

“You should speak with... and hurry!”: Some personal reflections on the value of oral history for the history of archaeology

‘Deberías hablar con...y rápido!’ Algunas reflexiones personales sobre el valor de la historia oral para la historia de la arqueología

Martijn EICKHOFF

NIOD – Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies
Herengracht 380 NL-1016 CJ Amsterdam
m.eickhoff@niod.knaw.nl

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the author reconsiders the importance of oral history for the history of archaeology. By reflecting on his own use of oral history as a source of information for his PhD dissertation on Dutch archaeology and National Socialism, he argues that oral history should not be defined as collecting primary sources, but seen rather as a method that provides information on how the past was and is remembered and valued by members of a given academic community. The collected stories created by the interviewee and the interviewer tell us what individuals, as participants of different communities that have their own frameworks of the past, are able to memorize at the time of the interview. Collected stories should be seen to a large extent as communicated memories; as a result, it is important to find out when these memories were created, by whom and for what social function. By opening up a variety of perspectives on the past, oral history can reveal how these communicated memories are able to strengthen the common bonds within certain communities, in this case by creating a single narrative on the history of archaeology.

KEY WORDS: *History of Archaeology. Oral History. National Socialism.*

RESUMEN

En este artículo el autor reflexiona sobre la importancia de la historia oral para la historia de la arqueología. Tomando como referencia el uso que el propio autor hizo de la historia oral como fuente de información histórica para su tesis doctoral sobre arqueología y nacionalsocialismo en Holanda, el autor argumenta que la historia oral no debería ser considerada como un método relacionado con la recolección de fuentes primarias, sino como un método que proporciona información no sólo sobre el pasado sino también sobre cómo dicho pasado es recordado y valorado por los miembros de una comunidad académica. Las historias orales nos dicen aquello que determinados individuos, en tanto que miembros diferentes comunidades con sus propias interpretaciones del pasado, son capaces de memorizar. En este sentido, las historias orales deberían ser consideradas hasta cierto punto como memoria comunicativa y, en este contexto, es importante averiguar cuándo, por qué y para qué función social dicha memoria fue creada. Creando una variedad de perspectivas sobre el pasado, la historia oral puede revelar como esa memoria comunicativa es capaz de estrechar los lazos entre ciertas comunidades, creando, en este caso, un narrativa unificada sobre la historia de la arqueología.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Historia de la arqueología. Historia Oral. Nacionalsocialismo.*

1. Introduction

Archaeological research has a long tradition in the Netherlands. During the early modern times of the Dutch Republic antiquarians in many cities collected archaeological objects, corresponded with colleagues throughout Europe and published on the early past of the Netherlands. At this time the Leiden University was a renowned centre of humanistic studies. A new archaeological infrastructure was established after the Netherlands became a kingdom in 1813. The National Museum for Antiquities (*Rijksmuseum van Oudheden*) was founded in 1818 in Leiden and soon after developed into the archaeological centre of the country. Local and provincial learned societies, often dating from the late 18th century, continued to conduct archaeological research at this time. The Biological-Archaeological Institute (*Biologisch-Archaeologisch Instituut*) was founded in 1922 at the University of Groningen; with the support of local archaeological societies based in the northern part of the Netherlands, this institute developed new scientific ways of doing archaeological research. This new institute challenged the archaeological monopoly of the Leiden museum. As a result, the Leiden research tradition, which had a strong focus on the classical past, was marginalized. In 1947 the Dutch State Service for Archaeological Investigations (*Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek*) was founded; on a personal level this new state institution was closely related to prehistorians from Groningen and as a result of this initiative, the National Museum for Antiquities lost its authority to do excavations in the Netherlands¹.

As a young historian in the early 1990s, I was working on my PhD dissertation on Dutch archaeology and National Socialism (Eickhoff 2003); one of the problems I tried to solve was how national socialism had affected all these institutional developments. When speaking about my project with contemporary archaeologists, they often advised me to speak with the last living members of the pre-war and early post-war generation. They told me they would like to interview their predecessors themselves, but their practical research left them little time to do this. This advice was repeatedly accompanied by name-dropping, sentimental sighs, statements about the mutual interest in doing these interviews and *now-or-never* phrases. I now identify this response as the discourse of heritage and recognize within it the fear of forgetting collective memories before they are saved for future generations. One of the aims in this paper is to explore what and whose heritage I was actually dealing with. What meaning did the memories I collected through interviews in these years represent for the generation of archae-

ologists active in the 1990s, for their predecessors (the prehistorians active in the 1940s and 1950s) and, last but not least, for myself?²

Between 1994 and 2000, I interviewed nine members of the pre-war and early post-war generation of archaeologists in the Netherlands and one German prehistorian. My informants were male archaeologists who studied in the 1940s and 1950s, or wrote their PhD in this period, and who later became professional archaeologists at universities, museums or the Dutch State Service for Archaeological Investigations³. My informants seemed to consider it an academic duty to receive me while at the same time it was clear they enjoyed being interviewed. Remembering and especially telling one's life story is a way of defining one's own identity in relation to questions asked by the interviewer. Moreover for the interviewee, participating in an oral history project on the history of archaeology is the moment *par excellence* to control the way she or he will be remembered by future generations of archaeologists.

2. Oral History

Historiography has a long tradition of interviewing eyewitnesses. Firsthand stories, however, were generally regarded as a complementary and less valuable source of information. Only in the late 1960s did oral history come to be regarded as an important alternative way to study the past; at this time interviews with individuals or groups of individuals were aimed at understanding their narrative about certain experiences and events in the context of their life. Committed historians drew attention to the neglected histories of groups such as workers, women, ethnic minorities or homosexuals; they asked questions, for example, about the unequal power relations or forgotten aspects of everyday life. Oral history was not focused on political authorities or cultural elites, but on the positions of the less powerful, whose legacy had hardly found its way into the official archives (Henkes 2007).

Against this background – university archives notably often do keep (correspondence)-files on their employees – we cannot speak of a traditional oral history situation when interviewing retired academics. Furthermore, the strategies developed by some leading oral historians were not applicable for interviewing my informants. This was especially the case with the “rule” that during the first part of the interview, monologues should not be interrupted and memories should be evoked by short and open questions (Leydesdorff 2004; von Plato 2000). My informants, being academics, often expected direc-

tive questions or a dialogue with discussion; it was clear that they often had their own conversation strategies. For example, at the start of an interview in 1997 with Rafael von Uslar – whom I intended to ask about his memories of the Dutch prehistorian Frans Bursch, who worked as a curator at the museum in Leiden and became a National Socialist in 1940 – von Uslar asked me first: “Do you know why Bursch became a Nazi?” This was exactly the question I had in mind to ask him. Von Uslar and Bursch had been close friends since studying together in Marburg in 1933. Being polite and naïve, I answered him and gave von Uslar the opportunity to obscure his own role in the political ‘conversion’ of Bursch.

Many of my informants prepared a story about their lives, thereby deciding which memories were relevant and which were not. The framework for the selected biographical information consisted of more general stories about World War II and the development of Dutch archaeology in the 20th century. Given the moral dimension that memories of World War II can have, it is not surprising that these stories often had the character of evidence used for defending the past. In view of the factors discussed above, I decided to interpret these stories both on a micro-level (meaning of the anecdotes) and a meta-level (structure and meaning of the general narrative of the life stories). I did this work later, back in my office, by confronting their stories with other personal sources and also more general ones; sometimes I returned to the interviewees in order to ask further questions⁴.

One of the main characteristics of the stories prepared and told by my informants was a concentration on their formative years. Of course one cannot exclude that this focus is related to my own position as a PhD student at that time. My position certainly did endorse this focus; for example, von Uslar started a private lecture during the interview by advising me in a fatherly tone (after I told him I was a historian and not an archaeologist) which archaeological studies I should read. Besides the relation to my position as a PhD student at the time, I believe that the formative years do have a central position in the life stories of my informants. Specifically in this case, the period was structured by the experience of World War II; and in general, the formative years of archaeologists often define with which research tradition in archaeology they associate. What was clearly important was through this emphasis on their formative years, my informants could confirm their loyalty (or disloyalty) to their teachers, who had shaped the research traditions in which they worked. Thus it should come as no surprise that the various memories of my in-

formants were often accommodated with the same anecdotes. These anecdotes were told time and time again, in an atmosphere of confidentiality and often with the same words. I have come to see them as *founding myths* for the Groningen research school in Dutch archaeology, the school most of my informants were directly or indirectly members; these stories legitimize the existence and dominance of this Groningen research school by marginalizing the importance of the Leiden school⁵.

3. Founding myths

The first story that I was repeatedly told during the interviews was about the conflict between Jan H. Holwerda (1873-1951), an archaeologist working as director of the National Museum for Antiquities in Leiden, and Albert E. van Giffen (1884-1973), a prehistorian based at the University of Groningen as director of the Biological-Archaeological Institute. The conflict supposedly started during the excavations at Arentsburg in 1911-12. Holwerda (figure 1) had just learned to recognize postholes at the excavations of the Roman-Germanic Commission (*Römisch-Germanische Kommission*) in Haltern (Germany); Van Giffen, who was his junior assistant at the time, supposedly had a much better eye for reading and interpreting the soil. One time when Van Giffen made a drawing, so I was told, Holwerda took an eraser and changed it.

According to the members of the Groningen school, this intervention was the beginning of a lifelong antagonism, which resulted in two competing research traditions, one in Leiden and one in Groningen. In this story, the reason for the existence of these two schools is reduced to personal conflict, the clash between Van Giffen’s precise observations and Holwerda’s tendency to abuse power.

The second story I was repeatedly told was the unexpected visit of the German prehistorian Karl H. Jacob-Friesen to Van Giffen in 1940, just after the Germans had occupied the Netherlands. Van Giffen was embarrassed because his friend and good colleague from Hannover wore a *Wehrmacht* uniform; finally Ms. Van Giffen, who was very anti-Nazi, sent Jacob-Friesen away. Thanks to the moral stamina of his wife, so the story goes, Van Giffen, who as an academic had many contacts in Germany, was rescued from collaboration.

When interpreting these stories, rather than regarding them as additional information, I see them as communicated memories that give individuals a base within communities. It is important to find out when these memories were created, by whom and for what precise social function. Do the stories



Figure 1. Jan H. Holwerda (at the left) at the start of his career (Vaassen 1909). Copyright *Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Leiden*.

strengthen the common bonds within a certain community?⁶ In order to answer these questions, I contrasted the stories with related archival information. By doing so it was possible to deconstruct the anecdotes on the basis of archival evidence and to understand better their later social function. For example, the archive of the National Museum for Antiquities in Leiden contains documentation that Van Giffen accused Holwerda of changing the Arentsburg drawings. A special committee set up by the society that financed the Arentsburg excavation concluded in 1913 that there was no evidence of fraud and that the mistakes were the result of inadequate measuring equipment⁷. In addition, I have been searching for the Leiden version of this affair, one could say the loser's perspective on the event. Notably, the excavation school of the National Museum for Antiquities in Leiden stopped in 1947. It was Willem C. Braat (1903-2000), one of Holwerda's few students, who opened up this perspective for me. He told me that Holwerda had assured him that during the Arentsburg excavation it was actually Van Giffen who had committed fraud when the drawings were made. This notwithstanding, the

meaning of the Groningen version of the anecdote is clear – Van Giffen was the better archaeologist, hence the Groningen school of archaeology became dominant in Dutch archaeology with good reason.

The story about the visit of the uniformed Jacob-Friesen to the Groningen Institute has a comparable meaning. Although Van Giffen had many contacts with German archaeologists, many of whom were Nazis, he succeeded with the support of his wife in not getting personally involved in Nazi politics during the German occupation of the Netherlands. This story can be deconstructed as well, again with the help of archival information and memories of an eyewitness. First of all, material in Van Giffen's correspondence archive in Groningen makes it clear that Jacob-Friesen did announce his visit prior to arriving. Moreover, Hendrik Brunsting, Van Giffen's former assistant, told me in 1995 that when Jacob-Friesen rang at the door of the institute, Brunsting let him in and Van Giffen received him in his office. Brunsting recalled that Jacob-Friesen even made jokes: after noticing the reconstruction of the head of a Neanderthal in the corridor, he asked if this was a former director of the institute. Brunsting also

added that Van Giffen received Jacob-Friesen in a very reserved way, given his uniform. Furthermore, he told me that Ms. Van Giffen had once sent away some Dutch National Socialists who wanted to visit her husband at home. It is most probable that the anecdote of Van Giffen and Jacob-Friesen contains elements of these two historical events. Nonetheless, Brunsting's story can be seen as an act of sabotage towards one of two main foundation myths of the Groningen research school, that while the prehistorians in Groningen were focused on German archaeology, after the German invasion of 1940 they did not welcome their German colleagues anymore since many of them had turned into Nazis. Given the huge problems that arose in Groningen when Brunsting accepted a position at the National Museum for Antiquities in Leiden, and Van Giffen's crucial role in postponing the appointment, one does not have to search for Brunsting's motivation.

At this point I should stress that although I do see the importance of integrating oral history in the history of archaeology, one should be aware of the limitations of collecting information in this way; to put it positively, one should be aware of its specific qualities. In the context of the history of archaeology, oral history should not be defined as collecting primary sources – by holding a microphone under someone's nose – rather it should be seen as a method that provides information on how the past was and is remembered and valued by members of a given (academic) community at the time of the interview. The collected stories are mainly about representations of the past; they show us how individuals, who participate in different communities with their own frameworks of the past, are able to memorize. What is not mentioned is equally important to what is told. The product – in this case, an audio(visual) recording and a more or less extensive transcript – should furthermore be seen as the result of an interaction between interviewee and interviewer (Henkes 2007).

The majority of the people I interviewed (as I remember now) were well aware that the interview was a moment when they could influence the way in which they were going to be remembered. In this context, it is relevant indeed that one of the central themes in the interviews was the way they expressed their loyalty to their teachers, even after their own retirement. This phenomenon points to why archaeologists in mid-career attach so much importance to interviews with their predecessors: the collective stories of their predecessors should not be forgotten because these stories are about the academic communities they themselves belong to through inter-generational ties. Aware of this qual-

ity of the interviews and acknowledging this is a relevant finding in itself, I looked for ways to break through these canonized collective stories. I found a first solution offered in the so-called Sarfatij tapes.

4. Behind The Curtain Of Fixed Stories

The first oral history project related to archaeological practice in the Netherlands began in the early 1970s in preparation for the 25th anniversary of the Dutch State Service for Archaeological Investigations. Herbert Sarfatij, one of the archaeologists working for this state service, interviewed four archaeologists – Frans Bursch, Albert van Giffen, Willem Glasbergen and Pieter Glazema (Sarfatij 1972). In the early 1940s these four had been involved in the establishment of the state service. Sarfatij spoke to the very people to whom my informants were loyal. It is interesting to hear, for example, that Van Giffen himself was loyal to his teachers. His main concern, however, seems to have been his own biography; one could say he was dictating his own obituary. One of the remarkable statements Van Giffen made is that one should not attach too much value to the meaning of his conflict with Holwerda, that he never considered it to be important. Knowing with how much energy and for how long Van Giffen combated his rival and the Leiden archaeological school on this matter, I can only conclude that this was Van Giffen's final blow towards Holwerda. He wanted to keep him out of the history of archaeology.

The Sarfatij tapes are important for another reason as well. Sarfatij not only interviewed academics, he also spoke to a civil servant, E.A. Kuipers. This broadening of perspective was directly related to Sarfatij's research questions: how had the first Dutch state service for archaeology been prepared in the late 1930s? How and why did state servants try to end the conflict between the Leiden and Groningen archaeologists? His interest in the influence of civil servants on archaeology is certainly related to the ideals of oral historians in the late 1960s, that one should not only interview the famous figures of history, but also the other men and women involved in these historical contexts.

Following Sarfatij's example, I tried to find people who had been active in Dutch archaeology but not in leading positions related to the Groningen school, or who had other relations to the archaeological practice. My hope was that they would be able to break through the curtain of fixed stories about the development of Dutch archaeology. The first success I had in this respect was my interview with Grete Loeb (1907-2000), a tour guide at the National Museum for Antiquities in the 1930s⁸.

She told me Holwerda was happy to have her as she spoke four languages, how he taught her to give a guided tour and how he sometimes followed the guides in order to control the quality of their tours. Between 1931 and 1940 Grete Loeb (figure 2) gave more than 2000 tours. So also referred to her time at the Dutch State Service for Archaeological Investigations where she was appointed secretary in the late 1940s. With regards to her position in the history of archaeology, she made it clear to me that although she was serious and intelligent, the combination of being a woman and a guide, then secretary, did not leave much room for her own initiative. Another crucial topic in her life story was the letter of resignation – signed by the director of the National Museum for Antiquities – she received in November 1940 because she was Jewish. She told me she was not even allowed to collect her private belongings in the museum. She also related precisely how her former colleagues suddenly avoided her out of shame or fear of being seen in her company. During the rest of the interview she did not tell me much about her deportation to Theresienstadt nor about the death of her parents and two brothers. She made it very clear that I was only expected to talk about archaeology. For me, the interview with

Grete Loeb was very elucidating as its main theme was the failure of the museum community to protect one of its members, in this case a very loyal one. Although the story of Grete Loeb was characterized by a silent reproach towards the museum community she once belonged to, she still remained loyal to Holwerda, who had retired in 1939 and played no part in her dismissal in 1940.

Another source of information that helped me to recognize and get beyond the standardized collective stories of Dutch archaeology was the interview with a relative of a leading archaeologist. Through this type of interview one can obtain information that is not structured by academic group codes or intergenerational academic interests. I had the opportunity in 2000 to speak with Tineke van Giffen, the eldest daughter of the man who is considered by some to be the godfather of Dutch archaeology⁹. The interview helped me to understand Van Giffen’s persona, a concept in which the interaction between ideas, emotions and actions on an academic and private level are reconstructed (Frijhoff 2003; Santing 2000). For example, Tineke van Giffen told me about her father’s religious ideas; he considered himself an atheist although his own father had been a minister. She even told me that



Figure 2. Grete Loeb posing at the National Museum for Antiquities (mid 1930s). Copyright: *Rijksmuseum van Oudheden*, Leiden.

one of her grandfather’s sermons had been the reason for Van Giffen’s apostasy. When one compares Van Giffen’s chronology of Dutch prehistory with Holwerda’s, one becomes aware that this side of Van Giffen’s persona is not without meaning. At the beginning of the 20th century, he was the first Dutch prehistorian whose chronology thwarted the biblical one. Thus he created temporal ‘space’ for a modern vision on the prehistoric past that was to inspire archaeologists for many decades. In contrast, for Holwerda the world was not older than 6000 years. If one reads his publications, it is clear that he kept this opinion till the end of his career in the 1930s. By doing so he isolated himself and his assistants from those visions on the prehistoric past that would become more and more mainstream (Eickhoff 2003, 34-35). Here we see the antagonism between the Leiden and Groningen schools of archaeology is not only based on personal conflict, but also on different religious worldviews, which at the time were not articulated explicitly by the archaeologists involved.

Tineke van Giffen also gave me a clue about the broader context in which her father’s cultural-historical archaeology functioned¹⁰. His central research topic, the idea that contemporary Frisian and Saxon cultures had ethnic (defined as mixed cultural and biological) roots, even determined his inter-familial preferences. Van Giffen considered himself to be Saxon and his wife to be Frisian; together they had four children. As he admired Frisian ethnicity, the children who had Frisian looks were his favorites. Tineke van Giffen supposedly had Saxon looks and as a result sometimes felt ignored by her father. She also told me about one of Van Giffen’s hobbies, grafting. In his garden he had bred a pear tree with 14 different types of pears. I consider the story as a helpful metaphor that visualizes Van Giffen’s analysis of the ethnic composition of the people of the province of Drenthe. In his 1943 publication *Opgravingen in Drente* (Excavations in Drenthe) he spoke of more than ten different immigrations in pre- and proto-historical times. While the inhabitants of Drenthe constituted one coherent community, according to Van Giffen their heterogeneous ethnic composition was still visible when one traveled through this province. However, so I realized, the grafting metaphor might make his ethnic archaeology seem too innocent as well; in his book on Drenthe, Van Giffen spoke in a negative way of a Jewish “infiltration,” whereas other groups only “migrated” (Van Giffen 1942; Eickhoff 2003, 101-102, 166 and 281). For Van Giffen, so I learned, cultural-historical archaeology underpinned personal ethnic preferences not only in family circles but also in society.

Looking back at the interview with Tineke van Giffen, I can only conclude that while interviews with family members can provide answers, at the same time they can evoke many new questions. We should be aware that when a family album of memories is opened for us, it often suggests there is only one history. In that respect the family album, with its private perspective, has the same constituent characteristic as the album that is opened for us during an interview with members of the academic community. It is likewise about collective memory, where intergenerational connections have a pivotal position. The presented narrative is often so coherent we are almost made to forget that behind it a variety of perspectives on the same families or academic communities is hidden and only waiting to be unveiled.

5. Conclusion

I am aware that my paper on interpreting – on a micro and meta level – personal life stories and related anecdotes about the history of archaeology has an anecdotal character itself. I hope to have shown convincingly that the members of the generation of archaeologists active in the 1990s who advised me to speak with the last living members of the pre-war and early post-war generation had a fixed concept of collective heritage in mind. For me, however, it became more and more a task to show, with the help of oral history, how this fixed heritage is made and canonized in order to strengthen the common bonds within certain archaeological communities. Furthermore, I came to realize these oral stories had served the interests of these same groups in academic battles and legitimized their dominance in Dutch archaeology until the present day. Nevertheless oral history can make sensitive for alternative perspectives on this same history of archaeology and lead to insights in the connected manifold processes of marginalization.

That the heritage I was dealing with when doing my interviews was far from fixed can be illustrated with a last example. In 2003 prehistorians at the Leiden University made a short film for the occasion of Professor Leendert P. Louwe Kooimans’ retirement¹¹. The film depicted, among other things, the start of the conflict between Holwerda and Van Giffen (figure 3); it retold the story that for many years had been used by prehistorians from the Groningen school of archaeology to discredit the archaeological research of the National Museum for Antiquities in Leiden. To put it differently, the anecdote was reenacted. The actors, former pupils of Louwe Kooimans, ridiculed the



Figure 3. Holwerda and Van Giffen shake hands (re-enactment 2003). Copyright: *Archeologisch Centrum Leiden, Leiden.*

story on one level with a special focus on early 20th-century gender differences and social hierarchies. On another level, by reenacting it, the story was rendered innocent. Through the performance the anecdote lost its exclusive social meaning for

Groningen archaeologists, as it was finally integrated in Leiden's version of the history of Dutch archaeology; now the anecdote could strengthen the common bonds within that community of archaeologists as well.

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NOTES

1. For some general information about the history of Dutch archaeology, please see Van de Velde 2001. For some general information about Dutch archaeology and National Socialism, please see Eickhoff 2005 and Eickhoff 2008.
2. Until the present day, oral history has played a minor role in the history of archaeology. For an exception, please see the *Personal Histories Project* directed by Pamela Jane Smith: <http://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/personal-histories/> (26-5-2013).
3. Tjeert.H. van Andel (2-7-1996 Cambridge); Willem J. de Boone (9-5-1996 Garderen); Willem.C. Braat (8-6-1996 Oegsgeest); Hendrik Brunsting (25-8-1995 Leiden); Johan Gerritsen (10-11-1995 Amsterdam); Herre Halbertsma (13-11-1995 Amersfoort); Pieter J.R. Modderman (16-10-1995 Arnhem); J.G.N. Renaud (14-11-1995 Amersfoort); Rafael von Uslar (21-1-1997 Mainz); Harm T. Waterbolk (28-8-1994 Groningen).

4. This method was inspired by the work of the Dutch historian Barbara Henkes on German serving girls; for more on this, please see Henkes 1995; 18-25.
5. For the social factors that shape academic schools beyond private antagonism, please see: Engelhardt 1987; Machamer 2000; Rudwick 1985.
6. For a further understanding of ‘communicated memory’, please see Assmann 2006; 31-36.
7. Please compare this position with Verhart 2005.
8. Ms. Grete Loeb, 6-11-1995 Amersfoort
9. Ms. Tineke C.G. van Giffen- Oosterhout 13-8-2000
10. For the culture-historical archaeology of Van Giffen’s era, please see: Brather 2009, Eickhoff 2003; 69-105, Trigger 1989; 148-206
11. *Archeologische ontgravingen te Nierssen*, Archeologisch Centrum Leiden, Leiden 2003.

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