

Uchtepa 2 – Fire Temple in the Fergana Valley

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Abstract: This article discusses the archaeological research and excavations conducted at the Uchtepa Buloqmozor complex, specifically the Uchtepa-2 archaeological site. The article highlights the archaeological findings uncovered from the site, the structure of the monument, and its functions.

Keywords: Miyon-Rudon, Uchtepa-2, monument, excavation trench, structure, altar-fireplace, stone construction, Zoroastrianism, grave, pottery products, stone flakes, fire, religious ritual, oval-shaped.

The Uchtepa-2 Archaeological Monument – The Uchtepa Buloqmozor complex is located in the village of Uchtepa, Norin district, Namangan region, Fergana Valley. It is situated on the left side of the Namangan-Khaqqulobod highway, in a geographically advantageous natural area, at an elevation of 419 meters above sea level (Figure 1). Although the monument appears circular in shape, its platform is square, measuring 40x40 meters, with a height of 6 meters.

To the south of the site flows the Qaradarya, one of the main tributaries of the Syr Darya, while to the north flows the Naryn River. In medieval written sources, the area between these two rivers, the Naryn and Qaradarya, was referred to as Miyon Rudon.

Initial research at the Uchtepa Buloqmozor complex was conducted in 1963 by academician A. Asqarov. At that time, there were three mounds in the area, and A. Asqarov carried out excavations at the monument identified as "Uchtepa-1." To determine the chronological dating of the monument, he conducted a stratigraphic trenching at the site. In the upper layers of the trench, artifacts from the early medieval period were discovered, while pottery fragments from the ancient period were found in the lower layers. The trench was dug to a depth of 2 meters, and black-slipped pottery fragments were uncovered from the upper part of the ancient layer, while clear red-slipped pottery fragments emerged from the lower part. Subsequent information about the monument was recorded in the reports of M. Isomiddinov, based on A. Asqarov's findings[2, 21]. In the report, it is mentioned that the monument is also referred to as Uchtepa-2, O‘rtatepa, or Nuralitepa. At that time, the mound was almost circular in shape, measuring 40 meters from north to south, 30 meters from east to west, and had a height of 5 meters[2, 21].

After a long break (in 2019), extensive archaeological excavations were initiated under the leadership of academician A. Asqarov, with the aim of conducting research on the monument, refining its dating, structure, and function. As a result of these excavations, it was determined that the monument consisted of a four-step (terraced) structure. The excavation site revealed the remains of 30 rooms, many of which contained altar-fireplaces, stone altars, 7 skeletal remains (according to our initial conclusions, the bodies in the graves belonged to women – researcher), and the bones of 2 animals (Figure 2, plan). Observations indicate that the entrance to the structure was from the north, where a ramp-corridor expanded upward from the entrance of the temple, leading toward the central hall of the structure. The ramp is 7.5 meters long and approximately 70 cm wide (Figure 3). In its original form, this ramp-corridor would have been even longer than it is today.

Unfortunately, in the early 1990s, the northern part of the temple was significantly damaged when it was allocated as land plots to the local population. As a result, it was impossible to restore the original state of the ramp-corridor. The preserved section of the ramp-corridor has walls on both sides, with a

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thickness of 50 cm at the top and over 1 meter at the base. Its southern end rises on stairs made of mud bricks and leads to a triangular-shaped wall built from large mud bricks. At this point, a small stone-paved pathway begins, running eastward from the ramp-corridor. From here, the stone-paved path splits toward the north and south. The northern branch leads to the northern rooms of the structure, while the southern branch runs along the western wall of the central hall, extending southward. The stone-paved pathway heading south is 9.30 meters long and 70 cm wide (Figure 4). At the end of the stone path, a door opens into the central hall labeled as Room 1.

The central hall is rectangular, measuring approximately 12.15 meters in length (north to south) and 5.65 meters in width (west to east), making the total size of the central hall 12.15x5.65 meters. The thickness of the walls in the central hall is 80 cm on the north and east sides, and 50 cm on the south and west sides. From the central hall, the main altar-fireplace (№7), 4 graves (№2, №3, №4, №5), and 1 dog grave (№11) were uncovered. The graves were found in a disorganized manner on the floor, and near many of them were animal bones, pitchers, knives, and belt buckles.

Opposite the entrance to the central hall, a door leading to the eastern sector of the temple was opened from the eastern wall. The main altar-fireplace of the central hall's first phase was located between these two doorways. Unfortunately, during the Arab invasion (led by Qutayba ibn Muslim's forces – according to the researcher), this main altar-fireplace was destroyed. Around its location, the bodies of civilians, most likely women, who perished in battle were buried on the spot. Only the hearth (№6) of the main altar-fireplace has survived. This conclusion is supported by the fact that no artifacts from the post-Arab invasion period were found across the entire monument.

The excavated graves were found in a highly disordered state on the floor, with a single burned pottery fragment, an iron knife, and rusted and decaying iron belt buckles discovered around them (Figure 5). Additionally, three complete pottery vessels were found in this layer. Initially, it was assumed that these vessels belonged to a particular grave. However, upon completing the excavation and working on the site's master plan, it was concluded that these vessels were not associated with any grave. Instead, they were likely used during religious ceremonies around the main altar-fireplace. This conclusion was drawn because no similar antique-era tableware with engobe finish was found in any of the graves. The vessels likely served ritual purposes (Figure 6).

In the northern part of the central hall, a wall was built 120 cm eastward from the western wall, dividing the central hall into two. A platform was attached to the north side of this wall. The platform is 50 cm wide and 60 cm high.

In the room located to the north of the central hall, where the platform is situated, the doorway leading to the eastern sector, which dates back to the third construction phase, specifically the early medieval period, was not identified. However, traces remain that indicate there was a passage from the northeastern corner of the central hall to the eastern sector in the antique period. This is evidenced by the stone paving descending westward into the small room from the eastern side. Therefore, it can be concluded that the central hall remained functional throughout all construction phases of the temple.

As a result of the archaeological excavations, unique discoveries were made, including more than 50 fire-worshipping altar-fireplaces (Figure 7), over 10 sacred stone knives from various periods used for slaughtering sacrificial animals (Figure 8), several types of stone idols and deities (Figure 9), many religious artifacts associated with Zoroastrianism, grindstones (Figure 10), stone tools for grinding grain or other plants (Figure 11), finely crafted pottery fragments produced on a high-quality pottery wheel (Figure 12), and graves. As previously mentioned, the graves contained skeletal remains, rusted iron belt buckles, fragments of sacrificial animal bones, iron knives, and vessels intended for heating food or water placed in the graves.

Among the finds, the discovery of altar-fireplaces and stone structures (stone altars) with a religious character is particularly noteworthy. These finds were conditionally divided into two groups. The first group includes altars made of clay, with low relief edges, in rectangular, circular, and oval shapes. The second group consists of stone structures made from small and medium-sized stones (Figure 13). In order to gain a clearer understanding of the architectural plan and function of the studied structure, and



to draw an objective historical conclusion, comparative analysis with similar monuments was conducted by collecting relevant information.

The architectural remnants of Central Asian civilization, particularly from Southern Turkmenistan, date back to the 4th millennium BCE. Towards the end of this historical period, another wave of construction reminiscent of the culture of Mesopotamia emerged. It is believed that the Aryan invasion in the mid-2nd millennium BCE, which penetrated into the inner regions of Central Asia, led to the decline of this culture. Starting from the first half of the 1st millennium BCE, the "Avestan society" began to spread widely across Central Asia. In the 6th century BCE, the invasion of the Achaemenid Persians into Central Asia introduced a blend of fortresses and ancient religious architecture in the region. By the second half of the 1st millennium BCE, with the conquests of Alexander the Great, the spread of Mediterranean classical culture reached Central Asia. This resulted in the rise of Hellenism, where a fusion of Greco-Roman and local cultural elements was observed. The influence of the Greco-Bactrian state and its culture left a strong mark on the spiritual life of Central Asia, particularly in the formation of architectural styles for palaces and temples, regarded as the "strongholds of clans." These structures were adorned with columns, statues, and fire altars, combining Greek and Eastern styles. Clay and fired bricks were predominantly used in the construction and interior design of these palaces and temple complexes. The influence of Greco-Roman culture on architecture was more pronounced in administrative and religious buildings. A major weakness, however, was the use of mud bricks for construction, which compromised the strength and durability of these structures. In the oases of Central Asia, the use of fired bricks and stone in construction was quite limited. With the rise of the Kushan Empire in the early centuries AD, the influence of Buddhist culture increased in the region. As Buddhism became the state religion of the Kushan Empire, its traditions began to impact the architectural styles of Central Asia, including southern Uzbekistan and the Fergana Valley. Notably, the construction of "kungra" walls, characterized by ribbed designs, became fashionable in architecture. The collective architectural traditions of building cities, fortresses, and monumental structures from the ancient period underwent changes. During the late 1st millennium BCE and the first half of the 1st millennium AD, the development and decline of the Kushan Empire led to a fusion of Hellenistic, Buddhist, and local elements in Central Asian culture. This period also saw the active expansion of nomadic peoples into Central Asia. Similar to Western Europe, early feudal traditions began to take root in Central Asia. Rulers of large territories began to assert their control over their vassals and smaller domains. During this time, there was a sharp increase in the construction of fortified castles and palaces in Central Asian architecture.

The Uchtepa-2 site we are studying dates back to the 2nd century BCE – 8th century CE and exhibits two distinct construction phases. The architectural traditions of the site reflect many of the general elements mentioned earlier. For example, the architecture of the first construction phase features characteristics of a communal religious structure, fortified by outer walls. In the central room, a communal altar-fireplace is situated. The rooms are arranged around the circular defense wall, each with its own separate entrance. Similar construction features can be observed at sites like Sultonobod, Koson, G'ayrattepa, Maydatepa, and Qoratepa-1 in the Fergana Valley. However, while an altar-fireplace was not found in the central room of the latter site, according to G.A. Pugachenkova's classification, this structure belongs to Group 1. The central room served the function of connecting all other rooms and the main entrance. Complexes like this one held a communal religious character.

Another monument with a layout similar to the one described above is the Christian monastery in the city of Merv, which features an oval-shaped circular design. It is important to note that the primary function of the building was to serve as a residence for monks (nuns) and as a place for local inhabitants to conduct religious ceremonies. The presence of hearths, household items, and stone grinders in some of the rooms of the structure indicates that these areas were equipped for living. After conducting a comparative analysis of the architectural plan and function of the studied site, in relation to similar monuments, an objective final conclusion was drawn.

The emergence and development of religious monumental structures in Central Asia have been a focus of many researchers. Since the 1940s, the discovery of several examples of religious architecture has



intensified debates in this area. This is because the principle of religious tolerance has long been prevalent in Central Asia, where people with different religious beliefs have lived side by side in the same cities. An example of this can be seen in the temple complex discovered in the city of Quva. However, researchers have faced difficulties in determining which religion most of the temples uncovered during archaeological excavations belong to. Only Buddhist and Christian religious structures stand out, as their distinct construction, artifacts, and decorations leave no room for doubt.

Several Zoroastrian religious monumental structures have been studied in Central Asia, but the full development stages of Zoroastrian temples and religious practices have not been thoroughly traced. The main reason for this is that in Central Asia, Zoroastrianism was often intertwined with local religious beliefs, making it difficult to separate Zoroastrian elements from the indigenous practices found in the temples that have been excavated.

Indeed, many studies on Zoroastrianism provide information about the architectural structure of the religious monuments associated with this belief. For instance, the Greek historian Herodotus, who lived in the 5th century BCE, noted this in his writings, stating, "...they neither build temples, nor create statues or altars". In a later period, drawing on ethnographic data, the English scholar M. Boys wrote that in the early stages of Zoroastrianism, religious practices were carried out in open spaces, on high cliffs, or in specially designated open areas. This suggests that in the initial period, no enclosed structures were built specifically for performing religious rituals.

In ancient Iran, by the time of the Achaemenid period, it had become customary to build statues and depict gods in them. According to sources, the temple constructed by the Achaemenid ruler Cyrus II in Zeleda was an open-air structure, surrounded by a wall, and built on an artificially elevated platform. It was only during the Arsacid period that temples with sacred fire altars, where the fire continuously burned, began to be built. The Greek historian Strabo, who lived in the 1st century AD, provided information about the worship practices in Zoroastrian temples. In particular, by this period, the construction of temples had become common, and sources mention that sacred fire continuously burned in the altars. M. Boys highlights that in the temples of the Achaemenid and subsequent periods, there were two types of "Fire." "Otashi Aduran," known as the "Fire of Fires," was a relatively smaller fire, kindled from the flames of hearths belonging to various social classes. The second type, "Otashi Varaxron" or "Otashi Bahrom," referred to as the "Fire of Victory," burned in large temples. Another important aspect of this process was that the ash produced from these fires was also considered sacred. The priests would collect it in special containers or designated places, and then it would be buried in a separate, clean location.

When it comes to archaeological materials, several temples have been excavated and studied in Central Asia to date. Examples include religious centers at Jarqo'ton, Dashli-3, Oltintepa, and religious worship sites at To'g'oloq, Gonur, Sarazm, as well as temples in Panjikent, Yerqo'rg'on, Poykend, Jartepa, Chilonzor Oqtepsi, Qizlartepa, and Suyurlitepa. However, while some researchers have expressed clear opinions about which religion these temples belong to, others have not provided definitive conclusions.

For example, one of these temples, the Jarqo'ton temple, was extensively studied by academician A. Asqarov. The Jarqo'ton temple is rectangular in shape (44.5 x 60 m) and was constructed with its sides aligned to the sunlight. It is surrounded by thick (4.5 m) mudbrick defensive walls. Functionally, the temple consists of two parts: the sacred sanctuary and the utility-service section adjacent to the temple. The sacred sanctuary occupies the eastern side of the complex (35 x 35 m). The sacred part of the temple includes enclosed corridors, a room for Zoroastrian priests, a sacred ash room, a waiting hall with a platform, and a wide elevated platform area. On this platform, there is a main fire altar under a portico supported by four columns, an open courtyard with a narrow (80 cm) stone walkway, and wells and circular-shaped altars along the sides of the walkway. The entrance to the temple is located on the southern side of the complex, leading to the utility-service area.

The establishment of a special production-utility section next to temples was an integral part of Zoroastrian temples in the Ancient Near East. The stone walkway, well, and small altars found in the



open courtyard of the temple give the site a sacred character. Based on its architectural plan, the archaeological finds uncovered, and its overall characteristics, academician A. Asqarov concludes that the Jarqo‘ton temple was a Zoroastrian religious center, similar to the religious complexes at Dashli-3, Oltintepa, the sacred site at Sarazm, and the temples at To‘g‘oloq and Gonur in the Murghab oasis.

Researcher G. V. Shkoda, who studied the temples of Panjikent, suggested that while the structure is associated with the worship of sacred fire, based on the unique wall paintings, it might also represent a local religion intertwined with Manichaeism. On the other hand, A. Berdimuradov and M. Samibaev, who studied the temple at Jartepa, did not provide a definitive conclusion regarding which religion or deity the grand structure was dedicated to. In their initial research, the authors attempted to link the grand structure to fire temples. However, in later studies, A. Berdimurodov, considering the temple's location at the source of the Darg‘om canal, hypothesized that it might have been dedicated to a water deity, similar to the Taxti-Sangin temple. The Jartepa temple differs from the Panjikent temple in terms of its structure, as it was originally a four-towered building. In subsequent construction phases, additional rooms were built onto the main structure.

Following this reasoning, the authors expressed doubt that the 1st to 3rd construction phases of the building served as a temple. However, if we consider that Zoroastrians took great care to store the ash from the sacred fire in a special place to avoid contamination, it becomes clear that converting a residential building into a temple is unlikely.

The study of the Poykend temples remains even more controversial, and no comprehensive conclusions have been drawn to this day. Therefore, any conclusions must be based solely on the results obtained from reports. Notably, the Poykend temple exhibits several unique features. This archaeological site, like the temples of Yerqo‘rg‘on, Panjikent, and others, was built on an elevated platform and had two adjacent fire altars.

Another expert who made significant contributions to the study of Central Asian religious architectural complexes, R. H. Sulaymonov, successfully analyzed the entire region's religious monumental structures using the example of the Yerqo‘rg‘on temple. Based on this analysis, he categorized the places of fire worship into three types. The first type consists of grand temple complexes where kings participated in worship; the second type comprises city temples where the community conducted daily worship; and the third type includes household temples, or family altars. The main distinction between these three types lies in the sacrificial rituals performed. However, this scholar overlooked an important aspect during the classification process by not distinguishing between large city temples and religious structures located outside of cities. This distinction is crucial, as temples outside of cities prioritized defense capabilities. In these cases, a four-towered building was the central element, with the other parts of the complex arranged around it. This structural characteristic can be observed in religious-architectural complexes such as Jartepa, Chilonzor Oqtepassi, and Xontepa.

In the study of Chilonzor Oqtepassi in the Tashkent oasis, the same idea prevailed. In his initial research, the scholar did not confidently state that this structure was related to religion, placing the word "temple" in quotation marks. It was only in later studies, based on the fact that the grand structure was not suitable for living and supported by the findings, that the researcher concluded it was a religious architectural complex. Furthermore, the scholar associated the structure with the veneration of ancestral spirits.

The Qizlartepa temple in the Fergana Valley, like Jarqo‘ton, is an exception in this regard. During the course of the excavations, it became clear that the monumental structure was associated with Zoroastrian beliefs. The author noted that such temples had been identified in the Fergana Valley, and mentioned that the temple discovered in Margilan differed from them in size, being larger. Additionally, the author pointed out that the closest analogy to this temple can be found in the Qo‘rg‘ontepa site, which belongs to the Miyonqol group of monuments.

One of the structures that provides key information about the formation of Zoroastrian temples in Central Asia is the Qirqhujra monument. This site is located near the town of Pop in Namangan region, along the Syr Darya river. Specialists date the founding of the city to the 6th–4th centuries BCE. The



structure measures 32x28 meters. Before its construction, a platform was built on a specially prepared hill, and it is believed that the upper part was used as a place of worship. Based on the construction and finds at the site, experts have concluded that it was a Zoroastrian temple built in the form of a ziggurat.

Several religious structures in Iran, part of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations, have also been well studied. One of them is Govurqal'a, built in the 5th century and regarded as a Christian complex. It is located in the northeastern part of the city of Merv. According to the layout, the structure is oval-shaped, consisting of rooms attached to the outer wall and a central courtyard. The entrance is on the southern side, accessed via a ramp, and the complex contained 33 rooms. The rooms were arranged in a comb-like manner, with the corner rooms forming a triangular shape.

Similarly, elements of this nature are also found at the Uchtepa-2 site. For example, in Room 2, located in the northern part of the monument, millstones, altar-fireplaces, and household vessels were discovered, indicating that these rooms served both residential and religious functions. A similarly designed structure is the famous Qo'yqirilganqal'a monument in Khorezm. This monument consists of two construction phases. The first phase, from the 4th–3rd centuries BCE to the second half of the 1st century BCE, served as a fortified mausoleum, temple, and observatory with a religious character. The central rooms of the temple housed the living quarters and utility rooms for the Zoroastrian priests who served at the temple. The second construction phase, dating from the 1st to the 3rd–4th centuries CE, shows changes indicating that the structure then served as a residential building. All of these elements suggest that the monument functioned as a major religious center.

Several monuments related to Zoroastrianism have been studied in the Fergana Valley. One such site is the Zoroastrian temple in Koson, dating to the 6th–8th centuries, which has been compared to Jonbosqal'a in Khorezm. Another similar monument is G'ayrattepa, located in northeastern Fergana. According to V. I. Kozenkova, the G'ayrattepa monument exhibits early characteristics of a Zoroastrian temple. The placement of the fireplaces and the careful plastering of the top layer of ash with clay suggest its religious significance.

Another temple complex discovered in the Fergana Valley is the Maydatepa monument, where a square-shaped hall with four pillars, covering an area of 50 square meters, was found. A deep niche was built into the southeastern wall, and a platform ran along the wall. In front of the niche, a well-fortified rectangular fireplace was located, with the walls showing significant burning from the fire. To the south of the fireplace, a rectangular structure filled with ash and plastered with straw-mixed clay on its surface was found, indicating that this was used to store ash from the sacred fire. Rituals related to fire worship were likely conducted by sitting on the platform around the fireplace. Another unusual site in terms of layout is the Oqtepa monument (located at the beginning of a ridge west of Arsif village in Fergana region), which covers an area of 0.1 hectares and stands 4–5 meters high. The structure is encircled by an outer ring wall, with rooms built along the inner side of the wall.

Circular or oval-shaped complexes have a temple-like character and, in some sense, reflect celestial construction and cosmological ideas. Examples of such complexes include Tog'oloq-21, Dashtli-3, and Gonurtepalar in Bactria and Margiana. The southern Gonur complex embodies the idea of the world's cardinal directions. The presence of altars, ash storage pits, and fire temples in these monuments testifies to the sacredness of fire. Additionally, architectural features such as open reservoirs at floor level, collections of gravel stones, or circular pathways leading to a central room indicate the presence of water or river worship. The dualistic belief system in ancient faiths demands such attributes. Concepts like "good and evil, fire and water, light and darkness" were deeply embedded in the material culture of the people. The architectural layout of the Dashtli-3 temple complex, with its circular temple at the center surrounded by a rectangular defensive wall, resembles a mandala-cosmogram model. This type of architectural tradition was widespread among Indo-European peoples. Oval-shaped settlements are considered the earliest in Central Asia, followed later by circular and rectangular settlements. According to R. H. Sulaymonov, who studied the Qarshi oasis, oval-shaped settlements are dated to the 1st millennium BCE and the 4th–6th centuries CE, and unlike square and circular settlements, they are characteristic of the ancient period. The author links this phenomenon to the fortification of



previously unfortified rural settlements in antiquity. The area of such monuments typically ranges from as small as 0.1 hectares, with 90% of them occupying around 0.5 hectares.

The Uchtepa-2 site has been dated to the 2nd century BCE – 8th century CE. It is oval-shaped, with a total area of 0.5 hectares. During the excavation of the site, elements and artifacts similar to those found at previously mentioned monuments were uncovered and studied. These include more than 50 fire-worship altar fireplaces, 20 stone structures in rectangular, oval, circular, and crescent shapes, many religious and cultural objects related to Zoroastrianism, stone grinders used for crushing grain or other plants, finely crafted pottery fragments made on a high-quality pottery wheel, stone idols, and disordered graves on the floor, among others.

According to the ancient Greek historian Strabo, fire worship among the ancient Iranians took place in enclosed large open spaces. In the center of these spaces was a sacrificial altar, where an eternal flame burned and a large amount of ash accumulated. He wrote, "They (the Iranians) turn to the fire before offering sacrifices to any deity or god..."

Sacrificial offerings were carried out according to specific established rules. First, dry wood was stripped of its bark, piled up, and olive oil was poured over it before lighting the fire. However, blowing on the fire was forbidden. Large leaves were used in the process. The ritual area resembled a mandala, with a "circle within a square" shape. When selecting the location, builders considered dry elevated areas near water, typically 3–4 meters high.

A vivid example of such settlements can be seen in the topography of the Alanda settlement. The Suunduk and Solonchan rivers surround the settlement on all sides, making it appear like an island during the spring floods. The distinction between similar oval settlements lies in whether or not they have an internal defense system. The residential quarters do not differ in contour from one another. The houses form a closed ring. They are built so densely together that the wall of one house serves as the wall of the next. The residential houses are connected to the central area of the settlement through a long axial corridor. The exit paths of the settlement align with the cardinal directions. When constructing such settlements, a convenient riverside relief was selected to shape the landscape. Bright island-like settlements located between water streams, such as Arkaim and Isin-2, are prime examples of this type of settlement.

In conclusion, the Uchtepa-2 monument embodies the architectural, religious, material, and spiritual elements mentioned above. It reflects the communal lifestyle, architectural traditions, spiritual worldview, and historical development stages formed in Central Asia from the Eneolithic and Bronze Ages. Communal worship rooms that emerged during the Eneolithic period evolved into city temples during the Bronze Age, showcasing traditional religious architectural styles that spread in the early Iron and antique periods. These elements ultimately culminate in the feudal society's lifestyle of the early medieval period.

The Uchtepa-2 site under investigation served as a communal center embodying elements of fire worship, water cult, Zoroastrianism, and ancestor worship. Through a comparative analysis of the altars, fire temples, Zoroastrian terminology, and construction traditions, as well as an examination of religious architectural examples from the Ancient Near East and Central Asia, the site's architectural function was determined. Furthermore, a comparative and scientific interpretation of the objects related to ancestor worship found at the site led to this conclusion.

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