

THE PROPHETIC LEGEND OF EMPEROR MARCIAN IN BYZANTINE HISTORIOGRAPHY*

Abstract

The article examines the intersection of social hierarchy, captivity, and divine symbolism through the legend of Emperor Marcian (r. 450–457) as narrated by Procopius of Caesarea (6th c.), Evagrius Svholasticus (6th c.), and Theophanes the Confessor (8th-9th c.). While, generally, social status of prisoners of war in Byzantium and among its adversaries largely determined their treatment and future fate, the case of Marcian represents a paradox. According to the narrative, the future emperor was captured as a low-ranking soldier by the Vandal king Gaiseric, but spared after a prophetic omen foretelling his rise to the throne: as an eagle shaded him from the sun.

The study argues that this legend should be understood as a Byzantine tradition aimed at legitimizing Marcian's unexpected rise to power following the death of Theodosius II in 450 CE through divine signs. In particular, the eagle signifies a protective and providential intervention, marking Marcian as divinely chosen for imperial authority. Captivity, in this context, functions as a ritual of divine selection and salvation, echoing the biblical motif of the righteous sufferer whose temporary imprisonment becomes a sign of divine election and future glorification, as in the cases of Joseph in Egypt or Daniel in Babylon.

Keywords: *Byzantium, prisoners of war, divine omen, eagle symbolic, imperial legitimacy*

The fate of prisoners of war in Byzantium and among its adversaries was largely determined by their social status. High-ranking prisoners, such as nobles or military officers, were often treated with respect and care. This attitude is reflected in the legend of the future Byzantine Emperor Marcian, who was released from captivity by Gizerich, king of Vandals. This fascinating tale intertwines elements of prophecy, divine intervention, and the idea of predestination.

The treatment of the high rank captives, advised in texts like Leo VI's *Taktika*,¹ served diplomatic, propagandistic, and strategic purposes. In contrast, common soldiers and civilians were frequently enslaved or forced into labor, valued mainly for ransom or utility.² Legal texts like the *Ecloga* and *Nomocanon* promoted ransom as a charitable act, but state policy remained pragmatic, especially when mass enslavement served economic or military

¹ The original Greek text of the *Tactica* and a Latin translation see in: Jacques Paul Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 107, (coll. 669-1116).

² George Finlay, *A History of Greece: The Byzantine and Greek Empires*, pt. 2, A.D. 1057-1453, II (Clarendon Press: 1877), 213.

needs. A notable example of symbolic captivity was the humiliation of Tsar Boris II in 971, used to assert Byzantine imperial and religious supremacy.

The Vandals, especially under King Gaiseric (r. 428–477), often treated prisoners harshly. Procopius records that, most ordinary soldiers and civilians were enslaved or used for labor.³ According to Procopius of Caesarea, Gaiseric was exceedingly cruel to his prisoners, especially those of Roman birth, whom he subjected to the most grievous slavery.⁴ While high-ranking captives were sometimes retained for negotiation.

At first glance, the preferential treatment of Marcian reflects the general practice of assessing prisoners of war based on their social status. However, at this point, Marcian is merely a private soldier with no high rank, which underscores the central role of prophecy in this legend.

Historical writings frequently record prophecies concerning the fate of future emperors, often aiming to legitimize or explain their reigns through divine or supernatural intervention. These prophecies typically fall into two categories: prophetic miracles—such as visions, dreams, and extraordinary events interpreted as divine signs—and direct forecasts made by oracles or astrologers. In Roman tradition, there was a widespread belief that the destinies of emperors, especially from the time of Augustus to Flavius, were preordained by such divine portents. The Roman historian Suetonius, writing in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, recounts numerous prophetic legends that were said to have preceded and foreshadowed the rise of emperors like Tiberius, Galba, and Vespasian. These narratives served not only as retrospective justifications of imperial rule but also as instruments of political and religious ideology, reinforcing the idea that imperial power was sanctioned by higher forces.⁵

In Byzantium, this notion was further ritualized: the birth of a *porphyrogennetos*—a child born during the father's reign—was accompanied by ceremonies and astrological forecasts to signal divine favor.⁶ Yet, being born in the purple did not guarantee succession; prophetic dreams, such as John Komnenos' vision of his son Alexios failing to tame a lion, emphasized that true imperial power came from divine election, not heredity.⁷ With no fixed succession law, legitimacy depended on consecration by the emperor or anointment by the patriarch, often reinforced by elaborate coronation rituals and divine imagery. Byzantine art and coinage frequently depicted emperors being crowned directly by Christ, the Virgin, or saints, underlining the belief that imperial authority was ultimately granted by God.

The legend surrounding the future Emperor Marcian's captivity and miraculous foreshadowing of his imperial destiny is a notable example of a prophetic narrative aimed at legitimizing imperial authority through divine signs. According to *Procopius of Caesarea*

³ Procopius, 3.14.3. trans. Henry Bronson Dewing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916); See also Andrew Merrills and Richard Miles, *The Vandals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 173–175.

⁴ Procopius, 3.5.10–12.

⁵ Suet. Tib. xiv, Galba i, iv, Vesp. v, vi; Richard Lattimore, "Portents and Prophecies in connection with the Emperor Vespasian", *The Classical Journal*, vol.29, no.6 (1934), 441-2.

⁶ The ceremonies associated with the birth of Porphyrogenitus are described in: De cer. II, 21-23; Nik. Chon. 219-220.

⁷ Niketas Choniata, *Historia*, ed. Emmanuel Bekker (Bonnae 1835), 5.23-24.

(6th c) in his *Vandal Wars*⁸, and *Evagrius Scholasticus* (6th c),⁹ Marcian—before becoming emperor—was once captured by the Vandal king Gaiseric while serving as a low-ranking soldier, possibly during a campaign or while stationed in the East. While Marcian was held in captivity, he fell asleep in the sun. At that moment, an eagle reportedly flew overhead and spread its wings over him, shielding him from the harsh sunlight. Gaiseric, observing this, interpreted the eagle's protective gesture as a divine omen that the young captive was destined for greatness—specifically, to become emperor. In response to this prophecy, Gaiseric released Marcian and extracted from him a solemn oath that he would never take up arms against the Vandals. This vow, if historical, could explain why Marcian, once emperor, did not launch military campaigns against the Vandals despite their increasing threat in the Western Mediterranean and their sack of Rome just a few years earlier (in 455).

The 9th-century chronicler *Theophanes the Confessor* presents an expanded or alternative version of this legend in his *Chronographia*¹⁰, claiming that the miraculous sign involving the eagle happened not only during Marcian's captivity but also earlier, while he was hunting. This version adds a layer of continuity to the divine favor allegedly bestowed upon Marcian, suggesting that his imperial destiny was prefigured multiple times throughout his life.

The earliest known version of the eagle omen appears in Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars*, where the Roman historian recounts a prophetic episode from the life of Emperor Tiberius (r. 14–37 AD). While residing in Rhodes, an eagle descended and perched on his house—an event interpreted as a divine sign foretelling his future rise to imperial power.¹¹ This symbolic linkage between the eagle and imperial destiny formed a literary and ideological topos that would resonate deeply within later traditions. In Byzantine historiography, similar motifs were employed to reinforce imperial legitimacy through divine signs. A notable example is found in the *Synopsis Historion* of John Skylitzes, who recounts that as a child, Basil I (r. 867–886) was shaded by an eagle while sleeping in the sun—an omen interpreted as a sign of his predestined ascent to the throne.¹² Mistaking the bird for a predator attacking her son, Basil's mother threw a stone at it. However, when the eagle returned once more, she came to understand that this was a sign of divine favor

⁸ Procopius 1.4.12

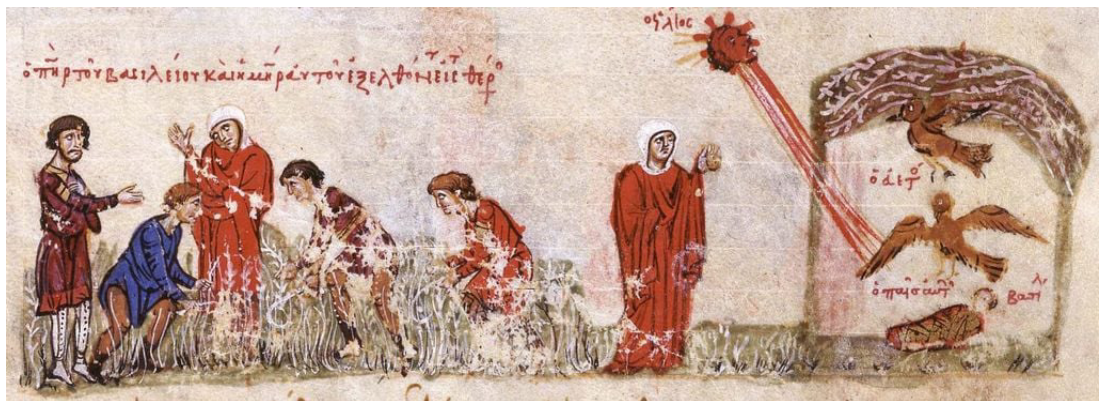
⁹ Evagrius Scholasticus 2.1: “Μαρκιανὸς δὲ καθεὶς ἑαυτὸν ἐς τὸ πεδίον ὑπὸ τῷ ἡλίῳ ἐκάθευδε θερμῷ τε ὄντι καὶ διαπύρῳ παρὰ τὴν ὥραν τοῦ ἔτους. Ἀετὸς δὲ τῶν ὑπερθεν ἐπιστὰς καὶ κατὰ κάθετον τῷ ἡλίῳ ἀντιμέτωπον τὴν πτῆσιν ποιησάμενος, νεφέλης δίκην σκιὰν καὶ τὴν ἐντεῦθεν παραψυχὴν τῷ Μαρκιανῷ ἐτεχνάσατο' ὡς θαυμάσαντα Γιζέριχον συμβαλεῖν εὐστόχως τὰ ἐσόμενα, μετὰπεμπτον τε τὸν Μαρκιανὸν ποιησάμενον ἀφεῖναι τῆς αἰχμαλωσίας, ὄρκοις δεινοῖς κατασφαλίσάμενον ἥ μὴν τὰ πιστὰ φυλάξειν Βανδύλοισ ἐς βασιλείαν παριόντα καὶ ὅπλα κατ' αὐτῶν μὴ κινεῖν: καὶ φυλάξαι τὸν Μαρκιανὸν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἔργοις ὁ Προκόπιος ἱστορεῖ.”

¹⁰ Theoph. AM 5942, 100-101.

¹¹ Suet. Tib. 14. 2: “Fertur etiam eo actu inpropere se proripuisse, quod aquila repente conspecta et mox despecta, quasi ad terram descendisset, in sinum ei incubuisset.”

¹² Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum, ed., Hans Thurn (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1973), 6. 3; See: An eagle protects the future Emperor Basil I from the bright sun. Miniature. Skylitzes Matritensis (1100) fol.82v.

and part of the Lord's providential plan.¹³ This scene, depicted in the *Skylitzes Matritensis* (c. 1100), fol. 82v, is strongly influenced by the legend of Marcian and serves a similar purpose—to legitimize his imperial authority through a divine omen.



The recurrence of such motifs reflects a broader Byzantine strategy of adopting and reinterpreting Roman imperial symbols within a Christianized framework. The eagle, once an augural figure tied to Jupiter and Roman augury, was transformed into an expression of divine favor in Byzantine hagiography and imperial propaganda. Byzantine authors “sought to construct continuity with Rome not merely through institutional memory but also through narrative patterns and symbolic codes”.¹⁴ “The use of omens and dreams in imperial biographies is less an expression of superstition than a literary device for articulating divine providence”.¹⁵ Alexander Kazhdan, in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, emphasizes the importance of omens in Byzantine political discourse, where they served to validate not only imperial accession but also the moral fitness of the emperor.¹⁶

The repetition of miraculous legends, omens, and symbolic dreams across the biographies of different Byzantine emperors is not a coincidental feature of imperial historiography, but a deliberate narrative strategy rooted in the literary and ideological conventions of Byzantine culture. In many cases, similar - even nearly identical - stories appear in the lives of emperors separated by centuries. These include accounts of eagles shielding sleeping children, prophetic dreams involving golden trees, celestial visions, or divine figures predicting the emperor's future greatness.

Byzantine historians were not primarily concerned with the strict chronological or factual accuracy expected of modern historiography. Rather, their task was to present a moral and providential vision of history that demonstrated God's ongoing involvement in

¹³ Joh. Skyl. 6. 3; In addition, there were other prophecies hinting at the future emperorship of Basil I. For example, Basil's mother saw in a dream a huge tree, similar to a cypress, with golden leaves and golden branches at the top of which Basil was seated - Joh. Skyl. 6. 5.

¹⁴ Averil Cameron, *Byzantine Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 35–37.

¹⁵ Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of the New Rome* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 98–99.

¹⁶ Alexander Kazhdan ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New-York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) s.v. “Omens”

the life of the empire. Repetition in this context served as a form of narrative authentication. In this vein, John Skylitzes, when narrating the omens surrounding Basil I's childhood, explicitly interprets the appearance of the eagle as an unmistakable sign sent by God, that he will become an emperor of divine election: τοῦτο δὲ ἦν σημεῖον ἐκ θεοῦ γεγονός, προεφηνεῖς αὐτῷ τὴν μελλούσῃν βασιλείαν.¹⁷ Skylitzes situates this motif not merely as an anecdote, but as part of a prophetic logic of imperial history. The familiar was perceived as more trustworthy, especially when it echoed earlier, authoritative models - whether drawn from Scripture, classical antiquity, or imperial precedent.

The symbolism of the eagle occupies a central place in both classical and Christian traditions, offering a rich backdrop for understanding its repeated appearance in legends surrounding imperial figures. In ancient Rome, the eagle (*aquila*) functioned as the emblem of imperial authority¹⁸ and the standard of the legions¹⁹, symbolizing Jupiter's power and Rome's martial supremacy.²⁰ As a military and political signifier, the eagle conveyed dominion, strength, and divine favor—qualities easily transferable to Byzantine conceptions of rulership. Every legion bore a silver or bronze eagle standard that was guarded with almost religious reverence.²¹ The eagle also adorned imperial regalia, public monuments, and coinage, reinforcing the emperor's association with Jupiter and the heavens. Its image symbolized not only earthly power but also the idea of *apotheosis*—the elevation of emperors to divine status after death. This linkage between the eagle and imperial divinity would have a long afterlife in the Christian Roman (Byzantine) Empire.

Christian tradition layered this classical heritage with new spiritual meaning. The eagle appears frequently in the Old Testament as a metaphor for God's strength and protective care. In Exodus 19:4, God declares: "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself"²². The Lord is compared to an eagle guarding its young: "like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft."²³ The faithful are promised as "They will mount up with wings like eagles." Psalm 17:8 further reinforces this motif of intimate, providential care: "Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me under the shadow of your wings".²⁴ The Psalms also employ this imagery to convey divine protection: "He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge"²⁵. Theodoret of Cyrrhus, commenting on this later verse, sees it as a symbol of both God's providence and His election of the righteous: "Under the wings of

¹⁷ Joh. Skyl. 6. 3.

¹⁸ ODB, s.v. "Eagles"

¹⁹ Piotr Grotowski, *Arms and Armour of the Warrior Saints: Tradition and Innovation in Byzantine Iconography*, translated by Thomas J. W. Metzger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 249-250.

²⁰ Joe E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1997), 248–251; Pat Southern, *The Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 211.

²¹ Vegetius. *Epitoma rei militaris*. Edited by Michael D. Reeve (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), II. 6, 13.

²² "καὶ ἀνέλαβον ὑμᾶς ὡσεὶ ἐπὶ πτερύγων ἀετῶν καὶ προσηγαγόμεν ὑμᾶς πρὸς ἑμαυτόν" - Exodus 19:4.

²³ „ὡς ἀετὸς σκεπάσαι νοσσιὰν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς νεοσσοῖς αὐτοῦ ἐπεπόθησεν, διείς τὰς πτέρυγας αὐτοῦ ἐδέξατο αὐτούς καὶ ἀνέλαβεν αὐτούς ἐπὶ τῶν μεταφρένων αὐτοῦ." - Deuteronomy 32:11.

²⁴ "Φύλαξόν με ὡς κόραν ὀφθαλμοῦ, ἐν σκέπῃ τῶν πτερύγων σου κρύψον με." - Psalm 17:8

²⁵ "ἐν τοῖς μεταφρένοις αὐτοῦ ἐπισκιάσει σοι, καὶ ὑπὸ τὰς πτέρυγας αὐτοῦ ἔλπιεῖς" – Psalm 91:4

God the pious take refuge; there they are sheltered and preserved.”²⁶ Through such interpretations, the eagle became a sacred metaphor for divine kingship, mercy, and omnipotence. Byzantine authors frequently employed this image to suggest that emperors, like God, shield and protect their people, or are themselves chosen and upheld by divine wings.

The story of Marcian’s prophetic dream during his captivity, promising his future ascension to the imperial throne, belongs to a category of Byzantine imperial legends that legitimize power through divine sanction and providential prophecy. There is no solid historical evidence that the future Emperor Marcian was actually imprisoned by Gaiseric, the Vandal king. The idea that Marcian was taken prisoner—possibly by the Vandals—and experienced a prophetic vision predicting his future reign is found only in much later and legendary sources, not in contemporary or near-contemporary historical records. The legend likely arose posthumously to provide a providential justification for Marcian’s unexpected rise to the throne, much like similar legends for Constantine, Justin I, and Leo I. It should be treated as a symbolic or ideological narrative rather than historical fact.

In *Wars*, Procopius tells a symbolic version of the story: while serving as a soldier, Marcian once fell asleep in the sun, and an eagle hovered over him to shade him. This event was later interpreted as a sign that he would become emperor. - “While he lay asleep in the fields, an eagle came and with its wings shielded him from the sun. And this was taken as a sign that he would someday wear the crown.”²⁷ This episode does not mention imprisonment or Gaiseric, and it reads more like a providence tale than a historical report.²⁸ In *Ecclesiastical History*, Evagrius provides the first known written version that connects Marcian with captivity: “While he was a soldier, he was captured by the barbarians and while in captivity he saw a vision, foretelling his elevation to the empire.”²⁹ He does not specify who these “barbarians” were—some later interpreters assume the Vandals or Persians, but this is speculative. Evagrius, writing long after Marcian’s reign, is not a direct source and seems to be echoing popular imperial legends. In *Chronographia*, Theophanes elaborates the legend, combining and embellishing earlier versions: He claims Marcian was taken prisoner during an eastern campaign, remained in captivity for a long time, and had a dream or vision promising the imperial throne.³⁰ The story of Marcian’s captivity by the Vandals occupies a unique space at the intersection of historical fact and narrative theology. According to the legend, during his imprisonment, Marcian had a prophetic dream in which a divine figure—often identified as an angel—promised him the imperial throne. Gizerich, upon hearing of this vision or witnessing signs of its truth, purportedly released him, swayed not by political pressure but by reverence for divine will.

²⁶ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Interpretatio in Psalmos*, PG 80:1585–1586: “Ὑπὸ τὰς πτέρυγας τοῦ Θεοῦ προστρέχουσιν οἱ θεοσεβεῖς· ἐκεῖ σκεπάζονται καὶ διαφυλάττονται.”

²⁷ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, trans. H. B. Dewing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), 3.6.10–12.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Evagrius Scholasticus. *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*. Translated by Michael Whitby. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000, 2.1.

³⁰ Theophanes Confessor. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284–813*. Translated by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), AM 5942.

Whether or not this account holds empirical accuracy is beside the point: the legend itself serves several functions. First, it affirms the Byzantine practice of framing imperial rule as divinely sanctioned. Marcian's elevation is not credited merely to military or political competence but to fate, a force that validates existing hierarchies and confers moral weight to authority. Second, the tale reinforces the idea that high birth or noble quality is recognizable—even by enemies—and merits exceptional treatment. Gizerich's alleged recognition of Marcian's destiny implies that elite captives possess not just tactical value but transcendent purpose. Such narratives reinforce both the ideology of Byzantine exceptionalism and the religious overtones of imperial power.

Modern scholarship widely regards this account as a retrospective invention, crafted to legitimize Marcian's unexpected rise to power following the death of Theodosius II in 450 CE. As Marcian was of relatively humble origin and had no dynastic claim, such narratives served to imbue his accession with divine sanction, aligning with a long-standing Byzantine tradition of using omens and divine signs to justify imperial authority. It seems likely that Marcian's captivity should be interpreted symbolically rather than taken as a historical event.

In both Old Testament tradition and Christian theology, captivity transcends its political meaning, becoming a spiritual metaphor. In the Septuaginta, captivity symbolizes divine judgment for covenantal failure, such as the Babylonian exile, seen as punishment for sins (Amos 5:27)³¹. Yet, exile also carried the promise of renewal for the faithful (Isa. 40–55; Jer. 29:10–14)³². This dual theme of judgment and redemption influenced Christian thought, with early authors like Origen and Augustine.³³ In this reading, Christ is the liberator who “leads forth the prisoners” from the tomb (Eph. 4:8; Col. 2:15),³⁴ that is echoed in Holy liturgy and Byzantine hymns.³⁵ Captivity thus became a spiritual condition, and deliverance, the defining act of salvation.

The story of Emperor Marcian is embedded within this framework. Moreover, the legendary account on captive Marcian's, prophetic dream foretelling his rise to the throne³⁶ echoes the biblical pattern of the righteous sufferer whose temporary captivity becomes a sign of divine election and future glorification, akin to Joseph's imprisonment in Egypt (Gen. 39–41) or Daniel's captivity in Babylon (Dan. 1–6).

To conclude, the legend of Marcian's captivity and his miraculous deliverance illustrates the complex intersection of social hierarchy, political necessity, and divine symbolism in Byzantine representations of war captivity. While the fate of prisoners in both Byzantine and enemy hands typically depended on their status, legends such as Marcian's

³¹ Amos 5:27, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

³² Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 35–42.

³³ Origen, *Homilies on Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 35–36.

³⁴ Eph. 4:8; Col. 2:15; cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 14.18.

³⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 78.

³⁶ Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.1, trans. Michael Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000); Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, AM 5942, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

served a different, more ideological purpose. Rather than documenting a historical event, the story, by the repeated use of motifs such as the protective eagle and prophetic dreams, functions as a narrative device to legitimize Marcian's unexpected rise to power with support of Aspar, the influential roman patrician and military officer, following the death of Theodosius II in 450 CE. Ultimately, the captivity of Marcian—as with biblical Joseph and Daniel before him—becomes a metaphorical rite of passage. Thus, Byzantine historiography reshaped the harsh realities of war captivity into spiritual narrative that affirmed the ruler's divinely ordained role.

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