

1-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Marianina Demetri Olcott. "Greek and pre-Greek Oath : The Importance of Styx" *Faculty Publications* (2009).

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Greek and pre-Greek Oath: The Importance of Styx

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ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to prove that in pre-Greek oaths and truth-tests , liturgy associated with this religious stratum did not have libations as the primary ritual feature. Rather, from an examination of a variety of textual sources we uncover evidence not only that Styx and Demeter are aspects of the same pre- Greek female deity but also that pre-Greek oaths may have been associated with certain stones rather than merely libations.

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A salient feature common to oaths, ordeals and truth - tests preserved in the epic tradition of Homer and Hesiod to the rhetoric of the 4th century BCE law courts and beyond (1), is the pouring of liquids as words, sometimes of a consistently formulaic pattern, are recited. Furthermore, these formulae present features consistent within Greek culture (2) and may even point beyond to the larger IE complex (Justus 10 - 12). Even a superficial examination of the texts reveals that in the older literary tradition represented by Homer and Hesiod and that preserved by the historian Herodotus (fl. 6th c. BCE) the waters of Styx possess a particular relationship to oaths and truth - test oath waters (3).

Herodotus (Histories 6.74 ff) relates that the Spartan King Cleomenes (519 - 487 BCE) required the Arcadians to swear by the local waters of Styx as a guarantee of their support in a revolt. In this connection it is important to remind ourselves of practices current in the law - courts at the time of Demosthenes (384 -322 BCE) where the use of clepsydra or water clock may be a survival of this more ancient practice. We also compare the inscription now in London between Calymna and Coos:

"Let the the scribe read the proposals .. and anything else carried in the commons.. and the depositions without water." (see endnote 4).

When we read in Hesiod, Theogony 389 ff (5) that Zeus will confirm in his new order the prerogatives which they had under the Titans of whosoever will side with him in the coming conflict with the Titans, we assume that Styx, his first ally, whom he confirms later as the Olympian oath waters, encompassed oaths as her earlier prerogative. Consistent with this myth and the rest of the Hesiodic corpus, Homer's deities also swear by Styx waters as their "greatest

oath" (6). We might, therefore, presume further that since the oath ritual under the new Olympian order involves Styx water (7) so too the primary liturgy under her previous "regime" was also libation.

So, to interpret Hesiod, Theogony 393 ff, just as Styx' prerogatives in the old order are confirmed in the new, we might easily conjecture that the concomitant ritual remains substantially unchanged. To review, as Styx was the oath object of the Titans she will now be the oath object of the Olympians. And it is not too far-fetched to assume that as with the function so too with the liturgy. Consequently we might posit with Frazer (253-254) that as the rituals for oaths etc. in the epics and elsewhere involve libations as a primary liturgy that the analogous liturgy in the pre-Olympian or Old European religion was also libation.

However, further scrutiny of the evidence indicates that this assumption may be incorrect.

A rather different interpretation first considers the geography of the site of Styx falls in conjunction with the adjacent Arcadian cult centers. That the site of Styx falls was an important location in the cultural traditions of Greek Arcadia may be inferred from the brief mention in Herodotus (Histories 6.74 ff) and from a variety of fragmentary myths which locate disparate traditions at this locale. No doubt the dramatic aspect of the falls helped to locate it as an important locus for traditional stories. The grandeur of the site has elicited frequent mention from all who have traveled to the area. Frazer reported in his commentary on the 2nd century Greek traveler Pausanias as surpassing that of Delphi (vol. 4, 248) . From his visit in the fall of 1895 Frazer had this to report about Styx falls which are situated high on Mt. Chelmos' summit in Northwest Arcadia:

The cliff over which the water of Styx descends ..is an immense cliff (600 feet high) absolutely perpendicular a little to the left of the high conical summit of Mt. Chelmos..The view from the top of the falls embraces nearly the whole mountain system of Greece, from Parnassus, Helicon, Cithaeron and the mountains of Attica ..away to the distant Taygetus in Laconia on the south. (vol. 4 276 -7)

We compare Frazer's description with that found in Hesiod, Theogony 785 ff :
the famous cold water which flows down from a high and steep rock..

and later on Theogony 805 ff:

..the imperishable, primeval water of Styx (which) ..rushes through a rugged landscape.

I myself have visited the site on two separate occasions (July ,1993 and August 1999) and can verify that these descriptions are remarkably apt. The water is indeed quite cold and flows from a high cliff where it leaves a prominent black stain. Even in July the falls are capped by snow deposits and the volume in the lower reaches of Styx' stream - bed at all times of the year are plentiful and clear.

In fact, so dramatic is this aspect that we would like to agree with Frazer that Hesiod's descriptions in Theogony 785ff and 805 ff bear so remarkable resemblance to these falls in Arcadia that :

This accurate description seems to show that Hesiod had either seen the falls of Styx himself or had talked with those who had (vol. 4, 253).

As Bethe, the author of the Pauly-Wissowa article on Styx points out, by Herodotus' time, the falls in Arcadia at Nonacris were certainly considered to be the site of Styx (459).

We further remark upon the appropriateness of Iris, the rainbow goddess, who is sent to Styx falls .." to bring from far away the great oath of the Gods, the many named water, in a golden ewer (Theogony 785). Frazer (vol. 4 254) reports that the local inhabitants tell how the volume of water in winter although substantially increased by winter storms ..."all dissolves into a spray by falling through such a height. " As we know from common experience light diffracted through mist creates a rainbow. Here again the resemblances between mythic descriptions found in the epic literature and the actual site are remarkably apt. (So too Bethe 461).

Although modern archaeology has not as yet reported finds of any permanent shrine at this locale (Jost 36) the adjacent foothills of mount Chelmos and the important town of Pheneos list many important cults including athletic games at Pheneos (Jost 30). In particular Pheneos interests us because according to Pausanias, who visited the area in the 2nd century, here at the very old sanctuary of Eleusinian Demeter an oath ritual was performed.

According to archaeologists, the acropolis at Pheneos, already occupied in the Neolithic, thus testifies to the antiquity and longevity of settlement there (Jost 31). And it is here at Pheneos that our next evidence for a different theory of the original oath ritual has its source. Pausanias' (8.15 ff) description of the sanctuary to Eleusinian Demeter is particularly instructive since ancient Pheneos lies well within sight of Mt. Chelmos, third highest peak in the Peloponnese (by some 20 meters) and according to the epic traditon this mountain is the source of Styx' s waters which descend a sheer 600' precipice within 40 ' of Chelmos' summit. (Frazer 253 -254). In fact, according to Frazer, who made the climb, the precipitous and difficult path to Styx falls provides frequent vistas of Pheneos and Lake Pheneos (248).

Within the sanctuary of Eleusinian Demeter at Pheneos Pausanias (8.15 ff) reported that :

..." a sanctuary has been made called the Petroma constructed of two large stones jointed to one another. Every year when they practice the rite called "the greater " they open these stones. (Then) they take out writings from them and read them to the initiated and immediately return them the very night. I learned that many of the Pheneans swear their most important oaths on the Petroma. There is a top on it and it is round and it holds inside a mask of Demeter Kidaria. This mask the priest puts on during the greater mystery and according to some story beats with rods the underworld gods."

The antiquity of these rites to Demeter are revealed in local legends preserved by Pausanias (8.15ff) who reports that the Pheneans

..." perform rites to the goddess saying that what is performed at Eleusis is the same as that founded at Pheneos. For, they tell that Naus (a grandson of Eumolpus) came to them (the Pheneans) because he was commanded by the oracle at Delphi."

According to the Marmor Parium the traditional date of Eumolpus, based on his association with Erectheus, is late 15th century BCE. As the founder of the mysteries at Eleusis, Eumolpus' date, legendary though it may be, both supports the antiquity of the Eleusinian rite and, by extension, is indicative of the antiquity and authenticity of the same ritual at Pheneos.

As Jost and others have pointed out a religious nexus between Arcadia, Delphi and Attica begins to emerge (37).

A further consideration of the topography proves instructive. Styx' waters flow east into the Krathis river and then north into the bay of Corinth (also known as the Bay of Lepanto) directly across from the modern port of Itea whose protected harbor lies at the base of the Delphic plain.

We note with some interest the mask of Kidarian Demeter hidden inside the Petroma, the Phenean oath Rock, which also contains the sacred writing. Is the Petroma upon which they swear also the concretization of Demeter? Or is it a symbolic cave which is suggested by Pausanias use of the word ἄρμωσμένοι ('jointed, fitted') which they open (ἀνοίγουσι). Curiously enough a consideration of Styx' cave, which is found at the base of the falls, figures in several local legends, one of which is associated with Demeter and the rape of Persephone as at Eleusis. This cave is composed of light gray limestone of the Tripolitza- Gavrovo type and looks remarkably like two large slabs of stone meeting at shallow point. Before the cave is a broad sloping shelf of the same limestone. My husband, Dr. Douglas Olcott, who visited the cave, reports that it has a broad triangular opening but a shallow interior. Nonetheless it is still capacious enough to allow up to twenty adults to stand erect within it. Our local informant, a retired schoolteacher known to the inhabitants as Uncle Heracles, reports that the spring located in the cave is believed to be the purest and freshest of Styx' waters.

But what about this curious ritual involving a mask of Demeter? Although Farnell (205) in *Cults of the Greek States* designates this Phenean ritual of the mask of Kidarian Demeter as "specially Arcadian," scenes on a South Italian vase from the mid 5th century BCE now in Dresden collected by Jobst (114) in another context offer some assistance in uncovering the nature and extent of this particular rite. The vase scene depicts a large female figure in this instance entitled "Pherephatta" which is an ancient name for Persephone, Goddess of the Underworld, and Demeter's daughter (Jobst abbildung 12). Her upper torso emerges from a cave mouth while satyrs holding staffs dance around her, perhaps, to call her forth.

Another krater now in the Valetta museum on Malta shows a similar scene - a woman's torso emerges from a cave-like surround while satyrs dance around her. In this latter instance the female figure is not named (Jobst abbildung 14). One is immediately reminded of Aristophanes, *Peace* 294 ff where Trygaeus enjoins the chorus to help him bring up Peace to

the chant of the "Datis hymn" (l.289). Does the hidden mask of Kidarian ritual point in this direction ?

The scholiast on this passage of Aristophanes helps little other than to suggest that Datis may be an Aristophanic joke at a competitor or an obscure reference to a Persian general defeated at Marathon cf. Herodotus 6.94. (Dubner 179 - 180).

But, when we investigate the word κίδαρις, "kidaris", which is no doubt the basis of the epithet "kidaria", we find some tantalizing clues for a possible relationship of this ritual to religious expression elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean world. The use of the word in the Septuagint at Exodus 284 ff is instructive. Here according to the text God carefully describes the ritual headdress to be worn by Aaron as κίδαρις, "kidaris".

We are reminded that it is a male priest to Demeter at Pheneos who dons the mask of Kidarian Demeter and beats the ground. Perhaps Athenaeus had this ritual in mind when he described κίδαρις as an Arcadian dance (Athenaeus 14. 631 D). Again all of these snippets appear to be fragments of a larger Mediterranean religious complex as the scenes from Italian pottery, the descriptions of the Petroma by Pausanias and the etymology of the word kidaris itself suggest.

We make comparison with the omphalos and the prophetic rock of the Sibyl at Delphi which was originally sacred to Ge before the site was coopted by Apollo. No doubt the cave of Ge at the Kastalian spring at Delphi was related to the cult of Ge Eurysternos in a cave some four miles from Styx's tributary, the Krathis, as Pausanias tells us in Book VII .25.13. We also find a cult of Ge at Olympia reported by Pausanias in Book V 14.10. That the left fork of the head-waters of the Alpheios at Olympia, the Ladon, has its source in the mountain system of Mt. Chelmos may point to some sort of connection between Styx and the various cults of Ge at Olympia, at Delphi and the one to Ge Eurysternos which is very close to the site of Styx, some 30 stades (about 3 1/2 miles) as Pausanias reports. And finally we note that the summit of Mt. Chelmos, known today as Styx' mountain, provides an unbroken vista towards Delphi and Mt. Parnassus giving further support that Boeotian and Arcadian theology are related.

Perhaps, Delphi also points to other stone rituals cognate to that at Pheneos. The presence of offerings to stalagmites and other stone formations in Cretan caves of Neolithic up to Bronze age and beyond clearly demonstrates the sacral nature of stones and other mineral

formations (10). Pausanias (9.24.3) reports that in the healing shrine at Hyettus in Boeotia, Herakles was worshipped as an unwrought stone. Further in his travels he describes the Thespians (9.27.1) who worship Eros also as an aniconic stone image.

Elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean, if Genesis 44 - 54 is indicative of actual practice, we find that the early Hebrews also had oath rituals involving stones similar to the Pheneans.

"... ' We (Jacob and Laban) will make an agreement ...and let it stand as a witness between us.' So Jacob chose a great stone and set it upright as a sacred pillar...(and) it is witness."

From these instances we might assume that throughout the ancient Mediterranean world sacred stones were the prominent furniture of oath liturgy although libations and chrisms might also have been concomitant features.

Further discussion of the Phenean oath ritual at Pausanias 8.15ff. concerns the two large stones ' fitted together ' as we are told; the Greek words *μεγαλοὶ* and *ἠρμοσμένοι* are rather general in meaning and therefore permit only the vaguest of interpretations i.e.the stones have been worked. Furthermore upon these stones the Pheneans "swear about the most important things.": *ὄμνυντα ὑπὲρ μεγίστων τῶν πετρώματι*. The presence,however, of this ritual at Pheneos confuses us since we note that this very shrine is rather close to the dramatic site of Styx falls on the summit of Mt. Chelmos and Styx' cave where important mythic events took place, among them Demeter's retreat after the rape of Persephone. Pheneos is the largest town southeast of Mt. Chelmos and the Aroanian mountain range both of which have many sites on their flanks sacred to a wide variety of Olympians. A consideration of Frazer's map VII, Achaia (vol.6) and Immerwahr's list (113-116) of cults located in the environs of Mt. Chelmos, we find the following:

Cult of Artemis & Apollo at Pheneos

Cult of Artemis at Lusoi

Cult of Hermes at Nonacris (very close to Styx)

Cult of Poseidon at Pheneos

Cult of Eileithyia at Kleitor

Cult of Athena at Kleitor

Cave -cult of Pyronian Artemis at Krathis , a tributary of Styx.

Cave- cult of Ge Eurysternos possibly to be located on the Voraikos Gorge

We compare with this list another provided by Jost (299) where we find within the two towns closest to Styx falls cults of Demeter: Eleusinia, Kidaria and Thesmia at Pheneos; at Kleitor a cult to Demeter and somewhat further away at Thelpousa cults to Demeter Erinys, Lousia, and Eleusinia.

An embarrassment of riches to be sure! In addition we might easily ask the question: Why do the inhabitants of the major town closest to Styx falls swear not by her waters which the epics of Homer and Hesiod tell us repeatedly was the "greatest oath of the Gods" but rather by stones - and stones furthermore sacred to a Demeter with chthonic associations ? To some extent the difficulties vanish if we decide that at some point in time (probably before the coming of the Indo - European Greeks) Styx and Demeter were one and the same. We can postulate that when the Indo-European Greeks penetrated the northern Peloponnese so bewildered were they by the association of so many divine attributes in a single deity, and a female deity besides, that they followed the polytheistic pattern of their own existing theology and reformulated the female deity of Arcadia/ Achaia as Demeter whom they no doubt had encountered elsewhere in her aspect as corn goddess. Other aspects of this pre-Greek female deity were reaffirmed in an already pre-existing cult of the mother as a water divinity. This they localized at her aboriginal site on the summit of Mt Chelmos. That Styx has the epithet *wjgevnio* , "very ancient, aboriginal," in the first century BCE mythographer Parthenius (Fragment 7) clearly underscores this point.

And as this aboriginal divinity was reconfigured as one or more Olympian deities, so too were her rituals, although some important overlapping functions remained, no doubt the influenced by longstanding local cults, viz. swearing by the Petroma at Pheneos. Thus, Demeter retained the fertility complex originally belonging to the Great Mother, while Styx remained as the most sacred oath water in Homer and Hesiod. But like Demeter, Styx retained her Underworld functionality as one of the rivers of Hades. While at Pheneos, the local inhabitants preserve the traditional association of the Petroma and Demeter with oaths.

This is admittedly a somewhat creative reconstruction of religious pre - history. But do we have any other evidence of a more concrete nature to substantiate this hypothetical

reconstruction? There are, indeed, some mythological fragments which help support this reconstruction. Ptolemy Hephaestion in a text preserved by Photion (Immerwahr 116) says :

"About the water of Styx in Arcadia, when Demeter (was) mourning her daughter, she became very vexed when Poseidon raped her although she was in mourning. In her anger she changed herself into a horse and when she came to the spring and saw her outward appearance, she hated it and made it black."

No doubt this obvious aetiological myth seeks to explain the prominent black stain which marks the 600 foot cliff over which Styx' waters fall some 40 feet from the summit of Mt. Chelmos. According to Frazer, populations local to Styx called it "Mavronero" 'black water'. Styx' falls are still called so today because of this very stain which is as obvious to the modern traveler as it was to the ancients as they made their way into the Arcadian interior traveling along the winding valley cut by the Krathis River. Mt. Chelmos and its twin peak across the Aroanios valley, Mt. Cyllene, are two of the three tallest mountains in the Peloponnese, 2355 and 2374 meters respectively. In addition, each is sacred to a potent chthonic deity - Hermes in the case of Mt. Cyllene, and, as the many descriptions in epic and elsewhere indicate, Styx on the summit of Mt. Chelmos. As we have already noted Pheneos, Kleitor, Lykouria and Lousoi in addition to Thelphousa and Phigaleia are all sites of Demeter worship. A glance at a good map of the Peloponnese (cf. Frazer, 6. Map VII) indicates that three of these sites: Kleitor, Pheneos and Lousi ring the foothills of Mt. Chelmos.

According to the mythographer Conon, (Immerwahr 106) the Pheneans also tell the story that Persephone was dragged into the underworld through a chasm which is close to Styx and Mt. Chelmos. In addition we have a tantalizing corroboration of this tradition from the Hymn to Demeter (l.423) wherein Styx and other divinities were picking flowers in a meadow with Persephone when she was stolen away by Hades. This reminiscence in the Homeric hymns of Styx' proximity to the site of Persephone's abduction clearly corroborates the Phenean myth. Compare also Apollodorus 1.3.5 who says that Zeus fathered Persephone on Styx and not on Demeter.

Our final piece of evidence once again comes from Pausanias who

(8.42) tells us of the cave of so-called Black Demeter which lies above the Neda gorge at Phigaleia. Frazer's description bears repeating:

The cave of the Black Demeter has been identified with a small cavern in the glen of the Neda about an hour's walk to the west of Phigaleia. The place is known as the *στομιον τῆς Παναγίας* or Gully of the Virgin. The cave is situated in the face of a prodigious cliff ..about a hundred feet ..above the bed of the river. (vol.4 405-6.)

Again we might find this rather curious because we have just been reminded by Ptolemy preserved in Photion (Immerwahr 106) that Demeter in her fury at her equine appearance which she saw reflected in Styx' waters made Styx black. We are now told that there at Phigaleia was a cave-cult of Black Demeter. Traditions relating to this cult also seem to be associated with the same episode in Demeter's career. Once again Poseidon is associated with the goddess who refuses his amorous attentions so griefstricken is she over the loss of Persephone. After the rape she puts on black as a sign of her anger and hides herself in a cave. For our purposes we note these further details from Pausanias' description of the cave in 8.42.4:

..They considered the cave as sacred to Demeter, and dedicated a wooden statue there. The statue was like this: she was sitting on a rock, and looked like a woman except for the head; she had a horse's head and mane with serpents and other beasts sprouting out of her head.

This is clearly a corroboration of that tradition represented earlier by Ptolemaeus Hephaestion but with a noticeable absence - Styx. As in Ptolemaeus here too we find Demeter in a horse guise which detail may also associate this cave-cult with the widespread cult of Poseidon Hippios in Arcadia (Jost 287 - 293) ; note especially the cult of Poseidon Hippios at Pheneos (Jost 287). We might interpret as reasonable that Styx is nowhere mentioned in this local myth since this cave-cult at Phigaleia reported by Pausanias (8.42) is rather distant from Styx' falls. Is it possible that we have traces here of parallel cults to a pre - Greek goddess : one at Phigaleia, where now as Demeter she is "the Black One" and another in the region of Styx' falls where she has been made "black" by the pre-eminent Greek goddess, Demeter, but behind both of which formulations stand very

old cults to a Great Mother ? Or, do we have an extension of rituals to Styx/Demeter located originally nearer to Styx but now moved further afield and isolated to Demeter alone ? The brevity of this evidence does not justify further reconstruction. Nonetheless, the combination of all these fragments of a larger picture does lend some support to the conclusion that Styx and Demeter were once subsumed under the same entity; and that pre-Greek oath might have been a ritual centering on sacred rocks such as we find at Pheneos with the Petroma or on a construction similar to Jacob's sacred pillar reported in Genesis 44 ff.

The settled neolithic culture of the pre Indo-European Mediterranean which had millennia to evolve in specific places over long periods of relative calm would have been more likely to develop permanent sites as sacred. This is clearly pointed out by the great antiquity of such sites as Delphi, which, with its sacred stone omphalos, is a clear reminiscence of that earlier time. Thus oathings and truth-tests in pre Indo-European Arcadia required both a locus and an action whereas Indo-European oath involved actions and not particular loci. This would make sense for a culture whose early economy was nomadic.

NOTES Greek and pre-Greek Oath: The Importance of Styx

1) All translations unless otherwise noted are my own.

Examples of Oaths with libation

Homer Iliad, 3.300;Odyssey 14.331= Ody.19.288

The use of the clepshydra in the law courts to limit testimony may be a vestige of more ancient practice. See Demosthenes 45.8; 54.36; 57.21 water and

Dittenberger # 953 - testimony of witnesses implies elsewhere a ritual with water

2) Formulaic oaths from Homer & Hesiod

ἴστω νῦν τάδε Γαῖα καὶ Οὐρανός..καὶ τὸ κατειβόμενον Στυγὸς ὕδωρ H.to Apollo 84 ff= Ody.
5.184ff= Iliad 15.36ff

ἴστω νῦν Ζεὺς πρῶτα θεῶν.. Ody.19.303 = 20.230 = Iliad 3.279 = 19.258 cf. Ody.14.657

3) Examples of oaths by Styx water:

Homer, Iliad 14.271; 15.38; Odyssey 5.185.

Hesiod, Theogony, 384 ff ; 773 ff; Hymn to Hermes 518; Hymn to Demeter 259;

Hymn to Apollo 84.

Herodotus 6.74 Styx water

4) Demosthenes Speeches: 45.8;54.36; 57.21: "Take up the water and read the depositions"

Dittenberger # 953: 2nd c. BC: Agreement bet.Calymnae and Coos; Stela now in London : "Let the testimony be read without water."

5) Hesiod, Theogony 383 ff : Thus deathless Styx the daughter of Okeanos planned on that day when the Olympian Lightener called together the immortal gods on great Olympus and he said that whosoever would fight with him against the Titans he would not deprive them of any of their honors, but each would have the honor they held before among the immortals...So then First deathless Styx came to Olympos with her children at the advice of her father. And Zeus honored her and gave her great gifts . For her he made her to be the great oath of the Gods and her children to be dwellers with him for all time.

6) Homer, Odyssey. 5.185 ff; Il.14.271; 15.38.

7) Hesiod, *Theogony* 783 ff: But whenever strife and contention should arise among the immortal gods, then Zeus sends Iris to bring in a golden ewer the great oath from far away; the many-named cold water which flows down from a high crag. ..Whoever of the gods ..should swear falsely after pouring a libation remains breathless until a year has been completed.

8) Pausanias the preserves in his travel commentary a surprising amount of information both about the monuments which he saw but also about the various local legends. Although at first he appears to be much later than the period which interests us, his information is still remarkably accurate. It is a well-known fact that Arcadian religious traditions have been able to preserve an astonishing longevity. The mountainous terrain discouraged invasion and therefore ancient traditions remained remarkably intact over the centuries.

9) Bogdan Rutkowski *The Cult Places of the Aegean*. New Haven: Yale Press 1986. p.10; see esp.p.70 n 23; 226-227; all include offerings made or affixed to stalagmites or stalactites.Finds date from MM I - LM III.

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