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VILNIAUS KAIP GAILESTINGUMO IR PILIGRIMYSTĖS MIESTO TAPATYBĖ

The Identity of Vilnius: City of Mercy and Pilgrimage

SUMMARY

This article focuses on the identity of Vilnius as a city of pilgrimage and mercy, which is closely related to the cultural and religious heritage of the old town of Vilnius. The main problem in this research is the use and sustainable management of religious heritage in modern Vilnius. The main sources for the article are ethnographic fieldwork materials collected by the author in Vilnius in 2018–2022, the websites of tourism companies, the daily newspapers and the diary of St. Faustina Kowalska. The study reveals that the sustainable adaptation of cultural and religious heritage in urban spaces is an important tool which models the authentic experience of city-dwellers, pilgrims, and city guests, as well as acquainting them with the cultural, religious, and historical heritage of Vilnius and providing them with knowledge about the city's identity. Vilnius's cultural and religious heritage could have a significant role in the creation of a common identity for all European cities. One way of creating a distinctive city identity is to combine cultural and religious heritage with unique narratives about local religious sites and the saints of a particular city. Alternatively, knowledge of religious heritage can be used to develop the authentic and unique atmosphere of religious sites.

SANTRAUKA

Šiame straipsnyje siekiama atskleisti Vilniaus, kaip piligrimystės ir gailestingumo miesto, tapatybę, kuri glaudžiai susijusi su Vilniaus senamiesčio kultūrinio ir religinio paveldu. Pagrindinė tyrimo tema – kaip panaudoti ir tvariai tvarkyti religinį paveldą šių dienų Vilniuje? Tyrimo šaltinis – etnografinio lauko tyrimų medžiaga, autorės surinkta 2018–2022 m. Vilniuje, taip pat turizmo firmų tinklalapiai, Vilniaus dienraščiai, s. Faustinos Kovalskos dienoraštis. Tyrimas atskleidė, kad kultūrinio ir religinio paveldo tvarus pritaikymas miesto erdvėje – svarbi priemonė, padedanti miestelėnams, piligrimams ar miesto svečiams išgyventi autentiškas patirtis, pažinti miesto kultūrinį, religinį, istorinį paveldą bei įgyti naujų žinių apie miesto tapatybę. Vilniaus miesto kultūrinis ir religinis paveldas gali tapti reikšmingu indėliu kuriant bendrą Europos miestų

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Vilnius, kultūrinis ir religinis paveldas, miesto tapatybė, Europos miestas.

KEY WORDS: Vilnius, cultural and religious heritage, urban identity, European cities.

tapatybę. Vienas būdų siekiant sukurti savitą miesto tapatybę – naudoti religinį ir kultūrinį paveldą pasitelkus pasakojimus apie miesto religines vietas ir šio miesto šventuosius. Kitas būdas – religinio paveldo žinias kūrybiškai pritaikyti turizmo sektoriuje siekiant sukurti autentišką ir unikalią religinių vietų atmosferą.

INTRODUCTION

The identity and status of many European cities is determined not by their size, but by the cultural identity of their central areas, especially their respective old towns, with their distinctive features (e.g. Strasbourg, Geneva, Weimar, Kraków, etc.) (Daunora 2003: 13). One of the components of a city's cultural identity is its religious heritage, which, together with cultural values and their manifestations (e.g., religious holidays or the granting of indulgences in a certain city), creates the city's cultural and religious identity. A city's identity is affected by several factors: its landscape, its urban, cultural, and religious heritage, its architectural environment, and its residents, who create urban lifestyles, traditions, and festivals (Račiūnaitė-Paužulienė 2021: 170). One factor in particular – cultural and religious heritage – has a positive impact on the formation and reinforcement of the identity of a place (Ashworth, Larkham 2013: 2).

There is a strong reciprocal link between heritage and places. On the one hand, "places frequently are the heritage product"; on the other hand, heritage is one of the main determinants of the individual character of places (Ashworth 2013: 19). This article aims to investigate the identity of Vilnius, the city of pilgrimage and mercy, as an integral part of the cultural and religious heritage of the old town of Vilnius.

For a long time, urban studies, urban planning, and urban theory have ignored religion as a factor in the organization and life of cities, but currently a growing religious population is motivating the authorities to take this into consideration, encouraging them to acquire knowledge and skills in both urban studies and religion (Day 2021:17). Some scholars use architectural analysis to study religion and cities through the built environment (Edwards 2021), others use visual methods and visual data to study religious identity and spirituality in the city (Williams, Shortell 2021), and yet others delve into issues of historical sacred places in an urban environment (Hildebrandt, Martin 2021). According to Elise Edwards, sacred buildings are interpreted by their viewers and visitors. Besides, the context of the building – the time and place of its existence, the memory of a site and its historical traditions – are of the utmost importance (Edwards 2021: 81–82).

The different experiences of scholars, urban planners and religious practitioners create the possibilities to study an urban identity together with its cultural and religious heritage, not to forget other dimensions of the city. According to Katie Day, a comprehensive study of religion in cities is multidisciplinary because the collaboration of different academic disciplines constitutes a different

approach. She adds that ethnographic research is also helpful, as it includes conversations, interviewing and focus groups, field notes, coding, discourse analysis, etc. Besides, ethnography as the predominant research method builds on historical study, quantitative data, architecture, economics, and other methodologies concerning the city and religious studies (Day 2021: 17–32).

The main *problem* in the present research was the use and sustainable management of religious heritage and its cultural values in modern Vilnius. The study is based on ethnographic research conducted by the author in 2018–2022. The main sources of the article are ethnographic fieldwork materials, urban stories collected by the author, the websites of tourism companies, daily newspapers, and the diary of St. Faustina Kowańska.

Vilnius's cultural heritage is mainly religious in origin. Most of it consists of Christian churches and monasteries, as well as other places of worship, such as the Vilnius Choral Synagogue, the Karaites *kenesa* and other sacred buildings still used for worship. Such living religious heritage might be defined as the tangible and intangible embodiment of the different faiths that have sustained human life through time (Stovel 2005: 9). Living heritage also might be defined as "a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, use, appreciate or have an interest in as a reflection

and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions" (Lindblad 2022: 38).

It is vital to emphasize that living heritage has strong relationships with the local community that "created or inherited the site, the object, the tradition or ritual and that is still using, taking care of and safeguarding it" (Lindblad 2022: 37). As the community changes, its heritage also changes with new, modern cultural expressions that are relevant to contemporary life. Thus, living heritage can be characterized by "continuity in four specific aspects: use, community connection, cultural expressions and care" (Lindblad 2022: 37). Continuity is an important component of living heritage, which might be understood as in constant change, as it can be interrupted and renewed. "Continuity of religious heritage can be interpreted differently by various actors, e.g., conservation professionals and heritage communities, who can contribute with alternative or complementing narratives and thereby enrich a building, site or a tradition" (Lindblad 2022: 38).

According to Henrik Lindblad, the adaptive reuse of religious sites has cultural, environmental, social, and economically sustainable benefits, thus being preserved for later generations. Furthermore, the use of religious sites has "social, pedagogical, commemorative, and symbolic" aspects (Lindblad 2022: 38).

VILNIUS, THE CITY OF MERCY

The contemporary globalized "overheated" world, which is facing rapid social challenges, such as pandemics and

climate change, and political and economic instability, brings to the fore local differences and a place's identity. In or-

der to shape the sociocultural identity of a place, a reinterpretation of the past is required (Ashworth, Larkham 2013). The past might be used in different ways, as there are lots of different producers and consumers of religious heritage.

This paper focuses on Vilnius, the city of mercy and pilgrimage, which has a very old multicultural and multi-religious heritage. A large centre of culture and education in the 16th–17th centuries, Vilnius was particularly distinguished by its inhabitants' religious tolerance and the diversity of confessions. Today Vilnius Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is a place of pilgrimage that is rich in Lithuanian, Polish, Belorussian, Ukrainian, Russian, and Jewish cultural and religious heritage.

Vilnius is closely linked to the phenomenon of the piety of Divine Mercy. Today it is recognized for this not only by foreign tourists, but by Lithuanian residents as well. The message of Vilnius, proclaimed a City of Mercy, spread round the world in 2016, the year of Divine Mercy. However, it became a city of mercy and pilgrimage much earlier.

It was as early as the 16th c. when a picture of *Mater Misericordiae* was installed above the city gate to protect Vilnius against various disasters in war, fires, pandemics, and other calamities. In 1668 the authorities entrusted the Carmelites with the guardianship of this painting of the Madonna, a wooden chapel being built in 1671 for its veneration. After a fire in 1715, a brick chapel was built with the inscription on its pediment *Mater Misericordiae* ("Mother of Mercy"), and below *Sub tuum praesidium confugimus* ("We take refuge under your

protection") (Ališauskas, and Račiūnaitė 2003: 24–25).

Vilnius's citizens have been praying to the picture exposed in the chapel of the Gate of Dawn for guardianship and intercession, and giving thanks for the graces they have received, since the 17th c. Since 1735 the festival honouring the Holy Mother as a guardian has developed into the festival celebrated in the chapel of the Gate of Dawn in the second week of November (Ališauskas, and Račiūnaitė 2003: 55–56, Ragėnaitė 2017: 37). Lithuania's National Museum of Art houses a painting by Vincentas Slendzinskis, resident of Vilnius, in 1889 entitled *Aušros vartai* ("The Gate of Dawn"), which portrays the *Mater Misericordiae* festival in the chapel at the end of the 19th c. (Jonaitis 2019). The picture shows the chapel decorated with illuminations during the evening service and a crowd of people praying in the street. In the 19th c. the festivity was described by Władysław Syrokomla, who observed that for eight days the nearby church and street were filled with people reciting the litany in the evenings, and on the last evening during the final Vespers the crowd was crammed into the whole street, extending almost as far as the Town Hall square. The Gate and the street were extensively illuminated, and the festival ended in solemn chanting of the litany of the Virgin Mary, with the best soloists and the city choir taking part (Ališauskas, and Račiūnaitė 2003: 57). In 1927 the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, proclaimed by the graces, was adorned with crowns Pope Pius XI had given as a present, and it was awarded the title of *Mother of Mercy* (*Mater Misericordiae*).

During the Soviet occupation, the title of the Gate of Dawn's Street was renamed after the Russian writer Maxim Gorky. Nevertheless, thanks to the initiative of the city's residents and the church community, the tradition of the Gate of Dawn's indulgences did not die out during either the war or the post-war period and continues today.

At present the pilgrimage site transcends conventional confessional, ethnic and national boundaries. The picture of *Mater Misericordiae* at the Gate of Dawn is visited by Poles, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, and believers of other nations. Local traditions and multicultural narratives are revived, made visible and linked to European narrative cultures with a multi-layered heritage. Votive offerings attached to the walls of the chapel testify to graces received by praying in front of the miraculous image down the ages. People give witness to the miracles they have experienced by telling their stories, one of which is given here.

It happened during World War II. In 2018 the following story was told by a nun of the Congregation of Sisters of Jesus residing in Vilnius:

Sister Pia from the Congregation of Jesus the Eucharist left the chapel of the Gate of Dawn and stopped nearby, where she heard the story of a Russian military officer. He told her: "I've been here." A former pilot, he was sent on a mission and was approaching the city

from the side of the railway station. He was told to drop three bombs [on Vilnius]: one was intended to blow up the railway bridge, the second was to be dropped on the Gate of Dawn, and the third on the Cathedral.

As he was flying, he saw the railway bridge approaching, and all of a sudden there is Mary, standing in front of him. He didn't know who she was: just a beautiful woman, with her hands folded as if praying in front of the plane. He did not drop the bomb but went round a second time, ready to drop it again – and there was Mary again, in front of his eyes, in front of the plane. He went round for the third time but didn't drop the bomb either. And this is what he said: "I've come to see who didn't let me destroy this place. When I ascended the Gate of Dawn, I saw it was Mary: she didn't let me drop bombs or blow up the railway bridge, the Gate of Dawn or the Cathedral".

So to say, she [Sister Pia] heard it on her own. My telling it to you is second-hand. The story is not made up, as it was certainly Mary who didn't allow [the bombing]. The blowing up was planned during World War II.

(An interview with a sister from the Congregation of Sisters of Jesus)

This and many other stories have become a part of intangible religious heritage which extends the usual confessional, ethnic and national boundaries, as it embraces multicultural experiences. Such narratives are identified as part of a religious heritage, newly reconsidered and used as a reflection and expression of one's values and beliefs.

HOW IS RELIGIOUS HERITAGE USED FOR TOURISM PURPOSES IN VILNIUS?

In Soviet times a lot of churches were closed, and pilgrimage was officially forbidden in Lithuania. In recent years the

religious heritage of Vilnius city has been presented in traditional pilgrimage sites, and the new routes for Lithuanian and

foreign pilgrims have been created in Vilnius's tourism sector. The main issue of this section is to understand to what extent religious heritage is used for tourism purposes in Vilnius and to examine modern trends and the strategy of Vilnius's tourism and pilgrimage centres.

First, let us focus on some institutions located in Vilnius, like the Vilnius Pilgrim Centre (VPC), the Official Development Agency of the City of Vilnius (Go Vilnius) and the Tourist Information Centres (VTIC). Recently the Vilnius Pilgrim Centre has renewed or created from scratch eleven pilgrimage routes, namely "The Northern Route of Saint James through Vilnius", "The Road of Mercy", "The Pilgrimage Route of Saint John Paul II", "Vilnius's Calvary Road of the Cross", "The Pilgrim Route of Saints of Vilnius", "Famous Places of Marian Devotion", "Jesuits in Vilnius", "Franciscans in Vilnius", "Dominicans in Vilnius", the Cathedral Belltower and Treasury" and "The Route of Father Alfonsas Lipniūnas." On their visits, most of them take in Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic and Orthodox churches, chapels, cloisters, and other sacred sites in Vilnius. Itineraries created by the VPC are focused on Christians' religious pilgrimage practices and its cultural and religious heritage, as presented in the light of modern living. The information concerning the itineraries of pilgrimages on the website of the VPC is presented in three languages (Lithuanian, English and Polish) and is also uploaded on to social networks, such as Facebook and YouTube, giving both locals and foreigners access to it.

The Official Development Agency of the City of Vilnius (Go Vilnius) helps

visitors discover most popular sites in Vilnius. Go Vilnius invites the guests of the city and pilgrims to visit the two tourist information centres or to contact them on social media, browsing the guides and tips to plan their trips to Vilnius in advance. Go Vilnius also invites visitors to join in the regular Vilnius workshops, bring newcomers face to face with them and allow them to join other foreigners on a tour of the city.

Vilnius's Tourist Information Centre (VTIC) has prepared a pilgrimage route, "Experience an itinerary of your own pilgrimage in Vilnius", which is focused on Catholic pilgrimage sites. Another route, called "Discover Jewish Heritage in Vilnius", includes Jewish pilgrim sites. The VTIC offers visits to different houses of prayer – Catholic, Jewish, and Orthodox, the churches of Evangelical Lutherans and Evangelical Reformists and Kairite *kenesa*. The pilgrimage itinerary includes the main objects of Vilnius's sacred sites (churches, houses of prayer, the Hill of Three Crosses), galleries, monuments, panoramas, parks, and the environs of Vilnius. The information concerning the pilgrimage routes is presented on the website of the VTIC and on social networks like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube in five foreign languages, which accounts for the greater number of pilgrims from foreign countries.

The activity strategies of then VPC and VTIC, when compared, are obviously different. The websites of Go Vilnius and the VTIC present a modern image of Vilnius, while the VPC is based on the religious heritage of Vilnius: thus, the first page advertises "The Road of Mercy in Vilnius". The events offered by

the VPC mainly focus on the Catholic tradition, with religious feasts, religious services, retreats evenings of glorification and religious festivals like Pentecost, St. Kazimir's and the week of Divine Mercy. The VTIC puts on various contemporary events related to the city's cultural heritage and sports activities, as well as theatre, cinema, music, clubs and bars, and all kinds of other entertainment, such as air balloon flights, SPA (lat. *sanitas per aqua*, e.g., a commercial establishment offering health and beauty treatment), bicycle rent and even the services of medical tourism. The types of accommodation they offer are also different. The VTIC advertises modern hotels, motels, and campsites; the services offered by the VPC include Catholic guest houses, pilgrimage accommodation and cloisters.

The VPC, which organizes various pilgrimages, proposes a route called "The Road of Mercy". The main objective of the Centre is to help pilgrims discover Vilnius as the City of Mercy and experience their pilgrimage as a journey of mercy in a phenomenological manner,

as well as with reference to religious practices and experiences, striving to know God in a unique way. The website of the centre writes:

A pilgrimage is a journey during which we learn to trust God and people. The end of a pilgrimage is a place renowned for God's graces, but it is the journey itself which makes for its meaning. The communities of people encountered on the way, their everyday lives, religious practices and sharing of experiences, the nature of a concrete place, architecture, art, and traditions form a broader view of life and one's faith, but what is most important, all of it helps one to know God and oneself in a unique way (VPC).

Pilgrimage presentations by travel agencies, based on marketing principles, increasingly focus on the dimension of personal experience, where the results of interpretation are expressed. Thus, the phenomenological approach emphasizes the importance of interpretation and the individual's semantic experience in understanding the phenomena of religious practices. Renewed religious practices during pilgrimages therefore add to the significance of renowned pilgrimage sites.

THE ROAD OF MERCY

The pilgrimage route of *The Road of Mercy* in Vilnius extends through places associated with the lives and activities of St. Faustina and the Blessed Father Michał Sopoćko. The main sites of this pilgrimage route are the Gate of Dawn Chapel renowned for the graces of Our Lady of Mercy and the sanctuary of Divine Mercy (see Figs. 1–3).

Nowadays, on the eve of the Sunday of Mercy (the first Sunday after Easter),

people walk in a procession from the chapel of *Mater Misericordiae*, the Gate of Dawn, as far as the sanctuary of Divine Mercy. The ecumenical Walk of Light on the streets of Vilnius unites Christians of different denominations (VPC). It is worth remembering what the origins of the cult of Divine Mercy were.

It started in Vilnius, and the practices of piety were spread by Sister Faustina Helena Kowalska (1905–1938), a nun



Fig. 1. *The Gate of Dawn*. Photo by R. Račiūnaitė-Paužulienė. Vilnius. 2022

of the congregation of the Sisters of Merciful Jesus and one of the most prominent Church mystics. She transmitted the message of Divine Mercy, inviting people from all over the world to turn to merciful Jesus.

Sister Faustina was born into a poor family of ten children in the village of Głagović, not far from Łódź in Poland (Burkus 1993: 7). Although she only lived in Vilnius for a brief period, from 1933 to 1936 she had about eighty visions of Jesus there, during which she was instructed about the forms of piety to Divine Mercy. There she met her spiritual director and confessor, the Blessed Father Michał Sopoćko. He encouraged Sister Faustina to write a diary, and it is thanks to him that the image of Divine Mercy was painted, that the first homilies about Divine Mercy were delivered

and that devotion to Divine Mercy was initiated. The diary kept by Sister Faustina, which has survived and has been published, “testifies to her journey of holiness and collaboration with Divine Mercy” (Grušas 2014: 3). Father Sopoćko made a significant contribution so that the message of Divine Mercy conveyed through Sister Faustina obtained a concrete form of piety and was spread worldwide. He arranged for the artist Eugeniusz Kazimirowski, a resident of Vilnius, to paint the image of Merciful Jesus, which Kazimirowski did by following Sister Faustina’s instructions in 1934. Today the painting is venerated in the shrine of Divine Mercy. It is the only picture of Merciful Jesus and was painted in accordance with Sister Faustina’s visions while she was still alive and could supervise the process of its paint-



Fig. 2. *The Shrine of Divine Mercy*. Photo by R. Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė. Vilnius. 2018

ing. All other widespread images are either copies of the theme of the picture or variations on it.

In 1935, the picture was displayed at the Gate of Dawn for the first time during the three-day celebration of Easter, serving as an illustration of the sermon on Divine Mercy delivered by Father Sopoćko. At that time Faustina saw a vision of the image above Vilnius which tore the netting covering the city and showed the sign of cross radiating its light to the hearts of the praying people. In 1935, while she was still living in Vilnius, Sister Faustina was taught to pray the Divine Mercy chaplet, and in 1946 the Sunday of Mercy was celebrated at the church of St. John for the first time. The forms of piety to Divine Mercy described above are still alive not only in Lithuania, but worldwide.

The cult of Divine Mercy started spreading in the difficult war period and post-war years, but later faded away. It

was an initiative of Pope John Paul II that provided the incentive for the spreading of the cult of Divine Mercy all around the world (Červokienė 2015).

John Paul II canonized Sister Faustina on 30 April 2000 and declared that the festival of Divine Mercy would be celebrated on the first Sunday after Easter. He pointed out the basic guidelines of the third millennium of the Church: open oneself to receive and testify to God's Mercy. On the day of canonization, he announced Sister Faustina as a patron saint of Vilnius and three other cities, Warsaw, Płock and Kraków. He said: "By naming these cities, whose patron is the new saint, I entrust their residents to be especially mindful of spreading the message of Divine Mercy" (*Regina Caeli* 2000).

In his book *Memory and Identity*, John Paul II notes that the unveiling of the mystery of Divine Mercy is to be related to the period of the two world wars, when Nazi and communist ideologies were



Fig. 3. *The Route of Divine Mercy*. Photo by R. Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė. Vilnius. 2018

spreading, and God's Mercy was the only answer to them. A few years later, after Jesus had conveyed the message of Divine Mercy through Sister Faustina, Vilnius suffered greatly from these ideologies. Its Jewish community was condemned to perish, thousands of priests were killed, hundreds of thousands of Lithuanian citizens were martyred, and the city of Vilnius was destroyed. These war crimes, lies, hates and divisions have stuck in the minds of a number of generations, their consequences being faced today, with many unanswered questions hindering individual and community reconciliation (Bernardinai 2016).

The image and its history in Vilnius remind us that we cannot manage without God's Mercy, and that they help us find ways of achieving it. St. Faustina's diary contains the following words said to her by Jesus: *By means of the image I shall endow souls with lots of graces. It should remind them of the request of my*

Mercy, as even the strongest faith without deeds will not help (Kowańska 2014: 742). The request is to be merciful to one's neighbour by first deeds, second words and third prayer. The three steps embrace mercy in its fullness, being undeniable proof of one's love for Jesus (Kowańska 2014: 742).

Contemporary secular society, whose members are used to relying on themselves, do not consider the message of Divine Mercy to be rational. However, the inscription beneath Jesus' image, "Jesus, I trust in you", reminds us that confidence in Him is the only path towards His Mercy.

The *Road of Mercy* pilgrimage route follows the path of Christianity in Lithuania and encompasses the sites bearing testimony to the martyrs of faith, people and communities that are known for their works of charity and deeds of mercy. Visiting such sites and meditating there is a way to recognize our own pain,

to cure the wounds of history and personal memories, as well as those of one's nation, family, and kin, and to become reconciled with one another (Bernardinai 2016). Thus, local traditions and urban narratives, together with religious heri-

tage, are revived and linked to the common Christian narratives of European nations. They become the source of connecting with the history of neighbouring nations, reinforcing Christian identity, and claiming sacred urban spaces.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that the sustainable adaptation of cultural and religious heritage in urban spaces is an important tool that helps city-dwellers, pilgrims and guests to the city to have an authentic experience, get to know Vilnius's cultural, religious and historical heritage, and gain new knowledge about the city's identity.

Today cultural heritage might be used not only to reinforce the identities of places but also to foster tourism (Sandri 2013). It is likely that together they will become instruments of economic development and economic resources that can act as the signs of identity. Thus, renewed religious practices during pilgrimages substantially add to the significance of renowned pilgrimage sites. Cultural and religious heritage, traditions and local religious narratives are revived and linked to the shared Christian narratives of European nations.

The cultural and religious heritage of Vilnius as a city could have a significant role in the creation of a common identity for all European cities. The Christian heritage can be found in Vilnius as in numerous other cities throughout Europe because local identities in Europe have been influenced by Christian culture for many centuries. Christian heritage and culture help to integrate a European identity, as well as develop a new city narrative. One way to create a distinctive city identity is to use its cultural and religious heritage together with unique narratives about its local religious sites and saints. Another way is to use the knowledge of religious heritage creatively to develop the authentic and unique atmosphere of religious sites. This helps to foster religious tourism in the global cultural economy.

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