

# HAWAII'S FRAGILE RIDDLES IN STONE

Many of the prehistoric carvings called petroglyphs are being thoughtlessly destroyed

Written by Kay Swenson  
Photographed by Pat Duefrene



*In 1978, a London auctioneer banged his gavel and a Hawaiian 'aumakua disappeared forever in the arms of an anonymous European collector. The small idol's \$462,000 price tag was front page news in the Islands. Yet comparatively little publicity has been given to the day-by-day destruction of an island heritage that is priceless.*

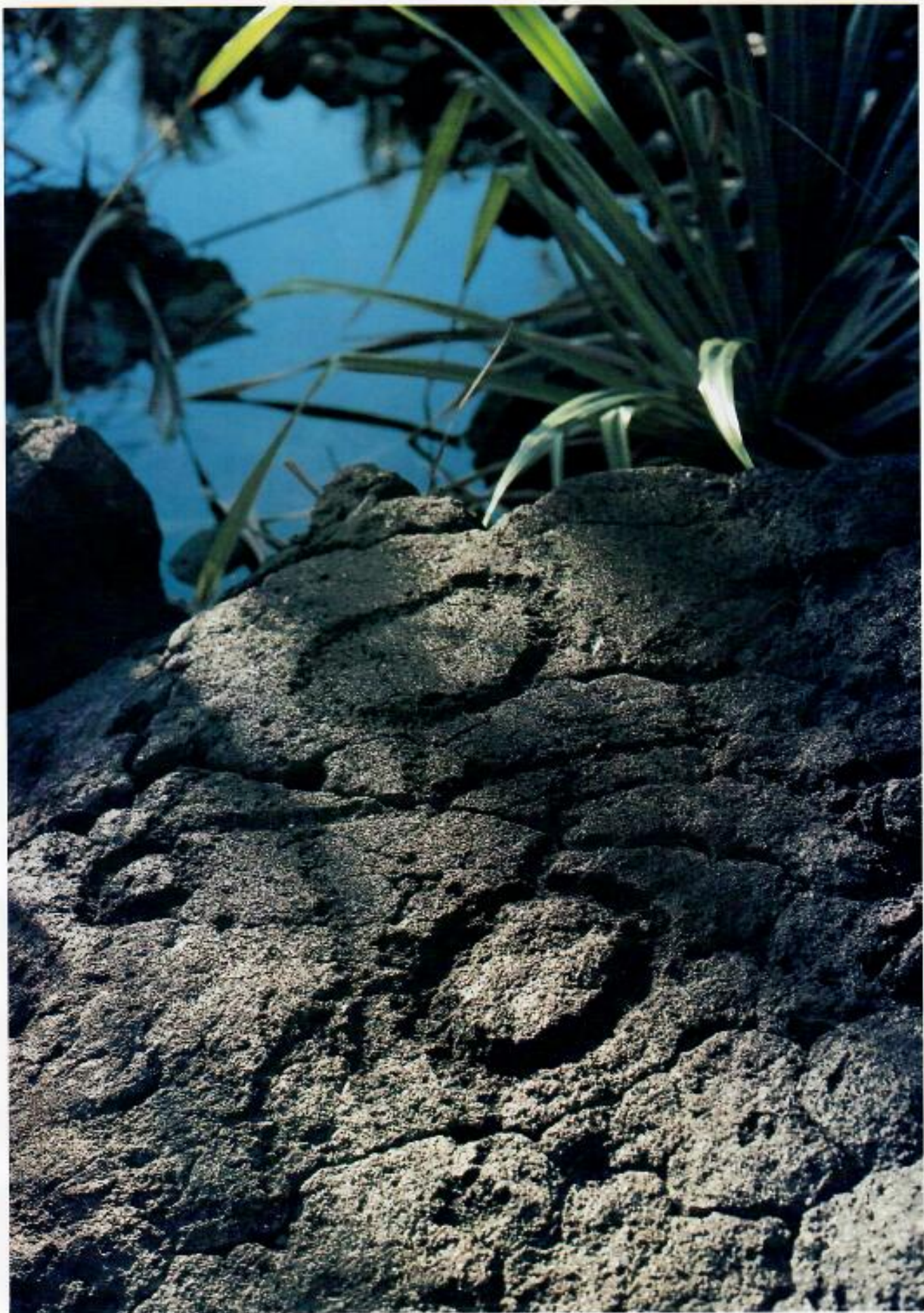
We're all familiar with petroglyphs. Like palm trees or pineapples or hibiscus, they decorate our walls, fabrics and stationery. And because the dramatic figures are easily copied by a layman, hundreds of people visit the original sites each year to reproduce the figures.

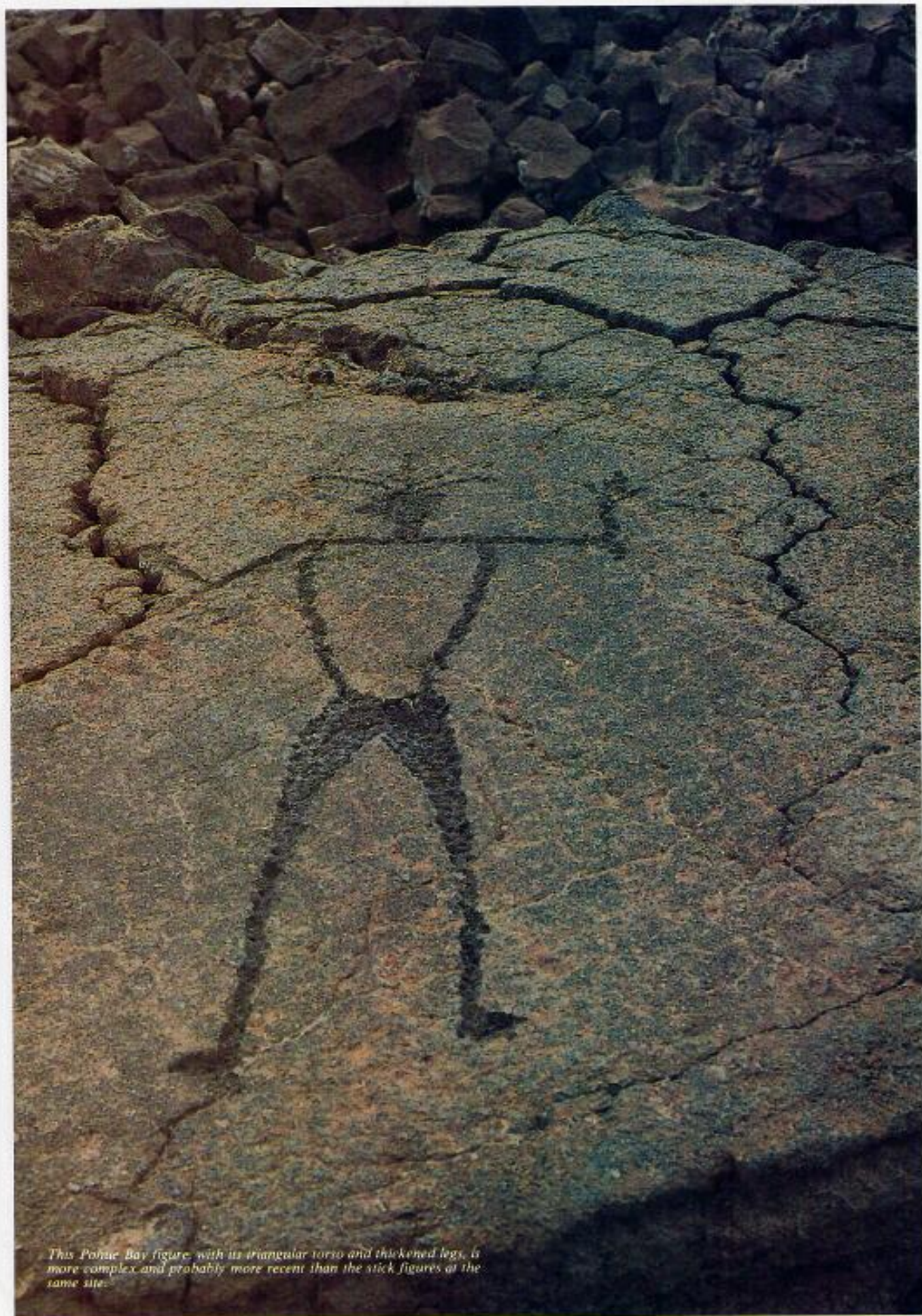
Ironically, some of the visitors who enjoy petroglyphs enough to create replicas are as destructive as the vandals who view them with contempt or the developers who would like to see them bulldozed. Pat Duefrene, whose photographs illustrate this article, estimates that over half of the figures have been clumsily deepened, painted, filled with latex or otherwise defaced.

The vandalism that masquerades as "art" is usually produced by otherwise law-abiding citizens who wouldn't dream of slashing lipstick across an Art Academy canvas. They need to be reminded of three good reasons for regarding our petroglyph fields with respect.

First, Hawaii's vigorous primitive art is pleasing and many of the figures are far more than handsome: Edward Stasack, University of Hawaii art professor and petroglyph enthusiast, claims, "Some of them are not inferior to the finest art work anywhere in the world." Then, too, many sites are museums of a sort, located on stony land eerily unchanged since the first Hawaiian knelt to carve a

*Above and right: Petroglyphs found at Pohue Bay on the Big Island.*





*This Poʻhū Bay figure, with its triangular torso and thickened legs, is more complex and probably more recent than the stick figures at the same site.*

## MAKING PETROGLYPH REPLICAS

Here are tips from illustrator Pat Duefrene for reproducing petroglyphs with minimum damage to the original rocks.

Whatever artistic technique you use, do not walk on the carvings. Carry a newspaper on which to set your equipment and clear the site when you finish.

### Rubbings

**Fabrics:** Rubbing is hard work and, unless you are extremely cautious, delicate fabrics such as rice paper will tear on the rough rocks. Muslin and burlap are recommended since they are rugged, inexpensive and available in natural colors suited to an out-of-door art form. To protect the petroglyph and steady the "canvas" over the carvings, always anchor your fabric at the corners. Stones are easy to collect on the site and to lift when checking the rubbing for accuracy.

**Coloring tools:** Oil-based crayons melt in the sun and are not recommended. Use medium-hard charcoal or pastels which may be smudge- or water-proofed with a fixative such as "Krylon" or "Tuffilm." Apply the fixative at a safe distance from the carvings or

carry the rubbings home wrapped in tissue or newspaper and apply it there. Dyeing pastels and felt tip pens with permanent ink are waterproof and washable. Any coloring tool or fixative will cause serious damage if it leaks onto the bare rock.

**Negative images:** Light, persistent rubbing reproduces the textured rock background on the fabric but leaves the petroglyph figure blank. The technique is mildly abrasive and over the years may erode the carving at its fragile edges.

**Positive images:** The indented petroglyph figure is colored in on your fabric. The surrounding "canvas" may be left blank or given a background pattern by rubbing it on an uncarved but textured portion of rock. This method may be used with minimal damage to the original carving if a felt-tipped pen is used to trace the outline. The pen exerts almost no pressure yet produces an accurate figure which may be filled in at home.

**Decorative uses:** If the coloring agent is permanent, rubbings can be used like any other printed fabric and made into clothing. Stiffened with burlap backing,



Plants and wood paneling enhance this petroglyph reproduced on muslin with a blue felt-tipped pen.

they can become curtains, pillows, wall hangings or place mats. More conventionally, they may be glued to plywood or other backing and framed as pictures or murals.

### Molds

Petroglyph fields are too soft for the production of molds. When applied directly, casting materials such as latex, epoxy or acrylic seep into the rock and permanently damage or even destroy the petroglyph. In fact, the mere weight of plaster or other casting material is damaging to the soft rock.

### Photography

Photographs are harmless to rock carvings and provide the most accurate of all petroglyph recordings. Art forms in themselves, they may also inspire subsequent "freehand" petroglyphs to be created at home where conditions are comfortable and a variety of mediums are available.

Even on overcast days, photographers will find a strong contrast between the figures and their surroundings between sunrise and 10 a.m. and again in late afternoon. The contrast produced by filling the crevices with water is comparatively insignificant while sand poured into the cracks will become abrasive when a "rubber" next works on the carving. Paint and chalk damage the petroglyph; both seep into the porous rock. —K.S.



Stones anchor the muslin canvas as a Puako petroglyph is reproduced with felt-tipped pen.



*Clockwise, from above: Petroglyph fields, such as this one at Pohue Bay, often have dramatically stark settings.*

*Images carved at the entrance to a cave at Kiholo Bay on the Big Island.*

*This ship was carved at Pohue Bay after Captain Cook visited Hawaii.*

*Nature "framed" these figures in a lava bubble at Kiholo Bay.*

*This permanent "board" for two *konane* players is at Pohue Bay.*

stick figure as long as 1,200 years ago.

Second, Hawaii has an uncommonly rich lode of petroglyphs. The Big Island may be dotted with more petroglyphs than any area in the world of comparable size. Certainly, no other part of Polynesia produced as many carvings, including some of the most ancient and most recent. And nowhere else on earth has anyone recorded interviews with members of a culture that was still in the process of making petroglyphs.

Third, petroglyphs are a major legacy from Hawaiian culture, yet we still have much to learn about their meaning. Evidence indicates several motives for the creation of petroglyphs. Many are apparently "tallies" which register the traveler's presence on an ancient footpath, particularly at the boundaries of an *ahupua'a* (a division of land) where crossing might require the ritual protection furnished by the carving.

Other petroglyphs were cut to insure long life or well being. The Big Island site known as Puuloa, or "Hill of Long Life" has a reputed *mana* which attracted Hawaiians from all the Islands. As late as the 1860s they pecked holes here in which to bury the *piko* or umbilical stump of a new-born child and thus assure it a long life.

Many carvings are enigmas which don't resemble any known form. They were made by different people in different centuries and possibly for different reasons. Some of these abstract figures may have been profound symbols, known to the carver alone or perhaps to a group

of initiates. There is no way to decipher them today and the mystery is compounded since it is difficult to determine when adjacent figures are part of the same "story." Even the human forms may be cryptic when arms or legs are raised—we recognize an action but not its purpose.

Whatever the motive behind their creation, the majority of petroglyphs remain mysterious. Here are more unanswered questions:

*How old are they?* Some forms must have been created following Captain Cook's arrival in Hawaii in 1778 since they depict rifles, square-riggers, a church with a spire and goats or horses. But most petroglyphs cannot be accurately dated. Kenneth Emory of the Bishop Museum surmises that the stick figures clustered at the center of a



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*pahoehoe* (smooth lava) site are the oldest, and more complex carvings on the peripheries are more recent.

*What are their origins?* Stick figures are a common motif in petroglyphs throughout the world. They may have developed independently in Hawaii or may have been brought from other Polynesian cultures where they are also common. However, muscles are not appended to human figures in other parts of Polynesia and appear to be a late development peculiar to Hawaii.

*How were the subjects selected?* Among the subjects that we can recognize, it is uncertain why petroglyph makers were partial to some and not to others. For example, there are many illustrations of canoes, sails, paddles and fishhooks but very few of fish or other sea creatures. Birds, chickens and pigs are infrequently

portrayed, yet dogs are popular subjects.

An excellent survey of all available data on petroglyphs can be found in *Hawaiian Petroglyphs*, written by University of Hawaii art professors J. Halley Cox and Edward Stasack and printed by the Bishop Museum Press. The book can also help you decide which sites to visit since it describes the type and estimates the number of figures at every published site on five islands.

Some argue that the state of Hawaii should remove petroglyph sites from its maps until it can defend them with grids or guards. In the meantime, the "rubbers" who respect this heritage are its best guardians. They are on the site to rebuke vandals, and they can demonstrate techniques of duplication which leave petroglyphs intact for the rest of us. 70



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