



EUNUCHS

EUNUCHS, castrated males who were in charge of the concubines of royal harems, served in the daily life of the court, and sometimes carried out administrative functions.

The Achaemenid period.

ii. *The Sasanian period.*

iii. *The Early Islamic period.*

iv. *The Safavid period.*

v. *The Qajar period.*

i. THE ACHAEMENID PERIOD

According to Herodotus (8.105), the Persians, like other Oriental peoples, valued eunuchs highly for their trustworthiness. Ctesias and Xenophon date the appearance of eunuchs in Persia to the time of Cyrus the Great. It is possible that the Persians adopted the practice of castration from the Babylonians or Assyrians (Cook, p. 136; cf. also Meier, pp. 485-86). According to Xenophon, Cyrus the Great included eunuchs among his guards (Xenophon,



Cyropædia 7.5.60-64). The most influential eunuch under Cyrus was Petisakas, who was sent to bring the former Median ruler Astyages to the Persian king (König, pp. 3f., par. 5). After the death of Petisakas his place at court was taken by Bagapates, who was charged with taking Cyrus's body back to Persia (König, p. 5, par. 9). Later he guarded the tomb of Darius I for seven years (König, p. 9, par. 19). Aspadates and Izabates were two other influential eunuchs at the court of Cambyses (König, p. 5, par. 9). Herodotus (3.77 f.) reports that eunuchs carried the king's messages. The Book of Esther (1:10) names seven eunuchs who personally served Xerxes. Herodotus tells how a certain Hermotimus of Pedasa in Caria was captured by his enemies and sold to Panionius, a slave-dealer who bought boys of great beauty, castrated them, and sold them in Sardis or Ephesus. Later Hermotimus was sent from Sardis to the court of the Persian king, along with other gifts. Gradually, he became the most esteemed of Xerxes's eunuchs and was put in charge of the royal children (Herodotus, 8.103-5). After the capture of Darius III's harem by the soldiers of Alexander the Great, one of the eunuchs escaped from the prison camp to inform the king about the death of his wife (Plutarch, *Alexander* 30).

As part of their tribute, the Babylonians annually sent five hundred boys to the court of the Persian king to be made eunuchs (Herodotus 3.92). The five boys sent every third year by the Ethiopians and the hundred boys sent every five years by the Colchians and their neighbors probably were also made eunuchs (Herodotus 3.97). In 494 B.C.E., when a revolt of Ionian cities had been crushed, the Persians castrated the best-looking boys (Herodotus 6.9, 32).

Beginning with Artaxerxes I, the eunuchs gained increasing influence over the king and his court. When Artaxerxes's three sons contested the throne, eunuchs plotted on their behalf. Ctesias mentions the Paphlagonian eunuch Artoxares who helped Darius II rise to the throne and who later perished due to the intrigues of the queen Parysatis (König, pp. 16, 19f., 21; pars. 39, 40, 49, 53). Apparently, he was the Artahshar referred to in Babylonian documents as chief of the treasury during the reign of Darius II (Dandamayev, pp. 36-37; Stolper, pp. 91f., 103). When in 343 B.C.E. Artaxerxes III marched on Egypt, one of the Persian commanders was Bagōas (q.v.), a powerful eunuch who soon became a king-maker. He had Artaxerxes murdered and gave the throne to Arses, the youngest of the king's sons. Two years later Arses also fell victim to a conspiracy by Bagōas who put Darius III on the throne. When Bagōas tried to murder the new king, he was compelled to drink the cup of poison himself (Diodorus Siculus 17.6.1-2 and 7; Dandamayev, pp. 64-65). Darius III took a



crowd of eunuchs and 360 concubines on his campaign against Alexander the Great (Curtius Rufus 3.3.23-25; see also Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 12, who tells of a eunuch who accompanied Artaxerxes II in a campaign).

Though all the eunuchs known to us except Hermotimus had Iranian names, we cannot be sure of their ethnic background since their names could have been changed. Schmidt believes that the beardless Persians and Medes depicted on the Persepolis stairway reliefs were eunuchs (p. 225). A number of Apadāna (q.v.) and Treasury reliefs in Persepolis depict the king sitting with a man behind him in a bashlyk head-dress and holding a large towel. Since this attendant is beardless, he was probably a eunuch—the royal cupbearer who represented the office of lord chamberlain (Schmidt, pp. 133, 165, 169; Olmstead, pp. 217-18). The king's cupbearer Nehemiah, who in 445 B.C.E. became governor of Judah, may have been a eunuch (Olmstead, p. 314; Cook, p. 136; Heltzer, p. 127, rejects this view).

Several Egyptian inscriptions mention Atiyawahy, son of Artames, who was a “*saris* of Persia” and governor of the city of Coptos during the reigns of Darius I, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes I (Posener, pp. 118-24, nos. 24-30). Since in the Old Testament (Genesis 37:36, 39:1, etc.) *saris* means “eunuch,” Olmstead (p. 90) supposes that this Persian was a eunuch. Finally, there were the eunuch priests of the mother-goddess Artemis at Ephesus in Asia Minor, whose priests bore the Iranian title *Megabyzi*, “at the service of god” (Strabo 14.1.23).

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(Muhammad Dandamayev)

ii. THE SASANIAN PERIOD

In the Sasanian empire (224-651), the employment of eunuchs was quite common and was repeatedly mentioned in contemporary sources. The term *šābistān*—“superintendent of the royal bed-chamber” or “overseer of the royal quarters”—is found in materials dating as far back as the mid-3rd century C.E.: in a Middle Persian ostrakon from Dura-Europos (Harmatta-Pékáry, pp. 467-75), in the inscription of Abnūn from Barm-e Delak (Gignoux, pp. 9-17), in the trilingual inscription of Šābuhr I on the Ka’ba-ye Zardošt (ŠKZ, Mid. Pers. I. 34; Parth. 28-29; Gk. 67; Back, pp. 365-67), and on the seal of queen *Dēnag (Borisov and Lukonin, p. 48). That this term means “eunuch” is confirmed by the Greek version of the trilingual ŠKZ inscription (cf. Mid. Pers., I. 34; *s’s’n ZY š’pstn ZY s’s’nykn=Gk., 1.67, sasan eunouchou sasangan*).

In the 3rd century, under the first Sasanians, eunuchs occupied a modest place in the court hierarchy. In the list of courtiers of Šābuhr I, eunuchs are mentioned towards the end of the list (57th and 64th out of 67), with such officials as the treasurer (*ganzwar*), scribe (*dibīr*; see DABĪR), head of the market (*wāzārbed*), and judge (*dādwar*). In the Dura-Europos ostrakon, the *šābistān* is mentioned after the finance inspector (*ḥmlkl, hamargar*) and the head of the hunt (*nḥcyrpt, naxčīrbed*) and closes the list of the highest officials of the city administration. In the inscription of the eunuch Abnūn, he calls himself *PWN š’pstn ’dnyk*—“maître d’hôtel dans le gynécée” (Gignoux, p. 12). There are indications that eunuchs were also appointed to other important positions in the royal household. P’awstos Buzand reports (tr. Emine, 5.7, p. 285; in *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum* V/2, Paris, 1870) that under the Armenian Arsacids, chief eunuchs were responsible for the safekeeping of the royal treasury.



By the late Sasanian era (5th and 6th centuries), eunuchs performed other official functions. Thus, Māhān's seal (Hermitage, gemma no. 46) identifies him as personal eunuch (*P-tn š'pstn*), counselor at the royal court (*BB' 'ndlčpty*), and leader of the farmers' estate (*w'slwš'n srd'l*) in a district of Babylonia (Khurshudyan, p. 95; Gignoux, p. 21). In the Pahlavi *Āyādgār ī Wuzurgmihr*, Wuzurgmihr Buxtagān, the supervisor (*winārbed*) of the royal bed-chamber of Kōsrow I, is also the palace superintendent (*dlykpt'*, *darīgbed*). He is the prototype of the Bozorgmehr (q.v.) whom Ferdowsī characterized as an outstanding scholar, vizier, and court counselor to Kōsrow Anušīrvan (q.v.).

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(A. Kolesnikov)



iii. THE EARLY ISLAMIC PERIOD

Eunuchs were known and employed in the caliphate from Umayyad times onwards (cf. the anecdote about Mu‘āwīa and a eunuch harem attendant in Mas‘ūdī, *Morūj*, VIII, pp. 148-49 = ed. Pellat, par. 3289, and that about Solaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malek’s castration of a man as punishment, in Ṭabarī, III, p. 581). Jāḥeẓ (I, p. 124) attributes the Muslims’ use of eunuchs to the example of Rūm, i.e., the Byzantines .

By the time of the ‘Abbasids, it was the norm for eunuchs to be employed as palace servants and harem attendants. In particular, Amīn (193-8/809-13) purchased many more eunuchs than his predecessors, made them his personal servants and confidants and lavished on them money from the public treasury (Ṭabarī, III, pp. 950-51). By the early 4th/10th century, the palace eunuchs of Moktafī and Moqtader were numbered by Helāl Ṣābe’ at 10,000 and 11,000 respectively, comprising negroes and white Ṣaqāleba (*Rosūm dār al-keḷāfa*, p. 8; tr. Salem, p. 14).

It is probable that the provincial dynasties which arose in the Persian lands of the caliphate imitated caliphal practice here, as in so much else. Some of the eunuchs employed at these local courts were blacks, such as the Ṣokr or Ṣakar who was the intimate of the Buyid amir ‘Azod al-Dawla (q.v.; cf. Bürgel, pp. 10, 14), imported from Africa, but the white ones were essentially Ṣaqābela (i.e., Slavs and other fair-skinned peoples from the South Russian and Western Siberian steppes), Turks and Indians. Jāḥeẓ, again, mentions eunuchs brought from Khorasan and Sind (of whom the latter ones known to him had been castrated by a certain Mūsā b. Ka‘b) and also Ṣaqḷabī ones, but he states that all these were few in number compared with the Ḥabašīs and Sūdānīs (Jāḥeẓ I, pp. 113, 118). In the absence of specific information, it seems likely that the “Khorasanis” were actually Turks from the Central Asian steppes, since these were such a great source of slaves for the eastern part of the caliphate (for the slave traffic from Inner Asia and Eastern Europe into the Persian lands, see BARDA AND BARDADĀRĪ iii). Where the actual castration (q.v.) took place is not clear, but it would be a reasonable assumption that this was done in the slave marts of the towns of Transoxania to which such slaves were brought. Such eunuchs were not only employed for domestic duty, but also, given the famed fighting qualities of the Turks (clearly not necessarily affected by emasculation), for military duties, as was frequently the case in the ‘Abbasid caliphate (cf., e.g., Mu‘nes Kādem or Moẓaffar, Moqtader’s leading general and the Q.n.b.j. Afšīnī who was governor of Fars at the same time). One of the



contenders for power in Khorasan during the period of decline there of the Samanid amirate, Fā'eḳ Kāṣṣa, was a eunuch general of the Samanid army of Turkish origin. The Ghaznavids used eunuchs as harem attendants and court servants, and the *agāčī-ye kāṣṣa* who oversaw the running of the royal household and court, and who certainly had eunuchs under his control, was presumably himself a eunuch (anticipating here the specialized usage of *āḡā* = “eunuch” in later Persian and Ottoman Turkish usage; see Bosworth, *Ghaznavids*, pp. 138-39). We know likewise of slave commanders of the Great Seljuqs who were eunuchs, such as the Turk Sāvtigin, the trusted commander of Alp Arslān (q.v.), who is said to have emasculated himself voluntarily (Ṣadr-al-Dīn Ḥosaynī, ed. Eqbāl, pp. 30-31; ed. Nūr-al-Dīn, p. 79). Unfortunately, Sāvtigin's place of origin is written in this source in an impossibly corrupt fashion; and Ṣaraf-al-Dīn Gerd-Bāzū (q.v.), who was much involved in the internecine warfare of Saljuq princes and their atabegs in the mid-6th/12th century (ibid., ed. Eqbāl, pp. 143-8, ed. Nūr-al-Dīn, pp. 257-62). We also know that black slaves continued to be imported into the Persian lands during Saljuq times. Among the presents which the Salghurid atabeg of Fārs, Zangī, sent to the sultan Arslan b. Ṭoḡrīl and his atabeg Eldigüz in ca. 564/1169 were castrated African slaves (*al-ḡelmān al-ḥobuṣ men al-keṣyān*): since other presents sent with these included Arabian horses from Qaṭīf, it would appear that these slaves were brought from East Africa to the Persian Gulf ports (ibid., ed. Eqbāl, p. 154; ed. Nūr-al-Dīn, p. 269).

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(C. Edmund Bosworth)



iv. THE SAFAVID PERIOD

K̄vāja sarāyān in the Safavid age were granted the title of *moqarrab al-kāqān*, for they were privileged members at court who enjoyed special proximity to the shah and to his family (*Taḍkerat al-molūk*, pp. 55-57; *Dastūr al-molūk*, pp. 301-7. The *Dastūr al-molūk* preserves a more detailed account of the various roles and functions of eunuchs.) Initially, only black eunuchs had been employed for court service. Chardin (V, p. 42) comments that as late as in the age of Shah Solaymān (r. 1077-1105/1666-94) only the shah could own black eunuchs. By this time, however, white eunuchs had been introduced at the Safavid court. The *Taḍkerat al-molūk* (p. 56) notes that ‘Abbās I (q.v.; r. 996-1038/1587-1629) incorporated one hundred castrated Georgian *ḡolāms* (slaves, pages) in Isfahan. He created two new posts of *yūzbāšī* (centurion)—one to act as preceptor to black eunuchs and the other to white *ḡolāms*. This structural division was part of his policy of consolidating power in the hands of the Safavid dynasty and of abating the power of the Qezelbāš. The evolution of the posts held by eunuchs, as portrayed in the two extant administrative manuals from the first half of the 17th century, reflects the growing prominence of white eunuchs at court. The official chronicles from the reigns of Shah Ṣafī, ‘Abbās II, Solaymān, and Solṭān Ḥosayn attest as well to the ascendancy of eunuchs in collaboration with female members of the harem in Safavid politics. Perhaps, as in the Ottoman system, the chief black eunuch in the post-1574 era acted as the personal tool of the *wāleda-ye solṭān* (sultan’s mother) and the chief white eunuch as that of the sultan (Inalcik, p. 86; more is known about the Ottoman palace system in which eunuchs seem to have enjoyed similar functions as in the Safavid court; see bibliography).

The *moqarrabs* comprise the third category (*bāb*) of functionaries enumerated in both administrative manuals. They appear after the men of religion (*ahl-e šarī‘a*) and the men of the sword (*amīrs*). The latter are referred to as the Pillars of Government (*arkān-e dawlat*). The *moqarrabs* were singled out for their worthiness to enjoy physical proximity to the shah. In the *Dastūr al-molūk* three sub-groups (*maqāla*) appear under the rubric of *moqarrab al-kāqān*. (The *Taḍkerat al-molūk* enumerates only two sub-groups, for it does not include the *yūzbāšīs* as a separate division, p. 56.) Two of the three sub-groups of *moqarrabs* delineated by the *Dastūr al-molūk* consist of eunuchs: white and black eunuchs (*k̄vāja sarāyān-e safīd o sīāh*) and a separate group of white eunuchs (*k̄vāja sarāyān-e safīd*). The former sub-group had access to five crucial posts of the *andarūn* (inner quarters of the household), with duties



exclusively addressing the most private affairs of the shahs. Of these five posts, the two most prominent were that of the Chief Eunuch (*rīš-safīd*) of the Harem and the Keeper of the Royal Treasury (*ṣāḥeb[-e] jam'-e kazāna-ye amīr*). These two seasoned eunuchs were the guardians of the shah's household and of his treasury.

The post of *rīš safīd* of the harem was at first monopolized by black eunuchs. Once 'Abbās I introduced white eunuchs, the post could be held either by a black or a white trustworthy eunuch (*Dastūr al-molūk*, p. 302; *Taḍkerat al-molūk*, p. 56). Chardin (VI, p. 22) speaks of the prominence of the *rīš safīd* Āqā Šahpūr under Shah Solaymān: "His position awarded him such respect that everyone feared him in the city (Isfahan). A recommendation from him was worth as much as a decree from the Grand *Vazir*." In fact, Chardin reveals that one of his main sources on court affairs was a eunuch, a confidant of Shah Solaymān's aunt. The *Dastūr al-molūk* notes that this post was divided into two positions. One *rīš safīd* went off on campaigns (*rīš safīd-e jelow*), and the *rīš safīd* of the harem in Isfahan inherited all the prerogatives of the shah in his absence (*Dastūr al-molūk*, p. 302).

The post of Keeper of the Royal Treasury was reserved for the most trusted black eunuch. This post was to have been equal in rank to that of the *rīš safīd* of the harem. Early on, the Safavids made use of only black eunuchs in the *andarūn*. From the onset of Safavid rule they served as the most private instruments the dynasty used to exercise personal power.

In addition to being guardians of the shah's harem and of his treasury, senior eunuchs were in charge of the shah's arsenal (*jobbadār bāšī*), his wardrobe and private accessories (*mehtar-e rekābkāna*), and his pages (*lala-ye ḡolāmān*). The posts of Master of the Wardrobe and of Tutor of the *ḡolāms* could be held by either a white or a black eunuch. The eventual monopoly under Shah Solaymān and Sultan Ḥosayn of the white eunuchs over the post of *jobbadār bāšī*, previously the domain of the Qezelbāš, attests to the waning of the Qezelbāš and to the role the eunuchs played in this waning (*Dastūr al-molūk*, p. 303).

The *lala* of the *ḡolāms* trained pages until they attained puberty. According to the manuals, once these pages became bearded they would enter the service (*yūzda*) of the *qūllar āqāsī* (senior officer of the *ḡolāms*). The *Dastūr al-molūk* speaks of two *lalas* in the age of Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn (r. 1105-34/1694-1721): one tutored the *ḡolāmān-e kāṣṣa* and the other the *ḡolāmān-e anbārī*. The *kāṣṣa*



ḡolāms may have been personal pages and soldiers actively employed by the shah. The *ḡolāmān-e anbārī*, as suggested by their names, may have been a reserve of trained *ḡolāms* not yet employed in court service (*Dastūr al-molūk*, p. 306).

Finally, a second sub-group of *moqarrabs* introduced by the *Dastūr al-molūk* are the *yūzbāšīs*: one in command of the white *ḡolāms* and the other in command of the black eunuchs. Once again these were posts introduced by ‘Abbās I to allow for the expansion of the power of the eunuchs and, by extension, of the Safavid household. Chardin estimates that around three thousand eunuchs resided at court. He claims that very few were Africans; “black” referred to eunuchs who came from India, mostly from Malabar and the Gulf of Bengal. Each female member of the harem had at least two eunuchs in her service. Grandees, too, would employ between six and eight eunuchs in their homes. These eunuchs would play a similar role to that of their courtly counterparts. They would act as tutors of elite children rather than palace pages. They would teach them reading and writing, a rudimentary knowledge of religious precepts, and elementary sciences. Eunuchs between the ages of eight and sixteen would cost 1000-2000 French francs (Chardin, VI, pp. 24, 40-42.).

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v. THE QAJAR PERIOD

The establishment of the Qajars as the ruling dynasty in Iran was due to a eunuch, Āgā Moḥammad Khan Qājār (q.v.; r. 1203-12/1789-97), who, as a child, had been castrated by 'Adel Shah, the nephew of Nāder Shah, during the internecine conflicts over power at the end of the 18th century. In spite of the Islamic laws which require the physical integrity of the ruler, Āgā Moḥammad Khan was officially crowned shah in 1796.

Another eunuch who rose to a position of dominance during the Qajar epoch was Manūčehr Gorjī (q.v.) Mo'tamad al-Dawla, an Armenian from Tiflis captured and castrated by the Qajars in 1804. He later was to become very powerful as governor of Isfahan, Kermānšāh, Lorestān, and Ḳūzestān in the 1840s.

Naturally, the most common role of eunuchs was as guardians of the harems, and their most coveted position was that of *ḳvāja bāšī* (or *āgā bāšī*), i.e., chief of the royal harem, as it was one of the most important channels of communication between the *andarūn*, the shah's private apartments, and the outside world. Everyone who had to enter the harem, from the women's relatives to the suppliers of goods, from the physicians to the tailors, needed the *ḳvāja bāšī*'s permission. Therefore, it is easy to imagine the level of



influence that the *kvājas* could reach in the crowded harems of Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shah (q.v.; r. 1211-50/1797-1834) and of Nāṣer-al-Dīn (q.v.; 1264-1313/1848-96). During Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah’s reign every first rank lady had three or four eunuchs at her service, second rank ladies had two or three eunuchs, while the shah had seven eunuchs at his disposal, both white and black (Mo‘ayyer-al-Mamālek, p. 18).

The origins of these eunuchs can be traced to two main periods. At the beginning of the Qajar era many eunuchs who populated the royal harems and the rich households were of Georgian origin, taken as prisoners during the wars against Russia. After the Treaty of Torkmānčāy (1828), it became more and more common to have black eunuchs from East Africa, especially Abyssinia, which constituted the largest slave market for Iran, at least until the end of the 19th century. The preponderance of black eunuchs over white in Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah’s harem is evident through the numerous photographs of the members of the shah’s seraglio in which eunuchs are often present. The photographs of the royal collection also show the eunuch’s uniform, which was a high fur-skin hat and a long, loose robe worn over the trousers.

The *kvāja bāšī* held the keys to the royal quarters and the harem doors (Tāj-al-Salṭana, p. 14). He controlled the other eunuchs of the royal harem, a total of 38 in 1887 (E‘temād-al-Salṭana, *Rūz-nāma-ye kāṭerāt*, p. 564). The *kvāja* was not only an intermediary between the royal women and people from the outside; often he was also a go-between for the court officers (even high ranking dignitaries) and the shah himself. In addition, he was sometimes sent on missions around the country searching for girls suitable for the royal harem. Anyone who wanted to have one of his family’s women to be in the royal entourage would try to ingratiate himself with the *kvāja* by giving him presents and money. People would also send their daughters to the *kvāja*’s house in the hope of their being accepted for the court (Varharām, p. 128). In fact, in addition to the rooms the eunuchs had at their disposal in the harem, some had houses of their own in the city so they could live outside the harem as well (Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī*, p. 386).

Another source of income for the *kvāja* came from the royal ladies’ stipends. Each woman received a monthly salary ranging from 100 to 750 tomans from which the *kvāja* would take a payment for his services as middle-man (Mo‘ayyer-al-Mamālek, p. 18). Some *kvājas* thus became rather wealthy. When Āgā Jawāher Khan Mo‘tamad-al-Ḥaram died in 1305/1887 at the age of 87, he left 60,000 tomans in cash and goods. Āgā Jawāher Khan had started his career



under Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shah and had been the private eunuch of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah’s first wife before becoming the chief eunuch of the harem. He was held in the greatest respect by everyone at court. These facts become more impressive when one considers that he had once to ransom himself from slavery (E’temād-al-Salṭana, *Rūz-nāma-ye kāṭerāt*, p. 527).

It was especially under Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah that the royal eunuchs enjoyed power and wealth. Some of them even obtained villages and lands belonging to the royal domain in *toyūl* concessions (Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī*, p. 387). Some of them used their wealth to defend political causes. This was the case of Ḥājj Jawāher Khan Šadīq-al-Ḥaram, who served under Moṣaffar-al-Dīn Shah (r. 1313-24/1896-1907) and Moḥammad ‘Alī Shah (r. 1324-26/1907-9). Ḥājj Jawāher was a fervent supporter of the cause of the Constitution (see CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION), to which he devoted both energy and money to such an extent that when Moḥammad ‘Alī Shah closed the parliament in 1908, Ḥājj Jawāher had to take *bast* (asylum) at the British Legation with other Constitutionalists. However, in 1909, during the reign of Aḥmad Shah, Ḥājj Jawāher was appointed head of the police office (*naẓmīya* [modern *šahrbanī*]) for Khorasan province (Bāmdād, *Rejāl* I, p. 300).

(for cited sources not given in detail, see “Short References”):

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