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Manamunda-Asurgarh: An Early Historic Fortified Settlement in the Middle Mahanadi Valley Region of Odisha

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Abstract: *Like other parts of Indian sub-continent, Odisha also witnessed the emergence of various fortified early historic centres of different sizes and styles by the early 4th century BCE. Several of these sites have been excavated in recent years to investigate their cultural sequences and characteristic features. One of such fortified settlement is Manamunda-Asurgarh, located near the confluence of the Mahanadi and the Tel rivers. Despite being excavated twice, there has been limited discussion in public forums about the nature of the material remains recovered from the site. Hence, an attempt is made in this paper to highlight the significance of the site through a documentation of the artifacts preserved in the Prof. N.K. Sahu Museum of Sambalpur University of Odisha. In addition to this, a comparative discussion based on excavated materials from other sites in the region has been made to understand the distribution of culture represented as Manamunda-Asurgarh.*

Keywords*: Early History, Iron Age, Fortification, Mahanadi, Odisha, Trade*

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Introduction

The archaeological and historical literatures reveal that the Indian sub-continent witnessed the beginning of the early historic period around the middle of the first millennium BCE. This emergence was influenced by various factors, including natural conditions and preceding cultural developments particularly those associated with the Iron Age (Ghosh 1973, 1989: 130-151; Erdosy 1988, Allchin 1995; Dhavalikar 1999: 1-16). The advancements in Iron Age technology, the expansion of agriculture and the emergence of new social organizations collectively contributed to the evolution of more structured and complex societies. During the early phase, the process of early historical growth covered

the middle Ganga plain, Ganga-Yamuna doab, Northwest India and parts of Central India (Chakrabarti 1995: 170-262). Several decades of archaeological research have revealed that by the early 4th century BCE, Odisha also experienced the proliferation of different urban and semi-urban early historic centres of various sizes and styles (Beglar 1882: 112-116; Lal 1949: 62-105; IAR 1956-57: 30-31; Tripathy 2002; Yule 2006; Patra 2007: 27-36, Mohanty and Smith 2008; Behera and Chattopadhyay 2013: 124-34; Hussain 2018:103-107, 2020: 69-90; Mishra and Behari 2019: 1-33; Garnayak 2020: 353-377). These early historic settlements with the evidence of large settlement areas, massive ramparts made of earth/brick, gateways and moats, craft specialisation, and use of coinage have fulfilled the basic characteristic features of the early historic cities as defined by scholars from time to time (Ghosh 1973, 1989; Allchin 1995; Dhavalikar 1999). One of such early historic fortified settlement is located near the confluence of the Mahanadi and the Tel *i.e.* Manamunda-Asurgarh. Based on the above discussion, an attempt is made in this paper to (i) throw light on the excavated material remains from Manamunda-Asurgarh as well as from other excavated sites in the region, (ii) understand the role of Manamunda-Asurgarh as a centre for the proliferation of trade in this region during early historic period, and (iii) know the importance of other contemporary satellite settlements that played the pivotal role.

The Site and Previous Researches

The archaeological site (Lat. 20° 49' 59.90" N; Long. 83° 56' 0.63" E) was first reported by R. D. Banerji in 1929 as *Asurgarh* near Manamunda in the Boudh state (Banerji 1929: 64-86). It is a fortified settlement on the right bank of the river Mahanadi, close to the confluence of the river Mahanadi and the Tel. At present, the site is represented by a mound which has formed in a linear fashion. A wall made of burnt bricks and partly disturbed by the river Mahanadi is visible along the right bank. In fact, the present day village of Manamunda covers some portions of the ancient settlement area and major part has been washed away due to frequent inundation of the river. Hence, it is difficult to trace the actual territorial extent of the site. Excavation was conducted at the site in 1981 by P.G. Department of History, Sambalpur University in collaboration with Department of Archaeology, Deccan College, Pune, in search of *Lanka* of *Ramayana* (Behera 1982: 16-22). While the excavation did not corroborate the site as *Lanka*, it confirmed the existence of an early historic fortified settlement which was dating back to at least two thousand years older. Unfortunately, the excavator Prof. Sarat Chandra Behera was passed away and the excavated materials were not properly documented. The excavation was resumed at the site in early 90s of the last century (IAR 1989-90: 80-86, 1991-92: 86). It was from this second phase of excavation that two different periods *viz.* Megalithic/Iron Age and Early Historic have been identified, and on the basis of an imperial variety of Punch-Marked coin, from layer-3, the upper level of period-IB has been dated to 3rd century BCE (Pradhan 1992: 26-28). However, till date no detail excavation report is available in the public domain and while general inferences have been drawn by scholars about the origin, development, and fall of this ancient settlement based on surface finds, no systematic research was carried out to understand the site from a regional and extra-regional perspective. Keeping in view the strategic location and importance of Manamunda-Asurgarh, intensive exploration and selected excavations were conducted during last three decades in the middle Mahanadi valley region by Sambalpur University and resulted in the discovery of more than 100 settlements (both fortified and non-fortified types) of Iron Age-Early Historic period (Hussain 2020). As discussed

above the excavated material remains of Manamunda-Asurgarh have not been properly documented and due to lack of appropriate preventive measures, several artifacts and important antiquities were lost forever. But still a small collection is found in a trunk and few in the display gallery of the Prof. N.K. Sahu Museum at Sambalpur University.

Interestingly, as the excavated remains of 14 sites from the middle Mahanadi valley region of Iron Age-Early Historic period have been documented and reports are available (Behera 2002-03: 87-103; Behera and Chattopadhyay 2013: 124-34; Behera *et al*. 2015:178-96; Behera *et al.* 2019: 95-134; Behera and Hussain 2020: 67-91; Behera *et al.* 2021-22: 134-157), it was not too difficult to handle the artifacts of Manamunda-Asurgarh to develop an understanding on their chronological context.

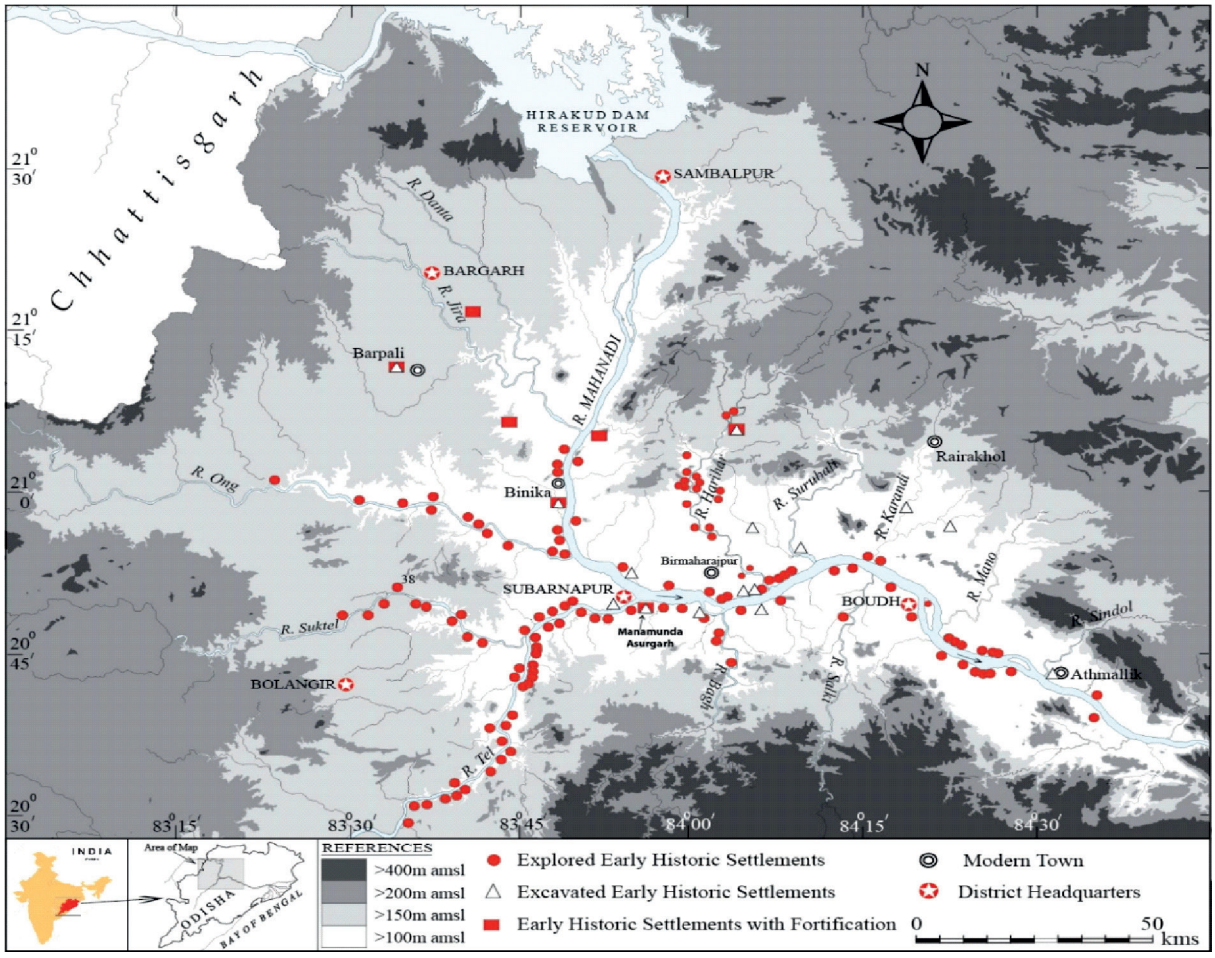

Fig. 1: Map showing the distribution of Early Historic Settlements in the middle Mahanadi valley regions of Odisha

Early Historic Culture of the Middle Mahanadi Valley

Detailed studies of material remains from the excavated sites in the middle Mahanadi valley region suggest that there was a gradual development of cultures without any discernable hiatus from Iron Age to the early historic period. Radiocarbon dates and a detailed study of diachronic changes in the material cultural remains, *viz.* pottery and other antiquities, revealed that Iron Age village settlements were gradually developed into different urban and semi-urban centres during the early historic

period with several new trait elements in the Tel-Mahanadi valley region. The evidence for large scale stone bead manufacturing workshops at Badmal Asurgarh and Bhutiapali (Behera and Hussain 2019: 1-16), glass manufacturing activities at Kurumpadar (Singh and Behera 2001-02: 173-76) and Iron smelting activities at different sites suggest that there were several industrial centres of different craft specialisation and of different dimensions in the region. During this period for the first time introduction of the fortified settlement have been recognised in the region (Yule *et al.* 2005: 307-318; Hussain 2018: 103-107). However, while there are as many as six fortified settlements in the Tel-Mahanadi valley region, a large number of non fortified satellite settlements of different size have also been recorded from the banks of the river Mahanadi as well as its major and minor tributaries (**Fig. 1**). Interestingly, an imperial variety of punch-marked coin, one each from Manamunda-Asurgarh and Kurumpadar are reported from excavations (Pradhan 1992: 26-28; Behera and Khamari 1998-99: 205-10) whereas a number of punch-marked coins have been found during explorations from different sites, largest among them was the Lokapada hoard (Yule 2006: 45). Studies of different ceramic assemblages from the excavated sites along with other associated materials suggest that RSW and RW are still the dominated varieties followed by BSW and BRW during early historic period. Black slipped bowl/dish with a central knob (Knobbed ware) surrounded by multiple rings is another diagnostic ceramic assemblage of the early historic period in this region. Besides, in the upper level of the early historic period black-and-red ware is completely missing which may be dated to the early centuries of Christian eras. Based on the foregoing discussion it can be said that compare to the neighbouring regions, cultural sequence in the middle Mahanadi valley is well established not only from stratigraphic occurrence of material remains but also with the help of scientific dates (Behera *et al.* 2007: 41-46; Behera *et al.* 2019; 95-134).

Material Remains from Manamunda-Asurgarh

A brief description of the available material remains is given below:

Pottery: The ceramic assemblage unearthed during the Manamunda excavation along with other associated materials, provides valuable insights into the prevailing pottery traditions of the period. Red Slipped Ware and Red Ware emerge as the dominant varieties, followed closely by Black Slipped Ware and Black-and-Red Ware in period-I. Among these, Black-and-Red Ware appears limited to a select few fine varieties of bowls, while Black Slipped Ware represents fine to medium fabric bowls and dishes, along with medium to coarse fabric vases. The Red Slipped Ware and Red Ware categories consist of a various types of pottery forms, including vases, bowls, basins, lids, and storage jars. During the succeeding phase (period-II), most of these vessels exhibit characteristics inherited from preceding Iron Age ceramic industries (except black-and-red ware), although with some notable techno-typological changes. Noteworthy among the ceramic assemblage are the black slipped bowls and dishes adorned with a central knob surrounded by multiple rings, known as Knobbed Ware, which is an indicative of the early historic period (**Fig.2**). Similar Knobbed Ware artifacts have been documented in several early historic settlements across Odisha (Tripati 2019; 82–89).

Moreover, fragments of Rouletted Ware have been reported from the surface at Manamunda-Asurgarh, suggesting possible exchange through riparian/terrestrial trade networks originating from the coastal region. Additionally, a wide variety of decorated potteries, including incised, appliqué,

Fig. 2: Knobbed Vessels from Manamunda-Asurgarh (1-5: excavated and 6-11: explored)

Fig. 3: Decorated pottery from Manamunda-Asurgarh (Period-I: 1-8; Period-II: 9-17).

and stamped designs, have also been unearthed in abundance from the site, further enriching our understanding of the artistic and technological expertise of the period (**Fig.3**). The archaeological remains have yielded a good number of pottery fragments with both pre and post-firing graffiti marks (**Fig.4**). These marks occur normally on the outer surface of the pots *i.e.* base, shoulder, stand and body parts. These marks are found more in red slipped ware potteries than in other ware types. While a few of these marks resemble those with early *Brahmi* alphabets others represent geometric and non-geometric shapes viz., ladder, bow and arrow, floral, sun etc.

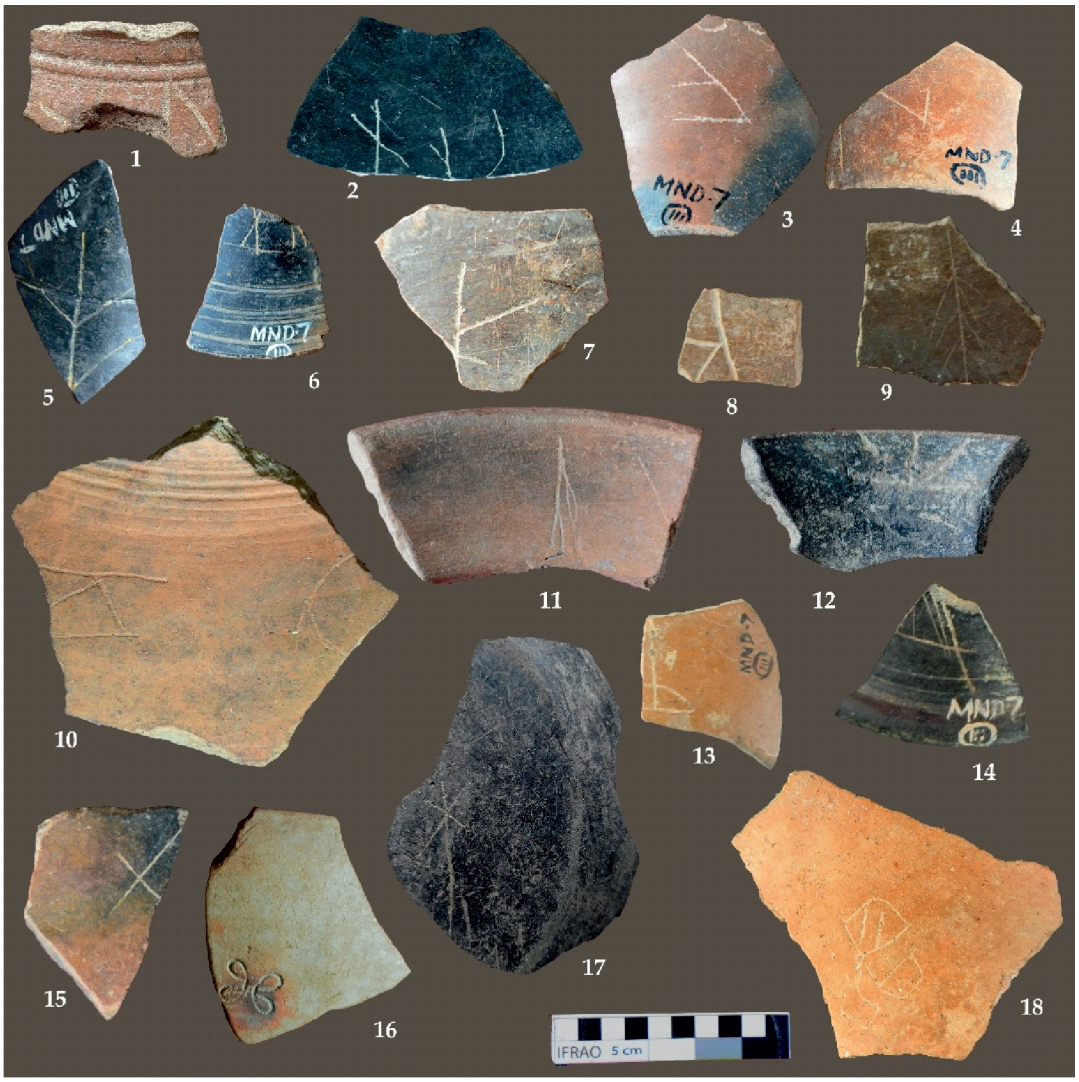

Fig. 4: Graffiti Marked pottery from Manamunda-Asurgarh (Period-I: 1-15; Period-II: 16-18).

Iron Objects: At the Manamunda excavation site (from period-II), a variety of iron objects and Iron slags have been unearthed, highlighting the advanced metallurgical skills of the ancient craftsmen. These objects include chisels, axes, knife, arrowheads, dagger, door clamps, sickle, spearheads, nails, etc (**Fig.5**). These findings not only indicate the wide range of iron tools and weapons in use during the period but also suggest the presence of developed metallurgical industries capable of producing diverse iron objects for various purposes. The use of iron provides insights into the technological advancements and daily life practices of the ancient inhabitants of this region. Further, it is important

to mention here that in the absence of any source of iron in the middle Mahanadi valley region, the inhabitants most probably imported iron in raw or semi-finished form from nearby areas. In this context, the PIXE analysis of iron objects from Badmal-Asurgarh is significant which provide information for probable nearest sources of iron located about 180 to 300 kilometres north-eastern and eastern part of the middle Mahanadi valley *i.e.* Nuasahi-Boula area and Tomka-Daitari belt of Keonjhar district, Baripada-Rairangpur belt of Mayurbhanj district and Betei-Rangamatia area of Balasore district (Behera and Chatopadhyay 2013: 131-32).

Fig. 5: Iron Objects from Manamunda-Asurgarh (Period-I: 1-5; Period-II: 6-18).

Beads: The semi-finished and finished beads made of precious and semi-precious stones unearthed from the site include long and standard barrel-shaped beads, short-triangular beads, short barrel beads, spherical beads, cylindrical beads, rectangular beads, and disc beads (**Fig.6:**1-33). Besides the above finds, few beads made of terracotta were also found (**Fig.6:**34-35). In relation to the semi-finished and finished beads and pendants, a significant quantity of manufacturing waste of precious and semi-precious stone beads has been recovered during the excavation of Badmal-Asurgarh and Bhutiapali (Behera and Hussain 2019). These waste materials sheds light on the intricate craftsmanship involved in bead production and offers clues about the techniques employed by the ancient artisans.

Fig. 6: Beads and Pendants from Manamunda-Asurgarh (Period-I: 1-30; Period-II: 31-35).

Coins:An imperial variety of punch-marked coin was recovered during excavation from upper level of period-IB which contains five symbols *i.e.* a rising sun, a cresent on hill, a Nandipada/Lotus, an elephant with two taurines at the back and a six-armed symbol or *Shadara Chakra* on obverse and one central symbol of four taurines with a central dot on reverse side (Pradhan 1992). Further, an imperial variety of punch-marked coins was also found during excavation at Kurumpadar (Behera and Khamari 1998-99), and several punch-marked coins have been reported from different explored sites, largest among them was the Lokapada hoard (Yule 2006: 45). These findings suggest the circulation of currency and inter as well as intra regional trade network of this area.

Terracotta Objects: The terracotta objects include finger pressed circular shaped terracotta disc, terracotta tiles, terracotta ring wells, ear studs, spindle whorls, pottery disc and animal & human figurines. Interestingly, a terracotta sealing with two different stamps is found from Manamunda (**Fig.7**). While the small mark is clearly identified with the left facing swastika symbol (*vamavarta*),

the big one has different symbols like Sun (?) and Moon (?), including one left facing swastika. The structural remains in the site were mostly made of burnt brick of various dimensions, like 35×26×8 cm, 32×23×5 cm, 30×25×9 cm, 26×20×5 cm. Even, during excavation several pits made of bricks and circular brick structure were reported. However, no detailed information is available on these findings.

Fig. 7: Terracotta and Bone object from period-II of Manamunda-Asurgarh.

Other Findings: Moreover, the excavation yielded fragments of various tools such as pestles, anvils, mullers, and bead polishers. Additionally, plain as well as two-legged and four-legged saddle-querns were discovered at the site, suggesting the presence of other domestic activities. Besides, few broken bones points were also found from the site. This rich assortment of artifacts highlights the complexity of the socio-economic and technological landscape of the region during the early historic period. Bi-chrome and polychrome glass bangles, as well as glass beads, have also been discovered at the site. These artifacts suggest a sophisticated level of craftsmanship in glassmaking during that early historic time. It is important to mention here that evidence for large-scale glass manufacturing activities has been found at Kurumpadar, located about 40 kilometers from Manamunda-Asurgarh (Singh and Behera 2001-02).

Discussion

Based on the circumstantial evidence from various excavated sites, we can develop an understanding on the subsistence strategy of the inhabitants of Manamunda-Asurgarh. Besides, agricultural activities

people were dependent upon animal husbandry, hunting-gathering, fishing and trade/exchange. The available collections of faunal remains include cattle, buffalo, dog, goat, sheep, deer, wild pig, and hare (Joglekar 2015: 188-189). However, during this period the region was in flourishing condition due to the active trade network which played a crucial role in shaping the settlement patterns across the middle Mahanadi valley region. There was a notable increase in settlements compared to the preceding Iron Age, with new areas being inhabited as well (Hussain 2020). The emergence of large settlements and their strategic locations were pivotal in asserting dominance over medium and small-sized satellite settlements. Manamunda-Asurgarh likely functioned as the primary centre and grew into the largest settlement during this period, followed by Taraporegarh and Badmal. Instead of the other form of economy the development of specialised craft industry was more important as it became the backbone of the economy during this period. Although raw material is exposed to the early settlers and few beads of carnelian are also reported from the Chalcolithic and Iron Age period, massive bead manufacturing centres were developed only during the early historic time. For manufacturing beads, the craftsmen of this period not only exploited the locally available raw material but also imported materials such as banded-hematite-red-jasper, agate, chalcedony and amygdaloidal basalt, from other regions by way of trade or exchange (Behera and Hussain 2019). Other industrial activities like glass manufacturing and iron smelting were also developed and the remains of which have been noticed from a few more sites in the valley region (Singh and Behera 2001-02). Importantly, iron objects used during both the Iron Age and early historic periods in the middle Mahanadi valley were imported from various regions (Behera and Chattopadhyay 2013). The strategic location, size, and material remains of this site are witnessed of a trading centre which turned into an important settlement that most probably controlling the trade network of the region during the early historic time.

Concluding Remarks

From the aforesaid discussion based on the available materials from Manamunda-Asurgarh and other excavated/explored sites in the middle Mahanadi valley indicate that the region was a focal point of trade/exchange during the early historic period. The development of Manamunda-Asurgarh was significantly influenced by contemporary satellite settlements, which played crucial roles in its growth and prosperity. This trade and distribution system required a well-organized socio-political hierarchy to manage the economic activities effectively. The size and organization of these settlements suggest a need for strong market authorities and a complex regulatory framework to ensure smooth trade operations. This economic system aligns with the centre and periphery theory reveals that larger settlements have substantial influence over their surrounding areas. Manamunda-Asurgarh emerged as one of the most prominent and influential settlement in the region and becoming a major centre of economic and trade activities. However, more studies are required to understand the continuous developmental pattern of urban growth, political change, and economic evolution that characterized the history of the region.

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