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ARCHAEOLOGY
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RAS KIAMBONE TO BUR GAVO : AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
APPRAISAL

In March 1983, an archaeological reconnaissance was carried out by the writer, accompanied by Bridget McCrum, of the stretch of the southern Somali coast south of Bur Gavo as far as the border with Kenya at Ras Kiambone. Due possibly to the inaccessibility of the sites, combined with the seasonal weather and conditions of the tracks, very little has been written about this part of the coast, 60 km long, and it has been sadly neglected from the archaeological point of view. The extensive remains of mosques, town walls and monumental tombs situated in that region have only received cursory mention by a few people. Consequently the information available for identifying the sites is rather meagre.

In 1968, N. Chittick surveyed the coast from Mogadishu as far south as Bur Gavo and paid visits to several of the Bajun Islands. Unfortunately, his informative study was curtailed at this point due to lack of time. V. L. Grottanelli's admirable work, *Pescatori dell' Oceano Indiano* concentrates on the Bajun Islands and he describes and illustrates various remains on the islands and makes occasional reference to sites on the mainland. He quotes extensively from J. E. G. Elliot but to my knowledge never visited the sites described below. Elliot made several visits along the coast and to the islands and his article (1926) has a wealth of information as to the archaeological sites, customs of the people, wildlife, poetry and superstitions. However, it is only on the last page (358) that he deals briefly with the ruins ex-

tending southward from Bur Gavó, mentioning Veko, Mnarani, Mbarabala, Miandi and Odo. (Here I have retained Elliot's spelling of place names. In describing the sites below, I have used, where possible, the modern Somali equivalent.) W. W. A. Fitzgerald in *Travels in East Africa* mentions the mosque at Ras Kiambone and the archway at Odo and his book contains the only photograph previously published of the main pillar tomb at Ras Kiambone.

The coast with which this survey is concerned consists of a narrow maritime plain, for the most part dry and sandy and covered with low scrub. The mainland gradually rises from the coast to low hills and in places the rather monotonous landscape is broken by solitary hills close to the shore. Out to sea, the larger islands give way to chains of rocky islets, some of which can be reached by wading across the shallow water at low tide. Navigating this coastal stretch is difficult due to the great distance the tide goes out and the settlements can only be reached by boat for brief periods at high tide. There is a narrow track along which a land-rover can pass close to the shore. The bush is sparse and the only difficulty encountered was scatterings of low coral along the track.

Nevertheless, despite the absence of any decent anchorage between Bur Gavó and Ras Kiambone, there is evidence of settlements which, judging from the sherds of imported porcelain, the fine workmanship used in building the mosques and the size and decoration of the tombs, suggests that at one time there were settled communities, trade from outside and a reminder to posterity of the importance of the ancestral powers within the community.

Further study of these tombs would be worthwhile for what they could tell us about the people and customs along this coastal area. The majority of tombs observed are walled

enclosures built of coral rag masonry with the surfaces plastered and are often creatively decorated in some form or other. Generally the decoration is made by using cut coral in the form of simple geometric designs: crosses, squares, rectangles and combinations of all these. As will be seen many of these tombs have pillars or rounded headstones built into the eastern wall and these are often decorated with bowls of imported porcelain or local pottery. The corners of many of the tombs have step ends and sometimes a row of small niches has been used as a decorative frieze along the eastern wall.

Most interest has been given to the pillar tombs along the coast and various theories have been offered regarding this form of funerary architecture. Certainly, of the six pillar tombs observed in this survey (two of which have collapsed), all would have been clearly visible from the sea, making it not such a fanciful suggestion that perhaps they served (as a secondary function) as navigational aids. Possibly the idea behind the building was simply a conspicuous and lasting reminder of the deceased.

A useful line of inquiry might be made in regard to the correlation between the importance of the deceased with the size of the pillar or tombstone, for example at Rasini, three hours northwards by boat from Bur Gavó. The remains of Sherif bin Omari, whose spectacular little mosque stands close to the shore, lie within a tomb which has a pillar of four meters. The tomb of Sheikh Ali, close by, has a pillar of at least six meters with recesses for six bowls. Another tomb, that of Sherif Omar Ismail has a modest tombstone on the eastern wall and the remaining tombs are simple walled enclosures. Due to the lack of time, I was unable to ascertain the chronology of names of all the owners or their importance within the community.

The majority of these scattered settlements have been abandoned but where there are small modern villages, the people are growing maize and tending their herds of cows, goats and sheep. Eight years ago, a fishing industry was started at Ras Kiambone by the Food and Agriculture Organization and 250 people are involved in the catching, processing and transportation of the fish up the coast to Kismayu.

Small fishing boats are moored on either side of the promontory of Ras Kiambone. Some of these have engines and the more affluent fishermen have imported glass fibre boats from Kenya as well as investing in this type of boat which is now being made in Somalia. With these they are able to navigate much further and to extend their business up and down the coast. Apart from the normal fishing trade, sharks are caught and dried and transported down to Tanzania; wood is collected for fuel and taken from one settlement to another, as well as mangrove poles which are used in building. People naturally travel by sea rather than rely on frequent transport on land.

Ras Kiambone was reached by travelling inland from Kismayu. The sites are described from south to north.

Ras Kiambone

This village is 5 km from the border with Kenya and the modern houses, for the most part, are built of mangrove poles and mud and straddle at the western side of the promontory. Small boats are anchored on either side of this according to the monsoon and a certain amount of activity results from traffic in and out of Kenya.

One kilometer north of the modern village, are the extensive remains of a walled town and a week was spent photographing, drawing and mapping the tombs, city walls and remains

of houses and the mosque. The area enclosed by the wall at Ras Kiambone extends to some ten hectare and is intersected by a modern path which is in frequent use by people carrying stone from the old site to the modern village where they are being used to build houses. The wall is fragmentary in many parts, especially at the southern end and reaches a maximum height of one meter. In the center of the site are remains of stone houses with a dried up well close by. Many of the stones from the houses have been used to make small walls delimiting allotments for growing maize and consequently little is left of the original structural walls. However, judging by the amount of scattered stones still remaining the town must have had a fair number of inhabitants.

The tombs cover a very wide area; one is far outside the city walls to the southeast; another has been built on a small hill, whilst the remainder are to the west of the mosque, the exception being the very fine and imposing pillar tomb which stands on the edge of the cliff to the north. One curious tomb, which does not come into Dr. Wilson's classification, was found some hundred meters to the south of the mosque and close to the sea shore. It is 1 m high and 2 m in length and the sides curve over, completely covering the resting place of the deceased. Either the eastern wall was left open for offering of incense or, in this case, has fallen down. I observed exactly the same type of tomb in good condition (which has an actual carved aperture of half a meter square) at Kwa Bunu close by Rasini, some three hours north by boat from Bur Gavo. This tomb, however, is further enclosed on all sides by a stepped wall with a central pillar.

There are seven tombs within the general area of site I. The first one can be seen along the track approaching the modern village from Kismayu and measures 5 X 4 m. Although

the structure is still standing, the density of the vegetation covering it makes it difficult to document the decorative features. Certainly stepping can be seen on one side and two small depressions for bowls.

On a small hill, some distance from the western wall of the town, is a round-headed tomb, the walls of which are badly damaged and have fallen down in places. At a point 4 m high on the oval tombstone is a bowl which appears to have some cursive pattern or arabic writing on the greenish coloured surround. The central part of the bowl is biscuit-coloured and has a total diameter of approximately 25 cm. The tomb, which measures 10 X 8 m, has recessed rectangular panels on three sides; the eastern wall has a deep rectangular niche, topped by eight small rectangular niches.

Within the city walls, the most imposing funerary structure is the pillar tomb built on the sea and just within the northern part of the wall. The circular pillar is approximately 5 m high and the walled area is stepped on all corners as well as in the centre where a secondary tomb has been added to the original structure. The decorations on both tombs are very similar, consisting of rectangular panels and the eastern wall has 20 small rectangular niches below the pillar. On both my visits to Ras Kiambone, the top of the pillar was the favourite perch of a huge fish eagle.

Some 20 m from the mosque is a modest tomb with stepped ends and a low wall of a little less than 1 m which is carved with small niches. A tombstone is on the western wall between the stepping and the tomb gives the impression of having sunk into the ground. Close by the area of scattered stones of houses, are the remains of a tombstone tomb, but much of it has fallen down. It would appear to have been divided into two enclosures on either side of the tombstone which is rounded in shape, surmounted by a finial and with

a small depression for a bowl. The remaining tomb is attached to the mosque and described below.

Built on the cliff a few meters from the sea shore, the mosque follows the general architectural pattern of others observed along this coast and is very similar to the one at Myaandi, although it lacks the fine workmanship. Measuring 12 X 8 m, there is a door on the western side and two doors to the east; a dried up well is on the eastern side between the southern wall of the building and the first door. On the northern end of the mosque, a tomb has been attached with two identical rounded tombstones facing the sea. Both tombstones have fragments of bowls inset half way up and a few sherds of pottery were found on the ground below. Steps lead up into the tomb on the eastern side, presumably to facilitate the carrying in of corpses or for the offering of incense. However, there is exactly the same arrangement on the western side of the mosque at Rasini, which also has a tomb attached to it, and I was told that this served as the minbar.

The mihrab, which is recessed nearly 2 m, has vertical stonework ribbing and there is a narrow band of red pigment at a meter and a half. The ribbing continues for 70 cm each side of the mihrab and the whole decoration is pleasingly contained within a surround of raised stonework.

A great deal of pottery and porcelain sherds were collected from all over the site but were more plentiful on the two small inclines within the walls. A great many fragments of imported celadon dating from the 14th to 16th centuries were found, together with fragments of Islamic monochrome and manganese purple ware. The pottery sherds showed a predominance of dark red paste with an unusual type of combed decoration not found anywhere else along the southern coast. This is also true for one pottery sherd collected which has deco-

ration on both the inside and out. Along the eroded part of the small cliff in front of the mosque, there were a great deal of potsherds and one unusual piece with red and cream decoration on the outside. No pottery is made today in the modern village and vessels are bought and transported from Kismayu.

During the excavations, two trenches were dug. The first of 150 square meters was dug 15 m due west of the mosque but abandoned at 70 cm. The deposit did not change and there was no evidence of sherds. Another small trench was dug to a depth of nearly 2 m on the small hill to the south. This produced a great deal of decorated potsherds and a piece of Chinese stone ware at 90 cm. The area where there are remains of houses is flat and it seems unlikely that there is much depth of deposit. It was judged unwise to dig in this area as the ground all around has been carefully divided into small strips of allotments belonging to individual people where maize is being grown.

A further 250 m to the north of this site (which I shall refer to as site II), there are two well preserved tombs, a much dilapidated one which the villagers said had been destroyed by elephants and scattered remains of buildings. This further site, which seems of secondary importance, has no enclosing wall.

The southernmost of the two tombs has some interesting decorative work. On the southern side, between two panels decorated with linenfold panelling, there is a central panel marked with a St. Andrew's cross, the centre showing evidence of once holding a small bowl. On the eastern side of the second tomb to the north, between the stepped corners, is a small rounded tombstone which once held two bowls. Below this is a curious leaf decoration which I had never seen before on funerary monuments, although one of the older

houses in Barawa uses this motif as a decorative frieze around the ceiling. Elliot notes this leaf which he refers to as a mtambu at Koyama and I subsequently saw it used above the kibla of the mosque of Sherif Ismail bin Omari at Rasini. This mosque, the mihrab of which is beautifully carved in cufic writing from the Koran, also has two examples of the St. Andrew's cross. This strange decoration occurs again further down on the tomb at Ras Kiambone.

The local people at Ras Kiambone could offer no history of the site or the names of the people buried in the tombs and no evidence was found of any modern incense burners, whereas on the island of Ngumi, which has only recently become re-inhabited after many years, several modern incense burners were found outside the crumbling remains of tombs. It is also a curious custom on Ngumi to place half conch shells outside the tombs. A local fisherman, Mohammad Baba, whom I met at Ras Kiambone, told me that all the small coastal settlements had been abandoned at the time of the Galla wars during the late 17th century and the majority of the people had fled south into Kenya and Tanzania.

Kiski Chini

Five kilometers northwards along the coast from Ras Kiambone is the small settlement of Kiski Chini. A few meters from the edge of the low cliff are the ruins of a small mosque. Only the mihrab remains and it is difficult to take any measurements as stones from the main structure have been removed and placed in a curious cairn on the eastern side of the mosque. The mihrab follows the same design as the one at Ras Kiambone but shows none of the fine workmanship observed at Myaandi. Behind the mosque, the sandy soil has been cleared for maize but there are scattered remains of stone houses extending some 250 X 80 paces. Only two small stone

walls, both of approximately 2 m remain standing measuring 70 cm at the highest point. At either end of the settlement, the coral extends deeply into the bush, making it impossible to grow crops. The village is not walled and there is no sign of any well. It was here that more celadon sherds were found than in any other place covered by this survey and the whole area is covered with potsherds. Kiski Chini can only be reached by boat at high tide or by foot along the narrow track along the cliff.

Hannassa

This settlement must also be visited either by boat or on foot and is referred to by Elliot as Odo. Odo, is in fact, the modern village where there is a well some 2 km to the north. Hannassa is a small promontory and the pillar tombs can be seen quite clearly from Ras Kiambone.

The area, which is not walled, contains scattered remains of houses and 80 m from the sea, there are extensive ruins of a building. All that remains are fragmentary pieces of walls and one archway is in danger of collapsing which is mentioned by Fitzgerald. There is no indication to suppose that this was a mosque and due to the state of dilapidation, it is impossible to ascertain if the building was divided into rooms or courtyards. A little to the south are mounds of stones, presumably of houses, but following the pattern of all these coastal settlements, the stones have been partially cleared away to leave the land free for tilling.

There are two very fine pillar tombs at Hannassa. The one to the south measures 5 X 6 m and has recessed panels on all sides with a frieze of brick shaped niches around the top. The corners are stepped and the southern side has the usual small rounded tombstone in the centre. A further tomb, of secondary importance, has been added at a later

date to the northern wall. On the seaward side, the rounded pillar measures 4.5 m and has recesses for three bowls. The pillar is capped by a finial, underneath which are three small rectangular windows. This was presumably for the burning of incense but it was impossible to ascertain whether the pillar is a hollow chimney or not.

200 meters to the north is a smaller pillar tomb, measuring 6 X 4 m with recessed panels on all sides and rounded step ends. The pillar is curious, being octagonal, again with the three windows let into the column below the finial. The pillar has recesses for three bowls, a few fragments of which remain. Several sherds of celadon were found lying on the ground below. This is the only octagonal pillar I have observed on the southern Somali coast. Unfortunately, as in many similar cases, the vegetation inside the tomb is pushing the walls outwards and the corner stepping is in danger of falling down.

400 meters to the south of these tombs, there are several simple rectangular tombs with no decoration, pillars or stepping. This is an area used by the villagers of Odo as a modern cemetery and they are of no great age. I was told by a fisherman, Mohammad Obo, that the poorer people had always been buried in this area, whilst people of some substance were buried to the north in the area of the two pillar tombs.

Some 80 paces due east of the ruined building with the archway, are the remains of a small mosque overlooking the sea. Measuring 12 X 8 m, it has a well preserved mihrab and again the decoration is identical to the one at Kiski Chini and very similar to the mosque at Ras Kiambone. The walls to the east and west remain standing in places and it would seem that there were once doors on both sides. A few sherds of pottery were collected but none had any

decorative marks on them and two small pieces of blue and white ware were found in the area of the pillar tombs.

Myaandi

Myaandi is a walled town which has the remains of an impressive mosque and a tomb, the pillar of which has fallen down. Although the stones of the town walls are still in evidence, they are mostly fragmentary, only reaching a height of 70 cm in a few places. In the centre of the town, on a small hill, are the remains of stone buildings. It is difficult to say if these are tombs or houses due to the bad state of dilapidation. A small piece of fluted carving on coral which was found, together with the general size of each building (although many have collapsed onto one another) does tend towards tombs. The area of scattered stonework continues almost to the boundary wall and the site is set back some 300 m from the shore.

The mosque, which is 14 X 8 m, has two oval doorways on the seaward side and one on the west side. Between the two doors, attached to the main wall of the mosque, is a small enclosure which must have held water at one time. Inside, the mosque is much overgrown with trees but it is still possible to appreciate the particularly smooth plastering that Elliot commented on during his visit 60 years ago. The mosque has two rows of ruined arches running the length of the building; each row consists of four arches. A small niche is on the opposite (south) wall to the mihrab. The mihrab is mostly in ruins; only a small part of the right hand side remains but is delicately carved in a herringbone design. A round stone boss, with spiral decoration is set some 2 m high and the corresponding one from the left hand side was subsequently found lying on the ground amongst the stone buildings in the centre of the town.

As Elliot mentions, it is a great pity that the central pillar of the tomb has fallen down as it certainly must have been imposing and well visible to those approaching from the sea. The main pillar tomb is 6 X 8 m and is adjoined on the northern side by the remains of a broken tomb measuring four square meters. It is difficult to ascertain the exact length of the pillar as it is broken in several places and is much chipped. It should have reached approximately 6 m and perhaps its unusual length caused it to fall. The top portion is fluted and the decorative work is banded by a narrow strip of herringbone pattern which matches the workmanship on the mihrab of the mosque. The small carved finial from the top of the pillar is lying a few meters away and fragments of celadon (where there was once a bowl) were found underneath it. On turning over the main pillar, two celadon bowls were found. The upper one which is made of very delicate porcelain is pale green in colour and measures 15 cm in diameter and 7.5 cm deep. The lower one had become detached and was lying on the ground with a small piece missing. This has a particularly fine floral design and measures 19 cm in diameter and is 7 cm deep. The latter bowl has been tentatively dated (from photographs) by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London to the 14th or 15th centuries and originated in Siam. I was told by Mohammad Obo, the fisherman who accompanied us on this survey, that this was the tomb of Said Barghash, presumably a local sheikh, who died about 500 years ago. There is no well at Myaandi, but I was told that the people have always collected their water at Odo, 2 km away, which shares its well with other settlements along the coast. Of the few sherds collected, all were pieces of pottery decorated with simple lines.

Ras Bar Balla

A further 10 km north of Myaandi, along the narrow coastal track, is the small promontory of Bar Balla. This must have been a small settlement at some time as it is ideally situated to the north of the promontory. However, nothing remains now except a few stones and the area is used as a resting place for herdsmen and their flocks of sheep and goats. There are two tombs; one has a pillar of 5 m with the bowl still in situ. This is of cream coloured pottery, approximately 25 cm in diameter and there is a further recess a little higher up for another bowl. The tomb measures four square meters and is decorated with rectangular panels on the eastern side.

A few meters away, is a further tomb measuring 4 X 5 m. This has a small rounded central tombstone which once held a bowl and the sides of the tomb are plain.

Mnarani

The small modern village, consisting of a few huts is 29 km from Bur Gavo and 10 km north of Ras Bar Balla. Elliot notes that the name suggests that at one time there was a pillar there but only a grave or two are now to be seen. In fact, 500 m from the sea and behind the village, there are remains of a pillar tomb built on a small hill. The pillar must have fallen many years ago, possibly due to its height. Under the pillar was a sizeable piece of Islamic monochrome, presumably from the inset bowl and a small sherd of celadon was found not far away.

On the cliff overlooking the sea is a tomb which stems of no great age, measuring 5 X 8 m with square niches on the eastern side and stonework panels on the other three sides.

Elliot saw six elephants airing themselves on the sand dunes and I was told that they can still be seen along this

coast during May when the vegetation thickens after the rains. Certainly the presence of elephants can explain the mutilation of some of the tombs as it has been noted that these animals rub themselves on the stonework, thus accelerating the destruction.

Veko

60 years ago when Elliot was travelling along this coast, the only people eking out a precarious existence were living at Warafoole. Today there is no village there although a fisherman or two can be seen walking in the shallow water on either side of the promontory of the same name. Three kilometers to the north (22 km south of Bur Gavo) is the small walled town of Veko at the foot of the hill of the same name. We are told that a Bajun chief, Shos, captured seven mitepe which came to attack the town from Siu and Pate. Chittick was told that at Veko there was the site of a place known as Shungwaya Ndogo, but I had no confirmation of this. The town is the smallest walled town seen on this survey, set well back from the sea and some 50 m up the gentle slope of the hill. Much of the enclosure wall is missing and nothing remains at all of the eastern side facing the sea. There are remains of several tombs or houses, but the profusion of fallen stones makes it difficult to ascertain the exact nature of the buildings. Certainly in the northwest of the enclosure there are at least three tombs as one has the usual stepped corners. There is no water there and no evidence of any mosque although this might possibly have been built of mud and thatch. Two sherds of celadon were collected and a piece of Islamic monochrome, as well as several potsherds with minimal decoration.

Bur Gavvo

This was visited by Grottanelli in 1953 and Chittick in 1967 and has been documented by them both, as well as Elliot in the early 1920s. The latter mentions that on a subsequent visit he brought workmen with him to re-point the main pillar tomb which was in serious danger of falling down. Here is found the best harbour south of Ras Hafun and the only one that could have accommodated large boats. If these ever did call at the other coastal settlements observed during this survey, they would have had to anchor some distance off shore and goods brought to land by smaller boats.

Bur Gavvo is generally held to be the ancient site of Shungwaya and is continually referred to by this name by the local inhabitants who state that Bur Gavvo, or Bur Kavo as it is more accurately pronounced, is a recent name superimposed on Shungwaya. As a small hill, Mabruk Hill, lies 2.5 km south of the modern village, it is tempting to equate the modern name with the Somali word for hill which is bur. I was told by a local fisherman, Abdi Fumo, that the name comes from the Swahili burei kwow loosely meaning that place where goods come from without anyone having to buy them and he elaborated by saying that Bur Gavvo was well known as the place where timber was washed up on the beach, the sea was full of fish and the shore strewn with shells and ambergris.

Mohammad Baba, previously mentioned, whom I met at Ras Kiambone, told me that it is a locally held belief that the history of Bur Gavvo (or as he said, Shungwaya) was written down and buried there at the time of the Galla invasions.

There is no water at Bur Gavvo, although at what Chittick refers to as site I, there is a dried up well. I was told that this could supply water again if it was dug to a suffi-

cient depth. It is all the more strange that this has not been done as once a week during the dry season, a boat has to go up the wide creek of the Meno wa Hori for a distance of some 22 km and collect water from a brackish well at Bushibushi. This necessitates a difficult fifteen minute walk knee deep in mud through the mangrove swamp, made all the more hazardous on the return journey carrying heavy water containers. During the rainy season, water is collected in cisterns and each house has an intricate system of collecting rain water from the roof and directing the flow down drain pipes of corrugated iron into empty petrol containers which seems to work quite adequately. Water is, however, a precious commodity and the comparative shortage might be a reason why a high percentage of the villagers seem to suffer from fevers and diarrhoea. I do not propose to add to what Chittick so adequately described in 1967 as I could find no additional tombs, mosques or remains of stone buildings. The fine pillar tomb, photographed by Chittick, is now much overgrown but the good quality stonework is still evident and has not deteriorated with the passage of time. Two large cup-shaped incense burners, with handles at one side, were found inside the tomb. Both have slight decorative work on the outside but must be presumed to have no great age. The curious rectangular building, which I was also told was the place of prayer of a certain Sheikh Mohi ed-Din, has not fared so well. This is a square building of 4 m, built of coral stone in lime mortar and plastered. The door on the eastern side with an ornamental roundel above it, has partially collapsed, as well as a sizeable portion of the northern wall. The building is used for storing palm fronds and the local people who are growing maize on the site, go in and out through a large hole in the western

wall. Several sherds of celadon and Islamic monochrome were found close to the wall of site I.

I was told by the local people that site II (as described by Chittick) was once a separate settlement with houses, tombs and a mosque and was known by the name of Pulu Doda. Unfortunately, today it is impossible to ascertain what type of buildings were once there due to the general ruinous state of the site; all that remains that can be positively identified are several tombs. Large fragments of pottery were found amongst the stone buildings and were collected from the shallow creek on the landward side.

At Bur Ndani, some 11 km up the estuary from Bur Gavo, I was told of a small settlement containing remains of houses and a town wall. Unfortunately my guide could not find it, although in the general area, he did show me another settlement consisting of the broken walls of two houses, a low enclosing wall and the area of approximately 80 X 200 paces was covered with large pieces of cut coral and stones. The small sandy bay which serves as anchorage for both these settlements is littered with potsherds and one piece of blue and white ware was collected.

On the open ground across the estuary from Bur Gavo, I was told of three minor settlements, Ndoa, Puluni and Shea but only Ndoa seems to have any visible evidence of old stone houses.

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