

## **Inscriptions: Narrating the Spatial Dynamics of the Immaterial Interior**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores inscription as a projection of the spatial dynamics of a setting, beyond a historical or cultural symbol in a context, and highlights that inscription—a written or carved message on a surface—is an element that immaterially demonstrates a more in-depth narrative of an interior. This paper focuses on exploring inscriptions embedded in various production settings in Jakarta and Central Java, collecting individual and observational accounts on the production of such inscriptions and their meanings. The study suggests that inscriptions demonstrate various roles, from providing information, mediating different spaces and performing as tools to assist activities. Inscriptions may traverse the trajectories of different spaces and exist in different layers of time, creating an interior connection across space and time. These layers and trajectories project the dynamics of material and bodily processes, assembling the immaterial interior.*

*Keywords: inscription, immaterial interior, temporality, palimpsest*

## Introduction

This paper explores the potential that an inscription has for revealing the spatial dynamics of space. An inscription, produced through the act of writing or carving words as a formal record, is a spatial element that informs the in-depth story of a context ('Inscribe', 2010; 'Inscription', 2010). Current inscription discourses are largely limited to defining the story of space in a symbolised way (Rhiney & Cruse, 2012). Examples of such symbolised inscriptions vary, from the use of hieroglyphs in ancient Egyptian culture (Butin, 1928) to the reggae music, graffiti and murals of Trench Town, Jamaica (Rhiney & Cruse, 2012), and marginalised gangs' graffiti in Los Angeles (Alonso, 1998). Such inscription portrayals demonstrate the spatial meaning in an immutable way (Roth & McGinn, 1998), arguably leading to the conceptualisation of the place as "timeless and bounded, with a singular, fixed and unproblematic, authentic identity" (Madanipour, 1996, p. 23). Most recent studies on inscription have focused on the urban environment (Rhiney & Cruse, 2012; Roth & McGinn, 1998). However, to better capture the spatial dynamics of a context, this paper tries to narrow the discussion to a smaller, more transient topic, such as traditional production spaces with more mundane and everyday types of inscription. These settings potentially demonstrate the high dynamics of the material and people moving across the space.

We argue that the perspective of interiority is helpful to emphasise the spatial processes of the settings that are informed by an inscription, rendering it an immaterial interior element that narrates such dynamics (Marinic, 2018; Murray, 2008; Reilly, 2015). The organic and dynamic nature of an interior is produced by the processes taking place in it (Marinic, 2018). Recognising spatial dynamics highlights how space is being made through the material practices that connect different social relations (Massey, 2005). Without spatial dynamics, space becomes simply a storage area for collecting things, devoid of living narratives (Marinic, 2018).

The paper's exploration begins by outlining the anatomy of inscriptions and the important aspects of producing inscriptions in space. The paper then explores the concept of inscription as an immaterial element of an interior. Outlining the context and methodologies of this study, the paper illustrates the framework for analysing inscriptions in five production settings in Central Java and Jakarta. The paper then concludes on the roles, layers and trajectories of the inscriptions that narrate the setting's spatial dynamics in an immaterial way.

## **Spatialising Inscriptions: Theoretical Overview**

### ***Anatomy of inscriptions in space***

Inscriptions are “signs that are materially embodied in some medium” (Roth & McGinn, 1998, p. 37). Inscription demonstrates a narrative of a series of events happening in space and time (Abbott, 2002; Barab et al., 2007). As narrative is a conceptual tool for making sense of the world and constructing space, understanding inscription as part of the living narrative enables a deeper comprehension of the context (Barab et al., 2007; Zoran, 1984). The spatio-temporal connectedness of narrative reveals the context; space defines the actors through their relation to it, and yet the space is also defined and shaped by them as time goes by (Malpas, 2010). The narrative also highlights different ways of everyday operation, moving “against static image of the city” (Atmodiwirjo, Johanes, & Yatmo, 2019, p. 228). Therefore, meanings narrated by inscriptions are flux in both spatial and temporal frameworks, creating such connectedness between space, time and their actors.

As part of the living narrative, an inscription is initially a social object (Roth & McGinn, 1998), as it is produced to communicate and support “the interaction of people” (Roth & McGinn, 1998, p. 42). Thus, an inscription should be produced based on a shared understanding between different actors that produce and perceive the inscriptions. For example, an inscription inscribed in a particular language can only be understood by the inscriber and the people who have a mutual knowledge of the message. Other than language, an inscription may demonstrate mutual knowledge through shared technical, cultural and aesthetic thinking (Emmons et al., 2017). The use of graphs, diagrams or figures in a scientific text, for example, communicates technical thinking (Latour, 2003), while the inscription’s cultural expression can be seen from how an inscription illustrates a certain group’s lifestyle (Alonso, 1998; Rhiney & Cruse, 2012). In addition, the aesthetic thinking of an inscription can be demonstrated from its production methods (Emmons et al., 2017). An inscription helps in identifying a place because it defines the conception of that setting and the associated behaviours surrounding the inscription (Canter, 1977).

An inscription signifies not only the message of the inscriber but also the way in which it is inscribed in a particular medium. There is a wide variety of mediums for an inscription, from mobile elements, such as specimens, graphs and photographs (Latour, 2003), to electronic media, such as computer screens (Roth & McGinn, 1998). This paper takes a particular interest in the inscriptions that are



the changing economic conditions in a certain area (Latour, 2003). The roles of inscriptions as mediating objects can be seen in the way inscriptions alter the relations among settings (Zeisel, 2006). Examples are signs embedded in space to increase privacy, enhance control or divide two areas. Lastly, inscription as a tool employs the inscribed message or the act of inscribing to assist a particular activity. An example is the use of a drawing as a pedagogical device (Roth & McGinn, 1998). Based on these explanations, each role would capture dynamics of space differently, from dynamic changes of information and dynamic use of space to dynamic movement of the body in space. Therefore, immaterially, inscription demonstrates the different narratives of the spatial process that is taking place in the interior.

The presence of inscriptions in space is also a part of the interior's memory palace (Hollis, 2010), as the practice of inscribing is a practice of memorising as well (Brockmeier, 2002). The inscription communicates stories from different temporalities depending on their roles (Massey, 2018). For example, inscription as the provision of information tends to demonstrate the past or present narratives of the interior. In contrast, inscriptions as mediating objects and tools tend to exhibit present or future narratives. Nevertheless, the inscription's relation to time is inseparable from its topographical dimension, as memory is both temporal and spatial (Malpas, 2012). The memory of the interior arises through the actors' engagement with the materiality of the inscription (Malpas, 2010, 2012). The memory reflects the connectedness between the inscription, the interior as memory's context and the inscriber who inscribes the memory in the space.

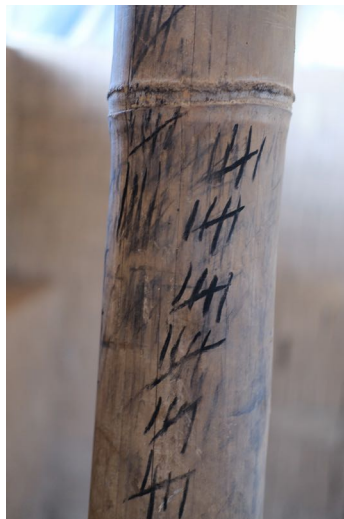


Figure 2  
Inscriptions  
as palimpsest  
(Photograph by  
Arif R. Wahid)

In the context of traditional production spaces, the inscription is commonly erased, and then its surface is reused to memorise a new meaning. This re-inscription process creates multiple layers of writing (both recent texts and the former's trace) on a singular surface, which Handa (2015) called *palimpsest*. Figure 2 demonstrates an example, where counting scribbles are inscribed in a bamboo column layered above traces of past counting processes. Handa stated that such a layered inscription "gives physical presence to the past, which otherwise has been obliterated" (Handa, 2015, p. 123). This physical presence holds significance, as it is a manifestation of the past itself, a *package of sense* of accumulated meaning that must be learned from and reshaped (Machado, 1976).

The palimpsest works as a repository of past information, yet some parts of the layered text may still retain its function in the present. The noticeable appearance of layered texts in Figure 2 also projects the expected marks to come, meaning that the inscription becomes "the evidence of a continuous transformation that allusively constructs our presence" (Warakanyaka & Yatmo, 2018, p. 66). Therefore, inscription reveals spatial dynamics by recording the transformation of space across multiple layers of time, from the past, the present and the future.

Lastly, inscriptions can be positioned in multiple areas, creating a trajectory of space (Ingold, 2011). The connection between two spaces, even across different spatial scales, creates a passage of interior territories (Paramita & Schneider, 2018). The inscription trajectory is produced through the movement of the inscriptions across spaces and is carried or performed by an actor. Along with the layers of its temporalities, such a trajectory of spaces immaterially demonstrates the presence of an ever-changing interior, demonstrating its dynamics across time and space.

### **Context and Methodologies**

This paper focuses on the dynamics contributed by production processes and how such processes produce inscriptions or influence them. Furthermore, this paper takes particular interest in the traditional process of production, arguing that such a process demonstrates a tight attachment between the society and its environmental and cultural context (Atmodiwirjo et al., 2018). The everydayness of this present context is chosen instead of the historical ones to enable witnessing the real-time changes of the inscriptions. This banal context shows the actual events that happened in the space, giving the inscription such a collective meaning without rendering it monumental (Harris & Berke, 1997),

as shown in graffiti or Egyptian hieroglyphs. Within the view of inscription as a palimpsest, traditional production settings also bring repetitive yet undictated routines, demonstrating the continuously ongoing spatial process through multiple points in time.

The data collected in this research is gained through field observation and conversations with actors in context. The study investigates the actors' role in the setting, their common practice and how they produce or perceive inscriptions in doing their production process. All texts and symbols found on site are documented and discussed with the actors to confirm the meaning behind the inscriptions. These inscriptions' findings and their meanings were qualitatively analysed to reveal how they immaterially project interiority based on their roles and positions across space and time.

The study took place in five traditional production locations across Central Java and Jakarta. The five locations discussed in this paper are the two traditional clay brick production places in Songgom, Brebes, and Kademangaran, Tegal; the two traditional fish-curing home industries in Pasarbatang, Brebes; and a traditional groceries market in the Kramat Jati Central Market in Jakarta (Figure 3). These locations demonstrate different aspects and phases of production. While the clay brick production and fish-curing home industries demonstrate the process of transforming matter to a different state (bricks or edible food), the traditional market reveals another kind of process that organises the flow of materials, such as through the process of packaging and distribution.

The locations selected for this study consist of material and food production settings. Kademangaran and Songgom are the two prominent areas in the Central Java region that produce clay bricks, and they have different labour organisations and space arrangements. The Kademangaran production areas consist of an array of brick production fields, which are divided into smaller areas for numerous seasonal brick craftsmen. Whereas, the Songgom production area is located by a river and consists of lengthy terrain that is divided into brick production areas, each owned or rented by an individual craftsman.

Conversely, the fish-curing home industry in the Pasarbatang sub-district is an eminent home industry in the Brebes region that is benefited by its adjacent location to the beach. Initially, the neighbourhood had nine home smoked-fish factories; however, now the number has been reduced to seven. Both locations are houses that have been partly transformed, equipped with two furnaces and chimneys, with the support of the government. In these home industries, the workers are either close relatives or neighbours.



The last location is the Kramat Jati Central Market, the biggest traditional market in Jakarta, and it is a traditional wholesale market located in a large area that is divided into several lots based on the commodities, separated with impermanent plywood or cardboard boundaries. This article focuses on the fruit lot, which occupies the largest and most prominent territory within the market, creating extensive people and object movements.



*Smoked fish home factory (location 1);  
Pasarbataang, Brebes, Central Java*



*Smoked fish home factory (location 2);  
Pasarbataang, Brebes, Central Java*



*Clay bricks production area;  
Songgom, Brebes, Central Java*



*Clay bricks production area;  
Kademangaran, Tegal, Central Java*



*Kramat Jati Central Market;  
Kramat Jati, Jakarta*

Figure 3  
The five  
production  
settings explored  
in this paper  
(Photograph by  
Arif R. Wahid)

### Inscription as the Markers of Spatial Process

The literature review argued that the roles of inscription in space indicate how each role demonstrates processes that signify the spatial dynamics transformed through space and time. The following paragraphs elaborate on how inscriptions' different roles shape the immaterial interiority of the production settings.



**Provision of information**

An example of an inscription’s roles in providing information is demonstrated in a list of employees who belong to an afternoon working shift in Kramat Jati Central Market (Figure 4). The inscription is situated on cardboard that covers a refrigerator. The working shift list informs the workers in that area about their turns in a particular shift of time. Apart from the working list, the cardboard also contains another inscription at the bottom, a sentence of Javanese stating *AKU NAK BALEK* (roughly translated as “I want to go home”). Seen together with the working shift, such writing demonstrates the larger context of the narrative by showing the local workers’ cultural background, while at the same time showing their present and future activities. Therefore, the inscription reveals the identity of the inscribers and the spatial process of the inscribers’ working activities between space and time during their shift.



Figure 4 Working shift lists and scribbles on cardboard in Kramat Jati Central Market (Photograph by Arif R. Wahid)



Figure 5 Employees’ earnings and a child’s drawing in Kramat Jati Central Market (Photograph by Arif R. Wahid)

Figure 5 illustrates another example of how inscription provides information. Located on a mangosteen shop wall in the Kramat Jati Central Market, the inscription lists the shop employees' daily tasks and their fees in Indonesian rupiahs. The inscription informs the context of the employees' potential earnings after they finish a particular work for a specified period. As the text is embedded permanently on the wall and there is no trace of other inscriptions, it can be assumed that such lists of earnings only apply for one-time fees. As the list is inscribed in Minang (a language used by a tribe in Sumatra), it also demonstrates the cultural background of the mangosteen workers. A drawing of an elephant and butterflies placed on the wall by a worker's child next to the earnings list signifies the multitude of activities happening alongside the working process in the area, which includes children playing in space.

### ***Mediating objects***

Inscription's other role is to become a mediating object that connects spaces and actors. While the previous inscription in the Kramat Jati Central Market simply provides information to the actors, the two following examples explore how the inscription mediates between spaces and actors in production settings.



Figure 6  
Smoked-fish  
production target  
as inscription  
in Pasarbatang  
(Photograph by  
Arif R. Wahid)

An important inscription found in Pasarbatang featured numbers scribbled in the house's column, illustrating the daily income target—in thousand Indonesian Rupiahs—that has been agreed to be gained for the amount of smoked fish sold on that day to the fishmonger (Figure 6). The inscriptions were positioned in visible areas above the human eye level, working as the point of reference that mediates the process by indirectly driving the pace of the production to meet the daily demand. Apart from mediating the production process, the numbers also signify the connection between the fishmonger and fish-curing, highlighting the existence of inscription as a social object. There are multiple numbers found in different columns within the working area, with another number assigned to the production targets for other fishmongers. Therefore, these inscriptions also become mediating objects that divide the workers' territories into two, each producing fish for different actors at the same time.



Figure 7  
Rows of numbers  
indicating the  
produced bricks  
(Photograph by  
Arif R. Wahid)

Another example of inscription as a mediating object is shown in Kademangaran clay brick production. The numbers of bricks produced were inscribed daily as rows of lines written on one of the bamboo poles of the brick production area. Each row informs the number of bricks produced daily in that season, starting from the top row for day one, the second row for day two and so on. As this number is only understood by the particular craftsmen working in that particular territory at that time, the inscription becomes the marker of the spatial and temporal territory of the craftsmen. The number varies throughout the season, demonstrating the social and environmental changes throughout the production process

that shape the production output. These changes may consist of the different availability of human resources that may speed the brick moulding process or the changing weather conditions that lengthen the brick drying process and so on.

Both examples indicate that in mediating space and its actors, inscriptions exist as memory storage, reminding the inscriber and other actors in the space of activity that must be done after an inscription is engraved. At other times, the inscription also informs what needs to be accomplished to inscribe meaning to surfaces. As memory is produced in an event, its performance “connects modes of personal and collective life” (Malpas, 2012, p. 15). Thus, one inscription matters to each actor differently; for instance, the number on a column means the target for a fishmonger and an expense for the fish buyer, while collectively, it still tells a narrative about money in fish production.

### ***Tools to perform activities in space***

As a tool, the inscription is inscribed to assist and guide actors in performing their activity. An example of such a role can be seen from the numbers written on a thermoplastic sack divider in the Kramat Jati Central Market, which indicates the amount of sold *kedondong* fruit or *Spondias dulcis* in kilograms (Figure 8). In the Kramat Jati market, the total weight of the fruit is written while the vendors serve their customers to measure the store’s overall cash flow. The vendors then employ these numbers as a reference to count the overall trading asset in their own administration book. Such inscriptions are found on many vertical surfaces across the market, written with different marker colours and different colour intensity, indicating the process of writing and rewriting across different times.

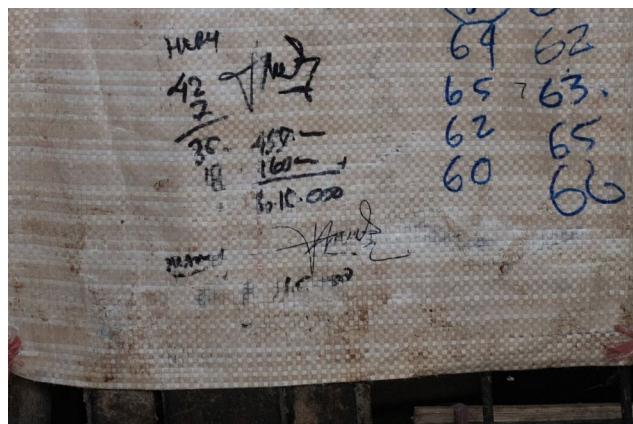


Figure 8  
Thermoplastic  
sack as tools  
to record the  
amount of sold  
*kedondong*  
(Photograph by  
Arif R. Wahid)

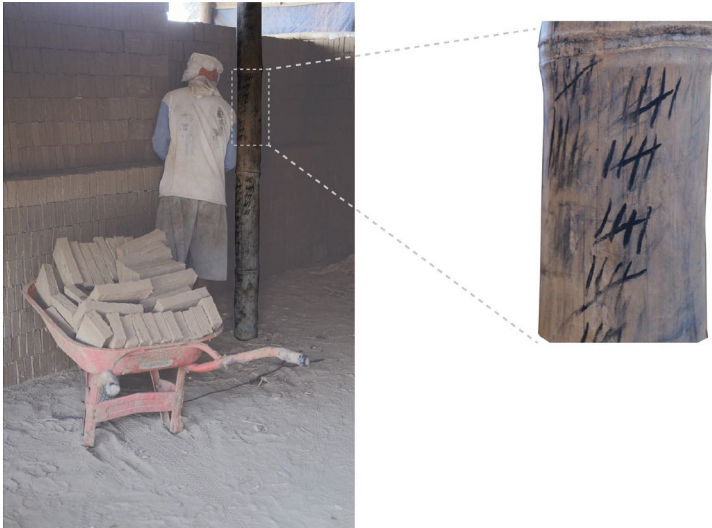


Figure 9  
Inscription used  
to assist the  
counting and  
lining process of  
brick production  
(Photograph by  
Arif R. Wahid)

The use of inscription as a tool is also found at the bamboo stall in the Songgom brick production area as tally marks written within the structure. This inscription is employed in the process of counting and arranging the raw bricks before they are burned. Different from the brick amount inscription shown in Figure 7, the inscribed tally marks assist the arranging process of the bricks. The bricks are lined interchangeably for every particular amount of bricks, from the ground up to the ceiling of the shelter, and the number ensures this process is done neatly.

### **Reading the Ever-Changing Interior Across Times and Spaces**

The previous section highlighted how each inscription, as an immaterial element, demonstrates the spatial dynamics happening in an interior. This section examines multiple inscriptions that are connected with each other, demonstrating an ever-changing interiority through the existence of layers of times and trajectories of spaces signified by the inscriptions.

#### ***Inscriptions connecting multilayers of time***

As discussed earlier, an inscription can be inscribed, erased and re-inscribed in the medium, creating layers of inscription that exist across temporalities. An example of this can be seen in Figure 10, where a palimpsest of fish stock exists on the kiln wall in Pasarbatang fish production. The numbers on the left side inform the amount of fish brought in the early morning in kilogram units for each species. The tally marks on the right side of the surface, however, communicate



the number of packed fish produced during the day. Positioned side by side, these inscriptions have both provided information and become the tools of performing fish production activity in the past, present and future. In the present time, the numbers become a memory palace that stores information of the production resource from past restocking activities. This information is then used to direct the smoked-fish production, represented through the tally marks, as an anticipation of the spatial process's future narrative, which is the required amount of fish to be sold to the fishmonger.

Figure 10  
Numbers and tally marks in Pasarbatang (Location 2) as palimpsest indicate the connection between multiple layers of time (Photograph by Arif R. Wahid)



The layered inscriptions over time demonstrate the actors' ever-changing activities in space. For example, in the morning, the fish smokers would inscribe the numbers to signify the amount of fish that they bought from the fisherman, signifying their buying activities. Afterwards, the actors would produce the smoke, place and turn the fish in the smoking process as part of the production and annotate the process in the tally marks. In the afternoon, the actors sell smoked fish to the fishmonger, referring to the achieved number of smoked fish in the wall. The domestic space changes along with these changing activities, influencing the arrangement of objects and the movement of people within the space.

### ***Inscriptions connecting multiple areas***

A trajectory of inscriptions connects inscriptions positioned in multiple spatialities, either through the movement of an inscription across spaces or the placement of similar or connected inscriptions in multiple spaces and other mediums. For example, the inscription of numbers on the market's divider in Figure 8 is rewritten in other mediums, such as in the vendors' accounting book and various other positions on the wall.



Figure 11  
*Ahira* brand as  
 the inscription  
 that connects  
 multiple areas  
 (Photograph by  
 Arif R. Wahid)

Another example of the spatial trajectory of inscriptions can be seen in Figure 11, which demonstrates the inscription of *Ahira*—a fruit company’s brand name—placed in some crates of orange fruit. The workers inscribe the brand name on all crates that will be circulated as part of the flow of orange distribution. The crates are inscribed as they arrive from the truck and then moved inside the shop to be counted and displayed for sale. The inscribed crates occupy multiple areas of the Kramat Jati market, from the parking lot to the market spaces and the retailers’ spaces. The inscriptions narrate the story of how the bulk oranges move from one space to another, constructing the interior trajectory of the *Ahira*-branded orange fruits.

## Conclusion

Discussion of inscription as an immaterial element proposes the idea of how it has become a medium to narrate spatial processes in an interior. An inscription’s presence has always demonstrated a space’s deeper story, contributing to the current discourse of inscription, which is often limited to the way inscription immutably symbolises a static and timeless sense of place. Inscriptions also play a part in defining a place through their function as a medium of interaction, providing spatial processes space within the setting.

The theoretical exploration of the anatomy of inscription in this paper unpacked the different characters of an inscription as the immaterial elements of an interior to escape its static and timeless nature. Evanescent inscriptions store and narrate the shared memories of the spatial processes according to their role in the space. Therefore, inscriptions are indeed a social object that enables multiple interactions between the actors involved in the space. The paper then employs this understanding to investigate the varied roles of the inscription in space, highlighting the different ways it immaterially projects spatial dynamics. Such dynamics are shown through the cases of mundane traditional production settings, in which real-time events happen with the extensive movement of material and people across spaces.



Inscriptions as the provision of information provide a broader understanding of the interior's narrative, highlighting the interior connection and exposing the variety of stakeholders in a production setting. As mediating objects, inscriptions mark, connect or divide territories and drive the pace of activities in an interior. Inscriptions as tools act as the guidelines between the steps of production activities, either ensuring the next activities are allowed to be performed or as the guidance on ways to do the next activities. In their mediating and tools roles, inscriptions project a deep connection between the body and the material, creating variations in placements and orientation based on the actors' working position and body movement.

Connections between multiple inscriptions also exist throughout spaces and times. The inscriptions written in the past become a reference, while in the present they become a guideline, looking forward to future anticipation. Similar or related inscriptions written in the multiple spaces and mediums of a production setting create a trajectory that constitutes the inscription's sense of interiority. Some inscriptions are intentionally multiplied and placed in moving objects, creating a transitory presence. In contrast, some of the inscriptions are re-inscribed within a different medium, continuing their roles and assisting activities in other spaces.

The investigation of inscription in production settings as the context of study enables the connection between explored spaces, signifying an interiority that is ever-changing, holding records of social and environmental changes that happen over time. Highlighting the connection of inscription across times and spaces reveals different production methods that shape the material, intensity and depth of an inscription. Perceiving the developing inscription as an immaterial element in the interior implies that it is a manifestation of collective memory, telling stories about the settings both spatially and temporally.

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