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Kavikratu

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In this article the meaning of the *bahuvrīhi* compound *kavikratu* (attested ten times in the ṚV: 1.1.5; 3.2.4; 3.14.7; 3.27.12; 5.11.4; 6.16.23; 8.44.7; 9.9.1; 9.25.5; 9.62.13; seven times used as an attribute for Agni, thrice for Soma) is examined. Its morphology (adjectival possessive compound) and the meaning of its two constituents *kavī* “poet” and *krātu* “resolve” are more or less undisputed, hence the common translation “with a poet’s resolve”. However, in spite of the rare occurrence and the apparent lucidity of the morphology and semantics of *kavikratu*, such a translation may not be appropriate. The uneven distribution of this term and its marked position within the stanzas where it occurs, in combination with the semantic ambiguity of Sanskrit compounds, may be taken as an indication that this compound possesses a more intricate structure, and that this intricacy is the reason for its occurrence. In this article it is argued that this compound admits more than one translation, and that it is necessary to reproduce its semantic ambiguity in translation. Finally, the possibility of using the uneven distribution of *kavikratu* to identify differences between certain groups within the Ṛgveda with regard to their world-views is briefly discussed.

Keywords: Ṛgveda; *kavī*; *krātu*; *kavikratu*

1. Introduction

Determining the meanings of the lexical items of a dead language, as well as the semantic and pragmatic relations holding between them, is always a challenging task, and the Rigvedic lexicon in particular is an appropriate example to illustrate these difficulties. Despite best efforts, the analysis of much of what constitutes the lexicon of the language of the Vedic texts has often still not yielded completely satisfactory results. With regard to the Ṛgveda, this problem is enhanced by the poetic nature of the text, which has direct consequences for its understanding and therefore its translation: any attempt to achieve a comprehensive understanding must take into account the complexities inherent in poetic texts and convey them also in the target language of its translation. In this article an attempt will be made to demonstrate by the example of the compound *kavikratu* how important an adequate understanding of the poetic subtleties of the ṚV is

for its comprehension. Such an examination could also have consequences for further research – at least hypothetically – for example with regard to the internal structure of the RV: if for instance it can plausibly be shown that not all semantic features of a word such as *kavikratu* are realised in all *maṇḍalas* alike, then this result may serve as an indication for the different notions of this compound realised in different *maṇḍalas* and therefore contribute to an analysis of the way the RV was understood by its creators, the poets. But in some instances, including in the RV, the prospect of obtaining a more satisfying result with regard to these questions can be increased by limiting the semantic domain that serves as the subject under discussion, and by comparing terms related to it with regard to their distribution among the Rigvedic *maṇḍalas*. Hence, the aim of this article is twofold: 1. to examine the possible ways of understanding *kavikratu* and illustrate the consequences for translation; 2. to evaluate the uneven distribution of this compound within the Rigvedic *mandalas* and the possibility of using it to uncover an internal stratification of the RV.

2. *Krātu* and *kavikratu*

The meaning of *krātu* has been the subject of an insightful and comprehensive study by Rönnow, and its results have by and large found wide acceptance among researchers; according to Rönnow, *krātu* denotes the “decisive, energetic sense of the courageous warrior”, and among the gods is mostly attributed to Indra.¹ The term is often attested besides *dākṣa*, and already in the ŚBM there is an attempt to distinguish between them: ŚBM 4.1.4.1: *sa yād eva mānasā kāmāyata idām me syād idām kurvīyēti sā eva krátur átha yād asmai tát samṛdhyāte sa dākṣo* “If he desires with his mind ‘This should be mine, I want to do this’, that is *krātu*. And when it flourishes for him, that is *dākṣa*.” The translation of *krātu* as “resolve” seems to be consistent with these ideas.

The more or less general consensus about the meaning of *krātu* notwithstanding, little effort has been made to elucidate the meaning of the compound *kavikratu*, attested ten times in the RV (1.1.5; 3.2.4; 3.14.7; 3.27.12; 5.11.4; 6.16.23; 8.44.7; 9.9.1; 9.25.5 and 9.62.13). To begin with, it belongs to the class of *bahuvrīhi* compounds and could therefore be understood as something like “with a poet’s purpose”,² as it has indeed been taken by the majority of the translators.³ However, given some peculiar features of this

¹ Rönnow (1932-33: 3): “Es ist der bestimmende, energische Sinn des mutigen Kriegers, vor allem Indras, eine Macht in seinem Inneren, dank welcher ihm Sieg und Erfolg geschenkt werden, und die der Gott seinen Verehrern, die darum bitten, geben kann.” For a comparison with the Greek parallel κρᾶτύς and their possible common origin, cf. Strunk (1975).

² So Jamison & Brereton (e.g. 2014: 89) in their translation. In terms of *vīgrahavākya*, the analysis of the relation between the two constituents of this compound would be *yasya kaveḥ kratuḥ sa kavikratuḥ*.

³ Grassmann (1996), s.v. *kavikratu*: “eines Weisen Einsicht habend; einsichtsvoll”; Dandekar (1938: 64) “*kratu* des Sehers besitzend”; Geldner 1951 (Vol. 1), 2 “mit Sehersinn”, etc.; Renou (1960: 17) “force-inspirante d’un poète”; (1964: 1) “(ayant) la pouvoir-spirituel d’un poète”; Thieme (1964: 15) “mit der Geisteskraft eines Sehers”; Velankar (1968: 8) “possessed of a poet’s wisdom”; Witzel et al (2007: 11) “Seherkraft”. Somewhat differently Köhler (2009: 62 f.) (Soma gives *krātu* to the *kavis* because he inspires the poets) and

term and the way it has been used, it certainly deserves further consideration. Although the number of its Rigvedic attestations is rather small, it always occupies a prominent position at the end of a *pāda*, with the single exception of ṚV 3.14.7, the only attestation of the vocative *kavikrato* (in all other places the nominative or accusative singular occurs), where it is placed in the middle. But there are more reasons to take a closer look at this compound: it is exclusively used for the designation of two gods, Soma (at the three attestations of the 9th *maṇḍala*) and Agni (at all other attestations). With regard to the close connection between *krātu* and Indra emphasised by Rönnow, this is a somewhat surprising result. Furthermore, three out of ten attestations come from the 3rd *maṇḍala*, and the poet to whom ṚV 1.1 is attributed, Madhuchandas Vaiśvāmītra, obviously also belongs to the same family of poets. This uneven distribution appears even more surprising if the small number of hymns of the 3rd *maṇḍala* is taken into account: it is the third shortest *maṇḍala* of the ṚV. And to make things even more problematic (and at the same time more interesting), the translation “with a poet’s purpose” or similar, although *prima facie* convincing, does not – without further commentary – convey much semantic content. To say that Agni or Soma has the resolve of a poet or *kavī*⁴ is on the one hand to state the obvious, for both of the gods are often termed as such and should therefore share some of their attributes with them, but then the question remains why this compound is not used more often. On the other hand, such a translation presupposes that there is a specific relation between *krātu* and *kavī* which occurs also outside the compound *kavikratu* or is at least suggested, but this has yet to be demonstrated. Consequently, since there is no obvious reason to single out the translation given above as against other possible translations, it is more than legitimate to address the question of how a compound such as *kavikratu* should be translated. And in dealing with this question it should always be borne in mind that with poetic language, more than one possible solution is always to be expected. In this case, *kavikratu* may also be understood as “causing the *krātu* of a *kavī*” or “receiving his *krātu* from a *kavī*”.⁵ To determine whether the acceptance of one of these three possibilities or a combination of them results in improved comprehension of the compound and the stanzas in which it is attested, these stanzas will be listed and analysed with regard to possible clues contained in them for the reason to combine *krātu* and *kavī* in a compound.⁶ Thereafter, the relation between these two terms outside the compound will be examined, and in a further step, more general arguments about the nature of Agni and Soma as well as the way the activities of a *kavī* are described in the ṚV will be adduced. Then, an attempt at a possible explanation for the prominent use of *kavikratu* by the Vaiśvāmītras will be made, before final deliberations on the consequences of the results for the translation of the ṚV, and on the use of concepts behind the

(: 86 f.) (Agni when figuring as a ritual priest has the *krātu* of *kavīs*) with some brief but unsatisfactory remarks on the different ways in which this compound is analysable.

⁴ Given the semantic differentiation of the Rigvedic terms for “poet”, it seems more appropriate to use the Vedic term, at least initially; cf. Köhler (2009).

⁵ The *vigrahavākya* for these two alternative relations would be *yasmāt kaveḥ kratuḥ sa kavikratuḥ* and *kaver yasya kratuḥ sa kavikratuḥ* respectively.

⁶ All translations of the ṚV are from Jamison & Brereton (2014).

formation of “locally” preferred terms or phrases to distinguish between different strata or layers within the RV.

The attestations of *kavikratu* are as follows:

- RV 1.1.5: *agnir hótā kavikratuḥ satyāṃ citrāśravastamaḥ devó devébhīr ā gamat*
 “Agni, the Hotar with a poet’s purpose, the real one possessing the brightest fame, will come as a god with the gods.”
- RV 3.2.4: *ā mandráśya sanisyaṅto várenyaṃ vṛṇīmáhe áhrayaṃ vájam rgmíyam rātīm bhṛgūṇām usījam kavikratum agnīm rájantaṃ divyéna śociṣā*
 “Wanting to win it, we choose the desirable, audacious, verse-worthy prize of the delighting (Agni), the gift of the Bhrgus, the fire-priest with a poet’s resolve – Agni (himself), who rules with his heavenly flame.”
- RV 3.14.7: *túbhyaṃ dakṣa kavikrato yānīmā déva mártāso adhvaré ákarma tvám víśvasya suráthasya bodhi sárvaṃ tát agne amṛta svadehá*
 “For you, o Skill with a poet’s purpose, are these things that we mortals, o god, have done in the rite. Be aware of everyone whose chariot [= sacrifice] is good. Sweeten everything here, immortal Agni.”
- RV 3.27.12: *ūrjó nápātam adhvaré dīdivāmsam úpa dyávi agnīm īle kavikratum*
 “The child of nourishment, shining in the rite up to heaven, having a poet’s purpose, Agni – him I summon.”
- RV 5.11.4: *agnir no yajñām úpa vetu sādhuṃ yá agnīm náro ví bharante grhé-grhe agnir dūtó abhavad dhavyavāhanaḥ agnīm vṛṇāná vṛṇate kavikratum*
 “Let Agni successfully pursue our sacrifice. Agni do men distribute in every house. Agni became their messenger, conveying the oblation. Choosing Agni, they choose him who possesses a poet’s purpose.”
- RV 6.16.23: *sá hí: sá hí yó mānuṣā yugá sídad dhótā kavikratuḥ dūtás ca havyaavāhanaḥ*
 “For he is the one who has sat through the human (life)spans as Hotar with a poet’s purpose, and as the messenger conveying the oblations.”
- RV 8.44.7: *pratnám hótāram ídyaṃ júṣtam agnīm kavikratum adhvarāṇām abhiśriyam*
 “The age-old Hotar to be reverently invoked, enjoyable Agni, who has a poet’s purpose, the full glory of the ceremonies.”
- RV 9.9.1: *pári priyā diváh kavir váyāmsi napyòr hitáh suvāno yāti kavikratuḥ*
 “The poet of heaven makes the circuit of his own vital powers, when propelled between his two granddaughters as he is being pressed – he who has a poet’s purpose.”
- RV 9.25.5: *aruśó janáyan girah śomah pavata āyuśák indraṃ gáchan kavikratuḥ*

“Ruddy Soma, giving birth to songs, purifies himself, attended by the Āyus, going to Indra with a poet’s purpose.”

RV 9.62.13: *eṣá syá pári śicyate marmṛjyámāna āyūbhiḥ
urugāyāḥ kavikratuḥ*

“This one here is poured in circles, being continually groomed by the Āyus, the wide-going one with a poet’s purpose.”

Following a survey of all stanzas containing *kavikratu* it becomes clear that they do not offer much information on the meaning of *kavikratu* or the reason for the creation of this compound. In most of these stanzas it figures as one element within a chain of epithets (RV 1.1.5; 3.2.4; 3.27.12; 6.16.23 and 8.44.7) or appears without any obvious semantic relation to other segments of the stanza (RV 3.14.7; 5.11.4 and 9.62.13). The two remaining stanzas from the 9th *maṇḍala* constitute an exception: RV 9.9.1 appears rather tautological, if *kavikratu* is to mean only “having a poet’s purpose”, because Soma is explicitly designated in the same stanza as *kaví*, so that *kavikratu* seems quite superfluous; but RV 9.25.5 offers a clue as to why Soma can be so addressed: he inspires other poets by creating their poetry.

It may therefore seem reasonable to choose “causing the *krátu* of a *kaví*” or something similar as a proper translation, but before doing so it is necessary to check those stanzas where both *kaví* and *krátu* appear, for possible syntactic or semantic relations between them.⁷ Once again, the results are not completely satisfying, as will be shown.

In one stanza, RV 9.100.5, the subject of *krátu* is not the one who is termed *kaví*:

RV 9.100.5: *krátve dáksāya naḥ kave pávasva soma dhārayā
indrāya pātave sutó mitrāya varuṇāya ca*

“For our will and skill, o poet, purify yourself in a stream, Soma, pressed for Indra to drink, for Mitra and Varuṇa.”

Here the obtainment of *krátu* is desired by the speaker(s) and his companions, but the *kaví* in this stanza is Soma. However, the fact that he at least is requested to grant *krátu* and that he is also a *kaví* may suggest the possibility that he is able to do so because he is a *kaví*. The next stanza displays a more complex structure, but allows similar conclusions:

RV 9.86.13: *ayám matávāñ chakunó yáthā hitó 'nye sasāra pávamāna ūrmiṇā
táva krátvā ródasī antarā kave śúcir dhiyá pavate sóma indra te*

“This one here, accompanied by thought, like a bird spurred on has run into the sheep’s (fleece), purifying himself in a wave. By your resolve, o sage poet, by your insight, the clear Soma purifies himself between the two world-halves for you, o Indra.”

According to this stanza, Soma’s purification proceeds only because of Indra’s *krátu* and *dhí*, and it seems likely that he is addressed here as *kaví* for this very reason.

⁷ Another attestation for the co-occurrence of these two terms is RV 3.1.5, which will be discussed below.

The next stanza comes from one of the more enigmatic *sūktas* of the 3rd *maṇḍala*, so it is not surprising that its message is rather mysterious:

- RV 3.54.6: *kavīr nṛcākṣā abhī śīm acaṣṭa ṛtāsya yonā vighrte mādanī
nānā cakrāte sādanaṃ yāthā vēḥ samānēna krātunā saṃvidānē*
“The sage poet, (through) having a man’s sight, has looked upon them: the two [= Heaven and Earth], separated but becoming exhilarated (together) in the womb of truth. The two have made a seat each for herself as a bird does, (though) being united by a joint purpose.”

It is not clear who is termed here as *kavī*, the most likely candidates being the sun or the human poet, and it seems plausible to assume that heaven and earth are spoken of here as well, but because the meaning of this stanza eludes us, it cannot be settled whose *krātu* is meant here: that of the *kavī* or that of heaven and earth.

Three more relevant stanzas show *kavī* in combination with *sukrātu*, and suggest that the gods, when they act as *kavīs*, have a distinguished form of *krātu* at their disposal; unfortunately, they do not say much more about it:

- RV 6.7.7: *vī yó rājāṃsy āmimīta sukrātur vaiśvānaró vī divó rocanā kavīḥ
pāri yó viśvā bhūvanāni paprathē ’dabdho gopā amītasya rakṣitā*
“He, the very resolute one, who measured out the dusky spaces, (measured) out the luminous realms of heaven – the sage poet Vaiśvānara – who extends himself around all creatures, he is the undeceivable herdsman, the protector of the immortal.”
- RV 9.12.4: *divó nābhā vicakṣaṇó ’vyo vāre mahīyate
sómo yāḥ sukrātuḥ kavīḥ*
“In the navel of heaven, he, wide-gazing, shows his greatness in the sheep’s fleece: Soma, who is a poet with good purpose.”
- RV 10.91.3: *sudākṣo dākṣaiḥ krātunāsi sukrātur āgne kavīḥ kāvyenāsi viśvavit
vāsuv vāsūnāṃ kṣayasi tvám éka id dyāvā ca yāni pṛthivī ca pūsyataḥ*
“Very skillful through your skills, through your will you are strong-willed. O Agni, you are the all-knowing poet through your poetic craft. As good one, you alone hold sway over goods, which both Heaven and Earth foster.”

3. Motives for the creation of *kavīkrātu*

The stanzas presented above do indeed suggest that there is a link between the two terms *kavī* and *krātu*, but given the huge number of attestations for both terms (239 for *kavī* and 181 for *krātu*), the small number of stanzas where both of them occur suggests that this link was not conceived of as essential. It therefore seems worthwhile to consider the possibility that the ascription of *kavīkrātu* to Agni and Soma may have its cause in some specific properties common to both of them, and in fact there are some such: first of all, Agni and Soma are the only gods who are visibly present at the sacrificial ground, and their presence is the *conditio sine qua non* for success in the ritual. The ritual succeeds, in other words, especially if these two gods actively participate in it, and one

of the terms to designate the possession of the expertise needed for this is *kavī*. The meaning of this term is much more comprehensive than that of other Rigvedic designations for “poet” like *ṛṣi* or *kāru*,⁸ and it includes the ability to discover and carry out the proper measures for ritual (as e.g. in RV 1.76.5; 3.8.4 and 9; 9.72.6; 9.74.9 and 10.114).⁹ The creation of poetry is, of course, one of the main activities, and it has been demonstrated above that an important feature of Soma is his ability to inspire and stimulate the poets. This trait is shared by Agni, as can be seen e.g. in RV 4.11.2 and 3:

RV 4.11.2: *vī śāhy agne grṇatē mañṣāṃ khām vépasā tuvijāta stāvānaḥ*
vīśvebir yād vāvānaḥ śukra devais tán no rāsva sumaho būri mánma
 “Unloose inspiration for the singer (as if) through an aperture, o powerfully born Agni, in your excitation while you are being praised. What you, along with all the gods, will crave, that grant us, o brilliant, very great one – an ample thought.”

RV 4.11.3: *tvád agne kāvya tván mañṣās tvád ukthā jāyante rādhyāni*
tvád eti drāvīnaṃ vīrāpeśā ithādhiye dāsūṣe mārtyāya
 “From you, Agni, poetic compositions, from you inspired thoughts, from you are born solemn words to be realized. From you come chattels ornamented with heroes for the poetic mortal whose thought is to the point.”

It becomes clear from these, and from similar stanzas such as RV 6.1.1 and 7.10.1, that Agni, like Soma, is considered to be responsible for the creation of poetry. Thus, since both deities termed as *kavikratu* confer the ability to create poetry to their followers, it is adequate to translate it as “causing the *krātu* of a *kavī*” as well. Furthermore, not only is it legitimate to translate *kavikratu* as “having a poet’s resolve”, but it is possible to show why *kavī* and none of the other designations in the poetic-ritualistic domain for those being active within it figures as the first constituent of this compound: it is because of the ritual know-how connected with a *kavī* in Rigvedic times. It remains to be checked whether the third option for a translation, “having *krātu* because of the *kavī(s)*”, makes sense as well. After reviewing another characteristic common to both deities, the answer should be in the affirmative: not only are both of them present on the sacrificial ground, but their epiphany depends on the ritualist. Soma has to be purified by the ritual priests in order to obtain his true form, and Agni has to be maintained by them as well. It is therefore not a big step to accept the third possible translation also, and in fact the idea behind it is expressed by a Vaiśvāmītra poet:

RV 3.1.5: *śukrēbhir āngai rája ātatanvān krátum punānāḥ kavibhiḥ pavitraiḥ*
śocīr vāsānaḥ páry áyur apām śríyo mimīte bṛhatīr ānūnāḥ
 “Stretching through the airy realm with his blazing limbs, purifying his resolve through the sage poets as his purifying filters,¹⁰ clothing himself all around in flame,

⁸ With the possible exception of *vedhás*, for the meaning of which cf. Pinault (2013).

⁹ For this aspect of *kavī* cf. Köhler (2009), especially chapter 2.4.

¹⁰ For this type of relation between a basic substantive and an epithet which is metaphorically identified with it, cf. Pinault (1997: 130).

and being the life of the waters, he measures out his splendours, lofty and never wanting.”

The notion that the epiphany of a god depends on human beings, the poets, is formulated in another stanza:

RV 3.2.1: *vaiśvānarāya dhiśāṅām ṛtāvṛdhe gr̥taṃ ná pūtām agnāye janāmasi
dvitā hótāram mānuṣaś ca vāghāto dhiyā ráthaṃ ná kúliśaḥ sám ṛivati*
“We give birth to the Holy Place for Vaiśvānara, who grows strong through the truth, like purified ghee for Agni. Once again, as an axe brings together a chariot, the chanters (bring together) with their insight the Hotṛ (= Agni) (who was) also (the Hotṛ) of Manu.”

Therefore, the translation “having *krātu* because of the *kavi(s)*” seems viable as well, and consequently, there are three distinct but meaningful options for translating *kavikratu*, all of which find their *ratio* in certain specific traits of the world-view of the Rigvedic poets. But the family of Viśvāmitra may have gone one step further: not only do the poets contribute to the theophany, they are partly shaping the very nature of the deity they are praising. In turn they are inspired by these gods, and therefore the Vaiśvāmitras may have coined, or at least used this term to express this complex relationship. Naturally, to transfer this into the target language is a problem for any translator; giving all translations simultaneously would immediately render the text incomprehensible, but giving only one of them would divest the text of its complexity, which in the eye of its creators is one of its essential features and which therefore should be conveyed in the target language as well. When translating the RV, it thus seems advisable to mention all plausible alternative translations and their background at least the first time a given word appears, and proceed with one of them.

There may be yet another reason why the compound *kavikratu* was featured especially by the Vaiśvāmitras. Not only this compound, but also its first constituent *kavi* has a higher number of attestations in the 3rd *maṇḍala* than expected, considering the small number of hymns collected there. It contains only about 6% of the Rigvedic hymns, but nearly 11% of the attestations of *kavi*.¹¹ The Vaiśvāmitras may have developed a predilection for the use of this word and compounds based on it, like *kavikratu*, because these terms were useful to initiate and express an idea of poetry which may have been unique within the family *maṇḍalas*. Once the idea was formulated that at least certain gods depend in a way on the activities of the ritual priests – and within the RV, this usually means the Hotṛ, who in Rigvedic times was or should have been a poet – it is only a small step to extend this idea to the creation at large, and the Vaiśvāmitras apparently developed this idea, so that one complete *sūkta*, RV 3.38, deals with the cosmogonic deeds of the primordial *kavis*. With regard to *kavikratu*, if the Vaiśvāmitras developed a unique world-view and if this term was coined to express it, could it not be used for tracing specific groups within the Rigvedic setting, groups with a distinguished world-view, and could this idea not serve as a starting point for further attempts to achieve

¹¹ For an overview of the distributions of *kavi* and related terms in the RV cf. Köhler (2015: 370).

a better understanding of the different groups, which perhaps to some extent maintained a specific identity?

In principle this seems a feasible project, but terms like *kavikratu* are not suitable for it. This term is attested in other *maṇḍalas* as well, and although the *sūktas* adduced to establish the meaning “having *krātu* because of the *kavī(s)*” all come from the 3rd *maṇḍala*, this does not necessarily exclude it from the other *maṇḍalas*. It may be the case that ideas about the relation between poets and gods as outlined above were alien to the circles outside the 3rd *maṇḍala*, but even then, one has to reckon with the possibility that the adaption of a meaning connected with it nevertheless results in a better understanding of a stanza and therefore in a convincing translation; after all, the originality of individual poets may easily transgress boundaries set by the common world-view of their fellow poets. Thus, it may be a promising enterprise to look for a stratification of the RV in terms of different milieus and world-views, but terms which are not restricted to one *maṇḍala* are presumably not helpful for this task.

4. Conclusion

Summing up, it seems that a case can be indeed be made for assuming that all semantic connotations of the compound *kavikratu* are realised in the RV, and that its use resonates with (and may indeed be caused by) a rather comprehensive notion of *kavī*, which includes perhaps the aspect of creating (in a cosmogonic way) by means of poetry, and which is explicitly attested there. Hence, it is the challenging task of the translator to convey the complexity of word formations like this one into the target language, lest one of its main features disappears. But to single out the 3rd *maṇḍala* as the source of this conception simultaneously means excluding these notions at least from all other family *maṇḍalas*, and as long as all the semantic features of *kavikratu* fit into the context of their attestations, it does not seem possible to rule out the existence of similar notions about the role of poetry there as well.¹²

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