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Two Developing Arabic inscriptions from the Old Town of al-'Ulā

This is a provisional version (before the page set up and the proofs) of the article published in *Semitica et Classica*. The figures are not included.

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The Old Town of al-'Ulā, which is not to be confused with the ancient site of Dadan, is located north of the modern city of al-'Ulā. It refers to a now abandoned c. 15 ha city which was inhabited not earlier than the Umayyad period. As for the ancient site of Dadan, it flourished in the first millennium BCE, prior to the arrival of the Nabataeans in the region. Dadan, the Old Town, and the modern city of al-'Ulā, all stretch along the Wādī al-'Ulā which runs north-south in the middle of a natural pass between high and impressive mountains.

The foundation date of the Old Town itself is not known precisely. It is mentioned as a stopping place on the Ḥajj pilgrimage route from the Umayyad period onwards. The first proper description of it is given in the 13th century by the traveller known as Shuja' ad-Dimashqī who, in his *Manāzil al-ḥajj*, says that “it is modest in size and has a small fort at the top of a rocky peak [...]. An emir heads the fort and pilgrims can leave their belongings there”.¹ It was inhabited for several centuries but was abandoned in the 1980s, when new modern districts were built in al-'Ulā and attracted more and more a growing population in search of modern comfort. The citadel, known as Qal'at Mūsà bin Nuṣayr, overlooks the village. The latter is overwhelmingly composed of two-storey mudbrick houses with flat roofs opening onto non-rectilinear narrow streets. These are sometimes spanned by covered bridges which offered shelters to pedestrians. Considering its heritage value, the Old Town was the object, in the 2010s, of a massive restoration project. More recently, starting from 2018, it was given particular attention by the Royal Commission for AlUla which, with the help of the French Agency for the Development of AlUla and the company Archaios, initiated the renovation of a number of streets and blocks. In parallel, a thorough study of the Old Town's buildings, implying mapping, photogrammetry, documenting of building techniques, recording of artefacts, archaeological soundings, etc. was undertaken in order to write the history of the place.

The two inscriptions published in this contribution were discovered recently in the Old Town in a reused position (fig. 1) and were examined *in situ* by the author during the 2022 season of the Madā'in Šāliḥ Archaeological Project (MSAP).² They are numbered UIDA 3 and 4, where UI stands for Ula and DA stands for Developing Arabic.³ UIDA 3 was previously published as CIS II 333 whereas UIDA 4 is unpublished.

¹ Al-Muraykhi 2019: 100.

² The author is grateful to the Heritage Commission of the Ministry of Culture and to the Royal Commission for AlUla for permission to study these texts.

³ Since the distinction between Nabataeo-Arabic and Pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions can be very difficult, both labels have been grouped under a single umbrella which refers to both categories, called “Developing Arabic”.

UIDA 3 (CIS II 333) (fig. 2–4)

Previous publications: CIS II 333; Doughty C. 1884. *Documents Épigraphiques Recueillis dans Le nord de l'Arabie*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, pl. 14 fol. 25; Euting J. 1885. *Nabatäische Inschriften Aus Arabian*. Berlin: Georg Reimer, no. 30; Huber C. 1891. *Journal d'un Voyage en Arabie (1883-1884)*. Paris: Leroux, no. 5 p. 395.

This text was known so far only from 19th century hand copies or squeezes made by Doughty (unusable), Euting, and Huber (see fig. 3). It was re-discovered by workmen in February 2017 in the area known to our informant, A. al-Emam, as Sūq al-Ḥasan, in the second house from the west end of the street (fig. 5 and see fig. 1). The workmen informed A. al-Emam who, in turn, contacted L. Nehmé. With permission from the SCTH, it was decided to proceed to the removal of the stone and to its replacement by an ordinary block. This was done in the evening of the same day and the stone was taken to the al-'Ulā Museum where it ultimately received, in June 2021, inventory number RCU.2021.61.

The stone is 23 cm wide, 41 cm high, and 15 cm thick. A quick copy was made in 2017 but it was not until February 2022 that L. Nehmé was able to examine it in the museum and make a new copy. Finally, Archaïos, a company specialised in the fields of Heritage and Archaeology, made a 3D scan of the stone and kindly put it at the disposal of the author in June 2022. The new reading proposed below is based on these documents.

Reading:

1. *dnh npš' dy*
2. *bn' '{m}rw br {d/r}{d/r}*
3. *'l brt-{h} {b/n}{š}{d/r}w*
4. *dy mytt {b-yw}m*
5. *'š[r]{y}n w šb{'h}*
6. *b-yrh šbṭ šn[t]*
7. *m'tyn {b}rt šnyn*
8. *'šr {w} '{m}{š}yt*
9. *lyl' ---- {bn}t šlm*
10. *p-'šbḥt mytt*

Translation:

¹ This is the *nefesh* which ² was set up by 'A{m}rū son of {d/r}{d/r} ³ for/above his daughter {b/n}{š}{d/r}w ⁴ who died {on the da}y ⁵ tw{en}ty-sev{en} ⁶ in the month of February yea[r] ⁷ two hundred [AD 306], ⁸ being ten years old. And she entered upon the evening ⁹ the night --- - being a healthy girl, ¹⁰ and in the morning she was dead".

Comment on the reading:

This label has the advantage of providing the initials "DA" which are not used yet, in the epigraphic sigla, for Semitic inscriptions in the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula.

l. 1. The initial *d* is just visible. The hole above the *d* in *dy* in this line may be accidental, as might be the one above the *d* of *dy* in line 4, but both may also be diacritical dots, which would not be surprising on this letter at this period.

l. 2. The name of the person who built the *nefesh* is difficult to read. *{m}rw*, which is relatively certain, could be read only with the help of the 3D scan made by Archaïos (see fig. 4).

l. 3. The reading of this line is also difficult and was made easier by the 3D scan. The reading *brt-{h}* was suggested to me by M.C.A. Macdonald, to whom I am grateful. The name of 'Amrū's daughter (*bšrw*, *nšrw*?) ends with a *-w*, which is not impossible for a girl's name in Nabataean.⁴

l. 4. The reading is fairly certain. The small hole above the *d* is either accidental or not (see l. 1). The reading of *ywm* is certain but the presence of the preposition *b-* before is not.

l. 5. This line gives the numerals indicating the day in the month and the reading is certain despite the traces being very faint.⁵

l. 6–7. The reading raises no difficulty.

l. 8. This line is expected to start with the age of the deceased person for whom the *nefesh* was made. *šr* is preferred to the only other alternative, *šryn*. Indeed, the traces visible on the stone after the *r* are not compatible with a medial *y* but rather with either a *w* or a *p*, and the shape of the *p-* in line ten invites to read *w* here.⁶ What follows is almost certainly a verb in the feminine, starting with *{m}* and ending with *yt*, i.e. an *'p'l* form which would parallel the verb in line 10, *šbht*. Based on a suggestion by P. Webb (p.c.), Classical Arabic *'amsà*, "he entered upon the evening" (Lane 1863–1893: 3020), *'amsat* in the feminine, is the best candidate for this verb. In Classical Arabic, the feminine form of this weak final verb would be *'amsat* but one should be aware that this form is the result of a contraction of **'amasayat* (**'amsaya* in the masculine). Nabataean may thus, as did Safaitic,⁷ have retained the final *y*.⁸ Note that *'m[š]yt* would be the first attestation of a final weak verb in the feminine in either Nabataean or Developing Arabic.

l. 9. *lyl'* and *šlm* are certain. Between the two, *bnt* may tentatively be read but there is enough space for at least two or three letters which are completely invisible.

l. 10. The reading is certain.

Commentary on the text:

⁴ Women's names ending with *-w* are known in Nabataean, for example *'trw* and *ħbw*.

⁵ By complete chance, the author read the text in the al-'Ulā museum on exactly the same day, February 27th, an amusing coincidence.

⁶ Besides, the *p-* introducing the main clause, "and in the morning she was dead", the preceding hypotactic clause in this line is likely to have been introduced by *w*.

⁷ For example in *ngyt 'mlk*, "the Queen was announced", see Al-Jallad 2015: 121.

⁸ I am very grateful to Peter Webb for his suggestion, and to Marijn van Putten, to whom the issue of the presence of the *y* before the *t* was presented and who explained to me why this orthography is possible.

l. 1. *dnh npš'* is attested in Nabataean along with *d' npš'*.⁹ The use of *dnh* here shows that *nefesh* was considered by the author as a masculine substantive.

l. 2. *bn'* is written here with a final *'*, an unusual orthography which occurs only in this text and in JSNab 386.¹⁰

l. 3. The author uses *'l*, a preposition which appears, along with *l-*, in Nabataean *nefesh* inscriptions. Both mean “for”—the monument is built *for* someone—but the former may also mean “over/above”, thus indicating the relative position (above the tomb?) of the structure of which the inscribed stone was part. This preposition is used in similar contexts in other *nefesh* texts from the first/second,¹¹ third (al-Najem & Macdonald 2009), and fourth centuries AD (JSNab 386).¹² The use of two different prepositions shows that *npš'* probably referred to several types of monuments, among which the Petra pyramidal stela and structures of some sort built above burials. The author is less convinced that it refers to “a funerary *inscription* used as a memorial, regardless of what it is written on (an obelisk, a stela, a lintel, a sarcophagus, etc.”, as suggested by M.C.A. Macdonald (2006: 288–290).

l. 4. The expression *dy mytt ywm* finds an exact parallel in the AD 280 inscription from al-Mābiyāt (al-Muraykhi 2008). It is not certain whether *ywm* is preceded here by *b-* but both *ywm* and *b-ywm* are syntactically correct. *Mytt* is the usual Nabataean Aramaic form of M-W-T in the 3rd person feminine singular of the suffixed conjugation.

l. 5. *šb'h* (feminine of *šb'*) is consistent with what would be expected in Nabataean: the gender of the numbers from three to ten is the opposite of the gender of the word they refer to: *ywm* being masculine, *šb'h* is feminine.¹³

l. 7. The text is dated to year two hundred of the era almost certainly of the Roman province of Arabia, i.e. AD 306. The formula *br/brt + šnyn* + numeral to express the age of a person is a standard Aramaic phrase. It is used in the so-called Māwiyah AD 356 text (see note 12), in an unpublished Nabataean inscription carved on a gravestone from Bošrà (BNab 12, for which see Nehmé forthcoming), and finally perhaps in a fragmentary text painted on a stone slab discovered inside tomb IGN 9 in Hegra, where the word *šnyn* can be read (Nehmé 2015: 137, fig. 2.12). The latter two are likely to be dated to the first century AD.

l. 8. See above, comment on the reading.

l. 9. *lyl'*, “the night”. To our knowledge, this word occurs in one other Nabataean text only, JSNab 2, where it is used in a unique expression, *prš lyl' mn ymm'*, “the one who separates night from day”, a metaphor referring to the god who curses whoever removes bodies from

⁹ See for example *dnh npš'*: Nehmé 2010: no. 1, p. 453, from Summāqiyāt, and *d' npš'*: *ibidem*, no. 4, p. 468–470, from Bošrà, and *CIS II 332*, from al-'Ulā, dated 9/8 BC. According to J. Norris (p.c.), the number of texts using *dnh* is roughly the same as the number of those using *d'*.

¹⁰ *Bn'* had also been read in a Nabataean text dated to the reign of Rabbel II from Avdat in the Negev (Negev 1961: no. 8 p. 135, pl. 31B) but the reading of this text was corrected by J. Naveh (1967: 188) and *bn'* does finally not occur in it.

¹¹ E.g. Nehmé 2010: no. 4, p. 468–470 (first century); al-Salameen and al-Rawahneh 2017 (first or second century).

¹² In the fourth century, also perhaps in the so-called Māwiyah text (Stiehl 1970) if the object dedicated is a *nefesh*, but the first line of the text is damaged.

¹³ Cantineau 1930–1932: vol. 1, p. 96.

the tomb. The presence of /yl/ is difficult to explain because it is redundant with 'amsayat. The reading {bn}t remains tentative but if correct, it means that the author used Aramaic *brt* lines 3 and 7, and Arabic *bnt* in line 9, hence shifting from Aramaic to Arabic. Another explanation, less likely, is that *brt* lines 3 and 7 are used for “daughter of” (*brt šnyn* meaning literally “daughter of years”), while *bnt* in line 9 is used for “girl”. As for *šlm*, it is best explained as a verbal noun used in an adjectival sense, i.e. “being healthy”.¹⁴ If it was an adjective, one would have expected a feminine form, *šlmt*, not a masculine one.

l. 10. *p-šbḥt* is the 3rd person feminine singular suffix conjugation of the 'p/l form of Ṣ-B-Ḥ. It is the first occurrence of this radical in either Nabataean or Developing Arabic. According to Leslau (1987: 545), it occurs in Arabic, Ancient and Modern South Arabian, and Ethiopian languages. It occurs once in Safaitic in the phrase *šbḥ tdmr*, “he made a sudden attack (in the morning) on Tadmor”.¹⁵ In Arabic, *ʿašbaḥa* means “He entered upon the time of morning named *ṣabāḥ* [which means both dawn and forenoon]” (Lane 1863–1893: 1641). As for the Arabic character of the conjunction *p-*, it has been debated but it seems that in this particular case, if the existence of a hypotactic clause is correct (see note 6), it is likely to be an Arabism.¹⁶ As for *mytt*, it is a feminine participle, “dead”, and not a conjugated verb as in line 4.

l. 8–10. The expression “and she entered upon the evening being healthy and in the morning she was dead” is not attested elsewhere in Nabataean or Developing Arabic. These lines are clearly written in Arabic and it is likely that they correspond to a formula which may have an echo in Arabic poetry.

Concerning the script, the following may be said: the text shows the typical features of the Developing Arabic inscriptions from al-ʿUlā at this period. For example, it is very similar to both the AD 280 text from al-Mābiyāt and UIDA 4 below. It differs however from other late 3rd and 4th century texts from elsewhere in North-West Arabia such as UJadhNab 297 (fig. 6), which is exactly contemporary but is written in a more advanced stage of the script, particularly the ' and the š. At a lesser degree, it is also less advanced than UJadhNab 309 and UJadhNab 538 (AD 295 and 302/303 respectively), in which ' and š also have more evolved forms. It is finally surprising that *rs* keep their upper short horizontal stroke, which is not present in other 3rd or 4th century texts except in one instance.¹⁷ Apart from these three letters (' , *r*, *š*), the characters in UIDA 3 agree with what would be expected in this place at this period: forked *d*, looped final *h*, double-stroke *ḥ* (*yrḥ*, *šbḥt*), straight or slightly wavy medial *y*, reversed final *y*, circular initial *m* as opposed to calligraphic Nabataean final *m*, ' sitting on the baseline, hesitation between calligraphic *t* (in *m'tyn*) and zig-zagged *t* (everywhere else). Other letters are not diagnostic (*b*, *t*, *l*, *n*, *w*, *p*, etc.) and are not commented on here.

Conclusion:

The close examination of the original stone has made it possible to considerably improve the reading of this text. The date, AD 306, is confirmed, and the new copy allows us to compare

¹⁴ I am grateful to Marijn van Putten for this suggestion.

¹⁵ WH 2833 (http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0013732.html).

¹⁶ See Healey 1993: 76 and Yardeni 2014.

¹⁷ UJadhNab 172, 327/328 AD, which is exceptionally written in calligraphic Nabataean.

the letter forms with those of other texts from the same period. The text contains some features worth pointing at:

- the use of *bn'* instead of the more usual *bnh*, the former being possibly an orthographic variant which appears only in later texts;
- the preferred translation for 'l in this text is “over/above”, and it is taken to refer to the position of the *nefesh*, assuming it was built above the tomb;
- a possible Arabic formula used to express the suddenness of the death of a ten year old girl;
- the mixture, as in other texts from the same time period, of Aramaic and Arabic, the core of the text remaining however Aramaic.

UIDA 4 (fig. 7–8)

UIDA 4 is a previously unpublished inscription which was photographed in February 2021 by A. al-Emam, who sent photographs to the author and showed her the location of the stone in March 2022, thus allowing a copy to be made *in situ*. Finally, Archaïos made a 3D scan of the stone and kindly put it at the disposal of the author in June 2022.

The stone, 19 cm wide, 29 cm high, and c. 10 cm thick, is presently reused in the doorjamb of a door in one of the streets of the Old Town (see fig. 1).

Reading:

1. {d}nh npš{'}]
2. {d}y bn{' } 'mrw b[r]
3. {'}šlm 'l
4. šm{y}ṭw
5. ḥtn-h dy
6. myt šnt
7. m'tyn w tlt{yn}

Translation:

¹ “[T]his is [the] *nefesh* ² {wh}ich ‘Amrū so[n] of ³ {'}Ašlam set up for ⁴ Šam{ī}ṭw ⁵ his son-in-law who ⁶ died year ⁷ two hundred and thir{ty}”.

Comment on the reading:

- l. 1. The *d* of {d}nh was observed *in situ* and is just visible.
- l. 2. The reading of bn{' } is almost certain. The final ' remains tentative but the traces visible on the stone are closer to those left by an ' than to those left by a *h*, which would be the only alternative.
- l. 3. 'šlm is preferred to mšlm because of the apparent absence of a horizontal line, and therefore of any form of ligature, between the first letter and the š.
- l. 4. The reading šm{y}ṭw implies a very long ligature between the *m* and the *y* but it is preferred to šm'ṭw, which would be the only alternative.
- l. 5–6. The reading is clear and does not require any comment.

l. 7. The reading of *m'tyn* is certain. One may hesitate between *tlt* and *tltyn*, but the latter is preferred, despite the fact that the *y* is almost completely invisible, because of the presence of a rather clear long vertical stroke at the end of the line which can only be a final *n*. The text is dated to AD 335/336, i.e. thirty years later than UIDA 3.

Commentary on the text:

The letters of the first line are thicker and are incised more deeply than those in the other lines. The script is on the whole very similar to that of UIDA 3. As in the latter, the *'* and the *š* still have a calligraphic Nabataean form. On the other hand, the only *r* (in *'mrw*) is more evolved than those in UIDA 3, having already the shape of a segment of a circle. The other difference lies in the *ṭ* (in *šmyṭw*), which retains here its “S” shape. Note also the mixture, in this text, of two forms of final *h* (in *dnh* and *ḥtn-h*), the one in *dnh* being closer to calligraphic Nabataean whereas the one in *ḥtn-h* is similar to the *hs* in UIDA 3. One last difference, albeit less significant, is the *ḥ* in *ḥtn-h*, which is more vertical. These differences, which probably reflect different hands, thus occur in the same place and roughly at the same time. The development process of the letters is however clearly engaged in both texts, particularly for the *m*, the *y*, and the *t*.

As for the contents, this text is very similar to the previous except that it is more concise: it does not give the age of the deceased, it provides only the year when he died (neither the day nor the month) and it does not contain any particular formula. From the linguistic point of view, it does not contain any identifiable Arabic loanword. The only word worthy of comment is *ḥtn*, “son-in-law”, which is known in one Nabataean inscription, JSNab 36, carved on tomb IGN 93 at Hegra.¹⁸ The personal names *'mrw* and *'šlm* are well known in the Nabataean and Arabic onomasticon and no particular information on the identity of the persons who bore them can be drawn from them. As for *šmyṭw*, it is new and it may be derived from Arabic *šamīṭ*, “mixed, applied to any two things; or any two colours”; “dawn” (Lane 1863–1893: 1598). Note that *šmyṭw*, with a *t*, occurs in three inscriptions from North-West Arabia: MBAZNab 1 and UJadhNab 462 on the Darb al-Bakrah, and a text photographed during the 2020 season of the al-'Ulā-Medina survey.¹⁹ There is however no reason to assume that *šmyṭw* and *šmytw* are the same name.²⁰

General comment on both texts:

These two dedications of a *nefesh* are dated to the first half of the fourth century AD and both were found in the Old Town of al-'Ulā. The *nefesh* were set up by men bearing the same name, 'Amrū. They were probably two different persons since the second text is thirty years later than the first and 'Amrū is a very common name at this period. One additional funerary text should be added to this growing corpus of late antique funerary texts from the area. It also comes from al-'Ulā—albeit not from the Old Town—and should be included in a reflexion on the occupation of al-'Ulā in this period. It is JSNab 386, a text known only from a black-and-

¹⁸ For the meaning and the parallels, see Healey 1993: 229.

¹⁹ The handwriting of *šmyṭw* in these three texts is relatively similar and it is possible that they were written by the same man although this is of course not certain.

²⁰ One might consider that what was read as *ṭ* is in fact a *t* with a slightly lengthened upper line, but the shape of the letter is clearly distinct from that of the *t* in *ḥtn-h*. Besides, there are several examples of Developing Arabic S-shaped *ṭs* (UJadhNab 178, to become UJadhDA 178, and others).

white photograph and a copy (fig. 9). At the beginning of the 20th century, it was reused in a “modern” wall enclosing a garden close to the Hijāz railway in the district known as al-Manshiyyah, 4 km south-east of the Old Town, near the al-‘Ulā Hijāz railway station. Its present location is not known.

The data relative to texts from al-‘Ulā written in Developing Arabic characters is summarised in the table below:

<i>Number</i>	<i>Other ref.</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Dim.</i>	<i>PA</i> ²¹	<i>Month</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Type</i>
UIDA 2	JSNab 386	al-Manshiyyah	23 x 41 x 15 cm	201	<i>sywn</i> (May-June)	AD 306	<i>nefesh</i>
UIDA 3	CIS II 333 RCU.2021.61	al-‘Ulā Old Town	19 x 29 x c. 10 cm	200	<i>šbt</i> (Jan.-Feb.)	AD 306	<i>nefesh</i>
UIDA 4	previously unpublished	al-‘Ulā Old Town	34 x 32 cm	230	—	AD 335/ 336	<i>nefesh</i>

The three texts are dated to the first half of the 4th century AD, a period which follows immediately the time when the army abandoned the Roman fort in Hegra (end of the 3rd century, see Fiema and Villeneuve 2018: 710). The dimensions of the blocks show that they were not gravestones (they are too small) but were probably included in the masonry of the funerary structure to which the texts refer: a *nefesh*. This word is not attested in the inscriptions from Hegra except in the Māwiyah text if indeed it comes from this site. In 4th-century al-‘Ulā, it probably did not refer to the same object as it did in the first century Nabataean inscriptions from Petra, i.e. an obelisk or pyramid shaped commemorative monument. One may also wonder whether the presence of these texts in reused positions in the Old Town indicates the presence, at this period, of a cemetery in the neighbourhood, either in the area of the Old Town itself or at a short distance from it. Some late antique levels were brought to light in Area E of ancient Dadan, south of al-Khuraybah,²² but it is impossible to say whether the stones were transported from there, 3 km further north. The Developing Arabic text carved on the slope overlooking the Old Town²³ shows that the area was visited at this period but this text is clearly later (later fourth into fifth century AD) than those which are discussed here. Among the three texts listed in the table above, two are written by individuals bearing Arabian names (our UIDA 3 and 4) while JSNab 2 (UIDA 2) was written by an individual who bore a Jewish name, *yhy*’ and was the son of one with another Jewish name, *šm’wn*. This shows that the population of al-‘Ulā in the early 4th century was a mixed one, composed of Arabian polytheists and Arabian Jews with comparable cultural background if one considers that they use the same script, use the same formulas in their texts and have the same kind of funerary monument built for them.²⁴

²¹ PA: date according to the era of the Roman Province of Arabia.

²² J. Rohmer and A. Alsuhaibani, contribution to the AlUla workshop, “Results of the 2nd field season of Dadan Archaeological project (2021)”.

²³ Nehmé 2018: 105–106, ‘Ulā 1, now UIDA 1.

²⁴ Of course, it is possible that some Jews bore Arabian names, and are therefore invisible to us in the epigraphic landscape, but in the absence of external evidence, there is no way one can identify them.

Sigla

- CIS II Nabataean inscriptions in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars II. Tomus II. Fasc. 1. Sectio Secunda. Inscriptiones Nabataeae*. Paris, 1889.
- JSNab Nabataean inscriptions in Jaussen & Savignac 1909–1922.
- MBAZNab Nabataean inscriptions from Mabnā Abū Zayd.
- UJadhNab Nabataean inscriptions from Umm Jadhāyidh.
- UJadhDA Developing Arabic inscriptions from Umm Jadhāyidh.
- UIDA Developing Arabic inscriptions from al-‘Ulā.

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