

The Structure of Tirana from 1614 to 1943.

Continuities, Discontinuities and Relation with Western Cities

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Genti AVDIJA, Polis University, Tirana

Abstract - This work explores the structural changes of the city of Tirana from its beginnings around the XVII century to the end of World War II, putting them in relation with the development and paradigms of the development and planning of the western civilisation urbanisation. In the development of Tirana in this period we have individuated three different phases of development of the city. In the first phase the development is characterised by the ottoman influences. In the second, that coincides with the creation of the state and the becoming of Tirana the capital of Albania, we can denote a certain tendency to westernisation. And lastly, the consolidation of the urban structure during WWII, under the Italian influence. The development of Tirana is not a linear development, but is characterised by fractures as a result of a complex interaction of cultural, political and geographic factors. These fractures contain elements that disappear, and elements that persist that characterise the structure of the city today. The development itself oscillates between spontaneity and plan, morphology and typology, urban and territorial. It is important to note that certain urban elements introduced during this period still persist in the structure of the city to this day, and therefore characterise the city. Precisely these elements should constitute a starting point for the future development of the city. The research output is a perspective on the development of Tirana until 1945 that extrapolates the urban elements of development and relates them with western cities. The relation of planning and urbanism in Tirana with the western civilisation is very peculiar, because of the early ottoman influence and the late application of western urban design principles. Lastly, the Italian plan (1939 – 1943) constitutes the first complex structuring of the city, and the last substantial structural modification of today.

Keywords - Urban structure, Medieval city, Modern urbanism, Resilience

Introduction

Tirana in the last thirty years has experienced first an extension of the boundaries, and then a radical transformation of many if not all the tissues of the city. The actual condition is one of a city in continuous and rapid transformation which brings a sense of alienation. The transformations in course are fragmented and gone through many phases during the last thirty years. Though there is a regulatory urban and territorial plan since 2016 it doesn't seem like the interventions are organic and cohesive. This plan is in line with the development of western cities in which Tirana aspires to be part of. Nonetheless Tirana has a peculiar development that renders it unique in the city development modalities. When everything is being considered anew maybe is time to reflect on the past. Tirana has a long history of proposals and planning interventions, different in character and scale, that have shaped the city

through the years. Some of these interventions disappear some persist, and some return. Though the tissues of the city are being modified the most reliable resilient part of this chaotic city remains its structure. This is a critical investigation on the structural modifications of the city from its birth to the end of World War II. Hopefully this will be a starting point for a mirror reflection for the city in the future. Looking at the development of the city until 1945 we can recognize three different phases of transformation that coincide with huge political and social changes. These changes produce distinct views on the development of the city.

Tirana from foundation to independence (1614 – 1912)

From the fourteenth century until 1912 when independence was declared, Albania, like all the

Balkans, was part of the Ottoman Empire. During this period Tirana was a small settlement, and the period of creation is uncertain. In the surrounding area there have been several archaeological finds. An example is the discovery of the mosaic of an early Christian church dated to the third century BC near the current center of Tirana (Korkuti, 2003). The date commonly accepted as the date of the city's founding is engraved on the Bargjini mausoleum, 1023 of the haxhiri [Muslim/Turkish] calendar which corresponds mainly to 1614. The city is constituted with the construction of a mosque, a hamam, an oven and an inn by Sulejman Pashe Bargjini (Frasheri 2004, p. 67), which subsequently led to the creation of the bazaar. Tirana was born as a crossroads of interregional merchant routes that had been consolidated since the sixteenth century. From Durres and Vlora, which were the two port cities, they led inland. From Dibra, Shkodra, Lezha in the north, they passed through the southern regions but also to reach Istanbul, Thessaloniki or Macedonia (Frasheri 2004, p. 71). The roads look more like paths. Where there are crossings or bridges, knots begin to develop appropriate for commerce and to offer services to travelers which is the way cities like Florence, Paris, Prague, etc. were born (Miho 1988, p. 86). In the first surveys of Tirana dating back to 1917 and 1918, carried out by Austrian technicians, these interregional routes are clearly visible.

The new capital city (1920 – 1933)

At the end of the First Balkan War in 1912, which sanctioned the definitive fall of the Ottoman Empire, Albanian territories were disputed by Serbian and Montenegrin forces in the north, Greeks in the south and Italians on the coast. With the support of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Albania he succeeds in proclaiming the independence recognized even by European nations. Despite this, the political situation remained unstable in the following years with three main factions vying for power: the party of the Young Turks; the pro-Italian movement; the

pro-independence patriots. Albania, despite not taking sides during the First World War, becomes a disputed territory where this war is fought. During the war, Albanian territories were controlled by Austro-Hungary in the north, Italy in the coastal region from Durres to Vlora, and France in the region of Korçë in the south of the country. Austro-Hungarian forces withdrew from Albania in 1918 following the defeat in the war and at the end of the First World War and Albanian cities will be under the control of the Italian and French allied forces. In 1920 the Congress of Lushnje was held where a group of patriots from all parts of Albania formed a government that proclaimed Tirana temporarily the capital of Albania and during 1920 managed to have the most important cities handed over (Frasheri, 2003).

There was a definitive detachment from the period of Ottoman influence with obvious repercussions from an urban point of view where Tirana suddenly found itself in the condition of having to host the entire state apparatus, and all efforts were concentrated there, with the intention of enabling the new capital with the appropriate institutions and planning future developments. During the following decade, a number of planning proposals were developed.

Tirana during the fascist occupation (1939 – 1943)

In 1939, in line with the expansionist policies of the time, Italy invaded Albania. King Zog I, had had economic relations and cultural exchanges with Italy since his coming to power (Lang 2024). Economic dependence, unconsolidated power within Zog's own Albania and inferiority of means meant that Zog did not oppose excessive resistance and went into exile. Vittorio Emanuele III of Savoy in this period was appointed King of Italy, Albania and Emperor of Ethiopia. Under the Italian administration, huge investments were made, especially in Tirana, with the intention of being accepted by the locals and starting a process of colonization. A few months

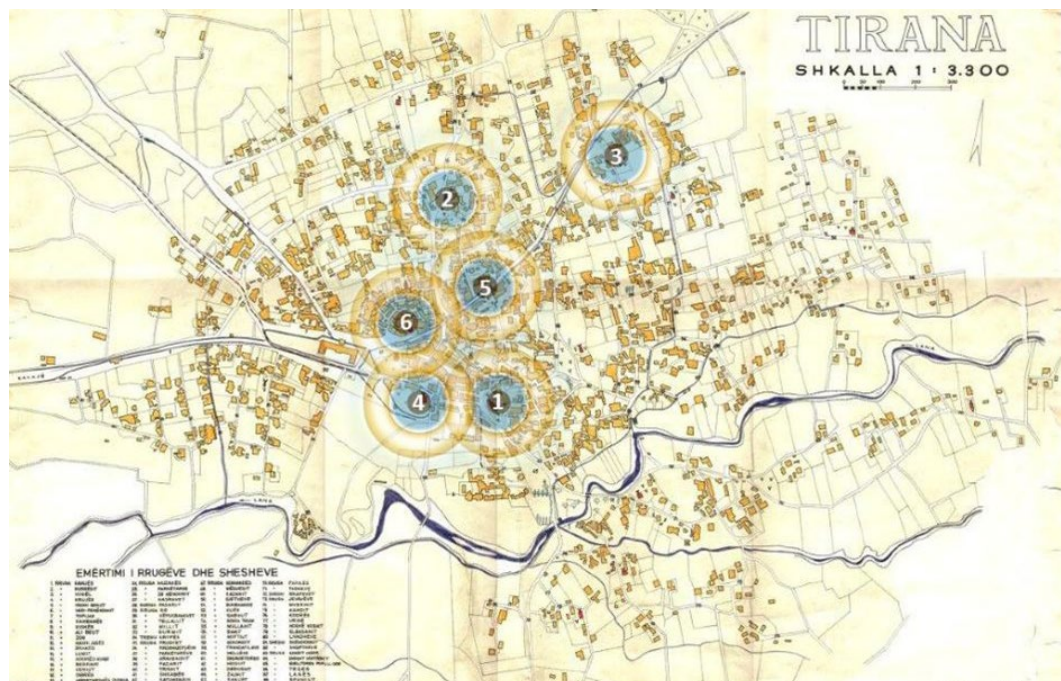


Fig. 1. The first six nuclei of the expansion of Tirana on the 1921 map: 1) old mosque; 2) Fira; 3) Zajmi; 4) Ethemi; 5) Stermasi; 6) Karpaci. Source: Elaboration of the author on AQTN map.

after the invasion, a new master plan for Tirana was thought of and the task was entrusted to the Florentine architect Gherardo Bosio. (Corsani 2017; Di Nardo 2018). The plan was completed in 1943. In 1941, due to Bosio's death, Ivo Lambertini and Ferdinando Poggi took his place.

Methodology

The work is based on the historical analysis of the development of Tirana until the end of WWII. Taken in consideration the plans and drawings of the era, and also the primary and secondary relevant sources that explain the historical and urban changes of Tirana during that period, the study, through an interpretative and critical investigation determines the fractures of the development and identifies the urban elements, methods and tools used in the different eras of the city's development. The main focus is directed to the structural dimension of said urban proposals and how it relates with the political changes of the time. Through this analysis the study proposes a comparison with the development of western cities in the different phases of evolution in order to discover the relations between them. This will be expressed through a series of dualities that consider the type, the form, and the scale in a development that moves between spontaneity and plan, morphology and typology, urban and territorial.

The study will develop in a mirror structure where to the three different periods characterized by political changes correspond peculiar urban and developmental characteristics. According to the three periods individuated we can discern the particular modes and elements of development in each of the phases.

Results and Discussion

We can start to note that in the first phase of development that extends from the creation of the city to the becoming of a capital city, structurally there is the emergence of medieval cities characteristics. Subsequently, in the period of independence and

monarchy, there is a prevalence of mid 1800s urban elements. Finally, during the fascist occupation there is an application of contemporary (for the period) modes of intervention.

Medieval Tirana

In the historical analysis of the settlement, Miho (1988, pp. 50-53) and Frasheri (2004), identify several nuclei in the formation of the historic center of Tirana until the beginning of the twentieth century. The first one of foundation by Sulejman Pashe Bargjini; a second nucleus created at the beginning of the eighteenth century with the construction of the mosque of Fira; a third that is created at the same time as the construction of the mosque of Zajmi in 1775; a fourth nucleus with the mosque of Haxhi Et'hem in the center which is located on today's Central Square of Tirana, and so on (fig. 1). During this period, the city expands in a centrifugal manner starting from these nuclei until they meet and clash. (Lambertini, Poggi, 1943).

Throughout the medieval period Tirana developed morphologically through spontaneous non-geometric fabrics. The dwellings consist of single-family houses for extended families that never overlook the street but are mediated by perimetral walls that create courtyards. Streets and lanes form randomly as the cores expand. Here the first differences between the medieval European city and Tirana with their oriental influences begin. The European model of urban development with 4 or 5-storey buildings in a period where there is no shortage of land is the result of the "materialization of social solidarity of belonging to the civitas in the compactness of the urbs" (Romano, 1992, p. 45). The concept of density, therefore, that we find in the birth of the city as we know it today according to Romano, we do not find it in Tirana in the Middle Ages.

Another characteristic that we find in the western medieval city is the division of the infinite



Fig. 2. The first proposal of Brasini for the boulevard. Source: AQTN.

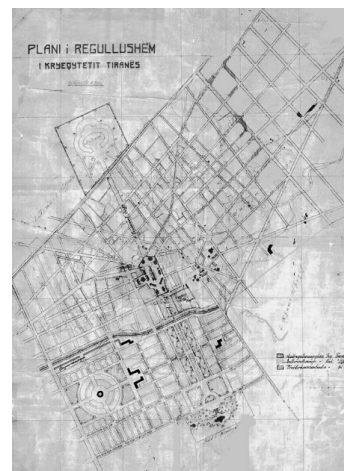


Fig. 4. Plan of Tirana 1929. Source: AQTN



Fig. 3. Tirana urban condition in 1937. Source: Personal archive.

countryside outside the walls from the collective life inside them. In eastern medieval cities, such as Tirana at the time, there were no walls, and a consequence no clear differentiation between urbs, suburbium e ager. Moreover, in eastern cities there is neither a public space representative of society as it can be in the medieval European city, much less a central organization that takes into account developments on a larger scale than the individual one. Thanks also to the prevalence of individual character, the density is lower than in medieval European towns.

Another aspect of differentiation between eastern and western medieval developments are the city functions and structure, related also to the top-down interventions on the city. As Enyedi points out, "The urban innovation of the multifunctional medieval city with regular street planning did not penetrate the Balkan Peninsula, as the region was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire for 500 years." (Enyedi, p. 106).

Elements of 1800s urbanism

In 1923, the first Master Plan was drawn up by Austrian engineers and architects with the participation of the Albanian counterparts (Aliaj et al., 2003; Dharmo et al., 2016). The radial layout of the main streets on which the city was formed is preserved, providing for their enlargements, and the orthogonal layout is introduced for the first time by superimposing it on the pre-existing structure. In

1925 Tirana was proclaimed the capital definitively. Ahmet Zogu became prime minister and, for the nascent capital, commissioned the Italian architect Armando Brasini to develop a project for Tirana. Brasini proposes the introduction of a monumental axis on which to arrange the functions of the capital (fig. 2).

The project presented by Brasini was never implemented but the idea of the axis remained in the structure of the city and was proposed again later. The axis related only to the territorial scale [and not to a city that was missing at the time], it read the parallel of the existence of the city that was the mountain of Dajti, a kind of "axis mundi" for the Tirana plain (Dharmo et al. 2016, p. 20). It is therefore important to note that Brasini's intervention, beyond the idea of the axis itself, in a certain sense also dictates the orientation of the city. The following year a new plan was drawn up on the basis of the 1923 plan, making improvements and integrating the idea of the Brasini axis.

In 1928 Ahmet Zogu proclaimed himself King of Albania and commissioned the Austrian Kohler and the Albanian Frasheri to rework the 1926 plan by expanding the territory. To these was added the Italian Di Fausto in 1929, when a further version of the master plan was presented (fig. 3). The structure of the plan is coordinated by engineer Eshref Frasheri. Kohler was in charge of planning



Fig. 5. Urban plan of the core of Tirana in 1943 by Bosio, Lambertini, Poggi. Source: AQTN



Fig. 6. Territorial Plan of Tirana in 1943 by Bosio, Lambertini, Poggi. Source: AQTN

the southward extension of the city beyond the Lana stream, and Di Fausto planned the buildings in the center of Tirana. Subsequently, in 1930 and 1931, two other improved and more extensive proposals were prepared based on the 1929 plan (Dhamo et al., 2016). From the 1931 plan, the six buildings that still delimit the southern part of the central square of the city, designed by Di Fausto, conceived as ministries of the reign of Zog I, were implemented, and in the northern part the town hall building that was demolished in 1982, and also to the north a piece of boulevard that passes through

the medieval city on the trail of Brasini's project, which today bears the name "Bulevardi Zog I". In this decade full of events from an urban point of view, we can glimpse some common elements or, if we want, tools, belonging to nineteenth-century urban planning that emerge in the urban design interventions of this period: the boulevard and the grid. The use of the idea of boulevard, widely used from Haussmann onwards, can be revealed from the first interventions of widening the main arteries of the creation of the city, and in the idea of Brasini's central axis. The grid, used in a military

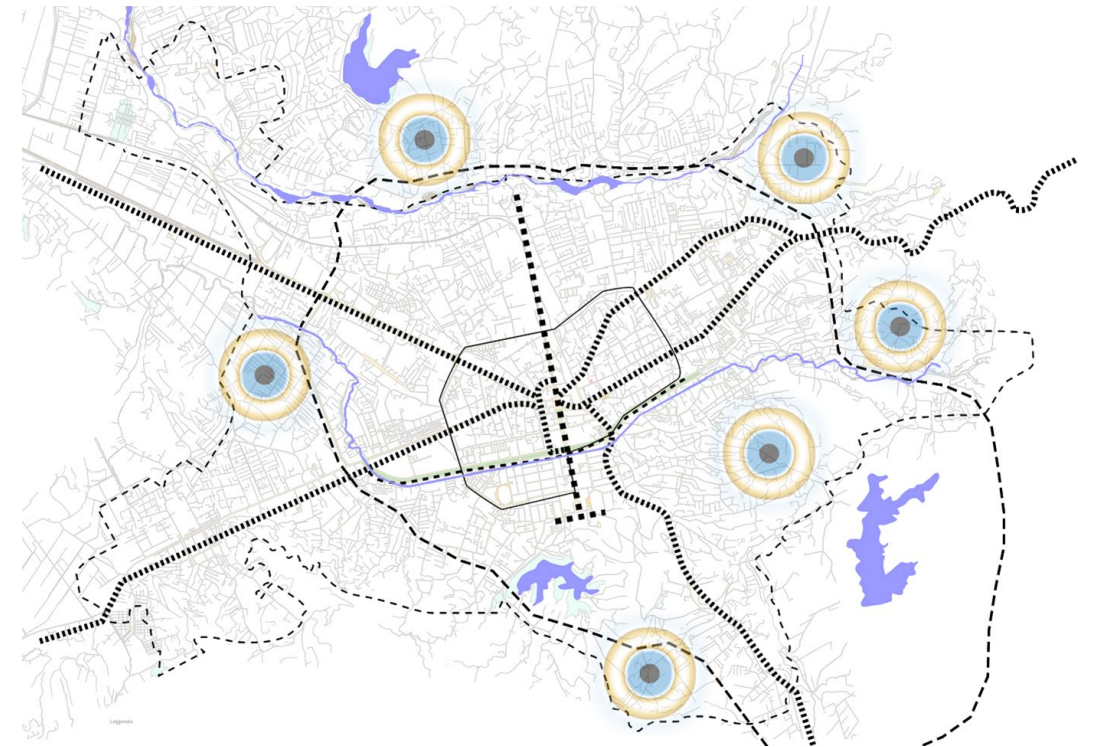


Fig. 7. The current structure of Tirana with the most relevant nuclei of expansion (from left up, Astir, Paskuqan, Fresk, Shkoze, Ali Dem, Sauk). Source: Author.

context since Roman times, lost relevance for many centuries during the Middle Ages and then came back into vogue in the 800s. The Manhattan plan in 1811 and Cerda's project for Barcelona in the mid-1800s are two examples. In Tirana, the grid has been proposed since the intervention of 1923 and later, as an overlay on the existing fabric and planning of territorial expansions. As we can note from the rendition of the urban condition of Tirana in 1937 (Fig. 4), the boulevard was actually the only element implemented structurally. The organic structure of Tirana still persists and it is clear (see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) how the implementation of the grid in the existing city and the southern extension of the city could have dramatically changed the layout of Tirana. In 1937 there is the persistence of the radial foundational routes and the organic nature of the settlements. Contemporarily, there is the addition of the central boulevard and the definition of the central square that emerge as strong geometric signs that somehow are superimposed to the city.

The consolidation of the urban structure

Bosio's plan of 1939 - 1943 will be the most advanced and complete plan made for Tirana, both for the in-depth study phase preliminary to the plan (fig. 5), and for the breadth and general unitary vision (fig. 6). Great attention was paid to private property, to the development of the city without undermining the already existing economic centers and therefore the investments of citizens. The plan envisaged planning for the following sixty years, and anticipating the increase in population, the existing nucleus was not considered suitable to accommodate the population. Howard's garden city was taken as a model for the new Tirana. The authors' considerations started from the love for nature of the citizens reflected in the courtyards of all the houses of Tirana with their vegetation that gave a picturesque character to the city (Lambertini, Poggi, 1943). As a result, the plan

provides for an environmental system with large parks on the edge and a system of small parks within the city. Structurally, the plan maintains the existing radial roads, to which enlargements had been made in previous years, connecting them with an infrastructural ring with a diameter of about 3 km. The proper urban somewhat dense development is envisioned inside said ring (Fig. 6). The axis proposed by Brasini, conceived as the representative backbone of fascism, is maintained and the structure of the plan recalls the typical layout that we can find in newly founded cities of the fascist period, such as Latina for example. Bosio will personally take care of designing in meticulous detail the buildings overlooking the axis, many of which will be built and still represent a significant cultural legacy in Tirana. Stylistically, unlike Brasini who had a neoclassical approach to design, Bosio prefers the lictorian style, stylistically a mixture of monumentality and formal simplification and of the elements.

The plan was not implemented due to Italy's defeat in World War II after which it had to withdraw from Albania, but the concentric-radial structure with a marked central axis was the starting point of the urbanization of the communist period. During this period there are several structural elements that define the structure of Tirana and persist to the current condition (Fig. 7). The foundation of a *cardo* - *decumanus* system composed by the boulevard and the Lana torrent. The central dense core with a superimposition on the radial roads. The inner ring which together with the radial roads emphasize the radial character of the city. The territorial dimension also suggests somehow the current extension of the city.

If we consider the current structure of Tirana there is a clear resemblance with the Bosio plan. For the above-mentioned reasons, we can say that the

Bosio plan constitutes the fully formed backbone of the consolidated structural identity of Tirana. In fact, the future major structural modifications that appear are the creation of an outer ring and the extension of the boulevard on the North side, which are in continuity with Bosio's vision. An interesting element that we can notice in the current structure is the spontaneous creation of several nuclei starting from the 1990s that recall the modes of creation during the first phase of creation of the city.

Conclusions

There is a series of considerations that we can make regarding the structural development of Tirana during this period. The first one is that the structure of Tirana is the only resilient part in the development of the city. The urban tissues, the functions, the typologies are constantly changing but the structure remains. Said structure was consolidated during the Second World War with the Bosio's Plan. This could be a starting point for the so longed identitarian future transformation of Tirana. The structure of today's Tirana has been formed through a series of continuities and discontinuities. The first discontinuity is expressed through the three phases that we analyzed in which there are two fractures. The first, and more evident one, happens in the passage from the organic structure developed during the ottoman period and the introduction of western, though dated elements of western urbanism such are the grid and the boulevard during the independence and monarchic period. During this phase we can note a clear passage from spontaneity to plan. The second fracture is more subtle, but non the less expresses the differentiation of approaches from different regimes. During the fascist occupation, even though there is an influence of Italian architecture and urbanism, the approaches are different. Stylistically for example there is a passage from a sort of eclectism adoperated by Armando Brasini and Florestano Di Fausto to a more sober lictorian architecture of Gherardo Bosio, reflected also morphologically in the respective projects. Structurally, the grid adoperated in the 1929 plan is a bit irregular and superimposes drastically in the northeastern part of the city. The Brasini plan, even though erases the old city, paradoxically maintains a closer relation morphologically with the existing city. The reinforcement of the *cardo* – *decumanus* system, the reinforcement of the central nucleus through the ring, emphasize the radial nature of the city. There is also a strong typological imprint in the plan, expressed through the courtyards, but this part was not implemented. It is clear how the urban development is closely related to political power and how it manifests in the urban fabric.

As for the current structure, the introduction of the territorial scale in the Brasini plan and the return of the spontaneous morphological development, represent two major discontinuities. In the first case, during the communist regime until 1992, there were attempts to expand the city to a territorial scale, but de facto this never really happened. The real expansion to the territorial scale happened during the 1990s with the spontaneous internal uncontrolled migrations of the population. This takes us to the second discontinuity. It is interesting

to notice how the uncontrolled movement of the population during the 1990s produced an almost identical development as the development until 1920. The prevalence of morphology differentiates only from the even more elimination of public space in current times, where in the medieval configuration there were the nuclei composed by the mosque, the bazar, the hamam, and the inn.

As for the continuities, the radial foundational roads represent the structural backbone of Tirana. During the creation of the republic, later monarchy, there is the consolidation of a univocal central square and the implementation of the boulevard that superimpose geometrically and typologically on the existing city. To these structural elements there is the addition of the inner ring, the completion of the boulevard with the reinforcement through the addition of the *decumanus* consisting in the Lana torrent, and the reinforcement of the radial nature of Tirana that are envisioned in the Brasini plan. The base of the current development on which the city is still expanding and modifying, is thus formed.

Lastly, there is an important topic that needs to be addressed. The aspiration of Albania and Tirana of being part of the western civilization, has brought dramatic urban changes which we cannot address fully in this research. The rapid transformation of the city is provoking an enormous fracture with city of the past, manifested in the urban fabric. These transformations bring a sense of displacement, and raise a doubt expressed in the dualism between globalism and regionalism. During the discussion we tackled the complexity of the structural development of the city, and would like to suggest that even though Tirana is a western city subjected to all the global factors of western development, the character of Tirana lays in the particular position between east and west, which is a richness that needs to be valorized.

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