



Thinking, Recording, and writing history in the ancient world

Edited by Kurt A. Raaflaub

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in the Ancient World

The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

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Series Editor's Preface

The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

The purpose of this series is to pursue important social, political, religious, economic, and intellectual issues through a wide range of ancient or early societies, while occasionally covering an even broader diachronic scope. By engaging in comparative studies of the ancient world on a truly global scale, this series hopes to throw light not only on common patterns and marked differences, but also to illustrate the remarkable variety of responses humankind developed to meet common challenges. Focusing as it does on periods that are far removed from our own time, and in which modern identities are less immediately engaged, the series contributes to enhancing our understanding and appreciation of differences among cultures of various traditions and backgrounds. Not least, it thus illuminates the continuing relevance of the study of the ancient world in helping us to cope with problems of our own multicultural world.

In the present case, as in that of some of the earlier volumes in the series, “the ancient world” is understood very broadly. Here a phenomenon of crucial importance for human civilization, the function, remembrance, and recording of the past, is examined not only in the global social and cultural context of what is usually understood as antiquity but also in that of societies that existed in later periods but are structurally comparable to ancient ones, such as early Japan, the early Islamic world, and the early Americas.

Earlier volumes in the series are *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub, 2007); *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity* (eds. John Bodel and Saul Olyan, 2008); *Epic and History* (eds. David Konstan and Kurt Raaflaub, 2010); *Geography and Ethnography: Perceptions of the World in Premodern Societies* (eds. Kurt Raaflaub and Richard Talbert, 2010); *The Roman Empire in Context: Historical*

and Comparative Perspectives (eds. Johann P. Arnason and Kurt A. Raaflaub, 2011); *Highways, Byways, and Road Systems in the Pre-modern World* (eds. Susan E. Alcock, John Bodel, and Richard J. A. Talbert, 2012); *The Gift in Antiquity* (ed. Michael Satlow, 2013), and *The Greek Polis and the Invention of Democracy: A Politico-Cultural Transformation and Its Interpretations* (eds. Johann P. Arnason, Kurt A. Raaflaub, and Peter Wagner, 2013).

Kurt A. Raaflaub

Notes on Contributors

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Marc Zvi Brettler is the Dora Golding Professor of Biblical Studies at Brandeis University. He has published and lectured widely on metaphor and the Bible, the nature of biblical historical texts, and gender issues and the Bible. He is coeditor of the *Jewish Study Bible* and the *Jewish Annotated New Testament* (2004), and author of *The Book of Judges* (2002); *How to Read the Bible* (2005); *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (1998), and *The Bible and the Believer* (2012) among other books.

Lisa Brooks is Associate Professor of English and American Studies at Amherst College. Her interests focus on Native American studies, early American literature, and comparative American Studies. She wrote the "Afterword" for *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (2006), has published *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (2008), coauthored a collaborative volume, *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective* (2008), and is currently working on a book project, "Turning the Looking Glass on Captivity and King Philip's War."

David Carr is Charles Howard Candler Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Emory University and currently Visiting Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of *Phenomenology and the Problem of History* (1974, reissued 2009); *Time, Narrative, and History* (1986); *Interpreting*

Husserl (1987); *The Paradox of Subjectivity* (1999); and numerous articles on philosophy and theory of history, especially in *History and Theory*, whose board of editors he joined in 2005.

Nicholas P. Carter has an M.A. in Latin American Studies from the University of Texas and is currently a doctoral student at Brown University, working with the El Zotz Archaeological Project in Guatemala. His research interests are broad, including anthropological archaeology; linguistic and semiotic anthropology; the origins, nature, and disintegration of complex polities; writing systems; and ancient economies. His dissertation focuses on the practice and representation of social inequality in Lowland Maya polities during the Terminal Classic period (circa 800–1000 CE).

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Stephen W. Durrant is Professor Emeritus of Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Oregon, where he was named Distinguished Professor of the Humanities. He has also taught at National Taiwan University and at the University of Münster. He specializes in early Chinese literature, historiography, and history. Among his publications are *The Tale of the Nisan Shamaness: A Manchu Folk Epic* (coauthored, 1977); *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (1995), and *The Siren and the Sage: Wisdom and Knowledge in Ancient Greece and China* (coauthored, 2000). In a collaborative project, he is currently completing a complete translation of the first major Chinese historical text, *Zuo Commentary*.

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Andrew Marsham is Lecturer in Islamic History at the University of Edinburgh. In 2009 he published *Rituals of Islamic Monarchy: Accession and Succession in the First Muslim Empire*. He is also the author of a number of articles and book chapters on the history and historiography of the late antique and early Islamic Middle East, as well as comparative work including “Universal Histories in Christendom and the Islamic World, c.700–c.1400,” in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing* (2012). His current research projects include a history of the Umayyad Empire.

Andreas Mehl is Professor Emeritus of Ancient History at the University of Halle-Wittenberg. His fields of research are ancient (especially Roman) historiography, Hellenism (Seleucid Empire and Ptolemaic Cyprus), the history of Cyprus in antiquity, and the history of culture and civilization. Recent publications include *Roman Historiography: An Introduction to its Basic Aspects and Development* (2011); “Zyperns Einordnung in die politische Welt Vorderasiens im späten 2. und frühen 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.,” in C. Ulf and R. Rollinger (eds.), *Lag Troia in Kilikien? Der aktuelle Streit um Homers Ilias, 207–24* (2011), and “Der Bürger und die Musik in Aristoteles’ Werk über den Staat (Politika): Einige Bemerkungen,” in A. Marneros (ed.), *Episteme, Scientia, Wissenschaft. Eine epistemische Anthologie anlässlich der Emeritierung*, 100–19, 529–36 (2011).

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Jason Neelis is Associate Professor of South Asian Religions at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Canada. He specializes in the study of early Buddhist inscriptions and manuscripts in their historical and religious contexts, and is interested in relationships between patterns of Buddhist transmission and trade networks. He is author of “*La Vieille Route* Reconsidered: Alternative Paths for Early Transmission of Buddhism beyond the Borderlands of South Asia,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 16 (2002 [2006]): 143–64; “Passages to India: Śaka and Kusāna Migration Routes in Historical Contexts,” in D.M. Srinivasan (ed.), *On the Cusp of an Era: Art in the Pre-Kusāna World* (2007): 55–94; and *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks* (2011).

Christian Oberländer is Professor of Japanese Studies at the University of Halle-Wittenberg. His research interests focus on the history of Japan, including

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Kurt A. Raaflaub is David Herlihy University Professor and Professor Emeritus of Classics and History at Brown University. His main fields of interest are the social, political, and intellectual history of archaic and classical Greece and of the Roman republic, and the comparative history of the ancient world. His books include *The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece* (2004); *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece* (2007, coauthored); *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (2007, ed.), and *Epic and History* (2010, coedited). He is currently working on a book on *Early Greek Political Thought in Its Mediterranean Context*, and editing the *Landmark Caesar*.

Robert Rollinger is Professor of Ancient History and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at the Leopold-Franzens University of Innsbruck and currently also Finland Distinguished Professor and Research Director at the University of Helsinki. His main areas of research are the history of the Ancient Near East and the Achaemenid Empire, contacts between the Aegean World and the Ancient Near East, and ancient historiography. Recent publications include *Continuity of Empire (?)*. *Assyria, Media, Persia* (coedited, 2003); *Commerce and Monetary Systems in the Ancient World: Means of Transmission and Cultural Interaction* (coedited, 2004); and *Herodotus and the Persian Empire* (coedited, 2011). He is editor of the Wiley-Blackwell *Companion to the Achaemenid Empire* (forthcoming).

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Theo van den Hout is Professor of Hittite and Anatolian Languages at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, and editor-in-chief of the *Chicago Hittite Dictionary* since 2000. Besides his work on the dictionary, his personal interests focus on ancient record management, the nature and function of Hittite tablet collections, and literacy in Hittite society. Recent publications include *The Life and Times of Hattusili III and Tuthaliya IV* (ed., 2006); “Institutions, Vernaculars, Publics: The Case of Second Millennium Anatolia,” in S. Sanders (ed.), *Margins of Writing, Origins of Cultures*, 221–62 (2007); and *The Elements of Hittite* (2011).

Introduction

KURT A. RAAFLAUB

All ancient peoples remembered the past and thought about it, integrated such memories into their social structures, customs, or rituals, used them to define and shape identities, recorded the deeds of ancestors or great leaders and stories about their origins and important events, composed songs or performed plays about past events, or even developed forms of historical writing. Historical consciousness is one of the hallmarks of developed civilizations. Yet the forms in which such thoughts and concerns found expression vary greatly from culture to culture.

The habit of recording and even writing history emerged independently in various parts of the ancient world: in China, in Mesopotamia and Egypt, in the Americas among the Maya. Other societies picked up earlier impulses, transformed them, adapted them to their needs, and carried them further: Japan, Israel, Greece and Rome, or the Aztecs. In states ruled by kings, history usually took the form of records that celebrated military campaigns, victories, and other royal achievements, of genealogies and king lists, or even of prophecies and omens. They were eternalized in stone or bronze inscriptions that were set up in prominent places (sanctuaries, funeral monuments, or palaces) or carved into rocks at significant landmarks. Such records might be purely textual, purely pictorial, or combine both; they are prominent, for example, in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Anatolia, and among the Maya. They might also be written on perishable materials (like tortoise shells in China, papyrus scrolls in Egypt, or codices in Mesoamerica) or on clay tablets (in Mesopotamia). Finally, they might be integrated into narrated history in various genres and of varying complexity (especially in China or Greece) or preserved, though eventually profoundly

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transformed and reinterpreted in the course of oral transmission over centuries, in myth, heroic epic, or some of the “historical narratives” of the Hebrew Bible.

If the forms differed, so did the purpose and function of past and history in all these societies. Let me look more closely for a moment, without anticipating too much, at one example, that of Greco-Roman antiquity. Whatever the influences the Greeks absorbed from Egypt and West Asia, their historical writing evolved out of a background of heroic epic song and story-telling. In a world of small, independent, open, and competitive communities that were exposed, in the late sixth and fifth centuries BCE, to major challenges first by the mighty Persian empire, then by the fierce rivalry between two Greek imperial systems (of Sparta and Athens), the Greeks developed a new form of historical writing that focused on the drama of politics and war, was adorned by speeches, and increasingly based on explicit methodological and theoretical considerations. This tradition of historical writing continued through Hellenistic and Roman antiquity (in the latter enriched by local traditions) and the (western European, Byzantine, and early Islamic) Middle Ages into early modern times.

Our modern understanding of the nature of historiography, however, is based on principles emerging in the nineteenth century. Whether or not we still believe in it, the ideal formulated by the German historian Leopold von Ranke, that the historian is obliged to reconstruct history “as it actually happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), implied a strong belief in the historian’s commitment to objectivity. The ancient Greeks and Romans too emphasized “truth” in writing history, but their concept of truth differed greatly from that of objectivity. Apart from preserving the memory of great deeds and entertaining their readers with fascinating stories about such deeds, Greek and Roman historians pursued “ulterior motives” that served ideological or didactic purposes. In a view expressed forcefully by Thucydides and Polybius, history represents a repository of past experiences that, if interpreted perceptively and presented effectively, can serve as a “possession for ever,” an instruction for life. The human condition, Thucydides postulates (*History* 1.22.4), offers a constant element in the bewildering kaleidoscope of historical events. By observing patterns in human (individual or collective) reaction to recurring challenges, by determining how and why others succeeded or failed, one can make history useful and prepare oneself for the challenges of life or of a political career. Roman authors writing about the rise and crisis of the Republic, wrote “exemplary history,” highlighting models of virtuous and vile behavior to be emulated and avoided. Cicero’s principle of *historia magistra vitae* (“history as a teacher for life”) was generally accepted in both Greek and Roman antiquity, although the Greeks understood this principle more strictly on a political, the Romans equally on a moral level.

This is but one example. The Greco-Roman tradition has dominated western understanding of history and the writing of history, although we are only now becoming fully aware of how radically different from our own the Greeks’ and Romans’ perceptions of the function of history really was. And any focus on historiography unduly privileges one form of historical awareness and expression over many others. It is also only in recent decades that we have become more fully

conscious of the wealth of other forms of dealing with the past that pervaded Greek and Roman societies. Nor have classicists, with few exceptions, taken advantage of the heuristic potential inherent in comparison with other civilizations. True, recent scholarship has engaged in fascinating comparisons of Greek and early Chinese historiography, two genres developing at almost the same time but, as far as we know, completely unrelated to each other. Yet again, written, literary history represents only one aspect of dealing with the past. Other highly developed ancient societies did not write history; some (like the Inca) did not even develop a formal script. But the past was no less important to them, and they found many ways to integrate it, express it, and use it for their own social, political, religious, and ideological purposes.

Broad cross-cultural comparisons of the ways ancient societies dealt with the past have been rare. An important exception is a volume that was recently published by Oxford University Press (Feldherr and Hardy 2011). The present volume complements rather than reduplicates it in three important ways, among others. First, it throws its net more widely, including societies that chronologically transcend the chronological limits usually chosen for “antiquity” (somewhere between the emergence of Constantine’s Christian empire and that of Islam) but whose historical thinking and writing are deeply rooted in “ancient” traditions (such as Japanese, Buddhist, Byzantine, or early Islamic historiography). We have also included societies that are structurally more closely related to “ancient” societies than to their early modern contemporaries (the Maya, Aztecs, and Native North American Nations).

Second, as its broad title indicates, our volume deliberately does not limit itself to historical writing but approaches the phenomenon of “narratives about the past” much more broadly, thus conveying to the reader some of the wealth of forms and means by which the past was preserved and used in the great variety of cultures that make up the world of ancient or early civilizations.

And third, the contributors to this volume make an effort to bring out the potential of illumination and enhanced understanding inherent in comparison across a wide range of cultures. Although pursuing lines of investigation that seem most productive in their areas, they also pay attention, to the extent possible, to some common questions, such as: What role did the past play in a society’s thought and imagination, its rituals and customs? What significance did it have for the self-understanding or identity, and the self-presentation of a society? Who (what types of individuals or classes) were interested in the past? How was the past imagined, represented, and recorded? What techniques or institutions existed to preserve memory? How and by whom were such memories or records preserved, perpetuated, and communicated to the public (and what public)? What were the sources of (economic, social, and intellectual) support of such practitioners? Were they tied into specific social or political structures, or did they (some) preserve their independence? What genres were developed to commemorate, perform, record, or write about the past? Were private forms or genres distinguishable from public ones? What purposes did the preservation of memory or the recording of the past serve? What interests or ideologies influenced such activities? If historiography existed as a specific literary genre, what were its characteristics? How did this genre

evolve over time? How did it interact with other genres of literature or with other traditions of historical thinking and writing (both within and outside this particular society)? Of course, many more questions could be and have been asked, and full coverage is impossible in the space provided here. Still, we hope that attention to these questions helps give this volume more internal coherence than might otherwise be the case.

In the arrangement of the chapters, we have tried to indicate and trace lines of development: from Chinese and Indian to Japanese and Buddhist, from Mesopotamian to Hittite and Achaemenid Persian, from Greek to Roman, early Christian, Byzantine, and early Islamic, and from Maya to Aztec thinking and writing about history. Especially in the case of the Hebrew Bible, placement in a sequence of traditions is difficult to decide: in so many ways, it reflects Mesopotamian heritages and influences, but the historical books seem close to traditions initiated by the Greeks as well. Moreover, sadly, due to the vicissitudes of scholars' lives and obligations, two important chapters were not written: on Hellenistic historiography and on the role and recording of the past in Inca society. Into these topics, and into others mentioned in this brief introduction, the short list of suggested readings (below) offers an initial avenue.

Early versions of most of the chapters in this volume were presented at a workshop held under the auspices of the Program in Ancient Studies (now Program in Early Cultures) at Brown University on December 12–14, 2008. The workshop was cosponsored by the Departments of Classics, History, and Religious Studies, the Program in Judaic Studies, and the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World. Thanks are due to the financial support of Faith and Frederick Sandstrom, the Programs in Ancient Studies and Judaic Studies, the C.V. Starr Lectureship Fund, and the Royce Family Fund for Teaching Excellence.

Yet, as always, it is individuals who make things happen. I thank the contributors for their participation in this project, whether they were part of the initial cast or joined us afterwards, for their valuable contributions and for their patience throughout the long process of producing this volume, Haze Humbert and her colleagues at Wiley-Blackwell for their enthusiastic endorsement of this project and assistance in producing this volume, Maria Sokolova for indispensable administrative and organizational support before, during, and after our workshop, and Mark Thatcher for producing the index.

Suggested Readings

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On Being Historical

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The conference on “Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World” brought together specialists from many areas of ancient studies. I was asked to contribute a theoretical perspective based on my work in the philosophy of history. As a nonspecialist often embarrassed, frankly, by the lack of concreteness and the lofty generality often (correctly) associated with my (non)discipline, I found this task daunting before the conference; it is even more so afterwards. I was overwhelmed by the richness of detail and the depth of reflection evident in the contributions of the other participants in this conference. Can the philosophy of history really contribute anything of value to this discussion?

Before I sink too deep into self-deprecation – such Socratic modesty is often thought disingenuous – I will assert that a general philosophical perspective can be of great value, provided it is not too lofty. By this I mean that it can be useful to gather together the various strands of historical inquiry and venture some general observations about what they all share and how they differ. It can also be helpful to bring to the surface what they all, at some level, take for granted, perhaps without realizing it. But the philosophical reflection has to draw from their work, not vice versa. Whether historians have anything to gain from the sort of reflection I propose, only they can say. For my part I can only say that my own thinking about history was deeply affected and enriched by what I learned from this conference.

“Philosophy of history,” as a coherent set of questions and concerns, emerged in the modern West at about the same time that “history” itself became a distinct and respectable academic discipline, that is, in the early nineteenth century. It has also

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been conceptually dependent on the knowledge provided by the new discipline of history, and this is reflected in the two kinds of questions the philosophy of history has asked:

First, given the past as we now reliably know it, thanks to the professional historians, does the course of history as a whole make sense? – that is, does it make moral sense? Is it a jumble of events without moral meaning, or worse, as it often seems (and as Gibbon thought), is it just a sequence of follies and atrocities? Hegel famously wrote: “But as we contemplate history as the slaughter-bench, on which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals were sacrificed, the question necessarily comes to mind: What was the ultimate goal for which these monstrous sacrifices were made?” (Hegel 1988: 24). This search for moral sense can rightly be called metaphysical, and perhaps even theological, as pursued by Hegel and others.

A second line of inquiry is not metaphysical but epistemological. Given the past as we know it, again thanks to the historical profession, *how* do we know it, how reliable is our knowledge, and how far does it extend? What is the evidence on which such knowledge is based, and what inferences must be performed to arrive at it? While the metaphysical/moral/theological approach to history has been denounced as “speculative” and empty, the epistemology of history, begun by the neo-Kantians in the nineteenth century and continued by the analytic philosophers of the twentieth, has achieved some measure of respectability.

But there is a deeper question not addressed by these two philosophical approaches, one whose answer underlies what they ask. Both approaches assume not only that knowledge of the past is given to us by historians, but also that the past matters to us enough to make us interested in knowing about it. But why does the past matter to us at all? Either explicitly or implicitly, many of the contributions to this conference raise this question. It is the main question behind the approach to history that I outlined in my presentation, where I focused on the concept of *Geschichtlichkeit*. This broadly theoretical or philosophical question, which derives from the historical school, from Dilthey and from the phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions of the twentieth century, differs from both the metaphysics of history and the epistemology of historical knowledge. Its question is not *What is history?* or *How do we know history?* but rather *What is it to be historical?* Dilthey wrote that “we are historical beings first, before we are observers of history, and only because we are the former do we become the latter ... The historical world is always there, and the individual not only observes it from the outside but is intertwined with it” (Dilthey 2002: 297). Dilthey and his successors think that the past matters to us because we are somehow deeply historical beings, and they want to know what it means to be a “historical being,” and in what sense we are intertwined with history. They want to know how history is encountered, how it enters our lives, and in what forms of consciousness and experience it does so. Thus they are asking questions not so much about historical knowledge as about both historical experience and historical being. And they want to know why this should lead us to become observers of history. Rather than assuming our interest

in the past, they are asking why we should be interested in the past at all. In the original version of my paper, I took up these questions and sketched very general answers to at least some of them, following a broadly phenomenological path. In this published version, I want to ask how my findings might square with some of the things I learned at this conference.

Christian Oberländer remarked at the end of his paper (though no longer of his published chapter, which has a somewhat different focus), “All in all, we find that in ancient Japan – as in other ancient societies – there was no particular interest in history as such.” On the surface this comment might seem to undermine the basic premise of the whole conference, which is that “thinking, recording, and writing history” did take place in the many cultures of the ancient world discussed by the participants. But the crucial part of Oberländer’s statement, I think, is found in the words “as such.” To be interested in “history as such” is to believe that the past matters for its own sake, and that is why it is worthy of knowing. This is a default assumption, I would suggest, of the modern era in which the discipline of history exists.

The emergence of this discipline in the nineteenth century is one expression of the fact that the past did in fact come to matter as such and to be considered worth knowing. But one of the great lessons of this conference for me was the recognition that it has not always been so. If there was indeed thinking, recording, and writing of history in many societies discussed at the conference, it was because the past mattered, not “as such,” but for some reason beyond itself. In other words, it is not enough to say that the past simply “matters”; one must ask *how* it matters. This is the question implied by Oberländer’s remark.

This is a question that was addressed either directly or indirectly by many conference participants. We discovered that in ancient societies the past was appealed to for many reasons: to establish or reestablish *legitimacy* for a particular ruler or class or family of rulers (Schneider on Egypt, Oberländer on Japan); to trace the *origin* of a people, practice, or institution (Brettler on ancient Israel); to find *stability* in the face of rapid or incomprehensible change (Grethlein on ancient Greece); as part of *ritual* observances (Papaioannou on Byzantium, Durrant on China); to provide *models* of meritorious conduct (Neelis on Buddhism, Mehl on Rome). Thus the past is even seen to have purely instrumental value, especially in the service of political power. In its ritualistic, religious, or commemorative sense, it serves needs that perhaps lie beyond the political, helping to anchor society in the world in the face of constant threats of dissolution.

Part of the modern “historical consciousness” that leads us to take an interest in the past for its own sake has to do with the *difference* of the past. It matters *because* it is different from the present; its otherness is what appeals to us. By contrast, according to Mehl, “The Romans were interested in the past, not because they regarded it as being different from the present but, on the contrary, because they considered both qualitatively equal.” And this view would be shared by all those who look to the past for stability and for protection against contingency. If past and present manifest continuity rather than change, then we have more reason to hope for the same in the future.

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