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PERIODICALS, THE EMPIRE AND THE CITY IN VICTORIAN CULTURE

PERIÓDICOS, EL IMPERIO Y LA CIUDAD EN LA CULTURA VICTORIANA

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ABSTRACT

This contribution investigates the representation of cities of the British Empire in Victorian periodicals, a mass medium in the second half of the 19th century. Articles on all aspects of Empire were then a staple of the British periodical press. They increased their readers' knowledge about the Empire and imbued them with imperial ideology. This is prominent in depictions of cities and their function as nodes in transport and communication networks, centres of trade, seats of government, administrative and educational institutions, contact zones as well as the demonstration of imperial power. The article focuses on the Indian cities Calcutta (now Kolkata), Delhi and Bombay (now Mumbai) and how they were related to the continuation of British rule through temporal categories such as progress, backwardness and tradition.

KEYWORDS: periodicals, Victorian period, British Empire, city, temporality, India

RESUMEN

Esta contribución analiza la representación de las ciudades del Imperio Británico en las publicaciones periódicas victorianas, medio de comunicación de masas en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX. En ese momento, era habitual en la prensa británica encontrar artículos tratando diferentes aspectos del

Imperio. Con estos textos los lectores ampliaron su conocimiento sobre el Imperio, a la vez que se impregnaron de la ideología propia del mismo. Esto se hace especialmente visible en las descripciones de las ciudades y en su funcionamiento como nodos en redes de transporte y comunicación, centros de comercio, sedes del gobierno, instituciones administrativas y educativas, zonas de contacto y también como escenarios para la demonstración del poder imperial. Este artículo presta atención a las ciudades indias de Calcuta (ahora Kolkata), Delhi y Bombay (ahora Mumbai), y en cómo estas estaban vinculadas con la continuidad del dominio británico mediante categorías de tiempo como el progreso, el atraso y la tradición.

PALABRAS CLAVE: publicaciones periódicas, época victoriana, Imperio Británico, ciudad, temporalidad, India

1. Introduction

The periodical press was a mass medium of the Victorian period, and the digitisation of 19th-century periodicals over the last two decades has significantly increased the academic study of this medium.[1] As a medium embedded in its readers' daily life and defined, in Charles Dickens's words, as a "companion and friend" to them (Dickens 1), periodicals give access to many aspects of Victorian society and culture. At a time when books were expensive, they could be purchased for as little as one or two pence in the cheapest market segment, and were described as a "popular" medium by the Victorian journalist E. S. Dallas:

> The rise of the periodical press is the great event of modern history. [...] A periodical differs from a book in being calculated for rapid sale and for immediate effect. [...] It is necessary, therefore, to the success of a periodical, that it should attain an instant popularity – in other words, that it should be calculated for the appreciation, not of a few, but of the many. Periodical literature is essentially a popular literature. (Dallas 101)

In this medium for "the many", Victorian society observed itself: "Each article, each periodical number, was and is part of a complex process in which

1 See, for example, handbooks and collections such as King, Easley and Morton's *Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers* (2016) and Easley, King and Morton's *Researching the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press: Case Studies* (2018). See also the journal Victorian Periodicals Review.

writers, editors, publishers and readers engaged in trying to understand themselves and their society" (Beetham "Towards a Theory" 20). In this way, periodicals also disseminated knowledge about the Empire and helped spread the discourse of Empire. As the historian Chandrika Kaul notes: "It is now widely accepted that imperial expansion, the popularity of empire, and the rise of the popular press were all inextricably linked during the late nineteenth century" (Kaul, "Researching Empire" 177).[2]

In the second half of the 19th century, articles on all aspects of the Empire were a staple of the British periodical press. These pieces – often written by men (and sometimes women) who resided or travelled in the Empire – allowed their readers to partake in the expansion of British imperial rule, its triumphs and crises. They acquainted readers with the regions and people of the Empire and imbued them with imperial ideology. All this is prominent in articles about cities.

As recently expressed in Salman Rushdie's magic-realist novel *Victory City* (2023), cities play an important part in the creation and growth of empires – as nodes in transport and communication networks, centres of trade, seats of government, administrative and educational institutions, breeding ground for the arts, contact zones and, not least, the demonstration of power in urban planning and architecture. Cities participate in the decline of empires, but they also survive them and preserve their material legacy. In his study *Ten Cities That Made an Empire*, Tristram Hunt observes:

> The most compelling of those phenomena still with us is the chain of former colonial cities dotted across the globe. From the Palladian glories of Leinster House in Dublin to the Ruskinian fantasia of the Victoria Terminus in Mumbai to the stucco campanile of Melbourne's Government House to the harbour of Hong Kong, the footprint of the old British Empire remains wilfully in evidence. (Hunt 7)

2 An early documentation of the importance of periodicals for Empire research is Parmegiano's bibliography published in 1987. The 2000s have seen significant new interest in British newspapers' and periodicals' engagement with the Empire such as Finkelstein and Peers's collection *Negotiating India in the Nineteenth-Century Media or Kaul's study Reporting the Raj*, as well as in colonial newspapers and periodicals, such as Herder and Mittler's collection of articles on *Asian Punches, Joshi's study Empire News* and Finkelstein, Johnson and Davis's Edinburgh Companion to British Colonial Periodicals.

The present article adopts a media-cultural perspective and looks at the Victorian perception of imperial cities through the lens of a key medium of the time. Periodical studies argue that periodicals should be treated not as "a neutral medium for content that can be extracted" but as a medium with "its own distinctive dynamics, its own function and agency" (Philpotts 307). The following discussion emphasises the distinctive temporal features of periodicals, because temporality is an aspect in which the mediality of periodicals and imperial ideology converge.[3] In a seminal article on the temporal dimension of periodicals, Margaret Beetham writes:

> Every periodical marks and is marked by time [...]. Coming out at regular intervals, however long or short, each number carries a date which means it claims to be of the moment: it is 'new' or 'news' or 'now'. However, it is simultaneously part of a series, pointing back to a past expressed by the volume number [...] and forward to a future whose length may be uncertain, though its existence is maintained by the promise of what will appear 'in our next'. (Beetham "Time" 324)

Two temporal aspects are of special importance in the imperial context. First, the fact that periodicals are dated with the day or month of publication signals their relevance to the present moment, even when they address the past; articles about the Empire in Victorian periodicals therefore always implied the topicality of imperial issues. Second, the periodicity of periodicals – their publication at regular intervals – provides an affordance for thinking in long timelines, from the past to the future, and such extended temporal perspectives are central to the ambitions of imperial projects.

In what follows, the focus will be on a close reading of articles addressing Indian cities – Calcutta (now Kolkata), Delhi and Bombay (now Mumbai) – since British India was the proverbial jewel in the crown of the Empire. However, it is important to consider these articles alongside depictions of London, the Empire's 'first' city. Articles on London and on cities in the colonies were often co-present in Victorian periodicals, with the metropole's capital serving as a foil for cities in the periphery. The articles to be discussed here are part of a larger sample mined from two comprehensive databases: *Gale*

3 It is derived from the author`s work on imperial cities in popular periodicals in the context of the graduate school 2571 at the University of Freiburg, whose research programme puts special emphasis on imperial temporality (https://www.grk2571.uni-freiburg.de/forschungsprogramm/ forschungsprogramm_grk_2571.pdf).

19th Century UK Periodicals and *ProQuest British Periodicals Collection*. It is important to note that the periodicals in which these articles were published were all directed at readers in the metropole. They do *not* reflect the views of British colonials or those of the colonised, for which other periodicals must be considered.[4] Furthermore, these periodicals were aimed at heterogeneous readerships, thus covering a wide audience: from popular family magazines to periodicals for women or publications with a special interest in the Christian mission. The differing addressees, along with the agendas of various editors and publishers, shape the respective views on imperial cities; nevertheless, it is evident that certain temporal patterns are dominant and recurring.

2. London as a City in Transformation

Numerous articles in Victorian periodicals noted signs of progress in the British capital. The *Leisure Hour*, for example, a popular family magazine, published accounts of city walks that negotiated the tension between modernity and tradition, like the six-part series "Haunted London" (1860) by Walter Thornbury. It opens with the observation that the modernisation of the capital sparked an interest in its history and heritage:

> It is healthy, in walking London streets, to fly the mind, as if it was a hawk, back at old times; it removes us from the selfishness of the present; it reads all our dreams and hopes a sharp sound lesson of the mutability of things, and teaches us what a great kaleidoscope this city (nay, the whole world itself) is in the hands of Time – that mighty conjuror, upon whose magic chess-board we men are but as the pawns of red and white. (Thornbury 74)

In the second half of the 19th century, London was the largest city in the world and changing rapidly; 'change' and 'transformation' are key words in many articles. In 1874, the *Graphic*, an illustrated weekly paper, printed an article about London entitled "A City of Transformation", which makes the following observation:

> We live in *a transitional Metropolis*. [...] we come into the City each morning with a wondering consciousness that the aspect of

4 Finkelstein and Johnson point to "the crucial role played by colonial periodicals in legitimising as well as contesting the economic, political and cultural hegemony of the British Empire from its inception to its end" (2).

> familiar streets has changed. Time, the insatiable eater, is perpetually nibbling, and occasionally takes whole houses, or the best part of some great building, at a gulp. [...] Quaint old nooks and corners [...] are invaded by the roar and tumult of turbulent streets. Ancient churchyards are desecrated by the snorting of strange engines, and the fumes of burning asphalt. (106)[5]

These sentences emphasise the dynamics and speed of change in the metropolis, which seems unstoppable. The advance of progress into the city is perceived as disruptive, and this perception is accompanied by feelings of loss. An article in *St. James Magazine* in 1872 conveys similar sentiments, expressing a sense of desecration even more strongly than in the *Graphic* article:

> London is *changing its aspect daily*. In these *times of energetic demolition and alteration* [...] we leave a familiar spot one week and return in the next to find it unrecognizable by eyes of flesh. When churchyards are demolished to make way for Metropolitan railroads, when even the consecrated dust reposing in the shadow of Westminster Abbey is disturbed, no spot can be sacred enough to stay sacrilegious hands. (Mayer 410)

However, Victorian periodicals also displayed pride in progress and in London's modern edifices; occasionally, this pride is accompanied by arrogance towards supposedly backward cultures, as in an 1854 *Leisure Hour* article about "A London Railway Station". The new railway stations with their impressive steel and glass structures were seen as cathedrals of progress. At the beginning of the article, the modernity of the station is highlighted with a racist personification of backwardness. It imagines how a "respectable mandarin from Pekin" would feel if he were transported to London and "dropped down in a London railway station at ten at night": "Poor Whampoo Fong [...] would certainly wish himself back again, away from the incomprehensible uproar, to the calm of the sober city of the celestial empire" (412).

The articles cited here are representative of many similar examples that present London as a city that is becoming modern, but where progressiveness also comes along with a destruction of the old, hence evoking amazement, nostalgia and feelings of loss. As the first city of the Empire,

5 Here and in following quotations, italics are mine.

London symbolised a form of progressiveness that was to spread not only in Britain but also to the colonies. Yet, the depiction of Indian cities reveals that the city's past could be just as important for maintaining British power as the importation of progress. The following examination of articles on Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay demonstrates how these cities are described through different temporal categories – progress, backwardness, tradition – depending on their significance for the continuation of British rule.

3. Indian Cities and the Temporal Categories of Progress, Backwardness and Tradition

The question of the continuation of British rule resonates throughout all articles in the sample on Indian cities. These accounts are framed in the awareness of a crisis and caesura of British rule over India: the Indian Rebellion ('Mutiny') in 1857-1858. Although the uprising was initiated by Indian soldiers in British service, it expressed a broader rejection of the Christian and Western values imposed by the East India Company (EIC). Intense media coverage of the Rebellion made the British public aware of the extent to which self-perceptions and external perception of British rule diverged, highlighting the need to review and reform its foundations. The rule of the EIC, founded in 1600 as a trading company, was dissolved, and in 1858 the Crown became the 'Paramount Power' in India. Articles published close to the events of 1857-1858 deal with the shock and indignation of the British at the violence of the conflict on both the Indian and British sides. However, they also reveal how this shock was quickly followed by reflection on the reconsolidation of British rule and the role of Indian cities in this context. Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay are evaluated differently regarding their significance for the continuation of British rule, as is evident in the temporal categories through which they are described.

Calcutta was of immediate importance for such a reflection, as it was the capital of British India. It was here that Warren Hastings resided as the first Governor General of the EIC (until 1785), and in 1803 the impressive neoclassical Government House was opened, symbolising the power of the Company. After 1857, the rule of the EIC, which had been accused of greed and corruption already in the 18th century, was completely discredited. Yet, once the trauma of the Rebellion had subsided, an article on "Calcutta: Past and Present", published in *Pall Mall Magazine* in 1896, adopted a more conciliatory look at the city and its past. Its author, George William Forrest (1845–1926), was born in India and spent most of his life there as a

teacher and administrator; he wrote several historical works and journalistic pieces on British rule in India (Prior), including accounts of his extensive travels in the subcontinent. Comparing the present with the past, Forrest's article on Calcutta observes the transformation and growing prosperity of the city under the rule of the Crown. Nonetheless, it treats the previous rule of the EIC, when the foundations of modern Calcutta were laid, almost nostalgically, as a good old time. Forrest even calls for the home of Warren Hastings to be turned into a memorial to the early colonisation of India: "It is fast crumbling into ruin, but it should be purchased by Government, repaired and converted into a public institution. It was the favourite residence of the man whose far sight first saw, and whose brave and confident patience realised, the romantic idea of his country founding an Empire in the East" (111).

Forrest's imperial way of thinking is evident in his depiction of contemporary Calcutta. Here he draws a clear contrast in the spatial organisation of the city, namely between its European parts and the 'native town' with its 'oriental' bazaar. Using an imperial time pattern, spaces that are synchronously present are made to appear nonsynchronous by categorising one as modern and the other as unchanged and traditional:

> North-east of Government House runs Old Court-house Street [...] The broad street, with its lofty row of houses and splendid shops, would do credit to any European capital. In fact, it is a Continental street transplanted to the East. Far different is the Burra Bazaar, with its old and shabby native houses, whose wooden verandahs face the street, and the marvellous dens of the grand floor filled with goods of every class and description. (105)

According to Forrest, Calcutta has been transformed only in its European parts and their immediate contact zone; the rural surroundings of the city are described as completely untouched by change and as "primitive": "we come across a primitive cabin, which consists of a roof of grass to keep the sun and rain out, for this is all that is needed. At the door is a woman grinding corn; about her are a group of scantly-clad men discussing the state of the crops and the hardness of the heart of the village money-lender" (111). The impression of a fundamental immutability, even "immortality", of India is concentrated verbally and visually in the image of an oxcart: "Waves of conquerors have swept by and been forgotten, but the bullock cart continues *a symbol of the immortal East*" (112).

Forrest's article on Calcutta was written at a time when resistance to British rule over India was again on the rise, this time supported by Western-educated elites who founded the Indian National Congress (1885) and were using the local press to articulate criticism. In this context, Forrest interpreted India's resistance to progress positively: he saw a traditional way of life as both a guarantee for the continuation of British rule and a means to prevent undesirable transformation: "Happy are they, and happy they will remain till their minds are poisoned against their rulers by a seditious press. [...] Let us never forget that when reverence for authority perishes among the masses, it will be an almost superhuman task to keep peace in India" (112). Overall, Forrest's article on the capital of British India takes a multi-layered look at the past, present and future of British rule in India and conveys an ambivalent view of progressiveness.

Articles on *Delhi* also present the city with a complex temporality. Compared to Calcutta, Delhi was a city with an ancient tradition, having served as the metropolis of several pre-British empires on the subcontinent, such as the mighty Mughal Empire. In 1857-1858, Delhi's reputation was tainted by its status as the main site of the Rebellion, as the article "Delhi: Its History, and Its Horror" in *Reynolds' Miscellany* points out right at the beginning: "It is now the scene of a terrible drama [...]. Before, and within its walls deeds are done which sink human beings immeasurably beneath the brute creation [...]" (215). In the same breath, however, the article pays tribute to the city's great imperial history and famous rulers such as Timur, Babur and Aurangzeb; significantly, its title names "History" before the "Horrors" of Delhi. From a historical perspective, London and Delhi appear as imperial cities of equal standing, and it is noted that the royal palace in Delhi is not inferior to the splendour of Windsor Castle (215).

In 1858, a *Leisure Hour* article with "Glimpses of Delhi and Its Interiors" refers to "the great Mogul city" and "the venerable old city" (38). Likewise, the *Missionary Herald*'s article "Delhi" speaks of "this imperial city" and "this noble city" (133).[6] Here, Delhi is perceived as a city in which imperial pasts are virtually layered:

> Twelve miles of ruins emphatically tell to this day of the extent and grandeur of this noble city. From the Ajmere gate to the Kootub

6 See also the 1857 article "Delhi" in the *Lady's Newspaper* that speaks of the "horrible atrocities so lately perpetrated in this city" but then describes Delhi as the "Rome of the Hindoo" and an "imperial city" (300).

> Minar, the traveller passes over plains strewed with the remnants of palaces, mosques, and tombs, while the pillar of Feroze Shah discourses of dynasties which reigned at the commencement of the Christian era, professing the Buddhist faith; and the Hindu corridors at the Kootub Minar speak of the rise and sovereignty of the Brahminical creed, displaced at the Moslem conquest by the religion of the impostor of Mecca. On the defeat of the Mahrattas, in 1803, and the release of the captive monarch of Delhi, the British found the representative of the Moguls a blind old man, and his dominions circumscribed by his palace walls. Then the sceptre passed into the hands of the English, whose power now exceeds that of the emperors of Delhi in their palmiest days. (133)

Such references to Delhi's historical importance were timely as there were voices calling for the city to be wiped out – or at least made insignificant – in retaliation for the Rebellion. An 1857 article in *John Bull* on "The Fall of Delhi" mentions such demands (712), and twenty years later an article on "Imperial Delhi and the English Raj" in *Fraser's Magazine*, written by the renowned journalist William Simpson, notes that "[t]he policy of punishing Delhi with marked neglect for its misdeeds has been urged by many" (Simpson 293). Both articles counter this opinion by arguing that the city's imperial past could be useful for the reconsolidation and preservation of British rule. The article in *John Bull* evokes the idea of *translatio imperii* when it posits "the value which these famous remains of departed glory may possess in our hands by aiding to confirm our supremacy in India" and explicitly describes Delhi as "an important instrument of renewing our hold with greater firmness upon India" (712). Due to its historical and symbolic significance, the author also considers Delhi to be better suited as the capital of British India than Calcutta, which was stained by the rule of the EIC:

> We must boldly look our responsibilities in the face, and treat the civil rule in a manner worthy of its magnificence. Such a change in the idea of Indian government almost necessarily suggests a transfer of the central power from Calcutta – [...] a place redolent throughout of its mercantile origin, and imparting of itself a trading character to our rule – to *the ancient city which keeps watch over all the Imperial traditions of India*.
>
> [...] Grandeur is an essential element of power in Eastern eyes. And the traditional and consecrated grandeur of Delhi, if it could be once

> blended with the associations of our Government, could not fail to strengthen that Government in India beyond any of the material benefits which we claim to confer on the population. (712)

Indeed, twenty years after the rebellion, Queen Victoria was installed as Empress of India in Delhi rather than Calcutta. Simpson's article in *Fraser's Magazine* explained this circumstance with Delhi's tradition as the "Rome of Hindustan" and its long history as the political metropolis of India: "It has still around its name all the halo of greatness and power. [...] There is no other city in that country which is associated historically with the 'Paramount Power', as we now express it" (Simpson 285). Delhi remains impregnated with power, even if its rulers change, alongside its culture and religion: "Thus ended the Moghul dynasty; but a metropolis does not necessarily become extinct with the race of its sovereigns; such cities as Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, and Mecca tell us of spots which have not only survived many dynastic lines, but also maintained their metropolitan reputation through more than one faith" (292–93). Under the Crown rule, Simpson continues, India has developed as rapidly as the metropole, so that Victoria as Empress represents not only authority but also a new era of (Western) modernity and progress:

> The change is even greater in India than in Europe, for the pre-existing state was much more primitive than in the West. [...] A change has now taken place; India has accepted a new ruler from the West, and it must also accept with that ruler the civilisation of the West. It is an entirely new era, and it will date in future history [...] from the sovereign who is associated with it—namely, Victoria, first Empress of India, proclaimed at Delhi on the first day of the present year. (297)

For Simpson, a rule designed to bring India Western civilisation is the latest layer in Delhi's imperial history, but interestingly, the article makes no mention of the city itself being modernised. A 1900 article on Delhi by G. W. Forrest in *Pall Mall Magazine*, although subtitled "Past and Present" like the author's article on Calcutta, is also fixated on Delhi's past; the text and its photographs focus on the relics of previous empires and the memorials to the events of 1857. In relation to Indian cities, modernisation and urban transformation, as observed for London throughout the period, are described primarily for Bombay.

In the triad of Indian cities considered here, Bombay is the most prominently one associated with the temporalities of the present and the future. In the Victorian perception, Tristram Hunt writes, Bombay stood for "the technological and managerial capacity of British imperialism" and "the Victorian spirit of Progress": "In Bombay the British Empire would build a monument to its own modernity" (Hunt 266). The transformation of Bombay into a modern city from the 1860s onwards took place in parallel to the many 'improvements' that London experienced in these decades. As seen in contemporary articles about London, such development could provoke regret over the material heritage lost in the process; in the case of Bombay, however, no such sense of loss is articulated. Instead, the city's dynamic growth is celebrated, even in periodicals propagating the Christian mission. A. M. Symington's 1885 article "Bombay or Western India" in the *Free Church Monthly* presents a view of the city as it was revealed to a European visitor from the harbour:

> When he is getting near the chief landing-place, a great city, with many new and handsome buildings, public and domestic, grows upon the sight. And when he goes into its streets, literally swarming with a picturesque and polyglot population; fills his eye with the broad square of the Apollo Bund, corresponding to the Santa Lucia of Naples; explores the cotton market in the Kolaba Point, the Fort, the town-hall, bank, school of art, university, post-office, and government buildings, with their pointed Gothic arches and long, cool colonnades; passes through the European city to the native town, and on by the Back Bay to Malabar Hill, – the rapid growth of this Indian city in all temporal prosperity within the last half, chiefly within the last quarter, of a century, is forced upon his mind with an effect of great surprise. (Symington 70)

The article "Bombay", published in *All the Year Round* in 1894, observes that the recent development of the city involved the destruction of old buildings, but conveys no regret or nostalgia because, since what was removed was outdated and no longer useful: "The original fortifications being out of date and useless for modern warfare, have been partially demolished and efficient defences erected in their place" (350). In fact, this article describes urban modernisation as a positive form of aggression, forcing progress into the city: "the presence of gas, electric light, and tramways in the Hindu quarter demonstrates *the success with which English energy carries the war of*

progress into the very heart of the enemy's camp" (351). Resistance to progress, it is suggested, is futile. On the contrary: Bombay's huge new railway station, Victoria Terminus, a cathedral of progress that opened in 1887, presents itself in modern neo-Gothic architecture blended with indigenous elements, thus giving the impression of a successful integration of Western progress and Indian tradition: "a chef d'oeuvre of modern architecture, with pink and white domes rising above vaulted halls supported on granite pillars, and encircled by balconies, where the sculptured parrots and peacocks of Royal India surround the symbols of British sovereignty (351). Whereas in 1854 the *Leisure Hour* article about a London railway station exposed a 'backward' Chinese to a miracle of progress, Victoria Terminus in Bombay at the end of the 19th century symbolises the successful transfer of Western urbanity to the colonies.

4. Conclusion

Imperial cities – like the Empire in general – attracted the interest of Victorian periodicals, in which they were interlinked with many other topics of the Victorian world. In the articles examined, cities are perceived as crystallisation points of progress, with London, as the super-metropolis of the Empire, serving as an implicit benchmark. In India, this is achieved above all by Bombay. Delhi's significance for British rule in India lies in its imperial past, or more precisely, in its layering of imperial pasts. After 1857 it is therefore identified as an instrument for maintaining rule in the present and the future. However, the interpretation of time in India's imperial cities is not limited to binarisms of present and past, or progress and backwardness, but turns out to be complex: at the end of the 19th century, the modern railway station of Bombay is presented as a symbol of India's progressive future, while, at the same time, the apparent Indian 'timelessness' in and around Calcutta is seen as a hope for the continuation of British rule.

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