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QARĀ ḴEṬĀY

QARĀ ḴEṬĀY, western branch of the Mongolic Qitans, who ruled China as the Liao from 907 to 1124. Upon being toppled from the throne by the Tunguzic Jurchens, they moved to Central Asia and established a new empire under the name Qarā Ḵeṭāy (called Si Liao "Western Liao" by the Chinese). After some eighty years of existence their empire was crushed by the Naiman (Nāymān) leader Küčlüg (Kučlok) in 608/1211. The Qarā Ḵeṭāy state is regarded by some as a precursor of the 13th-century Mongol empire.

HISTORY

After more than 150 years, the rule of the Qitan Liao dynasty came to an end in northern China in 1124, owing to the attack of new nomadic conquerors, the Jurchens, who sprang forth, as earlier the Qitans themselves did, from the territory of modern Manchuria, and who, as the Jin dynasty, would rule north China for the following century. During the years immediately prior to 1124, many Qitans submitted to the Jurchens; others, by contrast, chose to flee westward under the crown prince Yelü Daši. Within two decades, members of this fugitive Qitan party had conquered the whole of Turkestan and had imposed upon the more distant Khwarazmians a hefty annual tribute. The Muslim sources called the new power Qarā Ḵetāy (i.e., Black Ḵeṭāy; for the attribute *qara* "black" in Turkic names, see Pritsak, 1955), while the Chinese called them the Si Liao (Western Liao), thus identifying them as the westerly, fugitive branch of the Qitan Liao (Si Liao shi, in *Lioa shi*, by Tuotuo [1313-55], chap. 30, pp. 355-58; on Si Liao shi and some other Chinese sources, see Biran, 2005, pp. 4-7; for a translation of Si Liao shi, see Bretschneider, I, pp. 211-18).

The Qarā Ḳeṭāy empire survived some eighty years until its subjugation in 608/1211 by Mongol Naiman conquerors. The establishment of this Sinicized Khitan polity within the environment of Irano-Turkic Muslim Central Asia was a unique phenomenon, which has attracted much interest from modern historians. For more than seventy years, scholarly research had to rely on W. Vladimirovich Barthold's major work on Turkestan, in which a separate chapter was devoted to the Qarā Ḳeṭāy (Barthold, 1928, pp. 323-80), and on H. K. Menges' study (1949), until the publication of Michal Biran's monograph on the Qarā Ḳeṭāy in 2005, which replaced them as the major study of the subject.

Prince Yelü Daši (r. 1124-43), whose life abounded in dramatic moments, received the customary bi-cultural education, both Khitan and Chinese, which was typical of Khitan aristocrats of the time. He became an excellent mounted warrior who would oftentimes exercise his skills in military encounters with the southern Song Dynasty, but the attacks of the northern barbarian enemy, the Jurchen, became more and more imminent for the Khitan dynasty. When the last Khitan emperor, Tienzuo, escaped westward from the Jurchen attacks, Yelü Daši, already in charge of significant military posts in the Chinese army, oversaw the elevation of Prince Yelü Chun, following whose sudden death in 1122 his wife became regent. But soon the princess was also compelled to flee, and the fugitive emperor Tianzuo had her executed. Then the emperor made bitter reproaches to Yelü Daši, noting that he had broken his terms of fealty by enthroning Yelü Chun. Yelü Daši stoutly defended his deed by pointing out that he had no other choice, since the emperor had escaped (*Liao shi*, chap. 30, p. 355; Bretschneider, I, p. 212; Biran, 2005, pp. 23-24). On this occasion Tianzuo pardoned his wavering subject, but a real clash between the two seemed inevitable. Tianzuo then wanted to organize a large-scale campaign to regain the lost Khitan territories. Yelü Daši was again very critical of the emperor's cowardly retreat before the enemy and rebuked him for his ill-conceived plans to attack the enemy without the necessary preparedness. Since he could not dissuade the emperor, he excused himself from participating in the campaign by feigning illness. The open rebellion was not a distant possibility anymore (Biran, 2005, p. 25, with further references).

Chinese sources describe Yelü Daši as a talented statesman who did his best to save the sinking ship of the ruling house. But seeing this ship inundated by the waves, he realized that he had to escape. Having made away with two generals of Emperor Tianzuo, in 1124 he proclaimed himself king (*wang*). He abandoned the emperor's forces with a handful of retinue, thereby embarking

upon a new way of dissension (Biran, 2005, pp. 19-26). He crossed the Qara Muren (Huang) River and accepted the homage of the White Tatars (Bai Dada), who provided the newcomers with horses, camels, and sheep. The White Tatars, also known under the ethnonym Öngüt, were a Turkic population settled in the Ordos in the 7th century and professing Nestorian Christianity. After a brief halt, Yelü Daši headed for the west and crossed the Gobi desert, arriving in what is today southwest Mongolia. Here he adopted as a symbol of sovereignty the title Gurkhan (Kür Khan). The first element of this term is the Turco-Mongolian word *kür* (strong, mighty, glorious), which is to be observed later as the title of the Mongol Kereyit ruler and as one of Timur's titles as well. Both in the Chinese and the Muslim sources the title *kür khan* was translated as "universal khan" (Doerfer, III, pp. 633-37, no. 1672).

In the meantime, in 1125 the Liao dynasty fell for good, and the Jurchens captured the last Liao emperor, Tianzou. In 1129, Yelü Daši deemed it appropriate to come forward with his large-scale plans, and he put them forward to his subjects who had joined him in his long migration. He convoked the leaders of the seven provinces and eighteen tribes, which included the Onggirats, Merkits, Tanguts, and other peoples who inhabited the northwestern part of the former Liao empire (*Liao shi*, chap. 30, p. 355; Biran, 2005, pp. 227-29). According to the *Liao shi* (chap. 30, pp. 355-56; Bretschneider I, p. 213-14; Biran, 2005, p. 229), Yelü Daši now made an impressive speech, in which he referred to his Qitan ancestors who formed a long line of sovereigns, saying that now the Jurchens (founders of the Chinese Jin-dynasty) had ruined this heritage and expelled the last emperor, Tianzuo. Finally, he firmly exhorted his troops to antagonize the enemy and restore the former Khitan empire.

Daši deployed over 10,000 warriors to realize his grand scheme. He wanted to march to the west, subjugate the peoples there, and make them their allies, and then return with multiplied forces to regain the land of his ancestors. First, he moved to the river Emil, where they built a town and reached the vicinity of the Qarakhanid territories (Jovayni, II, p. 87; tr., I, p. 355); then he dispatched a message to the Uighurs of Gansu, reminding them of an old episode of their common history, when his ancestor Daizu crushed the Kerḡiz (Qerqiz) in Mongolia and offered to allow the Uighurs to return to their ancestral lands, but they politely declined. Now, Daši said, it was the Uighurs' turn to reciprocate this gesture; he and his troops should thus be allowed to march through the Uighur territories for the west. The Uighur ruler of Gansu

warmly accepted Daši's appeal and paid homage to him (*Liao shi*, chap. 30, p. 356; Biran, pp. 2005, pp. 36-37). Daši set out for his western campaign and conquest. The Qarakhanid ruler of Balāsāḡun was struggling at the time with an uprising of the Turkic Qarloq and Qanqlï tribes, and so he invited the Qarā Ḵeṭāy to help put down the rebellion. Daši hastened to offer his assistance; but he exacted compensation, making the Qarakhanid ruler a vassal by granting him the degrading title *ilek-i türkmen* and relocating him to Kāšḡar (see KASHGAR). Daši made the conquered Balāsāḡun the capital of his new realm. Soon Kāšḡar and Khotan were also annexed to the new Qarā Ḵeṭāy realm, which extended to the former Uighur and Eastern Qarakhanid territories.

Having the material resources of a newly founded empire in his hands, Daši could embark on the task of restoring the Qitan realm, so he turned back to the east to re-conquer his ancestral land. He headed for Mongolia with a cavalry of 70,000 warriors, but the few-thousand-mile trip and various natural disasters decimated his manpower and livestock to such an extent that his plan came to nothing. So he returned and became engaged in strengthening his newly founded empire in Central Asia (*Liao shi*, chap. 30, p. 357; Biran, 2005, p. 40).

The Western Qarakhanids in Transoxania were vassals to Sanjar, the Saljuq sultan of Khorasan. The Gurkhan first conquered Farḡāna and its vicinity, then turned to Samarkand. There the Qarakhanids had much trouble with the rebellious nomadic Qarloq tribes, who asked the Qarā Ḵeṭāy to help, while the local Qarakhanid chief appealed to Sultan Sanjar. First, the Gurkhan addressed a letter to Sanjar, asking for clemency towards the Qarloq, but Sanjar was dismissive and, besides, called upon Daši to embrace Islam. The inevitable confrontation between the Qarā Ḵeṭāy and the Qarakhanids-Saljuqs took place near Samarkand, at Qaṭvān Steppe in Moḥarram 536/September 1141, resulting in the complete defeat of the united Qarakhanid-Saljuq forces and the captivity of Sanjar's wife and a number of Saljuq grandees (Rāvandi, pp. 172-74; Ebn al-Aṯir, XII, pp. 81-82; Barthold, 1977, pp. 326-27). The whole of Transoxania lay at Daši's feet, and the ruler of the new Qarā Ḵeṭāy empire became the overlord of all Turkestan. Even the Ḵᵛārazmšāh Atsïz Ḡarčaʾi made peace with the Qarā Ḵeṭāy by undertaking to pay an annual tribute of 30,000 gold dinars (Barthold, 1977, p. 427). But Yelü Daši was not able to enjoy the harvest of his conquests; he died in 538/1143, after a twenty-year reign.

Soon an extensive legend was woven around Daši's robust personality in the remote medieval Christian world. Bishop Otto of Freising related in his

Chronicon (or *Historia de duabus civitatibus*) that in 1145, the Syrian Bishop of Gabula (Ar. Jabala) arrived at the papal court to meet Pope Eugene III to ask for help against the imminent threat of Muslim advance against the Christians in the Holy Land. He recounted in the papal court that beyond Persia and Armenia there was a Christian land under the sovereignty of a Nestorian Christian king and priest called Prester John. The latter, he reported, attacked the Medes and Persians, whose commanders were the brothers Saniard, and vanquished them. Prester John supposedly then advanced as far as Mesopotamia, hoping also to liberate the holy city of Jerusalem from Muslim rule, but in the end was compelled to retreat back eastwards. The report raised a genuine interest and kindled enthusiasm all over contemporary Europe. The news about the Christian realm of Prester John, who would assail the Muslims from the East and help rescue the holy places, spread from chronicle to chronicle. Prester John was even identified as a late descendant of the Magi (Otto of Freising, pp. 334-35; Silverberg, pp. 3-7). By peeling away the legendary accretions of the Prester John story, we find that the kernel of the narrative relates to the Qarā Ḵeṭāy's victory over the Saljuq Sultan Sanjar in 582/1141. Rumors of this decisive battle must have spread also in the Middle East soon thereafter, and the Christian legendary imagination made a Christian hero out of the Qarā Ḵeṭāy Yelü Daši. The name Saniard is evidently just a slightly distorted form of Sanjar, and the reference to the Christianity of this faraway eastern land must be a dim allusion to the spread of Nestorian Christianity in Asia.

The Qarā Ḵeṭāy themselves were not Christian, but their realm comprised several ethnic groups of Nestorian confession, notably including the Turco-Mongolian Naimans (Nāymān) and Kereyits. Nestorianism was an early movement of Byzantine Christianity condemned as "heretic" in the 5th century, after which their followers were persecuted. After their expulsion they found refuge in Persia whence, after the fall of the Sasanian state and the victorious advance of Islam in the 7th century, they escaped further east, spreading their faith among numerous Turkic and Mongol tribes and peoples as far as China (see CHRISTIANITY iii. IN CENTRAL ASIA AND CHINESE TURKESTAN). In the 8th-9th centuries Nestorianism found its way to the Uighurs in Turkestan, and in the 9th-10th centuries Nestorian Christian communities sprang up also in the territory of the Qarakhanid empire. One of their administrative centers was Kāšḡar, which became the seat of a Nestorian bishopric. Nestorian Christianity was practically unknown to contemporary Western Christendom, which is doubtless why the legendary news launched

by the report of the bishop of Gabula found such a fertile ground in medieval Europe (Zarncke, 1879, idem, 1883; Silverberg, 1996; Biran, 2005, p. 45, n. 197, with further literature).

Chinese sources provide relatively little about the Qarā Ḵeṭāy rulers who immediately succeeded Yelü Daši (for this middle period of Qarā Ḵeṭāy history, 1144-77, see Biran, 2005, pp. 48-59), but the final decade of the Qarā Ḵeṭāy empire is fairly well documented. The last Qarā Ḵeṭāy Gurkhan, Yelü Zhilugu (r. 1178-1211), was confronted by dual threats both from a resurgent Khwarazmian power under Sultan ʿAlāʾ-al-Din Moḥammad (r. 596-617/1200-20) in the west and the conquering Mongols in the east. The final decay began in 1210, when, in a battle near the Talas River, the Qarā Ḵeṭāy army, under the command of Tāyanku, was defeated by the Khwarazmians. Soon the whole of Transoxania lay under the control of the Ḵʷārazmšāh, who placed his governors in the newly conquered land (Jovayni, II, pp. 76-79, 81).

In the meantime, Čengiz Khan's Mongol troops advanced and killed the Naiman chief Tāyāng in a battle, and the Naiman chief's son Küčlüg (Kučlok) escaped westward together with a portion of the Naimans (Biran, 2005, pp. 77-78). The Naimans were allegedly a Turkic confederation that became totally Mongolized at this time. Having initially contracted an alliance with the Merkit, Čengiz now repudiated its terms and defeated the Naiman–Merkit allied forces. Thereafter Küčlüg went further to the Qarā Ḵeṭāy, where he was received in a friendly manner, marrying one of the Gurkhan's daughters and securing permission for his people to settle in the Qarā Ḵeṭāy empire. Küčlüg then entered into an alliance with Sultan Moḥammad Ḵʷārazmšāh and ʿOṯmān, ruler of Samarqand, still subordinate of the Qarā Ḵeṭāy. After the Khwarazmian victory over the Qarā Ḵeṭāy at Talas in 1210, Küčlüg took the reins of authority and ruled as the last Gurkhan until his death in 610/1213, when the realm was taken over by the Naimans. After the conquest of Kāšḡar and Khotan, Küčlüg had to face the Mongol general Jebe, who was sent by Čengiz Khan to crush the Naimans' power. Küčlüg could not resist for long; in 1217 he was captured and beheaded by the Mongols, and the Naiman rule in Central Asia came to an end (Jovayni, I, pp. 47-54; tr., pp. 61-81; Barthold, 1968, pp. 366-70, 400-403; Biran, 2005, pp. 60-86).

The Qarā Ḵeṭāy were dispersed and absorbed by their Turkic, Mongol, and Iranian environment. But a scion of the Gurkhan's family, Borāq Ḥājeb (d. 632/1235), who had joined the Ḵʷārazmšāh's services and turned Muslim, went to Kerman, where he founded a local dynasty called the Qarā Ḵeṭāy of Kerman

or the Qotloḡḵāniya (Nāṣer-al-Din Monši, p. 22; Waziri, I, pp. 427-31; Biran, 2005, pp. 87-89). The Qotloḡḵāniya were vassals and taxpayers of the Mongols of Iran until 1306, when Öljeitü Khan deposed the last local ruler and annexed Kerman to Il-khanid Iran.

The Qarā Ḵeṭāy empire of Central Asia, existing for less than a century, is an intriguing historical phenomenon, the harbinger of the huge political changes that were to take place in the 13th century as a result of the appearance of the Mongols. The Qarā Ḵeṭāy were of Mongol origin, similarly to their Qitan predecessors (contrary to Togan, p. 472, who says: “a Far Eastern people of indeterminate ethnic origin”), although with strong Chinese influence on their culture. Their appearance in Central Asia heralds the advent of a new period in the history of the Muslim Turkic and Iranian population of the area.

ECONOMY AND CULTURE

The territorial extension of the Qarā Ḵeṭāy realm was enormous. In the west, it reached the river Amu Daryā bordering on the Khwarazmian empire. Khwarazm had only a loose dependence on the Qarā Ḵeṭāy, to whom they paid tribute. In the south, the city-states of Turkestan (Khotan and others) were the adjacent territories, and in the east they bordered on the Tangut (Xi Xia) realm. In the northeast, the Mongol Naiman confederacy was in their vicinity, while in the north Qarā Ḵeṭāy jurisdiction stretched as far as the forest zone where the Kerḡiz (Qerqiz) lived. The Qarā Ḵeṭāy empire thus comprised the entire central territory of Inner Asia, otherwise known as historical Turkestan (see CENTRAL ASIA i. Geographical Overview, CHINESE TURKESTAN i. Geographical Overview).

The conquering Qarā Ḵeṭāy represented the Mongol ethnic element of the realm, but they must have comprised only a small minority of the whole population. An Iranian population had been dwelling in the cities of Turkestan since ancient times, and the Iranian character of such urban centers as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent has been preserved by their Tajik inhabitants to this day. In the vicinity of Balāsāḡun there lived a nomadic population of Turkic Qarloq tribes, while in Kāšḡar, Khotan, and Samarkand the Qarakhanid Turks represented the half-sedentary nomads. The city-states of the Tarim Basin (e.g., Turfan) were home to the Turkic Uighurs, who had settled in this area in the 9th century, following their departure from the region of present-day Mongolia. By the 12th century, the ancient Iranian and Tokharian population of these towns was thoroughly intermingled with the

Uighur newcomers. In this colorful ethnic cavalcade, the conquering Qarā Ḵeṭāy settled mainly in the vicinity of Balāsāḡun (*Liao shi*, chap. 30, p. 357; *Jin shi*, chap. 121, p. 2637; Biran, 2005, pp. 106-8).

The economic life of the realm was based on the sedentary and the nomadic economies. The Qarā Ḵeṭāy were careful not to cause harm to the traditional agriculture of the conquered lands, in contrast to the Oghuz and Türkmen tribes, whose appearance in Iran and the Middle East was often accompanied by plundering and devastation of the arable lands. As conquerors, the Qarā Ḵeṭāy were more tolerant than the Turks or Mongols, compared with whom they treated the subjugated lands and people with greater tact and adroitness. The Qarā Ḵeṭāy period was one of economic stability in the villages and oasis settlements of Central Asia, as well as in the mercantile urban centers. Peace and security allowed the development of agriculture, which had always been based on an extensive irrigation system. Yelü Chucai, who personally traveled through Qarā Ḵeṭāy territory in the 1220s, speaks of the flourishing agriculture of the Turkestani oases and describes the irrigational system near Balāsāḡun (de Rachewiltz, pp. 20-21). The most common crops were cotton, grapes, apples, onions, and watermelons. Animal husbandry also had a role in the life of the settled population. Horses, cattles and camels were the commonest species; the dromedary played an indispensable role in the traffic of the caravan routes (Biran, 2005, pp. 133-34).

The mainly Muslim towns of Turkestan were the centers of international commerce; the ancient trade routes of the Silk Road continued functioning during the Qarā Ḵeṭāy rule. Business transactions with China were mainly managed by the Uighurs, who reached China through the Tangut (Xi Xia) empire.

The Qarā Ḵeṭāy themselves pursued a traditional nomadic livelihood, based on extensive animal farming complemented with hunting. They did not become city-dwellers, and their capital city near Balāsāḡun was in fact just a large tent-camp or city of tents. Like the Qarakhanids, they were promoters of urban culture, but they themselves were not overly affected by it. They did not mingle with the urban population of their subjects; the main connecting link between them was taxation. Although the Qarā Ḵeṭāy issued coins on the Liao pattern, output (mainly by the former Qarakhanid mints) was insignificant and played practically no role in the circulation of money so essential to the economy. Issues were limited to a few coins throughout the whole Qarā Ḵeṭāy period (Kochnev, 1993; Nastich, pp. 3-5).

As far as state structure is concerned, the Qarā Ḵeṭāy empire continued the tradition of the Qitans of China. The central government was located near Balāsāḡun in the capital, but it had direct jurisdiction only over the nomadic Qarā Ḵeṭāy near the capital. All other territories of the realm remained under local Muslim administration. Unlike the later Mongol empire, the Qarā Ḵeṭāy realm had no centralized system of government based on appanages; the conquered lands were governed through a networks of vassal rulers and chieftains. Thus, Transoxania with Samarkand as its center, was a Qarakhanid vassal state within the Qarā Ḵeṭāy empire. The local rulers enjoyed relative autonomy, but they could be summarily dismissed any time by the Qarā Ḵeṭāy khan. The Gurkhan granted the ruler of Samarqand the insignia of his rule, namely a silver *paizu* (> Pers. *pāyza* "table of authority," a small tablet on which the ruler's name and imperial order were engraved) and a seal (for *paizu* and its Mongol and Turkic equivalents, see Doerfer, I, no. 116).

As in the case of all nomadic empires, the Qarā Ḵeṭāy viewed the main task of their government to be the taxation of the conquered territories. Taxes were levied on the population on the basis of households, and the tasks of population census and tax-gathering were administered and controlled by the emissary or governor of the Gurkhan, called *šeḥna* in Persian and *basqaq* in Turkic. Later, in the Mongol period, the representatives of the central power gained special importance, and the Mongol term *dāruḡa* became the equivalent of *šeḥna* and *bāsqāq* (Vásáry, pp. 201-6).

The state power was guaranteed by a mobile, typically nomadic army based on light cavalry. In the conquered territories no military was present apart from a small, armed retinue of the governor (*šeḥna*); the main forces of the Qarā Ḵeṭāy army were stationed in the neighboring district of Balāsāḡun. Primarily owing to this lack of military presence in the predominantly Muslim territories of Central Asia subjected to Qarā Ḵeṭāy power, many travelers could hardly notice the signs of Qarā Ḵeṭāy sovereignty. Furthermore, the Qarā Ḵeṭāy left the local economy and culture to function in their own ways. Yet an apparent symbol of the vassal status of the Muslim regions was that the name of the actual Qarā Ḵeṭāy ruler had to be mentioned in the Friday sermon (*ḵoṭba*). If a governor (*šeḥna*), who also supervised the taxation, was killed, this was tantamount to open revolt. Thereupon, the armed retaliation of the Qarā Ḵeṭāy power quickly materialized, as it did in 606/1209 when the Uighurs of Qocho assassinated their governor (Rašid-al-Din; tr., I, p. 76).

The composite character of the ethnic, economic, and political components of

the empire was likewise reflected in the field of religion, culture, and language. The admixture of the Qitan (Liao) culture survived with the Qarā Ḵeṭāy as well. The young aristocrats were partakers of a double, Qitan and Chinese, education. Though the official language was Chinese, no Chinese-language documents from them are known to be extant. In their communication with local conquered populations, the Qarā Ḵeṭāy used Persian and Uighur (Biran, 2005, pp. 126-28). They professed Buddhism, but they basically adhered to the ancestral beliefs of their Khitan forefathers. The subjected Turkic and Iranian population, which formed the preponderant majority of the Qarā Ḵeṭāy subjects, were adherents of Islam. Yet a sizeable minority of the Turks were Nestorian Christians, who had a metropolitan see in Kāšḡar, and the Turkic Nestorian grave inscriptions along the river Chu attest to their presence also in that region. The religious policy of the Qarā Ḵeṭāy can be characterized by the traditional tolerance of nomadic societies. Buddhism, Manicheism, and Nestorian Christianity all flourished in Central Asia in the 12th century, and these religions were real beneficiaries of Qarā Ḵeṭāy tolerance (Biran, 2005, pp. 176-80).

In sum, the two basic pillars of the self-identification of the Qarā Ḵeṭāy were their Inner Asian nomadic heritage and the Chinese legacy. The ruling house and the elite maintained its nomadic way of life (animal husbandry with an emphasis on horse, nomadic army and warfare, high esteem of women in society, and other values; Biran, 2005, pp. 146-68) and the Turco-Mongol nomenclature of certain dignitaries (*gurkhan*, *bāsqāq*, etc.). On the other hand, the Qarā Ḵeṭāy dynasty could pride itself upon its being a legitimate Chinese dynasty, the Western Liao, recognized as such also by the Chinese. They retained a great number of Chinese features in their administration and culture (reign and temple titles of emperors, titles for officials, census taking and taxation per household, imperial insignia as seal and tablet of authority, Chinese coins and literacy, Chinese dress and calendar; Biran, 2005, pp. 93-102). What is really conspicuous is that they never embraced the Islamic faith and culture characteristic of most of their Turkic and Persian subjects. Due to the relative religious tolerance of the Qarā Ḵeṭāy, their rule was remembered also by the Muslims as one of the milder epochs in the stormy history of Central Asia.

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