

The Babylonian Temple 1155-727 BC

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Abstract

I offer here a preliminary discussion of the history of the temples of Babylonia between the Kassite and Neo-Assyrian periods, an obscure but evidently formative period of some five centuries. I have consulted here the most explicit sources, mainly from the monumental and historiographical records, to produce a sketch of the vitality and circumstances of the Babylonian temples in this period. The sketch which emerges from the meagre evidence presents the major temples of Babylonia acting with a significant degree of self-sufficiency throughout the five hundred years of near-constant turmoil and political instability that the sources record. The king's role with respect to the temple was often solely that of maintainer, and until the last century of the period under survey, the king only very seldom seems to have intervened in the affairs of the temples. In this final century, ending in the celebrated but apparently inconsequential reign of Nabonassar, four kings stand out as having significantly interfered in the temples by instituting various reforms, major and minor. The last of these kings, Nabû-šumu-iškun, merits serious attention to separate fact from fiction in the account of his reign, in which, one important source alleges, the king ravaged the temples with his sacrilegious crimes. A clearer picture of the period should emerge when the facts herein are correlated with the limited but precious economic record from this period.

Keywords: *chronicle, Nabû-šuma-iškun, Nebuchadnezzar I, kudurru, prebend*

1.Introduction

Babylonia of the post-Kassite period until the reign of Tiglath-pileser (III) is said to be a dark age, owing to the lack of contemporary documentary evidence (Nielsen 2023: 520-523). The evidence available in patches depicts an age of periodic loss and recovery of Babylonian fortunes under a frequent overturn of dynasties. The Babylonian temples, well-known from the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and later periods to have been the centres of urban economic and intellectual activity (Kleber 2013), shared in the waxing and waning of the Babylonian kingship to which it was always tied. The monumental inscriptions of the time claim restorations of images to temples and the rebuilding of their complexes, for instance under Nabû-kudurrî-uşur (Nebuchadnezzar I) and Nabû-šumu-imbi, while chronographic texts of later date present devastation and sacrilege, for instance under Adad-aplu-iddina and Nabû-šumu-iškun.

Our period immediately follows the reign of the Kassite kings in Babylonia, who lavished attention on the Babylonian temples (Bartelmus 2010). The vitality of temples in this period is attested indirectly, for instance from building inscriptions (Bartelmus 2010) and royal benefactions to priests (Paulus 2014: 157-163). Such royal services to temples continued to be performed and recorded in our period, as they became standard until the Babylonian temple's death knell sounded near the end of the first millennium

BC. The Kassite kings practiced the royal patronage of scholarship (Földi 2019; Jimenez 2020), a practice which was continued at least in the following century (Jimenez 2020: 232). It was the priestly scholars of the Kassite and post-Kassite periods that left their mark on the learning and literature of the first millennium by composing the Babylonian classics and assembling long compendia of divinatory and medical knowledge (Nielsen 2023: 575-577 and cit. therein).

Not only the literati, but a greater segment of the Babylonian population benefitted from the function of their local temples, for a significant cross-section of the urban and rural population was tied to the temples of Babylonia. We may follow the clues of the sparse sources of our time to understand how the Babylonian temple and its dependents dealt with the ups and downs of the period preceding the well-documented Assyrian domination (Brinkman & Kennedy 1983).

2. Historical Sketch

Contrary to the notion of a dark age, the continuity of institutions, social structures, and settlements (Nielsen 2023: 522-523) during this period of relative hardship and turmoil permits us to trace the development of the temple and other institutions until the Neo-Assyrian period. An evident decline in population and urbanism likely resulted from the instability of subsistence, security, and economic institutions, beginning near the end of the second millennium and ending right around the end of the period of our survey. (Brinkman 1984: 3-10). At this time, Babylonian institutions and settlements were beleaguered and diminished, but not extinct (Brinkman 1984: 16-19).

The sources of our period are mainly monumental inscriptions recording royal benefactions to temples and private persons. The former are recorded on building inscriptions (Brinkman 1968: 4-6), whereas the latter are contained on entitlement stelae (Paulus 2014, esp. 485-689). Tablets of legal or economic contents are known in tiny handfuls until near the end of the surveyed period (Brinkman 1968: 6-9). Narrative sources all come from later periods, when the Babylonian priesthood developed a fascination for the acts of past kings from as far back as the beginning of our timeframe (Jursa & Debourse 2020).

2.1 The Isin II Dynasty

Our survey begins with the Second Dynasty of Isin, which displays two important changes in the cult. Some time before the dynasty's beginning, Marduk and Nabû had come to prominence in Babylonian onomastics (Beaulieu 2018: 157-158). A more significant event perhaps related to this development was the dynasty's fourth king Nabû-kudurri-uşur's recovery of the statue of Marduk from Elam (Nielsen 2018: 64-65; Beaulieu 2018: 160-161). Lambert's (1964) suggestion to place Enûma eliš's date of composition under Nabû-kudurri-uşur, or at some point in the Isin II Dynasty, finds favour in the circumstantial evidence collected by scholars (Beaulieu 2018: 161-163). The dynasty's special relationship with Marduk is clear, but Enlil and his city Nippur received equal attention (Nielsen 2018: 65-66; 2023: 530-531). Nabû-kudurri-uşur's brick inscriptions at Nippur show that he undertook building work for Enlil's temple, a stone tablet testifies to repairs on a temple of Adad in Babylon, while Nabonidus reports having found a stele recording Nabû-kudurri-uşur's building efforts while undertaking his own restorations at the Egiptar of Ur (Nielsen 2018: 65-67), though this may be a false claim by Nabonidus (Woods 2004: 39). One entitlement stele from Nippur records a land-grant to two priestly officials, one also being the mayor of Nippur (Paulus 2014: 491-502; Nielsen 2018: 66). A final

stone tablet records a land-grant in the area of Nippur to the two sons of a priest of an Elamite god (Paulus 2014: 511-515; Nielsen 2018: 62).

What is striking about Nabû-kudurrî-uşur is his choice of beneficiaries. The traditional (and perhaps newly ascendant) cult of Marduk takes second place to the minor cult of Eriya (Nielsen 2015: 59). We find no contemporary evidence for the restoration of the very ancient en-priestesship at Ur, while restorations of minor shrines such as Unumah in Nippur and Ekitušhegaltilla, both otherwise unattested (George 1993: 111).

While the later temples certainly owe something of their operation and organisation to this period, Nabû-kudurrî-uşur's documentation features two grants to be associated with priestly prebends, one at Nippur for Enlil's venerable cult, and one for a new and minor foundation. If he or his successors worked towards expanding the cults of Marduk or Nabu, or the existing major cults, they were very discrete about it. The prebendary system was already in existence, and the king's role at this time was to preserve it rather than to expand it (Waerzeggers 2011: 69-70).

Nabû-kudurrî-uşur's son and successor Enlil-nādin-apli produced an entitlement stele bearing the text of a land-grant restoring to a priest of Nanše and Namma of land which had been appropriated by the local governor of Bīt-Sîn-māgir (Paulus 2014: 521-524; Nielsen 2023: 531). Unlike in Nabû-kudurrî-uşur's NKU I 1, the land-grants of Enlil-nādin-apli's successors do not feature priestly witnesses, or beneficiaries, but only high-profile people from the royal sphere. Yet Marduk-nādin-ahhī restored temples in Ur (Frame 1995: 38-42), Marduk-šāpik-zēri in Borsippa (id. 47-48), and Adad-aplu-iddina at Kiš, Uruk (?), Larsa, and Ur (id. 53-61; Nielsen 2023: 534). Building inscriptions belonging to the Isin II dynasty cease after this prolific builder, whose reign had seen destruction to temples wrought by nomadic incursions (Nielsen 2023: 535), but from the dynasty's last king, Nabû-šumu-libūr, an entitlement stele survives, evidently from the environs of Nippur, recording a vibrant priestly community among the high-profile witnesses of the transaction, including Nippur's governor (Paulus 2014: 613-617).

Nabû-kudurrî-uşur and Adad-aplu-iddina appear to us as two kings who favoured the priestly establishment. This impression is corroborated by the later literature. Literary compositions about Nabû-kudurrî-uşur portray, alongside his military exploits, his piety and penitence towards Marduk (De Breucker 2015: 80-83; Jursa & Debourse 2017; Nielsen 2015: 58-63; 2018: 105-112, 114-115 no. 5). Adad-aplu-iddina's reign, like Nabû-kudurrî-uşur's, was remembered as a propitious time for priestly scholars working under royal sponsorship (Finkel 1988: 144-145; Nielsen 2023: 535). Adad-aplu-iddina is also well regarded in a Neo-Babylonian chronicle as having propitiated the cults of Marduk and Nabu in model fashion, even while nomads destroyed the cities of Babylonia (Glassner 2004: 284-285). Among the cities that fell victim to destruction by nomads, Nippur is listed, even though under Nabû-šumu-libūr, not long after Adad-aplu-iddina, the priestly community here appears to be alive and well. The situation was poor under Nabû-šumu-libūr as well, who is probably the king whose offerings in Babylon are described in the 'Religious Chronicle' (Glassner 2004: 296-301), after an unfortunately fragmentary passage about Nippur. This text goes on to describe the repeated cancellation of Marduk's processions due to the land's affliction by nomads during the same king's reign.

2.2 The Sealand II Dynasty

The destruction of the cult sites of Babylonia was partly cleaned up under Simbar-Šipak of the Second Sealand Dynasty. Two later copies of an inscription by the king relate that he restored a throne that was dedicated at Nippur by Nabû-kudurri-ušur but lost to nomads during the troubles under Adad-aplu-iddina (Frame 1995: 72-73). The famous stele of Nabû-aplu-iddina narrates, with considerable embellishment, a failed attempt by Simbar-Šipak to restore the Ebabbar temple at Sippar (Woods 2004; Paulus 2014: 650-659). Simbar-Šipak's successor, Ea-mukîn-zêri, is possibly identical with the only priestly witness from Simbar-Šipak's one surviving entitlement-stele (Paulus 2014: 618-621; Nielsen 2023:

The following reigns are dimly epitomised in only a few sources. The stele of Nabû-aplu-iddina states that under Kaššu-nādin-ahhī, hardship and famine caused the offerings of Ebabbar to cease. Bleak news comes from a copy of a chronicle from the time of Nabonidus that relates another interruption of Marduk's procession due to nomads (Glassner 2004: 210-213). Famine and hardship were apparently so overwhelming at this time that king Ninurta-kudurri-ušur of the Bazi dynasty and his successors were unable to pass judgement or collect taxes, and legal decisions were only enforceable under Nabû-mukîn-apli some three decades later (Nielsen 2023: 543-544).

2.3 The Dynasty of E

Under the long reign of Nabû-mukîn-apli, the founder of the 'Dynasty of E,' troubles persisted (Brinkman 1968: 171). The same entitlement stele, NMA 1, records prices of grain at famine levels (Paulus 2014: 623-636; Beaulieu 2018: 179; Nielsen 2023: 546), while the 'Religious Chronicle' mentions interruptions of Marduk's New Year procession (Brinkman 1968: 172; Glassner 2004: 300-301; Nielsen 2023: 546). We can do little more than observe that one of the princes who witnessed the transaction recorded on NMA 1 was a 'bishop of the temples' (ŠA3.TAM E2.KUR.MEŠ), and that the entitlement stele NMA 3 records a large parcel of unspecified size allotted to the kurgarrû-priests of Dūr-Šarru-kîn near Opis (Paulus 2014: 639). Such an allotment to a relatively minor profession in a minor city gives an optimistic impression of the temple's health in parts of Babylonia at this time.

Our sources once again go dark for about five decades until the famous reign of Nabû-aplu-iddina. This reign provides us with a happy assortment of sources testifying to the king's attention to the Babylonian temples. The aforementioned stele of Nabû-aplu-iddina claims that Ebabbar had suffered destruction and neglect due to attacks by nomads, and was only fully restored under Nabû-aplu-iddina. An entitlement stele records that he restored a temple-enterer's paternal property in Babylon (Paulus 2014: 644-646), another that he passed a (now lost) verdict on the inheritance of a temple prebend in Cutha (Paulus 2014: 660-661). One further source on the king's contribution to the temples comes from a later copy of an edict regarding the distribution of cuts of meat to the temple staff of Eana in Uruk, to be assigned to Nabû-aplu-iddina's reign (McEwan 1983; Nielsen 2023: 549). The prescription of allotments at both Sippar and Uruk is perhaps indicative of what kind of restoration the temples needed and received under Nabû-aplu-iddina, but the style and contents of the prescriptions are so different that the question of whether the text from Ebabbar is a forgery cannot be settled. The Uruk text gives far more detail and concerns itself with the distribution of the various parts of one animal, while the Sippar text names only a few professionals and describes allotments of a great range of commodities. Two possible explanations for this situation are either that the organisations of the two temples were in different states of survival,

Ebabbar having to be re-established to a greater extent, or that Nabû-aplu-iddina made similarly detailed prescriptions at Ebabbar too, and thus temples throughout Babylonia enjoyed a renewal of their assets and organisations under his attention. The former scenario gains some favour in consideration of what we know of nomadic incursions: one chronicle lists northern cities as the victims of Aramean violence (Glassner 2004: 284-285). The Puqūdu Arameans, the Aramean tribe occupying the vicinity of Uruk, were at times friendly, and at times hostile towards the Babylonian cities near their territory, at least in the Neo-Assyrian period when such events surface in the sources (Radner 2006-2008: 114). There was, curiously, no substantial Aramean presence associated with the countryside of Babylon and Borsippa; for example these cities are excluded from the list of places where Arameans were resident who supported Merodach-baladan (II) against Sennacherib (Brinkman 1968: 273).

The absence of many Arameans in the vicinity of Babylon-Borsippa may indicate that, contrary to the Uruk-Nippur region, here Arameans were either transitory or forcefully expelled, while the Aramean presence in the south involved less friction between city and country, and so was able to persist. The survival of sources from this period is so scant that the trends we observe may easily turn out to be false friends.

His successor, Marduk-zākir-šumi, left two entitlement stelae testifying to the economic activities of priests (Paulus 2014: 667-677). The first of these, from Uruk, features a land grant to a prebendary office, continuing the temple reforms of his father Nabû-aplu-iddina (Beaulieu 2018: 183; Nielsen 2023: 551-553). Shalmaneser (III), king of Assyria, who had the upper hand in Babylonia at this time, made sacrifices at the triad of Babylon, Borsippa, and Cutha (Nielsen 2023: 551). Marduk-zākir-šumi's royal inscriptions attest to one minor dedication at Babylon and the granting of tax exemption to Babylon and Borsippa, an economic privilege that benefited priests particularly (Frame 1994: 104-107; Schaudig 2019: 229-230).

Hereafter, Assyrian supremacy inaugurates a dark age for Babylonian documentary evidence (Beaulieu 2018: 183-184). Šamšī-Adad and Adad-nērārī performed the regular sacrifices at Babylon, Borsippa, and Cutha, while the former briefly robbed the temple of Dēr of its cult images, to be returned by the latter (Beaulieu 2018: 184; Nielsen 2023: 555-556).

2.3 Later Kings

Not long after, the Chaldaean dynasty emerged under Erība-Marduk. The disruption of the New Year procession in his first year according to the Eclectic Chronicle bodes ill (Nielsen 2023: 557), but the situation quickly turned around as the king restored the fields of the Babylonians and Borsippeans that had been appropriated by Arameans (Beaulieu 2018: 186; Nielsen 2023: 557). According to Merodach-baladan, Erība-Marduk was a laudable restorer, who also established Marduk's throne in Babylon and Borsippa, while Esarhaddon notes that he had restored Ehiliana in Uruk (Beaulieu 2018: 186; Nielsen 2023: 558-559).

Hereupon, we meet the astounding and complicated character of Nabû-šumu-iškun. The one entitlement stele from the eighth year of his reign concerns the inauguration of a new prebend in Ezida in Borsippa, where a large temple community is evident in the list of witnesses (Paulus 2014: 683-688). Only a few years ago, the Babylonian chronicles narrate, in his fifth and sixth regnal years, Marduk's procession

was impeded (Nielsen 2023: 559). A remarkable literary composition, an apparently political pamphlet against Nabû-šumu-iškun, possibly composed not so long after his reign (Cole 1994: 221; Beaulieu 2018: 187; but cf. Nielsen 2023: 560), offers a different account of these years. This text expounds at length a litany of illegal and impious deeds committed by this king. Alongside a number of political crimes, the anonymous author of this text charges Nabû-šumu-iškun with detaining Nabû in Babylon (3rd year; ii 9, 43), arranging a marriage between Marduk and Tašmētu (ii 13-14), violating the taboos of Ezida (ii 17-18), removing Madānu (ii 23-24), revoking the privileges of Babylon, Borsippa, and perhaps Cutha (iii 4'-5'), plundering Esagil during the course of its repair (iii 34'-41'), offering said plunder to Chaldaean and Aramean gods (iii 42'-43'), among many others only partially preserved. One of these partially preserved charges was the removal of Ištar from Eana, which Beaulieu (2001: 37) has attractively interpreted as his replacing Ištar with Zarpānītu, thereby imposing a Babylonian cult here. We must be wary of these allegations. Zadok (2017: 263-265) has identified some of these as political necessities. Others, Zadok has convincingly argued, were exaggerations taking issue with regular events. Namely, the confiscation of temple treasures was not strictly irregular (though naturally attracted priestly ire), and the gods of Chaldea and Aram were worshipped in the Babylonian temples (Zadok 2017: 262; in fact, the goddess Suītū is attested in the entitlement stele from Nabû-šumu-iškun's reign). Rebellion and disorder may of course explain Nabû's overstaying in Babylon and the cessation of the New Year procession. Zadok's defence clears Nabû-šumu-iškun of one charge of sacrilege. Beaulieu's suggestion that Ištar was replaced with Zarpānītu is difficult to see as a charge if the text comes from Babylon (Zadok 2017: 261). The event is well-documented, but may be attributed instead to Erība-Marduk (Beaulieu 2001). Ultimately, Zadok (2017: 263) has argued that these actions were intended to impose Babylon's cult over all of Babylonia, at the expense of local particularism and priestly establishments. Waerzeggers (2012: 293-294) has alluded to the contrary in noting that the 'Šamaš-šumu-ukīn Chronicle,' most likely from Borsippa, is the earliest known reference to the disruption of the New Year procession in Nabû-šumu-iškun's reign, as the text's copyist lived in the mid-6th century BC. Indeed the text, although it comes from Borsippa, makes no further comment on the crimes of this king, which particularly impacted Nabû and Borsippa.

We may finally compare this text with two similar polemical texts, whose degree of truthfulness is clearer. The reign of Nabonidus, some two centuries after Nabû-šumu-iškun, was similarly transgressive towards the cults of Babylon, and motivated the composition of two literary pamphlets charging the king with impiety. These are the 'Nabonidus Chronicle' (Glassner 2004: 232-239), not a chronicle at all according to Zawadzki (2010) and Waerzeggers (2015), and the Verse Account of the Reign of Nabonidus (Schaudig 2001: 563-579). Of these, the text about Nabû-šumu-iškun stylistically resembles the 'Nabonidus Chronicle' more than it does the Verse Account in its matter-of-fact presentation and chronic division; it is like a chronicle, unlike the highly narrative and poetic Verse Account. This 'Chronicle,' crucially, could only have been written during or after the reign of Darius, and the only manuscript of the text is of Hellenistic date, like the pamphlet about Nabû-šumu-iškun. It is possible to demonstrate that the author of this text had accurate knowledge of many of the events of Nabonidus' reign, he emphasised certain events of the reign and ignored others (Waerzeggers 2015: 107-108). A narrative flare is detectable in both this 'Chronicle' (Waerzeggers 2015: 108-109) and in the unfortunately damaged final section of the Nabû-šumu-iškun text (iv 20'ff.), felicitously in line with the historical literature promoting the 'Marduk ideology,' which was in fashion in the Persian and Hellenistic periods (De Breucker 2015: 83-91; Waerzeggers 2015: 109-119). The conspicuous appearance of the ahu-rabû priest only strengthens our suspicions of a Hellenistic milieu (Debourse

2022: 222-228; Jursa & Debourse 2017: 89-90; though even the entitlement stele from his reign mentions this priest), as it does for the ‘Nabonidus Chronicle’ (Waezegggers 2015: 113). Some of the accusations, such as Nabû-šumu-iškun’s reverence for foreign gods (who were actually legitimately resident in Babylonian temples) only make sense in the context of a later, Persian-Hellenistic origin (De Breucker 2015: 90-91), and perhaps actually betray some historical ignorance.

This long and timid line of argument tends towards a later origin. Thus, one may be persuaded to believe that the charges of sacrilege in this text were yarns spun later, perhaps from genuine ancient records, which may even explain the conflation with Erība-Marduk. The many changes of the time were perhaps telescoped onto Nabû-šumu-iškun’s reign.

Our final source for this reign is the exceptional cylinder of Nabû-šumu-imbi, governor of Borsippa under Nabû-šumu-iškun (Frame 1995: 123-126). This cylinder recounts with dramatic detail the circumstances behind the governor’s restoration of Ezida. The blame falls on nomadic enemies and on Babylonians themselves, while Nabû-šumu-iškun’s reign is only mentioned as a time of war between the Babylonians and nomads (i 15’-21’). The description of fighting over land suggests a continuation of the same troubles as were faced under Erība-Marduk. No mention is made of the king’s sacrileges, nor of his approbation for the building project. Brinkman (1968: 225) suggested that the absence of the king was due to the same nomadic threat that prevented the New Year festival. Even in his eighth year, when the temple was able to expand its ranks, the seal of the god replaces the seal of the king in officiating this grant; it is altogether surprising that while Nabû-šumu-iškun was able to perform the New Year festival throughout most of his reign, while the repairs and reorganisation of Ezida should have happened in the king’s absence, during a time of great instability. That the temple advanced its position during this time owes rather little to the king, given the evidence.

Finally, the highly regarded Nabonassar finishes our survey. Although Nabonassar was well remembered to posterity, his reign bears striking similarities to his predecessor, particularly in that royal prerogative of cultic affairs. Much like the Borsippean Nabû-šumu-imbi’s work in Ezida, in Nabonassar’s fifth year, two notables of Uruk restored the long neglected Akītu-temple of Uruk, making passing mention of the king only to indicate the date (Frame 1995: 127-129). If Nabonassar inaugurated a new era for Babylon, especially for priestly learning, we should not understand his lack of known benefactions to Babylonian temples as neglect. The letter collection from Nippur, probably from this time, offers vignettes of temple life as well, with its vivacious ups and downs (e.g. no.s 17 and 111; Cole 1996; Beaulieu 2018: 189; Nielsen 2023: 561-562).

Conclusion

Five hundred years preserved in such a patchy record can scarcely offer clarity. Yet, squinting, the evidence offers some broad outlines of the general characteristics of this period. First, although testimony of temple-related activities often disappears from the record for long stretches of time, when priests and temples make their appearance again, their functioning seems to be in order. We have noted that, other than the continuation of the ubiquitous tradition of temple renovation, the kings of this period scarcely made an effort to intervene in temple affairs or to expand them until Nabû-aplu-iddina, even when the cults of Marduk and Nabû must have been in the process of development. The king’s function was, for a long time, simply to maintain what was a generally self-sufficient temple community. While,

frequently, disaster and hardship caused offerings and festivals to cease, we only find, for instance, the occasional indication that the New Year festival, the cornerstone of the Babylonian cult, was interrupted. Such infrequency suggests discontinuity in something that was otherwise regular and functional, and we have reason to suspect that proclamations that the cult has been re-established after a pervasive disaster were somewhat rhetorical in their sameness. With Nabû-aplu-iddina, we find more attention being lavished on temples by successive kings. Under Nabû-aplu-iddina and Marduk-zākir-šumi, then almost a century later under Erība-Marduk and Nabû-šumu-iškun, we have frequent evidence, often from later historical memory, of cultic reform, on a background of constant struggles against nomadic incursions. Their attentions stretched both to Babylon and Borsippa in the north, and to Uruk in the south. Erība-Marduk was received well by Merodach-baladan not long after the reign of the former, and neither he nor Nabû-šumu-iškun became targets for priestly imputation perhaps until Nabonidus. Nabû-šumu-iškun, it seems, continued his predecessor's direction of attending to the temple (whether his attentions were welcome or unwelcome is difficult to say), and perhaps received the blame for acting at the end of decades of royal intervention in the temple to which the priests were now rather foreign. Instead, they were proud and self-sufficient, such that under Nabû-šumu-iškun (if the governor's cylinder is not to be dated to the early years of Nabonassar) and Nabonassar, it was local communities who conspicuously took on the traditionally royal burden of restoring their temples, being conditioned now by centuries of disorder in Babylonia.

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