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# The Church Foundations of Empress Pulcheria in Constantinople According to Theodore Lector's 'Church History' and Other Contemporary Sources

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# The Church Foundations of Empress Pulcheria in Constantinople According to Theodore Lector's *Church History* and Other Contemporary Sources[1]

**Abstract:** This article aims to confirm the account from Theodore Lector with the other extant sources and the answer the question if the four churches in Constantinople (The Blachernae Church, Chalkoprateia, Hodegon, Church of St. Laurence, attributed to the empress Pulcheria in Theodore Lector's work may be credited to her.

**Key words:** Marian Churches, foundations, Pulcheria, Constantinople

In a reference to the *Notitia Dignitatum*, Cyril Mango[2] stated that there were 14 church buildings in the city of Constantinople in the year 425. Before long, however, the number of the churches would increase significantly, but it is not possible to determine the precise count and the specific founders because of the insufficient evidence in the sources. Nonetheless, it is obvious, as the author pointed out, that many of those, including such illustrious temples as the Church of the Virgin Mary at the Blachernae, the Chalkoprateia church, as well as the churches dedicated to St. Theodore, St. Laurence, St. Stephen,

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[2] C. Mango, 1993a, 125.

St. Irene of Parma, St. Euphemia, the Forty Martyrs, and some others, were erected at that time, with the leading role of the empress Pulcheria in many of those foundations.[3]

According to the view presented by K. Holum,[4] the author of the book on the women of the Theodosian dynasty and a great admirer of the empress, whose opinion is supported by a number of scholars,[5] Pulcheria is recognized as the precursor of the Marian worship, as reputedly attested by her many church foundations.[6]

One of the essential pieces of evidence in the research on the religious foundations of Pulcheria, and at the same time a point of departure in a discussion of her actual role as a foundress, is the transmission of Theodore Lector, who states the following in his mention on the death of the empress in 453: "Pulcheria had also erected many houses of worship, the churches at the Blachernae, the Chalkoprateia, and the Hodegon, and also, besides them, [the church dedicated to] the Martyr Laurentius."[7]

This article aims to confront the account from Theodore Lector with the other extant sources and to answer the question if the foundation of the four churches in Constantinople attributed to the empress Pulcheria in Th. Lector's work may be credited to her.

## The Blachernae Church

None of the authors contemporary to Pulcheria referred to her as the foundress of the church there or, likewise, of the other Marian temples mentioned by Theodore Lector.

Theodore Lector's account was confirmed by Theophanes the Confessor[8] in the 9th century: "Blessed Pulcheria erected many churches for Christ and the church at the Blachernae for Our Lady Theotokos at the beginning of the reign of the pious emperor Marcian."

As Cyril Mango noted,[9] the author had drawn for this passage not on Theodore Lector, but on the *Euthymiac History*, used in the second *Homily on the Dormition* by John of Damascus. According to this lost work composed most likely prior to the year 750, or perhaps even in the 6th century,[10] Pulcheria had erected, along with her husband, emperor Marcian, the church at the Blach-

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[3] The daughter of emperor Arcadius, sister of emperor Theodosius II, wife of emperor Marcian, see PLRE II s. v. "Aelia Pulcheria", p. 929–930.

[4] K. Holum, 1982, p. 142–143.

[5] V. Limberis, 1994; K. Chew, 2006, p. 207–227.

[6] For an opposite view, see Av. Cameron, 2004, p. 9–14; R.M. Price, 2004, p. 31–32. Both scholars trace back the origins of the Marian cult to the empress Verina, emperor Leo I's wife (PLRE II, s.v. Verina, p. 1156).

[7] *Epitome fr.* 363: ἔκτισε δὲ καὶ εὐκτήριους οἴκους Πουλχερία πολλούς, τὸν ἐν Βλαχέρναις, τὸν Χαλκοπρατείων, τὸν Ὁδηγῶν· μεθ᾽ ὧν καὶ τὸν Λαυρεντίου τοῦ μάρτυρος.

[8] AM 5943.

[9] C. Mango, 1998, p. 66.

[10] S. Shoemaker, 2008, p. 68.

ernae in the early years of his reign, with the intent to bury the relics of the Mother of God, Mary. During the Council of Chalcedon, she requested Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem to give permission for the translation of the body of Mary reputedly buried at the Church of Gethsemane. The bishop told the imperial couple the story of the Apostles gathered at the Gethsemane in order to bury the Virgin Mary. When one of the Apostles arrived three days later, he saw that the tomb was empty except for the winding sheet. At the request of Pulcheria and Marcian, Juvenal sent it to Constantinople, where it was later deposited in the Church of the Theotokos at the Blachernae.

Another noteworthy account can be found in the *Patria Konstantinupoleos*, a source from the late 10th century. It says that "Marcian and Pulcheria had built a great church at the Blachernae and adorned it with the beautiful multi-coloured marble". The author also derives the name of the place from the fern that had been growing there earlier.[11] Another author, Nikephoros Kallistos (14th century) had no doubt about crediting Pulcheria with the foundation of the church, referring to her participation in the act alongside the emperor Marcian.[12]

Doubts as to Pulcheria's role in the founding of the Blachernae shrine are expressed by Theodore Lector himself. As he notes in the passage on the reign of Leo I: "In Jerusalem, the veil of the Mother of God was found, watched over with great care out of [God's] inspiration by a very pious Jewish virgin. Thereafter, [the veil] was translated to Constantinople and deposited at the Blachernae. Then the emperor erected the church of the Mother of God and prepared a chest of gold and silver, where the veil was placed. And even though it was woven with delicate wool, the weave-work remained intact and retained the same colour, not tattered or damaged to this day, which was expressly pronounced as the miracle of the Virgin."[13]

Complementary to those events is the narrative of two brothers that has survived to modern times as part of the *Life of the Virgin*,[14] whose authorship is attributed to Maxim the Confessor, living at the turn of the 6th century, the earliest version of which was written in the late 5th or early 6th century.[15] Briefly, the story is as follows: Galbius and Candidus, members of a prominent Roman family, went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the reign of Leo I. When they reached Galilee, they stopped at the house of a devout Jewish woman who possessed the miraculous veil of the Virgin Mary. The brothers stole it and took it to Constantinople, where they deposited it inside the chapel dedicated to Sts. Peter and Mark, which they erected at the Blachernae. After a certain period, they handed

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[11] III, 74.

[12] PG 147, 45 D, 69 C.

[13] *Epitome fr.* 397: Τῆς θεοτόκου ἡ ἐσθὴς εὑρεθεῖσα ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις παρά τινι εὐλαβεστάτῃ γυναικὶ Ἑβραΐδι καὶ παρθένῳ ἱερῶς διαφυλαττομένη καὶ ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει διακομισθεῖσα ἐν Βλαχέρναις ἀπετέθη, ἔνθα ὁ βασιλεὺς ναὸν οἰκοδομήσας τῆς θεομήτορος καὶ σορὸν ἐκ χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου κατασκευάσας κατέθετο ταύτην. ἥτις ἐξ ἐρίων εὐφθάρτων ἐξυφασμένη, καὶ ὁ στήμων ὁμοειδὴς καὶ ὁμόχροος, ἀδιάφθορος ἐστι καὶ ἀδιάλυτος μέχρι νῦν τὸ θαῦμα τῆς ἀειπαρθένου σαφῶς κηρύττουσα.

[14] M. van Esbroeck, 1986, p. 89.

[15] S. Shoemaker, 2008, p. 55.

over the relic to the emperor Leo, who built the great church of the Blachernae together with his wife, empress Verina, and placed the splendid relic there.[16]

We have yet another significant proof of the imperial couple's (Leo and Verina) participation in the founding of the Blachernae church, namely a description of the mosaic from the chapel of the reliquary.[17] It says that "(…) the portrait shows our Lady, the Mother of God, enthroned, and there also Leo and Verina holding her own son Leo, the young emperor, kneeling before the Mother of God; also depicted, there is Ariadne, their daughter."[18] The source gives Veronica as the name of the Express, but there can be no doubt that it refers to Verina, emperor Leo I's wife.[19]

The basilica church was built on that site during the emperor Justin I's reign (518–527), as attested in "On Structures" by Procopius of Caesarea, who credits Justinian with the erection of this temple.[20] According to his account, "This church, situated by the sea-coast, is among the most holy and magnificent ones, with an extraordinary length, to which the breadth was appropriately and proportionally adapted. Both his upper and lower storeys rest on nothing but the blocks of Paros stone set up there to serve as columns. In all the parts, the columns are aligned in straight lines, save for the centre, where they recede further aside." This latter part was exactly the section of the church that required suitable reinforcement, which would be eventually carried out in the reign of Justin II (565–578), as evident in the inscription on the two arcades added at the time.[21]

The passage above makes reference to the building of the great church, but there must certainly have existed a smaller structure or a complex of structures on the same site at some earlier time, which the events of Basiliskos' revolt would testify to. In fear for her life, the sister of the usurper, empress Verina, found a refuge at the *diakonikon* of the Blachernae church in 475 and resided there until August 476, when Zeno regained his power at the capital, although she had played a part in ousting him.[22]

The essential question that should be addressed here is which empress, Pulcheria or Verina, was the actual foundress of the Blachernae shrine. Basically, there are three possibilities and each one of these propositions has some advocates among the scholars concerned with this research problem: 1) attribution of the foundation to the empress Pulcheria, 2) crediting the imperial couple, Verina and Leo I, with this foundation,[23] 3) Pulcheria founded the church, but it was enlarged later by Verina and Leo.[24]

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[16] A. Wenger, 1952, 54–58; C. Mango, 1998, p. 72.

[17] Vatic. Palat. Gr. 317.

[18] A. Wenger, 1952, p. 46–59.

[19] K. Twardowska, 2009, p. 72.

[20] *On Structures*, I.3.3–5.

[21] Palatine Anthology 1.2–3.

[22] On this subject, see K. Twardowska, 2009, p. 119–130.

[23] A. Weneger, 1952, p. 54–56; A. Grabar, 1957, p. 22; R.L. Fox, 1997, p. 190; Ch. Angelidi, T. Papamastorakis, 2004, p. 209; B.V. Pentcheva, 2006, p. 12.

[24] S. Shoemaker, 2008, p. 60.

R. Janin and other academics concurring with his view,[25] who generally agree with the accounts in the sources referring to the common foundation of Pulcheria and Marcian, have assumed that the church must have been the final common enterprise of the empress Pulcheria and emperor Marcian, and for this reason it should have been erected shortly before 453 or in that year.

In his studies on the Blachernae church, C. Mango, an advocate of the second hypothesis, points out that the written evidence is ambiguous and of a later date, while the excerpt in Theodore Lector dealing with the foundation of this church by Pulcheria is, as he asserts, a later interpolation, arguing that it could be found only in one 13th-century manuscript (the sentence is absent in the early 11th-century manuscript).[26] This argumentation finds confirmation in Hansen, the editor of the source, who annotates the relevant passage as featured in the 13th- and 14th-century manuscripts.[27]

With regard to the later works, Mango holds the opinion that the attribution of the Blachernae foundation to Pulcheria by those authors would be related to a perceived link between the empress and the controversy over the figure of Nestorius. The scholar considers the events of the years 475–478, i.e., the flight of Verina and the appointment, at Ariadne's request, of Basiliskos, son of Armatus, to the post of lector at the Blachernae church, as a confirmation of special relations between Verina, and her daughter Ariadne, and Blachernae, which is, he believes, just another proof for the foundation of the church by Verina and Leo. At the same time, he rules out any participation of Pulcheria in this event.[28]

The third group seems to take up the position aimed at reconciling the previous two statements and posits the view that the construction was commenced by Pulcheria in the mid-5th century, followed by the building of the reliquary chapel by Leo and Verina.

From a thorough analysis of the source transmissions and the argumentation proposed in favour of the three possible options, it should appear that the followers of the second hypothesis are correct in claiming that the actual founders were Leo I and Verina, who had erected a new shrine instead of depositing the relics in an already existing structure. In my opinion, it seems reasonable to assume that the crucial argument is the presence of the above-cited sentence from Theodore Lector only in the 13th- and 14th-century manuscripts, which means that the said passage is a later interpolation.

## Chalkoprateia

It is just as difficult to establish a clear and definite link between the foundation of this temple and the figure of Pulcheria. According to Justinian's

[25] R. Janin, 1969, p. 161–171; K. Holum, 1982, p. 142–143, n. 120; M. van Esbroeck, 1988, p. 181–90; A.W. Carr, 2001, p. 62–64; J. Wortley, 2005, p. 171; M. Dirschlmayer, 2015, p. 135.

[26] C. Mango, 1993b, p. 4; C. Mango, 1998, p. 61–76; C. Mango, 2000, p. 19; Ch. Angelidi, 1998, p. 80–83.

[27] G.Ch. Hansen, 1995, p. 102.

[28] C. Mango, 1998, p. 71–73.

*Novella*,[29] "the venerable house of the holy and glorious Virgin and Mother of God Mary, which is located in the vicinity of the holy Great Church, was erected by the pious empress Verina."

In his entry for the year 449/450, Theophanes[30] records that Pulcheria had built the church on the site of a copper market (the former location of a Jewish synagogue). The same writer reports for the year 576/577[31] that the emperor Justin II ordered the demolition of the synagogue at the Chalkoprateia and erected a church dedicated to the Theotokos at this site, near the Great Church of Constantinople. The editors of this source, Mango and Scott,[32] reckon that the information relating to Justin II as the founder should probably refer to the renovation works taking place on the already existing structure after the devastation caused by the earthquake.

The author of the *Patria*[33] records the church at the Chalkoprateia as a foundation of the emperor Theodosius II. Following this source, the Church of the Theotokos was erected at the site of the Jewish copper market, where the Jews traded in metal vessels for 132 years (and were eventually evicted). After the church was severely damaged by an earthquake, the emperor Justin II (565–578) decided to restore and re-decorate it.

Nikephoros Kallistos[34] ascribes the foundation of this church to Pulcheria, at the same time crediting her with the initiative of the Tuesday processions from the Blachernae shrine to the Chalkoprateia church, during which the icon of the Mother of God was solemnly carried.

The scholars concerned with the study of this question tend to differ in their opinions on the founder and the foundation dates of this church. Some of them have attempted to reconcile the narratives of the individual sources, suggesting the figure of Pulcheria as the foundress of the Chalkoprateia church but crediting the empress Verina with the completion of the construction work.[35]

Cyril Mango[36], in his consistent treatment of Theodore Lector's text as a later interpolation, rules out the possibility of the foundation of this church building by Pulcheria and attributes this act to the empress Verina. His hypothesis is supported by such authors as B. Pentcheva[37] and J. Bardill,[38] who date the erection of the church to the years 474–478 as based on the analysis of the stamps on the bricks found at the former church location.

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[29] III 1, III 3.

[30] AM 5942.

[31] AM 6069.

[32] 368.

[33] III 32.

[34] XV, 14.

[35] T.F. Matthews, 1971, p. 28; R. Janin, 1969, p. 237; P. Grotowski, 2013, p. 630–631; M. Dirschlmayer, 2016, p. 137.

[36] C. Mango, 2000, p. 19; cf. also D. Krausmüller, 2011, p. 223.

[37] B.V. Pentcheva, 2006, p. 120.

[38] J. Bardik, 2004, p. 31–33.

There are reasons to believe that the argumentation propounded by Mango and those authors who support the view that Verina is responsible for the foundation of the Church of the Theotokos at the Chalkoprateia is difficult to refute.

## Hodegon

In his account of the events after the death of the emperor Theodosius II, Theodore Lector[39] states the following information: "Furthermore, [he writes that] Pulcheria removed Chrysaphios-Tzuma, and Eudokia sent, from Jerusalem, an icon of the Mother of God painted by the Apostle Luke to Pulcheria." However, the author does not link this particular image with Pulcheria's foundation of the Hodegoi church.

There are differing opinions on how to interpret this specific passage. It can be found only in one manuscript dating from the 14th century,[40] which would point to a late interpolation.[41]

The *Patria*[42] gives the following information: "The Hodegon was erected by Michael, who was murdered on Basil's orders. Earlier, a chapel had stood at that place, where many blind men recovered their sight at the spring there and numerous miraculous healings were said to have happened there." Thus, the source ascribes the foundation of a monastery standing by the already existing chapel to Michael III Metystes (842–867). The existence of this chapel is confirmed in the *Letter of the Three Eastern Patriarchs to the Emperor Theophile*,[43] a source written shortly after the year 843. Its author notes that the lector of the Church of Our Lady of the Hodegoi, later Patriarch of Constantinople John VII Grammarian, persuaded the emperor Leo V to reinstitute iconoclasm.

In an early 13th-century source, the author named Nicholas Mesarites attributes the foundation of the Hodegon monastery to Pulcheria in his description of her tomb (cf. "The Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles").[44]

Likewise, Nikephoros Kallistos reports that Pulcheria erected the Hodegon church, where an icon of Mary received from Antioch, allegedly painted by the Apostle Luke, was housed.[45] Further, he claims that the icon would be carried in processions to the church at the Blachernae already in Pulcheria's lifetime. Along the same line, the anonymous author of the 15th-century source *The Stories of the Venerable, Divine, and Most Holy Church of the Theotokos, Known as the Hodegon* records the information, in an elaborate form, referring to the foundation of three Marian churches by Pulcheria.[46]

The name of the church refers to the guide (in the plural form of the word) and was most likely derived from the monks' special practice of leading the

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[39] 353.
[40] G.Ch. Hansen, 1995, p. 100.
[41] K. Holum, 1982, p. 142 n. 120; B.V. Pentcheva, 2006, p. 123.
[42] III 27.
[43] 36.
[44] 915.
[45] XV, 14.
[46] Ch. Angelidi, 1994, p. 139.

blind to the holy spring where they would wash their eyes in the hope of recovering their sight. This appellation in reference to Mary is of a much later date as it appeared only in some 10th-century written sources.[47]

In this case as well, the scholars offer different views regarding the actual founder. According to R. Janin's hypothesis,[48] the church was founded by Pulcheria, whereas Michael III erected the monastery and enlarged the existing chapel.

Following the transmission of the Patria, Pentcheva[49] dates the erection of the church to the late 8th or early 9th century. She argues that the church was reconstructed and turned into a monastery during the reign of Michael III, i.e., sometime in the years 842–867, and rules out Pulcheria's participation in the foundation of the Hodegoi church, considering the two sentences in Theodore Lector to be later interpolations. Ch. Angelidi and T. Papamstorakis[50] have hypothesized that the reconstruction would have taken place in the years 861 and 865, pointing to the possibility that the works could have been limited to the "cleaning up" of the church after the defilement of iconoclasm. As Angelidi asserts,[51] the association between Pulcheria, the Hodegoi church, and the icon emerged at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries, leading the contemporary sources to mention Pulcheria as the foundress of Marian churches.

Due to the lack of relevant details in the sources, it is difficult to determine the construction time for the Hodegoi church. Nonetheless, it seems that connecting the foundation of this building with the figure of Pulcheria on the basis of accounts from the relatively late (13th–15th century) sources is false. Following the interpretation, as proposed by some scholars, to the effect that the above-stated sentence from Theodore Lector is a much later addition to the text, it is fair to assume that the participation of Pulcheria in the foundation of the Hodegoi church can be ruled out as well.

## Church of St. Laurence

Marcellinus Comes,[52] a 6th-century author, records the information on the death of the empress in 453 with the following detail: "Pulcheria Augusta, the wife of the emperor Marcian, furnished the church of the Blessed Laurentius with the magnificent works and passed away in peace."

Our discussion cannot ignore one more citation from this author, who records the following information for the year entry 438/439: "Eudokia, the wife of the emperor Theodosius, returned to the imperial city from Jerusalem,

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[47] Ch. Angelidi, 1994, p. 114; B.V. Pentcheva, 2005, p. 197–205.
[48] R. Janin, 1969, p. 199–207; for arguments in favour of Pulcheria's participation in the foundation, see also P. Grotowski, 2016, p. 145–146.
[49] B.V. Pentcheva, 2006, 123.
[50] Ch. Angelidi, T. Papamstorakis, 2004, 375.
[51] Ch. Angelidi, 1994, 132; Ch. Angelidi, 1998, p. 79–81.
[52] A. 453.

bringing with her the relics of the blessed Stephen, which were deposited at the Church of Saint Laurence."

Theophanes[53] restates the account of Theodore Lector, referring to a number of church buildings, houses for the poor, and guest-houses for travellers founded by the empress Pulcheria, although he mentions only one structure by name, the Church of St. Laurence.

The *Patria* mentions Pulcheria's participation in this enterprise in the following passage: "Marcian and Pulcheria erected the church of Saints Isaac and Laurence. The holy remains of the prophet Isaac were translated from Jerusalem."[54]

Nikephoros Kallistos also corroborates Pulcheria's part in the erection of this church.[55]

The involvement of Pulcheria in the foundation of the Church of St. Laurence is generally not contested in the literature.[56] There are however two distinct positions on this issue. One group of scholars favours the view that Pulcheria was the sole founder, while the other recognize Pulcheria and Marcian as co-founders. Likewise, there is no agreement on the dating of this church building.

Janin,[57] whose conclusions are cited by those in favour of the year 450 as the construction date, located the site of the Church of St. Laurence at the Pulcherianae. On the other hand, the followers of the earlier erection date, i.e., sometime in the 430s, represented by K. Holum, among other scholars, pay less attention to the transmission of Marcellinus Comes, stressing the argument of Pulcheria's more dominant position in the period. M. Dirschlmayer,[58] the author of the book on the church foundations of the empresses, draws a link between Pulcheria's foundation of the Church of St. Laurence and the Nestorian controversy as well as the influence that Bishop Cyril of Alexandria exerted on Pulcheria. No evident confirmation can be found in the sources, however, and such a circumstance would be more plausible in the case of a Marian church, not a church dedicated to St. Laurence, a 3rd-century martyr.

Apparently, the account of Marcellinus Comes allows us to consider the spring of 439 as the *ante quem* date of the foundation, in connection with the empress Athenais Eudokia's return from her pilgrimage to the Holy Land.[59] The Church of St. Laurence had already existed when the relics brought over by the emperor's consort were deposited there.

It is possible that the finishing work was resumed later, in the 450s, leading to the account of the completion of that church by Pulcheria, with the meaning indicative of the activity having taken place shortly before her death. There is

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[53] AM 5945.

[54] III 71.

[55] PG 147, 41 D.

[56] Ch. Angelidi, 1998, p. 78–79; C. Mango, 2004, p. 78.

[57] R. Janin, 1969, 301.

[58] M. Dirschlmayer, 2016, 129.

[59] On this pilgrimage, see K. Holum, 1982, p. 183–184.

no evidence in the sources to date this foundation precisely to the year 450, supporting this particular date with the argument of Pulcheria's return to power after the death of her brother, emperor Theodosius II. It is also difficult to ignore the account in the *Patria*, where the emperor Marcian's participation in the foundation is mentioned. It was obvious from the author's perspective, as the construction work was completed during the reign of this ruler and Pulcheria could not have possibly undertaken any action in this regard without her imperial consort's knowledge.

In recapitulation, as based on the present analysis of the accounts found in the sources and the relevant studies and publications, it seems that the three Marian churches attributed to Pulcheria in Theodore Lector's work cannot be linked with her founding activity. The excerpts from Theodore in question are in fact later interpolations added to the text (dating from the 13th and 14th centuries). The transmissions in the sources are much later, originating from the burgeoning Marian cult and the association of that cult with the figure of the empress Pulcheria, which would have occurred no earlier than the 12th century.

The last of the churches under consideration, the Church of St. Laurence the Martyr, had been founded apparently before the year 439 and there should be no doubt about Pulcheria's role in this foundation.

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