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Yahwism in the Achaemenid Imperial Religious Field: Using Bourdieu as a theorist of religious change in the Persian Empire

Introduction: How to understand Religion in the ANE

It was a very great honor to be at a symposium in the memory of the late Shaul Shaked, a man who pioneered the study of "Irano-Judaica," and a man whose assessments of "Iranian influence" are still some of the most lucid on offer. I only had the privilege of meeting him a handful of times at ASPS meetings, where he was gracious and supportive. I hope he would have found the following ideas of interest.

Everyone in this audience is well aware of the difficulties inherent in attempting to understand or define "religion." These problems are compounded when we try to understand how different or similar ancient religion was from that in our contemporary society; they get even more obstruse when one tries to understand how it fit into the wider social structure (not to mention understanding said wider social structure!). Should religion be treated as an independent phenomenon of human society, subsumed under the wider culture, or dismissed as merely the verbal superstructure of the political economy? Some of these difficulties of course derive from the limited extant evidentiary bases. Some, however, come from the tools with which we think about these things. Perhaps our tools have been too blunt or too influenced by the 19th and 20th centuries to be able to reveal more than they obscure.

Note: This paper was written in the context of the Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires, PI Saana Svärd. This essay grows out of ANEE Team 2's work on using Bourdieu for the social history of the ANE, and it expands on ideas sketched for a contribution to Rose and de Jong (eds.) *the Zoroastrian World*. I am grateful to Shai Gordon, Ryan Thomas, and Joanna Töyräänvuori for reading an earlier draft of this essay.

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I do not have the space to rehearse the history of these debates in the field.[1] Rather, I will briefly describe some tools of Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory that I think have the potential of placing old debates in a new, perhaps more productive light. Bourdieu's own foray into Ancient Near Eastern religion was very much dependent on Weber's earlier work, and thus has little to commend it.[2] Nonetheless, his theoretical concepts and orientation remain highly flexible and insightful, inviting a new, more relational assessment of religion in the Persian Empire (and the wider ANE).

Bourdieusian Field Theory

Bourdieu is widely utilized in sociology, anthropology, and more recent history, though he has received rather little engagement from Near Eastern historians. Those who have appealed to him have most often appealed to his most famous concept of *habitus*.[3] The wider breadth and analytical capability of his theory, however, retains much unexplored potential.[4] I find one of the most compelling aspects of his thought to be the effort to resist reductionism while retaining a relatively parsimonious toolkit. For Bourdieu, human society cannot be reduced to a mere epiphenomenon of economics. Neither is it simply a figment of the human imagination, with no reality outside human perception. Humans are neither entirely free to do as they will, nor predetermined to do anything. Despite the fact that many of his own analyses are clearly indebted to the specific historical experience of France, Bourdieu himself was quite insistent that every historical case had to be re-analyzed anew, without assuming similarities to other times and locations.[5]

The concept for which his thought is often named, the *field*, Bourdieu has described as:

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1 For a variety of overviews on various aspects, cf. Sharpe *Comparative Religion*, Adams, "Ancient Mesopotamian Urbanism," Garcia-Ventura and Verderame *Perspectives*; for a more popular reception cf. McGeough *The Ancient Near East*. The forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of the Ancient Near East and the Social Sciences* will have an entire section devoted to such overviews.

2 Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure."

3 Cf. the overview given in Silverman et al, "Preface."

4 See the forthcoming Team 2 project arguing this case as well as the relevant chapters in the forthcoming handbook.

5 Bourdieu and Wacquant. *Invitation*, 109–110: "I believe indeed that there are no transhistoric laws of the relations between fields, that we must investigate each historical case separately. [...] Rather, its [his theory of field] major virtue, at least in my eyes, is that it promotes a mode of construction that has to be rethought anew every time."

> a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions [that] impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation in the structure of the distribution of capital ... access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field ...[6]

For Bourdieu, a field comprises individuals and institutions with varying degrees of actual and potential access to relevant *capital* – we will return to capital below – and it is the relations between these occupants that define the structure of the field. These relations have both an objective reality (some positions have more capital than others) as well as a subjective reality (the perception of each person of the field and of their own position within it). The interactions between these entities are determined by a shared investment in the field (what Bourdieu calls *illusio* and its resultant *doxa*),[7] a shared understanding of the "rules of the game,"[8] and an organizing *capital* specific to that field.

Each individual and institution in the field will, according to their *habitus*, attempt to increase, maintain, or even decrease their position in the field based on their subjective understanding of their position in said field.[9] Thus, the topography of any given field is constantly changing, as the result of these interactions (Bourdieu prefers to call them struggles). Moreover, the very boundaries of a given field are part of the competition that takes place within a field: contesting who and what are part of a field are a constituent element of a field.[10] Nonetheless, no matter how fierce the competition between players, they share an unspoken, unconscious commitment to the values at stake in the given field (*illusio*) and take the structure of the field for granted (*doxa*).[11]

The field is a segment of society that is "autonomous." What Bourdieu means by this is,

> As I use the term, a field is a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy.[12]

By positing a field, therefore, one wishes to describe a segment of society in which the pursuit of specific capitals produces relations of positions independent of those in other fields, and with an internal logic ("rules of the game") that

6 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation*, 97.

7 E.g., Bourdieu, *Logic*, 82; Bourdieu, *Outline*, 164, 168.

8 Bourdieu, *Logic*, 148, 299 n. 14.

9 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 65, 72.

10 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation*, 100; Gorski, "Bourdieusian Theory," 331–2.

11 Bourdieu explicitly distinguishes *doxa* from *orthodoxy* and *heterodoxy*, in that the latter two are self-aware of alternate possibilities (e.g., Bourdieu, *Outline*, 164).

12 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 162.

cannot be reduced to those structuring other parts of society. Older studies spoke of four "canonical" Bourdieusian fields (economic, cultural, social, and political), though the existence of any "autonomous" field is an empirical question for any given historical moment.

A key element in analyzing a field is determining the capital(s) at stake. Although borrowed from (Marxist) economics, within Field Theory the point of capitals is to avoid a reduction to *economic* capital. As Bourdieu defines it,

> a species of capital is what is efficacious in a given field, both as a weapon and as a stake of struggle, that which allows its possessors to wield a power, an influence, and thus to exist, in the field under consideration.[13]

This capital may or may not be useful in other fields, but it provides the main structuring principle for its given field. The concepts of political capital[14] and social capital[15] have been widely used in academia, even outside a Bourdieusian context, implying at least their heuristic utility. A key aspect for field theory in this is that the capital provides both a shared orientation for those in the field, as well as providing the basis of power for those in higher positions in the field. Further, capitals can be "exchanged" or "converted" into other types of capital according to the logic of the society.[16] This is also one mechanism for thinking about the relationships between fields in a given society.

In their experience of and attempts to increase their position and access to capital in a given field, individuals and groups develop a *habitus*. In Bourdieu's admittedly abstruse formulation, habitus are,

> systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.[17]

In more prosaic language, *habitus* describes the ways of life and expectations for it that are unconsciously internalized by an individual or a group in relation to a particular field. This includes the person's subjective perception of their posi-

13 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation*, 98.
14 Casey, "Defining Political Capital."
15 Smith, "We All Bantu."
16 Bourdieu, *Logic*, 118–119, 300 n. 6.
17 Bourdieu *Outline*, 72.

tion in the field, and their ability to impact their position. Importantly such perceptions (Bourdieu likes the term *dispositions*) contain what agents consider *desirable* (compare Bourdieu's analysis of taste as part of the practices of distinction inherent in upper class *habitus*).[18] Habitus further comprises what Bourdieu called *hexis*,[19] the way in which one embodies one's *habitus* (clothing, posture, gestures, etc). Recently, Hadas has pointed to the examples of musical and sports training for the ways specific fields can inculcate correct *hexis*.[20] In the latter, Hadas points to the possibility for individuals to have multiple *habitus* related to the various fields which they inhabit. Atkinson has called any individual's combination of *habitus* their "social surface".[21] It is worth noting that one can speak of the *habitus* of a group or class as well as of an individual.

There are many more elements to field theory, but this brief overview of the three central concepts should suffice for setting the stage for this paper's proposal: to see the analytical purchase of thinking about a religious field in the Persian Empire.

Religion as an autonomous field

As noted above, adequately conceptualizing ancient religion is not straightforward. This paper is a thought experiment to see what might be gained from thinking about religion in the Persian Empire as an autonomous field in a Bourdieusian sense.[22] I want to emphasize that autonomous does not mean with no relations or interactions with other fields, but that it operates with its own structuring capital and rules for the game with a logic outside mere politics or economics. A key element to note in this regard is that the Persian king (like the Neo-Babylonian kings before him) was not a priest. Indeed, Darius's depiction of Gaumata as a *magušˇ*[23] (DBa I 36 ff) implies a societal differentiation between kingship and priesthood, and thus, arguably, between political and religious fields.[24] It is the goal of

18 Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

19 Bourdieu, *Outline*, 93; Bourdieu, *The Bachelors' Ball*, 84.

20 Hadas, Miklós. *Outlines of a Theory*.

21 Atkinson, *Beyond Bourdieu*, 26.

22 First briefly proposed in Silverman forthcoming. The context there, however, was to answer the question of what the HB can tell one about Persian religion. Here the interest is much broader and more theoretical.

23 He is called a *magušˇ* nine times in the text.

24 As does the myth of Yima, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Silverman, "From Remembering to Expecting," 430–1; Silverman, "Was There an Achaemenid," 175, 188).

this paper, therefore, to attempt to sketch what such a hypothesis would mean for understanding the period. A subsequent task, then, is to think about how such a field would have interacted with the political and economic fields.

I think we are safe in calling the existence of the divine world and the divine origin of society *doxa* in the Persian Empire (as in the ANE generally). It was also a matter of some import to determine divine approval for all kinds of decisions (via divination),[25] and in certain contexts which divine entity was responsible (e.g., 'medical' diagnoses[26] just as the Avestan texts insist on naming the deity being addressed[27]). It was incumbent on a ruler to ensure they were *perceived* as maintaining the divinely ordained order – even while there clearly was never any singularly agreed description what precisely that order ought to be. While the logic of a religious field would operate apart from politics, its structures are likely to be homologous to those of the political field.[28] Therefore, a key element in sketching the structure of the religious field at any given moment in time would be the Great King's own religious practice. We will return to analyzing the relevance of the king in the religious field below.

Other key elements to religion throughout the ANE are of course the various types of priesthoods and sacred sites, most prominently temples. The kinds of priests and their remits are crucial to assessing the types of positions available within the field. This requires assessing not only the relative hierarchies of specific types of priests, but determining the interactions between priesthoods and between cults. Temple institutions are vital actors here as well, with the relative prestige and power of temples no doubt strong elements in the relations between their priesthoods and potentially even the laity. Further, one must not forget the hazier aspects of everyday religion, which were also a major part of the field. Anyone who revered the gods was part of the religious field, even if the lowest levels are likely often to fall outside the extant evidence. Since Culturally Posited Supernatural Entities (CPSEs)[29] were believed to exist, they also ought to be reck-

25 E.g., Koch, *Mesopotamian Divination Texts*.

26 Heeßel, "Diagnosis, Divination and Disease," 99.

27 E.g., the Avestan phrase "aoxtō.nāmana yasna," "ritual in which its name is invoked," cf. Mithra's complaint in his Yašt for not being worshipped by his name (Yašt 10.54–5 [Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, 101]). Cf. Panaino, "Philologica Avestica IV," 172–3.

28 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation*, 106; Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 84, 87–97.

29 This terminology derives from the Cognitive Science of Religion. Spiro ("Religion," 96) defined religion as comprising interaction with 'culturally posited superhuman beings' and CSR scholars write of Culturally Posited Supernatural Agents. The concept is useful for retaining a phenomenological approach to ancient belief systems without imposing modern conceptual categories like "deity" or "ghost" that can be obfuscating. I include gods, demons, ancestors, heroes, *mischwesen*, etc, in this terminology. See, e.g., McCauley and Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind*. By using the term here I do not necessarily imply anything else from CSR.

oned as comprising the topography of the field. Their relative prestige and purported competencies would have had major ramifications for actors' perceptions of positions in the field – and the trajectories they might take to improve their own positions in the field.

A wide swathe of practices of course belongs to the field: these include not just the sacrificial cults, but other rituals, divination, calendars, festivals, funerary and mortuary traditions, etc. That not all practices held sway in all parts of the ANE is entirely in keeping with a Bourdieusian approach, whereby *habitus* is shaped by one's relative position in the field ("social space").

Capital and the structure of the religious field: Religious capital and Supernatural social capital

A field is structured around the distribution of a distinctive capital, so treating religion as a field at a given place and point in time requires one to identify what that distinctly religious capital would comprise. As a note, it is worth remembering in this regard that multiple capitals may be of value in a particular field, but theoretically one ought to provide the dominant structuring principle, though the interactions between several could also be considered. It is also to be expected that the structure and structuring principle of any given field will differ according to time and space.

In his own treatment of the religious field, Bourdieu merely called religious capital the "accumulated symbolic capital" of the priesthood,[30] which is rather vague. Among other issues (such as his dependence on Marx and Weber's depictions of the ANE[31]), his specific analysis resonates more with the development of the Catholic Church in France than religions elsewhere.[32] Bourdieu also underestimates the role of non-priests in the religious field.[33] One is therefore justified in seeking better ways to understand what religious capital might comprise, at least outside France.[34] Nonetheless, his idea of "religious capital" has frequently

30 Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure," 9.

31 E.g., in terms of urbanism as well as the role of the charismatic prophet vis-à-vis the bureaucratic priest; cf. Rey, "Pierre Bourdieu," 304.

32 Verter, "Spiritual Capital," 151.

33 E.g., Urban, "Sacred Capital," 364.

34 Verter "Spiritual Capital," 150, also thinks Bourdieu is most useful for religion when not utilizing Bourdieu's work on religion; he also notes the role of the image of the Catholic church (151). But Bourdieu often uses ideas or terminology from the Catholic church for the "secular" world, e.g., in Bourdieu, "What Makes a Social Class?," 14–15. For the influence of religious

been received as the form of cultural capital specific to a particular cult,[35] and thus not restricted to the religious field, and this will prove useful below.

In passing we can note the definition of religious capital by Iannaccone,[36] despite the fact his study was based in economic rational choice theory rather than Bourdieu. He considered it to comprise "familiarity with a religion's doctrines, rituals, traditions, and members."[37] This was slightly revised in a more sociological manner by Stark and Finke, who defined religious capital as "the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture."[38] They find this comprises both culture and emotions, and posit that people try to preserve their religious capital.[39] Other scholars have occasionally mooted other ideas for capitals belonging to various religious fields, though I find none of them to be useful for the ANE. Urban[40] uses "sacred capital" but never defines it.[41] Baker[42] has offered definitions of "religious capital" and "spiritual capital" that, due to his psychological framework, appears unhelpfully to blend capitals with *habitus*. In the context of the modern USA, Verter argues for defining "spiritual capital" as a sub-species of cultural capital, taking embodied (knowledge, competence), objectified (objects and ideologies), and institutionalized (churches) forms.[43] The individualistic marketplace of religious ideas Verter analyzes, however, is a very different religious world from the ANE. In the specific context of the Anglican Communion, McKinnon et al. see episcopal authority as the key form of religious capital, along with a newly created claim of "orthodoxy."[44]

In a forthcoming article Silverman, Töyräänvuori, and Wasmuth offer two ideas for understanding religious capital in Achaemenid Egypt: one as *numen* and one as supernatural social capital. It is the second one I wish to pick up and elaborate here as useful for analyzing the Persian Empire with a religious field. By supernatural social capital, I mean a similar concept to social capital, but one

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concepts on Bourdieu's thought, cf. Rey, "Pierre Bourdieu," 302. Rey goes so far as to claim Bourdieu is less useful for less centralized religions ("Pierre Bourdieu," 309).

35 E.g., Baker, "Social, Religious and Spiritual Capitals," 173.

36 Iannaccone, "Religious Practice."

37 Iannaccone, "Religious Practice," 299.

38 Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 108.

39 Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 109.

40 Urban, "Sacred Capital."

41 It is perhaps worth noting that Urban critiques Bourdieu's treatment of the religious field for ignoring the strategies of the dominated, though Urban's own model is quite in line with bow Bourdieu describes such strategies in other contexts (particularly in *Homo Academicus*).

42 Baker, "Social, Religious and Spiritual Capitals."

43 Verter, "Spiritual Capital," 159–160.

44 McKinnon, Trzebiatowska, and Brittain, "Bourdieu, Capital, and Conflict."

that includes all purported relationships to Culturally Posited Supernatural Entities (CPSEs) – deities, demons, the dead, etc. This distinguishes the religious field from the cultural field by including all CPSEs within it. This means that CPSEs are real insofar as they comprise part of actors' perceptions and dispositions towards the religious field.[45] Supernatural social capital comprises the relationships individuals are purported to hold with CPSEs as well as their relative prestige. This means the relative popularity and purported competences of CPSEs have a structuring role for the field: those deemed more powerful will attract more interest in relationships (e.g., worship, sacrifice) than others. It also means those with recognized relationships to them will also increase in prestige (such as those associated with institutionalized relationships). This is a positive feedback loop, much like how Gudme[46] has analyzed the function of votive inscriptions. Bourdieu's concept of religious capital, as the religious field's version of cultural capital – i.e., education in appropriate rituals, lifeways, etc – would be one of the prerequisites for humans to gain supernatural social capital. The exact "exchange rates" between the two would of course vary by cult and location. A benefit to this analysis is that it includes official and unofficial forms of religious roles and their attendant activity: centralized cultic priests, popular magicians, exorcists, and family mourners all participated in networks of relations with various CPSEs in various capacities. One can equally analyze royally sponsored sacrifices, the spread of apotropaic amulets, or ancestor veneration within this frame. "Illicit" activities such as witchcraft are analyzable as either heterodox corners of the religious field, or as cultivating different sets of religious capital.

I think this provides a useful way to deal with the undeniable fact that there were copious different deities, demons, and ancestors in the ANE, many of which required very specific cultic traditions. Participation in any given particular cult required a certain amount of religious capital, which could be translated into supernatural social capital in proportion to any particular cult's rules. So, while the "big brother" of the Esagila had the most supernatural social capital with Marduk, he probably had little to none with Anu.[47] The king could maintain or gain some with either or both with gifts to their priests and temples. Further,

45 Since actors' strategies depend on their perceptions both of other positions in the field and the interactions of others with those positions. It also means that the demarcation between such entities is immaterial for a sociological analysis. This is in line with a phenomenological approach to religion, in which we neither have to believe nor disbelieve in the existence of any such CPSE to take the religion's own perspectives seriously.

46 Gudme, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind?"; Gudme, *Before the God*.

47 Although there was a shrine to Anu within the Esagil of Marduk in Babylon (é.giš.ḫur.an.ki.a, Tintir II 18'; see George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*, 52–3; George, *House Most High*, 95).

since it is clear that ideas of exclusive worship are anachronistic for the Persian Empire, this invites analysis not only of the relative positions of various deities and their cultic sites, but the religious investments needed to gain social capital with any given deity or indeed ancestor.[48] It also invites a dynamic analysis of the religious field, when one recognizes a field as a competition between positions, and structured by the changing positions of actors, human and supernatural. Incidentally, one could therefore read Second Isaiah's program (e.g., use of creation theology, ridicule of Marduk cult, praise of Cyrus, etc)[49] as one to increase the supernatural social capital of YHWH in order to encourage both relations with YHWH and the requisite investment in religious capital to acquire supernatural social capital with him.

The Great King and the Religious Field in the Empire

Even if, as I would argue, the Persian Great King was not a priest, he was part of the religious field as a person claiming relationships with various CPSEs: not just Ahuramazda or other major formerly imperial deities,[50] but also with *farnah*, and likely with royal *fravašis* and/or royal ancestors, to name a few. He also had structural effects on the shape of the field through several different avenues: 1) through patronage of cults and priests (and their vetting); 2) through royal discourse on the divine and worldviews; and 3) through his own religious practices.

A traditional role of kings in numerous times and places in the ANE was the patronage of and indeed building of temples, as well as of various kinds of religious functionaries (priests, diviners, prophets, etc.).[51] As with all patron relations, both the king and the client received benefits from these relationships. Royally patronized deities often became more widely recognized and worshipped, even being moved to the tops of pantheons. Temples received social capital as well as economic capital from these relationships, as did religious functionaries. I have argued elsewhere[52] that the Great King insisted on vetting candidates for the

48 It is worth noting in this respect Sonia's argument that one could "co-opt" the ancestors of others to gain social capital (Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*; one could also analyze it in terms of increasing supernatural social capital.

49 Following my analysis in Silverman, *Persian Royal–Judaean Elite*.

50 For Marduk, see the Cyrus Cylinder, for Ra see Darius's canal inscriptions, for Humban, see the attested sacrifices in the Persepolis tablets.

51 For the Neo-Babylonian Empire, cf. Waerzeggers, "The Pious King."

52 Silverman, "Vetting the Priest in Zech 3"; cf. Silverman, *Persian Royal–Judaean Elite*.

priesthood along social criteria, meaning he and his satraps had a strong influence on the social capital needed for attaining priestly positions and thus their supernatural social capital. This is important for coloring debates over the impact of the king on the cults, as it is not their *religious* capital – i.e. their specific religious knowledge and competence – but their *social* capital that appears to have been a royal criterion in these matters, outside Iran, at least. This nonetheless determined some of the specific rules needed to reach higher positions in the field, thus shaping the effective strategies therein. In other words, to be able to convert one's religious capital into supernatural capital most effectively, one needed social capital within the imperial administration.

While one may be justified in seeing the primary intention of royal propaganda to be to shape the political field, there are at least two mechanisms one could imagine for its effect on the religious field. The first is the fact that dominant positions in the field are able to define what counts as capital and what counts as legitimate categories of evaluation and worth (what Bourdieu calls symbolic capital). The king, holding a relatively high position in the field, would thus have much power within the field (meaning ability to gain and wield religious capital, shape the rules of the game, etc). Further, the principle of homology between the political field and other fields would suggest that similar rules and legitimation principles as in the former would shape the latter. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, the royal inscriptions manage to redefine the value of deities based on their creative powers and on their benevolence.[53] This is because the king derives his legitimacy from the beneficial and creative powers of Ahuramazda (and which shape the Great King's view of his domain), which, in a homologous turn in the religious field would increase the symbolic value of creation and benevolence within the scope of divine positionality.

Finally, the Great King had effect through his own religious *habitus*. The CPSEs he chose to honor and worship, the rituals he sponsored and attended, the festivals and calendars he participated in, would have increased in status. This is beyond the effects of any royal decrees on any such matters. Those wishing to maintain a high position in the religious field – especially outside the priesthoods – and those wishing to increase theirs would have had every incentive to adjust their own practices accordingly. Topics I can imagine worth analyzing in these terms include

53 Silverman, "Achaemenid Creation"; cf. Silverman, *Persian Royal–Judaean Elite*. In the context of this paper, it is worth noting that Nehemiah stresses the benevolence of YHWH in ch 2 (vv. 8, 18 [2x]).

the worship of Mithra or Anāhitā,[54] ancestor cults,[55] and festivals.[56] One might also wonder about the implications for more restricted priestly practices; those priests whose positions were on an upward trajectory could both impose their understanding of proper priestly *habitus* on other priests, as well as have it copied by the same. I have in mind here questions such as ritual purity and lay roles in relation to cults, not to mention acceptable forms of divination, etc.

Other structural issues in the Religious Field of the Persian Empire

For the sake of time I will only briefly suggest further ways one might investigate the larger structure of the religious field in the empire and some of the ways it was likely changing. The first is the issue of dispersion through the empire. In a previous essay I noted that Judaeans and Iranians shared an experience of dispersal around the empire, though for different reasons.[57] The Judaeans lived around the empire as the result of waves of deportations and, presumably, other forms of migration. Iranian colonists were also settled around the empire, as military colonists, administrators, and satrapal elites. This means that these two groups at least potentially shared the experiences associated with *hysteresis*, or of (religious) *habitus* designed for one context and placed in another, incongruous context. It also means various cults were likely spread among groups of very different composition and with different positions in the religious field (not to mention the political field). One might think of garrisons versus satrapal courts, for example, proximity to temples or shrines, or the likely very different *habitus* of admin-

54 Often debated in terms of the sudden appearance of both deities in the inscriptions of Artaxerxes II (A^2Ha, b; A^2Sa, d) as well as the claim in Berossus (680 F11) that the same king instituted temples to Anāhitā. For Mithra there is also the perennial question of whether Mihragan dates as far back as the first Persian Empire. Boyce had famously adventurous interpretations of both (eg Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*). For various aspects see Boyce, "On Mithra, Lord of Fire"; Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism II*; Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 273–276, 371–377; Bahadori, "Persepolitan Ceremonies." Recently Henkelman has suggested there was a temple to Anāhitā in Fars (Henkelman, "Humban & Auramazdā," 289 n. 70).

55 E.g., Porter, "The Dynamics of Death"; Henkelman, "An Elamite Memorial"; Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*.

56 For Palestine, the origins of Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot, Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur have long been debated. For Babylon and Assyria the most discussed is the Akitu. For Iran the festivals of Nowruz, Tirigan, and Mihragan have long been debated. One might also consider whatever lay behind Purim.

57 Silverman, "Persian Religion in the Hebrew Bible."

istrative scribes (a position likely shared by some Judeans and some Iranians) and that of members of the imperial elite.

Case Study: Nehemiah 8 as Practices of Feasting within the Religious Field

In his study of food in the Hebrew Bible, MacDonald has already pointed to the relevance of Persian feasting practices,[58] which he sees as a good example of conspicuous consumption.[59] However, MacDonald focuses mostly on the post-Persian, Hellenistic use of the Persians as a foil for the Hellenistic ideal of moderation. It also would be remiss of me not to note that Laird has already wielded Bourdieu in her book on Ezra-Nehemiah, though she does not posit a religious field.[60] As will be visible below, her analysis of Ezra 3/Neh 8[61] therefore differs from mine.

Feasting has long attracted social scientific attention as a mechanism that constructs and maintains patterns of relationships.[62] MacDonald has highlighted it as a potential mechanism for the development of what, in Bourdieusian terms, would be the political field.[63] Following several anthropologists on feasting, MacDonald argues that feasting is a major way of converting economic capital into political capital,[64] pointing in particular to the narratives associating Solomon's court with feasts.[65] I would here like to analyze some hints in Nehemiah 8 as potential mechanism for change in the religious field in Yehud, as a subfield of the Imperial religious field and in relationship with the broader political field. I will first draw on Henkelman's work on royally sponsored feasts, and then turn to Nehemiah 8.

Henkelman has argued that attestations of *šip*-feasts in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets and in the Elamite version of XPh represent royally sponsored

58 MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone*, esp. ch. 7.

59 Ala Veblen, *Conspicuous Consumption*; MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone*, 203–211.

60 Laird, *Negotiating Power*.

61 Laird, *Negotiating Power*, 123–133.

62 O'Connor, *The Never-Ending Feast*, esp. ch 3; MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone*; Altmann, *Festive Meals*, §2.2 emphasizes the psychological element more; cf. Da Riva, Arroyo, and Debourse, *Ceremonies, Feasts and Festivities*.

63 MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone*.

64 MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone*, esp. 144–5.

65 Joanna Töyräänvuori suggested another side of the equation as one of fasting converting religious capital into social or supernatural social capital (personal communication). This could provide an interesting analysis in light of the developing tradition of penitential prayers and the fact that Zoroastrianism is not congenial to ascetic traditions such as fasting (cf. Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* I, 121; Choksy, "Fasting in Persia I").

events for imperial work forces.[66] He sees this as an instance of the royal ideology of gift-giving, but one with religious and sacrificial meanings (so far only the gods Zizkurra [NN 0654] and Auramazdā [XPh_e] are mentioned by name).[67] Large amounts of food were consumed, including duck, which Henkelman sees as a specifically royal prerogative,[68] and these events are attested involving large groups of laborers, up to 520 individuals.[69] They appear to occur in November/December, and Henkelman adduces culling of herds as the practical reason and the king's presence in Fars as the ideological reason.[70] It was held in *paradises* and possibly at the sacred precinct in Pasargadae.[71] Persian feasting also notoriously involved wine (as well as being one option for liquid rations, the other being beer).[72] Henkelman published one text documenting wine distributed at a *šip*-feast (NN 2402).[73]

The political symbolic function of such feasts is fairly transparent, as Henkelman has argued: the king directly or through his agents performs the role of most generous gift-giver, and in line with rules of hospitality demonstrates his superior social status.[74] But the religious elements to this feast – however elusive in details – also have implications for a religious field. Religious elements include any divine dedications or sacrifices made during the feast (so far only two known by name in Fars, one of Elamite origin and one of Indo-Iranian),[75] the location of the feasting in a sacredly tinged environ like a *paradise* or the sacred precinct, any other CPSE patrons named, food taboos created or ignored, or the creation of sacred festivals. Although one might imagine such feasts, if held regularly,

66 Henkelman, "Parnakka's Feast"; cf. Henkelman, "Practice of Worship," 1260–2. For higher-level dining practices of the kings, queens, and satraps, see e.g., Henkelman, "Consumed."

67 Henkelman, "Parnakka's Feast," 99, 102–103, 115, 119.

68 Henkelman, "Parnakka's Feast," 104–5.

69 Henkelman, "Parnakka's Feast," 119.

70 Henkelman, "Parnakka's Feast," 119.

71 Henkelman, "Parnakka's Feast," 132.

72 Colburn, *Archaeology of Empire*, ch. 5; Balatti, "Wine Consumption." There may have even been a Persian god of wine, Minam (See Henkelman, "Practice," 1234 [NN 2259]; cf. Silverman, forthcoming on this and Isaiah). At the level of the royal tables this is attested in staggering amounts: Henkelman identifies over 37k quarts of wine at the King's table, and a tenth of that at one queen's table (Henkelman, "Consumed," 681, 695).

73 Henkelman, "Parnakka's Feast," 99. The issue of the distribution of imperial dining ware and its local terracotta imitations would be relevant here, though it goes beyond the present scope. Relevant, perhaps, for below is of course the tradition in Nehemiah of said governor having been a cup-bearer to the king. Cf. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 263; Balatti "Wine Consumption," 178.

74 Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 314; Colburn, *Archaeology*; Gudme, "Guests."

75 Henkelman, "Parnakka's Feast," 103.

might popularize a particular holiday or even a particular deity, it is worth considering more subtle but more important ramifications. In line with the principle of homology, the practice normalizes the patronage of the Persian king or his agents over religiously-tinged public festivals outside of temple complexes. It simultaneously reinforces the position of the king in the field while maintaining a distinction between his position and priestly positions. As we know the satraps mirrored the king, and governors likely mirrored the satraps,[76] this means there is likely to be a ripple effect in the religious *habitus* in the empire. In other words, a strategy for imperial officials of various levels to increase their religious capital would be to sponsor such large feasts for workers. This should not be taken to imply a uniform, "trickle down" of cults from the crown downward; rather, a strategy available to imperial agents to improve their positions would have been choosing appropriate local festivities to sponsor in a conspicuous manner. Further, given the large-scale use of various forms of labor in the empire,[77] this means one might expect being a guest at such events to become incorporated into the *habitus* of the lower layers of society.[78] This involved an implicit recognition of the patron's, and ultimately the king's, position in the religious field.

Then there are the practical considerations of which gods are chosen to be honored, which priests chosen for the respective rites, which sacrifices are offered, which location they are held in, and the status distinctions which are marked among guests, etc. Depending on the historical moment such choices have the potential to reinforce existing positions and rules of the game or to alter them – Bourdieu is as much a theorist of change as of stasis. Further, the precise "table manners" or etiquette of feasting are also implicated. This is most immediately illustratable through the spread of the Achaemenid style bowls and rhyta, which represent manners of eating and drinking that were marked as imperial.[79] As the Persian style of feasting and drinking included reclining on couches with servants holding rhyta and drinkers holding bowls, this is a distinctive *hexis* (embodied *habitus*) with clear imperial connotations. If one believes Nehemiah's attribution as a royal cupbearer (Neh 1:11–2:1), then he would have been intimately familiar with this dining style. One might justifiably relate such matters of *hexis* to the raising of hands in Neh 8:6, which is reminiscent of the royal posture in front of the winged disk.[80]

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76 Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 314–5; Henkelman, "Consumed"; Miller, "Luxury Toreutic."

77 Dandamaev, "Forced Labour"; Aperghis, "War Captives."; Hyland, "Persia's Lycian Work Force."

78 On the neglected aspects of guest etiquette in hospitality and feasting, see Gudme, "Guests."

79 Dusinberre, "Satrapal Sardis"; Dusinberre, *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy*; Katchadourian, *Imperial Matter*, ch 5. MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone*, 196, speaks of table manners as part of the "grammar of identity."

80 Fried, *Nehemiah*, 207, calls this a "common posture of prayer," but does not note the similarity to the royal Persian posture (eg, at DB and DN).

The *šip*-feasts for workers noted above were of course not the only or necessarily most prominent feasting practice of the king and imperial elites (Neh 5:17–18).[81] Nonetheless, they might provide a new angle for considering the material presently in Nehemiah 8. I do not wish to delve into the question of the origin and/or redactions of this chapter, nor do I wish to go into the origins of Sukkot.[82] Recently, Fried has argued this chapter originally concerned a celebration marking the completion of the Jerusalem wall.[83] Whether this is the case or not, the chapter has the governor and his elites give orders for one or two different communal feasts. There is a feast on the first day of the month (v. 10, 12),[84] and then a festival of Sukkot, which one presumes also would have involved food, though this is not specified directly (of course in later tradition, it was/is common to eat in the sukkot). While here v. 12 might indicate it is not a centrally organized distributional feast like the *šip*,[85] both are still centrally mandated. The feasts are meant to be fancy as well, with choice food and wine (v. 10), albeit without much specificity. They are to be minimally distributed at least (to those unprepared, v. 10). Though people are to build sukkot on their own rooves, there are also others in public spaces, suggesting a wider variety of groups envisioned (not just the traditional concern with "pilgrims"). One could also point to the more explicitly rarified gubernatorial table in Neh 5:17–18 for more explicitly distributional dynamics.[86] Edelman has suggested that pilgrimage feasts such as Pesach (and later Sukkot) were designed by the priesthood to develop communal memories that bound land and diaspora.[87] Even if one were inclined to see this as the case, such a development would have occurred within a wider social structure with rules of the game beyond the specific concerns of Judean priests. In this context it looks very much like the governor (in the narrative, Nehemiah) is echoing the

81 Cf. Altmann, *Economics*, 270–287; Fried, "150 Men at Nehemiah's Table." Altmann (*Economics*, 244) does not even include our passage in his list of economically relevant passages in Nehemiah.

82 E.g., Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 109, thought the festival was a Canaanite harvest festival; Rubenstein, *The History of Sukkot*, ch 1, offers an overview of theories of its origins. I agree with Rubinstein (29) in seeing the most probable origin being a rural harvest festival. A handy overview of the textual versions of Sukkot can be found in Fried, "Sukkot." For discussion of literary developments outside present interest, see, eg, Weyde, *The Appointed Festivals of YHWH*; Weyde, "And They Found It."

83 Fried, "Sukkot"; Fried, *Nehemiah*, 193–198, 203.

84 Most commentators appear to ignore this first feast, as they are keen to discuss either the Torah reading or Sukkot (and its relation to Torah).

85 Fried (*Nehemiah*, 211) thinks they remained in Jerusalem, at lodgings there.

86 It may be worth pointing out the specifics of who prepares the food in Neh 8 is passed over in silence. The previous assembly had included women and children. For Neh 5 Altmann avers Nehemiah is depicted reflecting royal feasting glory (*Economics*, 287).

87 Edelman, "Exodus and Pesah/Massot."

feasting practices of the Great King for non-elites, and using it to increase his own supernatural social capital by linking it to religious tradition. The selection of religious functionaries involved (Levites and Ezra as priest and scribe) may have found this a useful moment for ritual innovation as well.[88]

I think the image sketched above of local elites emulating higher imperial elites in patronizing local practices provides an interesting angle to this passage. If we accept that Yehud and Samerina probably had had agricultural festivals marking the harvest and/or threshing of the harvest, we can argue the work forces at the disposal of the higher-level elites in the two provinces were probably well acquainted with these practices. There is no reason to assume that such regular agricultural practices would have been disrupted by the deportations of elites and/or urbanites by the Babylonians. If one accepts Rubenstein's argument that the building of temporary shelters for the purposes of such harvesting was the practical origin of temporary structures later called *sukkot*,[89] it would therefore follow that such agricultural workers would have been used to such practices – and have continued them through the Babylonian and Persian Empires – but that urbanites such as those in Nehemiah 8 would not have been. Through his authority as governor, Nehemiah is able to draw on the administrative resources of the temple establishment – the literate priests and scribes, here depicted as Ezra and the Levites – to increase his supernatural social capital. He does this by having the urbanites adopt as a sacred practice what had been merely a practical practice, thereby imbuing it as part of the cult and demonstrating his fealty to the local deity. In other words, what had been an incidental aspect of tradition only relevant to a portion of the community was taken up and transformed into a religious obligation for all. This is likely to be an effective way to coopt workers into the new "symbolic capital" by requiring minimal change to their *habitus*. As I have argued elsewhere,[90] the issue of written *torah* here is a red herring – what is really at stake is who the legitimate authorities for religious practice are. In this passage it is those who control the ability to read and write, and thus in reality the administration of the province. It is perhaps worth noting that this is an effect on the religious field outside the temple proper (unlike Ezra 3)[91]: it

88 There has been much debate over whether and how the instructions in Neh 8 for the sukkot are related to those in Leviticus or not (eg Weyde 2007), but since the phenomenon of written texts providing social warrants is later, this debate obscures discussion of the social processes involved.

89 Rubenstein, *History*, 17; Fried, *Nehemiah*, 221.

90 Silverman, "Concepts."

91 Laird (*Negotiating Power*, 126) sees a difference in impact between the decentralized and centralized versions in Neh 8 and Ezra 3; I think relating both to different spaces in the same religious field provides a better analysis of the effects. I suspect most major ANE festivals had

concerns the practice of the general "laity." It also has a twofold effect on the rules of the game in the field. First, it implicitly adds a criterion of literacy to the religious capital needed to gain priestly supernatural capital. This presumably would favor those priests who worked in the imperial administration, seeing as those are the most likely to have had the need to learn literacy. Indeed, Ezra is depicted exactly as a dual priest and imperial agent in his book. In this it is immaterial whether or not the practice decreed by the authorities was in fact written in a scroll or not. What matters is the ability to access the scroll and explain it to others. Strictly speaking, literacy had not been necessary for the religious capital to become a cultic priest. Now, however, it increased a priest's religious capital and thus potential for conversion of it into supernatural social capital (thus, contra the analysis of Laird[92] who sees rival authorities in Ezra 3 and Neh 8). Second, it makes what one might have called a cultural practice into an explicitly religious practice.[93] The building of booths becomes part of *torah*, the way things are done, and thus part of general religious capital available to all participants in the field. Of course, as capital available to all it had little value for social distinction (though it would have had value for group-belonging). It would, however, have been the occasion for the development of new patterns for the display of distinction (either in terms of types of wood used for the sukkot, their size, number of guests invited, etc). In this, the priests would have had the incentive to emphasize the temple-centric aspects of the holiday, as a way to heighten the position of the temple within the religious field.[94]

This analysis connects the religious field with both the economic field (through agricultural practices and the utilization of labor forces) and with the political field (through the agency of the governor and the administrators), but the strategies for advancement in the field are autonomous from both. It also highlights how *habitus* and positionality can effect religious change. The administrative *habitus* acquired by the governor and by his administrators shapes their expectations for warrants within the religious field, while the different positions of urbanites from rural workers changes the meaning of a similar practice.

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temple-centric and more public aspects, making the centralized/decentralized scholarly trope merely an artifact of overly prioritizing the text.

92 Laird, *Negotiating Power*, 131.

93 This is not to say there had not been fertility – and thus religious – elements to the festivities beforehand.

94 Laird (*Negotiating Power*, 123) sees a strong contrast between the home-centric and temple-centric versions of the festival, but relates this to differences in *habitus* due to exilic and local backgrounds (124).

I must contrast my analysis above with that relatively recently offered by Whitters.[95] Whitters argues that Nehemiah 8 represents, in my terms, a deliberate, conscious influence ("borrowing") from Achaemenid imperial ritual to Yehud. While I agree that Iranian influence is an important issue for Persian Period religion, and even that Bourdieu offers useful tools for exploring it,[96] this is not how I have analyzed the passage above. The first problem I have is I disagree with his analysis of the relief program at Persepolis as depicting a "liturgy" in any meaningful sense of the word, so I do not think there is actually something there to compare to Nehemiah. Second, his analysis depends on Neh 8 depicting a specific historical event, which is also problematic. Rather than seeing Nehemiah 8 as an example of pro-Persian elites deliberately inscribing the empire into their ritual practice, my analysis above accepts such an imperial background in the form of elite habitus formation but not in the construction of the feasts *per se* (whichever ones one thinks they are). At the end of his article Whitters helpfully points to a number of issues (what one might call symbolic capital)[97] certainly useful to think about, but my explicit use of Bourdieu highlights how the choice of local practices could still serve the interests of local elites as well as be part of a wider imperial religious game. One need not posit a specific ritual at Persepolis or for any Yehudian elite to have ever visited Persepolis for the structural effects of Achaemenid feasting practices to be relevant. Indeed, I would argue that in this case the structural changes are significant without any similarity in contents. If Neh 8 really does reflect the genesis of new feasting practices for the population, this creates not just new practices (such as the particular feasts in the seventh month or the building of sukkot for religious purposes), it creates new expectations (towards hosting and being hosted, construction and collection), and relationships (between and among families, new possibilities for patronage, the governor and the populace).

Of course, this analysis cannot prove anything about Nehemiah 8's historic dating or origins. If Fried's new theory on the dating of the chapter is correct, then one would have to seriously consider the relation with Ptolemaic Bacchic festivals, as she does.[98] Yet the viability of the toolkit arguably remains, as the religious field within the Ptolemaic Empire was different and would need to be

95 Whitters, "Persianized Liturgy." A similar sort of critique of Fleishman, "The Rebuilding of the Wall of Jerusalem," could also be offered, but is avoided here for constraints of space. However, cf. the discussion of Foroutan, "References to Zoroastrian Beliefs."

96 Silverman, "Cultural and Religious Influence."

97 Whitters, "Persianized Liturgy," 82–4. My take on his topics: Bureaucracy, minimal coercion, hierarchy, multiculturalism, sacred language, book as a replacement for kingship.

98 Fried, *Nehemiah*, 236–9.

analyzed on its own terms. Given a relevance for the Persian Empire, however, this enables a way to think about the potential social dynamics around religious change in Yehud that are not tied merely to redaction and exegesis, but to dynamic competition between positions in a religious field and the relations between this field and the political field.

Afterthoughts

Positing a religious field within the Achaemenid Empire forces one to ask many difficult questions. How did new practices, positions, and capitals change strategies for players in the field? How did Yehud relate to this larger game in Abar-Nahara and the empire at large? Direct influence of specific forms of symbolic or cultural capital are always a possible part of the evolution of the field. Nonetheless, practices that appear either entirely unrelated or only superficially analogous can sometimes be argued to share structural homologues, inviting a broader sociological analysis of what rules were at play in the field to create such similar conditions. I think the concepts of religious capital and supernatural social capital provide a more nuanced way to ask what is at stake in something as seemingly simple as the introduction of a feast or even just the institutionalization of a pre-existing practice with a new interpretation. Though analyses of the political and economic fields are still useful – no field ever operates in isolation – a religious field provides a heuristic for interrogating the relations between the local governors, administrators, and cultic officials beyond the tired old debates around the so-called priestly usurpation of 'Davidic' prerogatives.

One might be automatically inclined to relate the supernatural social capital at stake in our case study to YHWH, as biblical scholars are wont to do. Surely since Sukkot is a practice in the Pentateuch, the only relevant CPSE would be him? However, I think a distinction between religious capital and supernatural social capital is useful here, for taking into consideration the wider imperial religious context. Since we have hints in Third Isaiah (Isa 57: 5–10; 65: 3–5, 11)[99] of alternate practices, concrete proof of multiple deities in Elephantine, and a spread in popularity of apotropaic deities such as Bes, it is worth noting that supernatural social capital – like regular social capital – would not be exclusive. Its effectiveness would be just as situational as the former, based on prestige and "networks". Part of religious capital in the empire would be knowing the CPSEs most relevant in a given situation as well as which practices are appropriate for them.

99 Cf. Edelman, "Possible Rituals."

Just as one needs to know which person to approach to gain entrance to the royal court, one would need to know which CPSE would provide the most supernatural benefits. The fertility and labor aspects I hinted at above lurking behind the agricultural festival could suggest a wider array of relevant cultic practices and CPSEs around Sukkot or whatever other festivals are in Neh 8. Similarly, the chains of political patronage also suggest chains of divine patronage or identification as potential dynamics in the field. This again invites a wider consideration of what Bourdieu would call symbolic capital, or the principles of legitimacy and warrants in the field, requiring a zooming back out from just Yehud proper. Scholars often like to argue that something like monolatry provided power or solidarity for priests and/or scribes, but exact mechanisms for how this would achieve such results remain under-developed. Relations between CPSEs, and with their human counterparts, provide a social structure through which one could analyze any such changes in the rules of the religious game in Yehud. While religious specialists are to be expected to promote the prestige of the deities to which they are devoted, this does not imply a move towards a reduction in pantheon size (consider the rise of Anu in Uruk as a similar phenomenon).[100] A social space would be required in which agents could convert supernatural social capital to political capital and use it to eliminate rivals; this does not appear to be the case in the Persian Levant.

Field Theory is complicated and requires much thought to utilize properly. There are many more aspects to Bourdieu's thought and those who have utilized it than just the basic triad of field, habitus, and capital used here. Further, as a historical "empirical" question (as Bourdieu would phrase it), I remain ambivalent on the existence of an autonomous religious field in the Persian Empire. Nevertheless, asking questions such as "was there a religious field" forces one to ask a series of relational questions: between individuals, social positions, political positions, and social practices. Even though we lack the richness of the anthropological studies upon which Bourdieu cut his teeth, the thought process remains a valuable exercise. If for nothing else, the challenge of matching the necessary relational questions with the limited extant data gives rise to new questions otherwise not necessarily asked in the heavy debates over religion in the Achaemenid Empire.[101]

100 Krul, *Revival of the Anu Cult*.

101 This has of course been a very contentious field of debate, for Achaemenid religion itself (eg, recently Henkelman, Redard, *Persian Religion*; Jong, "Religion," 2:1199–1209), relations with local cults (eg. Achenbach, *Persische Reichspolitik*), and for Judaean religions (eg Edelman, Fitzpatrick-McKinley, and Guillaume, *Religion in the Achaemenid Persian Empire*).

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