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# **STRUGGLE FOR SUPREMACY: ARMED CONFLICTS IN THE EASTERN PETEN DURING THE LATE CLASSIC PERIOD**

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## **Abstract**

Throughout the Classic period the eastern central lowlands have been the theatre of recurrent warfare pitting one city-state against another. In the midst of this turmoil the glyphic texts of Naranjo assume a privileged position since they recount the conflicts that embroiled its rulers against its neighbors. The role that Tikal and the great Snake polity of the north played in the machinations of the eastern Peten are also considered. That warfare involved surprise attacks and tactics is made evident by key examples and an argument is made that armed conflicts were and continue to be primarily politically and economically motivated.

## **Resumen**

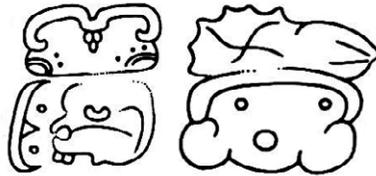
A través del período Clásico la zona de las Tierras Bajas Centrales orientales fue el teatro de guerras recurrentes en las que se enfrentaron una contra otra ciudad-estado. En el contexto de este turbulento ambiente los textos jeroglíficos de Naranjo son de mucha importancia puesto que dan cuenta de los conflictos que involucraron a sus gobernantes contra sus vecinos. El papel que desempeñaron en la historia de El Peten Tikal y la importante dinastía de la Serpiente del norte está también considerado en el presente artículo. Que la guerra implicó tácticas y ataques sorpresivos es un hecho evidente por ejemplos claves, al igual que los conflictos armados fueron y continúan siendo ocasionados por causas políticas y económicas.

During most of the Late Classic period, the eastern Peten was a recurrent theater of military campaigns. Due to its geopolitical location in the *mundo maya*, eastern Peten experienced the pros and cons of being situated at the political and cultural crossroads of the region. Parallel to other areas in the world where people, products, and politics traverse, eastern Peten was the meeting point of influences from the northern Lowlands, from central and southern Peten, as well as from the Caribbean (along with its avenue to central Maya Lowlands, the Belize River). Most of the belligerent past of this region concentrates, at least according to the written records of the ancient Maya themselves, around the ancient city-states of Naranjo and Caracol. The following is a review and a re-analysis of the bellicose history in the area.

The first armed conflicts recorded in the history of Naranjo begin during the reign of “Aj Wosal” *Chan K'inich* (or, possibly, *Ajasaj Chan K'inich*, as proposed by Christophe Helmke; see Helmke and Kettunen 2011). This, of course, does not mean that there were no wars before this, but the first bloodshed recorded at Naranjo is during the 6<sup>th</sup> century (as recorded on Altar 1, see Figure 1). At this

time Naranjo, ruled by “Aj Wosal”, was politically tied and under the sway of the emerging Snake Polity of the north, as recorded on Stela 25 (Martin and Grube 2000: 72). The Inauguration of “Aj Wosal” in AD 546 took place under the supervision of *K’altuun Hix* of the Snake Polity (Naranjo Stela 25; 9.5.12.0.4 – 6 K’an, 2 Sip), possibly established at Dzibanche at this point in time (see Martin and Grube 2000: 103; Grube 2004a; Velásquez García 2005).

The fact remains that we have a grisly evidence of the outcome of an armed conflict mentioned on Altar 1, similar to the records at Dos Pilas and Comalcalco (Lacadena and Zender 2001), where “bones and skulls have been piled up and blood has been spilled”:



Naranjo, Altar 1: G12-H1 (drawing by Ian Graham)

### WITZ-U-JOL NAB-K’IK’/CH’ICH’

*witz[aj]/witz[iij] ujol[il] na[h]b[aj] [u]k’ik’[el]/[u]ch’ich’[el]*

*witz[-aj/-iij]-Ø u-jol[-il] nahb[-aj]-Ø [u-]k’ik’/ch’ich’[-el]*

mountain[-THM.IVD]-3SA 3SE-skull[-POSS] pool[-THM.IVD]-3SA [3SE-]blood[-IP]

This is followed by an enigmatic sign (at I1) that, to my knowledge, still eludes decipherment. The sign appears syntactically right after the paired piling-of-skulls and pooling-of-blood expression (akin to a *difrasismo* but being a full sentence of its own right) and before the victim of the incident, the equally enigmatic site dubbed “Ko-Bent-Cauac” (or “Ko-Bent-Kawak”) that will again be mentioned below. The sign is composed of a main sign **CHAN** for “sky” and four adjoining **IK’** or “wind” signs. One interpretation of this sign is ‘hurricane’ (see Houston 2006). However, the exact meaning of this sign in the narrative context of Altar 1 still eludes decipherment.

After the seemingly splendid reign of “Aj Wosal”, things start going wrong in the state of Naranjo. This is when Caracol appears in the picture, attacking the aforementioned “Ko-Bent-Kawak” and the army of Naranjo in May and August of AD 626 (see Figure 2), Tzam in May AD 627 (see Figure 3), and finally (in December AD 631) the city of Naranjo itself (see Figure 4), ruled at the time by a king whose name appears to be *K’uxaj* (see Tokovinine and Fialko 2007: 17). This decisive battle, the “star-war” against Naranjo (Hieroglyphic Stairway 1: Step VI) is undertaken by *Yuknom* “Head” of the Snake Polity, now clearly – and for the first time without doubt – established at Calakmul, rather than Dzibanche. The long distance (ca. 150 km) between the sites speaks of the great influence of the emerging northern mega-power of Calakmul.

The Hieroglyphic Stair of Naranjo, almost certainly originally from Caracol (see Martin and Grube 2000: 72), reveals yet another high military leader – or even a hitherto unknown king of Naranjo (see Figure 5). His name is not fully legible but it starts with, what appears to be, the signs for **18** and **BAH**, most likely for *waxaklajun ubaah*, followed by a set of illegible signs. This may well be the first part of a similar name that we find later in the history of Naranjo, in the name of *Waxaklajun Ubah K’awil* – although here it is clearly not a namesake of this 9<sup>th</sup> century ruler. Reminiscent of the faith of *K’uxaj*, his army was also defeated by *Yuknom* “Head” of Calakmul. Interestingly, this episode took place on

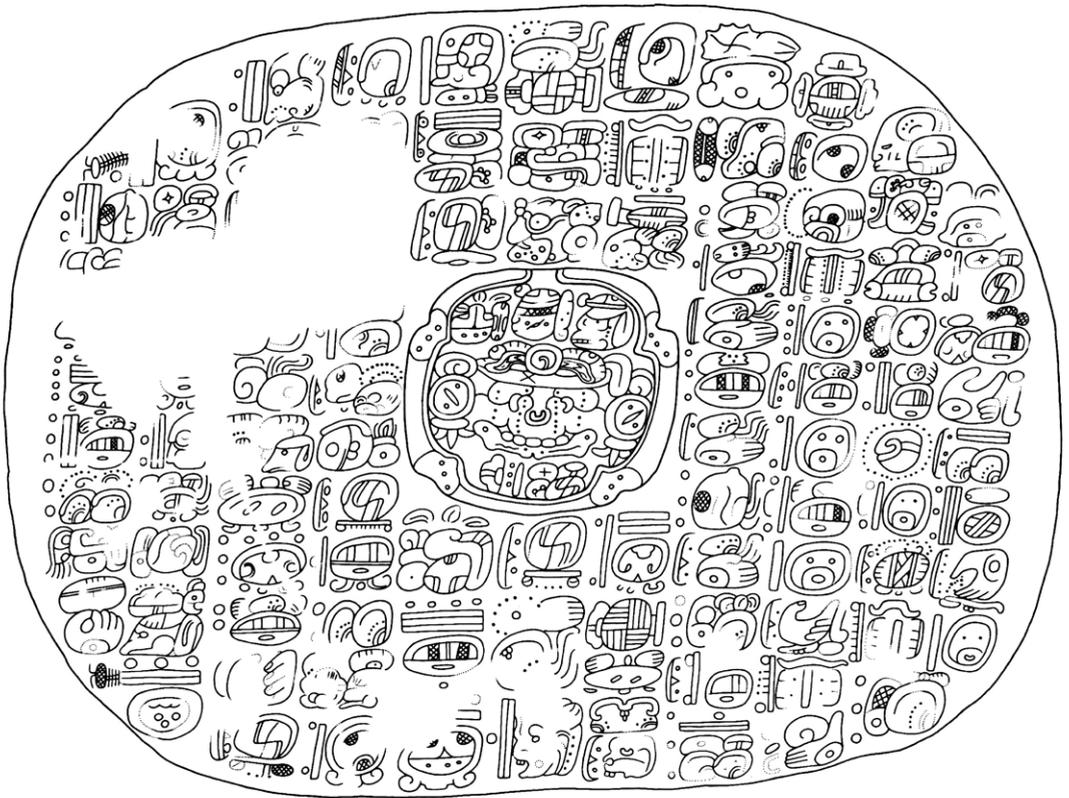


Fig. 1. Naranjo, Altar 1 (drawing by Ian Graham).

the seating of Pop (i.e., New Year's Eve), which might not be a coincidence (see the Tikal–Naranjo war below) (Zender 2005: 14).

Around and after the AD 631 and 636 blows, Naranjo most likely suffers a series of military defeats. However, fifty years later, deep in the dry season of AD 680, the tide is turning again and Naranjo strikes back. The Naranjo army under the command of their king *K'ahk' Xiw? Chan Chahk* inflicts a “star-war” against Caracol, recorded on the stucco texts of Structure B16 at Caracol (see Figure 2) (Grube 2004b: 198-199).

The king of Caracol, *K'ahk' Ujol K'inich II*, flees the city, but returns 168 days later in August 680 to Uxwitza', or Caracol (Martin and Grube 2000: 94-95). We have no records indicating as to where he took cover during and after the conflict, but the secondary satellite settlements around Caracol are good candidates. One of these, La Rejolla, has a statement on its stela that reveals that the king resided there one k'atun before the battle.

The seemingly glorious battle instigated by *K'ahk' Xiw? Chan Chahk* in AD 680, did not help Naranjo to keep the rhythm of the ever changing politics of the Late Classic. Two years after the battle, in August 27<sup>th</sup> AD 682, an “arrival” of a lady by the name of “Six Sky” took place at Naranjo (Martin and Grube 2000: 74). This “arrival”, as we know from other sources, is usually tied with a change in the dynastic order (see, e.g. Stuart 2000).

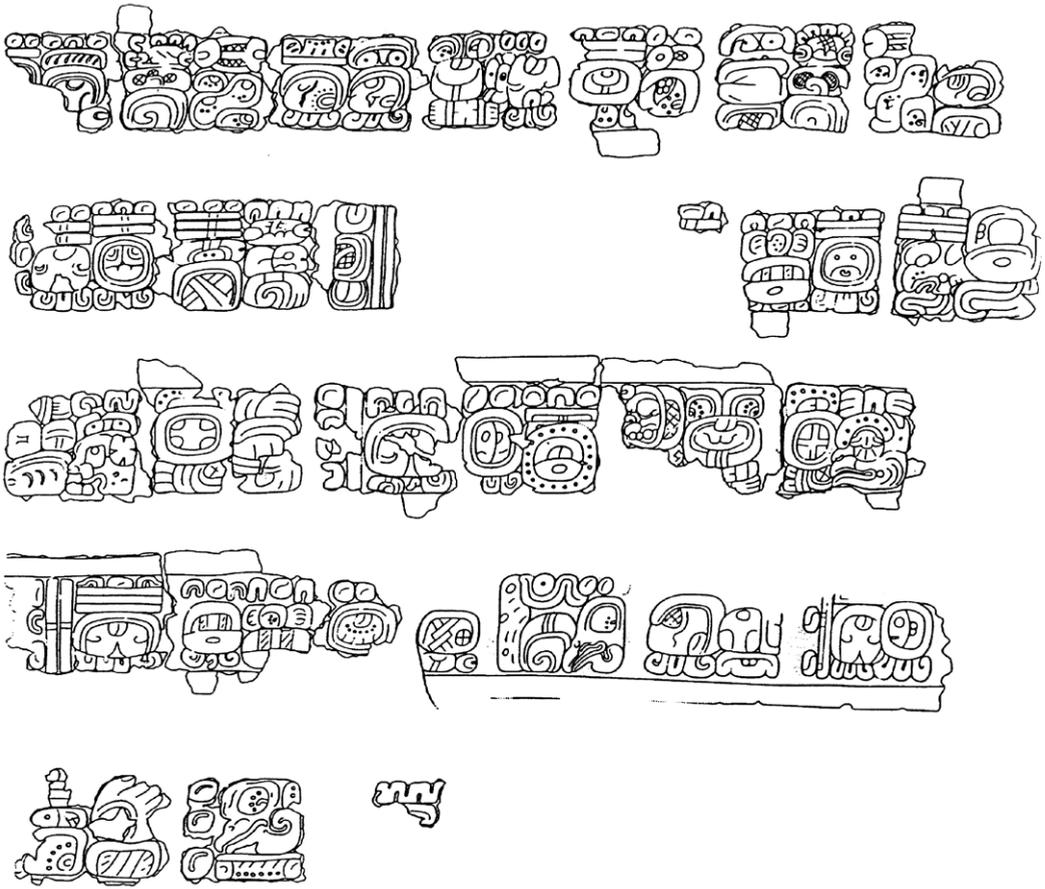


Fig. 2. Caracol, Structure B16 stucco texts (drawing by Nikolai Grube).

Roughly five years after the arrival of Lady Six Sky, *K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chahk* is born. Five years after that, he accedes to power (Stela 22: 9.13.1.3.19, 5 Kawak 2 Xul; see Figure 2). Right after the accession of *K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chahk*, Naranjo embarks on a series of military campaigns in its immediate neighborhood – at least we can assume that these places are close to Naranjo. It is possible that these satellite states used to be under the control of Naranjo but were lost during the mayhem of the 7<sup>th</sup> century (see Martin and Grube 2000: 76). Naranjo ‘brings down’ (*jubuy*) K’inichil? Chab, ‘burns’ (*puluy*) Tubal and Bital, ‘brings down’ ‘he of Mutul’, capturing *Siyaj K'awiil*, at “Yellow Rabbit” place, an unidentified location in eastern Peten.

The war histories continue with the burning of Kokom, K’anjol(?), K’inichil Chab, and K’anwitznal (Ucanal), the city of *Itzam Bahlam*. The fate of the Ucanal lords is to repeat itself 100 years later when *K'inich Joy K'awil* and *Tum Yohl K'inich* of Caracol capture the king of Ucanal (and Bital), as seen and read on Altar 23 of Caracol (see Chase *et al.* 1991: 7-11; Grube 1994: 84; Helmke *et al.* 2006: 7).

The burning of Ucanal is said to have been ordained by *K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chahk*, but being 10 years of age at that point in time, he is probably not taking part in the actual conflict. As a matter of fact, it is the mother of *K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chahk*, Lady “Six Sky”, who is in control (along with her



Fig. 3. Caracol, Stela 3: C17-D20 (drawing by Carl Beetz).

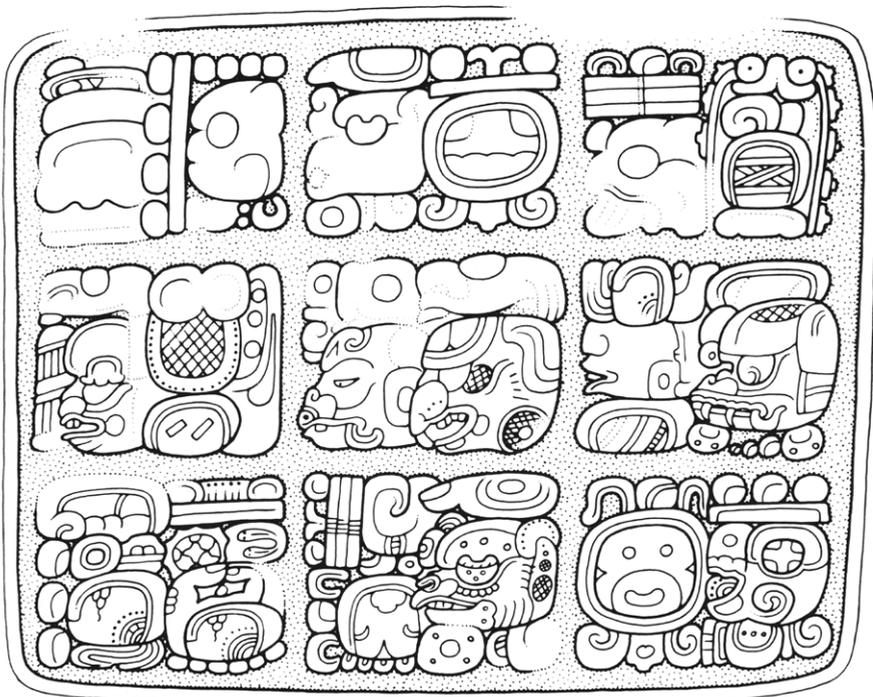


Fig. 4. Naranjo, Hieroglyphic Stairway, Step VI (drawing by Ian Graham).

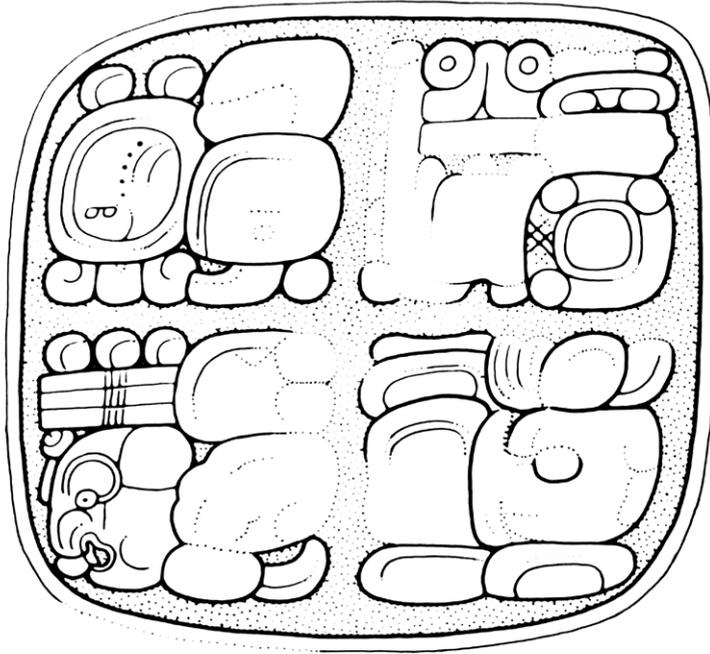


Fig. 5. Naranjo, Hieroglyphic Stairway, Step I  
(drawing by Ian Graham)

court) at this stage in the history of Naranjo, shown prominently stumbling on a war captive from K'inichil Chab on Stela 24 (Martin and Grube 2000: 75-76).

Although *K'ahk'Tiliw Chan Chahk* is mentioned on Stela 22 as being in charge of the campaign against Ucanal, he is probably not taking part actively in the expansionist politics of Naranjo before reaching adulthood. However, at the age of 18, *K'ahk'Tiliw Chan Chahk* is proclaimed to have entered Yootz (Naranjo Stela 21), extending the limits of his kingdom towards north. After that, in AD 710, he burns Yaxa' (Stela 23) and in AD 714 Sakha' (Stela 30) (see Martin and Grube 2000: 76).

After the famed reign of *K'ahk'Tiliw Chan Chahk*, Naranjo gets into trouble with Tikal. The tide had already turned with Calakmul in August 5, AD 695 when *Jasaw Chan K'awiil* of Tikal brought down the army of *Yich'aak K'ahk'* of Calakmul. In AD 744 it was Naranjo's turn when *Yax Mayuy Chan Chahk* was taken captive by *Yik'in Chan K'awiil* of Tikal (Martin 1996).

The interesting part of this campaign is that it has all the signs of a "strategic interdiction" – to use modern military terminology. The Tikal army reached Naranjo overnight, leaving a specific (but as of yet unidentified) area in the Tikal kingdom on the seating of

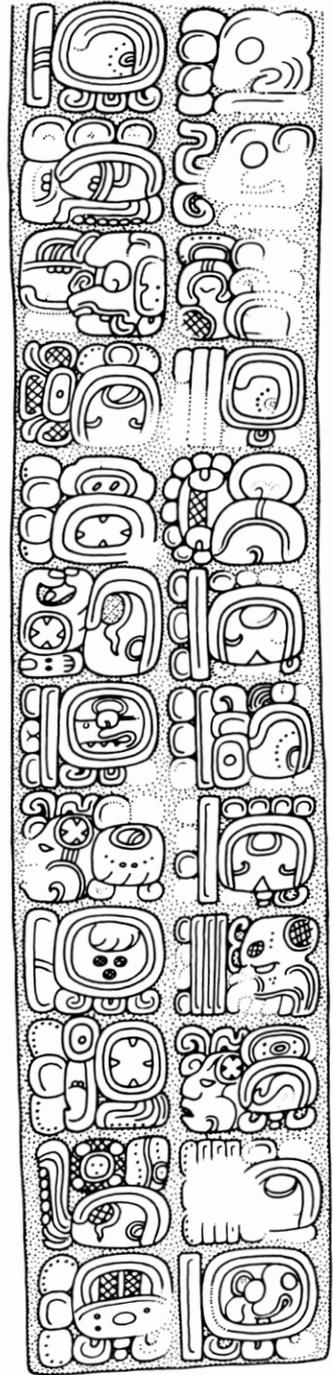


Fig. 6. Naranjo Stela 22: E9-F20 (drawing by Ian Graham).

Pop (i.e., New Year's Eve) and arriving in Naranjo the following day (after overnighing at Tubal) on 1 Pop, inflicting a star-war on the city of Naranjo (Wak Chabnal) itself, while the defenders of the city might not have been that sober (compare to the warfare reference on Naranjo Hieroglyphic Stair discussed above) (Zender 2005: 14-15).

This surprise attack is not unique in the military history of the world. It is, for example, somewhat analogous to the so-called Tet Offensive that took place during the Vietnam War, where regular and irregular elements of the People's Army of Vietnam attacked the armies of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and United States early morning on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1968. Although the offensive was not a success in the end, it was a surprise attack that stunned the opponent in the beginning of the offensive. Other similar surprise attacks include the so-called Yom Kippur War of 1973, during the Jewish religious holiday. Strategic surprise attacks like these are known since the writings of Sun Tzu (2008) from the first millennium BC onwards – and they continue to survive in modern military manuals, along with one of the nine principles of the US Army doctrine (United States Army Field Manual of Military Operations 2001; FM-3-0, sections 4-32 to 4-39). As far as I am concerned, principles of surprise attacks like these can be applied to any army any given time in the world, including Tikal and Naranjo in the 8<sup>th</sup> century: “It is not essential to take the adversary or enemy completely unaware; it is only necessary that he become aware too late to react effectively. Factors contributing to surprise include speed, information superiority, and asymmetry.” (ibid.).

Waging war in and around Naranjo did not end here. *Itzamnaj K'awil* attacks Yaxa' and its surroundings towards the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. However, the last known king of the site, *Waxaklajun Ubah K'awil* (accession AD 814) shows less bellicose themes on his Stela 32 (which, of course, does not mean that he did not wage wars – especially as the setting of the stela is at Ucanal rather than at Naranjo). The last known stela from Naranjo (Stela 9) from around AD 830 shows a theme we are already familiar with at Naranjo: The ruler standing on a captive. Furthermore, it is possible that Naranjo expanded its power to Xunantunich as there appears to be a Naranjo Emblem Glyph on one of its stelae (Helmke *et al.* 2010: 109-110).

All the episodes explained above need to be set into a larger political context. Maya warfare, at least to me, is primarily politically and economically motivated. As Karl von Clausewitz has said, “War is never an isolated act”. Whether or not we can – or want to – apply Western ideas to ancient Maya warfare, the fact remains that armed conflicts had far-reaching repercussions in the Maya area, both in time and space. The Kingdom of Naranjo, positioned at the geopolitical crossroads of the Late Classic (not unlike Poland, being historically sandwiched between Prussia/Germany and Russia), provides a good case. Since the twilight of the Early Classic, the fate of Naranjo was tied with the Snake Kingdom to the north, later to intertwine itself with the politics involving Dos Pilas to the southwest, waging war against Caracol to the south, Tikal and Yaxha to the west, while facing the Belize River, the gateway to the Caribbean, to the east. Naranjo happened to be in the middle of all this, struggling for supremacy in its immediate area, thriving at times, but failing every so often as well.

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