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# Axial Based Analysis of Dravidian Temple Settlements in the Cauvery Delta Region, Tamil Nadu, India

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## Abstract

In the Cauvery Delta area of Tamil Nadu (India), temple settlements are featured by distinctive spatial layouts that have evolved for centuries based on ritual processes, agricultural systems and localized geographic conditions. The temple area acts as a focal common core providing the setting for not only worship, but also festivals. Whereas the large temple cities of antiquity have been a subject of earlier studies, smaller and medium-sized temple settlements have not explored much for research. This study employs axial space syntax analysis using DepthmapX, focusing on global integration HH (Hillier and Hanson's integration) and mean depth, to examine three Paadal Petra Sthalam settlements (temples praised in sacred hymns of 7th and 9th CE) —Thirupungur, Thirupazhanam, and Thiruvenkadu—selected to represent distinct temple-based spatial typologies. The findings reveal three opposite spatial structures, whereby Thiruvenkadu is characterized by a concentric pattern with high central integration, Thirupazhanam can be characterized by a linear street-based structure, and Thirupungur can be characterized by a more scattered and extended pattern. These configurations reveal the role of sacred architecture in revealing accessibility to space and mobility of rituals in neighbourhoods centred on temples. The research also shows the effects of spatial hierarchy in movement potential and settlement cohesion in culturally entrenched rural areas. Using configurational measures, the study gives quantifiable results of the relationship between temple placement and accessibility and depth differences. The results can be used in heritage-sensitive planning as it identifies the significance of maintaining axial routes and circumambulatory street patterns of traditional temple settlements.

**Keywords:** Dravidian temples, Integration, Mean Depth, Morphology, Space Syntax, Temple Settlements.

## Introduction

The temples in South India have historically been used in other ways other than in the practice of religion. Moreover, temples play a role of socio-spatial nucleus which affects settlement structure and growth (1, 2). In the case of Dravidians, temples are living beings. The activity and other functions associated with the temple are merged in everyday life and rituals and the city is in harmony with the sacred geography (3). Structuralized space plans such as concentric streets and ritual streets centred around the centre of the temple can be seen in major temple cities such as Madurai, Chidambaram, and Kumbakonam (2, 4).

Although there has been abundant scholarly work in symbolic and historical interpretations of South Indian temple architecture. Nevertheless, the geographical arrangement of smaller temple settlements in the countryside like the Cauvery Delta is not mostly studied. These communities are not fundamentally significant, but are formed by subtle connections among ritual activities, agrarian land use and topographical limitations (5). Their spatial logic requires investigative forms that could unveil the concealed morphological patterns which could not be observed through the predictable architectural or historical typologies. The perceptual characteristics of temple gateways have been explained using empirical studies have shown that Rajagopurams are symbolic thresholds which serve to affirm the social-spatial identity of the temple settlements (6, 7). Language devotion and cultural identity have historically shaped the socio-spatial fabric of Tamil temple towns, where linguistic and ritual practices intertwine with sacred geography (8). Historical studies have further shown that South Indian temple towns developed in complicated ways with the interactions of trade networks, agricultural production growth as well as religion and hence again confirm the significance of the temple in organizing urbanization and social-economic structure (9). Rural Paadal Petra Sthalam



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settlements are unexplored, and most current literature is based on monumental temple cities.

It is consequently necessary a configurational analytical framework which can objectively quantify these spatial hierarchy, integration, and depth relations in these forms of culturally ingrained environments.

To fill this gap, the current research is answering the following research questions; like how are spatial arrangements arranged in temple-centred settlements of the Cauvery Delta? Added to that how do concentric morphologies, linear morphologies, and peripheral morphologies differ in terms of integration and mean depth and to find out the effect of temple location on the spatial accessibility and ritual mobility in these settlements?

The concepts employed in the study is the space syntax analysis. The space is in the form of convex spaces where all points can be seen in relation to each other and axial lines which are the longest sightlines or movement networks in the space without obstruction based on the theory of Hillier and Hanson (10) The simplest technique is the axial mapping technique which shrinks the urban space into a collection of longest and fewest lines passing through all spaces available in it, hence analysis of integration, connectivity, and mean depth can be achieved (11, 12). Despite its popularity in contemporary city form, Space Syntax has been rarely applied in the study of traditional South Asian cities. Recent studies have expanded the application of the space syntax not just to the urban centres but also to the culturally sensitive rural environments.

Recent research has broadened the use of space syntax not only to urban centres but also to culturally sensitive rural settings. The combined system dynamics with the space syntax to examine the changes in rural housing in Turkey and the impact of cultural evolution on the spatial morphology (13).

This study addresses this gap by analysing axial accessibility patterns in rural and semi-rural temple-based settlements. According to the space syntax theory and the spatial logic of the temple-centred settlements, the underlying assumption of this study is that the location of temples would have a strong impact on spatial integration and depth measure within the settlement network. Settlement that has centrally located temples are expected to be more globally integrated and have less mean depth because of concentric and circumambulatory street patterns. On the contrary, the linear and peripheral templates are likely to be of less integration and more space-depth and indicate directional or fragmented accessibility patterns. These theoretical expectations give a hypothetical context of comparing morphological typologies and explaining the syntactic deviation of the chosen case studies. The current research uses axial based space syntax to examine spatial logic in three temple settlements within Tamil Nadu-Thirupungur, Thirupazhanam and Thiruvenkadu to apply the syntactic analysis of space to an expanded context of formal urban space to culturally infused rural space using DepthmapX. Although the available literature gives more emphasis on large temple cities and urban centres, the study of the functionality of the spatial arrangement within small Paadal Petra Sthalam settlements has not been carried out extensively.

### Research Questions

This paper explores the way space is organised in settlements around temples in the Cauvery Delta and the syntactic differences in depth of integration and mean in concentric, linear and peripheral morphological structures. It also assesses the effect of location of temples on spatial accessibility and movement patterns of rituals in the settlement. By using configurational analysis, the study will attempt to categorise the morphological typologies and explain their socio-spatial meanings.

### Research Objectives

a) To apply Space Syntax analysis for identifying integration patterns in selected temple settlements of the Cauvery Delta region.
b) To compare Integration (HH) and Mean Depth values across three case studies—Thirupungur, Thirupazhanam, and Thiruvenkadu.
c) To classify and interpret morphological typologies based on spatial logic and socio-ritual behaviour.

## Methodology

This study investigates three temple-centered settlements in the Cauvery Delta region of Tamil Nadu, India: Thirupungur, Thiruvenkadu, and Thirupazhanam, with the autocad generated

maps. Each site is associated with the Shaivite tradition and is designated as a Paadal Petra Sthalam—a sacred site celebrated in Thevaram hymns composed between the 7th and 9th centuries CE. These settlements show different layouts that have developed organically with reference to the temple, temple-based rituals, environmental, and social reasons. They are found in rich, flat lands, and each has a temple area that is important for community life. Unlike formal temple cities, these villages have their own unique ways of organizing sacred spaces. Their streets and layouts show different connections between the religious centres and homes or public areas. Axial-based space syntax method was used to measure spatial configuration, accessibility and movement pattern in temple-based settlement quantitatively. This method, in contrast to descriptive historical analyses, allows measuring the comparison of integration and mean depth of various spatial typologies. The axial model is especially appropriate in terms of temple towns; their structure is based on processional streets and visual corridors, which follow the research goals of the study. This methodological approach resonates with Dayaratne (2018), who analysed vernacular settlements in Sri Lanka to highlight sustainable spatial practices (14). The method is used to examine the spatial configuration, accessibility, and movement potential of three temple-centred settlements in the Cauvery Delta region. Base maps of Thirupungur - Latitude: 11.188506°N, Longitude: 79.678046°E, Thirupazhanam - Latitude: 10.888651°N, Longitude: 79.131226°E and Thiruvenkadu - Latitude: 11.173682°N, Longitude: 79.810536° E were obtained from Google Maps and digitized using AutoCAD to extract the base map with temple and fewer surrounding road networks. Figure 1 describes the methodological workflow that will be used in the study. Through Google Maps, the base maps are collected, and the street network is digitized using AutoCAD. The digitized maps are then introduced into DepthmapX (version Xnet 0.30), a software tool developed by the Space Syntax Laboratory at University College London for spatial network analysis. to produce the axial maps and calculate the spatial parameter which include global integration (HH) and mean depth. Lastly, the findings are reflected to categorize the morphological typologies of the temple settlements.

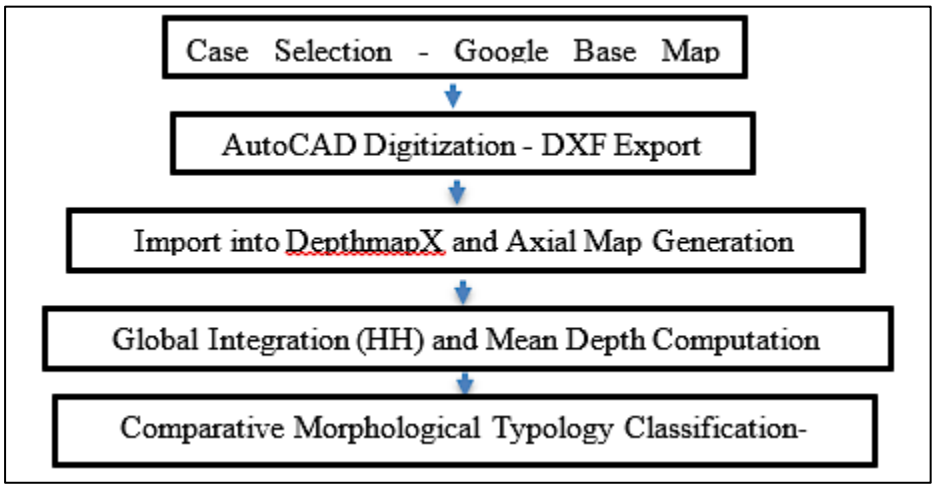
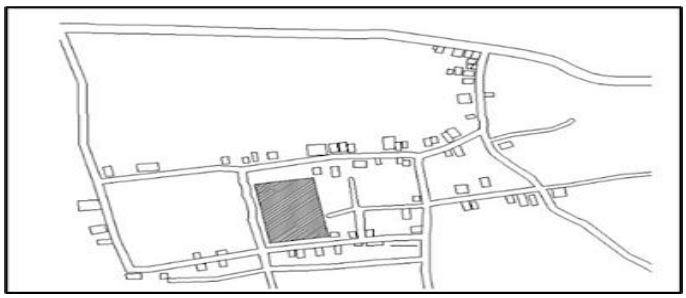



**Figure 1:** Research Design Workflow for Axial Space Syntax Analysis

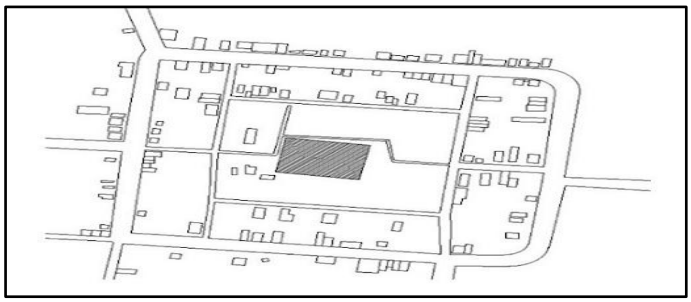
The study focused on two main measures: integration and mean depth. Integration shows how temple precinct space is for movement and social interaction, while mean depth shows the average distance from one space to all others, helping to understand how spaces are separated and how easy they are to reach. Axial map analysis has been selected as it is the best way of indicating the most visible and longest routes of movement in the traditional street designs in South Indian villages. Table 1 demonstrates the concept of the elevation of the temple gopuram, and digitized CAD map with north in the top to the scale of 1:1000. Table 2 has highlighted the characteristics of the rural area as compared. The prevalence of the temple gopurams as the visual points of reference supports the claim made by Lynch (1960) that landmarks have a significant impact on

the cognitive image of a city (15). This methodology has been demonstrated as a useful method to study the spatial configuration of the houses because (a) it is necessary to know how the spatial configuration relates to the culture, (b) it is necessary to make the comparison of the samples, and (c) it is necessary to trace how the spatial configuration changes over the time (16-18). In the same way the study of the temple based spatial configuration has been used in this method.

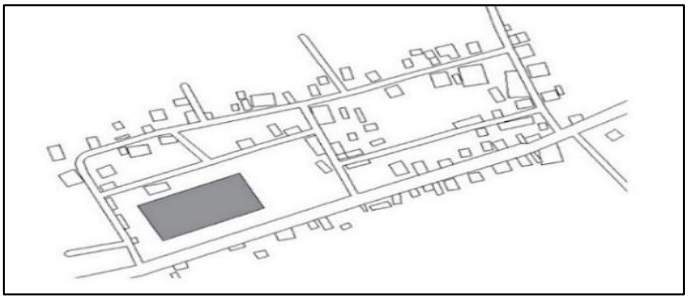
**Table 1:** Details of the Three Villages



(A) Digitized AutoCAD map of Thirupungur. Scale 1:1000



(B) Digitized AutoCAD map of Thiruvenkadu. Scale 1:1000



(C) Digitized AutoCAD map of Thirupazhanam. Scale 1:1000

Each village's axial network was examined to create maps and graphs. These helped us to identify common patterns and categorize the villages into diverse types. The analysis also used local knowledge, the axial integration of temples, and the paths used for rituals to better understand the meaning of space. This method combines numerical analysis with cultural insights to show the structure and social-religious roles of villages centred around temples.

**Table 2:** Features of the Settlement

| Settlement | Spatial Typology | Temple Placement | Key Morphological Feature |
|---|---|---|---|
| Thirupungur | Peripheral Anchor Pattern | Edge of settlement | Temple guides outward growth and aligns with ritual procession axes. |
| Thiruvenkadu | Concentric Core Configuration | Geometric centre of settlement | Temples are encircled by layered circumambulatory streets and radial pathways. |
| Thirupazhanam | Linear / Street-Oriented | Along main axial street | Dominant east–west linear development with integrated central spine |

## Results

The space syntax analysis indicates that there are unique spatial and accessibility trends in the three temple settlements namely Thirupungur, Thirupazhanam, and Thiruvenkadu. The axial maps constitute a colour scale in such a way that red and yellow represent greater integration and enhanced accessibility whereas green and blue represent lesser integration and connectivity. The mean depth maps have using lighter colours to denote shallow and reachable areas, and darker blue colour to denote deeper and more segregated areas.

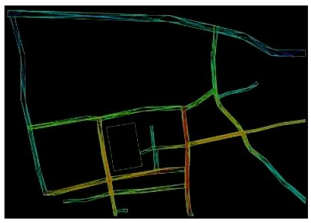
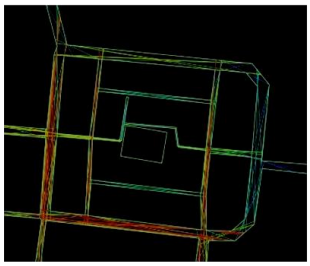
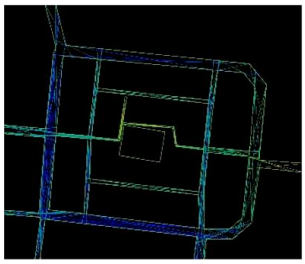
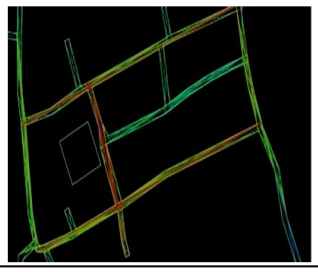
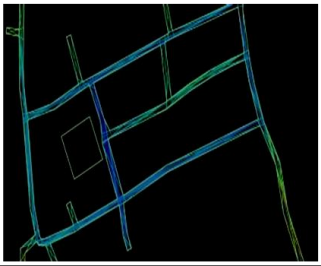
| Village | Average Integration | Mean Depth | Integration Map (HH) | Mean Depth Map |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Thirupungur | 2.8 | 3.4 |  |  |
| Thiruvenkadu | 3.6 | 1.9 |  |  |
| Thirupazhanam | 1.5 | 2.8 |  |  |

**Figure 2:** Integration and Mean Depth Between Settlements

According to Figure 3, Thiruvenkadu has the most integration value [3.6] and the least mean depth [1.9], with red-yellow concentrations around the core of the temple, which confirm the high central accessibility and spatial cohesion. Thirupazhanam has previously the least integration value [1.5] with a mean depth of 2.8 with few warm colours and a predominance of cooler tones in the periphery streets which is more linear and segregated. Thirupungur has moderate integration [2.8] and larger mean depth [3.4] with yellow green corridors extending out of the peripheral temple site depicting directional expansion and greater intensity of spatial stratification rather than centralized integration. Thiruvenkadu has a radial -concentric structure geometrically with axial lines creating unbroken circuits of circumambulatory around the temple, which strengthens central integration. By contrast, Thirupazhanam has a very linear axial geometry running parallel to the spine whereas Thirupungur has a peripheral anchoring system whereby axial lines run in an outward direction, producing directional instead of centralized space organization. The peripheral anchoring of Thirupungur resonates a 'natural movement' model, where configuration drives pedestrian accessibility (19).

The integration map shows medium-to-high values along paths leading from the temple, and

the depth map shows deeper structures in the outer lanes. This design supports processions and makes the temple an important landmark. Overall, the analysis highlights how each village's layout relates to its sacred geography and ritual use. Thiruvenkadu's layout encourages gatherings and smooth movement, while Thirupazhanam's straight design and Thirupungur's edge placement reflects different social and spatial ideas from Dravidian temple planning. The plot is split into four analysis quadrants by dashed lines that show the mean integration and mean depth values as shown in Figure 2. Thirupazhanam is in the low-integration–high-depth quadrant, Thiruvenkadu is in the high-integration–low-depth quadrant, and Thirupungur is in the high-integration–high-depth quadrant.

## Discussion

The spatial analysis of the three settlements referred in the paper appreciates the diverse spatial justifications that characterize the topography of the Dravidian temple towns. Every village has a syntactic signature that is different. It has related to the location of its temple and ritual functionality and demonstrating how the closeness in space organization in the environments is linked to the religious symbolism. It belongs to the processional movement and social interaction as well (5). The concentric core was the lowest in Thiruvenkadu [1.9] and the highest in average integration value [3.6]. As it is in the core of the city, and has the circumambulatory of the streets around, the temple is easily accessible both on an everyday basis and on ritual processions. Such concentric arrangements resonate with Michell's (1988) interpretation of Hindu temple forms as spatial embodiments of sacred cosmology (20). This design allows spatial coherence and interaction with the populace, which resonates with previous discoveries of temple-oriented urbanism (3) and the sacred geography perspective (18). Thirupazhanam, on the other hand, is linear with axis pattern which has a moderate mean depth [2.8] and much less integration [1.5]. The temple follows one of the major east west spines and even though the lateral axis connectivity is low, the axis connectivity is high. This is a hierarchical logic of space, which is in line with the locality production in the culturally embedded spaces (1). This is consistent with established principles of linear spatial representation in configurational analysis (12). The temple is located at the outskirts of the community at Thirupungur with its peripheral sacred anchor. The Mean Depth [3.4] indicates that it has a more disaggregated structure even though its score on Integration is moderately high [2.8]. This temple is in this case a visual and symbolic anchor but not a focal integrator of directionality of rituals and their exterior extension. Those differences lead to the way the Dravidian temple urbanism could be reconstructed to other ritual, culturally heterogeneous, and geographic contexts. This reflects Hanson's (1998) insight that domestic and ritual anchors often shape settlement accessibility and symbolic meaning (10).

The findings show that temple-based settlements of concentric and combined space structure are more inclined to more levels of accessibility and social interaction. Conservation, in its turn, should be aimed at the maintenance of circumambulatory streets and axial processional avenues. The spatial integration can be achieved with the help of the lateral links in the peripheral or linear settlements without the violation of the hierarchies of the sacred. Urban planners should also preserve visual corridors to temple gopurams plays spatial anchor in the settlement network (2). These observations indicate that configurational analysis can be used in informing such context-sensitive heritage planning and sustainable rural development about temple-based settings.

### Future Research and Practical Implications

The rural architecture has been given more importance as it summarizes the cultural heritage, lifeways and social relations of societies (21, 22). The housing determinants can be classified into housing physical and non-physical determinants. Physical determinants include terrain, climate, material appropriateness, and construction technique or technology, and the non-physical determinant include socio-cultural features (23). Recent study has also advanced classification frameworks for Indian temple towns, highlighting intrinsic and extrinsic factors that shape their spatial organization and resilience amidst urban pressures (24). Rapoport (1969) postulates that socio-cultural determinants play the major role, whereas physical determinants play a secondary or moderating role (22). This is reinforced in

earlier study, who demonstrate how Rajagopurams function as dominant visual markers guiding spatial cognition in heritage precincts (25).

The current research provides a few avenues to future studies. Subsequent studies can use segment-based space syntax, visibility graph analysis and pedestrian movement data to enhance configurational knowledge. It would help to establish comparative generalization by increasing the sample to include other temple settlements in other parts of Tamil Nadu.

In a practical sense, the results indicate context-specific conservation planning in temple towns. Continuous circumambulatory street, visual corridors toward temple gopuram, maintaining axial processional, and continuity of the spatial can increase the level of spatial integration without violating the sacred hierarchies. The configurational analysis can thus be used as a planning instrument in management of sustainable heritage in rural settings that are culturally embedded.

# Conclusion

This study is limited to three case studies, which may not represent all Dravidian settlements. The spatial base maps derived from Google Maps may omit finer informal networks. AutoCAD digitization could introduce minor-scale distortions. The axial-based Space Syntax method in DepthmapX excludes advanced segment and visibility analyses. The maps in both the tools are used in a not-to-scale format, as the study needs the map with the center point of the temple core with surrounding road layouts.

The study is constrained by the fact that it uses axial analysis, which lacks segment-based or visibility graph measures, which can further refine spatial interpretation. Digitized base maps can also fail to capture small informal routes on the ground. Also, the study is limited to three settlements, which is not necessarily the complete picture of the variety of Dravidian temple morphologies in the region. The paper used space syntax analysis, which is based on axials, to analyse spatial structure of three temple-oriented settlements in Cauvery Delta in Tamil Nadu. The findings came up with three morphological typologies, namely, concentric, linear, and peripheral typologies, all exhibiting quantifiable differences in global integration (HH) and mean depth. Centrally located temples in settlements had higher integration and less depth values and the peripheral and linear forms demonstrated fragmented patterns of accessibility. These results validate that the location of the temple plays a major part in the degree of spatial hierarchical and movement potential in the design of rural settlement buildings.

This paper also has theoretical contribution as it expands the configurational analysis to the rural temple settlements that are culturally embedded in the study which has not been heavily quantified in earlier studies. It shows empirically how the measurement of integration and depth can be used to classify in a systematic way the temple-based morphologies beyond the symbolic or historical senses of these morphologies. In practice, the findings emphasize the need to maintain the circumambulatory street networks, axial processional routes, and visual corridors in heritage-sensitive planning. By configurational analysis, therefore, it is possible to make context-responsive conservation strategies about temple towns. The research, however, is restricted to three case studies and axial analysis, which might be not as representative of Dravidian temple morphologies than they could be. The future studies could include segment analysis, visibility graph approaches, pedestrian flow data, and larger region sample to enhance comparative generalization. Altogether, the paper supports the topicality of sacred spatial designs in forming the morphology of settlements and proves the usefulness of space syntax as a strict instrument of analysis in non-Western rural environments.

## Abbreviations

HH: Hillier and Hanson Integration, GIS: Geographic Information System, AutoCAD: Automatic Computer-Aided Design.

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## Author Contributions

Yogapriya G: conceptualization, writing, study design, manuscript draft, Amiya Bhaumik: review, refine, Janani Selvam: review, refine.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the study or this article.

## Data Availability

Data will be available on request.

## Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

Generative AI assistance (ChatGPT) was used solely for the preparation of Figure 2 (graphical visualization) based on author-generated data and analytical results. The AI tool was used only to assist in generating the graphical representation and did not influence the study design, data analysis, interpretation of results, or scientific conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and integrity of the manuscript.

## Ethics Approval

This study involved the spatial analysis of publicly available Google Map and did not include human participants, animals, or personal data. Therefore, ethical approval was not required for this research.

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