

Exeter Book Riddles 48 and 59 and the Malmesbury Ciborium

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Most commentators on Riddles 48 and 59 in the tenth-century Exeter Book relate them to church plate, the solution supposedly being a gold *paten* or *chalice* or *pyx*. Yet these answers are not compelling. Problems remain. Recent discussion of the Malmesbury Ciborium and other twelfth-century ciboria in London or New York now permits a fresh approach. The solution to both Old English riddles will be *ciborium*, a vessel of precious metal used to contain consecrated wafers or hosts at the eucharist. The Malmesbury Ciborium and similar pieces make this clear. Round and made of gold, they had a shorter and squatter outline than a chalice; they possessed lids, inscriptions, and representations of Bible scenes (the Crucifixion amongst them); they were yet larger than a *pyx* (used not in services but to carry a few wafers only, as on visits to the sick). These aspects parallel those of the object in the two riddles: a ring-like item of gold which is gazed upon and revered by people in a hall, which makes no noise and yet conveys a message of salvation, and which (in the second riddle) displays Christ's wounds. If this analysis is sound, it deepens understanding of early English poetry. It also informs us on Anglo-Saxon goldsmiths, who produced magnificent works of art (as the literary sources prove) now lost, the gold having long been melted down for the purpose of exchange or as loot. Study of the two poems indicates as well how philologists and experts on material culture can work together, especially for the Exeter Book's other riddles.

1. Introduction

What follows has four main parts. In the first we discuss Riddles 48 and 59 in the Exeter Book and answers proposed to them since 1859. In the second we refer readers to accounts of the twelfth-century Malmesbury or Morgan Ciborium (in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York) and the similar Warwick

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Ciborium and Balfour Ciborium (both in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London). In the third we put this evidence together, proposing that the gallery exhibits allow the solution *ciborium* for the riddles. If so, it shows how post-Conquest works of art cast light on the vanished treasures of the Anglo-Saxon Church, as well as on Old English poetry. Finally, we compare these results with a Latin riddle by Aldhelm (d. 709), where the answer is certainly *ciborium*.

2. The Exeter Book Riddles 48 and 59

We start more than a century ago with Wyatt's editions of the two texts. First, Riddle 48 (in its standard modern enumeration):

Ic gefrægn f[o]r hælepum hring [ær]endean
 Torhtne butan tungan, tila, þeah he hlude
 Stefne ne cirmde strongum wordum.
 Sinc for secgum swigende cwæð:
 'Gehæle mec, Helpend gæsta!
 Ryne ongietan readan goldes
 Guman, galdorcwide; gleawe beþuncan
 Hyra hælo to Gode, swa se hring gecwæð.

Second, Riddle 59:

Ic seah in healle, hring gyl[d]enne
 Men sceawian modum gleawe,
 Ferþpum frode. Friþospe[de] bæd
 God nergende gæste sinum
 Se þe wende wriþan Word æfter cwæð
 Hring on hyrede, Hælend nemde
 Tillfremmendra, him torhte in gemynd
 His Dryhtnes naman dumba brohte,
 Ond in eagna gesihð gif þæs æþelan
 Goldes tacen ongietan cuþe,
 Dryht[en] dolgdon [...]
 Swa þæs beages benne cwædon.
 Ne mæg, þære bene [...]
 Æniges monnes ung[e]fullodre,
 Godes ealdorburg gæst gesecan,
 Rodera ceastre. Ræde, se þe wille,

Hu ðæs wrætlican wunda cwæden
 Hringes to hæleþum, þa he in healle wæs
 Wylted ond wended wloncra folmum.

In notes upon the pair, Wyatt stated that there was “little, if any, doubt” that *chalice* (after papers of 1859 and 1865 by Franz Dietrich) was the solution to both. He ruled out *pyx* because this object lacked the powerful symbolic quality of the chalice, “a sacred vessel consecrated with holy chrism”. After some dismissive comments on the second poem’s “vagueness and dullness of phrase”, Wyatt (1912: 37–38, 43–44, 105, 108) translated its obscure lines 7–11 as “Dumb, it brought vividly into his mind the name of his Lord, and, into the sight of his eyes, if he could understand the token of the noble gold, the wounded Lord”. So Dietrich’s suggestion *chalice* has had a long career. Yet this paper will fail if his oft-repeated answer is not rejected.

Difficulties of the texts are brought out in Mackie’s EETS edition of the Exeter Book, with these translations:

I have heard of a bright ring announcing good tidings
 In the presence of men, though tongueless, and though it did not
 Cry out with strong words in a loud voice.
 The precious thing, while keeping silent, said before men,
 ‘Save me, helper of souls’.
 Many men understand the mysterious saying,
 The charmed speech of the red gold, and may those that are wise
 Entrust their salvation to God, as the ring said.

Gaps in his version of the second riddle underline its problematic nature:

I saw men who were wise in mind
 And prudent in spirit gaze in a hall
 Upon a golden ring. He who turned the ring round
 Prayed to God the Saviour for peace and happiness
 For his soul. The ring afterwards spoke words
 In the congregation, named the Saviour
 Of those who do good, and, though dumb, brought
 The name of the Lord clearly into their remembrance
 And into the sight of their eyes, if one could understand
 The significance of the noble gold,
 The wounded Lord [...]
 As the wounds of the ring said.

When the prayer [...]

Of any man is unfulfilled, his soul

Cannot go to God's princely capital,

The city of the skies. Let him who will

Explain how the wounds of that wonderful ring

Spoke to men, when in the hall it was

Turned round and round in the hands of proud men.

In his list of solutions, Mackie (1934: 143, 151, 241) gave *chalice* or *pyx* as surely the answer to Riddle 48, and *chalice* to Riddle 59.

The text of the riddles was tidied up in the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records edition, with elimination of gaps left by previous editors. It was there noted how Dietrich in 1859 solved the first as *chrismal*, regarded as “the pyx or vessel which holds the chrism”, with Tupper thereafter proposing *paten* and Wyatt *chalice*; *chalice* was universally accepted for the second, despite objections made in 1915 by Moritz Trautmann (cf. Krapp & Dobbie 1936: 205–206, 209–210, 347, 351–352). Yet if *chalice* is unsatisfactory, *chrismal* is still more so. Seen on rare occasions only, a chrismal lacks the associations with Scripture and daily worship that the two riddles surely imply.

After that, stasis, with the answer on both poems in 1992 still appearing as *chalice* (Santano Moreno & Birtwhistle 1992: 228, 229). Recent scholars add details. For Riddle 48, Salvador-Bello (2015: 359–360) observes that Tupper's 1910 suggestion *paten* was supported in 2006 by John Niles, although she herself is undecided between *paten* or *chalice*. For Riddle 59 she cites others on how this entity's “wounds” allude “to the fact that the chalice bears an inscription” (2015: 376–379). One wonders. An inscription on metal might be taken as a ‘wound’. Yet the comparison appears strained. A simpler explanation is offered below. As for Corinne Dale (2017: 39, 68), whose subject is eco-criticism and eco-theology (not man-made objects), she accepts the received answers (if noting dissent from them), adding that the “wounds” in Riddle 59 are “markings on the chalice”.

Craig Williamson similarly accepts “*paten* or *chalice*” for Riddle 48 and *chalice* for Riddle 59. His translations can be compared with those of Mackie eighty-three years previous.

This bright circle spoke to men,
The tongueless treasure without voice —
The ring wrought power in silence saying,
‘Save me, Healer of souls!’ Let those

Who read the red gold's silent song-craft
 Catch the incantation, solve the song,
 And give their souls to God as the ring said.

I saw heart-strong, mind-sharp men
 Gazing in a hall at a golden ring.
 Who turned the ring prayed to God
 For abiding peace, the hall-guests'
 Grace. The bright circle of gold
 Spoke the name of the Saviour of good
 Men to the gathering, proclaimed to the eye
 And mind of man the most glorious token,
 Spoke though dumb of the suffering king
 To all who could see in its bodied wounds
 The hard carving of Christ. An unfulfilled
 Prayer has no power in heaven; the dark
 Soul will not find the city of saints,
 The throne of power, the camp of God.
 Let the man who knows how the wounds
 Of the strange ring spoke as it passed round
 The hall —twisting, turning in the hands
 Of proud men— explain the riddle.

Williamson (2017: 546–547, 550, 1161, 1163) again takes the first as “paten or chalice” and the second as *chalice*, the *wounds* being “probably icons or inscriptions”. Most recent are Jorge L. Bueno Alonso (2021: 148, 152) and Jennifer Neville (2020: 27). Although the former mentions *ring* for 48, he prefers *paten* or *chalice*, with *chalice* being “probable” for 59. The latter, in analysis of what she thinks is a poem on the sun (when it surely describes the chained door of a city gate), is certain that 48 is about a paten, and 59 “an inscribed chalice”.

The above reveals continuity from Dietrich in 1859 to Neville and Bueno Alonso in 2021. There are yet unanswered questions, some of which disturbed Trautmann in 1915 and are still troubling. Chalices are round, no doubt; but they tend to be tall, so that *bring* or *beag* ‘ring’ seem a curious term for them. Stranger are the words on *wounds*. No chalice or paten has been produced as evidence on that. It seems a forced reading of the text. Nor, in poems allegedly about chalices, is there any reference to wine, which is also strange. Hence the need for a different interpretation, modifying earlier ones.

3. Three early English ciboria

Let us turn from chalices and patens to ciboria. The word has a bizarre history. In Classical Latin it meant ‘drinking cup’, being borrowed from late Classical Greek *kiburion*, a word of Egyptian origin for the seed-pod of the Egyptian bean. The Latin word makes a unique appearance in Book Two of Horace’s *Odes*, on how the poet gave his old friend Pompeius Varus a hearty welcome: “Fill up light ciboria with care-soothing wine from Mount Masico; pour out perfumes from king-size shells!”.

Oblivioso laevia Massico
Ciboria exple; funde capacibus
Unguenta de conchis.

These ciboria were hardly real Egyptian bean-pods (as some imagine), but cups which were shaped like them and used at parties (Lewis 1901: 160). For such a convivial word Christianity had a surprising new use. *Ciborium* is explained in an eighth-century English glossary as ‘tomb’ (Lindsay 1922: 39). The arresting change of meaning from ‘seed-case’ to ‘wine-cup’ to ‘grave’ (and then ‘vessel for consecrated hosts’) was clarified in Braun’s monumental history of chalices, monstrances, thuribles, and the like (it includes the Warwick *Ciborium*, confusingly described as a *pyx*). The word *ciborium* has a basic sense ‘container’, and there was a natural graduation from the idea of the tomb as the body’s last container to that of the vessel which contained Christ’s Body, ready for distribution to the faithful, and with a lid to prevent the holy wafers inside from falling out (Braun 1932: 280, 342, plate 50). Chalices were tall; ciboria were lower and more bulbous. In addition, the wine within a chalice was not usually given to the faithful at celebrations of the Eucharist from the seventh century onwards, so that Luther eventually made an issue of the practice (Dix 1945: 629). To the senses of *ciborium* given above is another, for a baldachino-like canopy over an altar, “a complete little house surrounding the place for the altar sacrament” (Hirn 1957: 34). However, that meaning does not concern us here.

Information on the Anglo-Saxon Church’s plate indicates further why *chalice* is not a satisfactory answer. A sumptuous benedictional from tenth-century Winchester has an illustration of a bishop before an altar with chalice and paten. The chalice has a tall cup-like shape and is unadorned (Wormald 1959: 30–31). It is hard to see it as a ‘ring’, harder to perceive its ‘wounds’. The same may be said in different ways of the seventh-century Hexham Chalice (seven

centimetres high); the elaborate eighth-century chalice (twenty-seven centimetres high and of English design) presented by Duke Tassilo to Kremsmünster, Austria; or the ninth-century silver chalice found in 1774 at Cornish tin-workings by Trehiddle, near St Austell (Thomas 1971: 198–199). None of these is much like a ring. Other sources do not help either. A Latin poem composed in about 690 by Aldhelm for the Abbess of Withington (in present-day Gloucestershire) details the splendours of her church, with a “brilliant jewelled chalice” amongst them (Mayr-Harting 1972: 193–194). If “virtually all endowments of this kind have perished”, there is “no lack of written evidence” on what has gone. Peterborough Abbey in the late tenth century had four chalices of silver, and there are indications of similar wealth at Bury St Edmunds, Ely, Abingdon, Glastonbury, and Worcester (Hunter Blair 1977: 191). The classic comment must yet be that of King Alfred, reflecting how “before everything was ravaged and burnt” by Viking attacks, “the churches throughout all England stood filled with treasures and books” (Whitelock 1979: 889). There is still nothing in this to nail down the solution *chalice* (or *paten*) for the riddles. If we are to find an answer, it will have to come from after 1066, and specifically from the twelfth century.

That brings us to the Warwick, Balfour, and Malmesbury Ciboria, their features conveniently summarised in a Victoria and Albert Museum catalogue. All of them have six Old Testament scenes on their bowl, regarded as foreshadowing six New Testament scenes on their cover; all are of similar date and are probably from the same workshop. The Warwick Ciborium (discovered in 1717, its lid already lost) was damaged in a Warwick Castle fire of 1871, and is now best appreciated from an early watercolour belonging to the Society of Antiquaries. Amongst the six images on its bowl are ones of Isaac’s carrying of logs, the sacrifice of Isaac, and Jonah and the Whale. All three were related to Christ’s Passion. On the analogy of the two other ciboria, the cover would have shown Christ’s carrying of the Cross, the Crucifixion, and the women at the Sepulchre. On the Balfour Ciborium (18.3 centimetres high and of the 1160s) there appear (on its bowl) Isaac carrying logs and the Sacrifice of Isaac, but now with Samson and the Harlot of Gaza (not Jonah and the Whale); on the lid are the corresponding *via dolorosa*, Crucifixion, and women at Christ’s Tomb. These subjects had known equivalents in twelfth-century wall-paintings at Worcester and Peterborough cathedrals. The Malmesbury Ciborium (19 centimetres high), now in New York, again shows Isaac (carrying logs) and Samson, but this time with Moses and the Brazen Serpent (not the Sacrifice of Isaac). On the lid are the Way of the Cross, Calvary, and Women at the Tomb.

The low rotund outline of all three vessels also contrasts with that of a chalice. Finally, the lids have or had Latin inscriptions (Campbell 1983: 26–27). To those we shall return.

Before that, further accounts of Anglo-Saxon chalices again rule out the answer *chalice*. If the one from Trewiddle demonstrates the silver wealth of late ninth-century England, greater splendours are revealed by the Tassilo Chalice, given to the monastery of Kremsmünster (and there to this day) by Tassilo, Duke of Bavaria (until Charlemagne deposed him in 778). This impressive gilt object has engravings of Christ with the saints and a cast inscription on Tassilo and Liutpiric (his duchess). Its features show the influence of English craftsmanship (Wilson 1991). The Trewiddle Chalice is plain, the Tassilokelch is ornate; yet the contrasts between them and our three English ciboria are marked. Here are some of them.

A chalice contained wine, not usually given to the laity at a medieval mass. A ciborium contained bread for distribution to communicants. The nature of a consecrated wafer should be stressed. At the Consecration the bread miraculously became “the body of Christ; what had been indeed the work of human hands became the holiest object in the universe” (Kamerick 2002: 52–53). Hence, we submit, the powerful religious feelings conveyed by the two riddles. Whereas the chalices are tall, the ciboria have a dumpy (almost bun-like) outline, being almost as broad as they are high. They present Christ’s passion and have inscriptions on it. The nature of the last may be discovered from an edition of an Old English poem and its bibliography. On the Malmesbury Ciborium, for Christ bearing the Cross, are the words SIC A LAP[IDIB]IS CESUS PIA DUCITUR HOSTIA IHESUS, ‘Jesus, like a man dead by stoning, is led forth, a blessed sacrifice’. For Christ on the Cross is the text UT VIVAS MECUM FELIX HOMO DORMIO TECUM, ‘I sleep with you [in death], O Man, that you should live with me in bliss’. On the Balfour Ciborium for the Crucifixion (also with allusion to the Brazen Serpent raised up by Moses) is written IN CRUCE MACTATUR, PERIT ANGUIS, OVIS REVOCATUR, ‘On the cross he is slain, the serpent perishes, the sheep is reclaimed’ (Rambaram-Olm 2014: 110–111, 113–114). These phrases in mind, we return to the Exeter Book.

4. Comparison of the ciboria with the riddles

Even with a foot (and a pommel to lift the cover), the twelfth-century ciboria are (as noted) almost as wide as they are tall. They hence look more like a ring than a chalice does. They have inscriptions which certainly convey a silent message before men *strongum wordum* 'with strong words' or 'in a loud voice'; words that some might think could hardly be stronger. Other expressions relate to liturgy. The first riddle has the phrase *Gebæle mec, Helpend gæsta*, 'Save me, helper of souls'; the second tells how "He who turned the ring round / Prayed to God the Saviour for peace and happiness / For his soul". The second and perhaps the first of these may be linked to Psalm 51:2, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin". At mass, after the bread and wine have been brought to him, the celebrant utters this phrase as he washes his hands before going on to the Eucharistic Prayer and Consecration. What he says fits the solution presented here as no other proposal does. It accords too with the lines following, on how "The ring afterwards spoke words / In the congregation" and "brought / The name of the Lord clearly into their remembrance / And into the sight of their eyes". The bread has been consecrated, the faithful go up to the altar, standing or kneeling they receive on their tongues the communion wafers which the priest takes from a ciborium. At this point, before returning to the body of the church, the communicants had such a vessel clearly in "the sight of their eyes".

As for the images and phrases that they might see, these are equally urgent. The old serpent is vanquished, the sheep is saved. Christ dies that humanity should live with him in bliss. In word and picture, Christ's wounds were manifested before the men and women at mass. We can say more. These objects are covered in gold leaf and are beautiful to look at. That explains the terms *torhte, readan goldes, bryng gylденne*, 'splendid', 'of red gold', 'a golden ring'. The lines on how if the prayer "Of any man is unfulfilled, his soul / Cannot go to God's princely capital" also relate to the Eucharist, and specifically to St Paul's warning on it: "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup" (I Corinthians 11:28). If communicants do not do this, eating and drinking "unworthily", they commit sacrilege. (On what that leads to, Paul has sharp things to say.)

If, then, we can assume that English ciboria of the tenth century had on them representations of Christ, accompanied with inscriptions; that in this they resembled the Tassilo Chalice (designed on eighth-century English models); that, like twelfth-century English ciboria, they were covered in gold leaf (or

even made of gold); that, unlike chalices, they were not tall and did not contain wine; that they were handled by priests who were “proud” and who used them to give Christ’s body to the faithful; that they brought the Easter story before the eyes and imagination of worshippers, inspiring them to pray; then we could take the solution to Riddles 48 and 59 as *ciborium*. Such items were familiar to the clerics who wrote these poems. In the “hall” of a church, ciboria were every day “[t]urned round and round in the hands of proud men”, the form *wlonc* ‘proud, exultant, splendid’ here applying to the priests who handled those precious things. Containing the Body of Christ, ciboria had profound religious associations; perhaps now not easy to grasp when one sees them displayed inside the glass case of a museum.

Whether *ciborium* is here correct or not, one thing that Riddles 48 and 59 cannot possibly describe is an inscribed gold ring, despite arguments of Professor Peter Orton in an unpublished talk preliminary to the 2019 IAUPE conference at Poznań, Poland. It is true that Anglo-Saxons wore gold rings, some of which had pious inscriptions. Yet there are four reasons why his proposed answer cannot be right. First, no ring, not even a bishop’s one, had a fraction of the religious authority possessed by an altar vessel. Second, while a ciborium might show Christ’s wounds in the most obvious way, no ring was likely to do that. Third, rings are worn on fingers, but they are not usually passed round a hall; and (unless one came up close) one would not know the import of any religious inscription on them. A ciborium, seen by all at mass, was another matter. Finally and (one might think) definitively, the riddlers call their items a *bring*, *wriða*, and *beag*. These all mean ‘ring’, and it would be a poor riddler who gave away his answer so ineptly. The answer *ciborium* remains.

5. Ciboria and Aldhelm’s Riddle 55

There is a further comparison to make as regards Riddle 55 in the collection by Aldhelm (d. 709). It has been translated as follows, with the answer given as *chrismal*:

I am revered as a house of nourishment and filled with a divine gift; but no one unlocks folding doors or opens an entrance, nor does a squared atrium support a roof. Though gems blaze on the outside of my body, where a gold knob glistens with lustrous metals, my dull insides are adorned much more richly: Christ’s

most beautiful form burns there. The radiant glory of holy things shines so.
 There is no timber in this temple and the roofs do not rise on columns.
 (Allen & Calder 1976: 170)

With citation of F. Glorie's (1968) edition of them (where the answer is correctly given as *ciborium*), this and the ninety-nine other enigmata in Aldhelm's collection have been regarded as composed fairly early in his career (Lapidge & Herren 1979: 13). Item 55 certainly belongs to the group of poems there on "church furniture" (Orchard 1999: 171). Such texts are said to appear with "the solutions as titles or even concealed within the enigma" unlike the Exeter Book Riddles (Love 2016: 5). Nevertheless, that the subject of Aldhelm's poem could be regarded even in 1976 as *chrismal*, containing holy oils, when it must be *ciborium*, containing consecrated hosts, indicates problems even here. That Aldhelm could write a poem about a richly-decorated ciborium also naturally strengthens the case for *ciborium* as the solution to Exeter Book Riddles 48 and 59.

6. Conclusions

If the above arguments are sound, two more Exeter Book Riddles may be taken as solved. That should interest art historians on what Anglo-Saxon goldsmiths might produce for a great church, what it looked like, and how it was regarded. As a clue to pre-Conquest treasures today all but lost, it should also interest researchers on other Exeter Book Riddles. Amongst such investigators are Jennifer Neville at Royal Holloway College and Rafael Pascual at Oxford. The following shows how verses other than the above can sharpen our focus on early English life and learning.

In this context we note how Riddles 48 and 59 are not the only Old English poems referring to details of goldware. Cynewulf's lives of St Helen and St Juliana allude to 'appled gold', as does The Phoenix (by an unknown poet). Although the phrase has puzzled scholars, equivalents in medieval Welsh and Irish indicate a meaning 'apples or balls of gold', used as gifts or personal adornments (Breeze 1997). For the riddles themselves we can add these solutions (all prompted by Dr Jennifer Neville's innovative study of the material) to those listed in 2017 by Craig Williamson. Number 4 in the Exeter Book is *door of a city gate*. The men and women styled in it as *grombeort* 'angry at heart' are marketfolk come to town, who at a winter dawn are shouting at the

gatekeeper to open up; the *wearm limb* [idese] ‘warm limb [of a woman]’ belongs to a female of a certain class, who uses it to seduce a foolish warder into letting her in after curfew. Riddle 30 is about glass. It describes a glazier shaping molten glass with a blowpipe, and the resulting vessel admired at a noble banquet. Riddle 39’s solution is *hope*, which has neither “blood nor bones” but gives comfort everywhere except in heaven (where it is superfluous) and hell (where it is useless). Riddle 43 is not about body and soul, but an individual and his guardian angel, the “mother” mentioned therein being Divine Wisdom — compare the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament (Breeze 2007). The answer to Riddle 74 is not *siren* or *cuttlefish*. It is *Ceyx and Alcyone*, a loving married couple lost at sea and then transformed by the gods into halcyons or kingfishers. Ovid tells their legend in Book Eleven of his *Metamorphoses*, where the Old English poet read it. Riddle 95 is elucidated by the first chapter of the Book of Proverbs. It is about “Instruction in Wisdom”, with the passage on how she “uttereth her voice in the streets: she crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words” being echoed by the poet. Finally, the Exeter Book’s Latin “riddle”, which is no riddle, despite what is always said. It is a Cornish-Latin political prophecy on events of 927 or so, when the youthful Athelstan was challenged by Viking rebels at York and Cornish rebels at Exeter. Its author therein foretold Athelstan’s doom. (The king’s swift counter-measures soon led to another outcome.)

For those weary of dragons and bloodbaths, the Exeter Book’s Riddles conjure up other aspects of the Anglo-Saxons, whether a town gate by night and day, a glassblower at his furnace in the woods, scholars reading the Vulgate or (in lighter mood) Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, or priests and people at Holy Communion; the last of these apparently letting one solve numbers 48 and 59 in the collection as *ciborium*.

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