

# The Concept of Finding Aids

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## <국문초록>

Finding aids는 미국 및 서구 기록보존소에서 기록물에 대한 記述을 수록하고 있는 일종의 기록물로의 접근 도구이다. 일반 도서와는 달리, 기록물은 record groups 혹은 series로 다루어 지고 있으며, 각 그룹이나 시리즈마다 문서 생산 기관의 역사 및 기록물들의 생산유래, 목적, 결과 등이 기입되어 있는 기록물에 대한 광범한 정보가 실리는 도구이다. 도서로 치면 일종의 목록이라고 할 수 있다.

본 논문은 국내에서는 아직 생소한 이 finding aids의 개념을 북미에서 출판된 문헌과 기록보존소들의 실무를 통하여 구명해 보고자 한다. Finding aids는 초기 기록보존학이 미국내 성립되던 1950~60년대의 통합적이고 생산기관의 출처주의에서 크게 벗어나지 못한 상태의 개괄적인 개념에서, 80년대의 정보 기술의 한 도구로서의 좁은 의미를 지나, 90년대 들어서서는 이용자들의 접근 수단으로까지 발전해왔음이 밝혀졌다.

이러한 기본적인 개념의 인식은 기록보존가들이 이용자들에게 더욱 적극적인 정보제공을 할 수 있는 이론적이고 실무적인 기반을 마련해 주는 작업이고, 이를 바탕으로 더 나은 수준의 finding aids와 기록보존소의 유용성을 높이는 계기가 될 수 있을 것이다.

## <ABSTRACT>

Finding aids have existed from the time when ancient archives appeared. With this long history, they have been used in most of Western archives, and thus, it is one of the most familiar tasks generally performed by archivists. However, ironically, this accustomed concept has not been an academic object to many researchers. Especially, in this electronic age, finding aids are even more complicated in their forms and meanings.

This paper intends to address the concept(s) of finding aids as reflected in the archival literature in North America. The paper will attempt to illustrate how the concept of finding aid has evolved both

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conceptually and practically in archives and archival science and how circumstantial and social elements affect this concept. It seems that the concept of finding aids has developed from the broad and integrated concept of provenance and pertinence to the narrower and practical sense considering the use by the public. It also turns out that the concept has advanced from a mere technical tool for describing records to an access tool for maximum availability.

Not surprisingly, the concept of finding aids have changed as archival science and the profession has advanced and diversified. It is crucial for the archival community to understand changes in the practice and the concept of finding aids that will enable the preparation of higher quality finding aids enabling the optimum use of archives.

## 1 Introduction

One of the most important concepts in the western archival profession is that of the "finding aid." The concept of the finding aid has existed from the time archival repositories first appeared. Ernst Posner presents an example of a finding aid in an ancient archive. It was a kind of checklist of archival tablets found in Nuzi in Assyria, and was presumed to date back to approximately 1500 BC.<sup>1)</sup> Since its existence, various practical finding aids have been developed and accepted in specific concepts from repository to repository over time. Therefore, most archivists are probably very familiar with the term "finding aid." However, not all archivists can confidently answer the question of what a finding aid is and provide a useful definition.

A number of studies have examined the practices of accession, arrangement, description, and similar standards in archival work, but a comprehensive study involving the finding aid itself has not appeared very often. Moreover, no focal study has been performed using a conceptual approach to finding aids. In this paper, the concept of the finding aid has been defined and how these concepts have been accepted in practice will be addressed through the review of literature mainly from the North America.

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1) Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient Worl* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1972): 61-70

## 2 Concept of Finding Aids

### 2.1 Definitions of Finding Aids and Description

In many recent archival glossaries, finding aids have been defined in involvement with the description of archival materials. Similarly, a number of glossaries define the description as a part of or a process relating to a finding aid. Glossaries which define finding aids by their descriptions have been published relatively recently; in fact, no effort toward defining archival terms was performed until the 1970s. Not surprisingly, the definitions in glossaries from 1970s reflect the meaning of finding aids during particular times and circumstances of their development.

The first glossary for archival terms was "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers" which was a project of the Committee on Terminology of the Society of American Archivists in 1974. This Glossary defines finding aids as:

The descriptive media, published and unpublished, created by an originating office, and archival agency, or manuscript repository, to establish physical or administrative and intellectual control over records and other holdings. Basic finding aids include guides (general or repository and subject or topical), inventories or registers, location registers, card catalogs, special lists, shelf and box lists, indexes, calendars, and, for machine readable records, software documentation.<sup>2)</sup>

This glossary explains that a finding aid is a 'medium' which has 'descriptive' information for 'physical or intellectual control' over records. It also specifies examples of finding aids from a guide to a machine readable record. It defines the finding aid within the concept of physical tools or media and understands the finding aid as it relates to descriptive work. This is a very concrete practical concept reflecting 1970s

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2) Frank B. Evans, Donald F. Harrison, and Edwin A. Thompson, A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974): 422.

knowledge.

The fully revised version of this glossary, "A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," by the SAA, has a revised definition of a finding aid. According to this, a finding aid is:

The descriptive tool, published and unpublished, manual or electronic, produced by a creator, record center, archives, or manuscript repository to establish physical control and/or intellectual control over records and/or archival materials. Basic finding aids include local, regional, or national descriptive databases; guides; inventories; registers; location registers; catalogs; special lists; shelf and container lists; indexes; calendars and, for electronic records, software documentation.<sup>3)</sup>

This definition has become more sophisticated in terms of current word choices reflecting the electronic environment. However, the basic concept of a finding aid has rarely changed and was still being presented as a tool concerned with description using practical, narrow concepts based on the 1974 definition. Here, we can see that the concept of finding aid is very closely related to that of description, and that, at least in the United States, it is regarded as a practical tool or medium of control over archival materials.

Since the finding aid and description are very closely related to each other, it is necessary to investigate the meaning of description as they work together, as functions of each other. There have been several discussions about the definitions of archival description related to finding aids. Throughout these discussions, four major viewpoints about the definition of archival description were brought out. A "narrow, product oriented focus"<sup>4)</sup> for the definition of description is the first of these viewpoints. This term was developed by the SAA Working Group on Standards for Archival Description criticizing the definition of the first 1974 Glossary. This Glossary defines description as

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3) Lewis J. Bellardo and Lynn Lady Bellad, *A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Manager* (Chicago: the SAA, 1992): 14.

4) SAA, *Report of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description* *American Archivist* 52 (Fall 1989): 440.

“the process of establishing intellectual control over holdings through the preparation of finding aids,”<sup>5)</sup> and the Working Group criticized this definition for limiting the meaning of description as a process of the final product, the finding aid.

After examining several definitions of description, the Working Group expanded their definition of archival description for its project, Standards for Archival Description, as follows:

The process of capturing, collating, analyzing, and organizing any information that serves to identify, manage, locate, and interpret the holdings of archival institutions and explain the contexts and records systems from which those holdings were selected.<sup>6)</sup>

In its commentary, the Working Group explained that their definition was expanded and changed in several new aspects; it recognized description as an ongoing process, it discontinued use of concepts such as “product, which is finding aids,” and it expanded its scope to comprehend the contexts and systems of records.<sup>7)</sup> Luciana Duranti described this expanded definition as a “process oriented” focus.<sup>8)</sup>

There is another definition of archival description by Fredric Miller. Miller focused his definition on the process, as the Working Group did, and on the contents of records, as well.

Archival description is the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, controlling, exchanging, and providing access to information about the origin, context, and provenance of different sets of records, their filing structure, their form and content, their relationships with other records, and the ways in which they can be found and used.<sup>9)</sup>

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5) Frank B. Evans, Donald F. Harrison, and Edwin A. Thompson, A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974).

6) SAA Report of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description *American Archivist* 52 (Fall 1989): 442

7) SAA, Report of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description *American Archivist* 52 (Fall 1989): 440 443.

8) Luciana Duranti, Origin and Development of the Concept of Archival Description *Archivari* 35 (Spring 1993):47.

9) Fredric Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of

Because he focused on both “process” and “content” explaining description, this definition was described as a “process and content oriented” focus by Luciana Duranti.<sup>10)</sup> In her study of the origins of archival description, Duranti introduced another focus, a “goal oriented” focus, for definitions of description. A goal oriented focus was indicated in the definition by David Gracy II. However, strictly speaking, Gracy’s definition was a general discussion of finding aids not specifically concerning archival description. Therefore, in this paper, Gracy’s definition will be examined for the possibility of deriving a unified concept of the finding aid. As in these other papers, archival description and finding aids have been defined in relation to each other, much as a tool and a product obtained through the use of that tool. In addition, the development of concepts related to finding aids have been linked to that of description. In existing studies, finding aids and archival description have not been investigated separately.

The concepts of finding aid mentioned in this chapter are practical and specific rather than conceptual or comprehensive because they reflect the circumstances of the archival profession at a given time. Therefore, when a finding aid is examined, it should be understood a part of a process of intellectual control under the appropriate circumstances. Moreover, description cannot be performed without a process of arrangement, and a finding aid is generally recognized as a tool or media of description; that is, it is impossible to clearly separate concepts such as arrangement, description, and finding aid; and it is necessary to understand a concept within its overall background.

### 3 Development of the Concepts of Finding Aids

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American Archivist, 1990): 7.

10) Luciana Duranti, Origin and Development of the Concept of Archival Description *Archivari* 35 (Spring 1993): 47-48.

The concept of finding aids has been developed from a broad and abstract concept to a concrete and narrow one. During the 1950s and 60s, as archival theory and practice became the focus of writings on the concept of the finding aid, the idea seemed to be more conceptual and abstract. At that time, the concept of the finding aid included a comprehensive process of organizing material by mode of arrangement, description, and sometimes even a method for reference service.

### 3.1 Integrated Concept (1950s - 1960s)

A representative writer of archival theory and practices during this time, Theodore R. Schellenberg, did not differentiate between the finding aid and description. In *Modern Archives* (1956), he discussed finding aid under the chapter "Description Practice," and the components of this chapter were (1) European Finding Aids and (2) American Finding Aids. In other words, he regarded finding aids as inseparable from descriptive practices. However, his idea of a finding aid was not a specific form of description or tool for access. He used the term "finding aid system," and discussed how the American finding aid was developed by "taking characters from the records." As this phrase indicates, Schellenberg saw the finding aid as more a broad and abstract process than a simple tool for access by users or archivists; for him it was a total process for identifying records and manuscripts. He also introduced the National Archives' system and explained that the American finding aid system was based on record group and series, which embraced "all records arranged in a single integrated filing system," while European description units were volumes, bundles, or containers, representing physical form categorizations.<sup>11)</sup>

There were two different approaches used in the National Archives in the U.S. for explaining finding aid according to how records and manuscripts were described. The

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11) Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Technique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956): 194-214

first was the concept of provenance, which was related to the organizational and functional origin of a record, and the other was pertinence, related to the subject of a record. He adopted provenance theory and subject matter, usually understood as arrangement theory, in order to explain the finding aid system.<sup>12)</sup> His approach to the concept of finding aid was a provenance pertinence approach and this concept was comprehensive including arrangement and description process. This idea was presented again in *The Management of Archives* (1965) as follows:

Records may be described substantively in relation to the government agency, corporate body, or person that produced them, the functions that resulted in their production, and their subject content... Finding aids may thus be of various types: comprehensive or limited in their coverage, general or detailed in their descriptive data, and pertaining to record units of various sizes.<sup>13)</sup>

He still suggested that description should consider the original creators of records and their subject content, and his idea of the finding aid embraced content coverage, description depth, and physical extent, all of which should be considered in a process of arranging and describing.

### 3.2 The Components of a Descriptive Program (1970s)

In the 1970s, the concept of finding aids became narrower and more practical. It was a period when the demand for defining archival terms became important, and the first glossary in archival science was presented in *American Archivist* (1974).<sup>14)</sup> As mentioned above, the definition of finding aid in this glossary was expressed as “a

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12) Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Technique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956): 204-214.

13) Theodore R. Schellenber, *The Management of Archive* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965): 106-107

14) Frank B. Evans, Donald F. Harrison, and Edwin A. Thompson, *A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers* *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974): 415-433

description media...to establish physical or administrative and intellectual control over records and other holdings.” The concept of finding aids was placed under the concept of description, and became more reflective of a description.

The concept of finding aid began to indicate control over the holdings, both intellectually and physically. David Gracy II (1977), who was the chairman of the Society of American Archivist Committee on Finding Aids during the 1970s, approached the concept of finding aid with this control aspect in *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description* as follows:

The components of a descriptive program are called “finding aids,” which are defined as “any descriptive media, card, or document, published or unpublished, that established physical, administrative and/or intellectual control over archives or manuscripts.” “Control” is having at hand when needed: (1) essential information about, (2) knowledge of the information in, and (3) knowledge of the location of the records.<sup>15)</sup>

He also added that to meet and practice the purpose of being both a descriptive media and a means of establishing control, a finding aid might be divided into three practical groups. These are referred to as “internal control documents”, “in house reference service,” and “‘out of house’ consumption.”<sup>16)</sup> This was a practical grouping which represented descriptions typed by use, and addressed the idea that “control” included a whole archivists’ work from accessioning records and manuscripts in archives to the physical location of the records. Internal control documents were described as accession records for repository control over accessioning, including worksheets, accessions checklists, and inventories. In house reference aids were for use only within the repository, written without any intention of publication, and these aids were controlled for in house purposes. For instance, a card catalog or an index would represent this category. Finally, external reference aids were tools for active

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15) David B. Gracy II, *Archives and Manuscript: Arrangement and Descriptio*, SAA, Chicago, 1977: 19.

16) David Gracy II, *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Descriptio* (Chicago: the Society of American Archivist, 1977): 19-38.

reference services to expand outside the repository. He proposed examples for this group as notices in academic journal, guides, and calendars. This approach to the finding aids in the 1970s was somewhat narrower and more practical compared with earlier approaches. However, this still emphasizes a comprehensive role of a finding aid. A finding aid was both a description tool as well as a form of intellectual control which affects not only the archivists' access tools for the handling of records and manuscripts, but also providing reference services for its users. In other words, finding aids were recognized as tools for control over records and manuscripts, the tasks of archivists, and services provided in archives.

One final point of particular mention is that Gracy considered "notices in scholarly journal" as a form of finding aid description.

### 3.3 Products of Description (1980s)

During the 1980s, the discussions about the arrangement and description of archives was getting vivid, and the idea about finding aids was getting concrete. The prevailing and most feasible concept of finding aid in the 1980s was defined using the "descriptive tool" concept. This tendency toward the separation of arrangement and description became especially apparent after the publication of various sets of cataloguing rules such as those of the Anglo AACR) in 1967 and again in 1978 (AACR2), which provided the only model of descriptive process.<sup>17)</sup> Most definitions in the 1980s expressed that description is a major process in the archiving of materials and finding aids are products of the description process<sup>18)</sup> or even focus on 'process' itself; that is, description is a 'process' of organizing information about/from records.<sup>19)</sup>

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17) Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983): 6.

18) *Towards Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standard* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1986): 15.

At this time, the concept of finding aids became more closely related to that of description and regarded as a part or a concrete example of description. The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)'s terminology, prepared by Maygene F. Daniels (1984), defines finding aid as "a description from any source that provides information about the contents and nature of documentary materials."<sup>20</sup> It defines finding aid as a description, and further defines the term description as "the process of establishing intellectual control over holdings of an archival institution through preparation of finding aids [emphasis added]."<sup>21</sup> Another glossary shows the same concept of finding aid(s) in librarianship. Harrod's Librarians' Glossary (1984) contains two items: finding aid and finding aids. A finding aid is, "in archival management, a document which provides direction to information contained in other documents"; finding aids are "classification schemes, catalogues, indexes of various kinds and of different varieties of library materials, etc., which have been devised to enable stored material, or information, to be obtained (retrieved) when required."<sup>22</sup> The first item is a simple definition for an archival "finding aid," and the second is a definition from the perspective of librarianship. Though the second definition of finding aids is from a librarianship perspective, it uses many of the same concepts used in the archival profession, finding aid as surrogate for real materials.

In England, the finding aid seemed to be understood in the same way as in the U.S. during the 1980s. Michael Cook explicitly states this concept of finding aids as follows:

[I]t is necessary to write descriptions which can act as representations of the original material. These representations can then be structured and filed in different ways to

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19) SAA, Report of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description *American Archivist* 52 (Fall 1989): 440-443

20) NAR, Introduction to Archival Terminology, available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20020602233144/http://www.nara.gov/arch/geninfo/terms.html>.

21) NAR, Introduction to Archival Terminology, available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20020602233144/http://www.nara.gov/arch/geninfo/terms.html>.

22) Leonard M. Harrod, *Harrod's librarians' Glossar*, 1 ed. (Dorset, England: Gower Publishing Company, 1984) : 301

create finding aids. If there are an indefinite number of representations, there can be an indefinite number of finding aids, and an indefinite number of different types of finding aid.<sup>23)</sup>

He discussed that archival finding aids were created from structured description and according to the depth of the structure. He maintained that on general principles, finding aids should reflect description at the maximum possible depth under the circumstances. Consequently, finding aids became recognized as surrogates of archival materials, such as inventories, registers, indexes, and the like, based on their descriptions.

### 3.4 Access Tools (1990s)

As the demand for standards of archival description increased, the concept of the finding aid added another branch to its conceptual framework, becoming a tool of user access. The recognition that a finding aid is a descriptive tool became more obvious, and a new approach evolved to encompass the idea that a finding aid provided an access point. In the Report of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description of the SAA, the Group began its report with the assumption that if most archivists were asked about the definition of description, their answers would include the following idea: “the preparation of finding aid” to provide “access” to the repository’s holdings.<sup>24)</sup> Similarly, in a basic study for Archival Description Standards, Lisa B. Weber suggested that if the purpose of description is to provide access to holdings for users, then the description standards should include “mutually agreed upon guidelines, rules, and specifications that prescribe methods of producing uniform

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23) Michael Cook, *The Management of Information from Archive* (Dorset, England: Gower Publishing Company, 1986): 103.

24) SAA, *Report of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description* *American Archivist* 52 (Fall 1989): 440-443

and consistent results or products [undoubtedly description created according to standards] for use in 'providing access' to primary source materials."<sup>25)</sup>

Nancy Sahli had already proposed the user service concept of the finding aid in the early 1980s. She questioned several existing ideas about finding aids and asserted that "any information which serves to direct users to a particular institution's holdings, or provides intellectual control over records, can and should be regarded as a finding aid."<sup>26)</sup> This concept for providing access to users was accelerated in the 1990s when the discussions on automation in archival repositories were more lively. In a recent glossary, Michael Fox and Peter Wilkerson defined finding aid using this new viewpoint. According to them, a finding aid is

The broadest term to cover any description or means of reference made or received by an archives service in the course of administrative or intellectual control over archival material. . . . These are variously characterized as inventories, registers, and container lists. Some archivists consider catalog records a form of finding aid.<sup>27)</sup>

This definition shows that the finding aid is a descriptive tool, such as catalogs, inventories, and container lists, and it is methodically made for reference purposes in archive service. Fredric Miller also illuminates this approach to finding aid in the aspect of respecting "the public side of the archival information system."<sup>28)</sup>

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25) Lisa B. Weber, "Archival Description Standards: Concepts, Principles, and Methodologies," *American Archivist* 52 (Fall 1989): 505-506.

26) Nancy Sahli, "Finding Aids: A Multi Media, Systems Perspective," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 15.

27) Michael Fox and Peter Wilkerson Introduction to Archival Organization and Description, available at <[http://www.getty.edu/research/institute/standards/introarchives/table\\_index.htm](http://www.getty.edu/research/institute/standards/introarchives/table_index.htm)>.

This definition is at Glossary at

[http://www.getty.edu/research/institute/standards/introarchives/table\\_index.htm](http://www.getty.edu/research/institute/standards/introarchives/table_index.htm)>.

28) Fredric Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscript* (Chicago: the SAA, 1990): 88

## 4 Conclusion

In the past, the concept of finding aid was not similar to its present definition. Its definition has changed from a broad, abstract, integrated meaning to a specific, narrow, practical sense. The changing concepts are presented in <Table>. As the demand for electronic storage of archival material has been increasing, the accomplishment of archival description standards influences the concept of finding aid, and the terms of description and finding aid have been used in the same way. Thus, although a highly familiar concept to archivists, finding aid has had a number of meanings which have changed over time.

It is crucial in the rapidly challenged society technologically for the archival community to catch up the flow of progress in practices and the concepts and further to lead them to higher quality that fits to various circumstances for the optimum use of archives. At the same time, it will also become more important to investigate the meaning of this kind of common terms which are used daily without explicit understanding, in order to equip archivists with basic archival knowledge that is the corner stone of high technology.

Table : Changes in the Concept of Finding Aid

Date	Characteristics Of Finding Aids	Main Approach	Examples	Source
1950s 1960s	Integrated concept	Provenance Pertinence	Record group registration statement Card Catalog Index Inventory Guides Lists	Schellenberg
1970s	The components of a descriptive program	Control approach	Worksheet and accession checklist Inventory Card Catalog Index Notice in scholarly journal Guide Calendar	Gracy II. SAA
1980s	Descriptive tool	Products of description/ Surrogates of archival documents	Descriptive database Guide Inventory Register Catalog Shelf and container list Index Calendar Software Documentation	NARA Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards Cook
1990s	Descriptive tool Access tool	Respecting the public side	Catalog records Inventory/register Index File Plan	SAA Working Group Weber Miller Fox

<Reference>

"Report of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description," *American Archivist* 52 (Fall 1989): 440-461.

Bellardo, Lewis J. and Lynn Lady Bellardo, *A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers* Chicago, IL: SAA, 1992.

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<[http://www.getty.edu/research/institute/standards/introarchives/table\\_index.html](http://www.getty.edu/research/institute/standards/introarchives/table_index.html)>.
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