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NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
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Evaluation of Petrification Legends in Turkey in Terms of Cultural Heritage and Tourism

BY HASAN BUĞRUL

Petrification legends told in Turkey are one of the most interesting subjects that draw our attention. Although the legends are said to be stories that have been told over a long period of time with no proof of existence, the legends told in Turkey about these rocks are so logical and authentic that whoever experiences them find themselves deeply affected. When having a look at the map of the petrification legends told in Turkey, you realize how common they are, especially in the east, southeast, and northeast of Turkey. The

bride, groom, bride and groom, camel, dragon, and wedding procession rocks are the elements integrated with the petrification legends. Both listening to the legends from the local people and seeing the related rocks can be a good opportunity for visitors who are interested in cultural heritage. In this study, we have tried to draw attention to the petrification legends told in Turkey and the related elements (rocks) in terms of tourism. It is hoped that it will contribute to Turkish culture and tourism.

We know that people travel for various reasons, and one of the main reasons is the curiosity about cultural heritage. In fact, cultural heritage is rich in content. It involves both tangible and intangible values. While tangible heritage includes archaeological sites, museums, monuments, palaces, works of art, natural parks, and so on, intangible heritage covers oral traditions (folktales, sayings, songs, chants, and so forth), social practices, festive events, folklore (legends, music, oral history,



View of the dragon-shaped rock (petrified dragon), Ilıcak (Huzi) village, on the main road of Van-Hakkari provinces, about 25 km to Başkale town, Van-Turkey. All photos by Hasan Buğrul.

fairy tales, tall tales, stories, traditions, and customs), and more.

Although it seems that tangible and intangible heritage embrace different things, there are some values that have some connections with both of them, and one example is “petrification legends.” On one hand, the legends are told orally or can be read in books, and on the other hand, you can see rocks in different shapes that are believed to have relations with each of the legends. Anyone who is interested in cultural heritage can’t help hearing the legends and seeing the related rocks in Turkey, after learning about them. Besides being the cradle of civilization, we can say that Turkey is “the land of legends,” because you can hear legends and come across the rocks related to them in many parts of Turkey (see map on p. 34).

The subjects of the legends told in Turkey vary, but the legends about petrification seem to be the most striking. The impressive legends, with the incredible rocks, are told as if they were true and factual. That is why we think that it is worth evaluating this subject in terms of cultural heritage and tourism, but first we should consider what petrification stands for:

According to Cemile Kınacı,

Petrification is turning of human, plant or any other object to stone. There are a lot of reasons for turning to stone. Sometimes, an imprecate causes it, sometimes one who commits a sin suffers the wrath of God by turning to stone. And sometimes turning to stone comes true by wishing it. The ones who are in difficult situations pray to God to be petrified in order to get rid of the situations they are in. (Kınacı 2008, 78)

Here is another definition:

With their forms, some of the rocks and stones have an image like people or animals. These images of the rocks and stones are associated and made sacred with a legend related to any person or animal punished by God, often as a result of the desecration of a sacred object or person. (Kıyak 2011, 13)

When having a look at the legends, we can see that there are various reasons for being



View of the dragon-shaped rock (petrified dragon) with a petrified dragon cub on its left hand side, next to its head.

petrified. According to Nesrin Feyzioğlu, “Sometimes a curse (imprecation) causes petrification; sometimes those who commit sin are petrified by undergoing the wrath of God. And sometimes it happens by wishing it. Those who are in a difficult situation wish to be petrified by God in order to get rid of their situation” (Feyzioğlu 2011, 122).

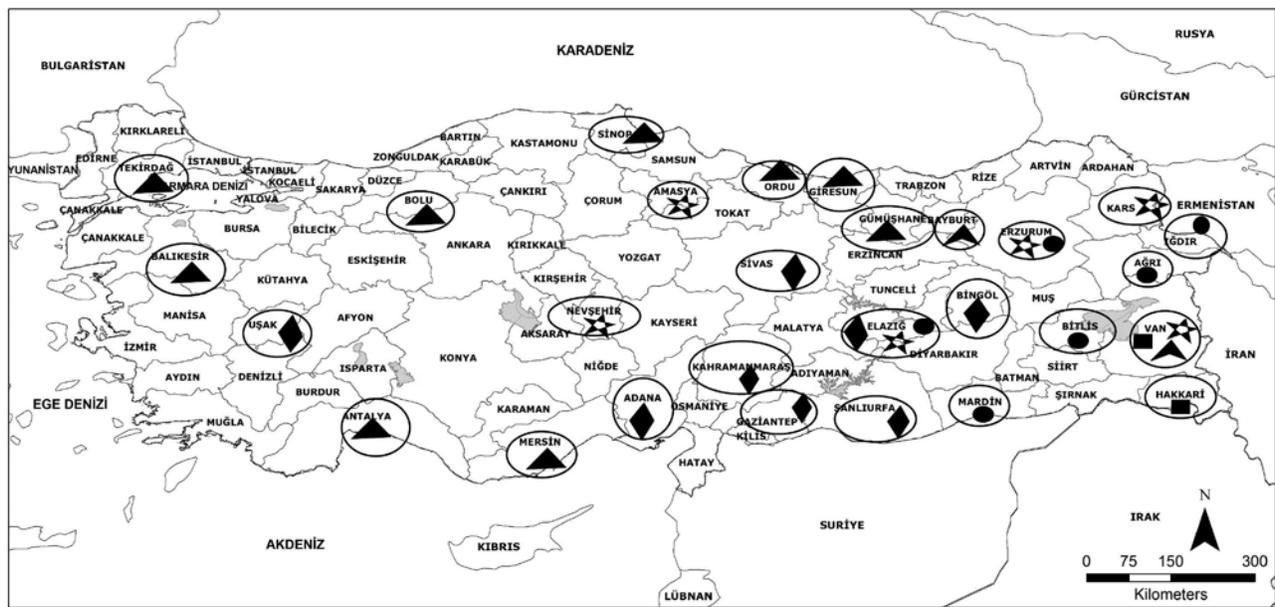
It is thought that there is a great impact of pre-Islamic Central Asian Turkish culture and beliefs on the legends related to petrification told in Turkey and in the Asian countries. In pre-Islamic Central Asia, some natural forces such as the sun, sky, mountains, stones, and trees were considered sacred. Some of the stalagmites were considered to be petrified humans or animals. Here is what a woman told Yaşar Kalafat¹ about some stones located in the Altay Mountains: “There were three

rocks on the edge of the water. It was believed that they were ‘three brothers.’ A few kilometers further, there were seen three rocks more which were thought to be the brothers of the other ones” (Kıyak 2011, 136).

Two of the Kryrgyz and Kazakh petrification legends

Here is “*Deve Taşı / Camel Rock*,” a legend of Kyrgyz told by Metin Ergun²:

There was a place where people lived in unity and solidarity and had respect for each other. These people, going about their daily lives, became anxious and worried one day. A camel—[it was] not certain where it came from,—disrupted the peace of the people. Wherever it appeared, it started to bite and kill people. No one



Map of Turkey related to Petrified Legends. Map of Turkey from the Geography Department of Yuzuncu Yil University, Van-Turkey. Images by Hanefi Alter. Customized by lecturer Guler Yilmaz.

could catch this camel. A gray-bearded man with mysterious eyes who lived there was not affected when he was cursed (imprecated). People gathered and decided to have that camel cursed by the gray-bearded man. And the graybeard cursed, “Don’t stand up where you are lying, petrify!” The next day, the people saw that the camel was petrified where it had been lying. (Kinaci, Cemile 1997, 608–609)

Metin Ergun also tells about a legend of Kazakh:

There was both a strong and a very good hero. One day, he became rich, and with the intention of saving the people’s lives, he set out. He came across some other heroes on his way. The young hero offered to join their forces and form an army. He told them it was easy to be defeated alone, but it was difficult to be defeated when they were together. The

heroes he encountered didn’t take any notice of him, and everyone went their separate ways. First, the young hero encountered enemies. However strong he was, it was impossible for him alone to cope with the large enemy army. After a while, he was exhausted, tumbled down, petrified there, and fell into an eternal sleep. As this hero struggled alone, he was named after the mountain Ceke Batır (Kinaci, Cemile 1997, 623–624).

Some of the petrification legends told in Turkey

The petrification legends have been studied by many academics, but we think that Professor Dr. Saim Sakaoglu³ has studied this subject most extensively. In Turkey, you can find bride-, herdsman-, sheep-, camel- or dragon-shaped rocks and hear legends told that are related to each of them. Some of the reasons for being petrified are listed as follows:

- Some of the petrification legends are about fleeing lovers. In such legends, the boy and the girl fall in love; however, they are not permitted to marry by the father of the girl. It is due to the girl’s father’s fame and wealth that he boy, from a poor family, is not acceptable to the father. The lovers escape, and with the fear of being caught, they both pray to be petrified. As both of them are petrified, you can see two rocks which are associated with them and are called “**girl-boy / the bride and groom rocks.**” These types of legends are told in the cities such as Şanlıurfa, Kahramanmaraş, Sivas, Karlıova-Bingöl, Adana, Sivaslı-Uşak, Nizip-Gaziantep, and Sivrice-Elazığ.

- Among the petrification legends, the most common ones are the legends about petrified brides, and you can see “**bride rocks**” related to them. The legends of this type can

be seen in two groups. In one group, the bride is in a bad situation, and she would like to get free of it. As she is helpless, she prays to be petrified. In this way, honor is preserved. Another variation is when the bride exhibits behaviors that are not acceptable to society. Although the girl is not permitted to marry her lover, she escapes with him. Generally, the boy is caught and killed, and the girl, left alone, prays to be petrified, and this becomes reality in the rocks. Such legends are generally told in Ürgüp-Nevşehir, Merzifon-Amasya, Kağızman-Kars, Kars, Erzurum, and Elazığ.

- You can also come across **“boy-rocks / groom rocks.”** Such petrifications come into being because a son shames his mother or father with degrading behaviors. You can see such rocks in Balıkesir, Sebinkarahisar-Giresun, Fatsa-Ordu, Korkuteli-Antalya, Kelkit-Gümüşhane, Tirebolu-Giresun, Silifke-Mersin, Mudurnu-Bolu, Muratlı-Tekirdağ, Sinop, and Gönen.

- Some petrification legends are about the rich who overlook the poor or the com-

munity, or despite offering oblation, back down. In similar legends, a rich man makes a vow, but is petrified with his camels for not keeping his promise. So these types of rocks are named **“cameleer mountains.”** You can see related rocks in Bitlis, Ağrı, Karayazı-Erzurum, Iğdır, Mardin and Sivrice Elazığ (Zekeriya 1992, 66).

- You can see atop certain mountains some rocks that are associated with a wedding procession. It is said that the people in the wedding procession were all petrified due to treating sacred values in an inappropriate way. Another reason why this happened is that the bride was not happy about her marriage, because she was forced to marry her husband. As she wanted to get out of this situation, she prayed to God to petrify the wedding procession. You can see **“wedding procession rocks”** on a mountain of Şemdinli, Hakkari, and on a hill in the Aşit village, Van.

- You can also see **“dragon-shaped rocks.”** In such legends, a lady is chased by a dragon. The fearful lady prays to God to

petrify the dragon, and this occurs. You see such rocks in Nişantaşı-Bayburt and Ates-Başkale (Van).

I think it would be useful here to mention some of the legends with the related rocks in more detail:

Legend I

There is a dragon-shaped rock in the Nişantaşı (Osluk) village. The village is a distance of 18 km from the main road, connecting Bayburt to Gümüşhane. It is situated on the slopes of a mountain. Here is the legend told about the dragon-shaped rock:

People see a dragon coming to the village, and they start to leave their houses and run away. A woman can't go very far, as she is very old, and she squats down in despair. On the one hand, the old woman starts waiting for the dragon, expecting to be eaten by it. On the other hand, she prays to God and pleads, “God, petrify either me or the dragon.” The prayer of the old woman is accepted, and the dragon is petrified at the last point that it could advance



Dragon shaped rock, said to have been divided into two (bisected) by Hazreti Ali with his sword. The bisection can be seen near the tail. The men (villagers) who told the legend also can be seen in the foreground.



View of both the dragon-shaped rock (petrified dragon) and the fountain (related to the girl thought to have become a fountain).

before reaching the old woman. (Şimşek and Sakaoğlu 2004, 97)

Legend 2

There is a rock on the shore of Van Lake in Adilcevaz, which is called “Kıztaşı” (“girl-stone”). Here is the legend told about that rock:

A young peasant falls in love with the daughter of a commander of the castle. Because of the fear of the cruel commander, they meet in secret. One night, the young boy swims through Van Lake in order to reach his lover. However, the young boy can't see the light that guides him. He gets tired of searching and drowns. The girl, who sees that her lover doesn't come, prays to God to be petrified. The young girl's prayer is accepted. In the region, it is believed that the shape of the Kıztaşı reflects the state in which the young girl was when she was petrified. (Çevirme and Sakaoğlu 2003, 25–26)

Legend 3

When a girl was bringing food for her father, who was working nearly 1 km outside of the village, the girl was attacked by a dragon. Realizing that she would not survive the dragon's attack, she prayed to God and

said, “Petrify the dragon and turn me into a fountain.” God accepted the prayer of the girl. The dragon was petrified and she, herself, became a spring. Now you can see a dragon-shaped rock and a fountain beside it. It is said that the fountain was once in the shape of a girl, but unfortunately, the villagers altered the original shape over time. The fountain contains mineral water, and it is said to be good to drink for treating different diseases.

According to another variation of the legend, a dragon attacked the girl who was taking something to her father to eat. When the father heard the screaming, he rushed to the scene. He was overwhelmed by what he saw. He could not do anything other than to pray to God. He said, “God, I can't manage to save my daughter. I beg my daughter to be rescued.” Not long after this prayer, Hz. Ali⁴ appeared and divided the dragon into two with his sword. At that moment, a dragon cub emerged. Shortly after that, both the dragon and its cub turn into stone (were petrified). You can see a 60 cm gap that is nearly 10 m from the tail and a 3 meter-long rock in shape of a dragon cub. (See the box on page 37, “Data Collection,” for more information about this legend and the related rock).

Legend 4

There was a very beautiful girl in Timar region, and there was a very handsome boy in the same village. They fell in love with each other. However, the girl was very unhappy, because she was forced to marry a man in another village. When the wedding procession was on the way to the other village, everyone was happy, except the bride. The girl prayed to God to be petrified with the wedding procession. The bride's prayer was accepted, and all the people in the wedding procession were petrified. It is thought that the two separate tall rocks next to each other are the petrified bride and groom, and the rocks around are thought to be the petrified wedding procession. (See the box on page 37, “Data Collection, for more details about this legend.)

Evaluating legends in terms of cultural heritage and tourism

When people travel for cultural heritage, they expect to experience the places and activities that represent the stories of the people of the past and present in a reliable manner. Cultural heritage is not only an element of tourism, but also belongs to many other disciplines. It can be seen from many different perspectives. If a subject is a focus of multiple disciplines, this implies that the subject is an important one. It is thought that by adopting different perspectives on a subject, one can provide more accurate and complete knowledge. If a subject is studied by the scientists from different disciplines, it will be more popular and more people will be interested in it. So, if cultural heritage is considered in terms of tourism in addition to other disciplines, it will become more accessible to more people.

We see that cultural heritage is very rich in content, and each of the elements has a great importance of its own. We cannot say that one cultural value is more important than another. Each cultural value is a cornerstone of cultural heritage. Both tangible and intangible, all related elements, can be regarded with this viewpoint.

Besides values such as music, oral history, fairy tales, tall tales, and stories, legends also take an important place in a country's folklore. Listening to legends from someone or reading them in books may not elicit sufficient interest alone, but if they are expressed in terms of the places where they are thought to have occurred, and if one can encounter the related rocks of petrification legends, for example, the impact becomes stronger. You can experience the thrill of "discovery."

When evaluating cultural values and heritage tourism, it can be said that they make substantial contributions to each other. Without cultural values, you can't attract visitors, and without visitors, there is no value to your attractions. The number of the visitors can show the value of a touristic attraction. In this regard, one of the ways of protecting and keeping the cultural values familiar is to encourage their relationship with tourism. Hakan Melih Aygün emphasizes that, 'It is known that one of the effective methods of protecting cultural heritage is through cultural tourism. When considering the effect of tourism in protecting cultural heritage, with accurate and scientific evaluation, tourism can be seen as a means of making an economic contribution to cultural heritage' (WTO 1999, 57–61, as quoted in Aygün 2011, 203).

There are such interesting legends in Turkey that they can attract many people. However, we cannot say that they are well known enough to be recognized by those who might be interested. As Philip L Pearce says, "Good scenery is not a tourist attraction, but a scenic lookout which is named, managed, and well used is included" [in visitors' travel plans] (Pearce 1991, 46). If something isn't known as widely as it should be, how can it be evaluated or be the center of interest?

These objects related to legends can be significant tourist attractions, if they are promoted as much as they deserve. The first aspect to be considered is to whom this cultural value will appeal. When having a look at the theme of the legends, we can say the ones who are interested in cultures, customs, a different way of life, and so forth, would definitely like to have an opportunity to hear the legends from the local people and see the

DATA COLLECTION

Legend 3

1. Information about the legend:

- a. **The name of the legend:** Petrified dragon
- b. **The place:** İlicak (Huzi) village, 4 km to the main road of Van-Hakkari and about 25 km to Başkale town, Van.
- c. **The material aspects about the legend:** A dragon-shaped rock and a fountain

2. Information about who told the legend

- a. **Name:** Namet Parlak
- b. **Place / Date of the birth:** İlicak-Başkale, 1964.
- c. **Education and job:** High school. Tradesman
- d. **When, where, and from whom he heard:** The man who told the story was born in the village where the dragon-shaped rock is located, and he still lives in the same village. He heard the legend from his father, grandparents, and the old people living in the village.

3. Description of the dragon-shaped rock:

There is a stream that divides the residential area of the village into two parts, and a dragon-shaped rock can be found in the streambed, nearly 500 m down the village. The dragon-shaped rock has a fascinating view. The length of the dragon is about 50 m. Although its tail's height is about 3-4 cm, its height gradually increases, and towards the head, its height is up to 5.50 m (Photo on p. 32). This portion, which is like a dragon head, has a dimension of 2.20 m x 3.50 m, and its mouth is 1.00 m x 1.75 m (Photo on p. 33). As the rock is sandstone and is subject to wear, it has been considerably eroded. Ten meters from the tail of the dragon, there is a 60 cm rift (Photo on p. 35). The back part of the rock has a nearly 10 cm width, and there is a curving line extending from the tail to the head. The line seems to be natural. Near the western side of the head, there is a small rock with a length of about 3 m, which reminds us of a dragon cub (Photo on p. 33). A spring, which is about 30 m away on the east side of the rock, also draws one's attention. It has mineral water (Photo on p. 36).

Legend 4

1. Information about the legend:

- a. **The name of the legend:** Wedding procession became rocks
- b. **The place:** Aşit Village-Van, on main road from Van to Özalp, near Anzaf Castle, 15 km away from Van province.
- c. **The material aspects about the legend:** Two separate rocks and lots of smaller rocks around.

2. Information about who told the legend:

- a. **Name:** Murat Uysal
- b. **Place / Date of the birth:** Van, 1973
- c. **Education and job:** University, civil servant

3. When, where, and from whom he heard: Murat, who told the legend, often goes to the villages of Van because of his job. He heard about the legend when he paid a visit to the village. He heard the legend from the village headman and from some others who live in that village.

4. Description of the wedding procession rocks in Aşit Village

You can see two tall rocks next to each other (Photo on p. 39). They symbolize the petrified bride and groom. The taller one, about 8 m tall, is thought to be the petrified groom, and the shorter one, about 6 m tall, the petrified bride. You can see many smaller rocks around, and they are called wedding procession rocks (Photo on p. 38). They represent the ones who joined the wedding, but became petrified because of the bride's prayer.

related objects. This can be young people, adults, and elderly people. In addition to these general audiences, there can be newly married couples on honeymoons, filmmakers, writers, social scientists, nature lovers/conservationists, adventurers, and anyone who is curious about learning or seeing new things.

Conclusion

Legends mostly come into prominence with expressive language, and therefore, they are evaluated as intangible cultural values. Although it is known that there are related physical elements (rocks in different shapes), this aspect is often disregarded. However, in addition to its abstract or intangible value, if the tangible aspect is taken into consideration, then its importance and the place it deserves among the other cultural values will be understood.

When the petrification legends are analyzed, it is seen that they have an important place in terms of both the subject and geographical area they cover. It is thus important to consider the following points on petrification legends and related rocks:

1. Legends associated with rocks (bride, groom, camel, dragon rocks) can create a new

market for tourism. By considering the map of the legends, tours can be organized.

2. Each legend and associated rock can be considered in the field of arts and crafts.

3. Books can be written about the associated legends and presented in the cinema and television sector.

4. The Cultural and Natural Heritage Protection Board of Turkey should protect the specific objects (rocks in different shapes) related to the legends. The legends will gain more meaning and vitality with the associated objects.

5. There are books related to the legends. The photos of the related rocks and documentation will contribute more in all respects.

6. The local people should be made aware about such cultural wealth.

7. The local people can benefit from such values economically if the values are considered in terms of tourism.

8. Although the petrification legends told in Turkey are thought to be based on pre-Islamic Central Asia Turkish culture and beliefs (paganism), they are regarded as if they were true and factual by the local people.

9. The legends are generally transmitted from generation to generation orally. As most of them don't have written versions or records,

it is inevitable that there are different versions when told over a long time period. In order to preserve the most accepted version, written records must be provided.

10. Another way to protect the legends from extinction is to keep them as an active part of local life. In this respect, tourism can be a good opportunity for preservation. ▼

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Front view of the wedding procession rocks. Petrified bride (the short rock), groom (the tall rock), and the wedding procession (the rocks around). Aşit Village-Van, on the main road from Van to Özalp, near Anzap Castle, 15 km away from Van province.



Back view of the petrified bride and groom rock.

works as a folklorist and writer. He has published many books, including these on legends:

- 1) *101 Anadolu Efsanesi (101 Anatolian Legends)*, İstanbul 1976; Ankara 1989; Ankara 2003, 2004. (Most of the legends are from the other Turkish countries).
- 2) *Anadolu—Türk Efsanelerinde Taş Kesilme Motifi ve Bu Efsanelerin Tip Kataloğu (Anatolia—The Motif of Petrification in Turkish Legends and The Catalogue of these Myth Type)*, Ankara 1980.
- 3) *Efsane Araştırmaları (Legend Studies)*, 2nd ed., 2013, contains many of his articles.

⁴ “Hz” is written as abbreviation of *Hazreti* in Turkish. It is a “honorific” word, which was used for very important persons in Islam. Hazreti Ali is the cousin of the Islamic prophet Hazreti Muhammad. He ruled the Islamic world as a Caliphate from 656 to 661. Known for his courage, he was also respected for his knowledge, honesty, belief, and loyalty to Hazreti Muhammad. With respect to his courage and bravery, in legends, when someone is danger, he/she prays to Allah to send Hazreti Ali to rescue him/her.

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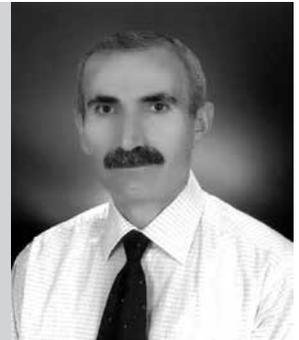
Notes

¹ Yaşar Kalafat is a member of the Society for the History of Religions of Folklore Research Institute in Turkey and has conducted much research in this field, mainly, in Asian countries.

² Metin Ergun is a professor of science and literature at Selcuk University in the field of Turcology (study of languages, history, literature, folklore, culture, and ethnology of people speaking Turkic languages and Turkic peoples), Konya-Turkey.

³ Prof. Dr. Saim Sakaoğlu was born in Konya in 1939. He is a retired professor, but still

Dr. Hasan Buğrul is Assistant Professor at Yuzuncu Yıl University, Van Vocational Higher School, Tourism Guide Department,



in Van, Turkey. He has taught vocational English to art history students and to tourism guides, as well as lectured on Byzantium Art, Seljuk Art, and Ottoman Art. As a project researcher, he has been involved in the study of gravestones and the excavation of Şavşat Castle in Artvin, built in the ninth century.

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