.D. with the dawn of Indianized civilization.

### Education of Bagan Kingdom

Bagan was a mere village after the fall of Pyu kingdoms. Over one century later, Bagan became a kingdom under the control of king Aniruddha (1044-1077 A.D). His dynasty lasted for three hundred years old (eleventh-thirteen centuries A.D). The territory of Bagan is mentioned in the Dhammayazaka Pagoda Inscription of 1196 A.D: his majesty's territory ranging from Nga Zaung Chan (Bamaw) in the north, to Ye, Dawei, Taninthayi and Thalinkyay (Junk Ceylon) in the south, and from the Thalwin river in the east to the Miccagiri (Western hill region) in the west.<sup>3</sup> Now, Bagan is the largest archaeological zone of Southeast Asia and exists 2217 religious monume nts. At Bagan, intangible cultural heritages—ten kinds of artistic crafts, devotion on Buddhis m, customs, literature, education, art and architecture—can be looked at Bagan area. Also, inscriptions of the Bagan period give us intangible culture.

Historically, the Bagan Period was the heyday of Myanmar. Reconsideration is needed why the Bagan kingdom was great. The answer was that great wisdom and martial prowess made Bagan an empire. It was also called knowledge or soft power which made Bagan a great civilization and physical strength or hard power which made it an empire. In soft power,

<sup>2</sup> G.H.Luce, (1937), "The Ancient Pyu", *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Vol. XXVII, Pt. III, Yangon: Burma Research Society, (307-321), pp. 318-319

<sup>3</sup> ရှေးဟောင်း မြန်မာ ကျောက်စာများ: Inscriptions of Myanmar),( in Myanmar),U Nyein Maung (ed.), Yangon: Archaeological Department, 1972, p.66

education is not only a soft power but also a cause to develop during the Bagan period. At the beginning of the Bagan period, the Pyus who lost their kingdom and the Mons who founded their kingdom in Lower Myanmar culturally influenced. The two indigenous peoples shared the Bamar's Buddhist and Brahmanic culture so that they were the teachers of the Bamar's. As the two peoples trained the Bamar's, Buddhism flourished at Bagan kingdom and practiced Brahmanism in royal ceremonies in the palace. They were possibly Buddhist monks there.

Therefore, the four languages—Pyu, Mon, Myanmar and Pali—profoundly developed in the early Bagan dynasty. The Rajakumar stone quadrangular inscription of 1113 A.D in four languages was the best evidence. When King Alaungsithu came to the throne, he built the Thabinnyu temple, erected his inscription in Pali at this monument and was a great work in Pali. Moreover, King Kyansittha also erected his inscriptions which were mostly written in Mon. In his reign, wall paintings, glazed and terracotta plaques of Jataka stories and its legends were also in Mon. Hence, it gave us that variety of indigenous languages were prosperous in Myanmar since the Bagan period. During the Bagan period, there were a large number of stone inscriptions which were written in Myanmar, Pyu, Mon, Chinese, Tamil, Pali and Khmer. Most of them were in Myanmar. As Buddhism and Brahmanism were flourished, Pali, sacred language of Buddhism, and Sanskrit, a form of secular language, were prominent in higher education in the Bagan period. Basing on the monastery, formal education appeared in the Bagan period. Some words extracted from inscriptions show historical images of education:

1. *kloṇ* (school/ monastery)<sup>4</sup>
2. *cāsaṇ kloṇ* (school)<sup>5</sup>
3. *cāsaṇ* (student/ pupils)<sup>6</sup>
4. *cāsaṇ tiuk* (school building)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> က္လောဏ် (ယခု-ကျောင်း)

<sup>5</sup> စာသင်္ကြောဏ် (ယခု-စာသင်ကျောင်း)

<sup>6</sup> က္လောဏ် (ယခု-ကျောင်း)

<sup>6</sup> စာသင်္ကြောဏ် (ယခု-စာသင်ကျောင်း) စာသင်

<sup>7</sup> စာသင်တိုက်

5. *charyā* (teacher)<sup>8</sup>
6. *mliy phū* (chock)<sup>9</sup>
7. *sañ pun* (teaching board)<sup>10</sup>
8. *parabaik* (books)<sup>11</sup>
9. *kaṃkutaṃ* (soap stone pencil)<sup>12</sup>

The king was the most powerful man in monarchic governance of the Bagan period. He was mentioned as a greatly Wiseman titles as follows:

1. *paññā tow krī cwā so mañ phlac ra kā*<sup>13</sup> (to be a king whose knowledge is great)
2. *paññā saddhā nhaluṃ tañ so*<sup>14</sup> (the one whose knowledge, belief and attitude are good)
3. *paññākṛī cwā so*<sup>15</sup> (the one whose knowledge is great)

At his court, his ministers were well-educated persons who were experts in Pitaka, Sanskrit, and Astrology in Sanskrit.

*...pitakat sumpuṃ le tat cwā so sasankruit byākaruṃ hurā samā amhu le tat tha so caturaṅgabijay mañ so amat*<sup>16</sup>

(trans. ...Caturangabizay, a minister of royal government, who is an expert in Pitaka Pali texts, Sanskrit, Astrology and Medicine of Indias)

It was mentioned in the Myanmar inscription of 1278 A.D. According to the inscription, higher education of Bagan kingdom depended upon Indian education.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> ဆရာ (ယခု-ဆရာ)

<sup>9</sup> မွှိယံဖူ (ယခု-မြေဖြူ)

<sup>10</sup> သင်ပုန်း

<sup>11</sup> ပုရပိုက်

<sup>12</sup> ကံကုကံ (ယခု- ကံကူဆံ)

<sup>13</sup> ပညာတော်ကြီးစွာသောမင်းဖြစ်ရကာ

<sup>14</sup> ပညာသဒ္ဓါနှလုံးတည်သော

<sup>15</sup> ပညာကြီးစွာသော

<sup>16</sup> ပိတကတ် သုံပုံလေတိစွာထသော သသံကြိုက် ဗျာကရဏ် ဟုရာသမာ အမှုခေ တတ်ထသော စတုရင်္ဂဝိဇယ မည်သော အမတ်

<sup>17</sup> ပညာကြီးစွာသော Nyein Maung: 1983:1-3.

Nyein Maung: 1982: 25-64.

Nyein Maung: 1972: 289.

Nyein Maung: 1983:226.

The king's teacher was called *mañ chryā*<sup>18</sup> in inscription. He rewarded them those Pali titles, i.e., Dhamma Rājākavi, Cibhatrakathika, Sirimahādhammarājāpaṇṭita etc.<sup>19</sup> The princes went to school and learned government studies (*dhammasāt*)<sup>20</sup>, and the *amunwan*<sup>21</sup> (now *razathat*, penal law in English). In ancient time, there was no such medical science that health care was certainly very weak. Curses mentioned in the inscriptions tell that severe diseases including epidemic and new born abnormalities defeated as follows:

1. *chiy wā*<sup>22</sup> (medicines),
2. *mrwe khai ruy se*<sup>23</sup> (snake-bitten deasd),
3. *chip phlac ruy* (poisons cases),
4. *nū so*<sup>24</sup> (leprosy),
5. *way so*<sup>25</sup> (scabies),
6. *kan so*<sup>26</sup> (blindness),
7. *Nāpan so*<sup>27</sup> (deafness),
8. *Khriy lak tui so*<sup>28</sup> (dysmelia:rhizomelia and mesomalia),
9. *Samā k u ruy ma tat rā so a nā*<sup>29</sup> (disease that cannot be treated by medico) etc.<sup>30</sup>

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Nyein Maung: 1972:269.

Nyein Maung: 1972:187.

Nyein Maung: 1983:49,120.

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မင်္ဂလာ

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မေရာဇေဝိ၊

စိဘကြကထိက

သီရိမဟာမေရာဇေဝိတ Nyein Maung: 1982:123.

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မေသတ်

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ရာသေတ် အမုန္တန်

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ဆေဝါ

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မြွေကိုက်ရယ်သေ

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နသော

25

ဝယ်သော

26

ကန်သော

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နာပင်သော

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မြွေလက်တိုသော

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သမာကုရယ် မတတ်သော အနာ

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Nyein Maung: 1983:84.

## Libraries

In education, library is an important resources center which has collected texts and information data. It remains, a ruined library, therefore, provides image of a certain civilization. Library, which former men used, shows how their civilization reached high.

Old Myanmar inscriptions mention the words “*pitak ak thā rā tuik*” (the brick building which was a place of Pitaka texts) and “*cā tuik*” (the building where the texts were placed).<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, there were libraries in the Bagan period. During the reign of Anurudha and Thi Luin Mañ, two libraries were built in Bagan. The first one was situated at the foot of Mt. Tuywin: it is called Sakku Tuik but government employees from Road Department had vandalized it in 1957 when they built Nyaung Oo-Kyaukpataung road construction.<sup>32</sup> Traditionally, Myanmar believed that King Anawratha kept the Pitaka scriptures which he brought them from Thaton after his conquest. Another one was in Shwe GLu Gyi temple (1589/901-A) near the west built on 17 May 1131. Alaungsitthu (1131-1163) erected a great inscription in Pali. The King in his inscription mentions as follows:

*...k ārā petwā likhā petwā pitakatta yaṃ muttamāṃ*

[Trans.] a copy of Supreme Tipitaka<sup>33</sup>

Luce pointed out that in Old Myanmar inscriptions, the term “Shwegu Gyi”(Great Golden Cave) usually implies a library of the sacred books. An Old Myanmar inscription dated on 9 February 1230 mentions as follows:

*...pitatat rhuīy kū twañ thā siy*<sup>34</sup>

[trans.] Pitaka texts are placed at Shwe Gu.

Furthermore, libraries are mentioned in the Old Myanmar inscriptions as follows:

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<sup>31</sup> Nyein Maung:1982:99.

<sup>32</sup> Than Tun, (2006), တန့်တလံ ဝုဂံဘယ်မြေမလဲ (Bagan where can be get by one step in a day), in Myanmar), Yangon: Thiriswe Books, p. 70.

<sup>33</sup> G.H. Luce, (1967), *Old Burma-Early Pagan*, New York: Institute of Fine Art, pp.407f.

<sup>34</sup> Nyein Maung: 1972:209.



1. A library, founded by Minister Anantathura and his wife, remain in Amanar, (now north of Minnan Thu), east of Bagan,
2. A library founded by Queen Ari Saw on 28 May 1260,
3. A home library founded by Minister Caturangapaccaya on 4 April 1278,
4. A library offered by Princesses Asaw Kwen in 1267,
5. A library offered by a queen Mibayar Saw at Min Waing monastery in Minnan Thu,
6. A library in Tak New Kyaung monastery founded by Mahathirizayya, a minister, at the end of the Bagan period: it is the most popular library which placed many numbers of books in Pali, Sanskrit, and *nissaya* (translation into Myanmar)<sup>35</sup>

Professor Than Tun stated that only Pali Pitaka scriptures were placed at libraries in the Bagan period. Therefore, education of the Bagan period was spiritually influenced by Buddhism.

### Public Education

Among the people, education is a need to raise a literate society. Although literacy rate possibly might increase, the people, majority of population, mostly were illiteracy in the Bagan period. The word *cātat*<sup>36</sup> was a literate man in Old Myanmar inscriptions. They usually became staff at administrative offices. Like staff are called *sayay* and *sachi* today, inscription mention their positions *cariy* and *cakhī*.<sup>37</sup> According to two inscriptions of A.D. 1227 and 1235, eight men were literacy in 116 men. Another inscription mentions that 15 men including 4 women were literacy in 140 men. Accordingly, literacy rate was ten per cent in the period. Although literacy rate was low, literacy rate of women was not few.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Than Tun, တန့်တလံ p.70-72.

<sup>36</sup> စာတတ်

<sup>37</sup> စာရှိယ်၊ စမီ

<sup>38</sup> Than Tun:1964:255f.

Vocational education formed informality in the Bagan period. It was an important concern in the citizens. Despite the foundation of schools by Buddhist monks at monastery, numerous monuments of Bagan and unique art and architecture, tangible culture of Bagan, threw us a light, development of vocational education in the Bagan period. some terms found in the stone inscriptions reveal variety of vocational education as follows:

1. *Pan phay* (art of black smith),<sup>39</sup>
2. *Pan thin* (art of silver and gold smith),<sup>40</sup>
3. *Pan khi* (art of painting),<sup>41</sup>
4. *Pan ran* (art of masonry),<sup>42</sup>
5. *Pan pwat* (art of wood turner),<sup>43</sup>
6. *Pan pu* (art of sculpture),<sup>44</sup>
7. *Lak smā* (carpenter),<sup>45</sup>
8. *Auit sañ* (art of brick-making),<sup>46</sup>
9. *Auiw thin* (art of pot-making),<sup>47</sup>

The Mons gave the Bamars the vocational education in Bagan because the terms derived from the Mon *pañ* (paññā in Pali) meaning art.

## Learning in Sri Lanka

Myanmar firstly opened oversea learning in the Bagan period. Not only Sinhalese monks stayed in Bagan but also Hsapada, a prominent monk of Bagan, went to Sri Linka to learn Pali literature. When the monk came back

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<sup>39</sup> ပန်ဖယံ

<sup>40</sup> ပန်ထိင်

<sup>41</sup> ပန်ခိ

<sup>42</sup> ပန်ရန်

<sup>43</sup> ပန်ပွတ်

<sup>44</sup> ပန်ပု

<sup>45</sup> လက်သွာ

<sup>46</sup> အိုတ်သဉ်

<sup>47</sup> အိုက်ထိန် (Nyein Maung: 1972:27, 196,241,300,308.)

from Sri Lanka, he built a stupa (187/145), a Sinhalese style in architecture, near Nyaung Oo.<sup>48</sup> After the fall of Bagan, Ceylon-Myanmar Buddhist relations continued to develop and created Buddhist epics which is called *pyo* in Myanmar like the epics in Pali of Sri Lanka.

### **Conclusion**

Education dawned in Myanmar with the establishment of Buddhism and development of sea voyage between India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. It appeared from the first millennium A.D. Therefore, Myanmar education based upon Pali, and Sanskrit. It was led by Buddhist monks who founded school which was located in their monastery. Therefore, *Kyaung* was a Myanmar word for both monastery and school. From that time, Myanmar education was being dependent on Buddhist monks till the present. As monks went to overseas to learn, education had more progress than before. Therefore, education needs a link with overseas schools. Teachers were Buddhist monks who led Myanmar society. They were also mentors and their influence extended from the king to his people who came from monastery. Accordingly, state was partially dominated by monks although Buddhist monks are banned not to participate in the secular affairs. A great civilization appeared in Bagan and was made by Buddhism and its education.

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<sup>48</sup> U Bo Kay, ဖုင်သုတေသနလမ်းညွှန် (A Guide to Bagan for Research), (in Myanmar), Yangon: Lwin Oo Books, 2017 Reprinted, p.137.

### References in Myanmar

ငြိမ်းမောင်၊ ဦး။ တည်းဖြတ်။ (၁၉၇၁)၊ ရှေးဟောင်း မြန်မာကျောက်စာများ၊ ပထမတွဲ၊ ရန်ကုန်ရှေးဟောင်းသုတေသနဦးစီးဌာန၊ ရန်ကုန်။

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-----၊ ဦး။ တည်းဖြတ်။ (၁၉၇၁)၊ ရှေးဟောင်း မြန်မာကျောက်စာများ၊ တတိယတွဲ၊ ရန်ကုန်ရှေးဟောင်းသုတေသနဦးစီးဌာန၊ ရန်ကုန်။

ဗိုကေ။ ဦး။ (၁၉၇၁) ပုဂံသုတေသနလမ်းညွှန်၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ လွင်ဦးဟယပေ၊ ၂၀၁၆ ပြန်ရိုက်။

သန်းထွတ်၊ မောင်၊ (၁၉၇၇)၊ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ ဘုန်းတော်ကြီးကျောင်း ပညာရေးသမိုင်း မဟာပညာရေး ဘွဲ့ယူကျမ်း၊ ပညာရေးတက္ကသိုလ်၊ ရန်ကုန်။

သန်းထွန်း၊ ဒေါက်တာ(၂၀၀၈)၊ ဗမာ့ဟောင်း မြန်မာရာဇဝင်၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ သီရိဆွေစာပေ။

-----၊ (၂၀၀၆) တန့်တလံ ပုဂံဘယ်ရွှေ့မလဲ၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ သီရိဆွေစာပေ။

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