

Beyond Yamato's Territorial Power: Northern Kyushu as One of the Centres of Power in Japan during the Yayoi and Kofun Periods¹

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This paper aims to challenge the traditional understanding that the Northern Kyushu region was a peripheral player in the binary opposition to the central region of Kinai in the formative stages of the Japanese state. Based on a variety of archaeological and textual data and taking into consideration the historical circumstances of Japan's relation to the continent, it is argued that the northern part of Kyushu indisputably played a key role in the history of the Japanese state. Given its strategically beneficial geographic position within the Japanese archipelago, it is claimed that in the Yayoi and Kofun periods the region of Northern Kyushu was, in terms of long-term development of social, economic, technological and power status, on par with the region of Kinai which was the base of the Yamato polity – future ruler of all Japan.

1 Introduction

Until the end of the Second World War, the reigning Japanese imperial dynasty derived its indisputable power from the mythological narrative that the members of the imperial family were descendants of the sun goddess Amaterasu 天照大御神. The claim of the “divine right to the throne” is based on written records in the oldest preserved Japanese chronicles: *Kojiki* 古事記 from 712 AD and *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀 from 720 AD.

These chronicles, which were among others written in order to strengthen and legitimize the sovereignty of the imperial family through the oldest Japanese mythology, describe the legendary events since the creation of the Japanese islands by the deities Izanami 伊邪那美 and Izanagi 伊邪那岐, continuing with details of the foundation of the Yamato state in 660 BC by the mythical emperor Jinmu 神武天皇, and ending with the

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reign of historically substantiated emperors.

Both these “domestic” chronicles, *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, contain a significantly disproportionate amount of records on individual parts of the Japanese empire, which is understandable, considering that their main aim was to integrate the reigning dynasty’s claims to power with the old Japanese mythology (Fiala 2013, p. 16). Moreover, since the Japanese emperors resided for centuries in the Kinai region 畿内, it is fully understandable that the chronicles were more focused on the myths, events, places, and dynasties that were directly connected to the ruling establishment. Therefore, the fate of marginal parts of the empire—seen from the imperial dynasty’s point of view—and the local aristocracy were sidelined.

Good examples of these “overshadowed regions” of Japan are Izumo 出雲国 and especially Northern Kyushu. According to Torrance (2016, p. 3), before a series of archaeological discoveries at Kojindani 荒神谷 in 1984 and Kamo Iwakura 加茂岩倉 in 1996, it was believed that the “prominence of Izumo gods in imperial myth was merely a function of literary structure, the creation of an antagonist to enhance the power and prestige of the Yamato polity”. The idea of Izumo’s insignificance compared to the Kinai region was by that time supported even by preeminent Japanese scholars such as Torigoe Kenzaburo 鳥越憲三郎 and Matsumae Takeshi 松前健, who claimed that Izumo was just a “backward provincial place” simply serving as a “narrative place filler used as an antagonist to Yamato in the official imperial histories of Japan” (Torrance 2016, pp. 3–4).

Like Izumo, Kyushu also has an indisputable place in imperial mythology. The subordinate role of the Kyushu island is noticeable in the Hyuga myth, with its symbolic emphasis on wet rice cultivation, which in all probability refers to the Yayoi expansion from Kyushu to Honshu (Cobbing 2006, p. 24). Even though it was the island of Kyushu, precisely the area of Takachiho 高千穂, where Ninigi 瓊瓊杵尊, the grandson of the sun goddess Amaterasu,² is believed to have descended from the high plain of heaven Takamanohara 高天原 upon his grandmother’s wish and reigned over the Japanese empire from there, Ninigi’s grandson, Emperor Jinmu, soon leaves the area of today’s Hyuga Province and starts his journey to the east.

The aim of Jinmu’s journey was to conquer the Yamato territory, which is described in *Nihon Shoki* as a beautiful land overflowing with wealth and abundant natural resources (Aston 2013, p. 90). As the attention of Japanese myths shifts from Kyushu to Honshu, the frequency of references to the Kyushu area simultaneously decreases in both the oldest chronicles of Japan.

Apart from the mention of the provinces of Toyo 豊国 and Tsukushi 筑紫国, through which Emperor Jinmu allegedly travelled on his way to Honshu, there is no other refer-

2 In her work, Gina Barnes cites Matsumae Takeshi, who proclaims that the worship of Amaterasu began as a local cult in the Ise 伊勢 region. Early on, Matsumae states, Amaterasu was a male god Amateru and that Amaterasu was only adopted gradually by the central court under the influence of Korean mythologies of a solar deity (Barnes 2014, p. 21).

ence to Northern Kyushu until the passage describing the successful military expedition of legendary emperor Keiko 景行天皇 to quash the rebellion in Kumaso Province 熊曾国, where the rebels refused to submit to the dominance of Japanese emperors and did not pay taxes (Aston 2013, pp. 160–167). The time difference between Jinmu's journey to Yamato and Keiko's military expedition to Kyushu amounts to approximately 700 years³ during which the Northern Kyushu region was completely ignored by the imperial myth creators. This long term of “silence” in *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* was finally broken during the rule of legendary emperor Chuai 仲哀天皇, who stood out among the Japanese emperors in that one of his main palaces from which he reigned over the country was situated in the province of Tsukushi in Northern Kyushu.

According to *Kojiki*, another rebellion broke out in Kumaso during Chuai's short reign⁴ (192–200 AD). His death was believed to have been caused by offending the gods, who entered the mind of his wife, the future empress-regent Jingu 神功天皇, to delegate him to rule the Korean peninsula. Emperor Chuai unknowingly refused and thus offended the gods (Fiala 2013, p. 205). After Chuai's death, his wife Jingu completed the task of conquering the kingdoms of the Korean peninsula.⁵ As she was returning from this military expedition, the empress gave birth to a son on the boat,⁶ the future emperor Ojin 応神天皇 (Fiala 2013, p. 208). During his reign, Emperor Ojin transferred the capital of the Japanese empire back to the Kinai area, making it the area of choice for building palaces of the successive emperors for more than 300 years.

Following the narrative string of events described in *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, we can notice that from the Emperor Ojin's times onward, there is an increase in the frequency of references to areas of Northern Kyushu in the context of contacts with the Korean peninsula. This can be considered a direct proof of the rising significance of Kyushu in the eyes of the Yamato court. Viewed from their capital in the Nara basin, the northern part of Kyushu, generally known as Tsukushi to the courtiers of the growing Yamato state by the 6th century, was a mysterious region in the outer reaches of the realm. Tsukushi was also considered a dangerous place inhabited by rebellious barbarian people who had only recently been subdued by the civilized Yamato rulers (Cobbing 2006, pp. 46–47).

If we had to rely only on the historical picture of Northern Kyushu as depicted in the imperial chronicles compiled in the 8th century, we could get the impression of a forgotten and relatively backward land left at the mercy of Yamato rulers. As we will discuss further in this article, the idea of the Yamato polity's domination over the northern part of

3 This calculation is based on the timeline of Jinmu's legendary accession.

4 He died before he could completely suppress the rebellion.

5 The conquered kingdom was supposedly Silla 新羅, but as William W. Farris states in his work *Ancient Japan's Korean Connection*, there is no archaeological evidence for that event, so we are certain that Jingu's conquest of the Korean peninsula is not based on truth (Farris 1996, pp. 14–15).

6 Traditionally, the place called Umi 宇美, which is nowadays a part of the Fukuoka prefecture, is considered to be the birthplace of Emperor Ojin. This is due to the fact that giving birth to an emperor in a foreign land would be, according to Shinto 神道, “filthy and disgraceful”.

Kyushu during the Yayoi 弥生時代 and Kofun period 古墳時代 can be misleading. Based on the archaeological discoveries of recent decades, it appears that Northern Kyushu turned into an influential political, technological, and religious entity at the beginning of the Yayoi period and its powerful status remained intact even during the early stages of the Yamato polity's efforts to unify Japan during the Kofun period.

2 Growing Stronger: The Yayoi Communities in Northern Kyushu

At the end of the Jomon period 縄文時代, between 2,400 and 300 BC, the Japanese society went through a radical change as waves of migration came to Japan from across the Tsushima Strait. At the same time, there was also significant migration within Japan itself. The reason for this internal migration was a “depletion” of natural resources in the Kanto region. The local population increased to such a degree that local food sources could no longer satisfy the demand (Koyama 1978, pp. 56–59). This caused the movement of people from the Kanto region to Kinki, Chugoku, Shikoku and Kyushu⁷ and brought about a blending of separate societies, which led not only to the mixing of various customs and traditions, but also the sharing of knowledge and experience in the fields of hunting, agriculture and handicrafts. This was a welcomed side effect of the whole resettlement process (Kidder 1993, p. 72).

It was the thinly populated Northern Kyushu that happened to be the main gateway for the delegates of the new culture called Yayoi who came from Korea and replaced the previous Jomon hunting-fishing-gathering way of life in Northern Kyushu in a very short time. According to Song-Nai Rhee and his colleagues (2007, p. 415), the appearance of paddy rice cultivation, in a fully developed form and within a relatively short time of three to four centuries, brought about “epochal” and “revolutionary” sociocultural changes to the Japanese archipelago during the Yayoi period.

If we are to speak about the arrival of Yayoi culture to Japan, we must understand that it was not a one-time occurrence, but a long-term process during which the migration waves first came to Northern Kyushu and from there spread further east at irregular intervals. According to computer simulations of demographic and skeletal changes in prehistoric Japan, the archipelago's population, supported by agricultural revolution and continuing migration from mainland East Asia, increased from 75,000 during the Final Jomon to the population of approximately 5,400,000 during the Kofun period (Rhee et al. 2007, p. 421).

The origin of individual migration waves, which were the bearers of Yayoi culture, can be traced to simultaneous events that took place in China and on the Korean peninsu-

7 In spite of the resettlement process, the population in the whole of Kyushu was only about 10,000 people during the Final Jomon period (1250–500 BC) (Rhee et al. 2007, p. 415).

la. During this time, China was going through the Warring States period,⁸ and the power battles between Chinese dynasties Zhou⁹ 周, Qin¹⁰ 秦朝, and Han¹¹ 漢 prompted a large number of people fleeing from war, among others, to move in the direction of the Korean peninsula and subsequently to Japan (Kidder 1993, pp. 82–83).

The huge migration waves of refugees moving from China to the Korean peninsula, together with the quick growth in population and settlement size during the Middle Mumun 無文土器時代 and the succeeding periods, resulted in social conflicts and warfare, which in turn forced some of the Mumun population to flee.¹² It was during this period of burgeoning settlements and violent destructions in southern Korea that village farming communities of the Korean type began to appear in Northern Kyushu, establishing paddy field rice cultivation (Rhee et al. 2007, pp. 422–423).

The establishment of agricultural settlements is closely connected with the use of raised-floor granaries. These buildings were typically attached to individual house compounds; however, a grouping arrangement of granaries appeared in western Japan in the latter half¹³ of the Yayoi period, which seems to reflect social organization, namely a shift to communal crop management, since such granary areas are characteristic only to large settlements in the Kinki and Kyushu regions, where the centres of Yayoi culture were formed (Hosoya 2014, p. 73). The oldest archaeological evidences of these striking changes in social organization were found in the Fukuoka plains and Chikugo River, where the tribal states are believed to have eventually formed. Those states had the power to rule the primitive communes, overseeing cultivation and controlling field labour. Kaga-wa Mitsuo 賀川光夫 (1973, p. 11) declares that these Yayoi societies might be called primitive communal “states”.

A functional distinction between large and small settlements was apparently established in the Northern Kyushu region, where small settlements were abandoned and larger sites became more populous in the process of nucleation. These new large settlements with centralized granaries gradually assumed the role of regional centres, overlooking the material flow across a wider region and defining settlement hierarchies across their sphere of power (Hosoya 2014, p. 73).

Many of these new or expanded settlements, such as Northern Kyushu's Yoshinogari 吉野ヶ里 or Itazuke 板付 sites, were now fortified by V-shaped ditches. References to building fortifications and watchtowers around the settlements can be found in the records in the Chinese chronicle *Weizhi* 三国志 from the end of the 3rd century AD, which de-

8 The Warring States period 中国の戦国時代 is dated approximately between years 403 BC and 221 AD.

9 Ruled between years 1045 and 256 BC.

10 Ruled between years 221 and 206 BC.

11 Ruled between years 206 BC and 256 AD.

12 The precise number of Korean immigrants that came to Japan is not known, but some Japanese anthropologists and archaeologists have asserted that around one-third of Kofun period residents could trace their ancestry back to Korean roots (Farris 1996, p. 16).

13 Period between the 1st century BC and 1st century AD.

scribe a period of disturbances between years 147 and 189 AD (Barnes 2015, p. 342). During a relatively short period of time, this new type of regional centres spread to other parts of the Japanese archipelago, for example Kojindani and Mukibanda 妻木晩田 in the Izumo region and Makimuku 纏向 in the Kinai region.

The chronicle *Weizhi* offers an interesting insight into Japanese protohistory through a section entitled “Account of the Eastern Barbarians”, which describes the historical figure of Queen Himiko 卑弥呼, leader of the tribal Yamatai confederation who lived during a transitional period between the Yayoi and Kofun periods (Miller 2014, p. 181). In addition to the information about Queen Himiko and her assumed leadership of the Yamatai confederation, *Weizhi* also contains a rough description of political power distribution in Japan, a country that is divided into 30 local polities called *guo* 國. In the early days there had been about 100 independent *guo*, which were integrated into confederacies during the consolidation processes of recent years (Mason and Caiger 1997, pp. 26–27).

As we focus on the region of Northern Kyushu in this paper, we may look away from the question of whether the Yamatai confederacy subsequently evolved into the Yamato state or not and instead devote our attention to the influential centres that emerged in the discussed region. There is widespread consensus among Japanese archaeologists that a 40ha large Yoshinogari site with over 2,500 jar burials and more than 300 pit-buildings, which has been excavated, must have been the centre of one of the Japanese *guo* identified in *Weizhi* (Barnes 2015, p. 344). Other names of some *guo* have been linked to places in Kyushu, for example, Matsuro 末廬國, Ito 伊都国, Na 奴國, and Sugu 須玖. These were important locations in Northern Kyushu, acting as focal points for trading networks between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese islands. Close connections between these polities and much more developed states across the Tsushima Strait can be found for example in the act of bestowal of the gold seal with a purple cord from the Late Han Emperor Guangwu 光武 in 57 AD to the chief of Na, naming him a “King” (Barnes 2015, pp. 326–329; Barnes 2014, p. 20).

The close connection of the above-mentioned polities with the continent is reflected in the large numbers of archaeological findings of luxury goods in the form of bronze mirrors or rare and valuable materials such as iron and glass. If access to iron signifies political power in the Yayoi times, the archaeological records¹⁴ also show that Northern Kyushu possessed relative advantages over Kinai¹⁵ (Cobbing 2006, p. 40). This assumption can be considered strong enough, especially when we take into consideration that in the Middle and Late Yayoi period bronze weapons were gradually replaced by iron. In addition, the steady decrease in the use of stone tools and shodging of wooden tools with iron

14 For more information on Yoshinogari see Kanaseki Hiroshi and Sahara Makoto, *Yamatai-koku to Yoshinogari*. Tokyo: Gakuseisha, 1997.

15 Cobbing also comes up with the assumption that the Yamato court’s insufficient access to iron in the Yayoi period led to a certain tendency to focus on the Izumo area in *Nihon Shoki* because of its better accessibility to iron (Cobbing 2006, p. 40).

tips was welcomed enhancement in agriculture locally and eventually in the whole of Japan.

3 Independence of a Subdued Realm

A discussion on the Kofun period inevitably involves a debate over the extent of the Yamato polity's hegemony over the Japanese archipelago and the formation of the early Japanese state. Japanese archaeologist and historian Tsude Hiroshi 都出比呂志 proposed the concept of a "round keyhole order". It was a form of regulating the burial practices of local chieftains according to its definition of status. Thus the diverse customs of regional burial practices were swept away and replaced by uniformity according to the Yamato rule (Torrance 2016, p. 19).

In the following part, I would like to challenge the idea of the imposition of Yamato's political power 大和政權 over the western parts of Japan during the Yayoi and Kofun periods, as I concur with Gina Barnes's hypothesis of unintentional overlooking of actual limits of the Yamato court's territorial power while focusing on the spread of the Mounted Tomb Culture 古墳文化. For that purpose, I will follow up on Michael Man's idea of four sources of power for emerging states—ideological, economic, military, and political power—which was used by Barnes in her work "A Hypothesis for Early Kofun Rulership" (Barnes 2014, pp. 4–6).

As I mentioned in the preface, my goal is to look at the region of Northern Kyushu from its individual perspective. This kind of different approach should help eliminate the stigma of the region being seen as a peripheral player in the binary opposition to the traditional centre of political power in the Japanese archipelago, the stronghold of the Yamato polity—the Kinai region.

Starting with the concept of ideological power, we can paradoxically follow the same narrative of Yamato's influence over burial practices that Tsude Hiroshi and Kondo Yoshiro 近藤義郎 used to emphasize Yamato's power. According to Torrance (2016, p. 21), a Japanese archaeologist Oda Fujio 小田富士雄 has observed that on the Ou plain, in the mid-sixth century or perhaps a little earlier, burial mounds *yokoana-shiki sekishitsu* 横穴式石室 with characteristic lateral entrances leading to stone burial chambers emerged. The origins of this new type of *kofun* were almost certainly in Geoguryo 高句麗 and Baekje 百濟, and it spread to the Japan Sea coast from Northern Kyushu.

Although diverse tomb clusters were created in the mid to latter half of the 6th century in the Izumo cultural zone, most of the tombs reflect influences from Kyushu. Along with the influence on burial mound building in other parts of Japan, came the burial rite called "Preventing the Resurrection of the Dead"¹⁶ 再生阻止儀礼. This activity, which required

16 One of the mounted tombs in which this rite was conducted is designated as a nationally important historical site. Its name is Kunidomi-Nakamura 国富中村 *kofun* and it is located in the north of the Izumo plain.

re-entering the *kofun* approximately ten years after the burial and vandalizing various objects connected with the dead—including one’s bones—with the apparent intention of preventing the dead from returning to the living world, has its precedents in Kyushu (Torrance 2016, p. 25).

Another cultural influence, which originated in the Northern Kyushu, divided Japan in the bronze era into two parts, based on the difference in preferred bronze products. In the areas of Northern Kyushu and Western Honshu (extending approximately to the border of today’s Hiroshima and Okayama prefectures), the preferred objects were mainly bronze swords *doken* 銅劍 and long spears *dohoko* 銅矛, whereas in the eastern areas from the mentioned border, it was bronze bells *dotaku* 銅鐸 (Kidder 1993, p. 93). Bronze weapons and bells were both considered very valuable products in Japan and were therefore used solely for ritualistic purposes and as symbols of power, while objects made from metal were mostly meant for daily use, such as weapons used in battles or agricultural tools.

Moving to the second Man’s category of economic power we may be a little repetitive because we need to stress again that it was in the fertile area of Northern Kyushu, where Japan’s earliest paddy rice farming initiated the “agricultural revolution”. In addition to agriculture, international trade also flourished. From the middle of the 1st century AD, some of the emerging local chieftains in the Karatsu and Hakata Bays engaged in direct trading with the Korean peninsula as well as Chinese outposts at Lelang 樂浪郡 and later at Daifang 帶方郡. As mentioned in the previous sections, the most important goods of the Yayoi and Kofun periods were iron ingots, prestigious bronze mirrors from China, weaponry and agricultural tools (Rhee et al. 2007, p. 430).

Beside the material goods, there were also Korean technological skills, ideologies, and cultural systems brought by immigrants, traders, artisans, and other people who came from the peninsula to the archipelago throughout the formative period of Japanese society. We should not overlook this intangible wealth that is also part of the international exchange, which, in this period, was primarily in the hands of traders from Northern Kyushu.

The last two categories of power—political and military—were relatively close to each other during the early stages of Japanese history, so I believe that they should be discussed simultaneously. From the archaeological findings and few written references in Chinese and Korean chronicles, we know that as Northern Kyushu developed economically, politically, and militarily, its elites began entering into political, trading, and ultimately military alliances with their mainland counterparts¹⁷.

17 For instance, there are Chinese records of an envoy from the “king of Wa” visiting the Sui 隋 court in China in 600 AD, although this does not feature at all in *Nihon Shoki*. Also the observations of Sui envoys visiting Japan graphically describe the landscape around Mt. Aso, but make no reference of any onward journey through the Inland Sea to the Yamato court. This supports Furuta Takehiko’s 古田武彦 claims that an independent Kyushu realm 九州王朝 existed until the late 7th century AD (Cobbing 2006, pp. 61–62).

Regional rulers in Kyushu may have pledged their loyalty at some point to the emerging Yamato regime, but they maintained an international outlook and had their own overseas connections¹⁸. In the north, they could also control the sea lanes linking the islands of Japan with the Korean peninsula. Although tenuously incorporated within the Yamato polity, these rulers were involved in a wider network of complex alliances, and could draw on alternative sources of political support. In fact, this situation came into being by the late 5th century AD, when the political authority of the Yamato regime had become more widely established under the rule of Yuryaku 雄略天皇. This is reflected in the discovery of tombs, located as far apart as Kumamoto in Kyushu and the Kanto plain, which contained swords with inscriptions pledging allegiance to Yuryaku's rule (Cobbing 2006, pp. 57–58).

The first major uprising against the Yamato's fragile hegemony broke out in 527 AD in Northern Kyushu. Soon after Yuryaku's death, his successor and a ruler from a different regional background, Emperor Keitai 継体天皇, rose to power, which weakened the allegiance of Kyushu chieftains to the Yamato state (Cobbing 2006, p. 59). Iwai Tsukushi no Kimi 筑紫君磐井 raised an army and challenged the distant Yamato court. He quickly took command of the sea-lanes across the Tsushima Strait and had been intercepting ships bearing gifts from the peninsula to the Yamato court for almost two years before losing his life in a battle and his son surrendering to the power of Yamato. This uprising was possible due to Iwai's formidable power base in Northern Kyushu and his close connection to the local chieftains and the Korean kingdom of Silla (Aston 2013, pp. 365–366).

Iwai himself is thought to have been buried in a great tomb near his court in Iwatoyama¹⁹ 岩戸山. The removal of this rebel lord reinforced Yamato's control over some vital bases on the northern coast of Kyushu, but it did not yet allow the imposition of direct rule in the region. As a result, the fall of Iwai had some important consequences for the Yamato state. It enabled an unprecedented flow of cultural exchange between Baekje and the Yamato court, including the arrival of doctors, herbalists, and astronomers (Cobbing 2006, p. 61). Significantly, it was just a decade or so after Iwai's death that Buddhism was transmitted to Japan. At the same time, it marked the onset of concerted Yamato activity in establishing military bases in key areas on the northern coasts of Tsukushi.

As we can see from the examples above, the early states of Northern Kyushu met all the prerequisites for newly emerging states in the same way that the Yamato state did. Nevertheless, it was the Yamato rulers who, in the end, managed to enforce their sovereign rule over the Japanese islands, and their homeland became the centre of the Japanese state. In contrast, the island of Kyushu was put in a peripheral position.

18 See the previous section, where the bestowal of the gold seal with a purple cord from the Late Han Emperor Guangwu in 57 AD to the chief of Na is discussed.

19 With its 135 metres in length, Iwatoyama is the largest known *kofun* in Northern Kyushu. Even though Iwai might have been considered a traitor, the fact that the *kofun* of such size was built for him can be seen as a proof that this fight was not only between the Yamato state and a mere local chieftain, but rather a clash between two regional power blocks (Batten 2006, p. 16).

4 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to provide a glimpse behind the curtain of the traditional binary point of view on the Northern Kyushu region during the earliest stages of shaping of the Japanese state under the rule of the Yamato polity. Leaving the peripheral player stigma behind, I tried to shed a new light on the complex history of the Japanese archipelago during its prehistoric and protohistoric periods. In my view, the advantageous geopolitical location of Northern Kyushu played an important role in Japanese history. The diplomatic, cultural, and business connections of local chieftains with the much more developed states of the Korean peninsula and China made the region independent of the Yamato emperors of the Yayoi and Kofun periods.

I assume that many of the details that were brought into prominence in this paper might be debated and I hope they will be. I believe that an open discussion on the topic of Northern Kyushu's complex position within the Yamato realm, supported by future archaeological findings, will bring us a step further to the truth, whatever it may be.

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