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The Steppe and Early European State Formation

Iver B. NEUMANN*

It is not a self-evident thing for a group of scholars to invite an outsider who has studied the home turf of that group to open one of their conferences. I am extremely pleased to be here, and I want to make the most of the opportunity by calling attention to an area of study that my previous work has been pointing me to, and that I believe we who study International Relations (IR) should make our own. I am talking about a relation between two places in time. The relation is the one between nomads and sedentaries. The places are the Eurasian steppe and the sedentary polities to its west. By the Eurasia steppe I mean that vast tract of land that stretched from the Mongolian-Turkic homelands around Karakorum, north of the agricultural lands of the Chinese, the Persians and the Byzantines, all the way to where the grasslands started to give way to forest, and where there lived Slavic and Finno-Ugric tribes. The time is what Europeans call the middle ages.

The relation was one between intimates. When I was here last, it was as the guest of Koc University, with my wife. We lived at Hotel Admiralty, with a panorama view of Hagia Sofia and the Sultanahmet Mosque. From the perspective of the roof terrace of the hotel, it was amply clear that we were talking about sister structures. My wife, the new ager, insisted that we spend an hour or two in Hagia Sofia, for it is amongst those place that have been charged with the prayers to different gods over a long period of time, and so, she told me, it is amongst the holiest of places. As I planned this lecture, it struck me that we have two models of how to conceptualize our region of the world here. On the one hand, we could think of it as consisting of two distinct parts; an Orient and an Occident, to use political terms that one may safely say are somewhat out of vogue. On the other hand, we could think of it as one of the many hybrid products that have grown out of the long series of meetings between East and West, between Turkic, Mongol and also Iranian peoples on the one hand, and Slav, Latin and Roman peoples on the other. For both analytical and political reasons I favor the latter view. In opening a conference that has the theme “after sovereignty”; I want to take the long view of what came before sovereignty. I want to speak about the period that started in the fourth century, when our records first note how a detachment of the steppe empire that the Chinese knew as the Hsiung-Nu and the Romans came to know as the Huns made their presence felt amongst the sedentaries, and into the 16th century, when a states system began to emerge amongst the sedentary states.

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There are two reasons why I have chosen to respond to your kind invitation in this way. The first one is analytical. It is about time that IR as a discipline takes seriously the whole gamut of systems of polities that we find in human history, and not just the states system that grew out of the European system that formed from the 16th century on. Addressing relations between the steppe and the sown in a systematic way increases our universe of cases, and that is a very important thing for any science. The second reason why I want to dwell on the steppe, so to speak, is to do with European self-understandings. It is about time that Europe acknowledges how the steppe was a constitutive outside of European state building from the very start. Even if we leave out the question of the lingering importance of the steppe for our understanding of today's political situation – and that is a question that I will not touch upon today – it is about time to establish how East-West relations did not start with the meetings between the Ottoman Empire and the Christian powers. It is true that that meeting was absolutely important in creating the concept of Europe in the 15th century, but the meeting is much older. It predates the fights of the Saracens and the Christians. Extant IR scholarship, which is a Western European product, has simply read out the importance of the Byzantines and their many policies towards the steppe. Some of you went to school in Hungary and in Bulgaria. Hungarian and Bulgarian schoolbooks, twisted as they may be by nationalist methodology and the need to inculcate a certain nationalist pride in unsuspecting youngsters, are very clear when it comes to the origins of those states. In various measures and in different ways, they grew out of meetings between multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic steppe polities on the one hand, and sedentary populations – Slav or otherwise – on the other. Furthermore, with the possible exception of the Basques, about whose origins we know little, the so-called autochthonous populations of Europe came from the East. In historical discourse, this is obvious. In political discourse, it is certainly put under erasure. The steppe, or more specifically peoples hailing from the steppe, has been the consistently productive constitutive outside of Europe. Where, if I may ask, does that basic insight crop up in IR scholarship? The answer is nowhere, or almost nowhere. We have here a theme that may potentially change the way we think about the origins of European states in particular and of Europe's beginnings in general. If the CEEISA is not the place to begin a discussion of these themes, then where?

I will proceed in three steps. First, I will talk about why identity matters, and how the outside is constitutive of identity. Secondly, I want to draw attention to how, in all three emergences of the concept of "Europe", the steppe was amongst Europe's constitutive others. Third, I want to exemplify the argument by giving a nutshell overview state of the case of north Slav state formations.

The Constitutive Outside

Let's start with Plato's dialogue *The Statesman*. Plato is interested in what it is that is specific to the work of the statesman, and by implication, to politics. His answer is that politics is the overarching or perhaps better undergirding art of regulating the relationship between the one and the many. The polis, Plato suggests, is a weave. The calling of the sta-

tesman is to finish this weave. The resulting cloth should be a perfect mix of the bold and the prudent, with everybody included. Such a weave, such a political community, Plato (261b-262a) concludes, would be the most shining one of them all.

To Plato, then, politics concerns tying together the threads of personal fates into a weave where they are all complementary, tied together in a community of practices and of fate. This is collective identity formation as seen from above. As seen from below, it is all about belonging and acting in accordance with pre-existing scripts. We find the theme all over the political theory canon. To the contract theorists, for example, people alienate their natural state in order to forge a community. Underlying all the questions of everyday politics, of what kind of constitution a community should have, how resources should be allocated etc. we find the basic question of who we are. Groups are key to human life. The larger they are, the more imperative to its cohesion it is that there exists some kind of glue, some markers of commonness, some integration.

Why is that? Because it is impossible to act collectively without having some kind of preconceived scheme of who is acting. This problem grows with the size of the group. Think of any work place, they are rife with occasions where the idea and practices of commonality are repeated, over and over. Why is that? So that the employees should feel good? That too, for it is a human thing that feeling commonality is one of the things that make most people feel good. But the key thing is that a feeling of commonality rests on a repertoire of knowledge about when and how to act together. It so happens that this knowledge is also a key part of productive power. It follows that a collective that knows itself to be a “we” is simply more productive, it has a larger capacity for action than what it would have had if the we-feeling had been weaker. So, as people have been pointing out since Plato, we-feeling is a key political resource.

Humans are not bees or ants, however. There exists no group mind that can orchestrate the behaviour of each and every individual. Given the human existence, the group will necessarily be heterogeneous in some degree. This means that a lot of the feeling of commonality will be imagined, not actually lived. Collective identities are also patchy. Collective identities are what social scientists call fuzzy sets or, following Ludwig Wittgenstein, family resemblances. There is no one physical or cultural trait that guarantees cultural similarity. Being a member of a group is a case of know it when you see it, as social anthropologists say when they are pressed into a corner. Collective identities are also relational. Where some groups are concerned, being a member of that group is compatible with being a member of another group, and no questions asked.

Collective identities may be imagined and patchy, but since they are relational, there always exist other identities which confirm them by being different. Which these Others are, varies within the group and also historically. The point that collective identity is relational, that it is the group's relations with other groups that sustain the group itself, is an old one. But in the decades following the Second World War, this insight was elaborated upon in ways which made it into the very stepping stone of social analysis of collective identity.

Philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas did the theoretical groundwork.¹ In terms of method, however, the breakthrough came within the social science that has specialised in identity since in its inception, namely social anthropology. In 1969, Fredrik Barth and associates published the book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, where the key point was that the maintenance of ethnic groups could be studied from its borders and in, and specialized in terms of which differences the groups themselves held to constitute them.² Social anthropology never looked back, and over the last thirty years, the other social sciences have followed suit.

The point that identity should be to studied along the boundaries has a number of repercussions for the way in which we think about IR. First, it means that attempts to draw up a list of historic and social traits from some outside vantage point –that of the Christian theologian, for example, or that of the Western philosopher– have limited value. A second implication of identity’s relational nature is that the size of cultural differences depends not on some inherent trait, but on how different they are perceived to be. Hungarian and Rumanian belong to two different families of languages, whereas Polish and Russian are, by comparison, linguistically very similar indeed. As identity markers, however, they are equally good. To an outsider, the differences between Serb folk music and Croat folk music are miniscule. To Serbs and Croats themselves, however, they are literally worlds apart –however close they may be musically, they are constitutive of a difference of identity. This point –that it is the difference as perceived by the group itself that is key to cultural difference– has important bearings on European identity. It means, for example, that all the things which are similar between Europe and its neighbours may count for nothing if everybody involved insists on the difference, not the similarity. Religion is a case in point. What does it help to point out that Islam and Christianity come in many varieties, that they are of common origin (“we are all sons of Abraham”), that they share a lot of structural similarities (monotheism and patriarchy, to mention but two), if most people involved see religion as a razor-sharp divider?³ This is why people like Samuel Huntington, Osama bin Laden and Jean-Marie Le Pen are so dangerous –not because they point to “real” differences, but because they insist that these differences should be constitutive of who we are, and so key to social and political life. Any identity has its constitutive outside. A lot turns on how we think about that outside, and in what ways and what degree we turn difference into otherness.

The Steppe as Europe’s Constitutive Outside

History is identity’s chronological aspect. I have already noted in passing how the Third chapter in Europe’s conceptual history – the chapter that starts in the 16th century and converge on how a torn Christianity owned up against the Ottomans under a new banner

¹ Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other. The ‘East’ in European Identity Formation*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p.1-38.

² Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1969.

³ Bahar Rumelili, *Constructing Regional Community and Order in Europe and Southeast Asia*, London, Palgrave, 2007.

that took the place of “Christendom”, namely Europe.⁴ Chapter one of Europe’s conceptual history is mythical, hails from Greece, and concerns how a Phoenician princess called Europa was abducted from the mainland to Crete by Zeus, who appeared in the guise of a white bull.⁵ Europe came to be used as a geographical term denoting the upper western half of the Greece T-maps, with Asia and Africa making up the other two parts of the map. The delineation between Europe and Asia was said to be the river Tanais, i.e. Don. Europe’s constitutive other was Asia. It was –and this is well known– Parthia or Persia. As we all know, however, Parthia was not to be found immediately to the east of the river Don. That was the abode of the nomads of the steppe. Parthia was not alone in being the constitutive outside of Europe’s first incarnation. The steppe was another one of Europe’s very first and Greek incarnation.

In between the first and the third chapters of Europe’s conceptual history, there is a second and less well known chapter. It is short, and plays itself out around the beginning of the reign of Charlemagne, i.e. around the year when he was crowned. This second incarnation of “Europe” denoted the Carolingian Kingdom narrowly, and Christendom broadly. We are talking about scattered uses of the term, not enough to fasten it to a specific territorial referent. Charlemagne was King of the Franks and, it will be recalled, crowned Emperor of the Romans in the year 800. Note, however, that the *translatio imperii* from the Roman Empire to the Carolingian one was only one of the *translatii imperii* in play. One key reason why the crowning took place when it did was in order to celebrate the victory over the Avars. A word on these Avars seems in order.

The Avars were one of many mainly Turkic-speaking peoples who fell on the already settled lands west of the steppe and settled there themselves.⁶ They arrived in the mid-sixth century, following the Sarmatians. The Avars rushed westward from central Asia to escape from the pressure from another Turkic group, the Altaic Turks. They defeated the Bulgars, another Turkic-speaking people, who camped out in the Pontic steppe at the time, and centred around what is now the Hungarian *Alföld* (plain). The Avars were organised in a khaganate, the political order of choice for the nomads of the steppe empires of inner Asia a khagan is a khan of khans. This khaganate was given short shift by

⁴ The third time the term Europe crops up is of course during the 15th century, this time as a substitute for the term Christendom, See Neumann, *Uses of the Other*. My reading of this is that religious fissures first between orthodox and catholic, and then between catholic and protestant, called for a concept which could be uniting by not referring directly to what was in dispute. “Europe” was such a term. One notes that the term Europe was also tied to the rallying of Christian counter-forces in the first half of the 15th century against the Ottoman onslaught that eventually brought down Constantinople in 1453. Its first use in a book title was by Enea Piccolomini, who later became Pope Pius II. Conceptually as well as politically, Europe is the successor of Christendom, and its constitutive outside this time was the Ottoman Empire that had conquered Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire. The Ottoman Empire emerged out of the Turkic-speaking peoples who trekked in from the steppes to settle. Once again, the steppe and its offspring peoples emerge as Europe’s constitutive outside.

⁵ See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europa_\(mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europa_(mythology)), (Accessed on 7 May 2011).

⁶ Florin Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500-1250*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Charlemagne, and his crowning was, among other things a celebration of this victory. In other words, Charlemagne set himself up as the crowned head of an entity that was sometimes called Europe, and one constitutive outside of this entity was the Avar Khaganate, an offspring of the steppe.

There is a direct connection not only between the Avars and the structure of European identity (the Avars being one historical constitutive outside of Europe), but also between the Avars and certain states in today's Europe. One is France. Another is the Bulgaria. The Bulgarian state emerged as a result of a merge between tribute-takers from the steppe –the Bulgars– and local tribute-giving tribes, most of them Slavic. The Bulgarian hold on this territory was fastened as the greatest of Bulgarian Khans, Krum (803-814), finished off the Avars.⁷ We have here three examples of how it is impossible to think Europe without including the steppe. Modern day Bulgaria is indeed a result of that meeting.

The Steppe and Russia

I would perhaps betray the trust which led you to invite me, however, if I did not give an empirically more extended example, and if that example was not something to do with Russia, so let's turn to the beginnings of the first north Slavic polity.⁸ Let's turn to the Rus' khaganate. Unfortunately, in terms of sources, there is not all that much to turn to. As a leading authority on stuff early Turkic, Peter Golden puts it:⁹

As for the Rus' qaghanate, we know nothing concrete about its origins. Both Pritsak and the writer of these lines concluded that there must have been some marital connection between the Khazar qaghanal line and the Rus' rulers. Pritsak suggested that the founder of the line was a Khazar Qaghan who fled the Kabar (Qabar) revolt in the 830's and 'found refuge in the Rus' factory (trading post) dominating the vital Volga-Donets route from the region near Iaroslavl' – Rostov. I also argued for a blood tie because anything less, in steppe Eurasia (the most important audience for such imperial pretentions), would have been meaningless.

Meaningless, because we are talking about a khaganate, and the title of khagan was not, as discussed, to be assumed lightly. Noonan argues that it was adopted, and remained in use into the 11th century, because the Rus' were intimately involved with the peoples of the steppe and:¹⁰

⁷ The existence of the quid ditch player Krum and his key function as the dark Easterner in the Harry Potter universe is an interesting example of how Europe's steppe connection still leads a subterranean existence in European culture.

⁸ Iver B. Neumann, "Russia as a Great Power, 1815-2007", *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol.11, No.2, 2008, p.128-151 and; Iver B. Neumann, "Russia's Standing as a Great Power, 1492-1815", Ted Hopf (ed.) *Russia's European Choices*, New York, NY, Palgrave, 2008, p.11-34.

⁹ Peter Benjamin Golden, "Nomads in the Sedentary World: The Case of Pre-Chinggisid Rus and Georgia" Anatoly M. Khazanov & André Wink (eds.), *Nomads in the Sedentary World*, Richmond, Curzon, 2001, p.32.

¹⁰ Thomas Noonan, "The Khazar Qaghanate and Its Impact on the Early Rus' State: The *translatio imperii* from Itil to Kiev", Anatoly Mikhailovich Khazanov and Andre Wink (eds.) *Nomads in the Sedentary World*, Richmond, Curzon, 2001, p.90.

were aware that Khazar pretensions to universal empire were something to be reckoned with. [...] If it had not been for the Khazars, much of southeastern Europe would have been conquered by the Umayyads and 'Abbasids and subsequently incorporated into the Islamic world. The Rus' of Kiev undoubtedly knew this history and understood how the mandate of heaven had helped the Khazars keep the Arabs out of southern Russia and Ukraine.

We know that the Scandinavians (also known as the Norsemen, the Varangians, the Vikings or the Rus') and the Khazars were competitors for tribute and trading partners. We also know that the Rus' borrowed practices from the Khazars. What we do not know is the exact relationship between the two polities and the degree in which the Rus' borrowed from the Khazars. Writing in the first half of the last century, Russian émigré historian George Vernadsky held that the Vikings had discovered the Donet riverway by 737, and that they were called upon by local tribes to help them against their Khazar overlords and hence established a political presence around Azov in 739. Thus, they came into direct conflict with the Khazars.¹¹ Vernadsky speculated that the Khazars "used" the Norsemen as allies against the Arabs.¹² While Vernadsky's stress on the importance of the steppe theses were once highly contested, and while a lot of the conjecture remains unsubstantiated, the trend in recent historical scholarship has been to upgrade the role of the Khazars for the political organisation of the Rus' Khaganate.

The crucial period in centralising tribute collection by driving out the Khazars, taking over their role as tribute taker and their base in Kiev as well as increasing the regularity of their payment was the tenth century. The Rurikid princes Igor and his Widow Olga, their son Sviatoslav, and his sons Iaropolk, Oleg and Vladimir presided over the Kaganate in this period.¹³ Oleg conquered the Slavic-speaking tribe of the Severyans ("Northerners") and forbade their further payment of tribute to the Khazars. The years after, upon learning that another tribe, the Radimichians, paid tribute to the Khazars, Oleg simply transferred that tribute to himself. Oleg also collected tribute from a Finno-Ugrian tribe that is consistently mentioned on a par with the others (regardless of the fact that

¹¹ See George Vernadsky, *Ancient Russia A History of Russia*, Vol. 1, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1943, p.273. It is, incidentally, in this context that Vernadsky draws on the Ynglingesaga to speculate that the gods of the sagas, the *Aesir*, are a "mythical façade" over the historical Asi, i.e. the Alan tribe known as As Vernadsky, *Ancient Russia*, p.274. This speculation is very much alive in less respectable Scandinavian writings.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.285.

¹³ As to the exact timing and names of the political leaders between Rurik and Igor, there is confusion. Igor is said to be Rurik's son, and Oleg is supposed to have ruled in the interim, but however way you look at it, the time stretch between the alleged times of Rurik's arrival and Igor's appearance on the stage is too long, see Simon Franklin & Jonathan Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus 750-1200*, London, Longman, 1996, p.57. Zuckerman's suggested solution is to postulate a lost generation between Rurik on the one hand and Igor' and Oleg on the other. One of his key sources is the so-called Schechter Letter, excavated in Egypt in the 1880s, which relates the story of a campaign against Khazaria by HLGW (Oleg) around 941, in which Oleg was defeated by the Khazar general Pesakh; see, Constantine Zuckerman, "On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion to Judaism and the Chronology of the Kings of the Rus Oleg and Igor' *Revue des études Byzantines*, Vol.53, 1995, p.237-270. The Khazars did not simply fade away.

they obviously spoke a non-Slav language) in our main written source (*Povest' vremennykh let*, The Tale of Years gone by), the Meria. Kiev emerged as the leading town in the second half of the 10th century, just as the Khazar Empire died away.¹⁴ Given the formative and centuries-long Rus' experience with trying to form and maintain a polity at the very edge of the Khazarian Empire, Prince Sviatoslav's victory over the Khazars at their own fortress of Sarkel on the Don River in 965 must have been experienced as a major Rus' breakthrough. When it subsequently proved to be instrumental in bringing down the entire Khazarian Empire, one major hindrance to Rus' tribute collection and hence political consolidation was gone. As a Scandinavian, I grew up with school books that detailed how Vikings or Varangians were very active indeed in this period of early state formation, and played the key role in early Russian state formation.¹⁵ I was never told, however, how they did so in competition with and eventually in cooperation with steppe peoples like the Khazars and the Bulgars. Neither was I told that relations with Pechenegs and Khipchaks remained very important indeed for early state formation in the 11th, 12th and 13th century, that what we now refer to as the Golden Horde actually referred to itself as the Khipchak Khanate or that the *translatio imperii* from the Khipchak Khanate to Muscovy was a key source of legitimation for the early tsars.

Conclusion

You all remember most of this from your school books. Many persons in this room will know much more about the mediaeval state than I do. And yet, as a discipline, we have not risen to the challenge of incorporating the step in our theorising of international relations.

The steppe remains with us as a subterranean identity theme. The old Habsburgs used to insist that Asia started east of the Ringstrasse –the beltway circling the town. Balts

¹⁴ Rus' played a role functionally similar to a steppe marauder vis-à-vis Byzantium, attacking it four times; in 860, in 911 in 941 and in 1043. Vasiliev establishes the historicity of the second attack, about which there has been some doubt, placing it in the context of opening the way to the Black and Caspian Seas in the context of Khazar decline; see A.A Vasiliev, "The Second Russian Attack on Constantinople", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol.6, 1951, p.224. Vasiliev also argues that all the attacks emanated from Kiev (Vernadsky tries to make the case for Tmutorokan; see George Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1959, p.217). The Khazars maintained uneasy relations with Byzantium, but given their increasingly weak position vis-à-vis the Vikings, in 833 the Khazars nonetheless appealed for help from Byzantium in order to keep out marauders from the north out. (While there is no doubt about the perceived need to keep the Vikings out, there is a possibility that the immediate cause for the Khazar appeal was actually Magyar pressure.) Together they built the fortress Sarkel on the left bank of the Don. For lay and lay-out, see <http://www.khazaria.com/sarkel.html>, (Accessed on 7 September 2009). Golden speculates that, since the building of the fort came at a point where the Khazar conversion to Judaism had become overt, it presented "a critical shift in foreign policy" that the Byzantines tried to meet by being forthcoming with their help. As it happened, the fortress not only came to serve as an effective barrier to direct (but not indirect) contact between the Rus' and Byzantium, but also as a base from which the Khazars could impose further tribute on groups to their north. See Peter Benjamin Golden, "The Conversion of the Khazars to Judaism", Peter B. Golden, Haggai Ben-Shammai & Andras Rona-Tas (eds.), *The World of The Khazars (Handbook of Oriental Studies)*, Leiden, Brill. 2007, p.159.

¹⁵ Noonan, "The Khazar Qaghanate".

and Rumanians will tell you that it starts across the river, in Ukraine. So will most Poles, if they are not of the expansive historical type that will think of themselves as Jagiellonian Poles, of a kind with Ukrainians. In that case, they will tell you that Asia starts in Russia, as will most Ukrainians. Most Russians will, however, insist that Asia starts somewhere to their East and South. In the south-eastern corner of Europe, yet another chain may be identified. Austrians will tell you that Asia starts in Slovenia, Slovenes will point to Croatia, Croatians will point to Serbia, Serbs will point to Bosnia and Bosnians will point to Turkey. Turks will presumably point to Iran. Most Greeks will eagerly join in to support the idea that Europe stops at their doorstep.

What we have here is a version of a very old theme: European othering of the Orient. That theme has been amply studied in and out of IR since Edward Said wrote his breakthrough book on *Orientalism*. Post-colonial scholarship is now firmly ensconced within the discipline.¹⁶ We have also done a good job of discussing state-centrism in general. What we have *not* done so far, however, is to study the importance of relations with the steppe for early European state formation. We are still trapped in Hegel's heritage. It was Hegel who laid down that the state was the keystone of civilization, and that it was inextricably linked to a sedentary existence. Morgan, Engels and other early theorists of the state simply followed suit. One result of this is that the political organisation of nomadic societies was not a fitting subject for the student of state formation. It is telling that one of the best works that try to theorize steppe politics remains that of a 14th-century Arab scholar, Ibn Khaldoun. The discipline of IR, a 20th century phenomenon, took over the Euro-centric view that a polity was by definition a sedentary phenomenon, and that political life worth studying presupposed a state. The history of the contemporary system of states is basically a tale of how, from the 17th century onwards, the European system, with its principle of sovereignty, came to envelop the globe. I challenge you to tell other stories, about how states in what we now call Central and Eastern Europe grew out of meetings with the steppe, how they formed alliances with steppe polities and how steppe ways of doing politics have left remnants in today's IR.

¹⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* London, Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1978.

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