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Life rhythms and floor sequences: excavating time in rural Rajasthan and Neolithic Çatalhöyük

Nicole Boivin

Abstract

Ethnographic data from rural Rajasthan in India demonstrate that the temporal rhythms of human life articulate with changes in the nature of village floors. Various temporal cycles, including the annual cycle, the lifecycle of the individual and the developmental cycle of the domestic group, find expression in this particular form of material culture. The varying experiences of the lifecycle by different groups within society are also, on some occasions, linked to variation in the changes undergone by house floors. The relevance of the ethnographic observations are demonstrated by an examination of soil micromorphological data emerging from the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük in Turkey. Potential links between floor and wall sequences, and various temporal rhythms and associated rituals are outlined. The analysis of the Çatalhöyük data suggests that the study of temporal rhythms in archaeology is not only possible and interesting, but also methodologically and theoretically necessary.

Keywords

Time; lifecycle; use of space; ritual; soil micromorphology.

We walk together along the sandy path of the main road running through the village, a small procession of women and children, our way lit by the light of the full moon. As I concentrate on negotiating the pits, stones and occasional splashes of cow dung with the help of the two girls whose small hands clutch mine, my mind wanders back to the morning scene at the house we are presently working our way towards. There in the innermost room of the small, mud-plastered stone building, we had painted the already smooth, clean floor with a new coat of plaster made of fresh cow dung, water and the red soil that is called *Laksmi* soil, after the goddess of wealth who is believed to reside within it.

‘If you had to plaster this room yourself, it’d never be ready for tonight’s *puja*!’ says Tama with more than a hint of pride, as she takes a break from her own work to watch my unaccustomed hand try to ape her confident, broad sweeps across the floor. I endure

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more than a little additional teasing from the small group of neighbouring women, who have straggled in to witness my curious ineptitude at yet another basic female activity. In no time, Tama's clean strokes close in on my quite aesthetically unpleasing little corner, and she then begins to paint a large white flower design in the middle of the floor.

The sound of women's voices singing brings me back to the present as we approach Tama's house. We walk through the gatehouse entrance, and the outer and inner courtyards of the house, and then I am escorted through the singing voices in the front verandah to the crowded inner room. It is completely changed from this morning, the sharp rays of bright sunlight from the occasional gap in the tiled roof having been replaced by the glow of flames from multiple little dishes of oil and the haze and smell of burning incense. The room is packed with those who knew and loved Tama's brother, but somehow space is found to accommodate the late-comers. Tonight is *Purbaj*, the time to placate the spirits of those, like Tama's brother, who have passed away too soon. . .

(Boivin, 1998 fieldnotes, Balathal village, Rajasthan, India)

Introduction: temporal cycles and floor sequences

The distinction between the abstract time of measuring devices like clocks and the lived time of individual experience has been a source of interest in the field of anthropology for some time.¹ Archaeologists have also, more recently, begun to consider the matter and its implications for our understanding of the past.² However, the scope of archaeological enquiry into this aspect of time has been extremely limited, not least because of a pervasive pessimism about the possibility of 'accessing' past experiences of the passage of time. What often seems to go unrecognized, however, is that the patterning of archaeological data is entirely the product of lived temporal rhythms. It is not so much finding evidence of these rhythms that is the problem, but rather relating them to the measured and abstract temporal units of the archaeologist. This is illustrated in the final section of the paper, where I use my ethnoarchaeological findings to shed light on certain archaeological data. In the Çatalhöyük material I look at, it is lived time that is more apparent, and calendar time that emerges as enigmatic.

This paper will examine certain aspects of lived time by focusing on some of the temporal cycles that ensure that time is experienced as heterogeneous and variable. Looking specifically at rural Rajasthan in India, I will examine how such cycles produce patterning in the deposition of one particular form of material culture. While the lifecycle of the individual will constitute one important focus of the analysis, the paper will also examine other relevant cycles. As Ingold has pointed out, 'in music as in social life, there is not just one rhythmic cycle, but a complex interweaving of very many concurrent cycles' (1993: 160). Often, more than one of these multiple temporal rhythms will impact on the patterning of a given form of material culture. I therefore examine two other important temporal rhythms, namely the annual cycle and the lifecycle of the house/household.

As hinted at in the fieldnotes excerpt with which this paper opens, the source of data on temporal rhythms that I will look at here is floors. Floors have long been a focus of attention within spatial studies in archaeology, and new high-resolution techniques like soil

micromorphology are turning the study of what is known as ‘the use of space’ into a much more sophisticated enterprise (see Courty et al. 1989; Gé et al. 1993; Matthews 1992, 1995; Matthews et al. 1994, 1996, 1997). However, the fact that neither anthropologists nor archaeologists have traditionally focused much attention on floors (at least beyond looking at the distribution of material culture items across them) means that ethnoarchaeological research from a soil micromorphology perspective is needed for the method to fulfil its obvious promise. My ethnoarchaeological study of domestic space in a rural South Asian village was motivated in large measure by my awareness of this lacuna.

The particular aspect of my research that is of relevance here concerns the variation through time that is commonly observed in floor sequences. My ethnoarchaeological research has shown that such variation derives primarily from two factors: 1) the laying down of floors of varying composition (as described in the opening excerpt), and 2) variation in the activities carried out on floors. Furthermore, and of pivotal importance to the discussion at hand, I have observed that the activities that generate this variation relate to the distinctive temporality of life, and in particular ritual activities, in the rural Rajasthani village of Balathal where my fieldwork was carried out (located in Udaipur district in southern Rajasthan; see Fig. 1).

In the following three sections, I will examine the relationship in rural Rajasthan between floors and the three temporal cycles outlined above. In the final section, I will explore the implications of these ethnoarchaeological findings for our understanding of past temporal rhythms, using Çatalhöyük as a case study.

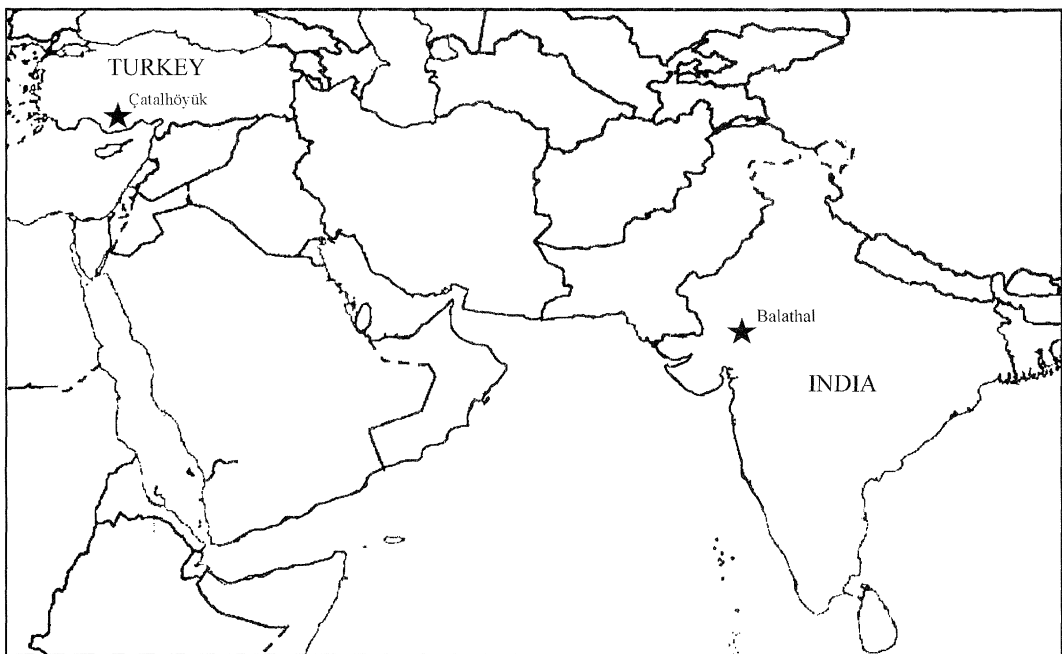


Figure 1 Map showing location of places discussed in text.

The rhythm of life in a rural Rajasthani village

The yearly cycle

Baisakh is the season for performing four happy things
 bringing home brides, marrying young people,
 building houses, and singing songs, but
 without my beloved, they all seem to be untimely.

(Grierson 1884: 207)

This passage (quoted in Wadley 1983: 71) is a brief excerpt from a *barahmasa* ('song of the twelve months'), a popular poetic form in north India (ibid.). (*Baisakh* is the name of the Hindu lunar month that falls in the Gregorian calendar months of April and May.) The varying flavour and tempo of the traditional yearly cycle in northern India is nowhere better illustrated than in these poems, of which there are a variety of types. The one given here is a *barahmasa* of separation, in which a woman laments her separation from a lover/spouse (ibid.: 55).

This particular poem, like most others of this genre, highlights the discord between the situation of the lamenting lover and aspects of the yearly cycle. As Wadley points out, *barahmasa* often emphasize the moral and physical decline which occurs when the actions appropriate to a given month are left undone (ibid.: 53), thus underlining the strong Indian belief in the importance of matching an activity to its appropriate time (ibid.; and see also Madan 1987; Pugh 1983). Time thus emerges as distinctly heterogeneous. As the poems furthermore demonstrate, the varying rhythm of the year is constituted by a variety of mutually interacting climatic, economic, social and ritual factors.

As Table 1 shows, this distinctive yearly rhythm is very much related to changes in house floors. Such changes often come about when there is a shift of some kind from the normal plastering routine (which usually involves plastering with a 'plain' beige-coloured soil called *doli mitti* at intervals of approximately one month) (see Fig. 2). For example, we find that the three major annual festivals observed in the village are generally an occasion on which floors are replastered. This occurs regardless of whether the floors have been replastered as recently as a few days before, and also involves the use of a special type of plaster.

This special plaster contains a variety of soil which is red in colour, and is called (for reasons no one could explain to me) yellow soil (*pili mitti*). It is also known as Laksmi soil due to its association with the goddess Laksmi. *Pili mitti* is generally considered to be a particularly auspicious substance, and is often associated with celebrations and festivals. On these occasions, the use of *pili mitti* is seen as pleasing to the gods, the worship of one or another of which is often an important part of the festivals. I should emphasize, however, that *pili mitti* seems to have distinctive connotations in different contexts, so that one or other of its multiple qualities is usually emphasized at any given use. Moreover, as indicated in the tables and in Figure 2, there are different 'grades' of *pili mitti*, which are considered appropriate for different occasions.

It is important to recognize that the festivals described in the table are not temporally random occurrences. They coincide with important yearly transitions and events that are in turn related to interwoven climatic, agricultural, productive and social rhythms (see

Table 1 Some variations from normal, everyday house floor plastering practices and their relationship to the yearly cycle in Balathal village.

Months ¹	Event/period	Cultural significance ²	How floor plastering is varied from norm ³
July–Oct./Nov.	Approx. 4-month-long rainy period	The gods sleep so this is an inauspicious time associated with world destruction; no weddings. Communication, travel and military campaigns traditionally disrupted. However, from agricultural point of view, is auspicious and associated with fertility. Also auspicious for commencement rituals.	Indoor floors are generally plastered at a lower frequency than normal, since humidity of the rains impedes drying. Outdoor floors not plastered. Up until the festivals of <i>Navaratri</i> and <i>Divali</i> , there is a lower likelihood of plastering with <i>pili mitti</i> (red soil) since no weddings and major festival of <i>Rakshabandan</i> (July/Aug.) not widely associated with floor plastering.
Sept. or Oct.	<i>Navaratri</i> ('Nine Nights')	Festival celebrating defeat of demon who turned cosmic order upside down; ushers in new period of order and stability. Close to autumn equinox.	Generally the floor of at least the main room of the house is plastered with <i>pili mitti</i> (red soil). Plaster may be applied as a thin 'wash' if floor recently plastered.
Oct. or Nov.	<i>Divali</i> ('Festival of Lights')	Coincides with harvest of <i>kharif</i> (summer) crop. Festival honouring prosperity and good fortune and associated with the worship of <i>Laksmi</i> (goddess of prosperity).	Generally the floor of at least the main room of the house is plastered with <i>pili mitti</i> (red soil). Doorways and entrances (including <i>chabutre</i> (platforms) at front of house) also generally plastered with <i>pili mitti</i> , to encourage <i>Laksmi</i> to enter. Typical <i>Divali</i> designs applied to floors using white paint to beckon <i>Laksmi</i> . Plaster may be applied as a thin 'wash' if floor recently plastered.
Nov.–Dec.	Post-rainy season repair work	With much of the heaviest post-harvest labour over, women turn to the task of repairing the damage done to floors and walls during the rains, particularly in outside areas. Symbolically a return to order. Since visitors are more likely after the rains and harvest, also reflects a desire to create good social image.	Floors in outdoor areas are plastered twice, first with a thick layer of strong plaster (using a clay-rich soil with abundant stones and clods), and then with a regular layer (which will probably be made of <i>doli mitti</i> ³ or a similar type of soil). Indoor floors also plastered (single layer). Major (and in some cases only) replastering of walls for the year is carried out.

Table 1 Continued.

Months ¹	Event/period	Cultural significance ²	How floor plastering is varied from norm ³
Mar. or April	Holi	Coincides with harvest of <i>rabi</i> (winter) crop. Close to spring equinox. Festival with multiple meanings: victory of good over evil; victory of death and promise of rebirth; a time of crisis. <i>Holi</i> also associated with lovers; is sometimes referred to as a spring 'Saturnalia.'	Generally the floor of at least the main room of the house is plastered with <i>pili mitti</i> (red soil). Plaster may be applied as a thin 'wash' if floor recently plastered.
May–June	Pre-rainy season preparations	Preparation of house for onslaught of rainy season.	Floors in unroofed areas may be plastered twice, as in post-rainy season repair work. Some households will also replaster walls.

Notes

1 Months are given according to the Gregorian calendar for the benefit of readers unfamiliar with the Hindu lunar calendar.

2 Interpretations are based on various sources, including my own observations in the village, villagers' statements, and the textual and ethnographic studies of others (particularly Fuller 1992; Gaborieau 1982; Ishii 1993; Pugh 1983; Wadley 1983).

3 Floors are normally plastered with a beige-coloured soil (called *doli mitti*), and plaster is normally of medium thickness (1–2 cm). Note also that plaster types are labelled according to the type of soil used, since this is the main source of variation in components. Cow dung and water are also generally used to make plasters.

Fuller 1992; Gaborieau 1982; Ishii 1993; Pugh 1983; Wadley 1983). Though the individual cycles are clearly affected by one another, however, it would be wrong to see any one of them as somehow determinative. Even climatic change plays no such role, since the significance of seasonal transformations, like other aspects of the 'natural' world, has much to do with human practice (Bourdieu 1972).

The various meanings that come to be attached to a given climatic phenomenon can therefore contradict each other, even within a single society. This fact is illustrated by the contradictory meanings attached to the four-month rainy season in north India (see Table 1). This period is an extremely inauspicious time in certain respects – no marriages will be held during the rainy months, for example – but it is also recognized as a time of fertility, growth and hence auspiciousness due to its association with the main growing season (Ishii 1993 and Pugh 1983 both address these contradictory readings).

There is also much data to suggest that the rhythm of the year may be experienced quite differently by different individuals or groups. A variety of sociological studies have demonstrated quite clearly that women and the poor will often be affected most strongly by fluctuations in nutrition, disease and birth and death rates that accompany the progress of the annual cycle in regions (like South Asia) that exhibit marked seasonal contrasts (see Agarwal 1989; Chambers et al. 1981). Such studies do much to emphasize the social

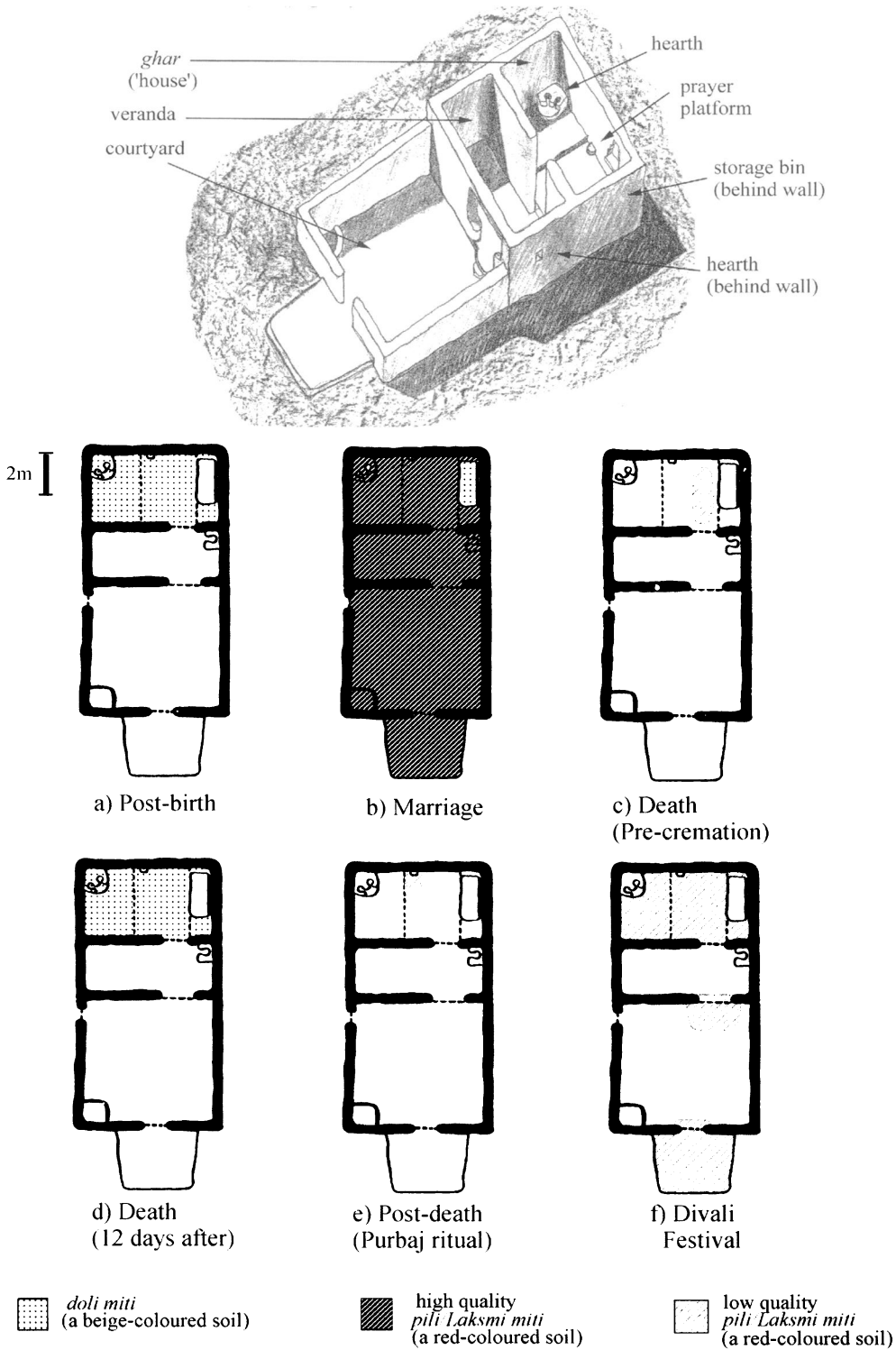


Figure 2 Top is an axonometric drawing of a simple-type rural Rajasthani village house. Below are plans of same house showing how its floors are plastered on different occasions.

embeddedness of apparently natural temporal rhythms and fluctuations. They also suggest potential explanations for some of the variations in plastering practices observed in the village.

The lifecycle of the individual

Interwoven with the rhythm of the yearly cycle is another temporal rhythm, distinct and yet not unrelated, that of the lifecycle of the individual. This longer-term cycle of progress through life clearly bears numerous similarities to the annual cycle we have just discussed. For one, it is related to, but not determined by a natural cycle (Bloch and Parry 1982). In the excerpt at the beginning of this paper, for example, the ritual I am about to describe is quite clearly based on the premise that an individual's ability to influence and interact with the world of the living does not end at biological death. Furthermore, as I hope to illustrate later, the nature and quality of the lifecycle, like the cycle of the year, varies both between and within groups. Finally, like the yearly cycle, the lifecycle is heterogeneous in quality, and (from a larger perspective at least) infinitely repetitive.

In most, if not all, societies, progress through the stages of the lifecycle is marked by a series of 'lifecycle rites'. This is certainly true of Hindu India, where the rites are known as '*samskara*'. Inden and Nicholas state that 'every *samskara* is regarded as a transformative action that "refines" and "purifies" the living body, initiating it into new statuses and relationships by giving it a new birth' (1977: 37). Although there are numerous *samskara*, I address only the three major ones, related to birth, marriage and death. These are common to all castes and all economic groups in rural Rajasthan, as well as to both men and women. I also address certain lifecycle stages that do not fall under that category '*samskara*'.

As illustrated in the opening excerpt, as well as in Table 2, progress through the lifecycle, like movement through the annual cycle, is often associated with specific changes in house floors. A perusal of the table will demonstrate that in many, though not all cases examined here, the change in floors is associated with floor plastering carried out on the occasion of the performance of a certain lifecycle rite (see Plates 1 and 2 and Fig. 2).

The replastering of floors in conjunction with lifecycle rites probably has certain distinctive connotations in each separate ritual (as evidenced by the fact that the specific timing and spatial focus of the floor replastering events, as well as the type of plaster used vary for different rituals). However, I would also argue that there is a semiotic undercurrent linking all of the ritual replasterings, just as there are clear parallels between the various lifecycle rites. These latter parallels have been remarked upon by Inden and Nicholas, who argue that the various Hindu *samskaras* share in common the three-step process that was first recognized by Van Gennep as a prevalent pattern in lifecycle rites across a variety of cultures (Inden and Nicholas 1977: 35). According to Van Gennep's well-known model, the main aim of all rites of passage is to provide the subject of the rite with a new identity (Van Gennep 1960). This new identity is conferred upon an individual only after he or she moves through a liminal stage, passage through which serves to sever the individual from a previous status and prepare him or her for entry into a new one (ibid.).

I would argue that, when it is used in lifecycle rites in rural Rajasthan, floor replastering plays a role in moving spaces, and hence the people that occupy them, between states

Table 2 House floor and wall plastering practices associated with lifecycle changes in Balathal village (only a selection of examples is given).

Stage of life-cycle	Particular event or ritual	Floor +/-or wall change ¹	Cultural significance ²
Birth	End of confinement period of mother (in some castes, associated with <i>Suraj Puja</i>)	Ideally all walls and floors are replastered (with regular plaster), but in practice is usually only floor of room where mother confined.	Purification of pollution associated with birth. Use of <i>pili mitti</i> (red soil) in some cases may be associated with birth of boy (i.e. auspicious event requires auspicious substance), but is not generally used since should not be associated with impurity.
Marriage	<i>Bheru Puja</i>	All floors (inside and out) replastered, using very fine quality <i>pili mitti</i> (red soil) (non-local source). All walls replastered with <i>safed mitti</i> (white soil).	Marks occasion as special and auspicious. Also associated with conferment of temporary liminal status on bride and groom.
Widowhood	N/A	Floors plastered less often or not at all and degenerate. Upper floor layers may be lost. Build-up of occupation debris may occur.	Not common occurrence, but if widow/widower living alone and in poor health, may not be able to maintain house. More likely for widow, who is often considered a burden and inauspicious.
Death	Cremation (occurs on day of death)	<i>Pili mitti</i> (red soil) is plastered in front of the doorway of the inner room in the shape of a sub-rounded rectangle slightly larger in size than the body.	Various interpretations: 1) <i>Pili mitti</i> (red soil), as both an auspicious and a pure substance, is appropriate for departing soul; 2) <i>Pili mitti</i> and cow dung, as well as act of plastering itself, mark space and hence body as liminal.
	<i>Mausar</i> (Death Feast) 12 days after cremation)	All floors, or at least those in room where body lay, are replastered, in most cases using regular plaster. Some individuals insist that <i>kali mitti</i> (black soil) is more appropriate.	Purification of pollution associated with death; often accompanied by other purifying acts, such as the replacement of all ceramic cooking and eating vessels with new ones. May also be associated with the reintegration of mourners after a liminal period during which regular acts of purification and maintenance are temporarily suspended. Use of <i>kali mitti</i> (black soil) in some cases is probably associated with the inauspicious connotations of the colour black.

Table 2 Continued.

Stage of life-cycle	Particular event or ritual	Floor +/-or wall change ¹	Cultural significance ²
Post-death	<i>Purbaj Puja</i> (particularly for 'untimely' death)	Floor of inner room, or at least area within room where puja will be performed, plastered with <i>pili mitti</i> .	Various interpretations possible: 1) One of a series of ritual acts designed to placate the 'ghost' of the dead individual (can be seen as 'pleasing' to use an auspicious substance like <i>pili mitti</i> (red soil)); 2) A means of conferring temporary liminal status on space and thus on individual who will 'communicate' with dead.

Notes

1 Floors are normally plastered with a beige-coloured soil (called *doli mitti*). Note also that plaster types are labelled according to the type of soil used, since this is the main source of variation in components. Cow dung and water are also generally included in the plaster mixture.

2 Interpretations are based on various sources, including my own observations in the village, villagers' statements, and various textual and ethnographic studies, a few of which are discussed in the main text.



Plate 1 A Rajasthani village woman replastering the floor of her house in preparation for a ritual that will be held in the house later on in the day (see Plate 2). The plaster contains cow dung, water and a type of red soil called *pili mitti* or *Laksmi mitti*.



Plate 2 A Rajasthani village man carries out rituals associated with *Purbaj Puja* (see opening excerpt). The space is the same as that depicted in Plate 1. It has been plastered with *pili mitti* and elaborated with designs drawn in white paint.

of liminality and non-liminality. The primary reason why floor plastering is able to achieve, or at least contribute towards such a transformation, is because cow dung, the main ingredient in all floor plasters, is remarkably purifying in the Hindu tradition (Dumont 1980; Huyler 1995). The relationship between concepts of purity and liminality is too complicated to address here, but has been clearly established by Das (1976).

Of interest here is the fact that floor plastering is capable of bringing about either a change from liminal to everyday or the reverse. Thus, for example, the space occupied by the mother and child after birth returns to its everyday, non-liminal status as a result of floor plastering to combat the pollution associated with birth. The liminal status of the mother and child is also gradually lost through this and other means. In contrast, the newly plastered floors on the occasion of a wedding contribute, along with numerous other factors, towards the bestowal of a liminal status upon the bride and groom. It is also interesting that a similar use of floor plastering – as a means of transversing between liminal and non-liminal states – seems to occur in southern Africa, where Lane has reported that plastering with cow dung is carried out on the first day after the end of the confinement period of expectant mothers, and implies the renewal of conjugal relations (1998: 189).

While Table 2 and Figure 2 draw clear links between changes in floors and lifecycle transformations, they nevertheless fail to represent the diversity in life rhythms that exists in rural Rajasthan. Such diversity finds its origins in a number of factors, primary among which are considerations of the caste, wealth status and gender of the individual concerned. In this regard, it is essential to point out that Table 2 represents mainly the

practices (and only a selection at that) of the upper-caste Rajputs of Balathal village, a group of people who are also among the wealthiest in the village. Other castes and/or socio-economic groups may be less inclined or less able to meet the ideal that has been given in the table. Different groups may also experience the lifecycle differently, and exhibit differences in the rituals associated with lifecycle ceremonies.

An example of the latter type of variation and its links to floors can be seen in the case of mortuary rituals among different caste groups in Balathal. Looking at the practice of laying the deceased on a patch of *pili mitti*-based plaster prior to cremation (see Fig. 2), we find that the patch is in the shape of a rectangle among Rajputs and various other castes, but in the shape of a square in the case of the Goswami caste. This is because, in this caste, the deceased is seated on a chair in the house rather than laid out on the floor. This difference occurs for various historical reasons, and coincides with differences in other aspects of the death ritual, one of the primary ones being that Goswami bury rather than cremate their dead. Variations in lifecycle ceremonies such as this constitute one means of drawing boundaries between different social groups in Indian society.

In this regard it is interesting that a number of informants of the Meghwal community stated that their caste did not observe the practice of placing the deceased on a patch of *pili mitti*, while this information was contradicted by other Meghwals. It may be that the Meghwals did not traditionally observe the practice, and that it is gradually being taken up as a result of the process of 'sanskritization' (Srinivas 1998), according to which this once 'untouchable' caste is attempting to increase its social status by adopting a more high-caste lifestyle. Aspects of lifecycle rituals may also therefore become a focus of strategic manipulation in attempts to lessen the distance between ranked social groups.

The developmental cycle of the domestic group

I turn lastly to the developmental cycle of the domestic group, which, as I show in Table 3, is often intimately related to the lifecycle of the house, and to the longer-term changes in its floors. Though houses in a myriad of societies are intimately bound up in the lives of their inhabitants (see Moore 1986 and papers in Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995), Goody has pointed out that this kind of relationship is much closer in societies where houses are built of mud or thatch than in ones where more durable materials are commonly employed (1958: 80). The same is obviously true of house floors and the materials employed in their construction.

More than for the other two cycles I have discussed here, however, the diversity of developmental rhythms that characterize household groups as well as houses themselves means that it is difficult to construct some kind of ideal or standard pattern (see Kolenda 1968, 1994). Table 3 represents a small proportion of the variety of household and house developmental cycles that exist in even a single village in rural Rajasthan. It is equally difficult to pinpoint the degree of isomorphism between family, coresidential group and domestic functions (see Yanagisako 1979), since these vary from situation to situation. Even identifying specific 'stages' is problematic, when the processes in question are in a constant state of flux. Trying to draw links between house/household developmental patterns and caste or economic class is equally difficult, since intra-group variety is so great.

Table 3 Hypothetical example of the lifecycle of a house and its relationship to changes in the household group and changes in the nature of floors in Balathal village.

Life stage of house	Nature of household group	Nature of floors in house
House construction initiation (foundations)	Household group currently living elsewhere, probably nearby in same village. May or may not be part of a larger household group from which it will split.	Floor or (more commonly) wall foundations may contain objects deposited during 'initiation of housebuilding' rituals, such as <i>pili mitti</i> (red soil), rice and silver objects.
House construction ongoing	It may take up to a number of years to complete the construction of a house, which may take place in stages as the necessary economic resources are accumulated.	Any of the rooms of the partially built house may be used for stabling animals (usually goats, since cattle destructive) +/-or storing fodder, equipment, etc. Floors probably unplastered, and will likely retain traces of activities.
House construction partially or fully complete	Household group (family) moves into house once there is sufficient roofed space (the acquisition of which may be speeded up if need considered urgent). Hypothetical household group constitutes a nuclear family (husband, wife and young children) which usually occupies a single room plus veranda. Often find two hearths: one (for winter use) in main living room (<i>ghar</i>) and one (for summer use) in front room (veranda).	Main living room (<i>ghar</i>) plastered with <i>pili mitti</i> for inauguration of house, and family deities installed (until this time, house is 'just a building'). Thereafter, while occupied, this room and the veranda are plastered regularly and frequently (normally with beige-coloured soil). Floors generally swept regularly, though may be stained around hearth and eating area. Other rooms may be plastered and used for guests +/-or 'clean' storage. Floors in these rooms will tend to be very clean, and plastered less often.
House elaboration +/-or enlargement	Daughters grow up, marry and move to husband's village. Sons marry and bring wives to live in house. Each daughter-in-law usually has own hearth, and lives with husband and their children in a separate room. Additional rooms or buildings gradually added onto house as required.	Storage and guest room(s) will be occupied by sons and wives, and so floors in these rooms may be somewhat dirtier than they were in the previous stage, though will now be plastered more frequently.
House reduction +/-or degeneration	Household begins to decrease in size, either due to death of one or both parents, or the splitting off of one or more of sons and their families.	Some rooms may be left to degenerate. These will once again be used for stabling animals (often cattle) or for storage. Floors deteriorate, and upper floor layers may be lost. Floors will often retain traces of activities, since not cleaned. May be exposed to elements if roof collapses or tiles removed. Wall plaster may begin to fall from walls and collect on floors.
House abandonment	House is abandoned due to relocation in new house +/-or death of last surviving occupants. In some cases, lineage deity may be retained in original place and continue to be worshipped on special occasions.	Unless family deity is still in place, house will now become public space and will often serve as a latrine. In some cases, may find use as a stable or storage area.

These facts do not, however, detract from the basic argument that the rhythm of household growth, fission and decline is linked to changes in the house and its floors in rural Rajasthan. As the table makes clear, and in contrast to the other cycles examined above, these changes generally relate less to individual plastering events than to activities carried out on floors. An enduring (rather than brief and temporary) shift in activities carried out in a given space will often lead to fairly substantial changes in the nature of floors. Such longer-term changes in the use of space are a common corollary of the lifecycle of the household. Overall, the Rajasthani ethnographic material provides further support to the assertion that it is necessary to think of the house as a dynamic, continually changing entity – as, in fact, a kind of ‘process’ (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995).

Thinking about time at Çatalhöyük

In order to demonstrate the archaeological relevance of my ethnographic data on the temporality of floor sequences, I will now turn to the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük in south-central Anatolia (Fig. 1). Although the site was partially excavated in the 1960s, it has since 1993 become the focus of a major new excavation project, which has produced an extremely rich corpus of data (see Hodder 1996 and Çatalhöyük Archive Reports). The detailed recording methods and high-resolution techniques of the current project mean that temporal rhythms, even short-term ones like annual cycles, are very much amenable to study at Çatalhöyük. The short discussion that follows will permit examination of only a small proportion of the Çatalhöyük data that is relevant to the issues I have raised in this paper. Nevertheless, it should demonstrate that it is possible, rewarding and even *necessary* to consider temporal rhythms when interpreting archaeological data.

I will begin, as I did with the ethnographic material, by looking at very short-term cycles, and therefore draw the reader’s attention to a sequence of wall plasters recovered from Building 5 at Çatalhöyük (and discussed in Matthews 1998). The sequence originated from a wall in the northern part of Space 154 (see Fig. 3). Wall-plaster samples taken from this and other buildings (discussed in Matthews 1996, 1997, 1998; Matthews et al. 1996, 1997) strongly suggest that the Neolithic people of Çatalhöyük shared the modern-day rural Rajasthani villager’s preoccupation with frequent plastering, but extended it to include walls as well. In some cases, such as in Building 5, wall sequences are preserved in more complete form than floor sequences, which have sometimes been truncated. Such wall sequences offer a useful means of looking at the use of space, and the lessons learned from the ethnographic study of floors clearly remain relevant.

The sequence in question is remarkable not for the number of layers it contains (though this is also significant), but rather for the distinctive and conspicuous cyclicity it exhibits (Matthews 1998) (see Plate 3). In it, single, thick layers of white plaster alternate with much thinner, soot-covered plaster lenses. This pattern of application was repeated over and over without exception, so that by the end of the sequence, there are at least seventy thick layers. The only variation to be found is in: 1) the number of layers in any given intervening set of thin lenses (this varies between three and nine), and 2) the amount of soot that has built up on the individual thin lenses.

The spatial cyclicity of this sequence implies a temporal cyclicity for the processes that

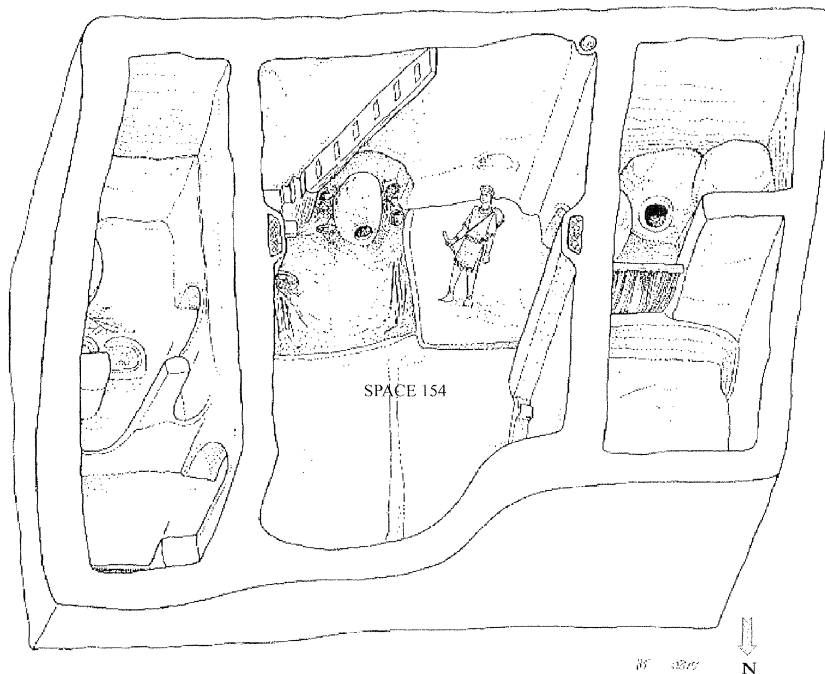


Figure 3 Reconstruction drawing of Building 5, North Area (final phase) at Çatalhöyük. (Reproduced with permission of John Swogger and the Çatalhöyük Research Project).

led to the application of the individual plaster layers, but what more can we say? Well, we can start, like Matthews has done, by trying to determine what span of time the sequence represents. Based on an examination of the likely average lifespan of a Çatalhöyük house, Matthews (1998) has decided that seventy years or so would not be an unreasonable estimate.³ She thus postulates that the ‘thicker layers represent more or less annual replasterings . . . whilst the thinner lenses of plaster and soot represent somewhere in the order of monthly replasterings’ (ibid.).

Interpretation need not end here, however. I believe it is also possible to suggest that the plaster layers relate to the temporality of rituals carried out in the space in question. Such an hypothesis is supported by various facts. First, the sample was obtained from a space with definite ‘ritual’ overtones. Following a pattern that has been noted in other buildings at the site, the central space (Space 154) of Building 5 can be clearly divided into two distinctive spaces. Its south half is ‘dirtier’ and retains evidence of domestic activities (Cessford 1998). In contrast, the northern half, where the wall plaster originated, is ‘cleaner’, is elaborated with apparently non-functional features and contains floors bearing multiple layers of white plaster (ibid.). The parallel space in Building 1 also contained multiple burials beneath the floor, as well as abundant ‘artwork’ (see R. Matthews 1996; Last 1998; Lucas 1997; Fig. 4).⁴

Second, we can also argue for a ritual reading based on the stability of the wall sequence pattern through time. For example, despite the fact that several generations of plasterers and multiple excursions for the collection of plastering material may have been involved,



Plate 3 Portion of wall sequence from Building 5 (North Area) in thin section. Lighter areas are thick layers of white plaster, while darker areas are sets of multiple, soot-covered thin lenses. Frame width = 3 mm. PPL. (Photo reproduced courtesy of Dr Wendy Matthews and the Çatalhöyük Research Project).

there is remarkable consistency in the materials chosen for plastering. This occurs despite the existence of multiple alternative types of materials available for floor plastering (as evidenced by the variety of plaster types observed and recorded by W. Matthews at the site). Invariance, traditionalism and rule-governance have been defined as characteristics of ritual (Bell 1997), and the fact that the wall sequence seems to indicate such qualities adds further support to the argument that it derives from ritual or ritual-related activities.

Finally, of course, there is the ethnographic case described above, which provides a plausible parallel and again supports a ritual interpretation. However, the Rajasthan floor sequences can also enlighten us via their differences from the Çatalhöyük sequence in question. Due to the interaction of so many different cycles, as well as to a certain relaxed attitude towards plastering ideals on the part of most village women, the village floor sequences I looked at do not exhibit any clear pattern. For a pattern as sharp and distinctive as the one from Space 154 to emerge, it therefore seems likely that fewer temporal

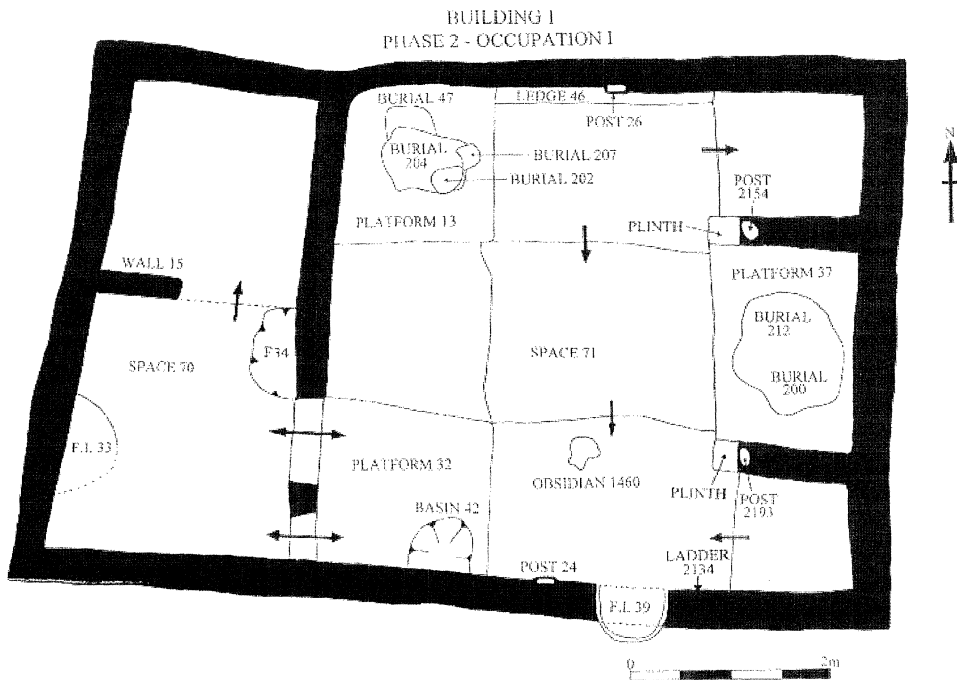


Figure 4 Plan of Building 1, North Area (phase 2) at Çatalhöyük. (Reproduced with permission of the Çatalhöyük Research Project).

rhythms were involved and that it was also considered far more important to stick to a traditional ideal than it is in the Rajasthani village.⁵

The meaning of the fastidiousness of those who plastered the walls of Building 5 is difficult to guess at in the absence of buildings, other than Building 1, for comparison. Building 1 revealed no sequence parallel to that of Building 5. The fact that it did *not* may be significant, as it suggests that different temporal rhythms unfolded in different buildings. It may be that the performance of certain rituals was confined to particular buildings. The existence of different short-term rhythms in different buildings is an exciting possibility that needs to be studied in concert with the longer-term rhythmic changes that buildings undergo (see below).

The exact nature of the rituals carried out in Space 154 is more difficult to infer, but is worth guessing at, if only to provoke debate. I would suggest that perhaps the thick plaster applications relate to annual rituals aimed at renewing the house, a practice which might easily be seen as having wider symbolic connotations relating to the reaffirmation of the cosmological and social orders. Such an event would likely have taken place at the same time each year, perhaps at a transitional period coinciding with the start or end of a particular season. I argue for such a relationship based on Smith's observation that periodic rites often attach themselves to natural cycles (1982: 108–9). As Bell has pointed out, this probably occurs because identification with such cycles serves as a powerful means of making an ideology appear natural, or even eternal (1997: 175).

In contrast, the variation in number in the thin lenses indicates that they might have

been implicated in rituals with no particular fixed schedule (what Smith (1982) calls 'occasional rites'). These would simply have been performed as and when they were 'needed'. Periodic rites of a different temporality (such as lifecycle rites) cannot be ruled out, however, and there is also a possibility that some of the thin lenses may still relate to annual rituals.

The cyclical sequence from Building 5 is not the only evidence for Neolithic temporal rhythms to emerge from Çatalhöyük and its walls and floors. There is also substantial evidence that houses went through processes of 'birth' and 'death', and micromorphological evidence from floors has been important in demonstrating that individual houses pursued different developmental cycles. For example, in some buildings, there is a shift through time from 'dirty' to 'clean' floors,⁶ while in others, the transformation occurs in the opposite direction.⁷ Understanding of the lifecycles of individual buildings has played an important role in the re-evaluation of Mellart's distinction between 'houses' and 'shrines' at Çatalhöyük. It has become increasingly clear that this interpretation likely represents a failure to take into account the temporal dimension of the house and the household.

Çatalhöyük has also produced evidence relating to the human lifecycle. That this was linked to houses is suggested by the existence of multiple burials beneath house floors, as well as the occurrence of painted scenes relating to birth and death on house walls (Mellaart 1963, reported in Last 1998). There also appears to be spatial patterning in the sex and age of burials. In Space 71 of Building 1 (see Fig. 4), the northwest platform contains predominantly children, and the east platform predominantly male adults (R. Matthews 1996). The area to the east of the northwest platform appears to be a 'transitional zone' associated with women as well as children (*ibid.*). This pattern has been taken to suggest that there may have been an association of different social groups, based on age group and gender, with different parts of the house (Hodder 1998). It has been hypothesized that the different groups may have carried out daily activities like eating and sleeping on different platforms, for example (*ibid.*).

It is therefore of interest that the plaster sequences on top of the two platforms in Space 71 vary significantly from one another and from the central floor sequence (see Matthews 1997). For example, in phases 1 and 2 of occupation, the sequence of floor plasters on the east platform, like the wall sequence from Building 5 discussed earlier, exhibits apparent cyclicity in its patterning, while the northwest platform sequence does not. This suggests clear differences in the activities and/or rituals carried out on the two platforms, and it is possible that these may have been associated with, for example, gender differences in the character of lifecycle rites. The difference could also relate to behavioural variations associated with gender and/or age, though variations of a type different than that suggested by Hodder. The sequences clearly require further study.

Conclusions

These interpretations of the Çatalhöyük micromorphology data are of course tentative, and remain to be substantiated by information emerging from other types of material and other houses at the site. Nevertheless, the brief analysis does suggest that, while much of

the richness of ethnographic detail that was highlighted in the opening excerpt and subsequent ethnoarchaeological description may be lost, the underlying rhythm of social and cultural life of past societies is not completely beyond the archaeologist's spade (or microscope). Examination of the Çatalhöyük floor and wall sequences indicates that various temporal cycles, and often the ritual events that serve to both mark and create them, are closely linked to archaeologically visible patterns of material culture deposition. The variation in the experience of different temporal cycles that was emphasized in the ethnoarchaeological analysis would also appear to be a potential target of archaeological enquiry.

The challenge then is not so much the limitations of the data set, though these of course exist, but rather the limitations of our own understanding of the temporality of human life, and its articulation with more tangible aspects of human society. Our insecurity about ever recognizing past experiences of time stems from the fact that we are dealing with unfamiliar temporal rhythms and unexpected relationships between temporality and material culture. What is needed then are ethnoarchaeological studies that address these issues, so that archaeologists may come to understand the multiple ways that temporal cycles can interact with human activity and with the material residues that such activity creates. The importance of temporal rhythms to our understanding of Neolithic Çatalhöyük suggests that such an understanding is less of a post-processual luxury than an integral aspect of archaeological investigation and interpretation.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, Durkheim (1912) and Bourdieu (1963). In addition, Gell (1992) and Munn (1992) provide reviews of the anthropology of time in which the development of this theme is summarized.
- 2 Archaeologists who have dealt with this issue include Bradley (1991), Gosden (1994),

- Lane (1994), Shanks and Tilley (1987) and Thomas (1996). See also papers in *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 6(1) and *World Archaeology* 25(2).
- 3 This argument concerning the average lifespan of a Çatalhöyük house is supported by dendrochronological work carried out at the site by Kuniholm and Newton (Hodder pers. comm.).
 - 4 The argument for ritual features in this north space does not require us to assume a static 'ritual' zone. In fact, as in rural Rajasthan, replastering may have been implicated in the temporal oscillation of the space between categories of sacred and profane.
 - 5 An example of more 'stable' practices would likely have been provided in my ethnographic account if I had had the opportunity to investigate the houses of Brahmin priests, whose families can be expected to be much more fastidious about the proper observance of ritual practices.
 - 6 For example, the building in the southern half of section 3, Area E (Matthews 1996).
 - 7 Such sequences come from Building 1, North Area (Matthews 1997) and Building 3, Bach area (Matthews 1998).

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