Popular Religion and Ritual

in prehistoric and ancient Greece and the eastern Mediterranean

edited by

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Popular religion and ritual: introductory notes

Giorgos Vavouranakis

Religion and ritual are exciting yet puzzling and difficult topics of research, as their study benefits significantly from an understanding of past people's metaphysical beliefs. Prehistoric archaeology, whose lack of textual sources restricts its affordances for empathy entirely, often abandons the effort to reconstruct systems of religious ideas and, instead, tries to analyse the ways in which such systems affected past ways of life. As much as this alternative aim seems to be, and is, feasible, it asks archaeologists to reach into the deep structural levels of past cultures and understand some of the principles that underlie their mechanics. Traditional archaeology has been rather keen to undertake such quests, as it maintained that they promised to deliver knowledge on the very essence of past cultures in a direct and objective manner. When the culturehistorical project proved ineffective in the mid-1960s, processual archaeologists suggested that the search for the symbolic content of past people's actions was chimeric. Instead, they argued, archaeology should be looking at the social functions of the ideological subsystem, where religion and ritual belonged, and the ways in which this sub-system was part of the overall system of any past society and appropriated processes of politico-economic evolution.

Since the 1980s the post-processual paradigm renewed archaeological interest in the meaning of material culture. This meaning was sought through contextual analysis which promised to give access to the grammar and syntax of the material remains of past religious and other ritual acts. The venture made it clear that the same set of artifacts is capable of having held different meanings. Then, emphasis shifted on the affordances of material culture to host diverse symbolic contents and the ability of the latter to be active rather than passive social constituents. In parallel, the cognitive processual response to postprocessual approaches, particularly Colin Renfrew's (1994) work, attempted to re-conceptualise religion and ritual and to create a checklist of criteria according to which archaeologists should be examining the material record in their quest for past religious beliefs and practices and their social significance.

These paradigmatic shifts have had a heavy impact upon prehistoric archaeology, but they have long reached other subdisciplinary fields, such as Classical or east Mediterranean and Near Eastern archaeology. The latter are frequently better equipped with written and textual sources that, on the one hand, allow a meticulous reconstruction of past religious beliefs

and cult practices, while, on the other hand, they have been fruitfully cross-fertilised with the advances in archaeological theory regarding the social dimensions of ancient and Near Eastern cult practices (for example, see the relevant chapters in Raja and Rüpke 2015).

Despite such theoretical richness and paradigmatic diversity, Insoll (2004: 1) complained that a textbook on the archaeology of religion was still lacking by 2004. A decade and more later, the picture is different, as several co-authored volumes and one handbook have appeared (indicatively see Barrowclough and Malone 2007; Insoll 2012; Kyriakidis 2007; Laneri 2015; Rowan 2012 and papers in the same volume; Steadman 2009; Wesler 2012). Such bulk of past research begets the question why another collective volume on religion and ritual, especially related to Greece and the east Mediterranean in Prehistory and in Antiquity. Both areas and periods are well researched and, evidently, contributions towards the understanding of religion and ritual abound (e.g. see Laffineur and Hägg 2001 and Alram-Stern et al. 2016 for two comprehensive related contributions in Aegean archaeology or papers in Johnston 2004 for an east Mediterranean perspective).

The answer lies in the focus of the present volume upon the popular aspects of religion and ritual, namely the beliefs and practices shared by large groups of people, which usually comprise the lower tiers of society. This aspect of ritual is not well studied, despite notable exceptions, which mostly concern ancient Greece and range from Nilsson's (1940) seminal study to recent contributions (e.g. see Collins 2008; Mikalson 2010). These exceptions are frequently the result of research in the field of Classical Studies than sensu stricto Classical archaeology. This comment does not underplay the importance of such interdisciplinary research. It only wishes to point out that excavations at Classical sites have mostly targeted public buildings and major sanctuaries, sometimes at the expense of the material remains of more private, informal and even subaltern aspects of social life in Antiquity.

In Aegean archaeology discussion is usually restricted to peak sanctuaries, which are usually interpreted as places of worship that stayed outside the control of the Minoan palaces, at least in their Middle Minoan phase (c. 2000-1700 B.C.). Peatfield (2000) has further noted that ordinary and popular cult practices, including but not restricted to the ones accommodated in peak sanctuaries, were more focused on the experiential

aspect of ritual and aimed to serve individual concerns, such as personal health. By contrast Minoan elites employed religion as a means of advertising their power and prestige. This topic has dominated research on Minoan religion. A similar focus may be observed in Mycenean research, although Robin Hägg (1981) had long acknowledged the existence of a popular sphere of ritual practices. Research discourse on the religion and ritual practices in the prehistoric and ancient east Mediterranean and the Near East cultures demonstrates similar thematic tendencies, such as the role of temples in state formation and the emergence of institutionalized systems of belief, such as the Canaanite, Hittite, Mesopotamian or Egyptian panthea of gods or Judaism (recent review by Stephens 2016).

On the one hand, such emphasis is at least partially understandable, as the institutionalization of religious belief and cult practice in all these early societies went hand in hand with the emergence of the first states which heralded the passage to higher levels of social complexity (recent review of the argument by Maran 2016). On the other hand, elites exist only because there are subjects, on whom authority may be exercised, and these subjects may also retain - as they did in many cases in the wider region and the time span under study here - their distinct religious ideologies and ritual activities. In Maurice Bloch's words: 'The creation of this transcendental holistic image of the complete kingdom, including gods and men, thus requires the creation of the incompleteness and disorganization of the subjects' transcendental social, which can only be made complete in the kingdom' (Bloch 2008: 2058). As much as past research has certainly acknowledged this aspect of social life, there seems to be still a lot of ground to be covered. The present volume addresses these gaps in knowledge.

A detailed understanding of the research potential of popular rites, and, indeed, of any topic related to religion, requires a few key-definitions. Even more so since archaeologists have frequently been quick to interchangeably ascribe religious, cultic or ritual significance to remains that simply puzzle them in terms of their function. Consequently, diverse past material remains have been lumped together in a single, untheorized and unproblematized interpretative framework. A part of this problem is understandable because religion is about the metaphysical beliefs that people held in the past, namely collective attitudes towards what lies out of the ordinary. More specifically, religion may be defined as a system of beliefs and practices. These refer to a supernatural order, include the irrational and aim at the understanding of the human condition and its place in the world. Communication with the supernatural order is an important aspect of religion (for detailed discussion and references see particularly Insoll 2004: 6-13; Steadman 2009: 21-23; Stephen 2016: 4-9).

Hence human acts are respectively characterized as cultic or votive, when they aim at the veneration of this supernatural order or focus on its commemoration. As the supernatural order itself is out of the physical perceptual abilities of human beings, its existence and power reside in sacred texts and/or in the performative stability of religious acts. The importance of faithful repetition renders religious acts ritualised and ritualisation is such a key-feature to religion and cult that the terms, religion and ritual are inextricably intertwined. This close relation is accentuated by the common goal of both religion and ritual, namely the renegotiation of the social order. Hence people frequently mistake one concept for the other. Nevertheless, religion and ritual are not identical. For example, a representation of the supernatural order, such as a painting depicting Virgin Mary, may not attain a ritual character. Reversely, there are ritual acts which are not religious and ritualisation may characterise a wide spectrum of human conduct. The power of ritual is strictly in its performance (Bell 1992), which may accommodate diverse and even contrasting meanings together, whereas religious ritual entails the additional but essential reference to the supernatural order. For Peatfield (2001), this may not be necessarily a problem. Not only is empathizing with past people a precarious venture, but the performative and experiential aspect of cult is frequently much more crucial than its significatory elements.

The intricate connection between religion and ritual and the emphasis on the performance of the latter also brings funerary action close to religion. It is also about ritual performances and operates through reference to a supernatural and frequently irrational order, which defines the afterlife status of the dead. There are ethnographic cases where the distinctions between the living, the elders, the dead ancestors and gods are not clear cut but, actually an issue of relative difference (Bloch 2008: 2056-2057). Nevertheless, funerary rites do not have to communicate with the dead or their supernatural order, in any case an unlikely religious action. Often it is enough simply to refer to them. Religion and ritual are also close to magic and witchcraft. The latter also entails ritualized behaviour, while it refers to and communicates with the irrational and by extension the supernatural. It was also related to death as sorcerers had to evoke the powers of the demons of death in ancient Greece (Johnston 2008) and the gods of the underworld in Hittite culture (Collins 2002). The difference between magic and religion is that the former aims at the control of social reality rather than its symbolic appropriation and frequently works instrumentally to the benefit of specific individuals. By contrast, religion and ritual are about the collective ethos and the shared values that regulate the function of society (for a fundamental treatment of the topic see Hubert and Mauss 1902-1903: 6; for magic in the ancient world see Graff 1997).

An important feature of both funerary ritual and magic is their popular element. The latter is particularly strong in funerary ritual, simply because all people die eventually and society has to deal with them. For this reason, archaeologists have often approached funerary ritual as a field of activity with a potential to express – either reaffirm or negate – issues of wider social importance, such as differences in social rank or hierarchy. Contrary to funerary ritual, magic may be either a popular or an elite activity, because it may be performed by both high and average status members of society. It may often be an extension of religion, but there are instances, such as during the Middle Ages, where magic and especially witchcraft were condemned by official religion.

The word 'official' is a key to the current discussion as it introduces a contrast to the popular aspects of religion and ritual, which constitute the main theme of this volume. Religion often becomes official, in other words, institutionalised. This phenomenon is due to the performative stability required by the ritual character of cult practices, whose efficiency ensures the sustainability of the belief system that lies at the heart of any religion. This institutionalisation makes religion similar and ties it to other social institutions, especially to political institutions. For example, religion and political authority were almost one and the same in ancient Egypt, where the Pharaoh was assumed to be a god on earth. In other cases, religion and political authority are distinct but closely related, as in the case of the ancient Greek polis which featured an official state religion.

Such close connection between religion and authority does not only hinge on their common institutionalized character. Formalised and stereotyped cult and other ritual activity frequently becomes an instrument in the hands of elites. These social groups seek to legitimise their place via ideological means, especially through reference to the supernatural, because the latter is an entity one cannot argue against. Thus, religion may become an instrument of wider social persuasion since every sovereignty needs the steady consent of its subjects. It is precisely this ability of religion that prompted Marx's critique, which includes his famous quote that religion is 'das Opium des Volkes' (Marx 1976: 378), meaning that religion may become an instrument in the hands of the ruling elites so as to prevent working classes from becoming socio-politically self-conscious and opposing oppression.

In the light of this Marxian orthodoxy, the term 'popular religion' may at first strike as an oxymoron. Nevertheless, ordinary people may produce their own versions of official cult or other types of ritual activity or even their own systems of belief and practice and maintain them outside elite control. There is no better

example than Christianity itself, which started as an anti-establishment religion in the Roman empire and then developed into one of the examples, par excellence, of authoritative institutions in the late Roman and Medieval periods. It seems then that religion may be either for or against political institutions, or it may be both.

This multi-faceted social role of religion, in both its official and popular varieties, is also illustrated in the wider context of Marx's critique on religion: 'Die Religion ist der Seufzer der bedrängten Kreatur, das Gemüt einer herzlosen Welt, wie sie der Geist geistloser Zustände ist. Sie ist das Opium des Volkes' (Marx 1976: 378). Alternative readings of this work (McKinnon 2005) argue that Marx was not entirely opposed to the ability of opium to offer utopian illusions to its users. Much like opium, the illusions of religion were not seen only as part of false social consciousness but also as a springboard for the people to start pursuing something more out of their lives, such as a change in their miserable living conditions. This way of reading Marx affords religion the twin role that has already been noted above. On the one hand, it secures social subordination and on the other hand it has the potential to comfort people, allowing them to overcome their social miseries and virtually affording them to take social action.

The particular contribution of popular religion and ritual to wider processes of socio-historical evolution may take different forms. In societies with a strong official religion, popular rites may remain restricted as a self-contained phenomenon at the foot of the social pyramid. In other cases, a popular religion may become a vehicle of social and political change, hence religious activism. In between these two extremes lie other possibilities for the social role of popular religion, which may encroach on the periphery of an official cult apparatus and start to change the latter as well as the wider social status quo in a piecemeal manner. This process brings to mind the work of the French philosopher Michel Serres (1980) on the parasite, as a metaphor for slow non-systematic bottom-up processes of social transformation.

When it comes to archaeology, perhaps the most dominant question within research on religion, either official or popular, is its footprint in the archaeological record. This question becomes acute within the study of non-literate societies such as the ones in the Prehistoric Aegean. Research remains largely based upon Renfrew's (1985: 19-20) methodology which places emphasis on the identification of a series of correlates. These may be concentrated at places that are exceptional either due to the natural setting (e.g. caves) or their architecture; extraordinary or special types of artifacts (e.g. the Aegean Bronze Age rhyta, figurines), food or drink

to be sacrificed, offered to the deity, or consumed by the attendants themselves; iconography depicting the deities themselves, ritual gestures or symbols.

Renfrew was cautious enough to underline that collective ceremonial activity is easier to trace than domestic ritual. He also pointed out that the finding of specific categories of artefacts may not be enough to assign a religious character to a specific space. His words of caution do nothing more than bring up the importance of contextual analysis as a way of understanding the – religious in the current discussion - meaning, of excavation finds. His views also afford, albeit implicitly, the suggestion that a religious element may co-exist within mundane contexts of activity. For example, a small cult installation may be part of an otherwise ordinary household. Polysemy then may extend to artefacts of religious significance, and the archaeologist should bear in mind this capacity of material culture to hold multiple meanings. Only iconography and texts may be of some assistance to the archaeologist who tries to distinguish which of these meanings may have been more dominant than the others and to provide clues for their symbolic content.

All these issues were explored in December 2012, during an international two-day conference at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, which aimed to address the relationship between religion, ritual and social organization. Thirty-three papers were presented during this conference. They covered a long time span from the Bronze Age to the Classical period and the geographical distribution of their case studies included mainland Greece, the Aegean including Crete, Cyprus and the east Mediterranean. Some of the papers favoured a formalist view of religion as an officially organised system of beliefs and practice and argued for an oxymoron in the term 'popular religion'. Others, especially the ones that focused on Greek Antiquity, suggested that popular religion and ritual may exist as a subordinate version of the official apparatus and both may be part of an overall comprehensive religious system. Finally, there were papers that relocated the distinction of popular vs. official religion to the binary opposition between private and public ritual. According to their arguments public rituals are more formalised because wide public participation them results in closer monitoring of social behaviour. Private rituals are more open to personal improvisation.

The chapters of this volume are selected and reworked papers from the above conference. **Giorgos Vavouranakis** reviews the evidence of funerary and religious ritual in Crete during the early 2nd millennium B.C., a period that marks the establishment of the first palaces. This review allows him to argue in favour of popular rites spreading throughout the island

and reflecting the rise of the multitude, namely social groupings with relatively loose horizontal organization operating at a regional scale. It is further argued that the rise of the palatial ceremonial centres and their related elite political authority was a response to the emergence of the multitude.

The next two chapters partly reinforce and partly counterpoint the above argument. Ilaria Caloi focuses on the ceramic evidence form Phaistos and its surrounding area in south-central Crete during the early 2nd millennium B.C. She argues that the Middle Minoan IB, namely the very beginning of the Old Palace period is characterised by ritual activities at cemeteries with a rather restricted funerary content. They may have been mostly - albeit not exclusively popular rites aiming to challenge the emergence of the palace at Phaistos and its elite-controlled communal ceremonies. This argument also explains better the rather late construction of tholos tombs at Kamilari and Ayia Triada as places of popular ritual, since they were architecturally impressive but received very few burials. This pattern that changed in the Middle Minoan II period.

Matthew Haysom focuses on peak sanctuaries, which are also a characteristic of Minoan Crete in the Old Palace period or the early 2nd millennium B.C. An exhaustive critical review of the available evidence allows him to argue that these sanctuaries were neither exclusive manifestations of popular cult activity, nor strictly defined arenas for elite display. He argues that a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon allows their definition as places of cult that were outside palatial control, although the elite was still able to penetrate them and promote its ideology through symbolically charged votive depositions, such as figurines of bulls and athletic men. The emblematic use of similar iconographic motifs on seals by the elites of the following Neopalatial period further reinforces Haysom's argument, that peak sanctuaries were not a popular, but rather a contested arena of cult ritual activity.

Santo Privitera examines a well-known feature of Minoan Crete, namely conical cups found inverted. An extensive review of the available evidence dating throughout the Bronze Age leads to the suggestion that there is a stable link between inverted cups and the burning of a solid substance in burial, palatial and domestic contexts. Nevertheless, there are cases where inverted cups are found associated with pouring vessels suggesting toasting ceremonies. Privitera concludes that turning the cups upside down was part of more than one types of ritual, but the gradual transference of this feature from funerary to domestic contexts may be telling of its relation to veneration rites in memory of house ancestors.

Lefteris Platon discusses a Minoan chytros from Zakros, namely a clay cooking vessel featuring a series of miniature cupules on its upper body. It is argued that the chytros was used in ritual activities in a nonpalatial and thus popular environment. Ritual may have included the preparation and offering and/ or consumption of food, possibly pulses and the consumption of drink. Platon connects the chytros to the much later Anthesteria, a festival with chthonic character related to the fertility of the earth that took place in ancient Athens every year. This connection suggests that the vessel from Zakros was part of a prehistoric predecessor of Anthesteria. Annette Højen Sørensen, Walter Friedrich and Kirsten Molly Søholm focus on the wall-paintings found at Akroteri, Thera. Contrary to the established view of these paintings as fine examples of elite art and ideology, they argue that their iconographic themes exhibit a common underlying interest in the principles of transformation and hybridity. These principles are sought in motifs of spirals, scenes related to the cyclical passage of time and in scenes that mix human beings with plants and animals.

The themes of the following three chapters are about ritual in the Mycenaean world. Helène Whittaker criticises the established approach to Mycenean religion and cult ritual, which sees a dichotomy between elite practices of Minoan inspiration and popular practices of a local Helladic genealogy. Her extensive review of the available evidence leads her to suggest instead a division between formal and informal rites. The former were official ceremonies, attended by large both elite and non-elite groups of people. The latter were restricted to the household or the family and were related either to house activities or funerary customs. Nagia Polychronakou Sgouritsa in a way agrees with Whittaker but focuses on the typology and the context of Mycenaean figurines from various sites of Attica, Aegina and Keos. She distinguishes a few unique examples, such as the triple groups of figures, which have been mainly found in tombs and several of them in association with child burials. She attempts to tentatively connect them to later groups of divine figures, such as the Fates, the Graces and the Hours. Nevertheless, she offers a word of caution as regards the meaning and social function of the figurines, including their elite or popular character. These frequently remain elusive despite the existence of adequate contextual information.

Eleni Salavoura examines the evidence for cult activities on two mountain tops, Lykaion in Arcadia and Oros on Aegina. The sanctuary on Mount Lykaion featured acts related to food and drink consumption. Mount Oros has yielded votive objects, including a hoard of bronzes and a stone mould for making double axes. Both sanctuaries are connected to popular cult,

perhaps aimed at controlling nature and the weather in favour of their respective communities. The chapter by **Theodore Eliopoulos** re-focuses on Crete, this time in the 12th and 11th centuries B.C. It approaches the large clay figurines of the so-called 'Minoan Goddesses with Upraised Arms' as elements of past palatial ritual practices of the Late Bronze Age that survived in a popularized form in the Early Iron Age. His argument is based both on the finds contexts of these figurines and on an elaborate analogy with popular Christian religious practices, such as the litanies.

Anastasia Leriou examines the Cypro-Archaic sanctuaries and argues for homogenous ritual practices throughout the island, permeating both elite and nonelite social groups. Such homogeneity, in her opinion, may point to an uninterrupted ritual tradition from the Late Bronze Age open-air sanctuaries to their Cypro-Archaic counterparts. The common cultural identity that the inhabitants of Cyprus seem to have shared despite the political fragmentation of the island probably hinged upon these widely shared ritual practices and was employed as a counterbalance to the successive occupations of Cyprus by the Assyrians, the Egyptians and the Persians. Electra Apostola discusses the representations of Bes, a demon god of Egypt and the Levant, in the Dodecanese, especially in Rhodes and Samos. She argues that Rhodes was a gateway for the diffusion of the images of Bes in the Aegean and the central Mediterranean. Figurines of Bes were dedicated at sanctuaries probably due to the magical powers of the god. Bes seems to have been widely adopted in popular ritual practices, suggesting that commonly held religious beliefs endorsed his apotropaic role and his ability to protect mothers with their infant children.

Valia Papanastasopoulou presents a study on the typology, function and meaning of so-called Judean Pillar Figurines of the 8th and 7th centuries B.C. She links them to the popular cult of goddess Asherah, which was practiced on mountains and mostly in domestic contexts. They may have been considered images of the goddess and were connected to beliefs about fertility and/or the protection of infants. Interestingly, their role ended when they were broken, as they were discarded in a casual manner. Such a cult was against the official monotheism of the monarchic state of Judah and its appearance is linked to the Assyrian and Babylonian pressure upon and subsequent domination of Israel at the time.

Papanastasopoulou closes the suite of papers on the eastern Mediterranean. The themes of the remaining five chapters are about ancient Greece. Two of them are about binding spells and curses in ancient Athens. **Jessica L. Lamont** and **Georgia Boundouraki** review the textual and artifactual evidence on ritual cursing. Then proceed with the examination of a set of cursing

tablets found in Athens, underneath the modern Piraios Street, an area that probably belonged to the ancient deme of Xypete. Their analysis of binding and cursing rites illuminates the world of private and thus popular cult and other ritual activity, which co-existed alongside the official ceremonies of the city-state. Yiannis Chairetakis presents an inscribed bowl from Salamis, dating to the fourth century B.C. The analysis of the remains of the text of the inscription suggest that this item had been used to bind a family and had been probably placed strategically in a domestic pit towards this aim. Chairetakis is thus able to connect this bowl to popular practices of household worship in the wider area of Classical Athens.

The next two chapters are about terracottas found in caves. Maria Spathi examines a group of mostly male and a few female figurines with Silenous, human and animal masks from a cave at Lechova, Corinthia and dated to the Classical period. The parallels from other sites suggest that these figurines were employed in initiation rites associated with age stages and probably the transformation of young people to grown-ups. The ritual may have included music and dancing. Spathi concludes that the ceremonial performances afforded a wide audience and were thus important aspects of social life. Socrates Koursoumis discusses a group of seventeen Classical and Early Hellenistic terracottas depicting women from a cave at Demiova on the Messenian slope of Mount Taygetos, a site which may not be located today. The terracottas suggest extra-urban cult activities in honour of a female deity, possibly Orthis, the patron goddess of ancient Sparta and protector of nature, child bearing, birth and nurturing. The existence of a sanctuary is indicative of the importance of the Messenian landscape, which seems to have been much more than a catchment area and probably imbued with metaphysical meaning.

The last chapter by **Panos Valavanis** proceeds to boldly contrast the ancient Olympic games and athletic activities that take place as part of religious ceremonies in the tradition of the Christian Orthodox church in Greece. These activities include hiking, swimming, racing and even shot-putting, stone tossing and wrestling. He argues that the games constitute popular attempts to influence nature in favour of the people and their farming and pastoral activities and their genealogy goes back to the Olympic Games and other sporting events that happened in the context of religious ceremonies in ancient Greece.

The present volume features the usual diversity of co-authored works with both its strengths and weaknesses. Thus, its individual chapters are written by specialists and may thus examine case studies in a meticulous manner but inevitably, they are not able to offer overviews on popular religion and ritual in their respective areas and periods. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw a few common threads.

One of them is an enriched definition of popular religion and ritual as the beliefs and practices shared by many people, especially from the non-elite tiers of society, regardless of whether these practices are open to public participation and/or monitoring, whether the host is a high-status group or whether both elite and non-elite members participate in them or not. Furthermore, and as with most aspects of human behaviour, popular religion and ritual are not tightly bounded entities, but rather connected with the rest of the social web, as one of the many versions of religious system and ritual practice that any given community adopts.

The most important aspect of popular rites seems to be their social function. They are able to offer better social connectivity and promote social cohesion at large spatial scales, as in the case of Bes in the Dodecanese and even prompt reaction from the upper echelons of societies, such as the Minoan palatial phenomenon or the state of Judah. More often they run next to official cults, as in the cases of Mycenean and ancient Greece. They are also afforded people to make sense of wider social transformations, as in the case of the Mother Goddess with Upraised Arms or Cypriot popular rites at the transition from the Bronze to the Early Iron Age. Such a social role is perhaps what the present volume may offer in the on-going discourse on religion and ritual in the prehistoric and ancient Greece and the East Mediterranean.

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