

The Temple of Abu Simbel: Rameses the Man

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Abstract

The Temple of Abu Simbel, located at the border of Egypt and Sudan, is a reminder of the exploits of Rameses II (1304-1237 B.C), the great pharaoh and the glory of the Ancient Egyptians.

The work is examined according to two theories. According to Susanne Langer's as explained in her book, *Feeling and Form* the work creates a primary illusion of space in three modes: of architecture, sculpture, and painting; and a secondary illusion of time and life. These illusions lead to an interpretation that emphasizes a metaphysical world, the word of eternity.

E.H. Gombrich's method of analysis as described in his book, *Art and Illusion* urges the beholder to identify the style of the work's representation and to locate the ambiguities in the work of art. Doing that, the beholder can use his findings as clues to interpret the work and consequently be able to reach the artist's intention. His method leads to a meaning that emphasizes the psychological side of Rameses's life.

The work is briefly reexamined by a third mode of inquiry that refers to the beholder's response and attitude towards the type of representation. This method is thoroughly explained in Norman N. Holland, *The Dynamic of Literary Response*. The use of this method resulted in the addition to the work's meaning concerning Rameses's emotions and his love for life.





At a place called “Wadi Halfa”, located at the border of Egypt and Sudan, the River Nile curves forming a charming bay. There, the silver water laps at tall sandstone cliffs over three hundred feet high. In that place, since early times, the rich green pastures growing in black-red soil, beside the yellow sands of the desert, have inspired the Egyptians to keep life and death constantly in their thoughts. For them, the vivid green color symbolize life; and the pale yellow symbolize death. Such a landscape is rare in an arid desert through which the river flows. Rameses II, one of the great pharaohs who ruled Egypt between 1304-1237 B.C, could not dream of a better location to lay out his magnificent sandstone temple of Abu Simbel, which has lived ever after as a testimony of the glory of the Ancient Egyptians.

Abu Simbel was cut into a rock in honor of Amon-Ra, Ptah, and Ra-Horakhte, the Egyptian gods, for helping Rameses to conquer the Hittites. A record of the Pharaoh’s achievements, particularly, his victory in the “Battle of Kadesh”, when he smote his foes, single-handed and scattered them in all directions, is represented in wall paintings throughout the temple.

The facade of the temple, dominated by four gigantic statues of the pharaoh himself, two on each side, is 35 meters wide and 30 meters high. The colossi of the king wearing the characteristic nemes head-cloth and double crown of upper and lower Egypt, is twenty meters high. (Figure 1) Not only is it the oversize of the colossi that dominates the viewer, but also the serenity and the warmth that these colossi seem to exude. They seem to have the endless patience of the world as they calmly wait for the dawn. When the sun rises the moving shadows alter their expressions until it sinks once more, leaving them in the darkness of their underworld. Between the giant legs of the colossi, peep out standing statues of the royal family’s members. Among them is the prettiest, the sexiest, and beloved daughter wife, Nefertary, (Figure 2), whom he adored and honored more than any of his other wives. For Rameses II is known to have had many wives who bore him a total of more than a hundred children. The statues of other members of the family included other daughters “wives”: Nebt Tau, and Bent Arat, his mother Tuya, his son Amen Herkophech, and his other daughter Merit Amen.

Crowning the facade of the temple is a row of baboons, animals considered sacred to the rising sun (Figure 3). They are shown with their hands raised in adoration for the rising sun, helping Ra the sun god defeat the nightly darkness. They are watching for the dawn from their lofty vantage point to reassure the pharaoh. Situated above the central entrance of the temple is a niche with a statue of the god Ra-Horakhte, the guardian



god of the dead. He is represented with attributes of Ra, “the sun disk,” and Horus, “the falcon head” (Figure 4). Scenes depicting Rameses II wearing the so-called “Blue Crown,” offering a statuette of the goddess Maat to Ra-Horakhte, are depicted on the right and the left wall of the statue.

The doorway of the entrance leads to a huge entrance hall that is 18m long and 10.70 m wide. There stand eight huge Osiris pillars stretching some 10m high from floor to the ceiling. Each pillar is bearing the features of Ramesis II (figure 5). Their presence is overwhelming. The pillar carries a “crook” and a “flail,” as symbols of great powers. An inscription of Rameses’s royal titles and cartouch: “The Good God,” “Lord of Two Lands,” “Rameses Beloved of Amun,” is seen by the side of each pillar’s head. Scenes of Rameses II before the various gods, holding hands; dancing, etc. cover the remaining sides of the columns from which these pillars spring. These scenes create the impression that Rameses II is a welcome friend among gods. Painted high above, on the ceiling are vultures with out-stretched wings sacred to Nekhbet, goddess of “El-Kab.” As the sun rises; and enters the temple, gradually the cold darkness is suffused with the golden warmth. Each statue emerges from the dark back-ground as if coming back to life.

Immediately to the right of the entrance is an excellent relief of Ramesis II, always twice the size of his enemies, (figure 6) pounding a group of Asiatic prisoners on the head with the hilt of his mace. Continuing along the right wall, is a drawing of the famous march of the Egyptian army under Rameses’s command to “Kadesh.” Kadesh was located on the River Oronto in Syria. The scenes of the battle are depicted around the chamber. Supportive hieroglyph statements and poems impressively describe the events of the battle in favor of the glory of Rameses. However, one of these poems spoken by one of his generals shows a different point of view. It says:

“... and his majesty went to look about him and found surrounding him on his outer side 2500 pairs of horses. They were three men to a pair of horses as a unit, whereas there was no captain with them, no charioteers, no soldier of the army, no shield-bearer... my infantry and charioteer melted away before them, not one stood firm to fight with them. Then said his majesty: (What ails thee, my father Amun? Is it a father’s part to ignore his son? Have I done any thing without thee? Do I not walk and halt at thy bidding? I have not disobeyed any course commanded by thee. How great is the great lord of Egypt to allow foreigners to draw nigh in his path! What careth thy heart, o Amun, for these Asiatic so vile and ignorant of God? Have I not made for thee very many monuments and filled thy temple with my booty, and built my wealth as a permanent possession and presented to thee all lands together to enrich thy offering, and have caused to be sacrificed to



thee tens of thousands of cattle... what will men say if even a little thing befall him who bends himself to thy counsel?) Then said his majesty to his shield bearer: (Stand firm; stead thy heart, my shield bearer). There upon his majesty started forth quickly and entered at a gallop into the midst of the battle for the sixth time of entering in amongst them.”¹

Beyond this chamber there is another antechamber that leads to the sanctuary. This antechamber is almost 12 m by 8 m deep. Its ceiling is supported by four pillars, carved with sculptures of Rameses II with gods. He is making offerings to Isis, Amun and himself. He is a living king who has established himself as a god in the kingdom of the dead and is content that his living self should worship his divine self. Deep inside, beyond this antechamber is the sanctuary, where four gods: Ptah, Amun-Ra, Ra-Horakhte and “Rameses” are seated in equal dignity on one massive throne. Rameses being represented in the same size as other gods implies that not only is he regarding them as protectors, but as partners as well.

The temple’s orientation is arranged in such a manner that twice a year, on February the 22nd, and on October the 22nd, at the Solstice, the sun rays penetrate the entire length of the temple, thus illuminating the statues of the seated gods, only for five minutes. But what is really amazing his that the rays of the sun never struck Ptah. Ptah is the god of darkness. Was Rameses a genius enough to foresee such image while he was doing his calculations, prior to laying out the temple? Who knows? The statues are carved from a living rock around which every inch of the sanctuary is full of relief sculpture. Most of that carving is colored. Undoubtedly, it is a giant tapestry in stone. The temple is 12 m in width and over 10 m in height. The facade, the chamber, the antechamber, and the sanctuary, a total of 18 m in depth, are all carved into the living rock.

In spite of the signature of “Piyay”, son of Khanufer that could easily be traced on some of the statues of the temple, it is most likely that Rameses himself was the designer of the temple and Piyay was the artisan who followed Rameses’ orders and supervision. The different sizes of the figures, the inescapable exaggeration of Rameses representations through the monument, in addition to the unique setting of the plaza, favor the suggestion that point at a greater intention in Rameses’s mind than a mere work of devotional architecture.

The tombs, Langer defines as “an image of the under world.”² They are intended for the silence of the Kingdom of Death. Their chambers, she says, express unequivocally a presence and its domain. They create an image of virtual environment. That image is the visible semblance of an ethnic domain: a mode of an illusion of virtual space.

The façade, Langer suggests, is like the skin of a living creature, which protects it against the world. It is the temple's means of contact with the outer world.

The sculpture, in Langer's theory, is very important to the temple. However, the statues are not considered as architectural elements. The temple is housing the statues and the statues are housed in the temple. The temple, as a work of architecture, introduces an illusion of "ethnic domain"³, an environment created by selfhood. The work of sculpture, on the other hand, is symbolizing the "self", or the center of life, introducing an illusion of "kinetic volume".⁴

Beside the statues, Langer explains, relief and columns are equally supported by the temple that they adorn. From this researcher's point of view, the colored, low bas-relief supported by the delicate hieroglyphs represented in Abu Simbel, expresses a decorative type of representation more than a work of sculpture. The depicted elements, even though they simplify reality, are never a copy of direct visual impressions. Langer put it this way: "It is the adaptation of the old decorative devices to the systematic depiction of objects."⁵

The colors reflex the nature of "Nile Valley": men painted terracotta red and women white or tan (the terracotta red simplifies the rich reddish-brown soil and the white color is a reminder of "Al-Zagil", the delicate white Egyptian pigeon). The blue color simplifies the river Nile, and the green stands for the pasture. Both colors and forms are intended for ornamental purpose as well as representative of natural objects. The work is not only a shape in space; it is shaping space that is given to the artist. It creates an illusion of a virtual space in the mode of "virtual scene."⁶

The hieroglyphs, on the other hand, can be read as an important element of the design.⁷ They also can be read as a work of poetry. They create the appearance of "experiences"; the semblance of events lived and left, an illusion of virtual experience. It is the "illusion of virtual life."⁸

The perfect astronomic setting of the temple, having the sun illuminating each of the eight Osiris pillars in turn each hour during the daytime in addition to illuminating the seated gods of the sanctuary only two days each year, is noteworthy. These two days mark the beginning of the sprouting and the ending of the inundation seasons. This setting creates a remarkable feeling of time. In this case we are talking about "after life time". By this impression, we can say that the artist is creating an "illusion of virtual time."⁹

Summarizing these previous interpretations, we can say that Abu Simbel introduces:

- A) A primary illusion of virtual space in its three modes:
- 1- As a work of architecture, it is an ethnic domain;
 - 2- The pillars and colossi, as works of sculpture, are kinetic volumes.
 - 3- The painted walls and the colored low relief are forms of pictorial arts or virtual scenes.
- B) The use of the sun, besides its powerful capacity of changing the forms by giving them a sense of life, introduces a secondary illusion of virtual time.
- C) The use of the poetic hieroglyphs, besides being a creative element of the design, introduces another illusion of virtual life.

Langer's theory suggests that "the artist-king" (assuming that the idea of the temple was his in the first place) by creating a primary illusion of virtual space and secondary illusions of virtual time and life, was in fact, creating a vivid image of a metaphysical life, a life of eternity. Through that life, he sets his ambitious goal: that is to be a ruler of the kingdom of Death. As such, by having his overpowering forces, he would be able to achieve what he could not in his actual life.

Gombrich for his part advises the viewer to look for the clues that violate the expectation, guided by the knowledge of the style. The type of representation seen through the work of Abu Simbel does not differ much from the ancient Egyptian style that we are familiar with. It is a stylized, repetitious form of representation: the left foot is advance of the right, the head in profile, the chest is front view, and the rest of the body is viewed from the side. That was the ideal perspective for the ancient Egyptian. In addition, the expression is serene. The painted walls and bas-relief picture life after death in a way similar to life on earth. They are intended to record the "dead's" life and to describe his journey after life.

The statues are life-like representations to provide a resting-place for the "Ka" or the virtual force. Each is one solid form stone to resist the journey of eternity. These statues are treated in normal perspective. Having the gods represented as human figures with heads of animals or birds does not mean at all that they were thought to be inferior to man. It simply means a marriage of human intellect to animal virtues.

The colors, as mentioned earlier, are representation of the clear and serene nature of the Nile Valley: the blue color for the sky and the Nile, green for pasture, reddish brown for soil, yellow for sand and white for the Zagil pigeons that cover the clear sky of Egypt. Zagil is the symbol of love and freedom for the Egyptians. That was the typical Ancient Egyptian type of representation. To compare such style to that of Abu Simbel we can find numerous ambiguous elements that violate the expectation such as:

- The extraordinary setting of the temple was made as if the artist demanded that it would be a part of nature and not of a man made form;

- The use of natural surrounding to frame the form and to help support the intention of life and death side by side;
- The use of the sun as a powerful element as if the artist intended his work to be read differently according to the change of time;
- The fact that the whole temple is cut from a living rock;
- The two gigantic colossi with the tranquil smiles, in addition to the raw baboons who assure the pharaoh of the rising sun;
- The use of certain numbers: 2 colossi, 8 Osiris pillars, Feb. 22 and Oct. 22;
- Rameses II represented as a god Osiris figure, or one of the four seated gods in the sanctuary, with the same size as the gods;
- Rameses, the dead king, worshipping himself as the living god;
- Rameses is always represented as twice the size of his enemy in the battle of Kadesh;
- The touch of agony and panic in the poem especially when he was talking to Amun: “.. is it a father’s part to ignore his son?..”

Nefertary, his daughter-wife, among his many other wives appears many times beside the king or beneath his legs, double the size of other members of the family. She is entirely captivating in her diaphanous gown with her breasts just showing below her shoulder-length hair.

To interpret these violations we may begin with the inscription of the Kaddish battle. It seems that Rameses tells us what he wants us to know. Even when he confesses that he was duped by a couple of Bedouins before the battle, his intention was not to call attention to his trusting disposition, but to add to the glory of ultimate triumph. But as we hear the panic in his words:

“...is it a father’s part to ignore his son? What careth thy heart, O Amun, What will men say if even a little thing befall him who bends himself to thy counsel?”

We feel that what he is telling us about his victory is tendentious. By further investigating the sequence of the battle, it seems that though Rameses had shown some degree of personal valor, it was only the treaty with the Hittites, which had occurred for some unrecorded reason, that ended the war and the war-like ambitions of Rameses II. He returned as rapidly as possible to relate the story of his great victory in order to cover his bad generalship that had caused the destruction of most of his army. He spent the rest of his long reign of over sixty-six years in erecting monuments to his personal glory. He is always being represented as twice the size of his enemy to make it appear that he, single-handed, was able to smite and kill hundreds at a time. Rameses, however, couldn’t forget his bitterness and

pain at not fulfilling his dreams to take over the Hittites, besides losing most of his army. By creating this monument, it seems as if he is planning a great victory, but in his "next life". The work of Abu Simbel implies such an intention. The colossi and the eight Osiris pillars who are waiting for the dawn to give them back life with such power that achieves eight times as much, are going to help Rameses to gain back what he was unable to accomplish in his first life.

On the other hand, it seems that Rameses had lost trust in the power of his gods when they didn't sustain him during the battle. This explains why he is represented as the same size as the gods, regarding them as partners. The image of Rameses worshipping himself is unique. It may suggest that Rameses, living more than a hundred years, had discovered at last that the real power is coming from himself: from his "Ka", his vital force, not from the power of the gods. So he imagined himself equal to Osiris, the god of the dead, as he gains his "Ka" back in his second life of eternity.

Rameses timed the sun very correctly to make sure that it would light the two colossi, bring them to life in their hugeness, and thereby, suggest their great power. The numbers of the pillars, four at each side is a reminder of the "Four Corners" of the world. They imply Rameses's overpowering rule over the earth as a king of eternity. So when the sun illuminates the innermost of the sanctuary, it will bring the four gods' seated statues to life twice a year on Feb. 22, and Oct. 22, as Rameses intended. Those two days mark the beginning and the end of life respectively.

On the other hand, the repetition of showing Nefertary always beside him as a supportive element to his power and energy points at his obvious love for life. Nefertary symbolizes life and fertility, which Rameses assumes he will need very much in his next life.

The fact that the whole temple is cut from one living rock, again supports the idea of bringing life out of death: from the solid, mute rock to a vivid work of art, "Abu Simbel"

Using these previous clues, we can say that Rameses, the great, ambitious hero, duped by two Bedouins, (as mentioned in ancient history of the region), as a result of which he had almost lost his army, was ashamed. His pride prohibited him from admitting his failure. However; this denial could not save his pain and bitterness. In fact, the work of Abu Simbel is telling us two things:

- 1- Rameses is not relying on gods any more because they were not really supportive when he needed them badly; in fact, they do not have the great power he though they did.

2- When the sun comes and illuminates the colossi, the pillars, and the four gods in the sanctuary, "bringing them to life," Rameses himself will come back to life. He will have a great power similar to that of Osiris, "he feels that he is incarnated Osiris". He will rule the four corners of Earth from the beginning to the end as the king of death, (considering that the seasons of irrigation never really have an end because they are cyclical: birth-death-rebirth). That means he is willing to be the ruler of eternity, taking the place of Osiris himself. His ambitions have gone so far: but can not hide a little touch of bitterness.

The two analytical methods used in this paper differ a great deal in their suggested approach. Following Langer's modes and illusion makes the viewer yield completely to his feeling entrapped by her demanding method. She carries him to a world of "virtuals" and a life of dreams. Her method is fascinating yet dominating at the same time.

Gombrich, on the other hand, leaves the rope to the beholder. He challenges him as a partner, after setting the rules of the game. Langer's theory is an abstract, philosophical, mythical approach. Gombrich's theory is scientific, experimental, intellectual approach. Gombrich has the beholder exercise his intellect; Langer inspires the beholder's feeling.

Without Langer's perspective, the researcher would not be able to go beyond the barrier of actuality to approach a new metaphysical world, the world of eternity. Gombrich's perspective, on the other hand, guides the researcher to cite the work's ambiguities; then uses these ambiguities, together with a previous knowledge of the Egyptian style, as clues to approach the psychological side of Rameses that the work implies. They bring pain and bitterness, as does Rameses' attitude toward the gods.

In conclusion, we see that even though the two theories seem to be far different from one another, they are not divergent. They are compatible and conjunctive, each theory adding to the work's meaning.

We could still use another psychological approach as discussed in Norman Holland's *The Dynamic of Literary Response*. For example, having his lovely daughter-wife Nefertary, the sexiest, and prettiest among all his other wives, beneath his legs, old aged Rameses sees to seek a "life support" as a denial of his age and weakness.

The work of Abu Simbel can be read in different ways:

- 1- Historically: it can be read as a statement about the long reign of Ramesis II, as well as the history of Egypt in that period of time.
- 2- Politically: it explains the final treaty between the Hittites and Rameses. It is the first known international agreement. Considering that it was undertaken three thousand years ago, it seems to be quite modern in its terms. It was further strengthened by the marriage of Rameses to a Hittite princess.

- 3- Psychologically: it describes Rameses, the man who was fond of life and who had great love for his daughter-wife Neferatry. He tried his best to hide his agony and weakness in order to save his dignity, so as to add to the glory of his ultimate triumph.
- 5- Astronomically: the work also cites the remarkable control of the Egyptians in the field of astronomy and mathematics as they were able to employ the sun to light specific spots in the temple at specific times.

Little could Rameses II have imagined that for a brief spell, at least three thousand years after his death, his fame would spread for beyond the limits of the empire over which he had ruled as a god incarnate.

The Temple of Abu Simbel proves that Rameses II and his wife Nefertary inspired sympathy as well as admiration. They were real people. They had their weakness as well as their love of life. They were not deities, but were human beings immortalized by their giant creative achievement.

NOTES

1. Taken from Sir Alan Gardener, *The Kadash Inscriptions of Ramesis II*, Oxford.
2. Susame Langer, *Feeling and Form*, Charles Scribner's sons, New York 1956
3. Ibid, p. 98
4. Ibid. p. 92
5. Ibid. p. 71
6. Ibid. p. 86
7. Coward Mc. *Temples, Tombs, and Hieroglyphs, The Story of Egyptology*, Camn, Inc. New York 1964
8. Ibid. p. 212
9. Ibid. p. 111
10. E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion, A study in the psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1972
11. Norman N Holland, *The Dynamic of Literary Response*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1975
12. William Mac Quitty, *Abu Simbel*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York 1965
13. "Rameses II", *Webster's International Encyclopedia* 99, Webster Publishing and Contributors 1998
14. "The Great Temple of Abu Simbel", simbel/nefertari.html
15. "History of Egyptian Architecture: Abu Simbel No. 2" jp/org/orion/eng/hst/egypt/abusimbel1.html





Figure 1: The facade of Abu Simbel, dominated by four statues of the pharaoh himself



Figure 2: Nefertari, the beloved daughter wife of Ramesses II

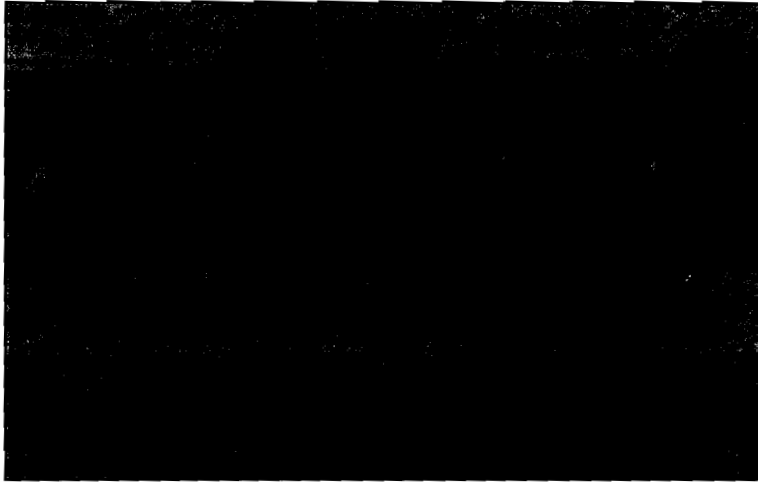


Figure 3: A row of baboon sacred to the rising sun

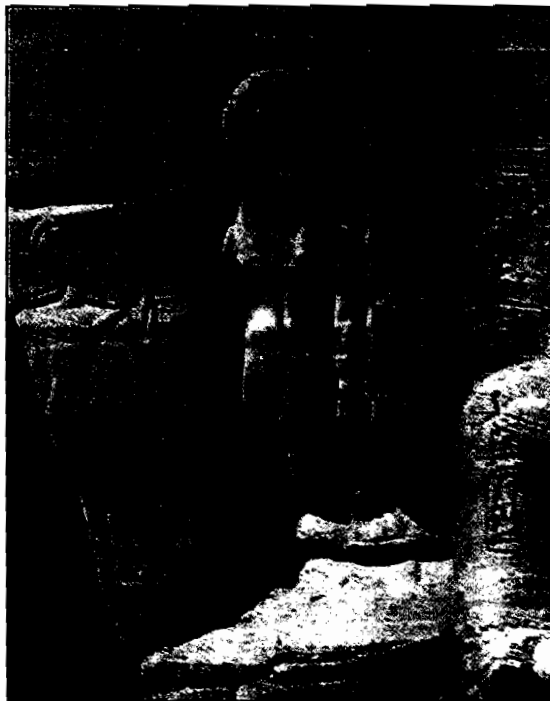


Figure 4: Ra-Harakhte, the guardian god of the dead

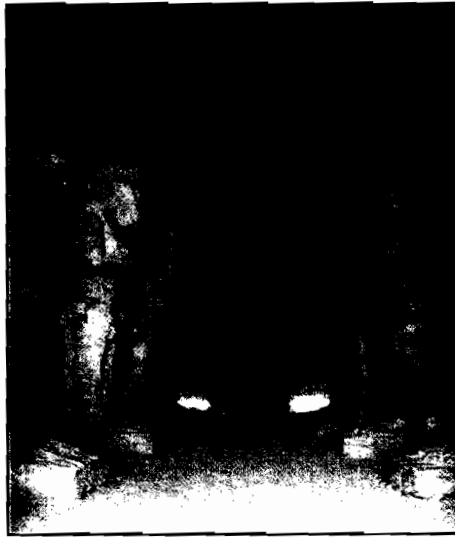


Figure 5: Eight huge Osiris Pillars bearing the features of Rameses II



Figure 6: Rameses II, always as twice as the size of his enemy



Figure 7: The sanctuary where four gods: Ptah, Amun Ra, Harakhte, and Rameses II are seated in equal dignity.

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