

La Arqueología funeraria desde una perspectiva de género

Lourdes Prados Torreira (Ed.)
Clara López Ruiz
y Javier Parra Camacho (Coords.)



COLECCIÓN ESTUDIOS 145

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THE VIX PRINCESS REDUX: A RETROSPECTIVE ON EUROPEAN IRON AGE GENDER AND MORTUARY STUDIES

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Abstract: The 1989 Chacmool Conference on the Archaeology of Gender resulted in a ground-breaking volume with the same title, one of the first attempts to present the work of scholars interested in the archaeology of gender in a single publication. I published a critique of the state of Iron Age gender studies in west-central Europe (Arnold, 1991) in that volume, focusing particularly on the elite burial of the so-called Vix “princess” and its androcentric interpretation as a “transvestite male priest”. Revisiting the topic of the archaeology of gender in Iron Age Europe after two decades suggests that significant progress has been made since 1989. An overview of recent approaches to Iron Age gender archaeology in the context of mortuary analysis is presented, including a discussion of more recent work on the Vix burial itself (Knüsel, 2002; Rolley, 2003).

Key Words: Vix, gender, mortuary analysis, Iron Age.

Resumen: El Congreso de Chacmool sobre Arqueología del Género dio lugar a una novedosa publicación con el mismo título, uno de los primeros intentos de mostrar el trabajo de los investigadores interesados en la arqueología del género en un mismo volumen. En él publiqué una crítica sobre el estado de la cuestión en los estudios de género relacionados con la Edad del Hierro en Europa Centro-Occidental (Arnold, 1991) centrándome, en particular, en el enterramiento de élite perteneciente a la llamada “Princesa” de Vix y su androcéntrica interpretación como “sacerdote masculino travestido”. Revisando, dos décadas después, el tema de la arqueología del género durante la Edad del Hierro en Europa, todo indica que se ha realizado un importante progreso desde 1989. Aquí presento una revisión de los recientes tra-

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bajos sobre arqueología y género a partir del análisis de los contextos funerarios, incluyendo la discusión sobre las últimas investigaciones relacionadas con la propia tumba de Vix (Knüsel, 2002; Rolley, 2003).

Palabras clave: Vix, género, análisis funerarios, Edad del Hierro.

The posthumous career of the Vix Princess has been quite lively considering that she died sometime between 500 and 450 B.C. (Pinin-gre and Plouin, 2003); her remains and grave goods have been more thoroughly studied and analyzed than any other individual prehis-toric European apart from Ötzi the Ice Man (for a partial history of the skeletal analyses to which the remains of this Iron Age person- age have been subjected since the discovery of the grave in 1953, see Depierre and Duda, 2003: 29-39). Ultimately her various metamor- phoses provide a useful proxy for the way contemporary meanings are inscribed upon the dead of past societies, but the burial has other lessons for mortuary archaeology and gender analysis to teach us as well. I first encountered the Vix Princess in graduate school in 1983. In that year she appeared in the guise of a transvestite male priest in Konrad Spindler's otherwise quite useful book on the early Celts in central Europe (1983) (figure 1). Spindler's willingness to concede the possibility of a third gender category rather than the possibility of a powerful woman leader was the focus of the critique I presented at the 1989 Chacmool conference on gender archaeology held at the Uni- versity of Calgary, a pioneering event in gender scholarship (Arnold, 1991). Many of the first wave gender studies in prehistoric archaeology presented at that conference took a similar line to my discussion of this grave, which exposed the gender bias inherent in the androcentric approaches to mortuary analysis that had dominated interpretations of Iron Age social organization up to that time. However, my research into this topic also revealed the existence of a category of burials that did not fit into the neat binary system of classification that charac- terized mortuary analyses in the European Iron Age. While the Vix burial exhibits no evidence of transvestism, if that is defined as a discontinuity between the biological sex of an individual and the gender attrib- utes associated with costume, dress or other personal items, some Iron Age burials do (though they tend to be male to female transvestites,

which are also more common in ethnographic contexts). Such ambiguous burials are found in the archaeological record of virtually all times and places, but they have typically been treated as anomalies or statistical outliers (Arnold, 2002).



Figure 1. The Vix Princess interpreted as a transvestite male priest (after Spindler, 1983: fig. 82).

Significantly, the initial analyses of the Vix skeletal material were largely in agreement in identifying the remains as those of a female individual (Depierre and Duda, 2003: 29), something which has since been confirmed by a DNA analysis (Ginolhac *et alii*, 2003). It was the question of how to integrate this extraordinarily wealthy burial into the established framework of male power, based specifically on the idea that this power was vested in martial prowess, that created interpretive difficulties for the largely male-dominated field of Iron Age studies. The disjunction in this case was not between biological sex

and culturally defined gender, which is how Spindler attempted to reframe the interpretation, but between socio-political power and female gender. The fact that Spindler was willing to consider a third gender category in order to avoid linking power and women (the most parsimonious explanation) speaks volumes about the impoverished mental templates in use at the time. By creating the category of a transvestite male ritual practitioner, Spindler had revealed the extent to which androcentric bias had permeated Iron Age studies until the 1980s.

In my Chacmool paper I argued that all the available evidence suggested that the Vix burial could be interpreted at face value as that of a powerful female individual and that Iron Age gender studies were overdue for a theoretical audit (Arnold, 1991). Following her rethroning in 1991, the Vix Princess enjoyed a well-deserved rest until 2002, when Christopher Knüsel, a bioarchaeologist at the University of Bradford, exhumed her for yet another post-mortem (2002). Most of Knüsel's study was devoted to a reanalysis of the skeletal remains to clarify sex, age and any paleopathological indicators that might help to interpret this unusually wealthy grave. On the one hand, the reexamination of the skeletal remains was a valuable contribution and added another vote in favor of interpreting this grave as female. On the other hand, Knüsel's interpretation of the physical anomalies exhibited by this individual represents a case of special pleading as well as continued fealty to the idea that political power, even if based in spiritual authority, could not be parsed as female in Iron Age society without some sort of qualification. Using ethnographic analogy, Knüsel argues that the Vix princess' physical abnormalities - represented in the skeleton by facial asymmetry and an abnormal gait - were a mark of unusual spiritual powers, making her either what ethnographers refer to as an honorary male (Arnold, 2002: 251) or at least canceling out her female gender sufficiently to override a proscription regarding women as rulers. It is perhaps worth noting that a more recent reassessment of the Vix skeleton by French bioarchaeologists concluded that the facial and gait-related anomalies noted by Knüsel did not necessarily alter the appearance of this individual sufficiently to be used as an argument for her role as a ritual specialist (Depierre and Duday, 2003: 46-47). While Spindler went to great lengths to

interpret the burial as male, thereby disenfranchising not only this particular woman but Iron Age elite women more generally, Knüsel elevated the Vix Princess to elite status on the basis of her physical anomalies, which he interpreted as providing her with the exceptional qualities necessary to justify placing a woman in a position of power. In this second iteration of the Vix grave as a “singular exception” (the phrase Elizabeth I of England used to describe herself as a living contradiction, a powerful woman [Arnold, 2002: 251]), the grave is still parsed as the burial of a powerful ritual practitioner whose gender was negated, or overridden, by her infirmities. The subtext is that in the absence of such physical abnormalities, this individual would not have achieved the status she did in her society. So what initially seems like an advance over the 1983 transvestite male interpretation is really still biased against the idea of a woman ruling as a woman, and not as a “singular exception”. We should at this point perhaps ask “How exceptional was the Vix burial really?” To answer this question we will need to examine the implied “normative” category of elite male graves in comparison to that of the Vix “princess”.

Ordinarily elite male graves contain weapons, and the fact that there were no weapons in the Vix grave suggests that the pathway to power in her case was not associated with martial prowess, either actual or symbolic. On the other hand, high status male graves of the late Hallstatt period in the West Hallstatt area do not necessarily convey a particularly martial impression, and weapons can serve as metaphors or signifiers for more than war or violence. The Hochdorf burial, the only unlooted male high status grave of the early Iron Age to have come down to us until the discovery of the Glauberg Grave 1 near Frankfurt in 1994, was not outfitted with an impressive array of weapons either. The gilded dagger in that grave was more a badge of office than a weapon (Sievers, 1982), as was also probably true for the bow and arrows hanging on the wall of the Hochdorf burial chamber (Arnold, 2010; Sievers, 1982: 62). Dirk Krauß has interpreted the Hochdorf burial as that of a “Sakralkönig”, or *pontifex maximus*, on the basis of the symbolic weaponry and sacrificial implements found in this grave (1999). Both Hochdorf and Vix apparently reflect a power structure based mainly on priestly or sacred duties; a similar inter-

pretation has been put forward for the Glauberg Burial 1 (Frey, 2002; Hermann, 2002). In this scenario, the physical anomalies of the Vix individual may have been incidental to other, more intangible qualifications for paramount status such as kinship ties, charisma or persuasive verbal skills none of which are gender specific or archaeologically identifiable.

The exceptional aspect of both the Vix and Hochdorf burials is mainly the fact of their preservation; how representative they may be of the general category called "Fürstengräber" is impossible to say. The Glauberg neckring burial, which is closer to Vix than Hochdorf in date, increases the sample size of the unlooted paramount elite grave category to three, which is hardly statistically significant. However, the fact that the combination of dagger (status marker and/or badge of office?) and bow and arrow (symbolic representation of leadership?) are found in both the Glauberg and the Hochdorf graves in spite of the geographic and temporal distance between them suggests a common vocabulary for a certain type of elite male power in this part of Europe during the Iron Age (Arnold, 2010). The close correspondence between some of the objects found in the Glauberg grave and those represented on the statuary recovered from the same burial complex further supports the idea that power in the world of Iron Age Europe was rooted in access to and manipulation of supernatural forces (Armit and Grant, 2008); physical prowess and gender appear to have been of secondary significance. Fragmentary stone sculpture found in association with the Vix burial complex suggest a representation of the "princess" existed at one time (Milcent, 2003: fig. 233), and the Hirschlanden statue exhibits most of the elements found in the Hochdorf grave, whose stela has not been recovered. The fact that all three unlooted central chamber graves have sculptural equivalents that can be interpreted as euhemerized ancestors indicates that some elites were considered powerful enough to serve after death as intermediaries between the world of the living and the supernatural realm. What makes the Vix grave significant is not the fact that this individual may have been a ritual practitioner or the fact that she happened to be female, but the fact that her grave contained the most impressive array of grave furniture and personal ornament found in any intact Iron Age

burial in terms of the quality, quantity and origins of the objects; this feature of the grave cannot be explained solely on the basis of ritual power. Clearly, progress has been made in Iron Age mortuary analysis since Konrad Spindler's transvestite priest took the stage in 1983. This is clearly illustrated by the more nuanced (and neutral) interpretation of the significance of the Vix burial presented recently by Pierre-Yves Milcent, under the heading "The status and function of an above average female personage" (Milcent, 2003: 313-366).

Whether or not additional progress will be made in deconstructing Iron Age social organization, which was clearly extremely complex, is constrained by the interpretive limitations imposed by the Iron Age archaeological record itself, as well as the continued emphasis on elite burials (which are clearly problematic as a proxy for gender configurations in the rest of Iron Age society). I would like to discuss this issue further before moving on to my case study. Part of the problem is the continued dependence on mortuary evidence, which is capable of providing only part of the picture and is neither comprehensive nor completely representative of social structure. To some extent this dependence reflects that fact that the settlement record of Iron Age temperate Europe is relatively ephemeral in most areas and appears not to have been the main modality through which social differences were expressed. There are no palaces or manor houses; social status and role were largely bound to the body in the form of dress, personal ornament and weaponry, with feasting equipment as a marker of redistributive wealth (Arnold n.d., 2002). Unfortunately, the mortuary record poses methodological as well as theoretical obstacles to understanding Iron Age gender configurations, as the history of the interpretation of the Vix burial illustrates. The absence of a predictable, one-to-one relationship between the material expression of mortuary ritual and the social personae of the deceased has become an axiom in archaeological mortuary studies, taking some form of the statement "The dead do not bury themselves" (*cf.* Hodder, 1982: 146; Leach, 1954: 15-16; Parker Pearson, 1982: 101; among others). The disposal of a dead body, the starting point for all mortuary ritual, can also be viewed as the last universal or predictable element. Some scholars subscribe to the idea that human dynamics in the past exist only as

historically situated realities mediated through material culture and therefore cannot be understood outside that context of meaning. This manifestation of the post-processual paradigm in its most nihilistic post-modern form represents a retreat from the rigorous investigation of the mortuary record and can ultimately contribute nothing productive to our understanding of such practices in the past.

At the other end of the theoretical spectrum, in the extreme processualism zone, are scholars focused on determining to what extent an anthropological archaeology is really necessary or desirable and whether archaeology should acknowledge its limitations as a social science by avoiding all the messy, unpredictable aspects of past human behavior while focusing on those manifestations of the archaeological record that can be studied and analyzed without recourse to ethnographic analogy. Those who take the middle path attempt to synthesize the useful elements of several paradigms, viewing mortuary evidence as an indispensable component of understanding past social systems, including gender configurations, that can only be interpreted with reference to living societies.

Whether the archaeological expression of mortuary ritual is a reflection or a distortion of real or idealized human behavior that can only be understood with reference to ethnographic analogy, most archaeologists do agree that it can be patterned and meaningful. Ultimately, all archaeology is about pattern recognition and interpretation, and the disposal of the dead provides a way to either directly identify or indirectly draw inferences about past attitudes and practices related to death as well as daily life. The archaeological mortuary record is simultaneously one of the richest and one of the most inferentially complex of patterned human behaviors because, while death itself is a universal phenomenon, every culture copes with it in its own way; the same can be said of the ways in which gender is configured and expressed cross-culturally (Arnold and Wicker, 2001; Bahn, 2003; Parker Pearson, 1999).

The spatial as well as symbolic division between the living and the dead that is an integral part of the Christian conception of death and dying is an example of how constrained prehistoric mortuary analysis would be without recourse to ethnographic analogy.

Within the Christian religious paradigm, the dead are physically separated from the living in bounded spaces associated with places of Christian worship. This division between the world of the living and the dead is one most Christians consider normative, but it is demonstrably not a division that has existed in all times and places. The incorporation of human remains in the structures of the living is found in many prehistoric societies and the placing of the dead, or fragments of the dead, in settlement contexts is a common phenomenon. Whether it occurs in intentional and patterned or expedient and casual ways, the presence of human skeletal remains in spaces still occupied by the living is meaningful, and has tended to be neglected in favor of the analysis of bounded, formal funerary space, the Christian pattern. Another important theme that has been given more focused consideration recently is the way in which the enduring relationship between the living inhabitants of a landscape and their ancestors are physically linked through monumental memory maps -- either literally, as in the case of mortuary monuments such as mounds or tombs, or symbolically through the inscription of ancestral associations on natural landscape features, in the case of mobile foraging societies (Lillios and Tsamis, 2010). Monuments can be either constructed or natural phenomena; it is the human process of symbolic inscription that invests them with meaning.

This is also why mortuary data, while critical to arriving at any understanding of past life-ways, including gender configurations, cannot and should not be studied in a vacuum, but must be evaluated in relation to complementary data derived from settlements and other contexts such as hoards or votive deposits. Difficulties arise when mortuary data are largely absent, as in the case of the so-called "invisible rite" that characterizes much of the Iron Age in Ireland, the British Isles and the Iberian peninsula, as well as in societies where virtually all social differentiation occurs in mortuary contexts but settlement data are limited or do not reflect such distinctions, as in my own study area of early Iron Age southwest Germany and in the highly mobile north central Eurasian kurgan cultures (Linduff and Rubinson, 2008).

Certainly the archaeology of death should not be viewed or approached as a conceptually or analytically separate field of study,

inextricably entangled as it is with the archaeology of life. At issue is the nature of that relationship, given that mortuary rituals are especially likely to be intentionally manipulated by the living. This makes an awareness of the many ways an individual death can be used to aggrandize, conflate, deflate or otherwise misrepresent social relationships, including gender roles, a critical part of archaeological interpretation of past societies.

Mortuary archaeologists oscillate between three investigative axes: the biological condition, the social condition and the material condition. Our work is also conducted with reference to a fourth axis, the political condition in which it is carried out; the history of the interpretation of the Vix grave demonstrates this very clearly. Archaeology has always been political, in the sense that it is both affected by and influences the political systems that support it, but the overt politicization of archaeological research that began in the late nineteenth century, particularly in nation-states with colonial histories or strong creationist religious traditions, has more recently begun to change the discipline in radical ways that will have a long-term impact on its theoretical development (Galaty and Watkinson, 2004). In the post-NAGPRA era, mainstream archaeological research in North America, for example, has begun to avoid mortuary studies altogether. An anthropologically informed mortuary theory that integrates new technological approaches to gender as well as agency, identity and mobility is unlikely, therefore, to arise in the United States in this century.

European archaeologists, on the other hand, are well placed to contribute to the development of new approaches to mortuary analysis, including gender studies, and have begun to do so. Working groups of archaeologists focused on theory have flourished in recent years, including organizations dedicated specifically to the archaeology of gender. The *Netzwerk archäologisch arbeitender Frauen* in Germany, which has produced an accompanying publication series (see for example Fries and Koch, 2008), and the recent launch of the *Archaeology and Gender in Europe* working group and Web site are just two examples. Scandinavia has always been a leader in gender archaeology; the earliest conferences on this subject were organized there in the 1980s, a fact that is unfortunately not always acknowledged by

Anglo-American publications, and that tradition continues to produce innovative research (Dommasnes and Hjørungdal, 2010; Sørensen, 2000; etc.). Archaeologists in the Iberian Peninsula also are beginning to make significant contributions in this area (Chapa Brunet and Izquierdo Peraile, 2010) and post-Iron Curtain eastern European scholars are not far behind.

There are several reasons why engendering mortuary analysis in Iron Age Europe has proved difficult methodologically as well as theoretically in spite of the progress that has been made in the last two decades; the challenges that remain are considerable. Temporal and spatial variations in mortuary assemblages across Europe make it difficult to extend analyses carried out in one area beyond their archaeologically defined borders, which makes it necessary for scholars to define appropriate boundaries for their studies in the first place, not an easy task. Gender markers in one region may not correspond to those in another, and what was once an exclusive gender marker might lose its exclusivity over time (Bernbeck, 1997: 329; Burmeister, 2000; Gero and Conkey, 1991: 8-9). The relative visibility of dress-related grave good assemblages as well as individual and group mobility patterns have been shown to vary by gender (Arnold, 2005; 2008). For example, in Hallstatt D southwest Germany female grave good assemblages outnumber those that can be identified as male, what Stefan Burmeister calls a female superfluity/male deficit pattern. This is primarily an artifact of differentially visible dress elements and is seen in many regions of west-central Europe at this time; however, it replaces a male superfluity situation in the preceding Hallstatt C period (von Kurzinsky, 1996: 74). The fluidity of such patterns should not surprise us, given that group membership is constantly being negotiated and redefined in all human cultures and the ethnographic record suggests that the rate of such changes can be quite rapid (Chapman, 1995: 12).

The question of why female burials are more visible than male burials during the late Hallstatt and early La Tène periods in southwest Germany illustrates the complexity of analyzing mortuary data that simultaneously communicate membership in more than one social category. Female dress during the late Hallstatt period does not consist of a larger number of object categories than male dress, but individual

female burials on average contain more inorganic grave goods than individual male graves. This contributes to the impression that there are more female than male burials and that women's graves are more impressively outfitted than male graves (Balzer, 1997: 108). In fact, women's graves during this period were not necessarily "richer" than those of men. Among the "richest" graves in the state of Württemberg, using the inventory value scale developed by Burmeister (2000: Table 18), 20 out of the top 20 female burials had an wealth index of over 75, compared to only 8 of the top 20 male graves. On the other hand, the wealthiest grave was a male burial (Hochdorf), with a wealth index of 675, more than twice as high as the wealthiest female burial (Ditzingen-Schöckingen) with an inventory value of 316. The majority of men's graves do not contain weapons, which is the primary exclusively male grave good category. Because weapons were simultaneously status, gender and age-specific grave goods (Burmeister, 2000: 86-94), men of low status, subadult males and possibly very old males were not buried with such items, which makes males less visible as a group. There is no imperishable grave good category that exclusively marks male gender without also marking status or age. This means that gender identification in late Hallstatt burials in regions where the soil conditions are inimical to skeletal preservation tends to favor female burials. More recent studies have begun to analyze gender by focusing on a particular landscape, such as the Heuneburg hillfort and its environs, and attempting to identify social configurations at the level of the community rather than at the level of the region (Arnold, n.d.), using dress and the body as the primary locus of interrogation.

The body has recently become a central arena of investigation and reflection in gender studies (Breuss, 2000-2001: 193; Joyce, 2008). Various ethnographers have argued that clothing plays a particularly important role in the construction of gender precisely because it is embedded "in a network of social action and communication strands... in which various dichotomies, including gender and marital oppositions, are represented together with other familial relationships" (Hager, 1999: 15). Of significance for archaeological mortuary analysis is the fact that this "close relationship between dress, the body and gender" (Breuss, 2000-2001: 199) appears to be ethnographically es-

pecially marked for women. As the means of reproducing and preserving the social group, the female body may function as the bearer of collective identity (Durham, 1999: 395). Women in such societies may be assigned an especially important role in mortuary ritual, one possible explanation for the elaborate dress seen especially in elite Iron Age female burials. On the other hand, ornate, complex female dress in many ethnographic contexts can also represent “the concrete, visible expression of the control that men have over women” (Durham, 1999: 395). Concepts of female purity and vulnerability may play an important role in the elaborate female costumes in such cases. The metaphorical “link between the collective body and the female body may have the consequence for women that their sexuality and reproductive potential becomes subject to increased social control” (Breuss, 2000-2001: 199). In this context the likelihood that adult, possibly married women in early Iron Age west-central Europe wore some form of head covering, either a veil or a bonnet, seems significant (von Kurzynski, 1996: 79). There is good evidence for such a head covering in iconography, particularly East Alpine situla art (figure 2), as well as in mortuary contexts during the Iron Age in west-central Europe (Balzer, 1997; Cordie-Hackenberg, 1992; von Kurzynski, 1996; Lenerz-de Wilde, 1989: 253ff; Lenneis, 1972: 26ff) and it can be supposed to represent a pan-regional social signal of long duration.

Ultimately, decoding the symbolic system of Iron Age gender marking since Spindler’s attempt to de-throne the Princess of Vix in 1983 has remained a complicated proposition, due largely to temporal and geographic variations in mortuary practices as well as shifts in gender marking within the same areas of Europe over time. The micro-region therefore continues to be the most productive analytical unit for gender-related research questions (von Kurzynski, 1996: 84). Expanding the burial sample available for analysis is critical to understanding the complex, polyvalent communication system that was largely bound to the body during the early Iron Age. The full spectrum of mortuary programs, including inhumations in flat graves, cremations, and mounds of all sizes, must be identified -- the focus in burial landscapes like that of the Heuneburg hillfort traditionally has been on mounds over 20 meters in diameter and the emphasis on

Fürstengräber has been a mixed blessing for gender research (Arnold, n.d.). Secondary burials are usually found in large enough numbers even in disturbed mounds for complex gender analyses to be carried out (Arnold, 2008); the typically looted central chamber graves can be best interpreted from a gender perspective through comparisons with such non-paramount elite graves. As Kilian-Dirlmeier has pointed out, it is significant that body-bound, dress-related grave good categories related to age and gender in the so-called “princely burials” are comparable to more poorly outfitted graves (1972: 125; von Kurzynski, 1996: 75); they vary mainly in terms of material and quality. Finally, archaeologists must make more frequent and systematic use of the existing literature on dress and clothing and the multi-vocality of these material culture categories. Such comparative analyses can open the research framework to new impulses that, aided by technical advances in bioarchaeology, conservation of textiles and other organic materials, provide increased opportunities to interpret social configurations in prehistoric societies.

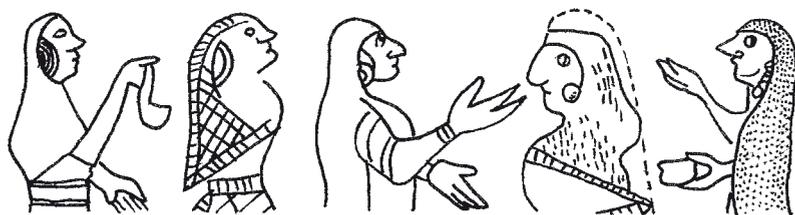


Figure 2. Various representations of women wearing veils or head coverings from the southeast Hallstatt zone (after Cordie-Hackenberg, 1993: fig. 2).

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