Facile Synthesis of ZnFe₂O₄ Nanoparticles with Tunable Magnetic and Sensing Properties

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Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Nanoparticles (NPs) and colloidal nanocrystal clusters (CNCs) of $ZnFe_2O_4$ were synthesized by using a solvothermal method in a controlled manner through simply adjusting the solvents. When a glycerol/water mixture was used as the solvent, $ZnFe_2O_4$ NPs were obtained. However, using ethylene glycol solvent yielded well-dispersed $ZnFe_2O_4$ CNCs. X-ray diffraction (XRD) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) data confirmed that the $ZnFe_2O_4$ NPs were a single crystalline phase with tunable sizes ranging from 12 to 20 nm, while the $ZnFe_2O_4$ CNCs of submicrometer size consisted of single-crystalline nanosheets. Magnetic measurement results showed



that the $ZnFe_2O_4$ NPs were ferromagnetic with a very small hysteresis loop at room temperature. However, CNCs displayed a superparamagnetic behavior due to preferred orientations of the nanosheets. Electrochemical sensing properties showed that both the size of the NPs and the structure of the CNCs had a great influence on their electrochemical properties in the reduction of H_2O_2 . Based on the experimental results, the formation mechanisms of both the $ZnFe_2O_4$ CNCs and NPs as well as their structure–property relationship were discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Spinel ferrites have attracted great attention because of their broad applications in many fields, such as magnetic materials, energy, biomedicine, and diverse catalytic processes.¹⁻³ As the shape, size, and structure of the materials have great influences on their chemical and physical properties when the dimension is reduced to the nanometer scale, nanostructured materials can show unique optical, electrical, magnetic, and catalytic properties, which are quite different from that of the bulk counterpart.⁴ Therefore, controlled synthesis of nanometersized materials is of great importance for investigating the structure-property relationship of the nanomaterials. 5^{-8} So far, ferrite nanomaterials with various structures have been prepared through different synthetic methods, such as the hydrothermal/solvothermal methods, sol-gel method, and template method. 5-20 For instance, homogeneous hollow core-shell microspheres of spinel ferrites (MFe₂O₄, M = Zn, Co, Ni, Cd) have been obtained by using carbonaceous saccharide microspheres as template.¹⁶ Submicrometer ferromagnetic ferrite spheres with single crystalline structures were synthesized by a solvothermal method and displayed excellent colloidal stability in aqueous solutions.¹⁹ Porous "timber-like" $ZnFe_2O_4$ superstructures have been prepared by calcining the zinc ferrioxalate precursor.²⁰ Recently, $ZnFe_2O_4$ has also received great interest due to the wide applications in magnetic material, adsorption, photocatalysis, and solar cells.^{13,19–23} For example, magnetic ZnFe2O4 nanoparticles can be used as colorimetric biosensors for the detection of urine glucose due to its intrinsic peroxidase-like activity of the nanoparticles.²¹

ZnFe₂O₄ nanorods exhibited a good photocatalytic activity toward the decomposition of methylene blue.¹³ However, controlled synthesis of ferrite nanomaterials with tunable morphologies, structures, and properties is still challenging.

Magnetic nanomaterials, especially superparamagnetic iron series materials, have great potentials in magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), separation and purification, drug delivery, and magnetically induced hyperthermia.^{1,24-26} However, superparamagnetic materials usually show a low magnetization value, which limits their practical applications. Increasing nanocrystal size is one way to increase the saturation magnetization (M_s) .³ However, a superparamagnetic-ferromagnetic transition occurs at a critical size.⁸ So magnetic nanocrystals that show superparamagnetic behavior with crystal size larger than the critical size at which the transition occurs are desired.³ Forming colloidal nanocrystal clusters (CNCs) has proved to be an effective way to retain superparamagnetic behavior with high magnetization.²⁷ The formulation of the synthesis protocol is a key to the preparation of targeted magnetic materials.^{9–20} Among the synthetic methods reported, the solvothermal method has proved feasible to synthesize nanomaterials with controllable morphology and microstructure.^{7-9,28,29} For solvothermal synthesis, the factors including the solvents, reactants, and synthesis procedure can be regulated easily to prepare a desired nanostructure. For

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example, magnetite CNCs can show superparamagnetic behavior with large $M_{\rm s}$ values, in which the size of CNCs can be adjusted in the range of 30–180 nm by controlling the concentration of sodium hydroxide in the starting systems.⁸ Recently, we used the solvothermal method to prepare submicrometer superparamagnetic MnFe₂O₄ CNCs with the $M_{\rm s}$ value larger than that of MnFe₂O₄ nanocrystals.⁷ Despite the recent research progress, the structural nature of nanosized magnetic materials deserves further elucidations.

In this paper, submicrometer superparamagnetic $ZnFe_2O_4$ CNCs and size-tunable ferromagnetic $ZnFe_2O_4$ nanoparticles (NPs) were synthesized by using a one-step solvothermal method through rational design. It was found that CNCs were composed of single-crystalline nanosheets with highly preferred orientations, showing a magnetization saturation value as high as 25.4 emu/g. The magnetic properties including magnetization saturation, remnant magnetization, and coercivity of the $ZnFe_2O_4$ NPs were found to be dependent upon the size of the NPs. Electrochemical sensing properties of the $ZnFe_2O_4$ CNCs and NPs were also studied using the reaction of electrochemical reduction of hydrogen peroxide.

2. EXPERIMENT

2.1. Materials. All chemicals, including $FeCl_3 \cdot 6H_2O$, $ZnCl_2$, CH_3COONa , ethylene glycol, glycerol, hydrogen peroxide, and ethanol, were of analytical grade (Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co.) and used as received. Double distilled water was used in the experiments.

2.2. Synthesis of ZnFe₂O₄ Nanoparticles. In a typical synthesis, 15 mL of ethylene glycol (EG) solution of FeCl₃· $6H_2O$ (0.54 g) and 15 mL of EG solution of ZnCl₂ (0.14 g) were mixed, and then CH₃COONa (0.8 g) was added into the mixture under vigorous stirring. The homogeneous mixture was transferred into a 40 mL Teflon-lined autoclave, which was then tightly sealed and heated at 200 °C for 12 h in an oven. Subsequently, the autoclave was allowed to cool down to room temperature. The solid products were collected by centrifugation, washed separately with distilled water and ethanol for several times, and then dried in an oven at 60 °C for 6 h. The final solid product is named CNCs. The procedure for the preparation of ZnFe₂O₄ NPs was the same as that of CNCs, except for the use of the mixed solvent composed of glycerol and deionization water with volume ratio of 1:1.

2.3. Characterization. Powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns were recorded on a Bruker D8 Advance X-ray diffractometer equipped with graphite monochromatized Cu K α radiation ($\lambda = 0.154$ 18 nm) from 10° to 80° (2θ). Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and high-resolution TEM (HRTEM) images were collected on a JEOL JEM2010 TEM operated at 200 kV. Energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) was performed on a JEOL JEM2010 TEM, and electron energy-loss spectroscopy (EELS) was carried out on a FEI Tecnai F20 TEM. Magnetic properties were measured using a LDJ9500 vibrating sample magnetometer (VSM) at room temperature.

2.4. Electrochemical Sensing Measurement. Electrochemical sensing measurements were performed on a CHI760C electrochemical workstation using a three-electrode cell. Platinum wire and saturated calomel electrode were used respectively as counter electrode and reference electrode in aqueous phosphate buffer solutions (PBS, 0.1 M, pH 7.4). ZnFe₂O₄-modified gold disk electrodes (3 mm in diameter) were used as the working electrode. A 10 μ L aliquot of ZnFe₂O₄ suspension (1 mg mL⁻¹) ultrasonicated for 30 min was uniformly cast onto the surface of the gold electrode. The modified electrode was dried under ambient conditions before being used. Different amounts of H₂O₂ were injected into the phosphate buffer solution, and the experiments were conducted in a thoroughly anaerobic condition by bubbling with high-purity N₂ for 15 min.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Crystal Structure. Figure 1 shows the XRD patterns of the samples obtained with the synthesis time of 12 h. It can be





found that the diffraction peaks match well with the standard pattern of cubic $ZnFe_2O_4$ with a spinel structure (JCPDS No. 77-0011). The peaks at 30.2° , 35.5° , 42.9° , 53.3° , 56.8° , and $62.3^\circ 2\theta$ can be indexed to (220), (311), (400), (422), (511), and (440) planes of spinel $ZnFe_2O_4$, respectively. The average crystal sizes of the $ZnFe_2O_4$ CNCs and NPs calculated from the Scherrer equation were about 10.4 and 19.7 nm, respectively, based on the measurements of the full width at half-maximum (fwhm) of the (311) peaks.

3.2. Morphology and Microstructure. The morphology and microstructure of the ZnFe₂O₄ samples were investigated by TEM and HRTEM (Figures 2 and 3). As depicted in Figure 2A, the appearance of individual spheres as well as the dark areas among the overlapping samples confirmed the wellseparated submicrometer spherical structures of ZnFe₂O₄ CNCs. The size of the ZnFe₂O₄ CNCs was about 450 nm, as shown in the inset in Figure 2A, by counting more than 300 individual particles. The crystalline nature of the sample can be derived from the selected area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern of a single particle (Figure 2B). The appearance of the bright arc in the diffraction circle in the SAED pattern of a single CNC indicated that the spherical structures were formed by ZnFe₂O₄ nanocrystals in highly preferred orientations, and slight misalignments existed among the primary nanocrystals.^{7,8} According to the bright-field TEM image of a single cluster (Figure 2C), obviously rough surface should express the unique structure for the separated CNCs. As shown in Figure 2D, the HRTEM image of an edge of an individual particle boxed in Figure 2C showed that CNCs formed by the assembly of ZnFe₂O₄ nanosheets with dimensions of about 10 nm (Figure S1). This value was in good agreement with the XRD results (Figure 1a). Moreover, the parallel lattice fringes observed in the nanosheets in Figure 2D further proved that they adopted perfectly orientated attachment.³⁰ HRTEM images shown in Figure 2D,E and Figure S1 also confirmed the single-crystalline nature of the primary nanosheets. As depicted in Figure 2E, the atomic lattice fringes can be clearly observed, and the interplanar spacings were measured to be 2.68 and 2.99 Å, which were close to the $\{311\}$ and $\{022\}$ lattice planes of cubic $ZnFe_2O_4$, respectively. The angle between the crystalline planes observed in Figure 2E was 64.7°, in good agreement with the theoretical value.

Figure 2F shows the electron energy-loss spectroscopy (EELS) results. The thickness of the nanosheets was about 5.2 nm calculated from the formula $t = \lambda \ln(I_0/I_t)$,³¹ where t = thickness of the nanosheets, $\lambda =$ inelastic mean free path, $I_0 =$



Figure 2. TEM images (A, C), SAED pattern (B), and HRTEM images (D, E) of $ZnFe_2O_4$ CNCs. The inset in (A) is the size distribution of CNCs. (F) EELS spectrum of the nanosheets. (G) EDS spectrum acquired from a single CNC in (A).



Figure 3. TEM image (A), SAED pattern (C), and HRTEM images (B, D) of ZnFe₂O₄ NPs. The inset in (A) is the size distribution of NPs.

zero-loss peak, and I_t = total spectrum. Energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) results from a single CNC showed that it was mainly composed of Zn, Fe, and O (Figure 1G). Quantification of the EDS spectrum showed that the ratio of Zn, Fe, and O was about 1:2:4, suggesting that the CNCs had a chemical formula of ZnFe₂O₄.

When the solvent of the synthesis system was replaced by a mixture of glycerol and water, $ZnFe_2O_4$ NPs were obtained (Figure 3A). The average size of these NPs was about 20 nm as illustrated in the inset of Figure 3A, which was also consistent with the XRD results (Figure 1b). Some agglomerated NPs

formed probably because of magnetic dipole interactions between NPs³² and/or high surface energy of NPs. The SAED pattern showed some circle rings (Figure 3C), which can be well indexed to a cubic $ZnFe_2O_4$ phase. However, the SAED pattern was mainly composed of bright diffraction spots because it was obtained from many particles, indicating the well-crystalline nature of $ZnFe_2O_4$ NPs. This can be confirmed by the HRTEM characterization of a single NP (Figure 3B), in which single-crystalline nature of the $ZnFe_2O_4$ NPs was clearly observed. Figure 3D shows a magnified HRTEM image of the boxed region in Figure 3C. The spacings between the lattice

fringes shown in Figure 3D are 2.67 and 3.16 Å, which agree well with {311} and {022} planar spacings of cubic $ZnFe_2O_4$, respectively. Furthermore, the measured angle between these two planes is 64.1°, verifying the formation of cubic $ZnFe_2O_4$ phase. Furthermore, the EDS data of a single NP (Figure S2) also confirmed the chemical formula of $ZnFe_2O_4$ for NPs.

3.3. Evolution of the Intermediates. The intermediate products of these two different synthesis systems were collected and characterized by TEM (Figure 4) and XRD (Figure S3).



Figure 4. TEM images of the intermediates prepared from the EG (A-D) and mixed solvent (E-H) systems at 1 h (A, E), 2 h (B, F), 4 h (C, G), and 6 h (D, H).

The color change of these intermediate products can be clearly observed. For the EG system aimed to synthesize ZnFe₂O₄ CNCs, the intermediates were tan with the synthesis time no more than 4 h and then turned to dark brown with increasing the reaction time. However, the products turned black after solvothermal treatment for more than 2 h for the mixed solvent system. For the EG system, the sample obtained after 1 h of reaction was amorphous with irregular shapes as can be seen from Figure S3Aa and Figure 4A. After being heated for 2 h, amorphous spindle structures were obtained, as shown in Figure 4B and Figure S3Ab. The sample maintained a spindle shape after 4 h of reaction (Figure 4C). Particle aggregation is obvious. The XRD pattern of the sample obtained after 4 h of reaction (Figure S3Ac) can be indexed to a tetragonal akaganeite phase (β -FeOOH, JCPDS No. 75-1594), which is in accordance with the color of the product. Spherical ZnFe₂O₄ aggregates with a large size distribution formed with the synthesis time up to 6 h (Figure 4D). This can be verified by the XRD pattern (Figure S3Ad) in which a sharp peak at 35.5°, ascribed to the (311) plane of cubic ZnFe₂O₄ phase (JCPDS No. 77-0011), was observed. In the meantime, spindle structures almost disappeared. Small NPs were also observed and some gradually assembled to spherical-like aggregates. The main driving force for the aggregation of NPs can be generally attributed to van der Waals force and electrostatic interactions as well as the tendency for reducing the high surface energy through both the attachments among the primary NPs and the rotation of these primary NPs to give coherent lattice structure at grain boundaries.^{33–37} The formation of these spheres could be ascribed to the expense of small particles on the basis of Ostwald ripening.³⁸ Finally, nearly monodispersed ZnFe₂O₄ CNCs were obtained after 12 h reaction (Figure 2A).

For the mixed solvent system, mainly small particles were observed for the sample collected after 1 h (Figure 4F). The XRD result (Figure S3Ba) revealed this sample was poorly crystalline. After being heated for 2 h, nearly monodispersed NPs were observed, and all the peaks of the XRD patterns (Figure S3B) can be assigned to the standard pattern of cubic $ZnFe_2O_4$ phase (JCPDS No. 77-0011). The morphology of the sample changed slightly within 2-6 h (Figure 4F-H). But the particle size increased with the augment of reaction time, and the average particle sizes were 11.6, 16.2, and 20.5 nm for the samples collected at the reaction time of 2, 6, and 12 h, respectively. Namely, the size of ZnFe₂O₄ NPs can be easily regulated by simply adjusting the reaction time. The formation of ZnFe₂O₄ NPs could be explained as quick nucleation occurred, and the growth process reached a balance before small particles could assemble into spherical aggregates.³⁹ The existence of water in the solvent should improve the hydrolysis of metal ions at a relative high hydrothermal temperature,³ and addition of glycerol may inhibit the aggregation of nanoparticles. With the synthesis time elongated to 4 h or more, the nanocrystal growth was dominated by the Ostwald ripening process in which the formation of larger nanocrystals was ascribed to the dissolution of smaller nanocrystals with high surface energy.⁴⁰ Thus, the sample prepared in mixed solvents only consisted of NPs.

On the basis of the experimental results, it can be concluded that the formation mechanisms of $ZnFe_2O_4$ CNCs and nanoparticles are different (Scheme 1). The solvents can





influence the hydrolysis of the reagents and crystal growth of the targeted nanomaterials because of their molecular structures, different solubility, viscosity, density, diffusivity, and other heat and mass transport-related properties.⁴¹ The Ostwald ripening process also plays an important role in the formation of nanocrystals for both systems. For the synthesis of CNCs, it is suggested that the existence of sodium acetate in EG systems should favor the hydrolysis of ferric ions due to the existence of crystalline water in the started iron source, which can be deduced from the XRD patterns and color variations of the intermediates. Furthermore, EG might form chelates with metal ions, which led to the decrease of the hydrolysis reaction rate. A slow hydrolysis reaction rate should compensate for the formation of spindle structures.¹³ The decomposition of the chelates might produce water into the system. Both the solubility of the precursors and hydrolysis of metal ions were increased with the appearance of water. The primary crystals

were formed through dehydration under high temperature. Large particles were gradually formed with the elongation of synthesis time due to the Ostwald ripening. Furthermore, the particles with similar sizes repelled one from another,^{8,41} which led to the formation of separated CNCs, as shown in Scheme 1. For the synthesis of $ZnFe_2O_4$ NPs, glycerol served as the solvent and stabilization agent (Scheme 1). The presence of water induced the quick hydrolysis process of both metal ions at elevated temperature, which contributed to the quick nucleation, and the glycerol molecules capping on the surface of particles inhibited the growth process and aggregation among NPs. Therefore, separated particles with controllable sizes can be obtained without aggregation via control over the synthesis time. The formations of $ZnFe_2O_4$ NPs and CNCs were similar to those of magnetite and ferrite structures.²⁷

3.4. Magnetic Characterization. Magnetic properties of ZnFe_2O_4 samples were measured at room temperature at a magnetic field of $H = 1.4 \times 10^4$ Oe. Figure 5 shows



Figure 5. Magnetization hysteresis of $ZnFe_2O_4$ samples (A): CNCs (a) and NPs with the sizes of 11.6 nm (b), 16.2 nm (c), and 20.5 nm (d), and the magnified graph of A (B).

magnetization curves of ZnFe₂O₄ CNCs as well as three types of NPs with different sizes of 11.6, 16.2, and 20.5 nm at the full scale. As depicted in Figure 5B, all the ZnFe₂O₄ NPs presented very small hysteresis loops in the enlarged manner, indicating the ferromagnetic behavior for these samples. The values of saturation magnetization (M_s) were measured to be 49.3, 53.8, and 61.3 emu/g for $ZnFe_2O_4$ NPs with the sizes of 11.6, 16.2, and 20.5 nm, respectively. Namely, the M_s value increased with the nanoparticle size similar to those results reported in the literature.^{1,3,6,40} NPs with the size of 11.6 nm showed the lowest remnant and coercivity among all the NP samples. These could be ascribed to the size effect of NPs.^{6,8,42} Furthermore, the single crystalline nature of ZnFe₂O₄ NPs should contribute to the variation of magnetic properties with the size of the NPs.³ It can also be expected the existence of the superparamagnetic-ferromagnetic transition with continuous decrease of particle size. However, submicrometer CNCs composed of small nanosheets were superparamagnetic with zero remnant and zero coercivity.^{8,27} Generally, singlecrystalline magnetic particles with the same size as those in CNCs exhibited ferromagnetic behavior. The superparamagnetic nature of ZnFe₂O₄ CNCs could be attributed to both the small size of primary crystalline nanosheets and their oriented attachment structure.^{30,34} Furthermore, the magnetic interactions among crystallites were perturbed sufficiently.²³ The M_s value of CNCs was 25.4 emu/g higher than the reported values for ZnFe2O4 NPs at room temperature.43,44 This should be ascribed to the unique structure of CNCs including the size, well-crystalline nature, and arrangement of the clusters. Namely, the assembly of ZnFe₂O₄ nanosheets endowed

nanocrystal clusters with distinctive properties similar to those assemblies of CdTe NPs and Au nanocrystals.^{45–47} However, the M_s value of CNCs was lower than that of NPs with the size of 11.6 nm probably because of the thin nature of primary nanosheets of ZnFe₂O₄.

3.5. Electrochemical Sensing Performance. $ZnFe_2O_4$ CNCs and NPs were explored to prepare biosensors toward the electrochemical reduction of H_2O_2 .⁴⁸ Figure 6 shows the cyclic



Figure 6. Cyclic voltammograms of $ZnFe_2O_4$ -modified electrodes for CNCs (A) and NPs (B) at different H_2O_2 concentrations from (a) to (f): 0, 0.62, 1.22, 1.82, 2.42, and 3.02 mM.

voltammograms of the ZnFe2O4-modified gold electrodes in phosphate buffer solutions (PBS, pH 7.4) with the H_2O_2 concentrations of 0, 0.62, 1.22, 1.82, 2.44, and 3.02 mM. It can be seen that both samples show electrocatalytic activity toward the reduction of H₂O₂, and the peak currents increased gradually with the consecutive increase of H_2O_2 concentrations. For CNCs, the onset potentials for the reduction of H_2O_2 were -0.16 and -0.10 V for CNCs and NPs with the size of 11.6 nm, respectively, as shown in Figure 6A. It can also be derived that the maximum currents for CNCs and NPs were 14.9 and 16.9 μ A at the potentials of -0.73 and -0.46 V, respectively. These indicated the improvement of electrocatalytic ability of zinc ferrite compared with those hematite structures.^{49,50} As shown in the insets of Figure 6, the calibration curves depicted the amperometric response of the modified electrodes to H_2O_2 in PBS. These as-made sensors presented linear responses to H₂O₂ concentrations in the experimental range, with correlation coefficients of r = 0.998 and 0.999 for ZnFe₂O₄ CNCs and NPs, respectively. On the basis of these experiments, it is suggested that the electrochemical sensor containing dispersed NPs had a larger surface area accessible for H_2O_2 molecules than that of CNCs,⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰ which explained that 11.6 nm NPs-based sensor showed higher catalytic activity than submicrometer CNCs-based sensor.

To verify the effect of the crystal size on the electrochemical sensing performance, NPs with the size of 20.5 nm were used in the electrochemical reduction of H_2O_2 . The corresponding maximum peak current was 13.2 μ A under the same experimental conditions (Figure S4), which showed the worst electrocatalytic activity among the used ZnFe₂O₄ electrodes. This confirmed that smaller single crystalline NPs displayed more active sites for the reduction of H_2O_2 than the larger well-crystalline ones. It should be pointed out that the reduction peak for NPs-based electrodes was much sharper than that of CNCs-modified electrodes. This indicated that the crystallization of the nanosheets and their ordered assembly in ZnFe₂O₄ CNCs had important influences on the electrochemical sensing properties of CNCs-modified electrodes.²⁷

4. CONCLUSION

Size-tunable ZnFe2O4 nanoparticles can be synthesized solvothermally using a mixed glycerol/water solvent while submicrometer ZnFe2O4 colloidal nanocrystal clusters are obtained when ethylene glycol is used as the solvent. Thus, obtained ZnFe₂O₄ nanoparticles are of a single crystalline phase with ferromagnetic properties. The saturation magnetization, remnant, and coercivity values of such nanoparticles increase with particle size. However, submicrometer nanocrystal clusters possess superparamagnetic properties with a relative large saturation magnetization value. Mechanistic study suggested that the hydrolysis of metal ions in the synthesis system plays an important role in the formation of spinel nanoparticles. The formation of the colloidal nanocrystal clusters was due to the self-assembly of crystalline ZnFe2O4 nanosheets into spherical cluster in highly preferred orientations. The particle size and structure of the colloidal nanocrystal clusters and nanoparticles play important roles in their sensing properties toward the electrochemical catalysis of H₂O₂ in a physiological system. These results presented in this paper are helpful for the controlled synthesis of targeted magnetic nanomaterials by rational design.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

S Supporting Information

Figures S1–S4. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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Notes

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