

PRECLASSIC MAYA REPRESENTATIONS OF XIPE TOTEC AT KAMINALJUYÚ

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During a visit to the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología and La Aurora Park Zoo in Guatemala City in 2008 and 2009, I had the opportunity to observe two related anthropomorphic monuments from Kaminaljuyú – Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61 and Monument 11. Two features immediately stood out in my observations of these sculptures. Both of these sculptures depicted figures holding human femurs and at least one (Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61) was rendered wearing a mask. These features have not been reported elsewhere either in the corpus of monumental art at Kaminaljuyú (see Parsons 1986) or the adjoining Pacific Coast region of Guatemala. However, such decorations do seem to correspond to Classic and Postclassic period Central Mexican depictions of the flayed god, Xipe Totec. The purpose of this brief report, then, is to draw attention to these two Late Formative period, Miraflores phase (300 BC – AD 250) anthropomorphic sculptures from Kaminaljuyú as possible Preclassic Maya representations of Xipe Totec. I begin by describing the sculptures from Kaminaljuyú.

The Anthropomorphic Sculptures from Kaminaljuyú

Kaminaljuyú Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61 is currently located at the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología in Guatemala City (MNAE Catalog # 3090) and was originally reported by Lee Parsons as Kaminaljuyú Monument 15 (1986:34-35). This sculpture is fairly large, measuring approximately 90 cm in height, and 80 cm in width. Although the provenience of this sculpture is unclear, its stylistic mate (Kaminaljuyú Monument 11) was found on the western edge of Kaminaljuyú, near the entrance of the Finca La Majada (Parsons 1986:35). This location may also be indicative of the original context of Kaminaljuyú Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61. Regardless of their exact provenience, both of these sculptures have been given a Late Formative period (300 BC – AD 250) timeframe based on their correspondence to the physiognomic features commonly found on the pot-bellied sculptures of southeastern Mesoamerica, i.e., a squat rotund body with schematic arms and legs wrapped around its protruding belly (Guernsey 2010:227; Parsons 1986:123, Table 4) (Figure 1).

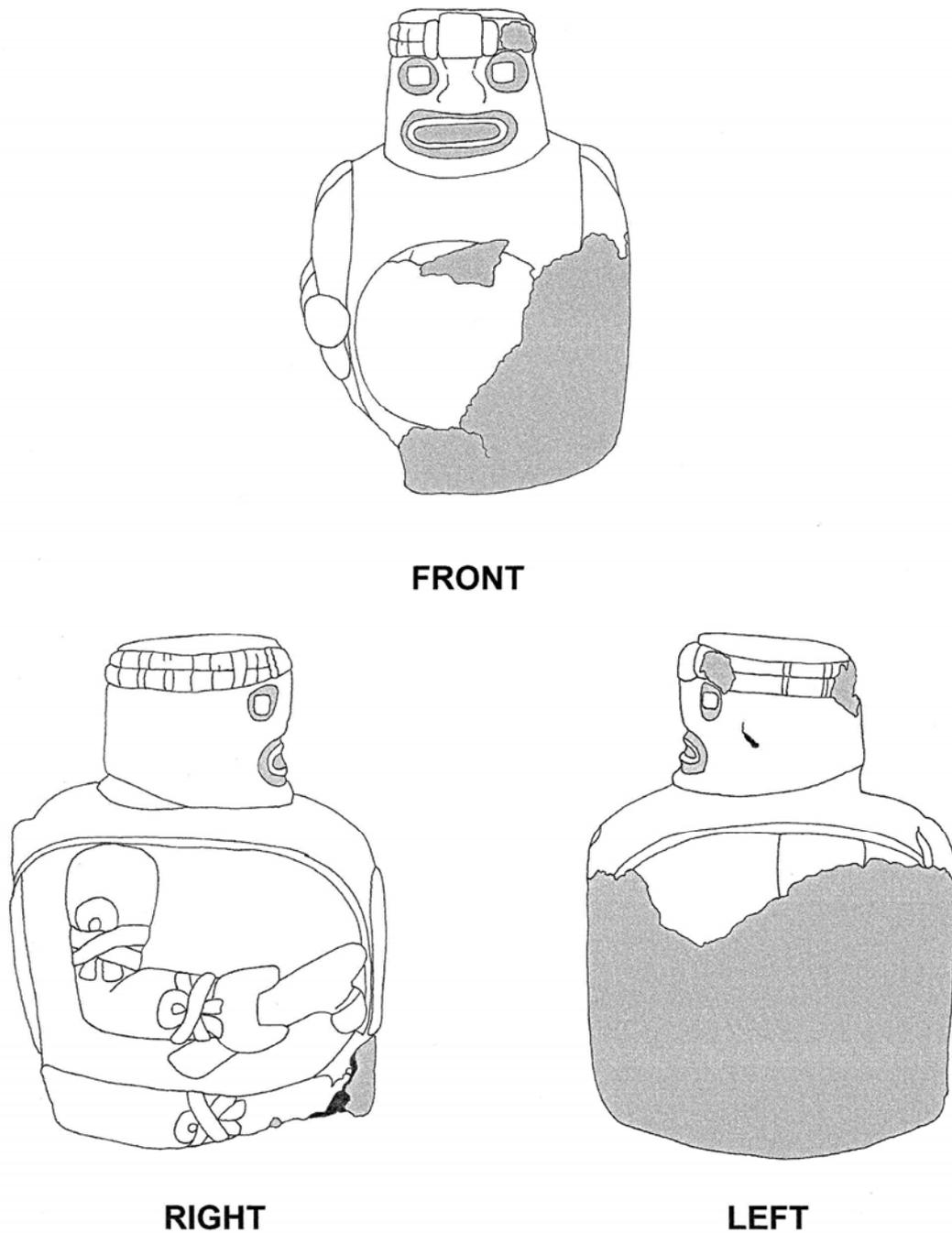


Figure 1. Kaminaljuyú Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61 (Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City). Drawings are not to scale. Drawings by the author. Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61 also displays a number of unique features. These features include a masked head with a head band encircling the mask at the top of the head, square peg-like eyes and an open ovoid mouth visible through circular “openings” in the mask, and a large sleeveless poncho-like vestment draped over the figure’s squat body. The poncho is decorated with a plain shield-like emblem on the front of the figure and a shield with a knotted design on the back of the figure. In addition, the right arm and leg of the figure are decorated with knotted bands. Finally, the figure is depicted holding a human femur in its right hand.

There are several signs of damage on this sculpture as well. For instance, the left portions of the body are missing thereby obscuring the front shield motif and the left arm. In addition, there are some areas of exfoliated material on the figure's headband and shield decoration. Whether or not this kind of damage is a sign of intentional mutilation in the past is unclear at the moment.

Kaminaljuyú Monument 11 is currently located at La Aurora Park Zoo in Guatemala City (Figure 2). It measures approximately 70 cm in height and width. Even though this sculpture appears to have significant damage (e.g., its head, its left hand, part of the figure's base and its feet are missing); enough of Kaminaljuyú Monument 11 remains to demonstrate that its iconographic features were consistent with Kaminaljuyú Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61. For instance, the figure is depicted with a poncho-like vestment draped over its squat body and its left and right arms appear to have short sleeves or arm bands. The poncho is rendered with a plain shield-like emblem on the front of the figure; while a shield with a knotted design is situated on the back of the figure. Finally, the figure is shown holding a human femur in its right hand.

Many of the features of these monuments are unique in the Late Formative period monumental art of Kaminaljuyú and the neighboring Pacific Coast region of Guatemala. Of particular interest are each the figures' poncho-like vestments, their use of human femurs, and the facial mask found on Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61. These may be related to later representations of the flayed god in the Early Classic period art of Teotihuacán and Monte Albán. Certainly, the inhabitants of the Pacific Coast and piedmont of Guatemala were cosmopolitan in their worldviews and social practices (Parsons 1986). The Maya inhabitants of both Kaminaljuyú and lesser sites throughout Escuintla appear to have used Teotihuacán-inspired tripod vessels and incensarios after the Miraflores phase (Carpio Rezzio 1999; Hellmuth 1975a). There is also evidence for the use of iconography from Monte Albán (i.e., urns depicting Cocijo) and Classic Veracruz (i.e., ceramic vessels decorated with individuals wearing ballgame attire and with decapitation scenes) (Hellmuth 1975b, 1978). Given this general cultural pattern at the start of the Classic period, it is worth comparing the monuments of Kaminaljuyú with depictions of the flayed god from other parts of Mesoamerica in order to determine if the symbolism of Xipe Totec was also known in Pacific Guatemala.

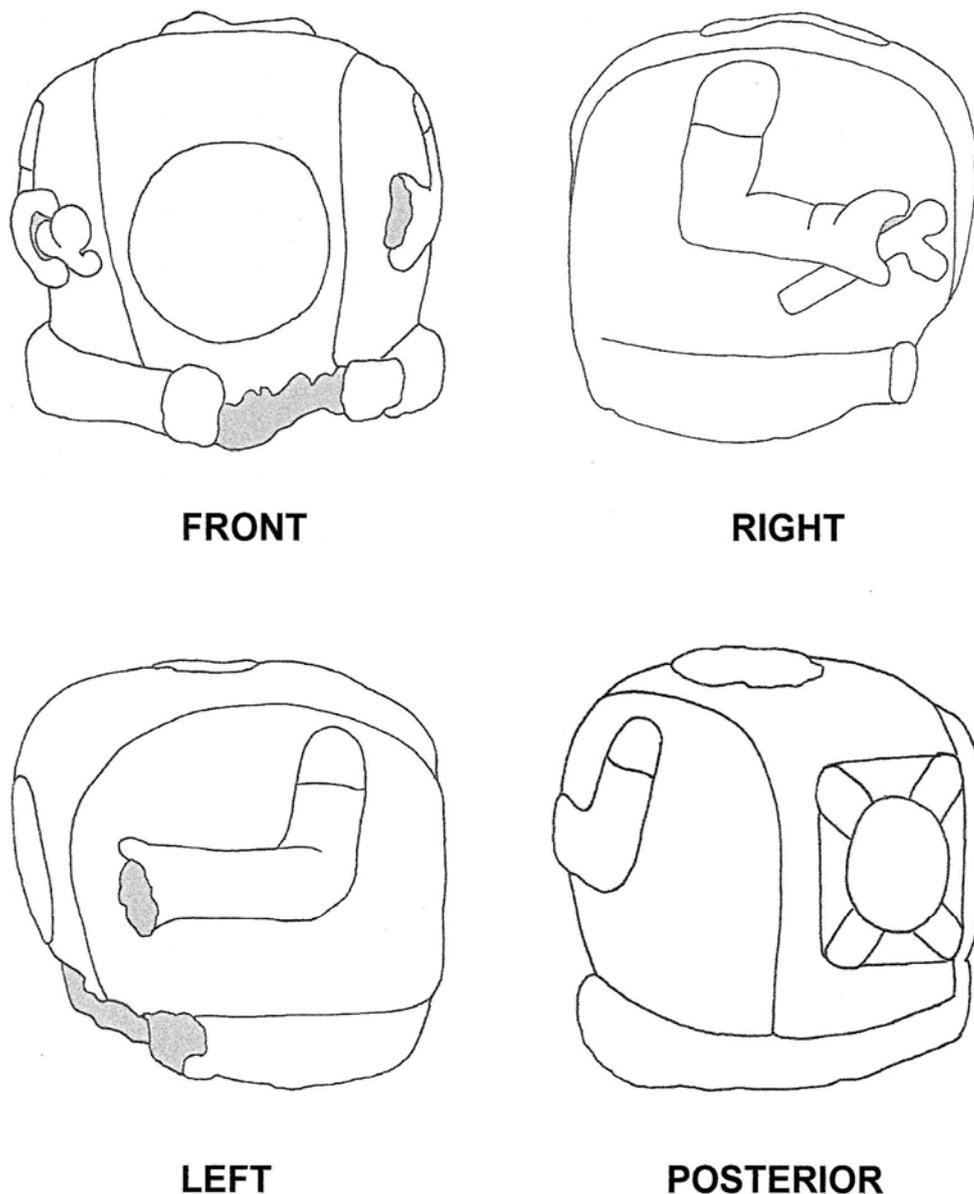


Figure 2. Kaminaljuyú Monument 11 (La Aurora Park Zoo, Guatemala City). Drawings are not to scale. Drawings by the author.

Comparisons with Representations of Xipe Totec in Central Mexico

Although of unknown origin, the cult of Xipe Totec, “Our Lord the Flayed One,” had achieved a large following in the Central Highlands, the Gulf Coast lowlands, the Yucatan Peninsula, and even western El Salvador by the Late Postclassic period (AD 1400-1500) (Boggs 1944, 1976; Mencos 2010; Saville 1929; Taube 1992). Within this cult, Xipe Totec or his impersonators were frequently depicted as humans wearing the flayed skin of another person. Currently, both archaeological and iconographic evidence shows that this imagery had its beginnings during the Late Formative-Early Classic period transition (AD 0-250) among the cultures of the Central Highlands of Mexico (Caso 1966; Caso and Bernal 1952; von Winning 1976). Over the ensuing millennia, much of the imagery of Xipe Totec became associated with agricultural renewal, warfare and the practice of sacrificing captives.

At least two representations of Xipe Totec are known from the Early Classic Period onwards and each has its own diagnostic attributes. The first form of Xipe Totec consists of a young man whose face is decorated with a line curving down from the brow and across the cheek, possibly indicating that he is wearing a flayed skin mask. Examples have been found in Classic period Zapotec ceramic urns (Caso and Bernal 1952:249-257), Postclassic period Mixtec codices of the Borgia group as well as the Codex Nuttall (Wohrer 1989:187-188) as well as the painted books of the Postclassic Maya, especially in the Dresden and Madrid codices (Taube 1992:106, Fig. 53). The second and more well-known version of Xipe Totec typically references the use of flayed human skins in a much more vivid manner (Figure 3). Such representations often emphasize the shut eyes of the dead victim, sometimes elaborated in abstract form as a "human face" shield in Maya glyphs, and/or the pulled back lips and empty eye sockets of the flayed face mask (Taube 1992:107-110; von Winning 1976:152).

In relation to the Late Formative Period sculptures from Kaminaljuyú, the second set of Xipe Totec attributes appear to correspond most closely to the features of these Preclassic Maya monuments. For instance, like Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61, the ceramic Xipe urn from Monte Albán (Figure 3a) and the ceramic sculpture and figurines from Teotihuacán (Figures 3b and 3c) feature masked faces with physical features that point to the use of flayed skin masks. Central among these markers are the headbands used to hold the mask on the face of the impersonator (see Figure 3c), and masks with their mouths pulled back to allow the mouth of the Xipe impersonator to show through as well as hollowed out eyes which permit the impersonator to see through the mask. Interestingly in both the larger ceramic sculpture from Teotihuacán (Figure 3b) and the Zapotec ceramic urn (Figure 3a), reference is also made to the knots which were used to hold the flayed skin in place on the arms and legs of the Xipe impersonator. The placement of knots on the arms of Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61 recalls the positioning of the Central Mexican examples precisely.

Although this Classic period imagery was later augmented by the introduction of new iconographic features during the Postclassic period, e.g., the use of knots on the back of the impersonator, the presence of severed hands and feet (Figure 3d), the absence of genitalia (Figures 3e and 3f), the use of the yopitzontli or conical-shaped cap, and the appearance of a large incision near the heart of the victim (Figures 3e and 3f) (Dyckerhoff 1993:140-142; Wohrer 1989:187-188), a number of intriguing correspondences with the Kaminaljuyú sculptures suggest the existence of a great deal of iconographic continuity among the representations of Xipe Totec. Principal among these are the use of roundels (Figure 3e) and shield motifs (Figure 3b) that were adopted as part of the ritual paraphernalia of these images.

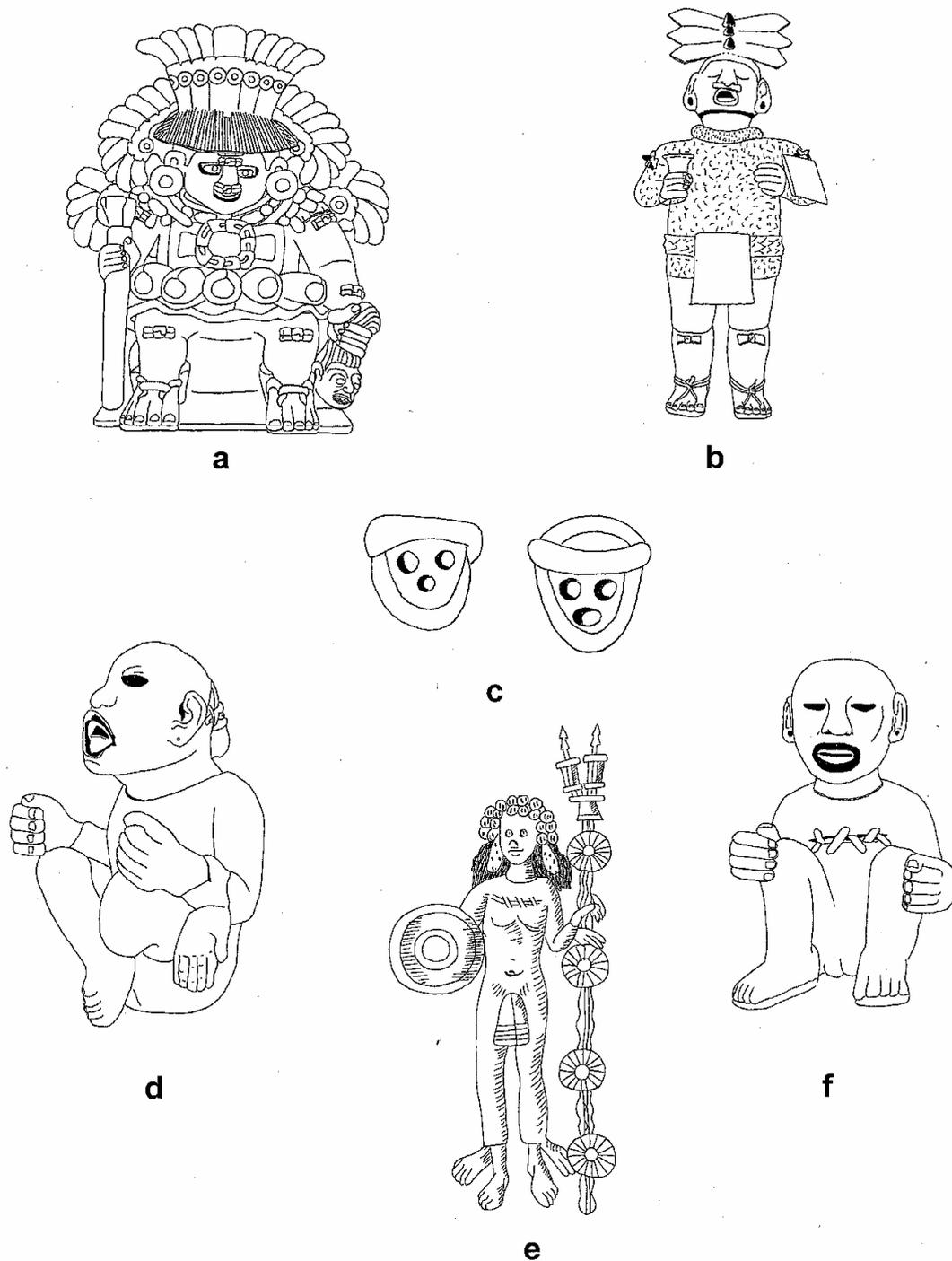


Figure 3. Classic and Postclassic period Representations of Xipe Totec: (a) urn depicting Xipe Totec from Monte Albán (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City), (b) ceramic figure depicting a Xipe Totec impersonator from Xalalpan, Teotihuacán (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City), (c) masked ceramic figurines from Teotihuacán (after Séjourné 1959: Fig. 75), (d) an Aztec sculpture of a young man wearing a flayed human skin in homage to Xipe Totec (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City), (e) an Aztec Xipe Totec impersonator (after Sahagún 1981, Book 2: Fig. 2), and (f) an Aztec sculpture of a young man wearing a flayed human skin in homage to Xipe Totec (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City). Drawings by the author.

Even though it is difficult to suggest a meaningful connection between these disparate examples, the use of such circular devices hint at a shared set of symbols used in cult activities associated with Xipe Totec. In particular, it appears that shield motifs were used to symbolize the armor of Aztec rulers during the Late Postclassic period and may therefore have been used to reference warfare and the taking of captives (Dyckerhoff

1993:140). More evidence of this warfare-aspect of the Xipe Totec cult comes from Kaminaljuyú and Oaxaca. Although unique to the Preclassic Maya representations of Xipe Totec at Kaminaljuyú, the use of the human femur as an element in the ritual paraphernalia of these sculptures may also be seen as a symbolic cognate of the trophy head held by the Xipe impersonator in the Zapotec urn depicted in Figure 3a as well as the skull held by a Late Classic period (AD 600-800) Classic Veracruz ceramic sculpture of a Xipe impersonator at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California (Catalog No. 44) (Labbé 1982:56) in the sense that these representations refer to the killing of human beings, possibly in association with rituals of human sacrifice linked to warfare (see also Taube 1988; Vié-Wohrer 2008).

Conclusions

The identification of the two anthropomorphic monuments from Kaminaljuyú – Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61 and Monument 11 – as representations of Xipe Totec rests primarily with iconographic data. Both of these sculptures depicted figures holding human femurs and at least one (Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61) was rendered wearing a mask which bore the physiognomic markers of flayed skin masks, i.e., the mouth pulled back to show the impersonator's mouth and the hollowed out eyes. Other iconographic features were noted in the ritual paraphernalia of these sculptures, such as rounded shields and arm knots, and were also found to be congruent with both Classic and Postclassic period representations of Xipe Totec. Although the meaning of some of these traits particularly the rounded shields remains unclear, it seems very likely that the relationship between the cult of Xipe Totec, warfare, and human sacrifice can now be pushed back from the Late Classic period in southeastern Mesoamerica (Mencos 2010:1263) to the Late Formative period, Miraflores phase (300 BC – AD 250) among the Preclassic Maya. While it is premature to speculate on the possible Maya origins of flayed god imagery on such limited evidence, it is hoped that ongoing investigations of the Preclassic Maya societies of the Guatemalan highlands and Pacific Coast will shed more light on the cross-cultural relationships which may have led to the early and widespread adoption of the Xipe Totec cult.

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