The Laterals in Tibetan
Guillaume Jacques

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The laterals in Tibetan.¹
Guillaume JACQUES²


The evolution of laterals from proto-Tibetan to Classical Tibetan is equally complex. In this paper, we will firstly describe the system of laterals in Classical Tibetan (henceforth CT), and secondly offer a reconstruction for several consonant clusters which we believe come from proto-Tibetan laterals incorporating insights from other scholars as well as new proposals.

1. The laterals in Classical Tibetan

The structure of the syllable in CT is implicitly described in the writing system. Tibetan is famous amongst Sino-Tibetan languages for its unusually complex consonant clusters, that are paralleled only in the rGyalrongic languages within the family. Traditionally, the Tibetan grammarians distinguish four positions in initial consonant clusters:

1. sngon-'jug སྔོན་འཇུག་
   (g- d- b- m- ‘-
     བ་ད་བ་མ་འ་)
2. mgo-can མགོ་ཅན་
   (r- l- s-
     ར་ལ་ས་)
3. ming-gzhi མིང་གཞི་(radical)
4. ’dogs-can འདོགས་ཅན་
   (w- r- l- y-
     ཝ་ར་ལ་ཡ་)

The only position that must be filled with a consonant is the ming-gzhi, the other positions can be left empty. It is possible for both the sngon-'jug and the mgo-can positions to be filled at the same time, but then the sngon-'jug must be b- (groups such as *grt- are not found). Following the terminology used in Jacques (2004) for the rGyalrongic language Japhug, we will call preinitials both sngon-'jug and mgo-can, initial the ming-gzhi and medial the ’dogs-can. In Tibetan, unlike rGyalrongic languages, we do not find any process of partial reduplication that could help us to analyse the syllable structure. We must rely on the distribution of the phonemes to analyse the syllable.

A basic constraint on the CT syllable is that syllable with the same phoneme in the preinitial position and the medial position are not permitted (*rgr-, *lbl-): a similar constraint is found in Japhug (Jacques 2004: 72).

In CT, we find only two laterals, l- and lh-. The lateral l- appears in two kinds of clusters, as a

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¹ The Archaic Chinese reconstruction follow Sagart 1999, the Middle Chinese transcription is from Baxter (1992), and the Tamang data is from Mazaudon (1994-2003).
² This work was supported by a postdoctoral grant from the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, ref. PD007-U-03.
preinitial, and as a medial. We find l- as a preinitial in the groups presented in Table 1; the groups with only few examples are written in parenthesis, and the examples given for these groups are exhaustive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>l-</th>
<th>examples</th>
<th>bl-</th>
<th>examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>k-</td>
<td>lkug-pa མཁུར་lkog མ།</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g-</td>
<td>lgpa མས་lgang-pa མ་ལ།</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ng-</td>
<td>lnga མང་lnga-pa མ་ལ།</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c-</td>
<td>lca-ba མཆད་lci-ba མ།</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j-</td>
<td>ljags མིགས་ljid-pa མ་ལ།</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t-</td>
<td>lta པ་ltung པ་ལེ་lten མ།</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d-</td>
<td>ldab མད་lding མ་ldug མ།</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-</td>
<td>lpags མགས་</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b-</td>
<td>lba-ba མབད་lbu-ba མ།</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The groups with l- mgo-can in CT.

From Table 1 it is obvious that l- occurs as a preinitial only before stops, and that examples are fairly rare with grave initials (labials and velars). There is no l- prefix in CT. Finally, the l-preinitial is incompatible with any medial: groups such as *lgr- or *lby- are unfound in the language.

The phoneme l- also occurs in the ‘dogs-can’ position; these cases have been summarized in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0-</th>
<th>example</th>
<th>b-</th>
<th>example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>k-</td>
<td>kl- klad མཁ་klu མ་klog མ།</td>
<td></td>
<td>(bkl-) only past / future tense forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g-</td>
<td>gl- glang མང་gling མ་glu མ།</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b-</td>
<td>bl- bla པ་blug པ་bło མ།</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>z-</td>
<td>zl- zla མ་zlug མ་zlog མ།</td>
<td></td>
<td>(bzl-) only past / future tense forms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 This verb is the only genuine root with this cluster, the rest being past and future tense of verbs in lt- such as blta, bltabs, bltos etc.
Table 2: The groups with -l- ‘dogs-can’ in CT.

The implicit analysis given by the Tibetan script is that in these groups -l- is always medial. However, as we have already mentioned, b- / g- can fill the sngon-'jug position and r- / s- can fill the mgo-can position: in the four groups gl-, bl-, rl-, sl- we could assume that g-, b-, r-, s- are preinitials when -l- is initial. In Japhug (Jacques and Chen 2004, Jacques 2004), the patterns of partial reduplication allow us to disambiguate this kind of clusters: in partial reduplication, the medial consonant is dropped, but no such morphological process exists in CT.

Beyer (1992: 74-78) has argued that in all these clusters except zl-, -l- is the real initial, his main reason being that no preinitial but b- can be added before these clusters: *skl-, *rgl- are unfound in the language. This insight comes from Tibetan grammarians.

The consonant lh- is analysed as a group l + h, l being mgo-can, but most researchers believe that this represents only a voiceless lateral (Sun 2003: 787 presents a divergent view).

2. Historical reconstruction of Tibetan laterals.

In order to reconstruct the proto-system of Tibetan lateral, we have two sets of data at our disposal: firstly, the internal data, consisting of the alternations observed in word families containing laterals and internal reconstruction based on the distribution of the phonemes, and the external data, in particular the comparison with closely related languages such as Tamang or Bumthang.

If we exclude the groups with l- or hl- as a medial / initial in CT, there are many other series of group coming from laterals: zh-, lc-, lj-, rj-, md-, ‘d-, lt-, ld-, phy- and by-.

2.1 The origins of zh- and lj-.

The lateral origin of zh- is proven by external comparison. This fricative comes from a palatalized lateral. This has been noted earlier by Benedict (1972), Gong (1977), Coblin (1986) and Michaïlovsky and Mazaudon (1994).

The first to propose that zh- comes from a lateral was Benedict (1972: 33 - footnote 104), but only for the numeral “four”. His interpretation was that *llyi > lji in CT, but that *blji became *bzhi because either *blji or *bji are impossible syllables in CT. Gong (1977 [2002]: 391) proposed a similar rule according to which *ly- becomes zh- before preinitials b- and g- (*gly- > gzh-, *bly- > bzh-).

Coblin (1986: 15) also proposed that *ly- become zh- in CT, but his proto-Tibetan *ly- also
becomes lj- in other examples (ljags “tongue hon.”). This is in fact the implicit reason why Gong did not extend his rule *ly- > zh- to examples without a preinitial: one cannot give two outcomes for one reconstruction in proto-Tibetan.

A lateral origin for zh- is confirmed by word families within Tibetan:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>zh-</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>lateral</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gzhogs</td>
<td>side</td>
<td>logs</td>
<td>side</td>
<td>Gong 1977 [2002 : 391]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bzheng</td>
<td>construct; establish (hon.)</td>
<td>lang</td>
<td>rise</td>
<td>Gong 1977 [2002 : 394]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bzha</td>
<td>humidity</td>
<td>rlon, brlan</td>
<td>wet</td>
<td>Jacques 2004 : 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gzhongs</td>
<td>region4</td>
<td>ljongs</td>
<td>region</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Examples of zh- coming from a lateral (word families).

Michailovsky and Mazaudon (1994 : 553), based on data from Bumthang, suggest that “the conditioning of the differential treatment *l > lj and *l > zh in WT might have been the presence / absence of a voiceless prefix, as reflected by the high/low tone of the Kurtoep reflexes”. They present the data in Table 4 to support their hypothesis, comparing CT to the Bumthang dialect Kurtoep and other related languages such as mTsho-sna mon-ba (Lun 1986).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tibetan</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Kurtoep</th>
<th>mTsho-sna</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bzhi</td>
<td>four</td>
<td>ble</td>
<td>pi43</td>
<td>四 *pS-lj</td>
<td>Benedict 1972 : 94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gzhu</td>
<td>bow</td>
<td>⁴limiʔ</td>
<td>li13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhing-ka</td>
<td>field</td>
<td>⁴ley</td>
<td>leŋ13</td>
<td></td>
<td>*lŋ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhim-po</td>
<td>tasty</td>
<td>⁴lembu</td>
<td>lim13 po53</td>
<td>四 *lim</td>
<td>Coblin 1986 : 145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lji-ba</td>
<td>flee</td>
<td>ˡlija</td>
<td>liu53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ljid-po</td>
<td>heavy</td>
<td>ˡjit</td>
<td>li53 po53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: The origin of lj- and zh- in CT (comparison with Bumthang).

These comparisons are quite convincing, but it is not necessary to suppose that the prefix was voiceless to explain the high tone in Bumthang languages. In some Tibetan dialects that lost preinitials, sonorant preinitials of CT yield high tone, as in the Lhasa dialect (syllables coming from etyma with clusters like mn-, mng-, rl- in CT have high tone in this dialect). Our solution is to reconstruct *ly > lj- when preceded by a sonorant: *n-ly > lj-, *m-ly- > mj- and *r-ly- > rj-. We can add the following examples to those of Table 4:

4 These words are unrelated to gshongs « narrow valley », a deverbal noun (caused by –s suffix) from the verb gshong-ba « to hollow out ».
Table 5: Examples of lj- / rj- / mj- coming from clusters with lateral initials.

The group brj- comes from *m-rly- in « to forget », the *m being denasalised in this position (there is no group *mrj- in CT). For the word rje “lord”, we must reconstruct different prototypes in proto-Tibetan and proto-Tamangic, one with preinitial *r-, and the other with *g-.

Not all zh-, though, come from laterals, as some of these belong to word families with stops or fricatives. Many examples can be found in Gong 1977:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>zh-</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>stop / fricative</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bzhugs བཞུགས་</td>
<td>to remain (hon.)</td>
<td>'dug ཀདུག་</td>
<td>to remain, to stay</td>
<td>Gong 1977 [2002 : 390]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bzhed བཞེད་</td>
<td>to wish (hon.)</td>
<td>'dod ཀདོད་</td>
<td>to wish, to like</td>
<td>Gong 1977 [2002 : 390]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bzhes བཞེས་</td>
<td>to take (as of food, clothe), food</td>
<td>za བ་</td>
<td>to eat</td>
<td>Gong 1977 [2002 : 391]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Examples of zh- not coming from laterals.

Also, Simon (1930 : 30) suggested that j- becomes zh- when preceded by b- and g- : *g-dy- > gzh- as in gzhom, future of 'joms “to destroy, to conquer” (where *dy- > j-, following Koerber’s law).

In the present work, we will reconstruct *ly- in proto-Tibetan for all the zh- coming from a lateral, regardless of whether they are prefixed or not. This reconstruction is possible since no group *ly- exists in CT.

2.2 The reconstruction of lc-

There is little controversy on the reconstruction of this group in proto-Tibetan. All authors from Benedict (1972 : 39, footnote 127) have agreed that *hly- > lc-.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tibetan</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Tamang</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lcags ལྕགས་</td>
<td>iron</td>
<td>铁 <em>b</em>lhik</td>
<td>Chang 1972</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lcang-ma ལྕང་མ་</td>
<td>willow</td>
<td>杨 <em>b</em>laŋ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lci-ba ལྕི་བ་</td>
<td>excrement</td>
<td>尿 <em>b</em>liŋʔ</td>
<td>1kli  Benedict (1972 : 185)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Examples of lc- corresponding to laterals in other languages.

We will adopt this reconstruction. However, not all cases of lc- come from *lhy-, eg: bltams-pa “to give birth to a child” / lcam “wife (hon.)”, with a honorific -y- infix (*lt-y-am > lcam), as shown by Gong 1977 [2002 : 391] (for *ty > c- in CT, see Koerber 1935).

2.3 The reconstruction of ‘d- / md-

It was recognized in Benedict (1972 : 111) that the Tibetan word mda “arrow” corresponded to words with laterals in other languages; such as Burmese mra:; but the explanation as a fortition of the lateral was not explicitly given: *ml- > md-.

Gong (2001 [2002: 198]) provides more evidence for this change in word families:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>md-</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>lateral (medial / initial)</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mdongs མདོངས་</td>
<td>blind</td>
<td>ldon-pa ལྡོང་པ་ long ལོང་</td>
<td>id.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mdan-pa མདན་</td>
<td>cheek</td>
<td>ldan-pa ལྡན་</td>
<td>id.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Examples of md- < *ml-

Since no cluster *ml- exists in CT, this explanation fits very well. As we have another nasal preinitial written with ‘- in CT, it is possible to reconstruct a group *nl-. Li (1933) proposed that this *n-l- (*‘l in his notation) yields ld- through *d-l- in CT. This hypothesis was accepted by Gong (2000, 2001) and Coblin (1986). However, we notice that the group ‘d- also corresponds to laterals, as can be seen in Table 9.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tibetan</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Other languages</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>’dab-ma འདབ་མ་</td>
<td>leaf (also ldebs ལེབས་ lheb ལྷེབ་)</td>
<td>鬚 <em>b</em>lap</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jin (2001 : 142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>’dom འདོམ་</td>
<td>two outstreched arms</td>
<td>竹 <em>b</em>lam</td>
<td>Bur. lam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Examples of ‘d- < *nl-

Therefore, we suggest that ‘d- comes from *nl- in some cases, and this change is fully parallel to md- < *ml-. Another reconstruction will be necessary for ld-.
2.4 The reconstruction of lt- and ld-

The group lt- seems to come very rarely from a group with lateral initial. The only clear example from word families is *ltung, *ltungs «to fall» that is related to *lhung, *lhungs of same meaning.

The comparative evidence is not clear. The comparison of *lteb, *bltabs “to fold” with Chinese ㄦ tsyep < *hl-lip was proposed by Simon (1929 : 240) and Gong (1980 : 146) and the related word *ldab, *blabs “to repeat” with Chinese ㄤ dep < *hlip by Shafer (1966 : 14.12), Benedict (1972 : 184), Coblin (1986 : 124). Though it is not sure that this comparison is acceptable, given the discrepancy in vowels and the fact that we do not find laterals in cognates from other languages (eg.: Burmese thap), this family could provide an example of lt- coming from a group with lateral initial (the Chinese data suggest *t-l- > lt-).

On the other, it is widely acknowledged that ld- comes from a group with lateral origin. Li Simon (1930 : 30-31) proposed the change *d-l- > ld-, and Fang-kuei (1933) proposed to reconstruct ld- as *n-l- > *d-l-. Li’s view is also held by Coblin (1986) and Gong (1980, 2000, 2001). There are many pieces of evidence from word families:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ld-</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>lateral (medial / initial)</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ldong-ba སྒོང་བ།</td>
<td>blind people</td>
<td>long སྒོང་ longs སྒོངས་</td>
<td>to be blind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ldug སྒོན་ ldugs སྒོནས་</td>
<td>to pour in</td>
<td>blug སྒོན་ blugs སྒོནས་</td>
<td>id.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ldob སྒོབ་ ldobs སྒོབས་</td>
<td>to know, to understand</td>
<td>slob སྒོབ་ bslabs སྒོབས་</td>
<td>teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ldang སྒོན་ ldangs སྒོནས་</td>
<td>to get up, to rise, to be enough</td>
<td>lang སྒོན་ langs སྒོནས་</td>
<td>to rise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10 : Examples of ld- coming from groups with lateral initial.

Given that *n-l- > *d- in our reconstruction, we suggest to adopt *d-l- > ld-. As for lt-, we follow Li (1933: 149) in reconstructing *d-lh- > lt- to explain to word family *ltung / *lhung.

2.5 The reconstruction of phy-

Gong (1977 [2002: 392]) noticed three examples of word families where phy- alternates with l-, and we can provide here some more examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>phy-</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>lateral</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>phyag གུ་</td>
<td>hand (hon.)</td>
<td>lag ག་</td>
<td>hand</td>
<td>Gong (1977 [2002: 392])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phyogs གུ་</td>
<td>side</td>
<td>logs གུ་</td>
<td>id.</td>
<td>Gong (1977 [2002: 392])</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 11: Examples of phy- < *pl-

Gong’s solution to explain these word families is to suppose two parallel changes *plh- > l- and *phly- > phy-. For example, *phlak > lag and *phlyak > phyag). Since the group *plh- do not exist in CT, this explanation is consistent with the data. However, a simpler approach seems preferable: a change *pl- > phy-. In this view, phyag and lag differ not by a *-y- infix, but by a *p- prefix. We also disagree with Gong’s later view (2001 [2002: 205]) that *pl- > lp- in the word lpags “skin”.

Unlike *pl-, the group bl- is attested in Tibetan. However, there is no syllable beginning in *bli (*bli, *blig, *blid etc.). We found one example of the group by- having word family relationship with word having lateral initial.

Table 12: One example of *bli- > byi-

We reconstruct therefore a change *bli > byi.

These two changes probably took place after *ly- > zh-, otherwise it would be difficult to explain why *bli- > byi- while *blyi- > bzhi-: if the changes had happened at the same time, we would have expected *bly- to change to by- also.

3. Conclusion

The reconstructions of Proto-Tibetan proposed in this paper can be summarized in Table 13.

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5 This word has been compared to Chinese 富 * bpuk (Simon 1929: #46; Shafer 1966: 4; Coblin 1986: 158), but this comparison is most certainly incorrect given the discrepancy in initial (*pluk vs. *bpuk); besides, it is not sure which meaning, of “cattle” and of “wealth”, is the oldest. Gong (1995) also rejected this comparison on other grounds (the vocalism of the rime in Chinese).
Table 13: Evolution of groups with laterals from Proto-Tibetan to Classical Tibetan

The reconstruction proposed here differs slightly from previous works: in particular, the rules *n-l- > 'd-, *n-ly- > lj- and *pl- > phyi- have not been proposed elsewhere.

The status of the reconstructed *-y- medial might be further investigated. Benedict (1972: p.33 footnote 104, also p.107) suggested that *li > *lyi > lji in Tibetan, in other words, that laterals palatalised before –i. This idea is interesting, especially where we consider that other dental consonants seem to have been through a similar change. However, the origin of words where l- did not palatalise before –i needs to be explained:

Table 13: Evolution of groups with laterals from Proto-Tibetan to Classical Tibetan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reconstruction</th>
<th>Tibetan Form</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*cly-</td>
<td>bzh-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*gly-</td>
<td>gjh-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*n-ly</td>
<td>lj-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*m-ly-</td>
<td>mj-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*r-ly</td>
<td>ri-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*n-l-</td>
<td>'d-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*m-l-</td>
<td>md-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*d-l</td>
<td>ld-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*d-hl</td>
<td>lt-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*pl-</td>
<td>phy-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*bli-</td>
<td>byi-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14: Non-palatalised laterals before the vowel –i in Tibetan.

One clue might be that palatalisation is hindered by a preinitial r-, so that *rli- cannot change

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6 The initial *n has been almost systematically palatalised before –i (*ni > nyi), the only exceptions being ni “focus particle” and na-ning “last year”. With *t- and *d-, the change occurred in some words, like gcig “one” coming from *g-tyik, with *ty- > c- / ch- as proposed by Koerber 1935), but not in many others, like mthil “middle”.

---
to *rlyi- > rji- 7, but otherwise there is not explanation why l- does not palatalize in some cases. For example, *liŋ is not palatalized in lings-pa “hunter” (cognate with Chinese 田 den < *liŋ “to hunt”) but is palatalized in zhing-ka “field” (Chinese 田 den < *liŋ “field”). This might be the result of dialect mixture in proto-Tibetan.

However, a comprehensive study of palatalization in proto-Tibetan and Tibetan dialects would be needed to settle the issue, and lies beyond the scope of this paper.

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--- The group *rdi- seems also no to have palatalised into rji-, for there are many roots with rdi- in CT.

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