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The Religious Life in Hellenistic Phoenicia: 'Middle Ground' and New Agencies

Corinne Bonnet

HELLENISTIC PHOENICIA: GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since Jörg Rüpke has initiated a reflection on 'Religious individualization in historical perspective', I have selected the case study of Phoenician cults in the Hellenistic period, already pointed out by Fergus Millar as a singular example of 'hellenization'.¹ Our concern, regarding this process, will be the creation of cross-cultural compromises and the emergence of new paradigms in religious agency characterized, or not, by an increasing role of the individual. Thus, any quick equation of 'hellenization' and 'individualization', as professed by Louis Dumont², for example, is replaced by a more complex analysis of this process—as a more precise treatment of the notion of individualization. Let us first present the main elements of the historical context.

From 332 BC the small Phoenician kingdoms were part of the new empire conquered by Alexander and his army, with important changes on different levels. On the political level the local dynasties disappeared³ within two or three generations and the Phoenician cities were fully integrated in the Ptolemaic or Seleucid empires. On

¹ Millar 1983. See also Millar 1987; Grainger 1992 (reviewed by MacAdam 1993); Sartre 2001.

² Dumont 1983.

³ Eddy 1961; Verkinderen 1987.

the linguistic and cultural levels, the Greek *koinè* generally spread and the Phoenician people often adopted Greek names, although Phoenician inscriptions and names are still present until at least the first century BC.⁴ In the material culture, Greek models of, for example, pottery, dresses, and coinage are very successful. Finally in the cultic life, whereas Greek influences become more and more visible, the Phoenician traditions remain vivacious. We can assume that religious practices particularly fit to strategies of cross-cultural negotiations.

The religious life in the Phoenician kingdoms before Alexander—although they are usually called ‘city states’—illustrates a rather different political and social shape from the Greek *poleis*. In Tyre, Sidon, or Byblos, the social structure is pyramid-shaped, or vertical, with the king at the top. In the royal inscriptions, the king is presented as chosen by the gods for his personal qualities; he is the mediator between the divine world and the people. ‘Beloved by the gods’, he is responsible for food, peace, health, welfare, power, and he performs some public rituals. For example, the king of Sidon mentions in his inscriptions first his priesthood of Astarte title and secondly his title of ‘king of the Sidonians’.⁵ The articulation between individual and collective levels of religious practices is thus differently conceptualized and operated in Greek and in Phoenician societies and polytheisms. In Greek contexts, especially in democratic cities, the notion of *isonomia* influences the ritual organization.

‘HELLENIZATION’: A DEBATED ISSUE

The complex phenomenon of ‘hellenization’ is the very core of my investigation.⁶ For sure, the introduction of a set of Greek cultural features (personal names, toponyms, images, cults, social behaviours or attitudes, literature . . .) must have transformed the ‘indigenous’ traditions. But the problem is when and where exactly, who, why, and to what extent, and last but not least, how can we describe and explain

⁴ Briquel-Chatonnet 1991.

⁵ Elayi 1986.

⁶ The bibliography on this topic is almost endless: Bichler 1983; Orrieux, Will 1986; Bowersock 1990; Momigliano 1990; Canfora 1987; Gehrke 1990; Cartledge et al. 1996; Funck 1996; Payen 2005; Couvenhes and Legras 2006, especially Couvenhes and Heller 2006, 15–49.

this process without using the old models of a colonial ‘acculturation’ or the confused notion of ‘syncretism’? The first concept implies that Greek ‘modernity’ was inoculated in the ‘primitive’ Phoenician traditions. An aspect of this process could deal with the promotion of a (more?) individual approach to the divine. However, we must admit that the strong persistence of native languages in ritual contexts (for example, in funerary or dedicatory inscriptions) does not necessarily reveal a lack of ‘hellenization’ and consequently a ‘primitive’ or ‘conservative’ behaviour. The second concept (‘syncretism’) is nowadays unanimously considered as unable to grasp the complex reality and the fluid process of translatability of religious names, practices, images, and beliefs.⁷

Moreover, we must keep in mind that Phoenician people began to adopt Greek cultural standards long before Alexander’s conquest. From archaic times at least (and even since the Late Bronze Age), Greeks and Phoenicians were continuously connected in the Mediterranean networks.⁸ In this framework, the Greeks learned the alphabet from the Phoenicians at the beginning of the first millennium BC, having with them intense and reciprocal exchanges. The late Persian period (fifth and fourth centuries BC) shows an unequivocal penetration of the Greek ‘taste’ in Phoenicia, especially at Sidon, the major town.⁹ When Alexander and his army invaded Phoenicia, they discovered a world already deeply ‘hellenized’. The conquest only intensified and extended a previous trend. Hence, it is certainly wrong to define sharp cultural and chronological boundaries between two different moments and two different habitus in Phoenicia, before and after the Macedonian hegemony.

‘Hellenization’ or ‘Hellenism’, far from exemplifying a clash between two worlds or collapse of the traditional framework, has to do with strategy and negotiation, social fluidity and cultural creativity. Glen Bowersock appropriately suggests that Hellenism is ‘a language and culture in which peoples of the most diverse kind could participate. . . . It was a medium not necessarily antithetical to local or indigenous traditions. On the contrary, it provides a new and more eloquent way of giving voice to them.’ Consequently, the range of effects, in terms of practices, behaviours, mental habits, and images, is

⁷ Smith 2008; Ando 2008, p. 43–58, on the *interpretatio romana*.

⁸ Malkin 2005.

⁹ Elayi 1998; 1989.

extremely vast and goes far beyond the colonial model of an imposed acculturation or the ideal picture of a meeting between East and West, according to Droysen's concept of *Verschmelzung* ('fusion'). For the Hellenistic period and even before, we must refrain from using clear-cut labels such as 'Phoenician' or 'Greek' cultures, which rely on an essentialist mapping of the Mediterranean world, made of single units. On the contrary, connectivity and cross-cultural processes are constantly on stage, producing hybrid realities which elude any rigid ideological approach.¹⁰

Turning to our main concern, we must be very cautious in establishing far-fetched 'markers' of Greek culture or Greek identity in Hellenistic times, such as an increasing attention paid to individual religious needs. The *opinio communis* on Mediterranean post-classical religions has presumably to be challenged on several grounds, in particular because the distinction between collective and individual necessities and actions, in religious contexts, is extremely difficult to operate. Moreover, it wrongly suggests that the emergence of individual religious agencies is part of an evolutionist trend of 'progress'.

A BRIEF SKETCH OF PHOENICIAN CULTS BEFORE ALEXANDER

The pantheons of the Phoenician cities are constructed on a common framework:¹¹ at the top, we find a divine couple made of a local Baal (Baal of Tyre, of Sidon, of Byblos, and so on) associated with a goddess (generally called Astarte). Together they symbolize the local identity, whereas several other gods and goddesses are worshipped with specific competences (such as sea, mountain, war, snake bites, birth and childhood, or death). The main goddess, the Baalat of every kingdom, is mentioned in the royal inscriptions as the divine queen who 'makes' the king and gives him the skills and powers he needs to be recognized as legitimate and right and to have a long and prosperous reign. The *charis* and sense of justice of every mortal king is at the same time inspired by the divine model of the local Baal. The

¹⁰ Jong 2007.

¹¹ Bonnet, Lipinski, and Marchetti 1986; Bonnet and Xella 1985; Lipinski 1995; Bonnet and Niehr 2010.

contractual religious exchange, according to which gods receive offerings from humans and give them what they are asking for (in other words the collective destiny), is closely bound to the personal ability of the king to capture the gods' benevolence. However the 'religious contract' also directly binds any single citizen to the gods: the Phoenician inscriptions reveal that anybody could offer gifts to the gods, asking them to be heard and blessed, to receive health, prosperity, longevity . . . The worshippers always introduce themselves as part of a kinship or lineage: 'X son of Y, grandson of Z, . . .'. The longer the genealogy, the more prestigious is the individual. Mentions of qualifications, ranks, or titles play the same role of social distinction. The epigraphic medium, displayed in public spaces, like sanctuaries, offers local elites an opportunity to emphasize their high status in the society. The economic activities of the Phoenician kingdoms, involved in the Mediterranean networks, helped the emergence of entrepreneurial elites eager for social promotion. We can hardly doubt that for them the 'hellenization' process was basically a positive challenge.

THE CONQUEST: A UNIVOCAL NARRATIVE

Even if Alexander was welcomed as a liberator by the Phoenician authorities and the people almost everywhere, except in Tyre,¹² the Macedonian conquest partly broke up the existing political, social, and cultural framework. The Phoenician kings, chosen by the gods, became Alexander's subjects. The new authorities theoretically respected local aristocracies and royal families, but they transformed them into political tools or puppets. Royal charisma was seriously questioned, while Alexander presented himself as a divine 'international' figure, Heracles' and Dionysos' heir in the East.

The cultic mediation of native kings became gradually meaningless. The local gods were maintained and adopted by the new inhabitants, but 'translated' into or identified with Greek gods. Does this mean that their religious identity and authority were at risk? When the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores invaded Mexico or Peru,

¹² For the Tyrian siege and the extreme violence on both sides, see recently Amitay 2008.

they declared that local gods were dead. *Interpretatio*—on which Cliff Ando and Mark Smith have recently thrown important light—is always a strategy of hierarchizing the divine world. Melqart in Tyre, for example, who was identified with Heracles centuries before,¹³ is not ‘dead’, but he is almost completely swallowed up by Heracles and put under Greek control. The bow and the lion skin, typical heraclean attributes, become part of his official image, even on civic coinage or weights. We can however confidently assume that it was not, or not only, a Greek decision, but also a Tyrian strategy. The local Baals are ‘used’ by the Greeks to mark their territory but, on the other hand, the Phoenicians take advantage of the Greek ‘equipment’ to give their own culture a new dimension and resonance. The result is that both parts work more or less consciously for a cultural compromise, a sort of ‘middle ground’.

In such an interactive context, new spaces and new figures of religious mediation can emerge. The Hellenistic (more) hybrid society needs individuals able to play with both tradition and innovation, and to display original strategies ‘in between’. Looking at Hellenistic Sidon, I shall focus on the invention of original forms of religious agency linked with social strategies of political and cultural mediation in which individuals operate at the same time for their own interest and for the group’s integrity and promotion.

WHEN ESHMUN MEETS ASCLEPIOS IN SIDON

The city of Sidon, between Beirut and Tyre, on the Phoenician coast, had been the capital of a rich kingdom since the beginning of the first millennium BC. Homer calls all the Phoenicians Sidonians, using an interesting *pars pro toto* figure. During the Persian empire, Sidon was the major Phoenician city, with its royal dwelling and huge *paradeisos*. Sidon is a very cosmopolite city, open to many influences, including Persian, Anatolian, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian, but mainly Greek.

Eshmun had been the Baal of Sidon since the second millennium BC.¹⁴ His name is connected with oil, an important element of

¹³ Bonnet 1988; see in particular Hdt. 2.44.

¹⁴ Brown 1998; Lipinski 1995; Xella 1993, 2001.

everyday life for health and medicine, but also for royal investiture and ritual ceremonies. Eshmun's divine spouse is Astarte, called 'Name of Baal' because, thanks to her close relationship to the god, she is the only one who knows his name.¹⁵ Both gods were venerated in an important urban sanctuary, in 'Sidon on the sea', as well as in another prestigious cult-place outside Sidon, on the first slopes of Mount Lebanon, at Bostan esh-Sheik.¹⁶ This extra-urban sanctuary, irrigated by the Ydal holy spring, was constructed by the local kings during the seventh or sixth century BC, under Babylonian hegemony. Step by step, the sanctuary became more famous: the royal family, the local elite, and all the Sidonians honoured Eshmun of the holy spring with different types of offerings. Among them, particularly striking are the numerous statues of small children, the so called temple boys (and, more rarely, temple girls), including children of the royal family. Originating from Cyprus, they refer to rituals dealing with birth, childhood, and family and consequently the destiny of the whole city. A set of Phoenician inscriptions reveals that Eshmun was invoked to protect the young Sidonian population. More than twenty royal inscriptions, over a long span of time, give further confirmation of the king's central position in this process: as a single and special individual, he works for the common interest of the population.

Because Eshmun had been identified with Asclepius since the fifth to fourth century BC, several scholars look at him as a 'healing god' and consider Bostan esh-Sheik as a 'healing sanctuary', similar, for example, to Epidauros. Its increasing size and prosperity during Hellenistic times is thus considered as a tangible sign of major attention paid to individual needs—body, health, sexuality, after-life—associated with a more personal and direct experience of the divine (something like 'mysteries'). Such a view has to be challenged, because the translation of Eshmun into Asclepius also relies on cultural strategies aiming at a new compromise from which both would benefit. What about 'individualization' in this context? Are the Hellenistic religious behaviours attested in Bostan differently orientated from before? How can we understand the new orientations of Eshmun-Asclepius' cult?

¹⁵ Bonnet 2009.

¹⁶ Stucky 1984, 1993, 2005. See also Stucky 2001.

Looking carefully at the evidence from pre-Hellenistic times, we observe that Eshmun's cult deals both with children, their development and integration, and with the future of the Sidonian society. The introduction of Asclepios in the sanctuary, from the fourth century BC, does not fundamentally change the ritual shape: the god receives the same images of temple boys, of children playing or involved in the activities of everyday life; they receive offerings like games or glass beads. Obviously the Greek taste is more perceptible in the style, but the Greek inscriptions to Asclepios still emphasize the collective dimension of the offerings tied with the family's concerns. Nothing expressly points to more individual rituals or to major interests in the body, in 'self-care' or individual destiny. The personal concerns are always encompassed in a collective frame. Besides, the worshippers in the Bostan sanctuary frequently go on using their own language.¹⁷

THE TRENDY CLUB OF ASCLEPIOS' INTERNATIONAL SANCTUARIES

From a strategic point of view, using both languages and divine names, and displaying a hellenized appearance, with Greek inscriptions, Greek iconography, and Greek architecture, the Sidonians favoured a cultural compromise. It allowed not only the Phoenicians, but also the Greek or hellenized people to visit the sanctuary, and recognize their own god, making offerings to an 'international' shared god. Taking advantage of the new political and cultural environment, the Sidonians endeavoured to participate in the prestigious and international religious network of the *Asclepieia* and in the big business of Mediterranean pilgrimage.¹⁸

Indeed, several pieces of evidence show that the Sidonians intentionally emphasized the compatibility between Eshmun and Asclepios. A bilingual Greek and Phoenician inscription from Cos,¹⁹ dating from the end of the fourth century BC, deals with a maritime construction offered by the son of Abdalonymos, king of Sidon, to Astarte as goddess of the sea and the seafarers. As far as this building

¹⁷ For the inscriptions from Bostan, see Stucky 2005.

¹⁸ Elsner and Rutherford 2005.

¹⁹ Kantzia 1980; Szyner 1980, 1999. See also Habicht 2007.

seems to be paid by Eshmun's sacred funds, we can imagine that the Sidonian authorities paid attention to the Coan harbour because the local famous *Asklepieion* began to be visited by Sidonian pilgrims and, conversely, because Coan or Greek pilgrims could easily join Sidon and honour its Phoenician Asclepios.

The Sidonian cult of Eshmun-Asclepios, far from revealing an individualization process and an emerging concern for personal religious experiences and individual needs, is rather a tangible hint of a new religious *koine*, which includes the Phoenician 'hellenized' kingdoms. Another clue comes from the famous 'Tribune of Eshmun' (dating from the end of the Persian period) and the so called 'Bâtiment aux frises d'enfants' (dating from the fourth to the third century BC).²⁰ Both iconographic designs express the Sidonian claim and desire to be integrated, even before Alexander's conquest, in a broader, international context in which their local traditions could be consolidated and disseminated. In fact, these monuments display images of circular groups dancing together, hand in hand, playing music and producing harmony: it is a kind of 'ring composition'. Barbara Kowalzig's recent analysis of similar material²¹ points to a persistent symbolic and iconographic frame which symbolizes the concept of integration in Greek communities through political and religious actions.

Concluding on that point, we must admit that the concepts of 'hellenization', 'individualization', 'modernity' or 'healing cults' do not do justice to the diversity and complexity of behaviours, beliefs, and practices to which the Sidonian sanctuaries testify. The Greek claim for cultural supremacy, even if based on a sophisticated process of translatability between gods, is balanced by the Phoenician strategy which aimed to preserve or even promote the traditional heritage taking advantage of the new international connectivity and using Greek tools to favour the integration process. Now, the search for a cultural compromise requires mediators able to work in the new 'middle ground', lobbying, networking, spinning. These persons try to build bridges between two cultural shores, working at the same time for their own personal prestige and for the benefit of the whole society.

²⁰ Stucky 1984; Apicella 2006.

²¹ Kowalzig 2005.

DIOTIMOS' INSCRIPTION: A SIDONIAN
COGNATE TO THE GREEKS

Diotimos is known through a Greek inscription from Sidon, discovered in 1862 by Ernest Renan and studied in 1939 by Elias Bickerman.²² The inscription contains an honorific epigram for the winner at the Nemean Games in Greece. The mention of the Cretan sculptor Timocharis allows us to date the monument to c.200 BC. The elegant and sophisticated epigram was probably composed by a deeply hellenized local poet. In fact, we are aware of the existence of Greek literary circles in Phoenician cities. Meleager of Gadara, who spent many years in Tyre when he was a young poet, is the best example of this milieu.²³

The City of the Sidonians honour Diotimos, son of Dionysios, a judge (*dikastès*), who won the chariot race at the Nemean Games.

Timocharis from Eleutherna made the statue.

The day, on which, in the Argolic valley, from their starting posts, all the competitors launched their quick horses for the race, the people of Phoronis gave you a splendid honour and you received the ever memorable crown.

For the first among the citizens, you brought from Hellas in the noble house of the Agenorids the glory won in an equestrian victory. The holy city of Cadmos, Thebes, also exults, seeing its metropolis distinguished by victories.

The prayer of your father, Dionysios, made in occasion of the contest was fulfilled when Greece made this proclamation: 'Oh proud Sidon, you excel not only with your ships but also with your yoked chariots which are victorious.'

The athletic *agones* were a typical feature of Greek culture. They made it possible for individual citizens to be distinguished by the *kleos* within a context which reinforced the social bounds. The introduction of *agones* in the Near East was a major aspect of 'hellenization', together with the *gymnasion* and the theatre.²⁴ They promoted Greek models of sociability and identity, offering spaces of cultural mediation under Greek control. In Tyre, for example, where the resistance to the Macedonian army was strongest, Alexander immediately after his

²² Bickerman 1939; Ebert 1972; Merkelbach and Stauber 2002. See also Couvenhes and Heller 2006.

²³ Cf. Gutzwiller forthcoming.

²⁴ Le Guen 2005.

victory imposed the celebration of athletic games in honour of Heracles in order to appropriate Melqart's cult, the Baal of Tyre.²⁵

The Phoenicians, used to working in a Mediterranean context, quickly understood how prestigious, from a social and cultural point of view, a victory was in a Greek (especially Panhellenic) festival. Hence they participated not only in the Greek *agones* celebrated in Phoenicia (mainly in Tyre and Sidon), but also in those in Greece itself. From the third century BC, Phoenician competitors definitely considered as 'Greek' won important games in Delos, Athens, Cos, and Corinth. Participation in such competitions appears as a relevant strategy of integration for the Phoenician elites and the Phoenician kingdoms without provoking a loss of identity. Diotimos, for example, who is most probably a descendant of the Sidonian royal family and won the prestigious chariot race at the Nemean Games, celebrated in Zeus' honour, must be a rich man, aware of Greek habits, but still deeply bound to Sidon. He and his father are mentioned in the inscription with Greek names; they are celebrated according to the Greek traditions, by an elegant Greek epigram and a statue made by a Cretan artist. All these elements could lead us to the conclusion that Diotimos is totally hellenized and that such a celebration of a single citizen is a feature of 'individualization' tied with a new cultural trend, typical of the Hellenistic *koinè*.

We must, however, refrain from such a simplistic analysis. In fact, the mythological elements contained in the text deserve more attention. Even if they are included in a Greek framework, they recall a sophisticated strategy of communication and a complex cultural landscape. First of all, it is worth noticing that Diotimos is at the same time proud of his victory in a Greek competition, but also of his title and duty of 'judge', *dikastès* in Greek, which clearly translates a Semitic word, *shufat*, meaning something like 'governor'. The cultural mixture is evident and not conflicting at all. At that time (c.200 BC) the Sidonian kingship had been abolished and a new political and social deal was emerging. Diotimos, who belongs to the higher aristocracy, skilfully uses a typically Greek strategy to get prestige, glory, and immortality, being also involved in the local institutional organization as a 'governor'. He appears as a typical Phoenician Hellenistic mediator.

Diotimos alludes in his inscription to the memory of Agenor, the first king of Sidon, and to his glorious family. Now, Agenor is an

²⁵ Adams 2006.

extraordinary case of Greek–Phoenician interaction. In fact he is said, at least since the fifth century BC,²⁶ to have been the son of Phoronis, king of Argos, and to have given birth to Phoinix, the Phoenicians' eponymous hero, and to Europa, Cadmos, Phineux, and Kilix. Cadmos is well known in Greece as mythical *oikistès* of the city of Thebes and the one who introduced the Phoenician alphabet to Greece. Through this 'comforting (mythological) fiction',²⁷ Diotimos finds a way to underline the crucial Phoenician contribution to Greek culture and to advertise a hybrid sense of belonging without resisting Hellenism. As Agenor has definitely a Greek origin, the Phoenicians are most certainly Greek. Moreover, Agenor, through his sons, fecundated Greece and 'civilized' it.²⁸ It is a tricky and paradoxical message in a context of 'hellenization'! The mythological traditions, in these circumstances, provide a common language necessary for any 'middle ground'. The concept of mythological kinship, *syngeneia*, helps to reveal very ancient bonds between the Greek and the non-Greek people. The idea of a common family rests on the model of Greek supremacy over barbarian enemies.

Turning to our main issue, Diotimos' inscription shows how a single citizen can be honoured with an elegant inscription and a public monument, using his personal glory, his 'sich selbst feiern' for the prestige of his family, of the whole city, and finally of the 'Phoenician culture' challenged by Greek models. The Phoenician elite borrowed the Greek aristocratic and even tyrannical model of the *kleos* won in the *agones* to recover part of their political and social prestige lost after the Macedonian conquest.²⁹ Through this strategy, they also inscribe the Phoenician identity in the symbolic and imaginary network of Greek mythology, promoting integration and mutual comprehension.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on Hellenistic times, John Ma recently proposed renouncing 'paradigms' (for example the paradigm of fusion or separation)

²⁶ Hellanic. 4 F 36 J (ap. Schol. Eust. Hom. Il. G 75).

²⁷ Gruen 2005.

²⁸ Later on, Ach. Tat. 1.1.1, speaking of Sidon, calls it 'mother of the Phoenicians, father of the Thebans'.

²⁹ Bremen 2007. See also Chaniotis 1995.

and to work instead with 'paradoxes'.³⁰ According to him the admission of contradictory situations and parameters coexisting in historical contexts is a fascinating clue to these 'times of troubles'. Following his suggestion, we should conclude that the category of 'hellenization' includes a wide spectrum of responses and levels of interaction, a huge range of attitudes and behaviours: violent opposition and peaceful communication, ideological pressure, or resistance and rebellion. Far from any 'obviousness', such an approach emphasizes the importance of creativity and opportunism in cultural interaction, according to space, time, purpose, and social context.

As regards the cultic life, we must pay attention to the 'religious work', tackled by J. Z. Smith in his *Imagining Religion*.³¹ The *homo religiosus* is more properly a *homo faber*, always busy, constructing social equipments with a large set of tools. 'Hellenization', like 'occidentalization' in Canada or Mexico in modern times, stimulated creativity as an answer to a certain disruption of techniques, memories, and the native realm of imaginations. After Alexander's conquest in the East, the cultural instability and change turned out to promote the construction of new cultural layouts and forms in which some individuals found space for their political, social, or religious agency. They tried to maximize the benefits derived from an environment oriented towards the Greek world and a new conception of 'otherness'. New identities lead to new agencies in a context where the old boundaries are replaced by transactions and networks of relations. The Phoenician case illustrates the fact, emphasized in the introduction, that individualization is neither coextensive to 'modernity', nor to the concept of 'progress'. It should not be regarded as opposed to society, but as an option in the numerous aspects of interaction inside the social network. Any claim to identify individuality must take account of the latter.

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³⁰ Ma 2008.

³¹ Smith 1988.

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