Thinking Iranian, Rethinking Greek

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Classical Inquiries

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Thinking Iranian, Rethinking Greek

April 19, 2017  By Gregory Nagy

2017.04.18 | By Gregory Nagy

Keynote address in celebration of the grand opening of The UCLA Pourdavoud Center for the Study of the Iranian World.

[Essay continues here...]

Introduction

§1. What do you first think of when we hear the words Iranian and Greek spoken in the same breath by anyone today? I bet you would be thinking, in a vague sort of way, about the fact that Iranians and Greeks were in ancient times at war with each other. And there would be one name that would most likely come to mind before any other name. Remembering what we learn from conventional world history, as we start thinking some more about it, that one name would be of course Alexander, or, to be more specific, Alexander the Great. The ‘greatness’ of this man, as we think even more about it, is linked primarily to his military and political conquest of the Persian Empire in the fourth century before our era. But there is a disconnect in our overall thinking here. Focusing for the moment on Alexander, I have just now used the word Persian instead of the word Iranian in referring to the empire that he conquered. We are thinking Greek here, in the sense that we are following what the ancient Greeks thought about the empire that Alexander conquered. We are talking about *the* Persian Empire. If we were thinking Iranian, however, we could be talking instead about *an* Iranian empire, even if we are aware that the word Persian could somehow be used as the equivalent of Iranian in this context. Recognizing such a disconnect, I argue that we need to rethink what the ancient Greeks thought about the Iranian world—and, conversely, what the ancient Iranians thought about the Greek world. That is what I mean when I say in the title: rethinking Greek. In these brief remarks that I have prepared for a very special event celebrating the greatness of this Iranian world, I propose to do such rethinking by not neglecting to think Iranian while thinking Greek.

Iranians as Persians
§2. But why does conventional world history say Persian instead of Iranian in the context of highlighting mostly hostile encounters between Iranians and Greeks? It is partly because much of this history is based on the history of Herodotus, a Greek who lived in the fifth century before our era. And Herodotus would be talking about Persians (Persi in Greek) or Medes (Médi in Greek), not about Iranians. The narrative of Herodotus centered on the wars between the Greeks and the Persians or Medes in the early fifth century before our era, highlighting the battle at Marathon in 490, the battle at Thermopylae in 480, and then the culminating sea-battle at Salamis in 480 and the land-battle at Plataea in 479.

§3. So, is the testimony of Herodotus enough to make us say Persian instead of Iranian? In asking this question, I could try to take an informal sample of opinions to be heard here, where I am speaking. If you live here in Los Angeles, you will most likely know many people who are Iranians, or you may well be Iranian yourself. So, would you say Persian instead of Iranian? I guess so. It seems that Iranians today often do prefer to call themselves Persians, not Iranians. But why? I personally think that the answer has to do for the most part with the Iranian Revolution of 1979. To say Persian is a way for modern Iranians to distance themselves from the ideologies of the revolution. Surely those people today who think of themselves as Persians are not thinking primarily about the wars between the Persians and the Greeks as narrated by Herodotus, or even about Alexander, that Greek man who conquered the ancient Persians and ruled over them? If Iranians know their own Iranian heritage well enough, they may think rather of Alexander as Iskandar, who can be viewed not as a Greek but as an Iranian king who fits into the history and prehistory of Iranian civilization. I will have more to say about this point in the analysis that follows.

After the Persian Empire

§4. After its conquest by Alexander, the Persian Empire as once ruled by an Iranian dynasty known to the Greeks as the Achaemenids gave way to a world order that was mostly non-Iranian, dominated by Greeks. But I must stress already now the fact that even the Achaemenid empire, before the conquest, had already been in many ways non-Iranian in the sense that this empire had been from the very start a multi-ethnic structure. Yes, the empire was ruled by the Achaemenids, who spoke the Iranian language that linguists today call Old Persian, but this empire included a vast array of populations speaking non-Iranian languages, some of which were more important than others in maintaining the infrastructures of empire: I have in mind here three languages in particular: Elamite, Aramaic, and, yes, Greek. But then, after the Achaemenid empire was conquered by Alexander’s Greek-speaking military and political apparatus, what remained of the old empire became of course even less Iranian than it ever had been beforehand. From a strictly historical point of view, the influence of Greek civilization after the conquest—we can think of this influence as an ideology of Hellenism—became a dominant and in fact dominating force not only in the Greek-speaking parts of the former Persian Empire but well beyond. A prime example is the Seleucid empire, lasting from 312 to 63 BCE, but there are significant secondary examples such as the near-contemporary Kingdom of Bactria, viewed retrospectively as a vast outpost of Hellenism in Central Asia.

§5. In my brief presentation here, I will not have time to consider these examples any further. Nor will I have time to confront another point of view, which is more a matter of modern ideology, less a matter of ancient history, as we see it already being promoted by intellectuals of the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. In terms of this modernizing ideology, Alexander was imagined as a liberator of populations once oppressed by the ‘oriental despotism’, as it were, of the Achaemenids, which was in turn imagined as comparable to the oppressive kingships that were still holding sway in Europe. Suffice it for me here to mention only in passing a leading critic of such an extreme though pervasive ideological view: he is Pierre Briant, Chaire d’Histoire et civilisation du monde achéménide et de l’empire d’Alexandre (1999-2012). The title of his most recent book, published in January 2017 by Harvard University Press and translated into English by Nicholas Elliott, says it all: The First European: A History of Alexander in the Age of Empire.

Shifting away from ‘the First European’

§6. I can now start thinking Iranian in earnest as I contemplate what happened in history after the era of quasi-Hellenization as represented by the Seleucid Empire, which as we saw lasted from 312 to 63 BCE in the wake of Alexander’s victories over the Persian Empire. After the Seleucid Empire, what then follows is an era of re-Iranization, initially represented by the Parthian Empire, lasting from 247 BCE all the way to 224 CE, which was ruled by an Iranian dynasty known as the Arsacids. This new Iranian régime of the Parthians, which is also known as the Arsacid Empire, started off as a rival of the Seleucids and ended up overcoming them and even absorbing them. Such an Arsacid Empire was in many ways a revival of the Achaemenid Empire: for example, even the exalted title of the Achaemenid rulers, Shahanshah or King of Kings, was revitalized in the Arsacid Empire. This régime then gave way to the Sasanian Empire, lasting from 224 to 651 CE, though branches of the Arsacids persisted in Armenia and elsewhere. In another project, I will be exploring the relevant role of Armenian traditions in transmitting some important aspects of Iranian civilization—especially by way of the Parthian connection, as it were. But for now I must stick to the essentials. Accordingly, I want to stop here in order to give full credit, however briefly, to the paramount significance of the Sasanian Dynasty as a world power of its time—and as an all-important continuator of Iranian civilization. And, while I am stopping to contemplate this significance, I want to give full credit also to the work of Rahim Shayegan, whose research has contributed mightily to our understanding of the civilizations represented by both the Arsacids and the Sasanians—as also of Iranian civilization in general. Let me cite here just one of his many stellar contributions: Arsacids and Sasanians: Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia (Cambridge University Press 2011). Also, I acknowledge my gratitude to my colleague and friend Rahim for organizing this splendid event where I serve as keynote speaker.
Strategizing a rationale for the argumentation

§7. That said, my presentation can start moving again. As I push the restart button, I find I have to ask myself... So why in the world did my friend Rahim ask me to present a keynote address about the Iranian world? As the superb Iranist that he is, he knows so much more than I about this wondrous world. In a perfect world, Rahim should be the keynote speaker. And there are many in the audience that I am addressing at this splendid event who are likewise Iranists. But here I am, standing before you as the designated keynote speaker, and I am not even an Iranist! I am a Hellenist. I specialize in studying not the ancient Iranians but the ancient Greeks, and my field of specialization makes me almost inappropriate or even unacceptable at our event here, since the ancient Greeks and their favorite leader Alexander can be held collectively responsible for putting the Achaemenid Empire out of commission! As I search for some kind of self-justification as speaker, I can come up with one plausible argument: I may be a Hellenist, yes, but I am also a comparatist. I compare structures, whether or not they are historically related to each other. UCLA has many world-renowned comparatists, including my dear friend Rahim. So I guess that Rahim as a comparatist invited me as a comparatist, expecting me to do my best in comparing things. I should add that many other UCLA comparatists besides Rahim are attending our splendid event, including our genial host, the Dean of Humanities at UCLA, David Schaberg, who has done world-class research in comparing typologically—I will explain in a minute what I mean by using this word—some aspects of ancient Chinese literary traditions with corresponding aspects in the historically unrelated literary traditions of the ancient Greeks. In referring to the comparative work of Dean Schaberg, I can speak rather knowledgeably: I had the honor of serving as one of the readers for his stellar Ph.D. dissertation in Comparative Literature, completed at Harvard University in 1996.

Applying comparative methods

§8. So, here I can loop back to where I started in my Introduction, where I spoke about Iranians and their relations with the Greeks. Given that my project is to think Iranian about the Greeks as well as think Greek about the Iranians, I can go about it as a comparatist, comparing the existing evidence about both Iranian and Greek civilization. The comparison can be historical, since Iranians and Greeks were in close contact with each other over vast stretches of historically documented time—and the contact was not even always hostile. Or the comparison can be typological where the details that are being compared are not necessarily the result of historical contact. And there is even one further level of comparison, which can be described as genealogical. By using this term I am referring to the methodologies of Indo-European linguistics. Both Iranian and Greek are branches of a language-family known to comparative linguists as Indo-European, and the shared linguistic heritage of Iranian languages and of the Greek language can yield a wealth of insights into the meanings of cognate words and even of the cognate traditions of verbal art in which these words are embedded. A master at this kind of comparative research is Rahim’s Doktor Vater at Harvard, Oktor Skjærvø, who is prominently in attendance at our splendid event.

§9. So, how shall I proceed with my exercise in comparing things Iranian with things Greek? I propose to present three sets of examples. I will start with (1) historical comparisons, where the details being compared resulted from actual contact between Iranians and Greeks; then I will continue with (2) typological comparisons, where the details being compared do not necessarily depend on any historical contact; and then I will end with (3) a genealogical comparison, where the Iranian languages and the Greek language have both inherited a detail that proves to be of some interest. In the last case, I know for a fact that the detail I will highlight is of particular interest to my dear friend Oktor Skjærvø.

Examples of historical comparison

§10. I start with a comparison that centers on the Iranian reception of the conquests achieved in Iran by the Greek man Alexander. We are dealing here with a historical comparison, since these conquests can of course be verified as historical fact. And Greek thinking reflects this fact, albeit imperfectly. But Iranian thinking forces a rethinking. In terms of the Iranian reception, which can be analyzed as a historical fact in its own right, Alexander the son of Philip of Macedon is transformed into Iskandar the son of Dāryush, viewed not as a Greek but as an Iranian king who fits into the history and prehistory of Iranian civilization. To say that Alexander was really born Iranian is of course not a historical fact, but the long-term Iranian tradition that figures him as a son of Darius, not Philip, is indeed a fact of reception, which is a genuine historical fact. This historical fact of reception is most clearly visible in the Shahnama or Book of Kings composed at the end of the 10th century of our era by Ferdowsi, whose name means ‘man of paradise’ and whom Iranians today justly consider to be the ultimate poet of Iranian civilization. In the exalted poetry of Ferdowsi, Iskandar is the conqueror of the world, yes, but he is not really the conqueror of the Iranians. His primary deed is not even his conquest of the whole world but rather his quest to find a grand meaning for his conquests, without specific reference to the Greek view of Alexander as conqueror of the Persian Empire. In this regard, I am strongly influenced by the article of Olga M. Davidson (2010), “The Burden of Mortality: Alexander and the Dead in Persian Epic and Beyond.” The full reference can be found in the Bibliography.

§11. Next, I proceed to a comparison that centers on three different receptions of an earlier historical event involving Greeks and Persians. The event was the sea battle at Salamis in 480 BCE involving (A) on one side, the Phoenician and the Ionian navies of the Persian Empire, and (B) on the other side, navies financed mainly by the Greek cities of Athens and Aegina—navies that were manned by the citizens of these cities. Two of the three receptions survive, and both of these receptions represent the viewpoints of Greek cities that were fighting against the Persian Empire. But we have surviving traces of a third reception as well,
§11.1. The first of the three receptions that I propose to analyze survives in a tragedy composed and directed by a state poet of Athens, Aeschylus son of Euphorion. It is The Persians, produced in the year 472 BCE and sponsored by the most prominent politician of Athens at the time, Pericles himself (IG II² 2318.10). This tragedy dramatizes the sea battle of Salamis and simplistically represents the Athenians as the winners and the Persians as the losers. Represented here as the major loser is the king of the Persian Empire, known as Xerxes to the Greeks and as Xšaya-ršā to the Persians.

§11.2. The second of the three receptions I posited comes from a later source, namely, the History of Herodotus, who as I already indicated lived in the fifth century before our era. The actual date for his making public the written record of his History is unknown, but we can safely say that the definitive writing-down of his text must postdate the sea battle of Salamis by at least half a century. The narrative of Herodotus, as I argue in greater detail in a project yet to be published, signals a far more complicated situation in comparison with the narrative of Aeschylus. For one thing, the drama of Aeschylus pictures the sea battle as a neatly binary struggle between a Greek navy represented almost exclusively by Athenians and what seems to be a non-Greek navy fighting for the Persian Empire. What gets mostly elided in the poetry of Aeschylus is the historical fact that there was no such binarism in the naval battle of Salamis as it really took place. What really happened at Salamis in 480 BCE can best be reconstructed from the History of Herodotus. From his narrative, we see the emergence of two historical facts about the sea battle, both of which I have already noted in passing: (A) the main forces that were fighting on the side of the Persian Empire were the navy of the Phoenicians and the navy of the Ionians, and (B) the main forces that were fighting on the other side were not only the navy of the Athenians but also the navy of the Aeginetans. I have no time here to speak about the second of these facts, except to say that Athens in 480 BCE was not yet the only dominant naval power in the Aegean Sea. As I show in another project (Nagy 2011), Athens in this historical period had two serious rivals in competing for military and commercial domination of the Aegean: one was the island state of Aegina, which controlled an enormous fleet of its own, and the other was the Persian Empire itself, which had under its control the naval might of both Phoenicia and Ionia.

§11.3. Which brings me to the third of the three receptions of historical facts surrounding the naval battle of Salamis. This third reception, as I already indicated, represents the viewpoint of the Persian Empire, and now we will see that this viewpoint can actually be reconstructed from the narrative of Herodotus himself about the naval battle. Although the Persian side of the story does not survive as a text, we can picture the look and feel of such a text on the basis of the description given by Herodotus. As we read in his History, there was an alternative history in the making, initiated by Xerxes himself as supreme ruler of the Persian Empire. As I interpret what Herodotus reports, Xerxes wanted his own side of the story to be written down for posterity. This way, there would be raw material for a history that recorded the victory he was expecting as the logical outcome of the naval battle at Salamis. As we read in Herodotus (8.90), Xerxes commissioned scribes to write up the basic facts about whomsoever he observed to be ‘performing a deed [ergon] worthy of recording’ while fighting on the side of the Persian Empire in the sea battle. Here is the wording for this act of ‘writing up’: καὶ ὁ γραμματιστὴς ἀνέγραφον πατρόθεν τὸν τριήραρχον καὶ τὴν πόλιν ἀποδείκνυμεν, which is a word that Herodotus uses elsewhere in contexts where someone is performing a deed that is worthy of recording by Herodotus himself (Nagy 1990:220–221). If the side that was fighting for the Persian Empire had won, I argue, there would have been an alternative history glorifying the victory, naming names and giving other such details about those who could claim credit for success. The would-be reality of such an evolving history could then be seen as an alternative to the reality of the History by Herodotus, which glorified the victory of the Athenian and the Aeginetan navies. In a project yet to be published, I intend to elaborate further on the argument I am making here, adding further details. But here I will already highlight a point that I consider to be all-important for my overall argumentation. And the point is simply this: those who were to be glorified in the would-be history commissioned by Xerxes, as we see from the overall narrative of Herodotus, were Ionians. They were not Persians. They were not even Phoenicians.

§11.3.1. With this point in mind, I can now confront here a most important overall fact of history: Ionians were Greeks. Yes, they were Greeks just as the Athenians were Greeks. But, unlike the Athenians on the west side of the Aegean Sea, who were European Greeks or Hellenēs ‘Hellenes’—which is what they called themselves—the Ionians on the east side of the Aegean were Asiatic Greeks. They were one of three major branches of Greek-speaking people inhabiting the coastland of Asia Minor and the outlying islands facing the coastland. And this vast space that they inhabited was all under the control of the multi-ethnic Persian Empire. The Ionians inhabited the central part of this Greek-speaking space, while the Aeolians and Dorians of Asia Minor inhabited respectively the northern and southern parts.

§11.3.2. These Ionians and Aeolians and Dorians did not think of themselves as Hellenēs ‘Hellenes’. No, these Asiatic Greeks called themselves simply Ἰόνες ‘Ionians’ and Αἰολεῖς ‘Aeolians’ and Δόρεις ‘Dorians’. And, of these three subdivisions of Asiatic Greeks—Ionians, Aeolians, Dorians—the most important were the Ionians. In the multi-ethnic empire dominated by the Persians, the Ionians became the Greeks par excellence, and that is why the word for ‘Greek’ remains to this day yunān in the Persian language—as also of course in the Arabic language.

§11.3.3. In earlier publications (for example, Nagy 2014), I have already made a related argument: that Herodotus, when he refers to ‘the logioi of the Persians’ at the beginning of his History (Περσέων ... ὀλλογοι 1.1.1), has in mind Ionian authors of history—I interpret the meaning of logioi in this context as...
'masters of prose'. Such Ionians authors, in terms of my argumentation, were meant to glorify the Persian Empire as the benefactor of their own Ionian civilization, which was part of the overall multiethnic civilization dominated by the Persians.

§12. If I had more time here, I would speak also about the support demonstrated by Xerxes for that ultimate expression of Ionian verbal art, which was the poetry attributed to Homer. Such support was doubtless motivated by the ambition of Xerxes to be the true representative of the Greek heroic past as mediated by Homer. On this subject, I have much more to say in my earlier publications (Nagy 1990:172–174; Nagy 2010|2009:131–132, 180, 194, 347–350; see also Haubold 2004:27–28; also Haubold 2007).

Examples of typological comparison

§13. Unlike historical comparison, as I already noted, typological comparison does not need to establish any historical or genealogical connection with the things that are being compared. I have over the years collected a number of examples where things Iranian are comparable with things Greek—even if they originally had nothing to do with each other. Since I do not have time here to review the facts and the argumentation about the facts, I promise to keep things as brief as possible by simply listing five of my most favorite examples of such typological comparanda. And here is something most remarkable about these five examples: each one of them involves comparisons that were already made in the ancient world between Iranian and Greek institutions. What follows, then, are the five examples:

1. The so-called ‘Debate of the Constitutions’, as dramatized in Scroll 3 of Herodotus. The question here is whether the political thinking of ancient Persians as described here was relevant to three forms of government as conventionally described in ancient Greek traditions: monarchy, oligarchy, democracy (Herodotus 3.80–87). For more on this question, I recommend the article of Sissa 2012, listed in the Bibliography. For further background, see Nagy 1990:181–192, 265–266.

2. The so-called Odeum of Pericles, as described in the Life of Pericles by Plutarch. The question here is: how accurate is the analogy between the Odeum and the Royal Tent of Xerxes, captured by the Athenians after their victory in the naval battle of Salamis (Pericles 13.9–11)? I address the question in Nagy 2009|2008 4§§174–175, §§177–180.

3. The education of Cyrus the Great, as dramatized in a work of Xenophon known by a latinized title referring to such an education, Cyropaedia. The question here is: can we say that the values of leadership as figured in this work by Xenophon are really grounded in Iranian traditions? On this question, I recommend Sandridge 2012.

4. The amorous encounters of Alcibiades with Tissaphernes the Satrap of Lydia and Caria, as described in the Life of Alcibiades by Plutarch. The question here is: did the enamored Persian satrap actually create a paradeisos for the charismatic Hellene (Alcibiades 24.7)?

5. The references in the Derveni Papyrus to magoi as performers of ritual. The question here is: why would ancient Greeks use an Iranian word magoi, which I translate here neutrally as ‘mages’, in referring to such performers? For background on this question, I recommend the article of Bernabé 2014, listed in the Bibliography.

§14. As I reached the fifth of these five examples showing typological comparisons having to do with things Iranian and Greek, I decided that I could not resist breaking my promise about doing nothing more that listing the examples. In the case of the fifth example, I feel compelled to say at least somewhat more, though I hardly have time to say too much more. First, a point of general information about the Derveni Papyrus... We see here a chronologically multilayered text: the sayings attributed to Orpheus as quoted by the text are evidently earlier than the discourse of the so-called commentator, which can be dated to somewhere around the late fifth century BCE, while the written copy of the text can be dated around a century later. Second, a point of specific interest... It has to do with a reference made in the text, at what is currently classified as Column VI, to rituals of incantation performed by magoi ‘mages’ as models for mustai who are ‘initiates’ into mystical rituals. For background, I recommend once more the article of Bernabé 2014. Much more research needs to be done about the connection of this word to the Iranian word maguš as attested in the Old Persian text of the Bisotun Inscription, dated to the second-to-last decade of the sixth century BCE, with reference to a man named Gaumāta, demonized as a false king or would-be king. But this word is surely connected to the use of the word magos (μάγος) in Scroll 3 of Herodotus with reference to a man named Smerdis, likewise demonized as a false king or would-be king. A major advance in understanding the connection, I should note, is a 2012 book by my friend Rahim Shayegan. I will confine myself here to adding one further note: Herodotus (1.132) speaks of the role of a priest called a magos in singing a theogony (βοιογονία) as an incantation that is necessary for the ritual of sacrifice.

§15. Which brings me to the ultimate mage, Zoroaster himself, a mystical figure who utters words of incantation that I cite here as an ideal example of the kind of comparison that I described as genealogical.
An example of genealogical comparisons

§16. The point of comparison here is elegant in its simplicity. I am comparing the Homeric word euk to in the sense of 'he prayed' with the Avestan word aoxta in the sense of 'he spoke'—that is, 'spoke prayerfully' (MueLLner 1976). And here I conjure a work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen, composed in four parts between 1883 and 1885 and published between 1883 and 1891. In this work, Nietzsche speaks as if he were Zoroaster, credited in world history as the founder of a system of thinking generally known as Zoroastrianism. But there is a prehistory to be noted here: in the course of his earlier experimentations with his speaking role as Zoroaster in Also sprach Zarathustra, Nietzsche had at one point been tempted to figure the ancient Greek thinker Empedocles and not the Iranian seer Zoroaster as his speaker. His ultimate choice of Zoroaster—a decision that I could playfully describe here as a victory of Iranian over Hellenic models—was influenced by the publication of the Avesta in the 50-volume Sacred Books of the East series, at the initiative of Friedrich Max Müller (starting with volume 4 part 1, Oxford University Press 1880). In the Avesta, at Yasna 9.16 we find this most memorable phrase: āaŋ aoxta zaraθuštrō 'also sprach Zarathuštra' or 'thus spoke Zarathuštra', introducing the words of prayer spoken by Zoroaster to the god Ahuramazdā. Here we see the foundational inspiration for the words used by Nietzsche as the title of his book Also sprach Zarathustra—which in turn inspired a tone poem composed by Richard Strauss in 1896, featuring the same title Also sprach Zarathustra (Op. 30).

Epilogue

§17. I end by noting that I started the keynote lecture by screening the opening vision in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey, made in 1968. The film opens with the opening of Also sprach Zarathustra (Op. 30).
30) by Richard Strauss. Just as Strauss has done Nietzsche proud, maybe Kubrick has done Strauss proud as well. And maybe all of them have done Zoroaster proud.

Bibliography


Tags: Pourdavoud Center, Zoroaster

One Response to Thinking Iranian, Rethinking Greek

mostafa younesie  May 5, 2017 at 11:10 am (Edit)

Lecture of professor Nagy as a comparativist Hellenist on three historical, typological and genealogical aspects includes good points and hints for further research. Besides, I think for the idea of Iran (Aryan-ness)there is a good useful reference:Gherardo Gnoli, "The idea of Iran : an essay on its origin" ,Roma : Istituto italiano per Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1989.

« Steuermann of Dionysus  A sampling of comments on Odyssey Rhapsody 5 »

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