Mithraism: Archaeological Evidence Of The Spread And Change Of A Roman Cult Religion

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Abstract: The cult of Mithraism is generally well-known in circles concerning Roman history and archaeology. The set of beliefs embodied by this cult transformed very rapidly when adopted by the Romans. This adoption most likely occurred in the late first century C.E. There are currently several proposed theories concerning the Roman adoption of Mithraism, and these focus on the Roman military during its occupation of Persia. Archaeology has uncovered origins of Mithraism in this area and as far east as India. When Mithraism reached Rome, it became very popular among legionnaires and lower statesmen. There is substantial archaeological evidence of Mithraism’s prominence in nearly all of Rome’s territories, including modern Great Britain and Africa. Most of this evidence occurs in the form of ruined Mithraeums. By the late third century C.E., Mithraism had all but disappeared, as it came into conflict with Christianity in Rome. The fact that followers of Mithras left few written records forces us to rely solely on archaeological evidence for information about its origins, growth, and eventual disappearance.
Introduction: The cult of Mithraism is not necessarily a new subject in the field of archaeology. Some of the first prominent work on the subject was done in the 19th century by Franz Cumont, whose Classical interpretation posited that Roman Mithraism was simply a Persian transplant that became Romanized as it spread throughout the Roman empire (Shandruk 2004). Cumont’s work led to a widely accepted theory that Mithraism, or at least the idea of Mithras, existed even before Zoroastrianism, another cult of prominence in Persia. He also sought to prove that Mithraism had in fact been a product of earlier Zoroastrian beliefs. Tracing the beginnings of Mithraism to this point was no easy task for Cumont, but his work influenced a generation of historians and archaeologists, and paved the way for later work on the subject. The main downfall of Cumont’s thesis is his adherence to a faulty belief that Mithraic rituals and, on a larger scale, Mithraism itself had not changed much after the Romans adopted it (Shandruk 2004). While Cumont was right about some things, namely that in Mithraism a soul rises to the sky or descends to a realm of evil spirits, or that in Mithraism there is a representative ladder of seven rungs to represent the seven planets, his research is considered now to be off-center (Cumont 1959). We now know that Cumont was working from a culture-historical approach that tended to ignore the complex relationships that the Romans had with the people they conquered. In fact, later research, conducted largely by John R. Hinnells and David Ulansey, points out two major components of Roman Mithraism largely ignored by Cumont (Ulansey 1989). First is the fact that Roman Mithraism became largely hierarchical as it grew in prominence. Second, there is little evidence of Mithras being so prominent a figure in early Zoroastrian religion in Persia. Thus, it can be inferred that the Romans adopted Mithraism as their own and tailored it to some degree in order to suit their own preexisting beliefs (Ulansey 1989).
The focus of this paper, then, is not to rehash historical research or to look into what has already been discussed at length by a great many writers and researchers. This paper will instead look primarily at Mithraism after its adoption by Rome, and the various forms it took after the initial acquisition. By employing a comparative approach to several Mithraeum sites at points all over the Roman Empire, I plan to point out the various similarities and differences of the worship practices at each site. The focus will be on Mithraism’s evolution as it spread across the empire, and what changes were or were not made as it became adopted by various indigenous groups who found themselves within the realm of Rome. Also of interest is how Mithraism may have changed when practiced by Romans who found themselves stationed further away from the central hub of Rome’s activity, i.e. the city of Rome itself. Finally, this paper will briefly address any significant changes Mithraism might have gone through as it came into conflict with the rising popularity of early Christianity in the Roman Empire, and how this conflict may have eventually led to the downfall of Mithraism.

**Background:** The cult of Mithraism is a subject surrounded by uncertainty. While we know for sure that the cult and its practices were adopted by the Romans in about the 1st century CE, the history of the cult before this time remains something of a mystery. Much of what we know about Mithraism stems from the Roman practices, but many historians agree that the origins of the cult of Mithras must go back much farther.

Mithras was a concept nearly unknown to the public for centuries, except for perhaps for a select few archaeologists and historians who specialized in ancient Rome. The first person to pursue the subject in detail was Franz Cumont, a Belgian archaeologist and historian with quite an impressive reputation (See Figure 1.1).
Cumont was born in 1868 and graduated from the University of Ghent with a Ph.D. in 1887 (Shandruk 2004). Cumont was recognized early as a talented individual, and was sent to work as an archaeologist in Armenia. He is most recognized, however, for his comprehensive work regarding the influence of Eastern religions on the Roman Empire, namely Mithraism. His life’s work, entitled Texts and Illustrated Monuments Relating to the Mysteries of Mithra, was first published in 1900, with an English translation surfacing in 1903. While unable to find this original, seminal work of his, I was able to read several of his other books to gain more insight into what his research was aimed at. Cumont was smart enough to see a connection between Mithraism and the cosmos, but assumed that the religion itself had forced its way into the Roman Empire along with the worship of Isis, Serapis, Baal, and others (Cumont 1960). Cumont, taking a strongly interpretive approach, sought to explain why such eastern religions would have appeal to the practical Romans. He argued for a duality in Persian cults that appealed to the subtle duality of the Roman existence (Cumont 1956). He wrote that the Romans, while practical on the outside, were still prone to worshipping a pantheon of gods, many of whom were just personifications of certain human qualities. That said, the appeal of Mithraism becomes more apparent for the Romans. They saw a cult with belief in a “heaven” and “hell,” a connection to the stars, and a celebration of good virtue. Also appealing was the secretive nature of such a cult.

Rather suddenly, the Mithraic religion became a well-known topic in archaeological and historical circles. Cumont hypothesized that the Roman Mithraic religion was an adoption of the much more ancient cult of Mithra, and that its practices spread from the Middle East to Greece, and from Greece to Rome (Shandruk 2004). Cumont’s theory proved to be a success in its time,
as it was widely read due its readability. The general public at the turn of the last century was greatly interested in the lands of the East, an area poorly understood at the time and very intriguing to the average reader of historical books (Ulansey 1989).

The theories that Cumont proposed hinged on some very ancient texts, particularly a collection of texts known as the Zend-Avesta. This text is the collection of sacred writings of Zoroastrianism, and his goal was to somehow connect these Zoroastrian writings with the practices and beliefs of the ancient Roman followers of Mithras (Beck 2006). His focus, then, fell mainly onto the scene known as the Tauroctony (see Figure 1.2).

The Tauroctony is the most well-known scene in all of Mithraic belief, and centers on a key event in the mythical life of Mithras himself (Wynne-Tyson 1972). Known to be a popular scene in the Roman religion, Cumont sought to connect it to the ancient Eastern Zoroastrian texts and thus prove a definitive connection between the two. The Tauroctony, several examples of which can be seen in museums the world over, is a complex scene of the most pivotal event in the mythology of Roman Mithraism. In the scene, Mithras is wrestling a bull to the ground, holding it by one horn while plunging a sword into its back. Below, a scorpion is attacking the bull’s genitals, and a snake and a dog are attacking the wound that Mithras has inflicted on the bull. Overhead, a raven can sometimes be seen.
Cumont attempted to connect this scene with a very prominent scene in the Zoroastrian texts, where a bull is sacrificed and from it flows the eventual cycles of life and death on earth, as well as all forms of plant and animal life (Shandruk 2004). To Cumont’s way of thinking, Mithraism was about ethics, and the Persian ideas of dualism that led to our beliefs of Good and Evil, and Right and Wrong; the eternal struggle in which life is a battlefield and the followers of Mithras were his soldiers (Cumont 1956).

Though Cumont is credited with bringing the name and subsequent mythology of Mithras to the forefront of archaeological and historical interest, his theories have suffered much criticism from later researchers. David Ulansey, a professor of religion who studied at Princeton, is the most prominent critic of Cumont. Ulansey points out that there is no mention of Mithras in the Zoroastrian texts, and that no Tauroctony scenes exist in what was once the Persian Empire (Ulansey 1989). Therefore, it is generally agreed upon today that Cumont was grasping at straws. However, we credit Cumont with doing the first exhaustive studies of Mithraism in the ancient world.

Mithraism has been well-known and heavily studied since Cumont’s first interpretations around the turn of the last century. We know quite a bit about the theology and practices of the religion, but it is important to note that researchers often must make assumptions based on archaeological evidence, because very little text remains (or was ever created) that describes what it is that followers of Mithras actually believed and practiced. The following is a brief outline of what researchers have both discovered and posited concerning the religion of Mithraism.

Mithraism was, first and foremost, a mystery religion of the Roman Empire. A mystery religion in the Greco-Roman world was one that a person could only practice if he or she
(usually only he) had been initiated. The term “religion” is used here loosely, and most historians prefer to call the mystery religions cults instead, because they were almost always offered as substitutes to whatever state religion was in place. Rarely did these cults have textual sources to back them up, and they were almost always formed solely on the basis of a set of secret rites of passage that one had to pass through in order to become a member. The first writings that we have about Mithraism come from Porphyry, a Roman Neoplatonist philosopher and writer who lived in the mid-200’s C.E. According to his views, the lower level initiates were simply attendants to the upper four levels of Mithraic rank, or the “true participants” (Shandruk 2004).

We must take a look at the various inscriptions found in conjunction with Mithraeums, because they are really the only textual evidence we have concerning the religion. Of all inscriptions found, the most popular consists of the letters VSLM, standing for “votum solvit libens merito.” In Latin, this is an abbreviation which means The dedicator has gladly fulfilled his vow in return for a benefit received (Shandruk 2004). Archaeologists have discovered that votive offerings were among the most popular forms of worship in Roman Mithraeums, and they were made so that the person giving an offering could receive something in return, almost like a Christian prayer. The definitive evidence comes from a second inscription that often accompanied the first, DSIOM, an abbreviation standing for “deo invicto mithrae et soli socio.” Translated, this means to the Invincible God Mithras and the Sun his Ally (Shandruk 2004). This inscription brings up the question of whether or not Mithras and the sun were considered to be one and the same, as though Mithras was in fact a sun god. This question is still debated, but the inscription is a start.

One final inscription brings to light certain aspects of the bull scene, or Tauroctony. In Latin, it reads “Et nos servasti eternali sanguine fuso,” which translates roughly to And us thou
have saved by shedding the eternal blood” (Shandruk 2004). This particular inscription does not answer for us where the Romans first came across the bull scene, but it lends credence to the fact that it was an integral part of the Roman religion.

Another source of information that we do have is a five-panel fresco found in a Mithraeum in Capua Vetere in southern Italy. The fresco shows what appears to be an initiation ceremony, but the interpretation is still hotly debated (Beck 2006). Among the scenes shown are a blindfolded initiate, a simulated execution, and a crown being placed on the initiate’s head. The scene raises questions, and not just those concerning what is actually happening. We know from a couple of historical sources, most notably Porphyry, that Roman followers of Mithras adhered to a strict religious succession, and that members had to start at the bottom and work their way up. The seven steps were known respectively as Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus, and finally Pater (which is Latin for “father”) (Shandruk 2004). Another fresco uncovered by archaeologists at the Aventine Mithraeum, also in southern Italy, shows that each of the seven levels was identified with one of seven celestial bodies. A progression through these steps by a follower of Mithras may indicate a belief in the passing of an individual through time and space, but this is mostly conjecture (Shandruk 2004).

Rituals and theology aside, much study has also been directed toward how Mithraism came to be such a popular Roman religion. There are some false parallels between Roman Mithraism and its seemingly eastern origin, but if the experts consider Cumont to have been wrong, then there must be some other explanation. After all, both versions share a scene of bull sacrifice, both had similar cosmologies, and neither wrote much of anything down. In fact, the Tauroctony scene is the only clue we have to what followers of Mithras actually believed, and what their theology was like. The truth is, Cumont may have fabricated a little too much of the
transition. There was a Persian god named Mithra, but he never killed a bull, and he was never worshipped in underground cave-like structures (Shandruk 2004).

David Ulansey, a contemporary expert on Mithraic studies, has stumbled upon a theory, now over 100 years old, which makes much more sense. In 1869, K.B. Stark met with Franz Cumont to propose the idea that each character in the Tauroctony scene was a constellation. Cumont promptly rejected the “absurd” idea, but more and more evidence has come to light in recent years suggesting that the theory is quite valid. For one, each figure does have a corresponding constellation (Ulansey 1989). Also, the zodiac almost always accompanies carved Tauroctony scenes. And, as Ulansey continues, his theory starts to make a lot of sense. If one were to look in the sky to the area above the constellation of Taurus, one finds Perseus, which perfectly matches the description of Mithras (see Figure 1.3).

While Cumont may have been about as far off as possible in his early interpretation of the mysteries of the Mithraic cult, he at least got the word out about this fascinating corner of history. David Ulansey was responsible for reinterpreting those mysteries in a comprehensive manner, and that leaves the Mithraeums themselves. To visit a Mithraeum, or even to see a picture of one, is to become an amateur interpreter. The Mithraeums seem to be one giant
symbol, and in truth most scholars would agree. Roger Beck, also a contemporary scholar of the Mithraic mysteries, has written extensively about the role of the Mithraeum itself in the worship of Mithras. Drawing partly on the writings of Porphyry, and referring to Porphyry’s history as a “gateway” text, he points out that according to the Zoroastrian myths, Zoroaster himself was the first to dedicate a natural cave in honor of Mithras, and Porphyry wrote that the cave resembled the cosmos. After Zoroaster, many others adopted the tradition of worshipping in caves, whether they are natural or man-made. Today, we can recognize the Mithraeum as a complex symbol of the cosmos because most of them are so proportionately arranged. The Mithraeum was essential to worship of Mithras, and all of them were caves, either man-made or natural where possible. The cave is an important shape because of its representation of the entire universe (see Figure 1.4).

It’s also important to note that Mithraeums could be built anywhere. Nowhere in ancient texts or the archaeological evidence is it suggested that Mithraeums needed to be built in a specific place or with a certain orientation (Beck 2006). Mithras could apparently be worshipped
anywhere, and this is proven by the hundreds of sites all across the Roman Empire, many of which are in seemingly unusual places. The Mithraeum was the sole place of worship for members of the Mithraic cult, and only members were even allowed inside. Thus, the Mithraeum can be viewed as a sort of secret hiding place for worship, an alternate universe where followers could congregate and participate in the rites and rituals of the cult. Outside of the Mithraeum, the rituals and beliefs were worthless. But inside, members could fully pursue their secret beliefs.

**Methodology:** My methodology consisted of several steps that helped me to build this paper into a presentable body of research. I first put together a rough outline to guide me through the beginning process of writing such a large research paper. I have spent the majority of my time in the library, researching my topic and tracking down as many primary and secondary sources as I could find in order to enhance my understanding of the subject I pursued. I also spent some time on the internet, researching my topic by seeking out reputable online sources as a way of adding to the large amount of textual research I already compiled. This is a standard research paper, so most of my time has been spent reading, organizing my thoughts, and putting together my body of research in a well-organized and comprehensive manner. I have attempted to organize all of my information into a definitive chronology of the cycle of Mithraism in ancient Rome, from its initial adoption to its expansion, changes, and eventual disappearance. After turning in my initial draft, I have taken pains to revise it several times in order to reach a respectable finished product.

**Results:** The focus of my research was to look specifically at archaeological sites that include Mithraeums, in hopes of comparing what was uncovered at different, far-reaching sites across the Roman Empire. In this manner it was my hope to find out if the cult and its practices differed at all from one location to the next, or if the cult was so widespread and regimented that little variation took place as it spread from region to region. My hypothesis was that it did in fact
undergo subtle changes from region to region, both from differences in language and from the sheer vastness of the empire. While there are literally hundreds of Mithraeum sites that I could choose to compare, spanning the entire ancient Roman Empire, I have chosen three that are far enough away from each other geographically so that changes would have been easily facilitated as the religion spread. I looked at differences in the architecture of Mithraeums, the differences in any artifacts that have been found, differences in iconography and inscriptions, and location in general. Mithraeums were the sole place in which to worship Mithras, and so they offer us the richest glimpse into the practices and lives of those who were members of the cult. Because of the cult’s exclusivity, little to no information concerning the cult was ever written down or recorded. We must instead focus on the archaeological record and the Mithraeums themselves to tell us more about this mystery religion in its Roman context.

The first area of interest for me was the area of the Roman Empire that was in the modern Middle East, particularly because the myths of Mithras have so often been purported to have originated there. One such site is the Mithraeum at Dura-Europos, first discovered in 1935 (see Figure 1.5).
According to site reports, the floor plan of the Mithraeum is typical of most other Mithraeaums that were part of the Roman Empire (AIA 1935). The vaulted ceiling was painted to look like the sky, blue with stars that were still painted white. There is a typical carved relief of the Tauroctony scene on the far end of the Mithraeum, and this particular Mithraeum is unique among most others (Elsner 2001). According to the reports, this Mithraeum has a painting in it of two bearded Persian men, which are interpreted to be Zoroaster and Osthanes, the supposed founders of the Mithraic mysteries (Elsner 2001). This is unique because no Mithraeaums that occur further within the bounds of the Roman Empire have these paintings in common, which may tell us something about how closely connected this area of the empire still was to the earlier eastern traditions (AIA 1935). In fact, the author Jas Elsner has suggested that perhaps the paintings of Zoroaster and Osthanes may have been a form of cultural resistance to otherwise staunch Romanization (Elsner 2001). This, of course, brings forth other questions. Was Mithraism only brought to this area by the Roman soldiers, or was it already here? This question
has not yet been answered, because the only dates we have were scrawled into the chapel, and not the Mithraeum itself. Certain inscriptions found at the site date it to around 170 A.D., and features near the temple include a small chapel and a private house, which another inscription identifies as belonging to a man named Ethpanai (Elsner 2001). No other artifacts of note have surfaced relating specifically to the practice of Mithraism, but the temple itself is distinctively “normal.” It follows patterns found in all other Mithraeums across the Roman Empire, from the symbolism of the cosmos to the scene of the Tauroctony. The only defining characteristic is the painting of the two founders of Zoroastrianism, which is quite unique.

A second Mithraeum that caught my eye was one discovered by accident in London in 1954 (see Figure 1.6). During this time, along with renewed interest in the mystery eastern religions, more and more Mithraeums were being discovered as researchers realized the full extent of this cult’s reach, and the rapidity with which it spread as Roman legionnaires took it with them to each new territory.
The temple itself is found nearly in the middle of London along a small tributary of the Thames, and was probably built in or around the second century A.D. (Vermaseren 1955). According to excavation notes, it is larger than other Mithraeums found in London, but its construction is similar to nearly all other Mithraeums found in the Roman Empire. Some of its timber floors are still intact, and marble sculptures found at the site are made of an Italian marble that archaeologists think was imported to this site (Vermaseren 1955). This hints at the importance of the Mithraic religion even by the second century A.D., given that Italian marble would be shipped to such a remote outpost of the Roman Empire (Home 1948).

This Mithraeum is also unique because it contains several representations of other deities not readily apparent in the Roman pantheon. There is a relief carving of two horsemen from the
Danube, a sculpture of Mercury, and one also of the Egyptian god Serapis, ruler of the underworld and also a deity of fertility (Vermaseren 1955). These unusual representations may point to a more lax worship of Mithras in an area that then would have been very new territory for the Roman legionnaires. It is possible that worship practices became more loose and came to incorporate more of the various beliefs already practiced by certain members of the Roman military, due to the fact that they were stationed in such a remote area. Roman soldiers were enlisted from all areas of the empire, from northern Africa to the eastern frontier and beyond, and they all would have brought with them various practices and preexisting beliefs.

The third area that I wished to compare with other, more far-reaching points on the ancient Roman map was the Italy itself (see Figure 1.7).

While modern-day Italy has many examples of Mithraeum sites, the ancient Roman port of Ostia continues to boast some of the best examples of the secret temples (seventeen, to be exact). A typical Ostian Mithraeum is, as always, rectangular, and they range in size from between about twenty feet in length to nearly sixty feet in length, and from around ten feet wide to twenty feet in width (Laeuchli 1967). All of the Mithraea have benches that the members would have reclined on while worshipping Mithras, and all share the altar at the front of the room where the Tauroctony would have been displayed. All were constructed or regular brick and mortar, and
would have at one time been further decorated with marble and detailed frescoes. One assumes that these decorations were looted after the fall of the Roman Empire (Laeuchli 1967).

While all seventeen Mithraeums share common features associated with all others found in the Roman Empire, each one has specific details that differentiate it from the others at Ostia. It should also be noted that all Mithraea in Ostia were created in preexisting buildings, and as such they had to be adapted to various differences in construction (Laeuchli 1967). Some Mithraea had multiple rooms and antechambers connected to the main sanctuary. While it is possible that they were employed in the worship ceremonies, no direct evidence of this has yet been found. Therefore, we can only speculate as to whether they were used by worshippers, or if they were simply leftover structures, when one remembers that all of the Mithraea were built in places that were already there.

Three of the Mithraea also have pronounced divisions in the central chamber; two with actual walls and one with a line of division in the mosaic that is present on the floor (Laeuchli 1967). Most archaeologists have speculated that this was to promote a visible distinction between the lower and higher ranks of the initiates of the cult. Of course, none of this can be proven with any certainty, but it stands to reason. A final note of interest in the Mithraeums of Ostia is the presence of sunken basins in the floors of several temples. It has been postulated that these were used for ritual baptism, which we know was practiced, as it was written about in the histories of Porphyry. A proposed, but less popular, theory is that the worshippers would have found it prudent to wash their hands prior to any ceremonies that would have taken place. If they did in fact hold water, they may have had something to do with the water myth associated with Mithras, in which he symbolically brings rain from the heavens by shooting at rocks with arrows so that water springs forth. According to the legend, he performed this feat during a time of drought,
thus relieving mankind of thirst in a divine manner (Beck 2006). In fact, we know that Mithras was often represented with some sort of spring, as though he was a life-giving deity, which indeed he was. Therefore, the water basins may in fact be representations of divine springs, as well.

**Conclusions:** When beginning this paper, I was worried about how the religious practices of ancient Romans could possibly relate to archaeology. The truth is, Mithraism was such an exclusive cult that very little was ever written about it, and researchers have no direct textual evidence of what the followers of Mithras actually did in their temples. The only extensive writing ever to be done on the subject was by the ancient historian Porphyry, and we of course must take those writings with a grain of salt, due to Porphyry’s own interpretations of what Mithraism was like in practice. Mithraism in fact has been interpreted almost solely on the basis of the archaeological record, and their temples, carvings, and inscriptions are all we have left.

I hypothesized that as the religion spread across the vastness of the Roman Empire, it must have undergone certain regional changes as it spread. No religion I have ever been exposed to is exactly the same all over the world. One need only to look at Christian churches in any town in the U.S. to get a sense of how many variations can be present for the same religion. The Roman Empire was among the largest in history, spanning three continents and encompassing thousands of square miles. Therefore, it stands to reason, particularly in an empire where the fastest mode of transport was a horse, that such a secretive cult religion would undergo certain changes as it spread.

In some respects, my hypothesis held. The worship of Mithras was practiced and spread primarily by soldiers of the Roman army. Because soldiers were drafted from all areas of the
empire, they surely would have brought with them many preexisting beliefs and practices. The Mithraeum at London is a prime example of this. Not only was it found to contain the typical elements of Mithraic worship, but representations of several other deities were found in context as well. This is not surprising, given that London at the time was much like a frontier town of the Roman expansion, with a lot of soldiers and very little order. One would postulate that religious practices in this area would have contained many different elements, including those native to the British Isles at the time (though no archaeo logical evidence of this has yet been found). In Asia Minor, we archaeologists found carved reliefs of the founders of Zoroastrianism, which is highly unusual and not found in any other Mithraeums within the Roman Empire. This can only be explained by Dura-Europos’ close proximity to the area where Zoroastrianism first began.

In other respects, my hypothesis was incorrect. All Mithraeums that I looked at are architecturally very similar, except in places where the Mithraeum was placed in a preexisting building. Ostia is a prime example of this. While all seventeen Mithraeums follow the same basic organizational pattern, archaeologists found that all seventeen were in buildings that predated the religious worship. So, the people who moved Mithraism into each building were more or less forced to take some artistic license when turning each building into a temple.

The similarities among all Mithraeums has to come from the pivotal fact that worship of Mithras could only take place in these cavernous temples, as Roger Beck points out. The form and function of each Mithraeum had to be exactly the same, so that each temple resembled the cosmos in as much detail as possible. Without this form, worship could not have taken place.

The cult of Mithras will continue to be a topic of heated debate and much discussion among archaeologists and historians alike, if for no other reason than the fact that so little hard evidence remains, aside from the temples themselves. In the past century, archaeology has been
able to reveal much to us concerning the beliefs and practices of the followers of Mithras, and we can only hope that it will continue to do so as the archaeological record continues to expand and inform us of the past.
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