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Mobile Situations: *Exedrae* as Stages of Gathering in Greek Sanctuaries

Abstract

Building on theoretical frameworks and concepts from the so-called ‘New Mobilities Paradigm’, this paper investigates freestanding *exedrae* as stages of gathering in ancient Greek sanctuaries. In the Epidauros Asklepieion, one of the most important destinations of pilgrimage in the Greek world, eighteen such *exedrae* were constructed from the fourth century BC onwards. Providing seating for small groups and adorned with honorific statuary, the *exedrae* were used for a variety of different gatherings and mobile situations, in some cases remaining in use across several hundred years, even by the same families. Concepts – including that of ‘mobile situations’ – developed by the urban theorist Ole B. Jensen shed light on the functions of the *exedrae* and the material footprint of gatherings in Greek sanctuaries more broadly.

Keywords

Greek sanctuaries; gatherings; mobilities; Epidauros; *exedrae*; processions.

Introduction

Studies of ancient Greek sanctuaries have traditionally privileged monumentality and focused on major foci of ritual action, such as temples and altars. While recent work has paid greater attention to the spatial and performative dynamics of individual sanctuaries (Gerding 2006; Mylonopoulos 2008; Melfi 2010a; Scott 2010), ephemeral and transient practices, such as gatherings and processions, remain unsatisfactorily explored, certainly when it comes to integrating material evidence more systematically. This paper takes inspiration from the so-called ‘New Mobilities Paradigm’ (henceforth NMP),¹ developed within sociology and geography in the past two decades, to propose new strategies and terminologies for confronting the issue of gatherings and other forms of what will be referred to here as ‘mobile situations’ in Greek sanctuaries.

Broadly speaking, the NMP challenges what is seen as static models of society that historically have privileged place over mobility (Cresswell 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Sheller 2014). In particular, this paper applies methods and terms developed by the Danish urban theorist Ole B. Jensen in work on the staging and design of contemporary mobilities (Jensen 2013; 2014). Such

¹ Sometimes also known as the ‘mobilities turn’.

methods provide a conceptual framework that allows us to study elements of Greek sanctuaries that have so far not received the attention that they merit, even if much more work is necessary to explore all of their potential uses. The first part presents some of the NMP's theoretical agendas and key concepts, as well as their potential contribution to the archaeology of gathering. The second part is a case study of one particular type of gathering in the Epidauros Asklepieion, one of the most important healing sanctuaries in ancient Greece (Fig. 1).²

Mobile Situations as Conceptual Framework for the Study of Gatherings

Increased sociological interest in mobilities as more than peripheral practices began around the turn of the millennium, especially with a series of landmark studies by John Urry (Urry 2000a; 2000b). Urry argued that sociology had entered a 'post-societal' phase in which the analytical focus shifted away from individual societies to the kind of networks and flows characteristic of the connected, global age of the 21st century (Urry 2000a, 1). In 2006, Urry published, with his colleague Mimi Sheller, a special issue of *Environment and Planning A* in which they coined the phrase NMP to describe this methodological turn (Sheller and Urry 2006). The issue reflected on the accelerated growth of mobilities in the contemporary world, from the invention of the automobile at one end to the rise of the Internet at the other. Sheller and Urry suggest that such profound changes in society have important implications for a broad range of scholarly disciplines. They thus identify the emergence of the NMP that concerns itself with relations rather than entities and considers the implications of their observation that 'travel is not just a question of getting to the destination' (Sheller and Urry 2006, 214), but rather a core element in the performance of mobility. Work on mobility has since flourished in geography, urban studies, and a variety of related disciplines that cannot be reviewed in any detail here (for an overview, see Adey *et al.* 2014), although it is open to debate whether the attempt to contain all these developments within one particular paradigm is fruitful (Sheller and Urry 2016; Lucas 2017).

While the majority of sociological research on mobilities before the turn of the millennium focused on social factors, the NMP turns to spatial mobility (of both people and objects) (Sheller 2014, 791), thus anchoring its methods in the type of spaces that are available for archaeological study.

² The case of the Asklepieion should make it clear how the NMP differs from other approaches to mobilities and gatherings in Greek religion, ranging from Fritz Graf's seminal paper on processions (Graf 1996) to Ian Rutherford's wide-ranging work on *theoria* (Rutherford 2013), as well as studies of specific sites and practices, such as Julia Shear's on the Panathenaia (Shear 2001) and Bonna Wescoat's reconstructions of the experience of moving through the sanctuary of the Great Gods on Samothrace (Wescoat 2012; 2017).

Although mobilities are ephemeral phenomena, they depend on any number of immobile infrastructures, such as in the case of our seemingly wireless and network-enabled world, we remain deeply dependent on internet routers and mobile antennas, demonstrating ways in which a mobile world is paradoxically also a material world. The NMP's close attention to the materialities of movement thus works well with archaeological approaches to past mobility that in spite of its seemingly ephemeral character nonetheless has a material footprint, even if the technologies in question are radically different.³

In the following discussion of gathering in a Greek sanctuary, I draw in particular on terms and concepts developed in two recent volumes by Ole B. Jensen. The first, *Staging Mobilities*, provides a theoretical and methodological toolkit for what its author calls 'Critical Mobilities Thinking' (Jensen 2013). Jensen builds on sociological classics, such as Georg Simmel and Erving Goffman, as well as the urban theorist Kevin Lynch. He argues that mobilities are always staged or designed in order to facilitate particular cultural conditions and builds on Goffman's work on social situations and interaction rituals to define mobile situations as 'an assemblage of human subjects, physical design and material infrastructures of the built environment' (Jensen 2013, 10). It follows that gatherings constitute a particular kind of mobile situation. The second, *Designing Mobilities*, connects Jensen's theoretical framework more directly with contemporary design practices in relation to a variety of different forms of movement in urban contexts (Jensen 2014). In both works, Jensen draws on ideas and concepts developed by Urry and other scholars within the NMP. In contrast to network or globalization theory that Jensen sees as abstract grand theory, his approach to mobilities turns to everyday flows and regular movements as they take place on the ground and repeatedly emphasizes the importance of materiality for staging particular kinds of mobility (Jensen 2013, 45-64; 2014, 39-53).

A key element in Jensen's work is his Goffman-inspired model of 'Mobilities In Situ' (Jensen 2013, 5-10; 2014, 53). The model brings three elements together that are important components in an archaeology of gathering: physical settings (including material spaces), social interactions, and

³ Methods from the NMP have been used in a string of new works focusing on past mobilities, and the methodological problems of capturing these phenomena without access to the ethnographic and sociological data available to scholars of more recent periods (Gibson 2007; Laurence and Newsome 2011; Beaudry and Parno 2013; Leary 2014; van Dommelen 2014; Sørensen 2015; Knappett and Kiriati 2016).

embodied performances (Fig. 2). The basic premise for the model is that mobilities are always staged, either from above, that is, through planning or design by an authority and regulated by the use of signs or other kinds of laws or institutions. Jensen compares staging from above to a kind of scenography in which scenes play out according to a manuscript (Jensen 2013, 7). Conversely, people embody or perform mobilities that may be rather different than those envisioned by architects or the designers of particular spaces. Jensen refers to this as ‘staging from below’, comparable with choreography, the way in which people act and move on a stage in a more improvised fashion.

Another key term in Jensen’s work is ‘mobile with’ that he uses to note the variety of different social interactions that take place when people move together in a group of more than one, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Jensen 2013, 77-84; 2014, 47). Jensen thus studies complex mobile situations in which multiple groups move within a shared space, comparable to many processions and gatherings in the ancient Greek context that are well-known through both visual representations and epigraphy, even if the coverage of the inscriptions is uneven in chronological and geographical terms (True, Daehner, Grossmann and Lapatin 2004; Luginbühl 2015; Stavrianopoulou 2015). Being ‘mobile with’ adds an additional layer of complexity to our understanding of movement and performance, including gatherings in a variety of settings. Jensen’s model of ‘Mobilities In Situ’ and his concept of mobile situations provide the basic vocabulary for the following case study of how gatherings could be staged within one particular type of monument in a Greek sanctuary.

Gatherings and Mobile Situations in the Asklepieion of Epidauros

The Asklepieion is a staple in the study of Greek religion and has been intensively investigated since its initial exploration by the Archaeological Society of Athens in 1881 (Riethmüller 2005, vol. 1, 162-174, 279-295; Melfi 2007, 17-209). In the Late Classical period (400-323 BC), it developed into one of the most important healing sanctuaries in the ancient world (Wickkiser 2008, 90-94). The site is large and complex, making it necessary to focus here on one particular type of monument where gatherings can be identified, particularly the freestanding *exedrae*. Such *exedrae* are relatively small, semicircular or rectilinear monuments with benches for seating that were an innovation of the early Hellenistic period and that continued in use into the Roman imperial period (Fig. 3). They are found in many sanctuaries, as well as in public spaces, most famously in the case of Priene. Their distribution, chronology and typology have been thoroughly studied by Susanne

Freifrau von Thüngen, although her monograph isolates the monument as a distinctive group of architecture and does not properly place the *exedrae* within the spatial contexts that they were closely tied to (Thüngen 1994, reviewed by Ratté 1997). In Epidauros, freestanding *exedrae* can be found in two central areas of the sanctuary, both of central importance during ritual activities (Fig. 4). The first group flanks the eastern side of the main processional way to the Temple of Asklepios and its altar. The second, smaller group is situated on both sides of the route to the *tholos* (round building) known as the Thymele, whose precise function is unknown but which must have been one of the most important sacred places in the sanctuary. While the *exedrae* in Epidauros are relatively prominent monuments, they have been largely overshadowed by the more monumental architecture that was directly associated with cultic activities, such as incubation (Ehrenheim 2015) and the enigmatic rituals that were undertaken in the Thymele (Schultz and Wickkiser 2010). Focusing on one type of monument helps us to shed light on some of the important flows of people that structured the space of sanctuary and that can be traced in the archaeological record.

Before proceeding, the basic history and character of the sanctuary should be outlined. The sanctuary of Asklepios is located some 8 km from the town of Epidauros with its strategically important harbour giving access to the Saronic Gulf (Fig. 1; Proskynitopoulou 2011; Petrounakos 2015). Given the sanctuary's extra-urban location, mobility defined its relationship to the outside world from the very beginning. A procession linking city and sanctuary is known in some detail from the famous Paean of Isyllos, an inscription found in the early excavations of the temple of Asklepios and dated to the late fourth century (*IG iv*².128; Melfi 2007, 51-54; 2010a, 327-328). This complex and multi-layered inscription carefully manipulates the foundation stories of the cults of Apollo and Asklepios, and outlines the (re)establishment of a sacred law regulating the procession that included male representatives from the city's tribes who walked together to the sanctuary wearing white garments and laurel wreaths. Isyllos' inscription not only configures the relationship between city and sanctuary, it links up the different sanctuaries in the Epidaurian landscape through a narrative of sacred mobility (Melfi 2010a). It thus establishes a connection between the sanctuary of Asklepios and the alleged earlier cult of Apollo Maleatas, located higher up on Mount Kynortion, defined by a procession between the two sanctuaries (McInerney 2014). Apollo's sanctuary is documented archaeologically from as early as the eighth century, even though the majority of the remains date to the Roman period (Melfi 2010b).

The earliest material from the Asklepieion dates to the first quarter of the fifth century and includes a dedication to Asklepios written in early Argive script (*IG 4².136*; Tomlinson 1983, 23; Mee and Spawforth 2001, 205). In this early phase, the sanctuary consisted of little more than an altar with a scattering of statues, votive dedications, and smaller structures. Towards the middle of the fifth century, the so-called Building E provided the sanctuary with its first example of monumental architecture. Massive investment in the sanctuary then kicked off in the first quarter of the fourth century, spurred by the new status of the cult of Asklepios, especially in Athens but also in other parts of the Greek world. The Epidaurian building programme transformed what had been a relatively small-scale local cult to a place of pilgrimage with visitors from many parts of the Greek world, as evident from the mid-fourth century list of *theorodokoi* who hosted pilgrims from foreign cities (Perlman 2000, 67-97; Rutherford 2013, 73). From early in the fourth century, the expansion of the sanctuary is closely traceable through the preserved building accounts that show an extraordinary attention to detail, down to the provision of nails, locks, and keys (Burford 1969, 218; Prignitz 2014). The first part of the programme focused on the altar and temple of Asklepios (400-390) with its elaborate sculptural decoration in marble (Prignitz 2014, 184-214, 248-249). Work then turned to the Thymele, beginning around 380 and continuing until after 351 (Roux 1961, 131-200; Burford 1969, 63-68; Prignitz 2014, 219-223, 249). Further buildings were constructed, including a temple of Artemis around 330-320, the famous theatre (Gerkan and Müller-Wiener 1961), the stadium (Patrucco 1976), and around 300 a massive banqueting hall with a monumental Doric propylon. As the sanctuary grew, provisions were made for the increasing number of pilgrims, such as the construction of baths (Trümper 2014) and a hostel, dated to the third century. Inscriptions found in the sanctuary provide information about a wide range of different aspects of its cult and organization (Edelstein and Edelstein 1945; Peek 1969; 1972). After extensive destruction and disruption of the cult during the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods, concerted effort was subsequently undertaken to re-establish the Asklepieion as a site of pilgrimage from the first to the third century AD, a period that in cultural and religious terms is referred to as the Second Sophistic (Melfi 2010a; 2010b).

Gatherings in Sacred Space: The Exedrae

While many of the individual monuments in the sanctuary of Asklepios have received detailed discussion, the overall experience of the sanctuary (as well as the movements and gatherings that populated it) is by comparison poorly understood (Friese 2017, 49-52). Even R.D. Martienssen's

The Idea of Space in Greek Architecture that attempted to understand the use of space and different lines of approach within the *temenos* (sanctuary precinct) failed to include dedications, statues, and other ‘secondary’ monuments contained within it (Martienssen 1956, 115-117, 141-143). Yet smaller monuments, such as the *exedrae*, play an important role in understanding how the different parts of the sanctuary worked together to construct a particular experience, not least because of the potential they offered for gatherings (Ma 2013, 144). Jensen’s work on contemporary mobilities is helpful here to understand the mobile situations found within the Asklepieion. In his terms, the open spaces of the sanctuary of Asklepios effectively worked as stages for being ‘mobile with’ (Jensen 2014, 46). Pilgrims moved occasionally as individuals, but more often as members of groups, organized by kin, class, or gender, as seen for example in the Paeon of Isyllos. In carefully staged processions, groups moved together, sang and watched or performed a range of rituals in many different locations across the sanctuary. When pilgrims moved within the sanctuary, they passed through a variety of locales and monuments that were given meaning through their actions and their temporary congregations at particular points of interest along the processional route. Through their movements, pilgrims thus participated in different mobile situations within well-defined in-groups (families, civic delegations, ritual communities) as well as temporarily staged congregations of multiple groups in both processions and less formal manifestations (Jensen 2014, 81).

The above brief history of the development of the sanctuary followed a traditional trajectory that privileged what Jensen would call ‘staging from above’, that is the perspective of the architects, patrons, and priests responsible for the construction of major monuments. In contrast, there has been relatively less attention paid to the perspective of ‘staging from below’ and the way in which groups and individuals embodied and performed different mobilities in the sanctuary. It remains a fact, however, that the sanctuary is a crowded, messy and seemingly organic place in which major monuments can be said to be little more than skeletons – only to be provided with flesh and blood through the construction of numerous, smaller-scale monuments, such as statues and other votives that profoundly shaped the use of space (Ma 2013, 108-109). The placement of these monuments is best explained through the perspective of mobility and by gatherings of people who temporarily populated them. Closer analysis of the *exedrae* in the Asklepieion provides us with a particularly good example of this point.

Already Georges Roux, in his work on Argolid architecture, noted the proliferation of *exedrae* at Epidauros (Roux 1961, 308). Thüngen's catalogue includes eighteen limestone *exedrae* from the Asklepieion, the earliest examples dating to the second half of the fourth century (Table 1). As mentioned, the *exedrae* are found to the east and northeast of the Temple of Asklepios, as well as along the processional way that continues along that temple's southern side towards the Thymele (Fig. 5; Melfi 2007, 61-63). Most if not all the *exedrae* originally supported (now lost bronze) statues, evident from the fact that their 'footprints' remain visible on individual blocks as well as preserved dedicatory inscriptions that occasionally include artists' signatures. The placement of the *exedrae* in the sanctuary, although obviously not possible without the acceptance of sanctuary officials, demonstrates some degree of 'staging from below' of the sanctuary space in the sense that they manipulated its overall design in a relatively improvised fashion to make room for individual, embodied performances, such as small-scale temporary gatherings. The size and seating arrangements of the monuments further indicate that the *exedrae* were intended for the provision of seating for relatively small gatherings, consisting of around five to ten individuals, comparable with the number of statues that originally were erected in, for example, Exedra 6a. The motivation for constructing monuments of this type was likely to secure the best possible seats to watch rituals and processions that were *en route* to the altar of Asklepios and further on to the Thymele (Thüngen 1996, 36). The *exedrae* provided a space for particular social gatherings for small groups, perhaps even to share sacrificial meals (Thüngen 1994, 36-38). Indeed we know that sacrifices at Epidauros had to be consumed within the sanctuary (Dillon 1997, 161), and the proximity of the *exedrae* to the altar emphasizes this connection. Just as importantly, the *exedrae* provided seating for priests and other officials with the privilege of *prothysia* (that of sacrificing before others) (Melfi 2007, 62-63).

A little more than half of the *exedrae* are datable by means of inscriptions that also inform us of their sponsors (Thüngen 1996, 32-36, 36-39). Eight *exedrae* were dedicated by the *polis* of Epidauros to local citizens and their families, thus transferring symbolic capital from the city to individuals. In the case of the earliest *exedra*, a brief inscription informs us that it was dedicated by Aristarchos, son of Ergilos and a priest of Asklepios also known for having made several other dedications in the sanctuary (Roux 1961, 303-304). In these, Aristarchos was portrayed alongside members of his family, four male and two female (Keesling 2017, 143-144), thus giving some sense of the people who would have gathered in the *exedrae* at the time of their dedication as well as the kind of social interactions that they hosted, primarily among families of a particular standing within

local society. Titles such as *γυνή* (wife) and *ανήρ* (husband) are thus repeatedly mentioned explicitly in the inscriptions (e.g. Exedrae 6a and 7), thus enforcing the sense of belonging among family members, as well as displaying such bonds to outsiders that moved past the *exedrae*. Inscriptions also bear testimony to continued use of the *exedrae* for several hundred years. While this complicates the issue of chronology, such re-dedications demonstrate that the *exedrae* continued to be in use for repeated gatherings across several centuries, often by the same families. In the case of Exedra 6a, the earliest inscriptions, from the second half of the second century BC, commemorate the erection of portrait statues of a married couple, Laphanta and Sodamos, as well as several generations of their family, including a daughter, Chariko, a son, Euklippos, a granddaughter also named Laphanta, as well as the parents of Laphanta herself (Thüngen 1994, 70). The later inscriptions belong to members of the same family, demonstrating that their ownership and use of the *exedra* could remain across several generations. In other cases, such as Exedra 9, earlier inscriptions were erased, perhaps indicating that ownership had been transferred to a different family.

As an ensemble, the *exedrae* in the northeastern part of the sanctuary created a distinctively irregular and open space immediately in front of them, which Thüngen refers to as the ‘Festplatz’ (Fig. 5). In the first phase up until c. 250 BC, they clustered in the southern part of this area where they were very close to the altar of Asklepios, allowing clear view of the ritual activities and sacrifices undertaken there in front of the temple of Asklepios. After this date, they expanded in a northerly direction, with some of them providing only a limited and indirect view of the altar, clearly oriented more towards the open space itself. With the construction of Exedra 11, in the last quarter of the third century, entry into this open space was by means of a narrow passage that severely would have affected the structure and composition of the procession (Fig. 6). From within the open area itself, the *exedrae* defined movement in front of the temple of Asklepios, and obscured the view of as well as access to other buildings outside, such as the Doric stoa, occasionally interpreted as the Stoa of Kotys. Their location clearly flanks a route leading up to the altar of Asklepios, thus fossilizing the procession’s path through this important part of the sanctuary (Fig. 7). As such, the *exedrae* also chart where the procession would have begun to slow down, becoming more static in the space in front of the altar, and thus signifying an important change of pace and rhythm during gatherings. It is indeed notable that *exedrae* are not found anywhere else on the processional way that begins in the city of Epidauros, some 8 km away, and that can be partially

followed in the landscape today. The second group on the southern side of the Temple of Asklepios suggests that ritual movement continued to the Thymele where further sacrifices were made.

Equally interesting is how the *exedrae* effectively created very peculiar spaces-within-spaces that were half-open (thus facilitating the viewing of rituals and processions for those seated within them), while at the same time being half-closed (thus visually and spatially identifying an in-group that was apart from other participants and viewers that were present in the sanctuary and walked by the *exedrae*). In analysing the function of such spaces, Jensen again provides useful terminology building on the work of the psychiatrist Humphry Osmond (Jensen 2013, 46-47; 2014, 152). Jensen defines a ‘mobile sociofugal space’ as one that forces people apart and dissolves groups by separating them spatially (such as a large, open plaza with no central focal point), whereas in contrast a ‘mobile sociopetal space’ brings people together, such as a when a path becomes narrower or more restricted, thus potentially offering a more intimate and more private space for gathering. The semi-circular space inside the *exedrae* combines features of these two types of spaces. By offering a separate space for small groups to gather in isolation from other groups, they can be described as ‘mobile sociofugals’. In contrast, the physical shape of the benches brings a group seated on them closer together, thus having a sociopetal function that enabled a range of social interactions. In scale the spaces of the *exedrae* are markedly different to other ‘mobile sociopetals’ at Epidauros, such as the stadium and the theatre where the body politic gathered as one, even if status was displayed in other ways in such venues, for example, through *prohedria* (the privilege of occupying front row seats during public events, bestowed by the city) and the use of inscriptions to reserve particular seats for particular individuals or office holders. The construction of the *exedrae* – across a considerable period of the sanctuary’s history – thus underlines a need for making spaces for gatherings at the scale of families and other sub-groups in contrast to the community-defining processions and large-scale congregations that filled up the theatre and the stadium during festivals. These groups clearly belonged to elite members of society with the status and means to sponsor such monuments, and we should imagine that other less well-off groups gathered in comparable ways in less formal and much more ephemeral spaces, both inside and outside the sanctuary, particularly during festivals.

When looking at the *exedrae* from this perspective of ritual mobility, they can be considered as a very particular type of connective architecture that brought together seemingly disjointed parts of

the sanctuary (MacDonald 1986). This perspective underlines the importance of studying the *exedrae* as a group and not simply as individual, secondary monuments scattered across the sanctuary space. As places of gathering, they provided physical settings for a wide range of social interactions and embodied performances that can be reconstructed through the archaeological remains. Of course, *exedrae* are only one type of monument that staged the spaces of the sanctuary and offered the opportunity for different groups to gather during festivals and other occasions. For example, the many dedications and statue bases that surround the temple of Asklepios demonstrate the intense interest in continuously shaping sacred space on the ground in the sense of Jensen's 'staging from below' – as well as offering opportunities for gatherings and mobile situations of many different kinds (Ma 2013).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that concepts and terms from the NMP enable us to challenge dominant approaches within the study of Greek sanctuaries that traditionally have privileged monumentality over ephemeral practices that have left only limited traces. The conceptual framework outlined here facilitates a shift from the monumental spaces in which (some, albeit important) ritual acts took place and towards the manifold places of gatherings that existed at a variety of scales in the Epidaurian Asklepieion – from the private, multigenerational families that gathered in the *exedrae* to the large-scale, public congregations in the theatre, stadium and at ritual performances in the sanctuary. The *exedrae* accommodated temporary, open-air gatherings that was regulated by the ritual calendar of the sanctuary but which furthermore shaped the creation and expression of a range of different group identities, such as families, priesthoods, and elite membership (both local and foreign).

The perspectives provided by Jensen's terminology furthermore extend beyond the Asklepieion at Epidauros and to many other types of gathering. Not only are *exedrae* found in other Greek sanctuaries, potential places of gathering are predominantly studied in isolation and too often only from the perspective of typology and chronology, for example, multi-functional monumental steps (Hollinshead 2015). In the case of the famous treasuries in Olympia and Delphi (Aurigny forthcoming), these too offered both interior and exterior spaces that functioned as stages for gatherings, before, during, or after festival processions. Without paying attention to such spaces and the different scales of gathering that they accommodated, we present a distorted image of Greek

sanctuaries that does not add up, either in functional or semantic terms. Perspectives from NMP are thus useful in formulating an archaeology of gathering that takes account of the full range of mobile situations.

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