
CLASSICAL COLUMN CAPITALS IN TARTOUS MUSEUM

Abstract: This article explores the collection of the classical column capitals exhibited at the National Museum of Tartous in Syria. It categorizes these capitals by their architectural orders, where only capitals of Corinthian and Ionic orders can be found, in addition to one votive capital. The article discusses the challenges of dating these capitals which lack archaeological context and explores the implications of their varied forms and origins. Additionally, it refers to the practice of reusing these capitals in later times, according to some modifications applied to those capitals. Moreover, half-finished capitals shed light on the presence of workshops in the Syrian coastal area, where both finished and unfinished marble capitals were imported.

Keywords: *Corinthian; Ionic; Votive two-part capital; local workshops.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Tartous Museum houses numerous classical capitals, which considered components of the classical architectural orders employed by the Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines in their construction projects.¹ Table (1) outlines certain characteristics of these capitals alongside their respective findspots. It is worth noting that it is uncommon to find other architectural elements of the complete order, or even components like shafts and bases from the columns themselves, alongside these capitals.

Nevertheless, these capitals provide significant insights into the overall architectural style of their respective periods. Large capitals offer clues about the scale of existing architecture, while the type of capitals can provide an idea of the type of the architecture during that time. Furthermore, analysing the state and design of these capitals may shed light on the economic and social dynamics of the region they originate from.

The main challenge with most of the capitals in the Tartous Museum is their lack of discovery within identified archaeological contexts or specific historical structures. Instead, they were unearthed during construction projects in Tartous or nearby areas. Additionally, some capitals in the museum have an unknown provenance. They either arrived at the museum from other sites or were intercepted by authorities while being transported for illegal sale. Consequently, dating these capitals and determining the types of buildings they originally belonged to presents distinct difficulties.

This article explores the examination of classical column capitals housed within the National Museum of Tartous, categorizing them by their respective orders. Within the collection, one finds Corinthian and Ionic capitals, alongside a singular identification as a votive capital (Fig. 1).

¹ The classical types in architecture include Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Composite.

Table 1. Details of the studied capitals in Tartous Museum.

| capital | Inventory Number | Findspot | Type of stone | Height (cm) | Lower diameter (cm) |
|---------|------------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|---------------------|
| No. 1 | 279 | Jabla | Marble | 82 | 59 |
| No. 2 | 608 | Banyas | Marble | 55 | 43 |
| No. 3 | 258 | Tartous city | Marble | 48 | 34 |
| No. 4 | 676 | Amrit | Marble | 61 | 50 |
| No. 5 | 658 | Amrit | Marble | 60 | 54 |
| No. 6 | 593 | Unknown | Limestone | 77 | 57 |
| No. 7 | 592 | Unknown | Limestone | 67 | 53 |
| No. 8 | 1650 | Amrit | Marble | 36 | 37 |
| No. 9 | 918 | Maqabir Azar | Limestone | 38 | 28 |
| No. 10 | 1693 | Unknown | Limestone | 43 | 30 |
| No. 11 | 329 | Unknown | Marble | 29 | 45 |
| No. 12 | - | Unknown | Marble | 51 | - |
| No. 13 | 259 | Unknown | Sandstone | 41 | 39 |
| No. 14 | 5369 | Unknown | Sandstone | 54 | 65 |
| No. 15 | 256 | Unknown | Sandstone | 44 | 66 |
| No. 16 | 5370 | Unknown | Limestone | 41 | 43 |
| No. 17 | 1726 | Unknown | Limestone | 22 | 20 |

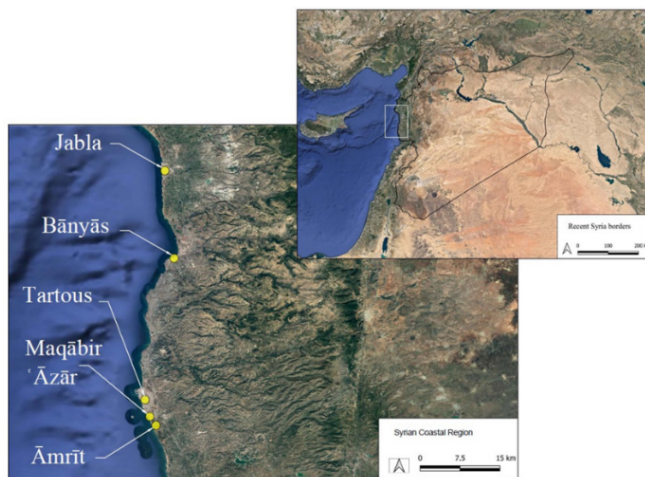


Fig. 1. A map illustrates the findspots of the examined capitals. (Drawn by the author).

CORINTHIAN CAPITALS

Various forms of Corinthian capitals exist, with the canonical Corinthian capital being the most common type, encompassing all essential elements.² Despite the enduring relevance of the classical morphology of the Corinthian capital, there have been divergent developments within the Corinthian order. In some instances, elements may be omitted or modified, rendering a non-canonical capital.³ Consequently, these variants require new designations, and numerous terms have been employed to describe them. The diversity of non-canonical Corinthian capitals is so extensive that Butler notes: “...the Corinthian displays unnumbered forms...”⁴

² SCHLUMBERGER 1933, Footnote 1: 285; DENTZER-FEYDY 1990, Footnote 1: 633.

DELBRUECK 1907, 158.
KAUTZSCH 1936, 5.

³ Various terms were used, such as: Non-canonical: GINOUEVS 1992, 95–96; Corinthianizing: MAVER/MÜLLER/RIŽNAR 2009, 120,129; Free: NEWCOMB 1921, 56; POLJAK/BOTIĆ 2018, 200.

⁴ BUTLER 1929, 1: 235.

Additionally, Corinthian capital can include one or more additional elements. The intent behind adding these elements can vary; they might serve solely decorative purposes or carry symbolic meanings. This symbolism can evolve over time and differ across various cultures and religious contexts. For instance, certain decorative motifs employed in Greek and Roman art and later embraced by Christians may undergo diverse interpretations.⁵

In most cases, dating capitals that lack an archaeological or architectural context can be quite challenging. Nevertheless, examining the overall form of the capital and its constituent elements, particularly those of the Corinthian capital, can sometimes provide clues for dating. Additionally, comparing them to similar examples from other contexts may assist in estimating their approximate date.

For instance, the arrangement of the acanthus leaves and the positioning of the helix and volutes against the abacus in capital No. 1 (Fig. 2), could aid in dating it to the era of Philip the Arab (AD 244–249).⁶



Fig. 2. Capital No.1. (Photo by the author).

Another two capitals made of marble are the capitals No. 2 and No. 3 (Figs 3, 4). Regarding the capital No. 2, it bears a striking resemblance to those discovered in the

⁵ ELSNER 2011, 7; BIRK 2013, 168.

⁶ DENTZER-FEYDY 1992, 473.

Roman theater of Jabala, which dates back to the Severan period. Similarly, capital No. 3 shares similarities with those unearthed in the Caesarea theater, which also dates to the Severan period, specifically the first decades of the third century AD.⁷



Fig. 3. Capital No.2. (Photo by the author).



Fig. 4. Capital No.3. (Photo by the author).

On the other hand, some capitals have clearer information, such as a group of twenty-one capitals from marble found on a shipwreck in Amrit, a site located few kilometres from the city of Tartous (Fig. 1). These capitals were dated back to the second half of the fifth century and the first half of the sixth century AD, originating from Proconnesus (Marmara Island), possibly intended for the construction of a large church.⁸ These capitals exhibit similarities, differing primarily in the shape of the abacus and the number of acanthus leaves in the lower register, ranging from six to eight. Ten of the capitals feature a grooved abacus, as in capital No. 4 (Fig. 5), while other capitals have a smooth one, as in capital No. 5 (Fig. 6). This variation may reflect the practices of the workshop or craftsmen involved in their production. Thus, it's plausible that the grooved-abacus capitals were produced by one workshop, while the others were crafted by different ones. Another indication of this is the diverse letters found on the non-grooved-abacus capitals, which are believed to represent signatures of various craftsmen or workshops. This further suggests the involvement of multiple craftsmen in the production of these capitals.⁹



Fig. 5. Capital No.4. (Photo by the author).



Fig. 6. Capital No.5. (Photo by the author).

The design of the acanthus leaf is significant in determining the age of the capital, as seen in capital No. 6 (Fig. 7). The intricate lace-like pattern formed by the acanthus leaves and calyxes is created through small triangular incisions. This artistic technique was frequently utilized in the capitals found in Byzantine churches across northern Syria during the fifth to seventh centuries AD. Therefore, this particular capital can be associated with this region and dated to that specific historical period, especially considering that it is made of limestone, the dominant material in the area.¹⁰



Fig. 7. Capital No.6. (Photo by the author).

Other features also contribute to determining the era of a capital, such as the garland motif on capital No. 7 (Fig. 8), which holds significance in Christian iconography. Throughout Christian history, the symbolism of wreaths has evolved, representing consecration, unwavering devotion to God, and ultimately, martyrdom and victory over sin.¹¹ This reinterpretation of the garland motif may have been influenced by scriptural passages, such as the mention of the "crown of life".¹² Consequently, this motif, now imbued with its new meaning, was reintroduced by the Christian community. While indicating the exact timeframe for this transition remains challenging, based on these distinctive

⁷ PENSABENE 1997, 352, 401.

⁸ WESTPHALEN/DENNERT 2004, 183–195.

⁹ WESTPHALEN/DENNERT 2004, 188.

¹⁰ BUTLER 1929, 1:237; NACCACHE/SODINI 1989, 485.

¹¹ LAIN 1963, 214–15; MIKAYELYAN 2016, 371

¹² JAMES 1:12; REVELATION 2:10.

characteristics, along with the shape of the acanthus leaves, this capital can be dated to the Byzantine period, particularly after the fifth century AD.



Fig. 8. Capital No.7. (Photo by the author).

There is also the marble capital No. 8 (Fig. 9), which is considered as an unfinished Corinthian capital. An illustration of the various stages of craftsmanship involved in the production of late antique Corinthian capitals is made by Asgari (Fig. 10), which were mass-produced on Proconnesus in the fifth and sixth centuries AD and predominantly shipped to Constantinople for final finishing. Many capitals found in Proconnesus are in this unfinished state, like the schematic Proconnesian capital of unknown context in Istanbul, which was designed to have only four leaves in the lower ring.¹³ Comparing our capital with stage D of the Corinthian capital manufacturing process, reveals a significant similarity between capital No. 8 and the form at that stage. This allows us to date our capital to the fifth and sixth centuries AD.



Fig. 9. Capital No.8. (Photo by the author).

This capital could serve as direct evidence of the presence of workshops for manufacturing capitals in the region. Furthermore, the material of this capital, marble, provides additional evidence that this area was not only importing finished capitals from elsewhere but also unfinished ones.

Additionally, two identical capitals, No.9 (Fig. 13), in the Museum of Tartous were found in Azar cemeteries (Maqabir Azar), while a third identical one, capital No. 10 (Fig. 14), is from an unknown place of origin. Given the evident similarities in shape, dimensions, and material (limestone) among these capitals, it is apparent that they originate from the same place and period, likely belonging to the same structure.

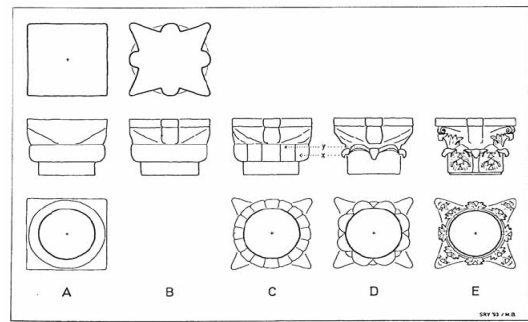


Fig. 10. Stages of craftsmanship of late antique Corinthian capitals. (Source: Asgari 1995, 278, Fig. 12).



Fig. 11. Capital No.9. (Photo by the author).

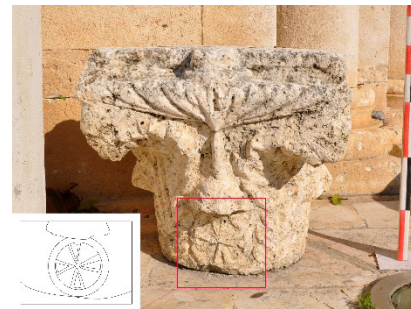


Fig. 12. Capital No.10. (Photo by the author).

The origin of these three capitals remains unknown. However, in discussions about architecture and its components, we must consider the practice of reusing these elements from earlier periods in later constructions. This practice is encapsulated by the term “*spolia*,” which refers to the utilization of building materials from previous epochs, known as *spolia* materials, whether modified or not, in the construction of new edifices.¹⁴ This tradition has persisted from ancient times to the present day, with each civilization incorporating remnants left by its predecessors, including buildings and their architectural elements. Among these elements, columns and capitals hold particular significance, as they are widely observable across various structures and eras.¹⁵

During the Byzantine era, Christians also employed *spolia* materials in their architectural endeavors, notably utilizing columns and capitals.¹⁶ They adopted various techniques to integrate these pagan elements into their structures, often incorporating crosses onto these elements as symbols of purification and the conversion to Christianity. This perspective is supported by the research of Helen Saradi:

¹⁴ DEICHMANN 1975; GEYMONAT 2012, 47; GRZESIAK 2011, 3–6.
¹⁵ GONNELLA 2010; SARADI 1997: 395; ERAVSAR 2016.
¹⁶ NIEWÖHNER 2018; GEYMONAT 2012; SARADI 1997.

¹³ ASGARI 1995, 277, 281.

“spolia reworked with crosses were presented as being Christianized and as symbolizing that the antique culture in all its manifestations had played a role in preparing the world for Christ’s advent and had not been excluded from salvation.”¹⁷

Hence, it is plausible to infer that these three capitals were relocated from its original site for incorporation into another Christian structure. This speculation finds support in the addition of a cross-in-circle motif to the capital at a subsequent stage.

In addition to the standard one-piece Corinthian capitals, there exists a variant composed of two pieces. This particular style emerged in the second century BC and gained popularity during the latter half of the first century BC. It was widely utilized across the Roman provinces surrounding the Mediterranean during the Roman Empire. Examples of this architectural form have been discovered in various cities such as Rome, Athens, Alexandria, and certain locations in Judea along the Levantine coast.¹⁸

In the Tartous Museum, there are two examples of this type of capital made from marble. The first capital No. 11 (Fig. 13), represents the upper section, while the second, capital No. 12 (Fig. 14), comprises the lower portion of these two-piece capitals. The presence of such capitals suggests the existence of substantial structures in the region. As noted by scholar Seth G. Bernard:

“It seems logical that a primary motivation in the two-piece technique, at least at its origins, was the desire to reduce the weight of individual structural components of an oversized building.”¹⁹



Fig. 13. Capital No.11. (Photo by the author).



Fig. 14. Capital No.12. (Photo by the author).

IONIC CAPITALS

In addition to the Greco-Roman parallel-sided capital, various styles of Ionic capitals emerged.²⁰ Illustrated in (Fig. 15), this diversification stemmed from a challenge encountered when reaching the corners of an Ionic colonnade. The design of the typical Ionic capital with volutes posed limitations for its application at the angles of a building. To address this issue, the Greeks devised three alternative styles. The initial style is termed the two-faced Ionic capital. In this variation, the two primary faces of the conventional capital are positioned perpendicular to each other. This arrangement necessitates some displacement of the elements. The lateral faces are oriented at right angles to each other, and at the corner where the volutes converge, the two volutes are curved outward, almost appearing to be back to back.²¹ The second variation is known as the three-faced Ionic capital. It comprises three sides, each adorned with a pair of volutes, while the remaining side features the bolsters. At the two corners where the volutes meet, they curve outward almost back to back, whereas at the other two corners where they meet the bolsters in the last side, they remain straight.²² The third variation, known as the four-sided capital, features uniform sides, with the volutes curving outward at each corner almost back to back.²³ This style is called the four-sided capital, and it appeared in the works of the architect Scamozzi in the seventeenth century AD.²⁴

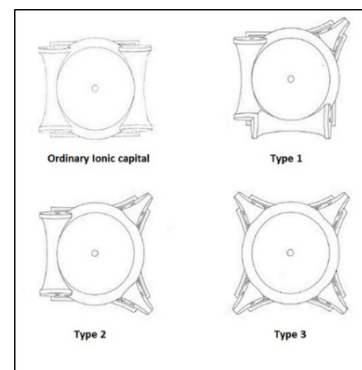


Fig. 15. Types of Ionic capital. (Source: GINOUVÈS 1992, Pl. 44).

In the National Museum of Tartous, we encounter only two varieties of Ionic capitals: the standard and the three-faced types. Capitals No. 13 (Fig. 16) and capital No. 14 (Fig. 17) adhere to the conventional style, whereas capital No. 15 (Fig. 18) represents the rare second style.

This particular type is exceptionally uncommon, potentially tracing its origins solely to the Greek and Hellenistic period, as no examples from the Roman era have been identified in available sources. The sole known instance of this style hails from a Greek hypostyle hall in Delos, Greece, dating back to the final years of the third century BC. Regarded as one of the later manifestations of this architectural form,

²⁰ GINOUVÈS 1992, 85.

²¹ BROWN *et alii* 1912, 121–123; MERRITT 1996; PIRANESI 1784, LII.

²² GINOUVÈS 1992, 85; MORETTI/FINCKER 2019, 115–116.

²³ BROWN *et alii* 1912, 121–123.

²⁴ CHITHAM 2005, 76; SCAMOZZI 1635, 82–88.

¹⁷ SARADI 1997: 495.

¹⁸ BERNARD 2012, 3, 6, 9.

¹⁹ BERNARD 2012, 10.



Fig. 16. Capital No.13. (Photo by the author).



Fig. 17. Capital No.14. (Photo by the author).



Fig. 18. Capital No. 15. (Photo and drawn by the author).

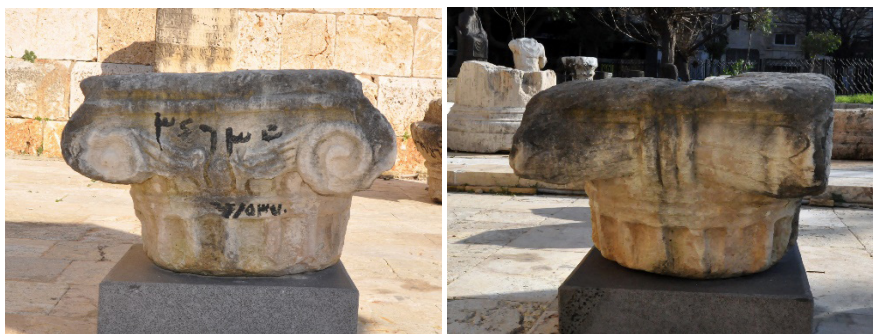


Fig. 19. Capital No.16. (Photo by the author).

its proliferation likely occurred during the classical or early Hellenistic periods.²⁵ Based on this evidence, we can attribute the dating of capital No. 15 to the early Hellenistic period in Syria, spanning from the latter part of the fourth century BC to the third century BC. The size and distinctive design of this capital raise inquiries regarding the potential presence of significant structures in the region during that era. Additionally, the use of locally available sandstone for its construction suggests the likelihood of local manufacturing.

²⁵ MORETTI/FINCKER 2019, 110.

Notably, the bolsters on the singular lateral face of this capital exhibit ornamentation featuring lotus leaves, forming two lotus calyxes with intertwined stalks in lieu of the conventional balteus, showcasing a discernible Egyptian influence on Hellenistic art.

Apart from the typical prototype, another prevalent group persisted in the Levant until the Byzantine era. Capitals within this category were deemed as low-quality in craftsmanship and displayed provincial traits. Often crafted by rural artisans using locally sourced stones, they found primary use in rural settlements like villages and monasteries

in Palestine. This style first emerged in the Levant during the Hellenistic and Roman periods and experienced a resurgence around the early fifth century AD in Palestine.²⁶

Capital No. 16 (Fig. 19) exhibits certain provincial traits and may be classified as a capital of low-quality craftsmanship. Its origin is uncertain, but it likely hails from a location outside Tartous and was likely fashioned by a rural artisan. Due to the lack of contextual information regarding its discovery site, the precise date of this capital cannot be determined.

Capital No. 14 resembles a half-finished Ionic capital. It is evident that the calathus was primed for the carving of the egg-and-dart motif, while the volutes were intended to be finished with the addition of bands and other details. This observation may further support the presence of workshops in the region.

VOTIVE CAPITAL

In addition to their structural and decorative roles, columns and their capitals served another purpose: the votive function.²⁷ Free-standing votive columns became prevalent in the Greek world during the first half of the sixth century BC.²⁸ Numerous examples are found across various sites and historical periods.²⁹

The limestone capital No. 17 in the National Museum of Tartous appears to be a votive capital due to its unusual deco-

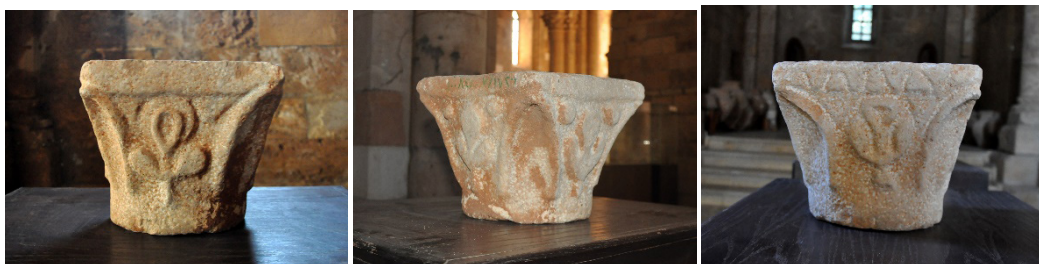


Fig. 20. Capital No.17. (Photo by the author).

ration on different faces (Fig. 19). Additionally, its small size makes it unlikely to have been used as a structural element, as votive items were often smaller than actual artifacts.³⁰

At the Metropolitan Museum, there is a capital that might have a slight connection to the one in the Tartous Museum, capital No. 17. The upper half of the four-sided capital resembles a high abacus adorned with three bands of triangles.³¹ The pattern of triangles in the first band mirrors that on one face of the capital. Based on this, it's plausible to speculate that this influence reached the Syrian coastal region from Cyprus.

²⁶ TAXEL 2018, 92–94.

²⁷ Votive column: It is also called commemorative column. It could be Doric and Ionic, and it might be twisted or decorated with plants or sculptures representing living beings or religious scenes. It holds the statue of the honoured person or dedicated object. GINOUVÈS 1998, 67.

²⁸ ROLLER 1989, 187.

²⁹ COOPER 1996, 305; WRIGHT 1992, 442, 445, 463; JEFFERY 1963, 159; MARCADÉ 1974; OHNESORG 2004; HERMARY/MERTENS 2014, 306 – 307; <http://www.egypt.swan.ac.uk/model-column-capitals/> (Accessed: 12/03/2024)

³⁰ <http://www.egypt.swan.ac.uk/model-column-capitals/> (Accessed: 12/03/2024)

³¹ HERMARY/MERTENS 2014, 306.

RESULTS

The National Museum of Tartous notably lacks capitals in the Tuscan, Doric, and Composite styles, potentially indicating the Corinthian order's dominance. However, the museum's collection offers just a glimpse into the broader spectrum of classical capitals from the Syrian coastal region, warranting more extensive research for a comprehensive understanding.

It is very hard to date these capitals, especially when they were found during construction projects or do not belong to an archaeological context, like the confiscated capitals. However, with the help of other means such as the shape of the acanthus leaves, the form of the capital, and other features related to specific periods, as well as comparing the capitals with similar examples, we can approximate their dates.

Marble is the dominant material among most of the capitals belonging to the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods in the Tartous Museum, despite this stone not being naturally available in the Syrian coastal region around Tartous. This supports theories of flourishing art and the movement of exports and imports in the region throughout its history.

The existence of two-part Corinthian capitals, considered evidence of the flourishing architecture and development in the region, suggests the construction of larger structures.

Moreover, the presence of unfinished and modified classical capitals in the National Museum of Tartous indicates the existence of workshops in the region. Additionally, the unfinished classical capitals made from marble support the idea that craftsmen were not only importing finished capitals but also high-quality raw materials to manufacture capitals locally.

Finally, the presence of low-quality Ionic capitals in the Museum of Tartous suggests the spread of manufacturing such capitals during a certain period in the region. This can be explained by the dominance of Corinthian capitals over other styles, which led local craftsmen to manufacture their own capitals in their simple workshops.

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