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In 1984 this article was published in the Journal of the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) of Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu (vol. 12, No. 1, December 1984, pp 23-49). In an article published in 2012, Gautam Vajracarya made an important correction to the dating of the first Visnu sculpture presented in this paper (Vajracharya, Gautam V, "Two Dated Nepali Bronzes and their Implications for the Art History of Nepal" in Indo-Asiatische Zeitschrift 16, Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Indo-Asiatische Kunst, Berlin 2012 pp 4-18.)

In the original article I had - working with the help of the great epigraphist Dhanavajra Vajracarya, Gautam Vajracharya's uncle - interpreted the inscription on the LACMA repousse Visnu plaque (fig. 1) to indicate the date NS 103, equal to 983 CE. Gautam Vajracharya corrected the interpretation of the original inscription (we are in agreement on the reading) to arrive at a more reasonable date, NS 300/1180 CE. I have included his reinterpretation of the inscription in a footnote below.

This correction shows how over the years, those interested in the art history of Nepal have made consistent strides to better our understanding of this important tradition. I felt it was important to publish this paper once again with this important correction. Note that the article itself has been left as it was published, the notes in the text referring to the correction of the date are printed in red, and the added footnotes are printed in red-bordered box.

Ian Alsop

Problems in Dating Nepalese Metal Sculpture: Three Images of Viṣṇu (corrected)

by Ian Alsop

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In the absence of many inscribed and dated Nepalese metal sculptures older than the late 15th century - the published corpus until very recently contained only six examples^[1] - historians of Nepalese art have of necessity had to fall back on careful stylistic

analysis as the only alternative open to them in their attempts to arrive at a reliable chronology of the development of Nepalese art.

Using the technique of dating by stylistic analysis, the art historian arrives at a date for a work of art through careful comparison with whatever dated material does exist, and often with material from neighboring traditions where the stylistic chronology is felt to be relatively securely established (in the study of Nepalese art, the Indian traditions - naturally enough - are used as touchstones). The basic assumption behind the use of such a dating technique is that the art tradition being studied exhibited a relatively uniform rate of stylistic progression; changes in style, though they occurred slowly, were progressive; stylistic elements were invented or borrowed, developed, employed more and more widely throughout the tradition, and in a final phase dropped or replaced by a new fashion. In studying any image, the art historian examines general features such as proportions, stance, quality of work etc., as well as minor elements of stylistic detail such as the base, crown, jewelry and clothing. (These latter are often crucial in forming an opinion, as is attested by the drawings of jewelry and clothing styles sometimes found illustrating art historical studies)[2]. These elements of style are then compared with equivalent elements found in dated sculpture or sculpture considered firmly dated on the basis of previous analysis, and the work of art being considered is then placed in a chronological continuum on the basis of this comparison.

Most art historians admit that intuition often plays a large part in this process, and all historians of Nepalese art caution that this system has serious shortcomings when applied to a tradition such as Nepal's where limited documentation is combined with a length of continuous artistic production of at least 1500 years.

In examining below several dated sculptures representing one theme, that of the standing four-armed Viṣṇu, we shall see just how hazardous dating by stylistic analysis alone can be, and we shall examine the problems that are sometimes presented even by Nepalese sculptures that are inscribed with a date. We shall further see how the products of the ancient and culturally complex Nepalese tradition often confound attempts at simple identification, and present the art historian with mysteries that defy easy solution.

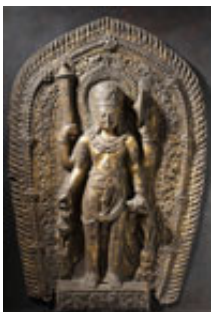


Fig. 1

The collection of the Los Angeles County Museum contains an attractive and intriguing gilt copper repoussé plaque of Viṣṇu in the common standing four-armed form (Figs. 1, 1a)[3]. This handsome plaque, whose form suggests that it may have been a kośa or kavaca - a metal sheath used to cover and beautify a stone image during worship - is dated in its inscription to the (Nepal era) year 103, corresponding to A.D. 983 (see Fig. 4. and appendix, inscription no. 1). It is thus the third earliest dated example of Nepalese metalwork to come to light and the only dated example from the tenth century.[4]

Correction: Gautam V. Vajracharya has recently corrected the interpretation of the date of this sculpture to NS 300 or CE 1180, almost two hundred years later. See [Correction footnote 4A](#)

This image exhibits what appears to be a peculiar melange of stylistic elements. Although the stance, proportions, face and crown are all of an early type, consistent with a tenth century or even earlier date, other elements at first glance appear to be anachronisms. Particularly surprising in an image of the tenth century are the highly ornate armlets, double bracelets and necklaces, ornate anklets and the large rosettes interrupting the bead motif of the exuberant aureole. All of these details are usually associated with later works, from the post 12th century medieval period at least. Images of the standing four-armed Viṣṇu and the thematically related Garuḍāsana Viṣṇu assigned tenth through 12th century dates in most previous studies of Nepalese art exhibit none of the features of ornamentation noted above.^[5] In such images, the necklace usually consists of a single or several bands of pearls or beads, while the armbands are often of a simple coiled band variety or a simple jewelled plaque, but never with the rows of pendant beads shown in the Los Angeles Viṣṇu plaque. Anklets are never seen, and the treatment of the aureole is generally more restrained than the work seen in this Viṣṇu, where the rosettes in particular are an unprecedented feature.

The recent publication of Mohan Prasad Khanal's work on Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇa - the most important Vaiṣṇava center in the Kathmandu valley - has added four interesting repoussé sculptures to the corpus of published dated metal sculpture of Nepal (see note 1). Since these sculptures, dating from A.D. 1050 to A.D. 1121, are thematically and technically related to the Los Angeles plaque, it is worth briefly comparing them to the plaque and noting stylistic similarities and differences. These four plaques are similar to the Los Angeles Viṣṇu in that all are repoussé and all represent Viṣṇu in his standing four-armed form; but while the Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇa plaques represent Viṣṇu flanked by Lakṣmi and Garuḍa, the Los Angeles plaque shows the god standing alone. It is interesting to note that in terms of modelling, stance and proportions, the Los Angeles plaque strikes the eye as the work of an earlier age, which of course it is, being more than 50 years earlier than the earliest Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇa figure. But although one of the plaques from Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇa, dated A.D. 1087 - about a century after the Los Angeles Viṣṇu - exhibits an aureole which approaches the exuberance of the work in the Los Angeles example, none of these later works of the same subject, in the same medium, exhibits any of the more extraordinary minor elements of jewelry treatment that we immediately notice in the Los Angeles plaque. The double necklace, double wristlets, heavy bracelets and ankle ornaments seen in the Los Angeles sculpture are conspicuously absent in these later examples.

The Los Angeles Viṣṇu, then, gives a remarkable impression of a very early prototype - the face, stance and crown all exhibit characteristics of Licchavi work - draped and bedecked with elaborate jewelry and decoration seemingly suitable to a date much later than that recorded in the inscription. The earlier elements of the sculpture could be explained by positing reliance on an earlier model, but the apparently post 12th century decorative elements discussed above can only be explained by positing an earlier appearance of such decorative elements in Nepalese sculpture than had previously been suspected. **With the correction of the date of the sculpture, this conclusion has now been disproved; please see [Correction footnote 4A](#)**

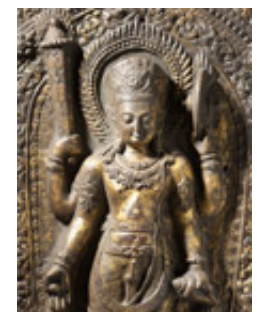


Fig. 1a

It is not only in its several 'anachronistic' stylistic elements that the Los Angeles Viṣṇu is surprising. It also

exhibits two icono-graphical peculiarities, one seemingly quite minor and the other more striking and puzzling.

The first - seemingly minor - iconographic peculiarity is a peculiarity only because the icon is Nepalese, for almost all pre- 15th century sculptures of the four-armed Viṣṇu - whether standing or Garuḍāsana - show the god holding the cakra in his upper right hand and the gadā in his upper left, an arrangement which when combined with the usual Nepalese arrangement of padma and śaṅkha in the lower hands is known as Śrīdhara, while in this plaque the arrangement of attributes in the upper hands is reversed (Figs. 1, 1a).[6]

In fact the ubiquitousness of the Śrīdhara form in pre-15th century Nepalese sculptures of Viṣṇu is one of the mysteries of Nepalese art, several times noted but difficult to explain. The predominance of this form is the more surprising since it would appear that in India, depictions showing the gadā and cakra in the hands opposite those in which they are shown in the standard Nepalese Śrīdhara form were quite common.[7]

Since we can assume that most Nepalese sculptors followed earlier models and certainly earlier types, and since no type other than the Śrīdhara has been attested from the period preceding the Los Angeles plaque, we are forced to assume that the donor of the plaque, Bhuvanā Jīva, must have made some specific requests regarding the disposition of gadā and cakra; or if the image is a copy or replacement of an earlier sculpture, as could have been the case were it a sheath, then the earlier image - perhaps Indian - also displayed these peculiarities. In this context, it is interesting to note the way - again peculiar by Nepalese standards - in which the cakra is held with its edge forward; although this is a stylistic rather than an iconographic peculiarity, it too lends an air of mystery and uniqueness to this remarkable sculpture.

The change in hand positions of the gadā and cakra is puzzling and certainly of some significance in the context of Nepalese sculpture where the Śrīdhara form predominates; but it is still a minor detail in comparison with the other much more unusual iconographic oddity displayed by the plaque; the erect phallus depicted beneath the god's dhoti.

Although ithyphallic depictions of Śiva are quite common in Nepal and perfectly understandable considering the identification of this god with the phallic emblem, this is the first time this author has ever come across an ithyphallic Viṣṇu. Certainly the most logical explanation for this unprecedented depiction is that it is perhaps one of several ways in which Nepalese sculptors have sought to unite these two popular and powerful gods in one image. Mary Slusser, in a discussion of another type of syncretic image, wrote: "The numerous surviving Harihara images attest to the syncretic outlook of the Nepalese and it is made particularly explicit by entries in the Himavatkhanda and the Nepāla-Māhātmya. These texts are studded with the Nārāyaṇeśvara concept, and the anomaly of a "Nārāyaṇa linga" is not even considered." [8] Perhaps a syncretist motive can also be assigned to the common practice in Nepalese art of surmounting an image of Viṣṇu with a small linga at the apex of the aureole, and there may be some connection between such depictions and the unprecedented ithyphallic Viṣṇu of the plaque. [9]

It is in fact probable that this image was connected with a specific cult in the Nepal valley, whose cult myth or history might provide an explanation for the peculiarities exhibited by the sculpture. But the identity and nature of this specific cult- if it does exist - remain a mystery, and most Nepalese react with puzzlement to the suggestion of an ithyphallic Viṣṇu. Unfortunately the inscription, which might be expected to provide us with some clue as to the full identity of the god and his cult, is unusually terse in its readable opening portion - not even an opening salutation is included - while the final portion is so obliterated as to be almost entirely undecipherable. So for the moment we must content ourselves, albeit without great enthusiasm, with the general surmise that this plaque is in some way yet another attempt to combine in one form the two supreme deities of Nepalese Hinduism.

II



Fig. 2

The next image of the Viṣṇu group has already been published several times, but perhaps merits further examination and discussion. Unfortunately this sculpture, a rather plain cast copper (?) depiction of a standing Viṣṇu in his most common Śrīdhara form, can only be examined through photographs, for its present whereabouts is unknown (Fig. 2 and 3 appendix, inscription no. 2).^[10] Brought into the Prince of Wales Museum in Bombay for an opinion, it was taken back after it had been photographed, and can no longer be traced.^[11]

Photographs of this sculpture were first published by Dr. Pratapaditya Pal in an important early article on dated Nepalese bronzes. Dr. Pal read the date of the inscription as 172, and referring this date to the Nepal Saṃvat, assigned the A.D. date 1052 to the sculpture.^[12]

At least one art historian has admitted that he felt this to be a surprisingly early date; Dr. Karl Khandalavala, discussing this image in an article dealing with the chronology of Nepalese art, wrote: "without the inscription we would frankly have assigned it to the 13th century, but the date established it to be A.D. 1052."^[13]

Another scholar, however, had exactly the reverse reaction. As Dr. Pal acknowledged in a note to his article, Gautamvajra Vajracarya had written expressing his view that the date of the inscription on the base of the sculpture should be referred to the Manadeva or 'Amśuvarman' era rather than to the Nepal era.^[14] This interpretation was recommended on the basis of an analysis of the paleography of the inscription; Mr. Vajracarya felt, as he later wrote, that 'the script is unquestionably in the Gupta character'.^[15] Referring the inscription and its date to the Manadeva era results in an equivalent date of A.D. 748, more than three centuries earlier than the date of A.D. 1052 resulting from reference to the Nepal era.

Dr. Pal however felt that such an early date was, as he wrote, "stylistically incompatible" and he let the date stand at A.D. 1052.^[16]

In his article he pointed out the stylistic elements shared by this Viṣṇu and several other dated eleventh century works, including a dated stone image of Sūrya in Patan.[17] These similarities are quite readily discernable, and other art historians followed his lead in assigning the date A.D. 1052 to the Viṣṇu.[18]

While historians of art published the sculpture as A.D. 1052, Dhanavajra Vajracarya published a reading of the inscription on the base, supplied by Gautamvajra Vajracarya, in his compendium of Licchavi inscriptions, now the most complete work on the subject. He placed the reading - also with the year read as 172 - with those of the Manadeva era; this results, as we have seen, in the Christian era date A.D. 748.[19]

The evident contradictions in published opinion regarding this Image and the date of its inscription certainly merit further discussion, for they highlight some of the hazards and complications art historians are forced to confront when assigning dates to Nepalese sculpture, even when inscribed.

What is the date of this sculpture?

For the purposes of a discussion leading to a possible answer to this question, we will adopt here the rather artificial approach of discussing first the inscription on the base without concerning ourselves with the image itself. If we confine ourselves to an attempt to date the inscription alone on the basis of internal evidence, we must rely almost entirely on paleographic analysis in reaching a conclusion. Although there are some stylistic elements in the text of the inscription which would seem to support the earlier date, these in themselves are not conclusive.[20] The date cannot be verified, nor are any firmly dateable personalities, such as a reigning monarch, mentioned in the text of the inscription.[21]

As more than three hundred years separate the two eras to which the inscription has been variously referred, an analysis of the paleography is not an attempt to split hairs; we are justified in assuming that such a span of time will result in an appreciable change in script types. Nepal has long been a country of graphomanes, and developments and changes in script types occurred relatively frequently. It is because of such rapid changes in scripts that scholars have felt able on the basis of paleographic analysis, to assign century dates to works with undated inscriptions.[22]

The photographs of the inscription on the base of the Viṣṇu have been examined by several of Nepal's leading epigraphists and historians, including not only Gautamvajra Vajracarya and Dhanavajra Vajracarya but also Hemraj Shakya and Shanka'rman Rajbanshi of the Archeological Department of His Majesty's Government.[23] All these scholars agree that the script in which the inscription on the base of the Viṣṇu is engraved should be referred to the earlier - Manadeva - era rather than to the later Nepal Saṃvat era. All agree that this type of script - which can be loosely characterized as 'post-Licchavi' - has not so far been attested so late as the mid-eleventh century A.D., and that even a 'freak' survival of such an early script in so much later a period is so

unlikely that the possibility can for all intents and purposes be discounted.[24]

So that the reader make his or her own judgement, we present here photographs of the inscriptions on the Los Angeles Viṣṇu plaque (Fig. 4; the part of the inscription visible corresponds to line 1 of inscription no, 1 in the appendix) and the inscription found on the base of the controversial cast Viṣṇu (Fig. 5). It is readily apparent that the script of Fig. 5 is of an earlier type than that of Fig. 4. But if we were to refer the inscription of the cast Viṣṇu (Fig. 5) to the Nepal Saṃvat, it would then be nearly-70 years later than that of the Los Angeles Viṣṇu plaque. The paleographic evidence would seem to make this highly unlikely.

From paleographic analysis, then, it seems relatively certain that the inscription should be referred to the Manadeva era, resulting in an equivalent date of A.D. 748.

That this does not automatically imply that the sculpture of Viṣṇu is eighth century was recognized by Gautamvajra Vajracarya when he wrote: "If, indeed, this is a bronze of the eleventh century, then one must assume that the statue was reworked in the later period with the inscribed base left intact." [25]

Mr. Vajracarya's suggestion is an attempt to take account of stylistic characteristics which seem to suggest an 11th century date for the sculpture while at the same, time satisfying his own certainty, based on years of experience with Nepalese scripts and inscriptions, that the inscription is eighth century.

Yet this solution, though theoretically possible, seems implausible; we certainly have no previous documented examples of a Nepalese religious icon of any kind being reworked to satisfy the aesthetic tastes of a generation succeeding that of its manufacture. The ritual difficulties involved in reworking a consecrated image would mitigate against this possibility, while the aesthetic motivation we would have to impute to such reworking seems out of character with what we know of Nepalese religious attitudes.

There are of course other possibilities of a similar nature which would explain the discrepancy between the paleography of the inscription and the style of the sculpture. Perhaps the image is later and was in some way affixed to an earlier base.[26] An inspection of a rear-view photograph (Fig. 3) of the Viṣṇu shows no indication of any joint in the metal although stress cracks in the upper ankles are visible. Photographs can of course be misleading, and as G. Vajracarya points out, an inspection of the sculpture itself is still very much to be desired. [27]

Another possibility - that the sculpture is a replacement, inscription and all, of a damaged original - has in its favor the fact that such replacement has been attested several times in firmly documented examples.[28] In the cases



Fig. 3

where we know that this has been done, however, the replacement is self-advertised in an inscription mentioning not only the original donation but also the circumstances of the replacement. The script of the replacement is always contemporary with the replacement; no attempt is made to copy the earlier script style. This type of 'admitted' replacement causes no problems for art historians; in fact, in one case where we have both the original and replacement, we are treated to a fascinating glimpse of the stylistic changes wrought by a later artist in copying an earlier original.^[29]

But what are the chances that an inscribed icon is an unadvertised replacement, inscription and all, of an earlier original? This is a disturbing question, for if we decide that there is a possibility that such replacements could have occurred, we automatically cast in doubt the veracity of any dated work of Nepalese art, including of course every inscribed image presented here. This would further cast in doubt the whole system of assigning dates to Nepalese works, for it is our precious stock of inscribed and dated sculptures and paintings that forms the bedrock of all approaches to dating.

If this Viṣṇu, for example, is such an unadvertised replacement, we would have to assume that the donor of the replacement, while specifying that the original inscription be copied, made no provision for an addendum mentioning himself. This certainly seems possible, for as we know the vast majority of donors chose to remain anonymous.

In the case of this Viṣṇu, we would have to further assume that the inscription was copied letter for letter in the original script while the sculpture itself was perhaps changed in the reproduction to accord with later - in this case 11th century - taste.

This possibility, while theoretically admissible, is unlikely. The original inscription, if copied more than 300 years later, would have been nearly illegible both to the engraver who attempted to execute the inscription and to almost anyone among his contemporaries who tried to read it. To engrave a faithful copy of an unfamiliar script is a difficult skill which would seem to serve no useful purpose other than forgery, which we can assume was not a practice in early medieval Nepal. Furthermore, an unfaithful, poorly executed copy of an earlier inscription by an illiterate engraver would catch the eye of the modern scholar experienced in early scripts, and this inscription does not exhibit the mistakes we would expect in such a copy.^[30]

After all this long-windedness, we come to the final possibility regarding this Viṣṇu and its inscription. It is of course the simplest; both inscription and image are a single work of A.D. 748. This solution, though by no means certain, is the one I will tentatively adopt here.

In accepting such a solution we must of course address the objection raised by Dr. Pal that this date is incompatible with the style of the sculpture.^[31]

While we have seen that this image of Viṣṇu is in fact, as Dr. Pal convincingly showed in his original discussion of this sculpture,

stylistically compatible with several other dated sculptures from the 11th century, it is considerably more difficult to demonstrate that it is stylistically incompatible with sculpture from the eighth century. This is so partially because we have not a single attested dated metal sculpture from this century, nor do we have any from the later seventh or the ninth centuries, while the repoussé Viṣṇu plaque discussed earlier is our first attested example from the tenth. When speaking of the style of Nepalese metal sculpture between the dates A.D. 607 and A.D. 983 - nearly four centuries - we are essentially working in a void. Nor do we find any dated stone sculpture from the eighth century to help us in our search for an eighth century style, if in fact such a discrete style actually exists. [32]

When we allow ourselves to view the Viṣṇu as a genuine eighth century work, we find that in fact the stylistic objections to such an early date are relatively slight. In suggesting such a great age for this sculpture, I find myself confronted with three anomalies in the work itself: 1) the relative slimness of the figure, 2) the lack of refinement in the over all workmanship and 3) the simple and rather crude three-leafed crown. The latter two, I feel, can be attributed to lack of skill on the part of the sculptor, while the former can be understood as a characteristic of metal sculpture in the round as opposed to the high relief usually employed in stone treatments of this and related subjects.

Aside from the idiosyncracies mentioned above, the Viṣṇu exhibits many stylistic characteristics consonant with an early date, among which we might mention the treatment of the clothing, jewelry and emblems, the simple square base, the bead and flame nimbus and the overall simplicity of the sculpture. In these elements at least this Viṣṇu certainly seems to display earlier characteristics than those seen in the tenth century plaque discussed above. [33]

I feel then that we can tentatively consider an eighth century date for this Viṣṇu. Absolute confirmation would have to come from further evidence such as other dated metal sculpture from the same period; [34] certainly an examination of the sculpture itself is still very much a desideratum. But in this case, I feel the simplest and most likely solution to the contradictions presented by this image lies in referring both inscription and sculpture to the year A.D. 748.

Although by no means a masterpiece, this sculpture remains an interesting document of Nepalese art history, for it provides a tentative point of reference where none existed before. The void of four centuries has hardly been filled, but at least one metal sculpture exists which may prove of help to art historians groping through the dark.

III

The last of the sculptures in the Viṣṇu group has already been published several times and is presented here again merely because, unlike the two other sculptures discussed in this article, it bears a date much later than one would expect from its

appearance.



Fig. 6

This Viṣṇu, flanked on either side by his vehicle Garuḍa and his consort -Lakṣmī, is inscribed with the date 818 (Fig. 6: appendix, inscription no. 3).[35] Although there are peculiarities in the inscription (Fig. 7). - the era is identified as 'śrī 3 Saṃvat' and the inscription is written mostly in Devanagari rather than in the Newari script one would expect in this period - it is quite certain that the saṃvat refers to the Nepal era, resulting in the equivalent date A.D. 1698.[36]

Considering its appearance, this is a surprisingly late date, and elicited from Sadashiv Gorakshkar the admission that, "but for its date, our bronze could also have been assigned to the thirteenth-fourteenth century." [37]

When we consider that, as we have seen earlier, another prominent art historian, Karl Khandalavala, would have assigned the cast Viṣṇu discussed at length above to the same general period were it not for an inscription, and that this cast Viṣṇu may very well be eighth century, we can see how difficult is the task of assigning dates to Nepalese metal figures.[38] These two Images, judged contemporary in appearance by two authorities, differ in age by at least six hundred odd years in conservative estimation, and in fact are probably separated in time by nearly a millenium.

The difficulty of assigning dates to Nepalese metal sculpture, so clearly demonstrated by these two examples, may be partially understood as a natural result of the great age and tenacious continuity of the Nepalese art tradition. As Mary Slusser has written, we have every reason to believe that in the case of Viṣṇu, an icrmographic and stylistic type was established very early and adhered to faithfully throughout centuries of artistic endeavor.[39] This is not only true of Vaiṣṇava themes, of course, for other themes, Saivite and Buddhist as well, have been treated with much the same conservatism by Nepalese artists over the more than 1500 years that comprise the span of documented Nepalese art history.

As has been observed many times before, this tenacity of stylistic characteristics makes dating sculpture by stylistic analysis alone extremely difficult and hazardous. It is in fact possible, nay probable, that the basic assumption on which stylistic analysis rests - that styles in Nepalese art: changed gradually through time - is faulty. Karl Khandalavala wrote while discussing the metalworking tradition in Kashmir: "It should be remembered that more than one atelier must in all probability have been functioning at the same time according to its (sic) own guild formulas and hence the stylistic differences which we today are often apt to regard as indicating different periods of production may, in fact, not warrant such a conclusion." [40] The model of an Asian art tradition presented in these words seems fitting indeed in reference to Nepal. There is little doubt that there were several prosperous and highly regarded ateliers thriving at any given time in the tiny area of the Nepal valley. Some sculptors were willing to experiment with unprecedented forms, while others were surely reactionaries, enamored of the work of their forefathers and scornful of

experimentation. These latter would never have had far to go to find a suitable model in a center of culture that can easily be traversed in a single day. The traditional sculptors and painters of modern Nepal certainly fit this model. While some eschew the use of a model and search continuously for new idioms to express ancient subjects, others never tire of discovering and copying the work of masters long dead, whether it be by visits to shrines or the more modern method of poring through art books.[41]

This confusion of schools with periods is unavoidable in a tradition that is as scantily documented as Nepal's. But as the study of Nepalese art begins to come of age, it is to be hoped that further documentary evidence will come to light which will help art historians to assign dates on the basis of a more solid body of known facts.[42] We may even eventually see a day when distinct schools can be identified and distinguished. Until this is possible art historians will be forced to date by extrapolating from the evidence at hand, analysing and comparing elements of style. But remembering that images separated by centuries can often appear contemporaneous, the wise art historian will perhaps refrain from such pinpoint phrases as the "first half" or the "second half" of any given century when assigning a date to an uninscribed sculpture. Certainly to assign dates within 50 years when there are either no or precious few dated sculptures from the centuries preceeding or following the suggested date amounts to little more than whistling in the dark. It is perhaps more worthwhile to search for the bits of hard evidence - documentary or technical - that will shed some light on the gloom which envelops Nepal's ancient and noble art traditions.

Appendix: Inscriptions, translations and comments.

I wish to acknowledge here my great debt to Dhanavajra Vajracarya, one of Nepal's foremost historians and a scholar of incomparable learning, who gave much of his valuable time to help the author read the inscriptions shown below. Without his help my understanding of the earlier inscriptions would not have been possible. In transliterations given below, illegible characters are indicated by 'x', uncountable illegible characters are indicated by '...', and supplied readings are contained in parentheses.



Fig. 4

Inscription no. 1. Los Angeles Viṣṇu plaque (see Fig. 4)

Transliteration:

1. trayasamadhike vatsarake śate, tapasaḥ dvādasi śukla tithau vidhau
2. pravara vaidya kulakama x x x bhuvana jīva iti jena khyātaya...
3. vara suvarnajana
4. ...ja nārāyanasattva...

Translation:

In the year 103, on Monday, the 12th of the bright half of Māgha, Bhuvāṇa jīva of the most excellent Vaidya family, for his glory (?)...

The date has now been corrected by Gautamvajra Vajracharya to, "In the year 300"; please see [Correction footnote 4A](#)

Comments:

The date corresponds to approximately January-February, A.D. 983. The readable part of the inscription, which is inscribed just inside the aureole around the body of the god, is extremely brief and terse. Lines three and four of the inscription are found on a sheet of copper bent under the base of the plaque, and the characters are extremely effaced and difficult to read. Even the name 'nārāyaṇa' which occurs in line 4 is at best an approximate or possible reading, and cannot really be taken as proof positive that this is the name intended for the deity, particularly since the name as read is misspelled (it should be 'Nārāyaṇa'); lines three and four are included here with some diffidence as the readings are so unsure.



Inscription no. 2. cast standing Viṣṇu (see Fig. 5)



1. saṃvat 172 āṣāḍha śukla diva dvādasyāṅkādulakagrāme śrī hetu jīva.. pati śrī vastramitra ...

2. śrī devasvāmi ... śrī dharamittra śrī dhuvamittra śrī somamitra śrī ... mittra śrī jayadeva

3. śrī nārāyaṇa prabhṛtibhiḥ svapuṇyabhivṛddhaye śrī bhagavadnārāyaṇa devaḥ (pra)ti (ṣṭha)pi(taḥ)



Fig. 5

Translation:

In the year 172, on the twelfth of fehe bright half of Āṣāḍha, śrī Hetujīva, śrī Vastramitra, śrī Devasvāmi, śrī Dharamittra, śrī Dhuvamittra, śrī Somamitra, śrī ... mittra, śrī Jayadeva, śrī Nārāyaṇa, etc., of Kādulakagrāma (village, town), for the increase of their own merit, consecrated (this image of) Lord Nārāyaṇa.

Comments:

The date, if referred to the Manadeva or 'Aṃśuvarman' era corresponds to approximately July, A.D. 748; if referred to the Nepal era, it corresponds to approximately July, A.D. 1052. Kādulakagrāma may perhaps be the modern Satungal, an ancient settlement situated near the road which leads out of Kathmandu towards Thankot. The reading of the inscription differs in a few minor respects from the reading given in Dhanavajra Vajracharya's Licchavikālakā Abhilekha, inscription 171, pp. 590-591, reflecting Mr. Vajracharya's own corrections upon close examination of the photographs.

Inscription no. 3. Lakṣmī-Viṣṇu-Garuḍa triptych (see Fig. 7)

Transliteration:

1. śrī 3 Saṃvat 818 āśvīna śukla 10 tasmin divasa śrī 3 lakṣmī nārāyaṇa garud murti
2. nayaṇata narasiṃha bhaṭṭana kārina śubha

Translation:

In the year śrī 3 Saṃvat 818, on the tenth of the bright half of Āśvīna; on this day (this) image of śrī 3 Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇa Garuḍa was made by (for) Narasiṃha Bhaṭṭa of Ņata. Good fortune.

Comments:

The date corresponds to September-October, A.D. 1698. The use of the phrase 'śrī 3 Saṃvat' is unusual; it may perhaps refer to the connection of this era with Paśupatiṇātha mentioned in the so-called Kaisar vaṃsāvali, or VK. [43] The Neta tole area of Kathmandu is still occupied by families of Bhaṭṭa Brahmins who trace their lineage from Lambakārṇa Bhaṭṭa, according to tradition one of the gurus and advisors of the 17th-century Kathmandu king Pratāpa Malla. Perhaps the Narasiṃha of this inscription is a relative. The use of a mixed Devanāgarī-Newari script for the inscription is also unusual, although Pratāpa Malla himself - a confirmed graphomane - occasionally set up inscriptions in Devanāgarī rather than the Newari script normal for the time.



Fig. 7

Footnotes:

1. Ulrich von Schroeder, *Indo-Tibetan Bronzes* (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 1981), fig. 74E: Buddha Sākyamuni, A.D. 591, P. 305; fig. 83C: Viṣṇu, A.D. 1052, p. 322; fig. 83D: Viṣṇu Garuḍāsana, A.D. 1003 (sic - should be A.D. 1004), p. 323; fig. 83F: Caturmukha Lingam, A.D. 1045, p. 323; fig. 85F: Vasudhara, A.D. 1081 (sic - should be A.D. 1082), p. 327; fig. 98B: Vasudhārā; A.D. 1466 (sic - perhaps should be A.D. 1467), p. 364.- All of these dated sculptures had previously been published by other historians of Nepalese art. Other inscribed but undated images have been assigned dates on the basis of paleographic analysis. Recently, Mohan Prasad Khanal in *Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇaka Aitihāsik Sāmagrī* (Historical Materials of Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇa) (Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, V.S. 2040, A.D. 1983) has published photographs of Aṃśuvarman' s gold kavaca of Garuḍāsana Nārāyaṇa of A.D. 607 (plates 10 and 11) and the following pre-16th century inscribed and dated material: the cast base of a Viṣṇu triptych with an attendant figure, A.D. 1038 (plate 29), a Viṣṇu-Lakṣmī-Garuḍa triptych, repoussé, A.D. 1050 (plate 30), plus three other repoussé treatments of the same subject dated A.D. 1087 (plate 31), A.D. 1106 (plate 32), A.D. 1121 (plate 33); and an interesting cast memorial 'portrait' sculpture of Yakṣa malla, A.D. 1482 (plate 34).

2. see Von Schroeder, Indo-Tibetan Bronzes, pp. 296-297, pp. 300-301, pp; 334-335, etc. In a succinct statement of the assumption underlying dating by stylistic analysis, von Schroeder remarks, "Stylistic changes come about through a slow process of gradual adaptation to the modified interpretation of how deities should be depicted", p. 340.
3. Los Angeles Country Museum of Art no. M. 80.187. I wish to acknowledge here the very kind and generous help extended to me by Dr. Pratapaditya Pal, not only in providing me with photographs and materials, but in his comments and encouragement as well. I deeply appreciate the interest he has shown in the work of a younger scholar.
4. Mary Shepherd Slusser, On the Antiquity of Nepalese Metalcraft, Archives of Asian Art, vol. 29 (1975-1976), fig. 5. a cast standing Buddha in the Cleveland Museum is, at A.D. 591, the oldest dated Nepalese metal sculpture, while Khanal, Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇaka Aitihāsik Sāmagrī, figs. 10 and 11, the Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇa kavaca of A.D. 607 is the second oldest and the oldest dated work in repoussé.

Footnote 4A: Vajracharya wrote, in his article: "According to ALSOP ... the Los Angeles Viṣṇu plaque is dated 983 CE. He translates the inscription as follows:

"In the year 103, on Monday, the 12th of the bright half of Māgha, Bhuvāṇa jīva of the most excellent Vaidya family, for this (sic, his) glory (?) ..." (ALSOP 1984: 33). The Nepal Saṃvat 103 Māgha corresponds to 983 CE. Thus to explain away the appearance of the highly ornate decorative elements seen in the plaque he proposes "an earlier appearance of such decorative elements in Nepalese sculpture than had previously been suspected" (*ibid.*: 25). SLUSSER (2005: 200-201) fully supports this view and calls it "incontrovertible evidence."

Certainly, this statement would have been groundbreaking in the history of Nepalese art had his interpretation of the inscriptional evidence been either correct or consistent. Note the fact that the date is given in Sanskrit words rather than in numbers. It reads "*traya samadhike vatsarake śate*". Knowing that in Sanskrit *traya* means "triple" or "threefold," rather than "three," and *sam+adhika* means "more", the statement cannot be translated as "in the year 103".4) It literally means "in the year, (which is) three times more than a hundred". Thus without doubt the passage "*traya samadhike vatsarake śate*" actually means "in the year of 300", thereby corresponding to 1180 CE."

In Vajracarya, Gautam, "Two Dated Nepali Bronzes and their Implications for the Art History of Nepal", in **Indo-Asiatische Zeitschrift**, 16; Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Indo-Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, 2012, p. 16.

When I first saw Vajracharya's reading it seemed to me to fit far better with the visual evidence presented by the sculpture. In this we are certainly in agreement: I wrote "Particularly surprising in an image of the tenth century are the highly ornate armlets, double bracelets and necklaces, ornate anklets and the large rosettes interrupting the bead motif of the exuberant aureole. All of these details are usually associated with later works, from the post 12th century medieval period at least." (see article above). Here I was in full agreement with his contention "The plaque is indeed highly ornate. Its entire available space is decorated with meandering foliage, flowers, beads and flame motifs. The image appears even more ornate due to the elaborate jewelry worn by the god, such as the double bracelets, multiple necklaces, and other ornaments. Such emphasis on decorative elements, as previous scholars have aptly shown, is a 12th-century development." Vajracharya, p. 16

It was alas not possible to confirm Gautam Vajracharya's interpretation with his uncle Dhanavajra, as he passed away in 1994. But other epigraphists in Nepal, after studying the inscription, agreed that Gautam Vajracharya's interpretation (our readings are the same) was correct, so the mystery of the date of this sculpture was solved.

5. For examples, compare with Pratapaditya Pal, *The Arts of Nepal: Part I, Sculpture* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974) figs. 30, 110, 111, 114 (a Viśvarvūpa), 116, 117; and Pratapaditya Pal, *Vaiṣṇava Iconology in Nepal* (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1970) figs. 30, 31, 42 and von Schroeder, *Indo-Tibetan Bronzes*, figs. 80D, 83A.

6. All 24 mathematically possible dispositions of Viṣṇu's four main emblems in his four hands were recognized as forms of the god - the so-called *caturviṃśatimūrti*- and are linked to 24 names first mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* and later in iconographic citations in a variety of texts. The earliest of these latter, in the *Agni Purāṇa*, lists the variation seen in the Los Angeles plaque as *Trivikrama*, while the later *Padma Purāṇa* mentions the name *Nārāyaṇa*, this latter name being the preferred name of Viṣṇu for most Newars, among whom the name *Viṣṇu* is at best rather literary and the term *Śrīdhara*, the technical name of the common Nepalese form, essentially unknown. Several other lists of forms of Viṣṇu do not even mention the variation encountered in the Los Angeles plaque, which, though unusual in Nepalese sculptural depictions, is relatively common in Indian sculpture. The disagreement among the various texts is an indication of the relative unimportance of the differences in hand-emblem variations, and the lists seem to be nothing more than examples of the oft-noted Indian love of codification and list-making. It is worth noting here that the predominance of the *Śrīdhara* form in Nepal is applicable only to earlier sculpture, for in painting and later sculpture other variations are often encountered. For discussions of the *caturviṃśatimūrti* see Nanditha Krishna, *The Art and Iconography of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa* (Bombay: Taraporevala, 1980) pp. 86-87, and Jitendra Nath Banerjea, *The Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1974) p. 388; Banerjea dates the development of the *caturviṃśatimūrti* to the Gupta period or somewhat before.

7. for a few examples, see Krishna, *The Art and Iconography of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa* figs. 20, 21 and 25; and Frederick M. Asher, *The*

Art of Eastern India, 300-800 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980) plates 132, 133, 158, 197, etc.

8. Mary Shepherd Slusser and Gautamvajra Vajracarya, Some Nepalese Stone Sculptures: A Reappraisal within their Cultural and Historical Context, *Artibus Asiae* 35 (1/2) (1973) p. 116.

9. Pal, *Vaiṣṇava Iconology in Nepal*, fig. 102, p. 127 Dr. Pal explains the surmounted linga as a sign of the supremacy of Śaivism in Nepal; this is the explanation of many Nepalese as well. Jitendra Nath Banerjea, *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, p. 546, contains the following tantalizing sentence: "A medieval sculpture from Bihar (now in the collection of the Indian Museum) does not contain all these elaborate features (elements of jewelry and decoration and attendant figures -I.A.), but the right and left parts of the combined image stand for Hara and Hari and the Hara aspect is emphasised by the ūrdhvaliṅga sign not always present in such images." I have unfortunately not been able to see this sculpture. Slusser and Vajracarya, "Some Nepalese Stone Sculptures: A Reappraisal within their Cultural and Historical Context," fig. 7, illustrates a Harihara image, one of several in Nepal, where the cakra is held in the left: hand, perfectly normal since in Harihara images the left side is always assigned to Viṣṇu. Perhaps the Los Angeles Viṣṇu was made to cover a Harihara image, but with the intention to display at the time of its use in worship the predominance of Viṣṇu - in which case the gadā in the right hand would have covered Hara-Śiva's trident. The ūrdhvaliṅga would then have been included in the kavaca to remind the viewer of the icon's relation with the composite form. But this is of course only speculation of the type which historians of Nepalese art must perforce indulge in from time to time.

10. I would like to express my thanks to Sadashiv Gorakshkar of the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay, for kindly furnishing me with photographs of this sculpture and its inscription.

11. Karl Khandalavala, *The Chronology of the Arts of Nepal and Kashmir*. *Lalit Kalā* no. 19 (1979) p. 34.

12. Pratapaditya Pal, Three Dated Nepali Bronzes and their Stylistic Significance, *Archives of Asian Art*, vol. 25 (1971-1972), pp. 60-61, figs. 5 and 6.

13. Khandalavala, *The Chronology of the Arts of Nepal and Kashmir*, p.34.

14. Pal, *Three Dated Nepali Bronzes and their Stylistic Significance*, note 10, p. 66.

15. Gautamvajra Vajracarya, personal communication, letter to author dated Feb. 23, 1982.

16. Pal, *Three Dated Nepali Bronzes and their Stylistic Significance*, note 10, p. 66.

17. *ibid.* pp. 61, fig. 3.

18. von Schroeder, *Indo-Tibetan Bronzes*, fig. 83c, p. 322; Mary Shepherd Slusser, *Nepal Mandala* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1982) vol. 1 Appendix IV-1, no. 171, where the date is listed as (N.S.?) 172, A.D. 1052 ?; the sculpture is not illustrated.

19. Dhanavajra Vajracarya, *Licchavikālakā Abhilekha* (Licchavi Inscriptions) (Kathmandu: Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, 1973), inscription, no. 171, pp. 590-591. Mohan Prasad Khanal also agrees with Gautamvajra and Dhanavajra Vajracarya: see Mohan Prasad Khanal, *Cāṃguko Nepali Mūrtikalā*, *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 8 (2) (June 1981) pp. 172-173.

20. Dhanavajra Vajracarya, in a personal communication, mentioned that, among other elements of style, the names encountered in this inscription are typical of Licchavi period epigraphy and are less frequently found in later documents.

21. As is to be expected in an early inscription, the day of the week - necessary for verification - is not mentioned.

22. for examples, see Pal, *The Arts of Nepal*; Part I, *Sculpture*, figs. 11, p. 26 and fig. 26, p. 32; and Slusser, *On the Antiquity of Nepalese Metalcraft*, fig. 1, p. 81. There are numerous works on the paleography of Nepal; two important publications are: Shankar Man Rajbanshi, *The Evolution of Devanagari Script*, *Kailash* 2 (1 and 2) (1974) pp. 23-120 and Hemraj Shakya, *Nepāla Lipi Prakāśa* (Kathmandu, Royal Nepal Academy, V.S. 2030 - A.D. 1973). See also Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, pp. 394-395 for a concise discussion of Nepalese scripts.

23. I am grateful to all these scholars for the time they have taken to examine the photographs on my behalf.

24. It is difficult, if not impossible, to classify and delimit script types exactly. Thus, Hemraj Shakya, *Nepāla Lipi Prakāśa*, p. 5, records the limit of the 'post-Licchavi' or 'later Licchavi' script as the 12th century of the Vikrama era (approximately mid-11th century A.D.). The example he cites from so late a period is considerably different from the script on the base of the Viṣṇu sculpture discussed here, and in a personal communication he has expressed his certainty that the Viṣṇu inscription could not be from so late a period. Rajbanshi, *The Evolution of Devanagari Script*, p. 25, places the end of the Licchavi scripts at the end of the ninth century of the Vikrama era, or approximately mid-ninth century A.D.

25. G. Vajracarya, personal communication in a letter dated Feb. 23, 1982.

26. This possibility was raised in relation to the standing Buddha of A.D. 591 in the Cleveland Museum; see Slusser, *On the Antiquity of Nepalese Metalcraft*, note 12, p. 94.

27. G. Vajracarya, in a personal communication in a letter dated Feb. 23, 1982, wrote: "I have to refrain from making any conclusion before examining the bronze closely." Unfortunately, unless the bronze turns up at some time in the future, no art historian will have the opportunity to do so.

28. The Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇa gold kavaca of Aṃśuvarman is a replacement: see Slusser, On "the Antiquity of Nepalese Metalcraft, pp. 84-93 and Khanal, Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇaka Aitihāsik Sāmagrī, figs. 10 and 11.

29. Pratapaditya Pal, The Arts of Nepal: Part II, Painting (Leiden/ Koln: E.J. Brill, 1978) figs. 7 and 8, pp. 22-23: in this example-paintings recording the donations given by the 15th century Indian Buddhist pandit Vanaratna - both part of the original, dated ca. A.D. 1469, and a replacement of A.D. 1842, are extant.

30. This has been confirmed by Dhanvajra Vajracarya in a personal communication.

31. Pal, Three Dated Nepali Bronzes and their Stylistic Significance, note 10, p. 66.

32. Pal, The Arts of Nepal: Part I, Sculpture contains the following stone sculpture with dated inscriptions relevant to this article: fig. 1, Viṣṇu Vikrānta, A.D. 467

fig. 2, Viṣṇu Vikrānta, A.D. 467 (?)

fig. 8, Avalokiteśvara, ca. A.D. 550 (inscription is undated but mentions reigning king)

fig. 9, Umāmaheśvara, A.D. 573

fig. 27, Sūrya, A.D. 987

fig. 28, Sūrya, A.D. 1083

fig. 34, Sūrya, A.D. 1159

fig. 35, Sūrya, A.D. 1349

fig. 36, Jhaṅkeśvarī, A.D. 1407

fig. 38, Umāmaheśvara, A.D. 1414

Slusser and Vajracarya, in Some Nepalese Stone Sculptures: A Reappraisal within their Cultural and Historical Context, pp. 79-138, convincingly date two Vaiṣṇava sculptures to the mid-seventh century on the basis of historical documentation (fig. 4, fig. 19); Slusser, Nepal Mandala, vol. 2, fig. 474 illustrates a Mañjunatha of A.D. 920 which had been previously published but never accurately dated; fig. 427 illustrates a Gaṇeśa of A.D. 1438.

It is interesting to note that between the dates of A.D. 607 and A.D. 1004 which form the limits of the gap in dates of previously

published pre-12th century dated metal sculpture, inscribed and dated stone sculptures provide us with only two examples, both tenth century, for comparison, although there are several other stone sculptures from this period with undated inscriptions which can be approximately placed by paleographic analysis.

33. It is indeed the surprising appearance of the Los Angeles Viṣṇu plaque which makes an eighth century date for the cast Viṣṇu seem less improbable. Art historians are unavoidably influenced by the earliest dated material at hand, and when this Viṣṇu was first published by Dr. Pal, the earliest known dated example of Nepalese metalwork was a repoussé Garuḍāsana Viṣṇu presented at the same time: see Pal, *Three Dated Nepali Bronzes and their Stylistic Significance*, fig. 1 and 2, and the discussion, pp. 58-59, of the history of scholarly opinion regarding the possible antiquity of metal sculpture in Nepal.

34. Khanal, *Cāṃguko Nepali Mūrtikalā*, fig. 7 and p. 139, presents what appears to be a repoussé roundel depicting Viṣṇu from the Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇa temple treasury, which is in many respects remarkably similar to this Viṣṇu. The sculpture presented by Khanal, which is not inscribed, is dated by the author to the fourth century A.D., which would place it in proto-historical times and seems somewhat ambitious a date; but as the material presented in this article clearly shows, the capacity of Nepalese art to surprise seems practically limitless.

35. first published in Sadashiv Gorakshkar, *Two Nepali Bronzes in the Prince of Wales Museum*, *Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India*, no. 11 (1971), figs. 29 and 30, pp. 26-32. Again published in Pal, *The Arts of Nepal; Part I, Sculpture*, fig. 48.

36. For a detailed analysis see appendix, inscription no. 3.

37. Gorakshkar, *Two Nepali Bronzes in the Prince of Wales Museum*, P.32.

38. see note 13 above.

39. Slusser, *On the Antiquity of Nepalese Metalcraft*, p. 87: writing of Cāṃgu Nārāyaṇa, Slusser remarks, "It seems that the enshrined icon is the prototype of all subsequent Nepalese works on the Garuḍāsana theme."

40. Khandalavala, *The Chronology of the Arts of Nepal and Kashmir*, p. 43. In his article, Mr. Khandalavala combines this valuable insight into South Asian art history with occasionally minute adjustments to dating assignments suggested by Dr. Pal in several of his publications. Often these adjustments concern sculpture dated to periods with no documentary evidence available whatsoever.

41. Ian Alsop and Jill Charlton, *Image Casting in Oku Bahal*, *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 1 (1) (December 1973) pp. 22-50

discusses the preferred styles of a few modern traditional sculptors.

42. In a forthcoming article the present author will present further documentary evidence concerning Nepalese metal sculpture from the 12th to the 15th centuries. See Alsop, Five Dated Nepalese Sculptures, *Artibus Asiae* (2/3) 1984. Forthcoming.

43. Dilli Raman Regmi, *Medieval Nepal: Part III* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1966) p. 158, VK, folio 1.

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