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THE EARLY 16TH CENTURY GARDEN OF ABDALLAH AL-ARAB AL-YAMANI AL-HADRAMAUTI IN THE VICINITY OF MEDIEVAL SAURAN (TURKESTAN REGION)

This article comments on the preliminary results from the analysis of a series of aerial photographs along with a ground survey of an outstanding cultural monument in Kazakhstan — the garden that belonged to an influential Sufi sheikh of Yemeni descent located near the medieval city of Sauran. Despite its importance and excellent preservation, the monument has yet to be excavated. Our joint project with E. A. Smagulov failed to receive financial support in 2015. A series of plant pollen analyses from the garden's soil which was taken from an irrigation ditch has not yet been organized. Two phases for the residential estate have been identified, first, one from the 15th century and the other from the early 16th century (illustrations 5-6). Initially, a group of families from the sheikh's relatives, who had several small gardens, probably lived at the site. Soon afterward, Sheikh Mir-i Arab created a fortified house with a treasury and a large 800 x 470 m garden nearby. It was divided into a southern section with the rows of fruit trees and a northern section containing a flower garden (bustan). In the center of the southern section was a reflective pool and to the south lay an area for recreation and the reception of visitors. In 1515, this sheikh's residence was destroyed by his political opponents. The surface of the garden has hardly been disturbed since that period and it is a uniquely preserved site in the western part of Central Asia.

Key words: 16th century gardens, aerial photo layout, Sheikh Mir-i Arab, medieval Sauran, southern Kazakhstan, research prospects

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AMONG the many plans of my friend, Erbulat Akizhanovich Smagulov, he showed particular interest in our jointly planned excavations of a *singularly well-preserved medieval garden in Kazakhstan*. Information about this garden along with its owner, reached our day initially through the efforts of the early 16th century writer, Zainiddin Mahmoud Wasifi (1485-1551) and his collection entitled *Astonishing Events* (Wasifi 2010). The garden attracted this author's attention for its vastness and intricate hydraulic facilities. It belonged to one of the most influential clerics of Central Asia, a sayyid of Yemeni descent, Abdallah al-Arab al-Yamani al-Khadramauti (Mir-Arab), who soon became the spiritual father of Ubaydullah Khan (1512-1533). One of his residences and, apparently, previously that of his relatives, was located one parasang from the town of Sauran. Eventually, P. I. Lerch identified the small,

fortified estate of Mirtobe, with its adjacent farm plots located 2.5 km northeast of the walls of Sauran with that of the Mir-Arab estate (Lerch 1870: 14) (Fig. 1). A detailed description of the appearance of the Mirtobe estate ruins was presented by E. A. Smagulov in his book entitled *Drevnii Sauran (Ancient Sauran)* (Smagulov 2011: 53–61). It was based not only on the collection of artifact remains and the measurements taken, but also on a series of high-quality hang-glider aerial photographs taken just before sunset by R. Sala of the Margulan Institute of Archeology in the mid-2000s.

In 2015, we planned to start joint work on the site with the main focus being the reputed Mir-Arab garden. Unfortunately, our detailed project (*Budget Application* 2014), with the additional support via related requests made by the Director of the Institute, Mr. B. A. Baitanaev, failed to receive the necessary



Ил. 1. Миртобе среди памятников округи средневекового Саурана (по: Смагулов 2011)

governmental support. Professor of the Almaty Institute of Geology Oil and Mining, S. A. Nigmatova attempted palynological studies (analyses undertaken to detect pollen of the cultivated plants from the period) in 2015, but the scarce samples available at the time did not produce the sought-after results. In fact, today the main source of our information is still the series of high-quality aerial photos of this very extensive site. Although I first attempted to decipher them back in December 2014, since then, certain details have received fresh explanations. Not all the details of the paleo-landscape in these aerial photos today lend themselves to unambiguous “deciphering” (rather, this requires the long-awaited excavations). However, let me focus further on the most obvious visible features described during the measurements taken on the site.

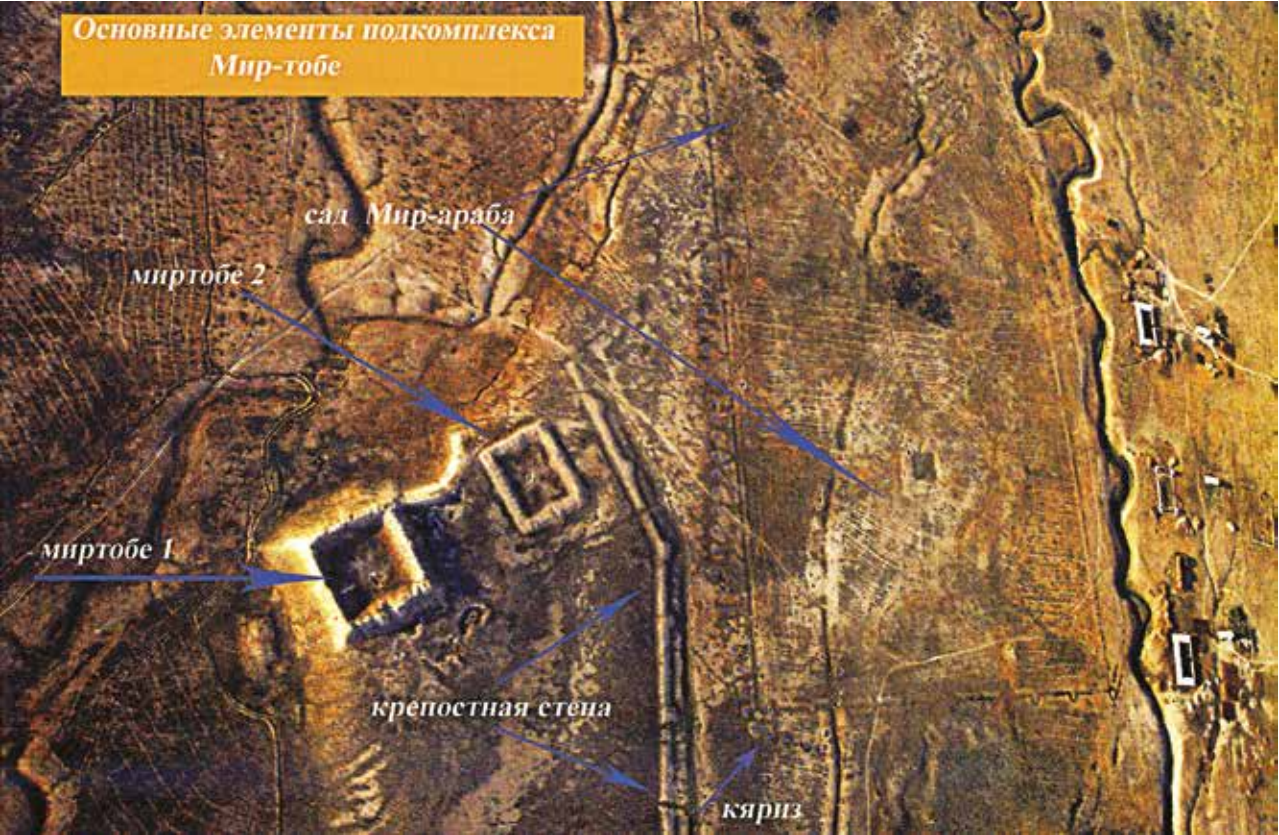
The Mir-Arab garden, which arose in the early 16th century, was laid out in a large rectangle with an area of 33 hectares and surrounded by walls whose eroded sections measure 3 to 5 meters wide. Its hydraulic structures (canals, drainage ditches, etc.), as previously mentioned, attracted the attention of Wasifi. Indeed, this garden as an archaeological site and monument of landscape architecture has

several important features. First, it is the only well-preserved late medieval garden in Central Asia. Moreover, it creates a combined ensemble with the associated estate as a result of several unique historical and natural circumstances. In 1515, the estate of Mir-Arab was plundered by his opponents. Soon afterwards he moved to Bukhara and to other cities. By the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries another period of desertification began in the region. The Aksu river previously had gardens along its banks due to its flood plains (like most of the rivers flowing from the neighboring Karatay mountains). These arable land areas at this period were abruptly reduced. Fortunately, following the former garden and estates’ surface desolation, active industrial or agricultural activity was not conducted at the site with the exception of small herds grazing in the region. Small cattle-breeding farms still adjoin the area from the east, behind the ravine right up to the former garden. Second, is the series of high-quality aerial photos of both the Mir-Arab estate as well as his relatives’ manor not to mention that the site itself is conveniently located for research near the highway and next to the Sauran settlement under study. Third, both at the estate and at the former garden (Figs. 2-4), traces of two relatively short phases of habitation are clear which are easy to distinguish. Initially, in the 15th century, apparently as E. A. Smagulov supposed, was the estate of Mir-Arab’s relatives (seyyids from the Hadramaut mountain valley in Yemen). Then the next phase involved his periods of residency in Sauran. Both sites (the residential estate and the irrigated land plot) looked very different during both periods, and this is clearly seen in the aerial photos (Figs. 5-6). The earlier adobe buildings and walls of the estate are more thoroughly eroded.

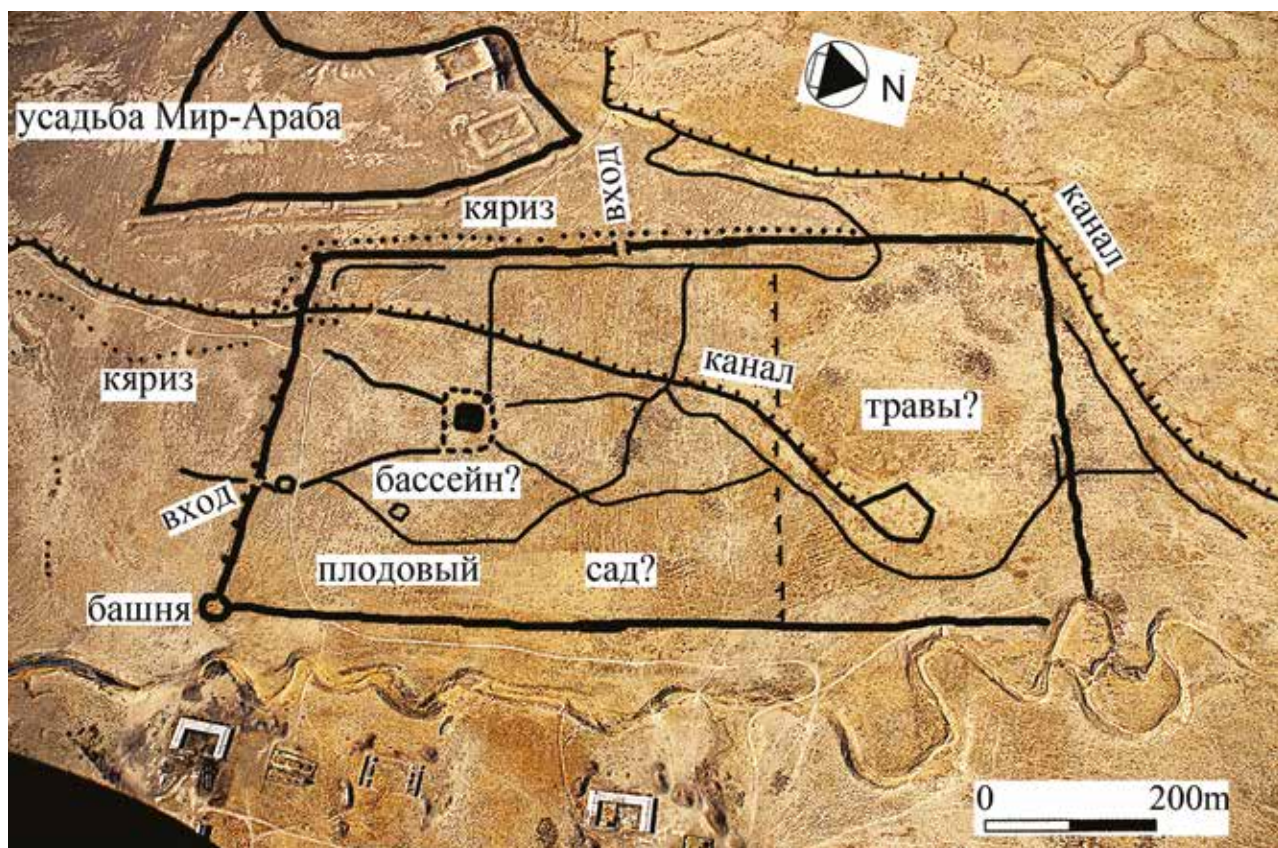
Under the initial owners, a manor house with external fortifications was apparently built at the turn in the Aksu River whose cape rose to 7 meters above the floodplain terrace (Fig. 5). In addition to the defensive moats, external walls (preserved to a height of up to 0.7 m) are visible with a rectangular configuration encompassing an area of 13.3 hectares. On the eastern, foundational side, 8 towers are visible which protrude beyond the line of the walls by 6 to 7 meters. The distance between these towers vary from between 48 to 76 meters. A fortified entrance is located on the southern side of the adjacent town of Sauran. A water well was located inside. The residential complex itself was surrounded by a rectangular fence (61 x 53 m) with only traces of buildings inside. The fence had an entrance on the southeast side. Relatively minor garden lands were located to the northeast of the estate (their enclosures cannot be seen in aerial photos), and, undoubtedly, just as today on this site they served as lands for cattle-breeding. Indeed, on the site



Ил. 2. Миротобе: усадьба и сад. Аэрофото Р. Сала Автор: М. А. Антонов



Ил. 3. Миротобе: усадьба и сад. Аэрофото Р. Сала (по: Смагулов 2011)



Ил. 4. Миротобе: усадьба и сад. Аналитический чертеж С. А. Яценко

of the future garden with its well-thought-out system of large parallel ridges of the same type, including to the north behind its fence, the aerial photo shows 4 isolated, albeit close to one other areas, with rows of rare parallel ridges for garden trees. The direction these ridges is different in each case and does not correspond to those in the future garden of Mir-Arab. Two larger sites are located northeast of the estate (the length of the farthest in a latitudinal direction is slightly more than 200 m). These are probably the gardens that belonged to smaller families who lived on the estate. This group of gardens was connected by two canals (ditches) leading southwest toward the Aksu river. Not far behind the ravine, on a hill to the east was the latitudinal line of a large *kariz* (Fig. 1). A branch of this canal, which was poorly preserved, apparently bypassed the future large garden from the south but was probably also associated with the owners of the estate.

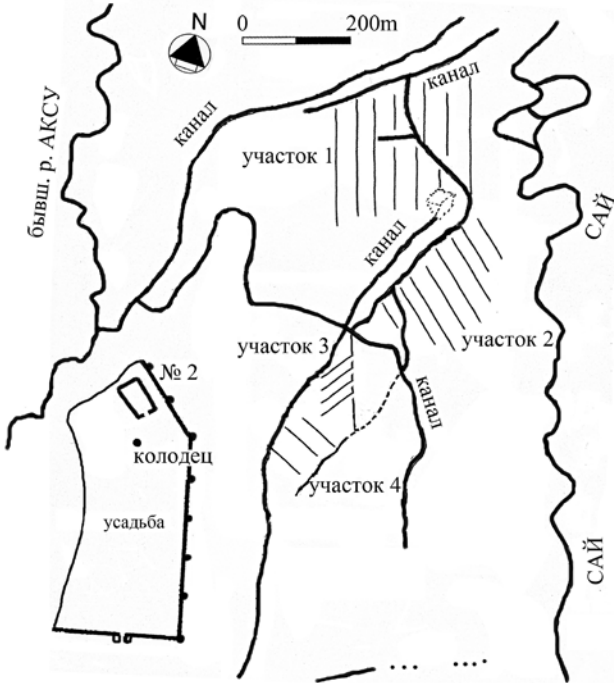
The second, and better known historical period of the estate's habitation, is associated with Mir-Arab himself. He was a sheikh of the Naqshbandi tariqa (Sufi order), famously known as the spiritual father of Ubaydullah Khan who inspired the successful struggle against Safavid Iran and a great and wealthy man (Wasifi 2010; Babadjanov 1995; Juraeva 1985). During his time in Sauran, the outer walls of the

estate apparently were not seriously renovated. However, next to the previous residential complex on the northern edge a new wall was built very close in size and spatial orientation to the earlier one measuring 60 meters in length (Fig. 6). However, this house was now a true fortress containing 10 towers, including those on the sides of the entrance. Today's preserved height measures between 4 to 5 meters with rubble 5 meters thick. Such strong fortifications is not surprising since it was rumored that the sheikh's basement contained treasures filled to the brim with gold and silver. The site was devastated by the Mir-Arab's opponents in 1515. A ramp proceeded from the northeastern corner of the fortified house which turned into a path reaching the gate of the garden so loved by its owner and which is clearly discernable even today. The garden itself (Pers. *bug*; Arab. *jannat*), which was newly planted at that time, had a rectangular shape that measured 800 x 470 meters. It was surrounded by walls of various widths. Such an oasis of greenery from the neighboring hills must have looked very impressive (Fig. 7). Most splendidly, the garden wall was decorated from the south, or the side which faced the city. This southern side contained 9 towers protruding some 8 to 9 meters beyond the walls. The largest and tallest of these, located in the southeastern corner, was 8 meters in diameter

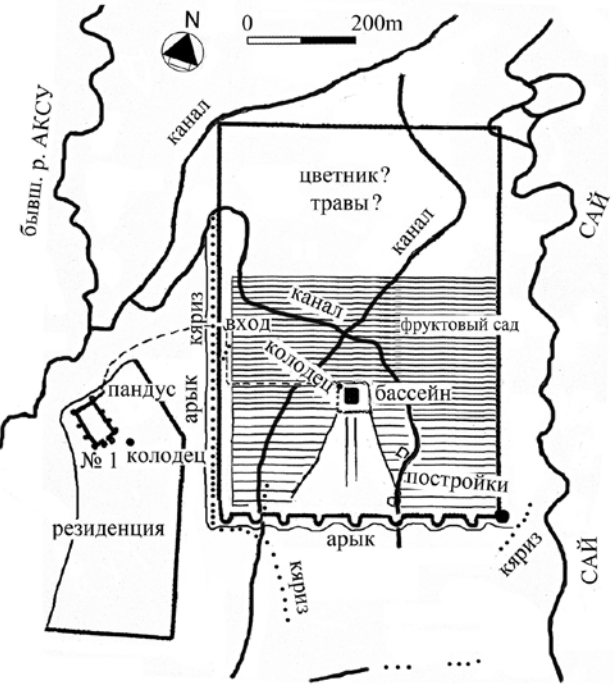
and probably housed the guards (cf. a similar well-preserved tower in the Persian garden of Fin founded by Abbas the Great at the end of the 16th century in the southwestern outskirts of Kashan) (Fig. 8). The other three sides contained no towers along the garden wall. Around the garden from the south and west (between the ravine in the east and the canal in the west) was a bypass irrigation ditch up to 4 meters wide. In addition, on the western side along the edge of the garden, an underground water irrigation network wing (kariz) was situated. It had two short entrances into the garden. Another underground water network from the northeast skirted the main tower of the fence. Inside the garden, irrigation ditches crisscrossed it in the form of irregular diagonals, resembling a letter X.

Approximately two thirds of the garden (except for its northern edge) was clearly used for numerous and valuable fruit trees which were planted perpendicular to the long side of the fence in a west-to-east direction. Trees were planted between forty irregular lines of irrigation ditches with a total length of 450 meters extending at equal intervals. (Cf. similar ridge rows with ditches are found in the Dovalatabad garden in Yazd. These were arranged by the local ruler in the mid-18th century) (Fig. 10). A reflective water pool was arranged on the central axis of the plot with the fruit trees. A rectangular depression measuring 30 x 25 meters is currently visible. Now its remains are only 0.7 meters deep. At the northwestern corner of this pool is a round depression (?). The influential owner and his visitors reached the pool through the path that extended from the garden's entrance along its western wall, which then turned along the west-east line to the water well. Between the pool and the garden's front southern fence was a triangular section about 200 meters long which was devoid of fruit tree ridges. It was bordered in the east by two small rectangular outbuildings. This site was clearly intended to receive guests. In its center was a rather wide longitudinal path. Since no traces of a large pavilion can be found, Mir-Arab must have received selected guests on a wooden platform under a canopy, or the pavilion was made of light material, without a solid foundation (cf., Wilber 1979) (Fig. 9). Undoubtedly, some type of shade or greenery (individual trees and small flower beds) was also present. As for the northern third of the early 16th century garden, (not including the small gardens of the Mir-Arab's predecessors) no obvious ridges can be found. This allows one to consider the northern section as containing a flower garden (*bustan*), where, according to Iranian tradition, flowers grew against a grass background (*alfalfa*) with interspersed trees (Fig. 11).

The Mir-Arab garden fits perfectly into the tradition of Persian-type gardens prevalent in



Ил. 5. Миртобе: первый период обживания: XV век. Схема С. А. Яценко



Ил. 6. Миртобе: второй период обживания: начало XVI века. Схема С. А. Яценко

the Islamic world (*The Persian Garden*; Khansari, Moghateder, Yavari 1998; Habhouse 2004; Golombek 2012). At the same time, only the southern or "fruit" section of the garden corresponds to the popular scheme of the Persian garden *char-bag* or *chahar-bag*



Ил. 7. Сад Шахзаде, у Махана, пров. Керман, Иран.
Фото: Hamid Sadegni



Ил. 8. Угловая башня и ограда сада Фин
у г. Кашан, Иран



Ил. 9. Сцена в саду. Миниатюра Мирзы Али,
около 1545 г. По М. М. Ашрафи



Ил. 10. Хамаи и китайцы в цветнике. Миниатюра
XV в. Париж, частная коллекция.
По каталогу: An illustrated Souvenir of the Exhibition
of Persian Art. London, 1931

(“four gardens”), in which the garden was divided by canals (irrigation ditches) into four main rectangular sections with various types of vegetation that often encircled a pool and a large pavilion (the latter could have also been located along the garden’s edge) (Pinder-Wilson 1976). This type of garden took shape during the emergence of the first “world empire” of the Achaemenids under Cyrus the Great, following the example of his palaces of the mid-6th century BC in Pasargadae (Stronach 1989: 475-487) and was reflected later in the Qur’an in the form of the four gardens of Paradise known as *Adi*, *Firdaus*, *Mava*, and *Naim*.

Alas, Mir-Arab’s garden has not yet been properly excavated archaeologically. Nevertheless, according to sources that arose earlier and synchronously with the garden in question, we can reasonably assume what type of trees, shrubs, and flowers could have grown there. Even at the end of the 6th century the famous Sassanian work *Khosrov, Son of Kavad and His Page* described the *best* flowers grown in Iran: First place was given to the Indian jasmine (“its smell is like the smell of gentlemen”); followed by the rose, basil, daffodil, gillyflower (*mattiola incana*), white lily, violet, and lotus (*Khosrov, Son of Kavad and His Page*, 2001). At the same time, violet, gillyflower and basil, judging by later evidence in Central Asia, can be considered specifically as Persian. In Central Asia for the first half of the 8th century in the suburban residence of the Sogdian rulers of Bukhara and Varakhsha; the tulip, daffodil, rose, peony, poppy, and jasmine flowers that grew in the region are recreated by the ceramic and gypsum carvings on the *iwan*¹ of the palace (Tsvetkova 2013: 31). During Timurid times, which immediately preceded the garden of Mir-Arab, various sources mention roses, daffodils, lilies, tulips, peonies, anemones, gillyflower, marigolds, poppies, and lotuses against a clover background. The ensemble of ornamental and fruit trees and bushes was also quite definite. In the abovementioned Varakhsha, were pomegranates, cherries, and grapes. In the 10th



Ил. 11. Грядки и арыки на участке фруктовых деревьев. Сад Довлатабад, г. Йезд, Иран.

century, Muhammad ibn Jafar an-Narshahi named elm, pears, walnuts, cherries, and almonds as among the most important tree species for Bukhara’s main residences and, in particular, the palace at the gate of the Registan (Narshakhi 2011: 37-38). Cypress, poplar, pomegranate, cherry, apricot, almond, pear, and quince are repeatedly mentioned in Timurid sources (Golombek 2012; Pugachenkova 1987; Clavijo 1992). It is interesting to compare this data with the descriptions of traditional gardens of Bukhara in the 19th century (Khanykov 1843; Yusupova 2005).

It is hoped that this most interesting and very vulnerable site – the former garden of Mir-Arab – will be the subject of archaeological investigation before it is destroyed by modern human activity. Such investigations would be the fulfillment of one of the last important desires of Erbulat Smagulov who has left us for a better world.

1 An *iwan* is a three-walled rectangular hall, space, or portal.

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