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Luxuriant and Well-Fatted: The Meaning of מעֲדָנָה in 1 Sam 15:32

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Abstract

The meaning of מעֲדָנָה in 1 Sam 15:32 is disputed, variously being translated “trembling,” “in chains,” or “cheerfully.” Based on linguistic and contextual evidence, I argue that it is best translated “luxuriantly” or “well-fatted,” and depicts Agag like a fattened animal going to slaughter.

Keywords

1 Samuel – Amalekites – linguistic analysis – animals – human sacrifice

The infamous slaughter of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15) ends with the Amalekite king, Agag, approaching Samuel for execution (15:32–33). At the climactic moment of Agag’s approach, though, the Hebrew is obscure. It reads וַיֵּלֶךְ אֲגָג מְעַדְנָה אֵלָיו “and Agag went to him *ma’ādannōt*” (15:32b). The syntax and context suggest that מְעַדְנָה is an adverb describing Agag’s movements, but its meaning is unclear. Modern and ancient translations offer various alternatives (e.g., NRSV “haltingly”; JPS “in chains”; ESV “cheerfully”).¹ In this article, I will suggest another possibility: that מְעַדְנָה should be translated “luxuriantly,” with connotations of being “well-fatted.” I will first explain the linguistic basis for this meaning, then demonstrate its fit within the literary context: Agag is

1 LXX, Vulg, and Targ are discussed below; the word is not represented in Pesh. See further Bratcher, “Agag”; Fraine, “Agag”; Talmon, “Conflated.”

correlated with the best fattened animals and brought to Samuel for sacrifice. Even if this denotation is not accepted, such connotations may reverberate around the word.

1 Linguistic Evidence

Three alternative derivations have been proposed for מַעֲדָנֹת: (1) מַעַד, (2) עַנַד, and (3) עֲדָן.²

1.1 מַעַד

Some commentators take מַעֲדָנֹת as derived from מַעַד “to totter, shake.”³ They suggest revocalising as מַעֲדָנֹת—a defectively spelt adverb on the morphological analogy of אָחֲרָנִית “backwards” (from אָחַר “to go behind”) and קִדְרָנִית “mourningly” (from קָדַר “to be dark”).⁴ The sense would be “shakingly,” suggesting Agag’s fear. This is supported by the LXX translation τρεμέων, and some Vulgate manuscripts, which offer *tremens*. However, this emendation can only remain speculative. It requires a particular interpretation of Agag’s psychological state, which may fit with LXX (where he seems fearful) but not MT (where he seems confident).⁵ Furthermore, the form מַעֲדָנֹת is not known elsewhere. Only two other words occur with this morphology, one of which is a *hapax legomenon* (קִדְרָנִית; only in Mal 3:14). It is far from certain that this word existed,⁶ and we can make good sense of the text without emendation.

1.2 עַנַד

If the vowels are not emended, מַעֲדָנֹת seems to be a feminine plural noun (sg: מַעֲדָן), formed on the *maqṭāl* nominal pattern,⁷ functioning as an adverbial accusative.⁸ Interpreters have hypothesised two possible derivations. The first is the root עַנַד, which occurs twice as a *qal* verb (Job 31:36; Prov 6:21), probably meaning “to bind.” The expected nominal form would be מַעֲנָדוֹת; here we

2 BDB and HALOT each offer all three suggestions.

3 Seminally, Lagarde, *Prophetae*. So Klein, *Samuel*, “trembling and hesitant”; Driver, *Samuel*, “totteringly”; Firth, *Samuel*, “trembling”; Bratcher, “Agag,” “trembling”; SCB, GNT “trembling”; NRSV “haltingly”; NEB “with faltering step.”

4 GKC §100g explains these words by the double addition of two adverbial endings ך and ית. Cf. also JM §102b.

5 The difference depends on the interpretation of Agag’s speech in 15:32c. See further below.

6 So Fraine, “Agag,” 541.

7 GKC §85g; JM §88Le.

8 GKC §188q; JM §102d.

require a metathesis of \daleth and \luncheon . This possibility may be supported by the single other occurrence of מַעְדָּנֹת in feminine plural (the masculine plural will be discussed below): Job 38:31 reads $\text{הַתְּקַשֵּׁר מַעְדָּנֹת בַּיָּמָה}$, usually understood as “can you bind the chains of Pleiades?” Thus, in 1 Sam 15:32, Agag goes to Samuel “in chains” (so Kimhi בְּקֶשְׁרִים “in bonds”).⁹

However, there are several problems with this interpretation: It is derived from a rare root,¹⁰ with metathesised consonants. If the metathesis is the result of an oral or written error,¹¹ it would be surprising to find it independently occurring twice, in the only two occurrences of the term. It could be instead a historic metathesis which solidified into the lexeme’s conventional form, though this is relatively rare in biblical Hebrew nouns.¹² Importantly, unlike the other proposed translations of 1 Sam 15:32, “in chains” does not seem to have been recognised by ancient interpreters. It does not have any versional support, suggesting that ancient translators were unaware of it or rejected it. Additionally, מַעְדָּנֹת occurs in a Masoretic list of homonymous doublets (i.e., words with two occurrences with different meanings),¹³ indicating that the Masoretes did not consider it to have the same meaning in Samuel and Job.¹⁴

Furthermore, the interpretation of Job 38:31 is not wholly secure. According to Driver, the translation “chains” “can hardly be accepted.”¹⁵ It is not supported by the Peshitta or Vulgate,¹⁶ and while it is suggested by LXX ($\delta\epsilon\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$) and some Targum manuscripts (שׁוֹשִׁילָא), these interpretations could be, as Driver notes, “guesses of translators at their wits’ ends.”¹⁷ There is no evidence of an ancient mythology of Pleiades in chains.¹⁸ It is possible that the word in Job is derived from another root, known from Ugaritic ʿdn “host” and Arabic ʿadanatu(n)

9 McCarter, *Samuel*, “in fetters”; Auld, *Samuel*, “in bonds”; Fraine, “Agag,” “chargé de chaînes”; NIV, CEV, ISV, JPS “in chains.”

10 Noted by Budde, *Samuel*, 122.

11 Habel (*Job*, 522–523) and Hartley (*Job*, 500) suggest an error in Job 38:31 and propose reading as מַעְנָדָת . Regarding Samuel, Tsumura (Scribal, 408) suggests that מַעְדָּנֹת is a “phonetic spelling” for מַעְנָדָת .

12 Shvitiel (“Metathesis”) notes that it occurs only in “a few nouns.” Neither he nor Kalimi (*Metathesis*, 17–22) lists this term as an example.

13 Marcus, *Masora*, 245–246. The list occurs in the Masoretic treatise $\text{סֵפֶר אֲכָלָה וְאֲכָלָה}$, published by Frensdorff (*Ochlah*, here §59).

14 Driver and Gray, *Job*, 306; Gordis, *Job*, 450.

15 Driver, “Astronomical,” 3.

16 Pesh has “face” (ʿapy); Vulg has “shining stars” (*micantes stellas*).

17 Driver, “Astronomical,” 3.

18 Clines, *Job*, 1063; Driver, “Astronomical,” 3.

“company, party of men,” thus referring to the company of stars which make up Pleiades.¹⁹ This would make little sense in 1 Sam 15:32.

1.3 עֵדָן

A final possibility is to derive מְעַדְנֹת from עֵדָן. This interpretation does not require transposition of consonants or repointing of vowels, and thus is the textually simplest option. Excluding this verse, forms from this root occur nine times in the Hebrew Bible,²⁰ including the alternative (i.e., masculine) plural of מְעַדְנָיִם (מְעַדְנִים; Gen 49:20; Lam 4:5; Prov 29:17).²¹ We also find related people and place names (most famously, the Garden of Eden), and cognate forms in other Semitic languages.²² While there is not enough semantic data to be certain, common to these uses seem to be ideas around luxury, abundance, and indulgence.²³ מְעַדְנִים refers to luxury foods (Gen 49:20; Lam 4:5); according to TDOT it “clearly means ‘selected delicacies.’”²⁴ I suggest that this core semantic content is important for interpreting Agag’s movements. This has, however, been missed by most commentators, even when they recognise this root here, for example translating as “cheerfully” or “delicately.”

(a) Several translators present Agag going “cheerfully” to Samuel.²⁵ Support for meaning this comes from some Semitic cognates²⁶ and from Prov 29:17. In Prov 29:17, the well-disciplined son gives מְעַדְנִים to his father’s being, usually translated as “delight” or similar. However, this is a semantic extension away from the basic meaning of מְעַדָן as “fine food” or “selected delicacies,” and (as TDOT notes), we “weaken the vitality of the metaphor by rendering it abstractly.”²⁷ Furthermore, after the annihilation of his people, it is unlikely that Agag would be delighted, even if (as possibly suggested by his subsequent

19 Driver, “Astronomical,” 3; Guillaume, *Job*, 131. Interpreters have also sometimes taken it from the root עֵדָן, to mean “sweet influences” (KJV) or similar, referring to the influence of Pleiades over the onset of spring (Nachmanides, Gersonides).

20 The occurrences are: the hithpael verb עֵדָן (Neh 9:15); the adjective עֵדָן (Isa 47:8), and the nouns מְעַדְנִים (sg not attested; 2 Sam 1:24; Jer 51:34; Ps 36:9), עֵדָנָה (Gen 18:12), and מְעַדְנִים (sg not attested; Gen 49:20; Lam 4:5; Prov 29:17).

21 Cf. the double gender possibility of the morphologically equivalent noun מְטָעָם—masculine (Gen 27: 4, 7, 9, 14, 17, 31) and feminine (Prov 23: 3, 6).

22 Kedar-Kopfstein, “עֵדָן,” 482.

23 Cf. BDB עֵדָן “luxury, dainty, delight”; עֵדָן “luxuriate”; עֵדָנָה “delight”; עֵדָן “voluptuous”; מְעַדְנָיִם “dainty (food), delight.”

24 Kedar-Kopfstein, “עֵדָן,” 485.

25 Bodner, *Samuel*, “confidently”; ESV, NASB, ASV “cheerfully”; NTL “full of hope”; GHCL “with joy.”

26 Kedar-Kopfstein, “עֵדָן,” 482: “Middle Heb. *‘iddûnîm* ‘delights,’ *‘dn* piel and Syr. pael, ‘delight, make pleasant.’”

27 Kedar-Kopfstein, “עֵדָן,” 485.

words in MT) he anticipates his imminent release (see further below). An alternative is to take מְעִדְנָה as “delicately,” centralising the daintiness of “selected delicacies.”²⁸ Such connotations may be present in some versions: Symmachus uses ἄβρός, Aquila τρυφερός, and the Targum מפנק. However, delicacy is not suggested by the literary context here, nor does it seem central to the meaning of עָדָן.

(b) Rather, we should take seriously this root’s connotations of luxury, fatness, and indulgence. מְעִדְנִים are fine foods. In Lam 4:5 they are implicitly eaten by the purple-clad elites, and in Gen 49:20 the “king’s delicacies” (מְעִדְנֵי-מֶלֶךְ) are connected with his fatty food (שִׁמְנָה לְחֶמֶן). So too עֲדֻנִים “luxuries” can refer to consumables, swallowed by king Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 51:34) and paralleling “fatness” (דָּשָׁן; Ps 36:9[8]). The verbal form עָדָן (*hithpael*) is the climactic culmination in a list of feasting verbs: “they ate and were filled and became fat and luxuriated” (וַיֵּאָכְלוּ וַיִּשְׂבְּעוּ וַיִּשְׂמִינוּ וַיִּתְעַדְּנוּ) (Neh 9:25). The Garden of Eden may be known for its abundant and luscious foods (Gen 2:8–9).²⁹ The versions may also suggest this understanding. Aquila’s τρυφερός could be translated as “luxurious, voluptuous” (LJS). The root in the Targum—פנק—is elsewhere connected with fatty foods (Tg. Isa. 55:2; Jer 31:14; Lam 4:5). Most explicitly, Vulgate has *pinguissimus* “very fat.”³⁰ I suggest that the sense of fatness is relevant here, and helps construct the elite Agag as a surrogate for a prized animal, ready for slaughter.

I therefore propose translating מְעִדְנָה as something like “luxuriantly” or “well-fatted.” Even if this translation is not accepted, there is conceivably a wordplay.³¹ מְעִדְנָה might be translated as, e.g., “in chains,” yet bring connotations of fatty foods via the homonym. These connotations are strengthened by the literary context.

28 Alter, *David*, “with mincing steps”; κJB “delicately”; YLT “daintily”

29 Millard (“Etymology,” 103) argues that Eden’s etymology is from this root, meaning “abundant, lush.”

30 Many Vulgate manuscripts conflate this with translation (1.1) above, giving *pinguissimus et tremens*. Talmon (“Conflated,” 456) suggests that *tremens* is “probably a secondary intrusion.” *Pinguis* commonly translates Hebrew שָׁמֵן (Gen 49:20; Num 13:21) and שָׁמֵן (Prov 21:17; Isa 25:6), and is used for fattened animals, translating מְרִיא (1 Kgs 1:9; Isa 1:11) and בְּרִיא (1 Kgs 4:23; Ezek 34:20).

31 Wordplays have been found throughout Samuel (see, e.g., Garsiel, “Wordplays”). In this chapter, the place name טְלָאִים (15:4) may be a pun between the location Telem (Josh 15:24) and a word for “lambs” (Isa 40:11), given the centrality of animals to the chapter.

2 Contextual Evidence

Samuel R. Driver proposed a translation similar to this, stating “[t]he most obvious rendering is *voluptuously*.” However, he rejected this because it “is not probable in view of the context.”³² On the contrary, though, I argue that luxury and fatness are contextually resonant, both in the immediate literary context and more broadly.

2.1 Immediate Literary Context

In 15:32, Agag is summoned by Samuel (v. 32a), he approaches מְעַדְנֶתָהּ (v. 32b), and then he speaks (v. 32c). Unfortunately, Agag’s words contain textual problems: In MT, he says סַר מַר הַמּוֹת אַכֵּן “surely, the bitterness of death has passed.”³³ This Hebrew probably underlies the Vulg and Targ too,³⁴ but LXX and Pesh seem to be based on the Hebrew אַכֵּן מַר הַמּוֹת “surely, death is bitter.”³⁵ The discrepancy involves the lexemes סַר and מַר, which are visually very similar in square script and thus raise various possibilities of orthographic corruption.³⁶ I do not think it possible to resolve this textual issue conclusively. I suggest, though, that my translation of מְעַדְנֶתָהּ is fitting for either option.

Some proposed translations of מְעַדְנֶתָהּ are only appropriate for one interpretation of Agag’s words. Thus “cheerfully” (1.3a above) is most appropriate if Agag anticipates his release (with MT), and “trembling” (1.1) if Agag anticipates his death (with LXX). “In chains” (1.2)—which does not suggest Agag’s psychological state—could fit with either. And so, I suggest, could “luxuriantly/well-fatted”. If Agag says “surely, the bitterness of death is passed,” then he may have an optimism veering on arrogance. This would be expected of a ruler who walks luxuriantly and well-fatted, used to evading trouble. He

32 Driver, *Samuel*, 129–130.

33 Followed by Bodner, *Samuel*; Firth, *Samuel*; Hertzberg, *Samuel*.

34 Vulg has *Siccine separat amara mors?* (Douay-Rheims: “Doth bitter death separate in this manner?”). Targ has apparently taken סַר (“to turn aside”) as שַׁר (“prince, lord”) and offers מוֹתָא בְּבִעוּ רַבְצֵנִי מַרִּיר מוֹתָא (“Please, my lord, death is bitter”). This is followed by de Fraine (“Agag,” 543), who restores the Hebrew מַרְה־מוֹת שַׁר אֲנֹכִי שַׁר, “je suis un prince, qui montre comment il faut mourir.”

35 Followed by Brachter, “Agag”; McCarter, *Samuel*; Klein, *Samuel*. LXX has Εἰ οὐτως πικρὸς ὁ θάνατος, “Is this the bitterness that will be death?” (probably understanding אַכֵּן as הִכֵּן, turning the statement into a question). Pesh has *šryr’yt mryr mwt*, “Indeed, death is bitter.”

36 The possible original lexemes סַר מַר may have been conflated through quasi-haplography (to just מַר). An original מַר may have been corruptly duplicated through a quasi-dittography (to סַר מַר). Two separate traditions—סַר and מַר—may have arisen through orthographic corruption, later being brought together (to סַר מַר; so Talmon, “Conflated”).

would be similar to the elites of Amos 6:4–7, who lead lives of indulgence and feasting, but “are not grieved by the ruin of Joseph.” Indeed, several biblical texts correlate indulgent, luxurious lifestyles with arrogant dispositions (Deut 32:13–15; Ezek 16:13–15; Prov 30:8–9; Ps 73:3–7).³⁷ Conversely, if Agag says “surely death is bitter,” then a poignant juxtaposition emerges between his body and his words. His body is luxuriant, fat, and thus life-filled, while his words are moribund. Furthermore, his flesh is fatty like fine food (מַעֲדָן), like livestock ready for slaughter. But unlike sacrificial animals, who are silent (Isa 53:7) or unintelligible (1 Sam 15:14), he speaks human words lamenting his fate (cf. Judg 11:37–40³⁸).

Indeed, additional clues in the immediate literary context imply animal sacrifice, supporting these connotations of “well-fatted.” In commanding הַגִּישָׁה לִי אֶת אַגַּג “Bring to me Agag” (1 Sam 15:32a), Samuel uses a verb (גִּישָׁה *hiphil*) often elsewhere employed for bringing sacrificial offerings.³⁹ He echoes Saul, who has twice recently used a similar imperative (הַגִּישָׁה) to command that animals be brought for slaughter (13:9; 14:34). After he arrives, Agag is killed (15:33).⁴⁰ The verb which describes his death—וַיִּשְׁחֵק—is best interpreted in relation to the root שָׁחַק,⁴¹ which elsewhere refers to tearing up an animal.⁴² Samson tears up (שָׁחַק) a lion like a goat (Judg 14:6); the priest tears up (שָׁחַק) a bird before sacrificing it (Lev 1:17). The versions here maintain the sense of animal dismemberment for sacrifice.⁴³ All this happens “before Yahweh at Gilgal.” This is a cultic location, connecting this event with a series of fateful

37 See Welton, *Glutton*, 146, 156–157.

38 Jephthah's daughter weeps for two months before being sacrificed like an animal on her father's altar. See further Stone, “Animal.”

39 E.g., Exod 32:6; Lev 2:8; 8:14; Amos 5:25; Mal 1:7–8; 2:12; 3:3; 2 Chr 29:23.

40 Before killing Agag, Samuel explains his death in legal terms, justifying it through *lex talionis* (15:33a). The death thus has both legal and sacrificial overtones.

41 BDB, HALOT. שָׁחַק is a *hapax legomenon* without clear Semitic cognates. An alternative is to take וַיִּשְׁחֵק as an incorrectly vocalised *shaphel* from שָׁחַל. In *qal*, שָׁחַל means “to come to an end,” so *shaphel* would mean “to bring to an end.” Thierry, “Remarks,” 88, followed by Dahood, “Lexicography,” 362; Tatlock, “Deuteronomistic,” 307; noted in HALOT. However, the *shaphel* is extremely rare in biblical Hebrew, and there is no other evidence of its existence for this root.

42 The only other occurrence of שָׁחַק is obscure: In 1 Sam 28:8[7], David “persuades[?]” his men.

43 For וַיִּשְׁחֵק, LXX has σφάζω, which often translates the Hebrew שָׁחַק, “to slaughter (an animal),” and sometimes זָבַח, “to sacrifice.” Pesh and Targ use פָּשַׁח, “to tear.” In Pesh, this verb is particularly used of dismembering animals (Pesh Judg 14:6; 1 Sam 11:7), including in a sacrificial context (Pesh Exod 29:17; 1 Kgs 18:23, 33). Vulg has *in frusta concidit*, “cut in pieces,” which elsewhere refers to preparing an animal for sacrifice (Vulg Exod 29:17; Lev 1:6; 8:20; 9:13).

sacrifices that have framed and punctuated Saul's reign (1 Sam 11:15; 13:8–14; cf. 9:11–10:1; 14:32–35).

2.2 *Broader Literary Context*

This brings us to the broader literary context, which similarly resonates with the sense “luxuriant, well-fatted.” The chapters surrounding 1 Sam 15 attend to the bodies of their protagonists. Saul is unusually tall (9:2), the potentially positive implications of which are complexified by his decline and by correlation with the giant Goliath (17:4).⁴⁴ Agag too may carry the over-large and aberrant body of the foreigner, in contrast to the “small” (16:11; 17:14) and beautiful (16:12) David. A large, luxuriant, well-fatted body may be a sign of a corrupt elite lifestyle,⁴⁵ in contrast to the fasting of soldiers (1 Sam 14:24; 2 Sam 11:11; 23:13–17). Eli's sons are condemned for fattening themselves on the choice parts of the offering (1 Sam 2:29), and Eli himself is heavy (כבד), crushed by his own bodyweight (4:18). Royals are particularly guilty. The wicked Nabal holds the “feast of a king” (25:36), and the corrupt “king like the nations” will employ a surfeit of “cooks and bakers” (8:13). Agag may represent such a monarch.

Furthermore, as noted above, Agag does not just correspond with indulgent elites, but with fattened animals. 1 Samuel 15 brings them into conceptual correspondence: Agag and various prized animals are together spared from destruction (15:9). This listing suggests that its items are somehow equivalent and belong in a common category. The animals are luxuriant and well-fatted, likely the property of elites—the “best of the flock and herd” (מיטב הצאן) (והבקר). “Rams” are specified, using a term—כרים—that elsewhere occurs in an elite context (2 Kgs 3:4; Jer 51:40; Ezek 27:21; Amos 6:4) and/or is explicitly connected with fatness (Deut 32:14; Isa 34:6; Ezek 39:18).⁴⁶ Perhaps also specified are “the fat ones” (השמנים), though the text here is difficult.⁴⁷ When Agag walks towards Samuel מְעַדְנֹת, he becomes like one of these creatures—luxuriant and well-fatted like they.⁴⁸ Fattened animals are prized sacrificial offerings; indeed, Saul's claim (whether or not we believe him) is that he spared these animals

44 Doak, *Heroic*, 132–135.

45 Welton, *Glutton*, 161–170.

46 Thus Welton (*Glutton*, 163) translates כרים as “well fed lambs.”

47 מַד has הַשְּׁנִימִים, “double, second,” which is difficult to understand (unless possibly referring to double portions). I assume an error via metathesis of ש and מ, supported by the Pesh (*wšmjn*), Targ (ושמיניא), and DeRossi's manuscript 594, and followed by most interpreters. An alternative is הַשְּׁמִינִים (cf. Neh 8:10; McCarter, *Samuel*).

48 Cf. the collocation of שֶׁמֶן and עֵדָן in Gen 49:20 and Neh 9:25.

for sacrifice (15:15, 21).⁴⁹ The twist is that the livestock are not in fact killed (for God does not delight in “the fat of rams”; חֶלֶב אֵילִים; 15:22). Instead, Agag comes to the priest at a cultic site, approaches מַעֲדָנֹת—like a fattened animal—and is slain before Yahweh.

The literary context thus attends to large elite bodies, connects Agag to fattened animals, and makes him the victim of sacrifice. Thus, it is no surprise if he comes to Samuel like the best of the animals, luxuriant and well-fatted (מַעֲדָנֹת).

3 Conclusion

I have argued that מַעֲדָנֹת in 1 Sam 15:32 should be translated “luxuriantly,” with implications of being “well-fatted.” This makes good sense of the linguistic and contextual evidence, and should thus be considered above—or at least alongside—the alternative proposals. Even if this translation is not accepted, connotations of luxuriance and fatness may be present in the root. If this is the case, it contributes to the highly problematic portrayal of foreigners in 1 Sam 15. This chapter includes an abhorrent command of ethnic cleansing,⁵⁰ and the fate of Agag is a stark example of cruelty against the outsider. By fattening Agag, the text taps into xenophobic tropes of the foreigner with a monstrous body. By connecting him with animals, it dehumanises him, delegitimising him as an object of moral concern, and offering sacrifice as a performative apparatus for his slaughter.

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49 Scholars disagree about whether Saul genuinely intends to sacrifice the animals (Gilmour, *Violence*, 93–94; Gunn, *Saul*, 71) or not (Gordon, *Samuel*, 57; Sternberg, *Poetics*, 506–511).

50 Kugler, “Metaphysical.”

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