

## Democratic War-Making in Ancient Athens

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### Resumen

La antigua Atenas desarrolló la democracia a un nivel superior que cualquier otro Estado antes de los tiempos modernos. Fue la principal innovadora cultural de la época clásica. La Atenas clásica es justamente alabada por esos logros políticos y culturales. Menos bien conocido es el extraordinario logro en éxito militar de este Estado. Atenas fue directamente responsable por la transformación de las guerras griegas y por elevar diez veces su escala. Hacia los años 450 había emergido como la superpotencia del Mediterráneo oriental. La primera razón mayor de esta elevación fue la ventaja demográfica del Estado. Con veinte veces más ciudadanos que un Estado griego promedio, Atenas podía poner ejércitos en campaña y flotas que eran mucho más grandes que todos los demás, salvo unos pocos. La segunda razón mayor fue la inmensa renta que Atenas obtuvo de su imperio. Esto permitía emplear miles de ciudadanos no de la élite en campañas y perfeccionar nuevos cuerpos y modos de combate. Hay un argumento sólido para sostener que el gobierno democrático era la tercera razón mayor. El impacto militar de la democracia ateniense fue doble. La competencia de actores de élite ante jueces no de la élite resultó en una cultura pro-guerra. Esta cultura alentó a los atenienses en números siempre crecientes a unirse a las fuerzas armadas y a votar por la guerra. Todo esto fue equilibrado por rigurosos debates acerca de la guerra en la democracia ateniense. El debate redujo los riesgos de un militarismo cultural ateniense. También facilitó las reformas y desarrolló la iniciativa de generales del Estado, hoplitas y marinos. Los científicos políticos han mirado mucho tiempo la democracia ateniense como una fuente de ideas frescas.

Pero actualmente no pueden explicar satisfactoriamente el proceso de ir a la guerra de las modernas democracias. En consecuencia, la Historia Antigua puede proveer a la ciencia política con nuevas líneas de investigación acerca de cómo la moderna democracia impacta en las relaciones internacionales.

**Palabras clave:** Guerra - Democracia - Atenas antigua - Relaciones internacionales

### **Abstract**

Ancient Athens developed democracy to a higher level than any other state before modern times. It was the leading cultural innovator of the classical age. Classical Athens is rightly revered for these political and cultural achievements. Less well known is this state's extraordinary record of military success. Athens was directly responsible for transforming Greek wars and for raising their scale tenfold. By the 450s it had emerged as the eastern Mediterranean's superpower. The first major reason for this emergence was this state's demographic advantage. With twenty times more citizens than an average Greek state Athens could field armies and fleets that were much larger than all but a few others. The second major reason was the immense income that Athens got from its empire. This allowed it to employ thousands of non-elite citizens on campaigns and to perfect new corps and combat modes. There is a strong case that democratic government was the third major reason. The military impact of Athenian democracy was twofold. The competition of elite performers before non-elite adjudicators resulted in a pro-war culture. This culture encouraged Athenians in ever-increasing numbers to join the armed forces and to vote for war. All this was offset by Athenian democracy's rigorous debates about war. This debating reduced the risks of Athenian cultural militarism. It also made military reforms easier and developed the initiative of the state's generals, hoplites and sailors. Political scientists have long viewed Athenian democracy as a source of fresh ideas. Presently they cannot satisfactorily explain the war-making of modern democracies. Consequently ancient history can provide political science with new lines of enquiry into how modern democracy impacts on international relations.

**Key words:** War - Democracy - Ancient Athens - International Relations

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## 1. The Democratic Revolution

Ancient Athens is famous for its direct democracy and for its cultural revolution that helped to lay foundations for the literatures and the arts of the ancient and modern worlds. In 508 BC the Athenian *dēmos* ('people') rose up against a leader aiming for tyranny and expelled him and the foreign troops backing his attempt ([Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 20.1-21.2; Hdt. 5.65.5-74.1). They had had enough of the bloody struggles of their elite and demanded an active role in the decision-making of their state (Pritchard, 2005, pp. 141-5). This popular demand was quickly realised by the reforms of Cleisthenes ([Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 20-1; Hdt. 5.63-73). His reforms made the assembly and a new popular council the final arbiters of public actions and laws. By the 450s the people had consolidated their *dēmokratia* ('democracy') by making decisions on an increasing range of public affairs and by taking over entirely the administration of justice and the oversight of magistrates (Pritchard, 1994, pp. 133-5).

Today we know that several other Greek *poleis* ('city-states') experimented with popular government in the course of the sixth century (Robinson, 1997, pp. 65-122). Therefore the invention of democracy can no longer be attributed to Athens. But Athenian democracy was different in that it avoided the *stasis* ('civil strife') that disrupted so many other Greek democracies (Hansen and Nielsen, 2004, p. 124) With the exception of two short periods of oligarchy it

enjoyed two centuries of unbroken operation. With incessant wars and an empire to administer Athenian democracy also had a lot more public business (Pritchard, 2010, p. 58). This state's stronger fiscal position allowed it to employ thousands of Athenians to conduct this business (Pritchard, 2015b, 7-6) In the 420s, for example, their *misthos* ('pay'), along with clerical assistance, added up to 150 talents ('t') per year (Pritchard, 2015b, pp. 62-90). This subsidisation of the poor's participation in politics was, apparently, innovative, because no evidence for it exists elsewhere until the fourth century (Rhodes, 1981, p. 339). It ensured that a much wider social spectrum could be politically engaged (e.g. Arist. *Pol.* 1293a1-10). The result of these differences was that Athenian democracy was more fully developed than any other pre-modern example.

## 2. The Cultural Revolution

Athens was also the leading cultural centre of the classical Greek world. The disciplines of the visual arts, oratory, drama and literature were developed to a higher level of sophistication in this state than any other. Many of the works produced there become canonical for Graeco-Roman antiquity. Ever since Joachim Winckelmann – the eighteenth-century pioneer of Classical Archaeology – scholars have attributed this cultural revolution to the democracy (Pritchard, 2010, pp. 4-5). The famous plays of ancient Athens are a good example. They may have been written by elite playwrights. But they were performed at contests before thousands of non-elite theatregoers. Officially the judging of these contests was in the hands of 10 judges (Pritchard, 2012, pp. 16-17). But these judges were swayed by the vocal reactions of non-elite theatregoers (e.g. Dem. 18.265; 19.33; 21.226; Pl. *Leg.* 659a). By going to the theatre regularly the *dēmos* gained an excellent grasp of drama (Revermann, 2006). Consequently playwrights had a better chance of winning if they pushed the boundaries of their genres.

## 3. The Military Revolution

Athens is rightly revered for such achievements; by contrast, its contemporaneous military revolution is not widely recognised. More than any other *polis* this state invented or perfected new forms of combat, strategy and military organisation. It was directly responsible for raising the scale of Greek warfare by an order of magnitude. In so doing the Athenian *dēmos* overcame the traditional conception of courage that elsewhere tended to stifle military innovations. This

represented a qualitative change from its military record before Athenian democracy (Pritchard, 2010, pp. 7-15). Sixth-century Athenians went to war infrequently and typically only for the sake of contested border lands. Their campaigns went for days or weeks and were settled by a solitary clash of hoplites. They were initiated not by the basic political institutions of the city but by leaders of aristocratic factions. These leaders raised volunteers by promising them the land that might be won in battle (e.g. Plut. *Vit. Sol.* 9.2-3). The hoplites of such campaigns were predominantly upper class and numbered only in the hundreds (Singor, 2009).

This small-scale war-making was initially transformed by the political reforms that Cleisthenes introduced immediately after 508. These reforms massively increased the readiness of non-elite Athenians to serve as soldiers and sailors and to start wars. In 506 their army defeated those of Chalcis and Boeotia in back-to-back battles (Hdt. 5.74-7), in 499 they sent 20 warships to help the Anatolian Greeks to revolt from the Persian empire (97-103), and, in 490, at Marathon they deployed 9000 hoplites (Nep. *Milt.* 5). These reforms effectively integrated Athens and its *khōra* ('countryside') for the first time (Pritchard, 2005, pp. 137-40). Each free male of Attica was now registered as a citizen of Athens in his village and groups of them from across the *khōra* were linked together in 10 tribes (Rhodes, 2014, pp. 44-5). These new tribes served as the subdivisions of the new popular council and a new publicly controlled army of hoplites. These registers of citizens were used to conscript hoplites (Crowley, 2012, pp. 27-35). This was the Athenian state's first-ever mechanism for mass mobilisation. Because Athens had around 20 times more citizens than the average-sized *polis* (Hansen and Nielsen, 2004, pp. 70-3), this mechanism gave Athens a huge military advantage. Demography would be one of the three major reasons of fifth-century Athens's military revolution.

In the late 480s and the early 470s interrelated events set in train a second phase of Athenian military innovation. To ready for the return of the Persians, the Athenian people decided, in 483, to direct a windfall of public income from local silver mines towards the massive expansion of their new publicly controlled navy ([Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 22.7; Hdt. 6.87-93, 7.144; Thuc. 1.14). The 200 warships that they possessed at the end of this shipbuilding represented the largest fleet of *polis*-owned warships yet seen (Pritchard, 2015a, p. 144). Three years later the Great King launched his expedition to subjugate the Greeks of

the mainland as he had recently done to those of Anatolia and the Dardanelles (Rhodes, 2014, pp. 58-62).

The final destruction of this huge Persian force, in 479, saw the Athenians invited to found the Delian League. Initially this league was a voluntary alliance of states contributing ships and soldiers or annual tribute to Athenian-led expeditions (Thuc. 1.94-8). For its first decades the league campaigned frequently to expel Persians from remaining strong points across the Aegean. At the same time the Athenians began eroding the independence of their allies, who, by the early 440s, were obliged to pay tribute and had long been forcefully prevented from pulling out of what was now the Athenian *arkhē* or Empire.

Imperial revenues allowed Athens to employ huge numbers of non-elite citizens as soldiers and sailors, and to perfect forms of warfare that broke decisively from the hoplite-based conception of courage (Pritchard, 2010, pp. 15-21). Among numerous innovations, they were now able to launch large fleets and to train their crews for months (e.g. [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 1.19-20; Thuc. 1.80, 142.6-7; 2.84-6, 89). Each trained crew could collectively work to make their warship an offensive weapon in its own right and to take part in manoeuvres at speed with other ships. In this new form of mobile sea warfare a standard tactic was retreat (e.g. Thuc. 2.91.1-92.2). Retreat was a source of shame among hoplites (e.g. Aesch. *Sept.* 10-20; Ar. *Vesp.* 1114-21; Eur. *Heracl.* 700-1).

By the 450s war had come to dominate the public affairs of Athens and the private lives of its citizens (Pritchard, 2015a, pp. 145-6). The *dēmos* now saw soldiering as the duty of every citizen (e.g. Aesch. *Sept.* 10-20; Ar. *Vesp.* 1114-21; Eur. *Heracl.* 824-7). In addition they waged war more frequently than ever before, doing so on average in two out of three years (Pritchard, 2010, p. 6). They also directed more public money to war than to all other public business. In the 420s public spending alone on the armed forces was 1500 t. on average per year (Pritchard, 2015b, pp. 92-9). The unprecedented supply of public income from the Athenian Empire was clearly a second major reason for the Athenian military revolution.

#### 4. Challenging Realism and Popular Beliefs

A striking feature of classical Athenian history is the timing of this military revolution (Pritchard, 2010, pp. 27-8). The transformation

of war by the Athenians directly follows the democratic revolution of 508. It coincides with the cultural revolution that was largely brought about by Athenian democracy. The near contemporaneity of these three revolutions opens up a challenging possibility: the Athenian military revolution may be another product of Athenian democracy. It may be the dark side of the Athenian cultural revolution. Consequently democracy may be the third major reason for the military success of fifth-century Athens. Among classical-period writers the perception of democracy's positive impact was more widespread than is usually assumed (e.g. Isoc. 16.27; Dem. 60.25-6). Herodotus for one attributed the unexpected double victories of 506 to Athens's new democracy (5.78-9).

This historical example of a militarily successful democracy challenges the realist school that has dominated international relations since the Second World War. This school's antecedents go back to Thomas Hobbes's translation of Thucydides (de Sainte Croix, 1972, pp. 26-9). Proponents of this school assume that every state, regardless of what political regime it has, rationally calculates foreign policy on the basis of what will maximise security and prosperity. In addition classical Athens confounds two popular beliefs about democracy (Reiter and Stam, 2002, pp. 2-3, 146-7, 150). The first belief is that democracies are bad at prosecuting wars. This assumes that democratic freedom undercuts military discipline, while the fear that democratic leaders have of voters means that the tough necessary policies for security are not always introduced. This example of democratic bellicosity also challenges the cherished view of our postwar era that democracies are peace-seeking. According to this belief, democracies shun violence in foreign affairs, prefer non-violent forms of conflict resolution and only reluctantly fight wars.

These popular beliefs and realism's influence beyond political science explain why democracy's impact on war has hardly ever been studied (Merom, 2003, pp. 3-18). Ancient historians have not been an exception: most of our studies have focussed narrowly on the organisation of one or another corps of the Athenian armed forces or on the general contribution of one or another type of soldier to Greek warfare. Victor Hanson writes (2007, p. 19): 'Often the parameters of present investigations simply reflect old controversies of the nineteenth century, while fruitful new fields of enquiry are left unexamined. For example, there are dozens of new treatments of traditionally narrow topics such as the hoplite push or the battle of Marathon, while we still

have no wider enquiry into the role of ancient political organization – oligarchy, democracy and autocracy – on military efficacy.’

## 5. Democratic Peace and War Theories

In the last two decades *some* international-relations theorists have also broken from the realist school by focusing on differences between the war-making of modern democracies and other regime-types. From their statistical analyses – which have been rigorously debated and repeatedly tested – they have made three important findings. Firstly, Bruce Russett, among others, has put beyond doubt that democracies do not fight each other (e.g. Russett and Oneal 2001). But this does not mean that they do not fight wars; for the second finding is that democratic regimes are no less warlike than autocracies. They have frequently fought colonial wars or attacked non-democratic states in the name, for example, of democracy and human rights (e.g. Ferejohn and Rosenbluth 2008). The third finding of these theorists is the general superiority of democracies at waging wars. Drawing on the US Army’s database of modern wars, Dan Reiter and Allan Stam have demonstrated statistically that democracies have enjoyed greater military success than other regime-types (Reiter and Stam, 2002, pp. 11-57). They have won over 90 percent of the wars that they have started and around 80 percent of the wars that they have fought.

‘Although this research’, Wolfgang Merkel writes (2009, p. 31), ‘uses sophisticated statistical methods, it often relies on a rudimentary understanding of democracy and the interdependent workings of democratic institutions. While these researchers specialize in questions of war and peace, they are hardly democracy scholars. Missing is the intertwining of comparative politics and international relations expertise’. Consequently it is no surprise that every attempt on the part of these theorists to explain these important findings has not withstood scrutiny (Müller and Wolff, 2006; Robinson, 2010, pp. 288-98). A good example is the cultural explanation why democracies do not attack each other, which accounts for the so-called democratic peace in terms of the preferences of voters (e.g. Maoz and Russett 1993). As they abhor violence, it is argued, and respect human rights, including those of potential enemies, they demand that their politicians resolve international disputes peacefully. But this leaves unexplained why democracies fight autocratic regimes; for, if their voters prefer peace, they should shy away from all wars, not just those against other democracies.

## 6. Theorising Ancient Democratic War

In order to develop a theory of Athenian democracy's impact on war I invited classical-studies scholars and political scientists to an edited volume that Cambridge University Press published as *War, Democracy and Culture in Classical Athens*. Together our chapters suggest that this democracy's military impact was twofold. The competition of elite performers in front of non-elite adjudicators created a pro-war culture. This encouraged the Athenians to join the armed forces in ever-increasing numbers and to vote regularly for war. But this was offset by Athenian democracy's rigorous debating of war. This reduced this cultural militarism's risks and encouraged military reforms. It also helped to develop the initiative of the state's generals, hoplites and sailors.

Non-elite Athenians understandably had a positive view of their own military service as hoplites and sailors. As a consequence they showed preference for those public speakers and playwrights who employed epic poetry's depiction of soldiering to describe their own military service (Pritchard, 2010, 36-9). This depiction had been the preserve of the elite before Athenian democracy (Balot, 2014, pp. 179-80, 198-203; Pritchard, 2013, pp. 198-200). Because poor Athenians continued to be ashamed of their poverty (e.g. Ar. *Plut.* 218-21; Lys. 24.16-17), this extension of the traditional conception of *aretē* ('courage') down the social scale made soldiering attractive to them as a source of esteem.

But this recognition of courage among non-elite soldiers proved to be a double-edged sword: while making them feel proud, it put them under social pressure to participate in, and to vote for, wars (Pritchard, 2010, pp. 37-9). For the Greeks *aretē* had to be regularly proven by actions, while those who saw themselves as courageous felt *aiskhunē* ('shame') to be accused of cowardice. Athenians could be so accused not only if they retreated from a battle but also if they failed to endorse a war that appeared to be necessary (e.g. Eur. *Heracl.* 700-1; *Phoen.* 999-1005; *Suppl.* 314-23). The result was that Athenian politicians exploited the fear of shame among assembly-goers to build support for their bellicose proposals, even if it risked pressuring them into wars that they could not possibly win (e.g. Aeschin. 2.137-8; Thuc. 6.13.1).

Certainly the democracy's open debating of foreign policy did not affect the bellicosity of the *dēmos*. But it did normally reduce the risk that they would endorse poorly conceived proposals for war

(Pritchard, 2010, pp. 47-51). Politicians were free to be contentious and their rivalries with each other guaranteed that proposals for war met with opposing arguments (e.g. Thuc. 1.139; 3.36-50). The constant adjudicating of such debates by non-elite Athenians improved the quality of their decision-making on foreign affairs. It made them more innovative and more flexible than the combatants of oligarchies and autocracies. It allowed them to see the merits of innovations that confounded the traditional conception of courage.

*War, Democracy and Culture in Classical Athens* probably puts beyond doubt that the third major reason for fifth-century Athens's military revolution was democracy. But this still leaves an ambiguity: we do not know how important democratic government was relative to the other two major reasons: namely, the huge demographic advantage that fifth-century Athens had and the unprecedented public income that it got from its empire. Here the military record of fourth-century Athens proves to be decisive (Pritchard, 2010, pp. 51-5). After 405 the Athenian citizen-body was only ever half the size that it had reached in the fifth century. Postwar Athens no longer benefitted from imperial income. The traditional argument was that these losses caused a huge decline in Athenian war-making (e.g. Mossé, 1962, pp. 315-22). It was long argued that the fourth-century *dēmos* waged fewer wars and were reluctant to serve in them. Consequently foreign mercenaries had to be used in ever-increasing numbers. They soon became the core of the Athenian armed forces. Without tribute Athens supposedly could not keep enough ships at sea to make itself safe. In making this argument French historians especially believed what Demosthenes had said in the 340s about Athenian wars. As part of his attempt to convince the *dēmos* to fight Macedonia Demosthenes made out that their soldiering failed to match the high standard that their fifth-century forebears had set (e.g. Dem. 1-4, 6, 8-9).

In the 1980s some military historians began to re-assess the wars of fourth-century Athens (e.g. Harding, 1988). This re-assessment completely disproves the traditional argument. It also corroborates the doubts that some always had about the reliability of Demosthenes as witness to military history. In the fourth century the *dēmos* actually initiated wars more often than it had before: they campaigned non-stop from 396 to 386 and then from 378 to 338 with only one-year periods of peace (Pritchard, 2010, p. 53). Leonhardt Burckhardt especially shows that 'mercenaries were only an important supplement' (1995,

p. 128). Certainly such soldiers were used as light-armed specialists and as permanent garrisons. But the backbone of Athens's armed forces remained its citizens (Burckhardt, 1995, pp. 118-20). Athenians still regularly fought pitched battles in which their soldiering secured victory (e.g. Xen. *Hell.* 3.5.18-22; 4.2.16-23, 3.15-20). Large numbers of them continued voluntarily to serve in the navy (e.g. [Dem.] 50.29; Xen. *Hell.* 5.4.61).

Indeed postwar Athens still ruled the waves: it launched the fleets that were required to protect its shipping-lines (e.g. Dem. 18.301-2; [Dem.] 50.4-6; Xen. *Hell.* 5.4.61), and, was again widely recognised as Greece's leading seapower (e.g. Dem. 6.12; 8.45; Diod. Sic. 15.78.4; Xen. *Hell.* 7.1.1). In order to pay for this warmaking Athens introduced a whole series of financial innovations (Pritchard, 2015b, pp. 102-3). In the 370s and the 360s it could therefore spend on average 500 talents per year on its armed forces (Pritchard, 2015b, pp. 102-3). This spending enabled Athens to become a major regional power and to keep its enemies outside Attica until the 320s (Harding, 1995, pp. 119-25). Athens achieved all this in spite of its much smaller population and its lack of imperial income. This renewed military success strongly suggests that the most important major reason for fifth-century Athens's military revolution was democracy.

## 7. The Usefulness of Ancient History for Political Science

Presently political scientists are unable to account for the warmaking of contemporary democracies. Here there is great potential for history to advance our understanding of this issue (Pritchard, 2015a, p. 151). The records of past democracies can expose questionable assumptions about the interaction of democracy and war today. More importantly an explanation of a past democracy's military impact can furnish new ideas for thinking about contemporary ones. In this respect ancient Athens would appear to be of real value.

Yet there are, of course, differences between this state's *dēmokratia* and modern democracies (Robinson, 1997, pp. 13-16, 25-33). The first major difference is that Athenian democracy was direct. Final decisions about all public business were made by a sovereign assembly. This assembly met 40 times per year (Pritchard, 2015b, pp. 62-3). In it 20 percent of Athenians always participated (Pritchard, 2015a, p. 152). In this direct democracy ordinary citizens directly voted on individual policies. In modern democracies this is not possible. Athens

may have been one of the ancient Greek world's largest states. But it was tiny by modern standards. Nation-states are larger by an order of magnitude or more. The result is that modern democracies cannot organise nation-wide assemblies for their citizens. Instead they ask them to elect politicians to represent them in parliaments. In modern elections participation may be much higher than 20 per cent. Modern politicians usually implement the policy platforms on which they were elected. But elections are still only held every two or three years. On the issue of voting frequency, therefore, modern democracies are less democratic than the Athenian one.

Ancient Athens was also innovative in its extension of political rights to all non-elite free males. Many other Greek states only gave political rights to those who met a high property-qualification. But the Athenians never enfranchised their female relatives (Pritchard, 2014, pp. 184, 188). They owned slaves who did not have any political and legal rights. This is the second major difference between their democracy and ours. Modern democracies outlawed slavery in the nineteenth century. By the 1960s all had extended the right to vote to females, indigenous peoples and other subaltern groups. On the issue of voting rights, then, the situation is reversed: contemporary democracies are more democratic than Athenian democracy.

These differences complicate the comparison of ancient and modern democracies. Certainly they make it impossible to project conclusions about classical Athens directly onto the modern world. In spite of this, direct and representative democracies still have a lot in common (Hansen 1989). Each gives political rights to as many people as social norms allow. Both give voters equal opportunities to elect or to be politicians, and promote freedom of speech and the rule of law. In addition both democratic regime-types encourage politicians to develop competing policy-proposals. In both the votes of the people play a vital role in deciding which proposals will be enacted. Consequently there is enough common ground meaningfully to compare ancient and modern democracies. Therefore findings about classical Athens can probably be used to enrich our understanding of modern democracies.

Classicists and ancient historians do not fully recognise this potential, because we generally do not pay attention to hot topics in international relations (Robinson, 2010, 278). This stands in contrast

to the ever-increasing numbers of political scientists who draw on ancient Athens. For example, theorists of comparative politics use ancient Athenian *dēmokratia* as a point of comparison for identifying unique features of modern democracies (e.g. Carson and Martin, 1999), while economists are turning to it to test their theories (e.g. Tridimas 2017). Some of those in international relations who have abandoned the realist school have also recognised the ancient Greek world as ‘the only other well documented state system with a larger number of democratic regimes’ (Russett and Antholis, 1992, p. 415). Consequently they draw on Athenian war-making in support of their own theories about why modern democracies do not fight one another or do better militarily than autocracies (e.g. Russett 2009, pp. 9-36). This use of ancient history by international-relations theorists makes clear that they remain receptive to ongoing research into the foreign affairs of Athenian democracy. In conclusion ancient democratic Athens can help political scientists to build a new empirical theory on modern democracies at war.

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