

The Lion of Bitlis: Abdal Khan, the Rozhîkî Emirate, and the Challenge to Ottoman Authority in the Mid-17th Century

Introduction

The mid-17th century represented a critical juncture for the Ottoman Empire. Far from a simple narrative of decline, this era was a period of profound internal transformation, where the complex relationship between the imperial center in Istanbul and its vast, diverse peripheries was being actively and often violently renegotiated.¹ In the rugged highlands of Eastern Anatolia, the semi-autonomous Kurdish emirates stood as a testament to this dynamic. These principalities, strategically vital as a buffer against the rival Safavid Empire, embodied a delicate balance of local power and imperial suzerainty.² Among them, the ancient and powerful Principality of Bitlis, ruled by the Rozhîkî dynasty, emerged as a crucible for the era's defining tensions.

The revolt of Abdal Khan, the emir of Bitlis, was not a simple act of provincial defiance but a complex political drama that encapsulated the major conflicts of its time. It was a direct consequence of the Ottoman Empire's own systemic evolution, a stress test of the fragile post-1639 peace with the Safavid Empire, and the ultimate expression of an autonomous Kurdish principality's struggle to maintain its sovereignty against an increasingly centralizing imperial state. The conflict, therefore, serves as a microcosm of the broader contest between imperial ambition and local resilience in the early modern Middle East.

Our understanding of these events is overwhelmingly shaped by a single, extraordinary source: the *Seyahatname* (Book of Travels) of Evliya Çelebi. Evliya was no dispassionate chronicler; he was an active participant in the drama, a kinsman and official in the retinue of Melek Ahmed Pasha, the very Ottoman governor dispatched to crush Abdal Khan's rebellion.³ His unique position provides a rich, detailed, yet inherently biased account. The narrative is marked by a profound internal contradiction: Evliya meticulously chronicles the downfall of a man he simultaneously praises as a multifaceted "renaissance prince".⁴ Navigating this duality is central to comprehending the intricate realities of the Bitlis revolt.

Table 1: Timeline of the Bitlis Revolt and Key Contextual Events (1636–1673)

Year(s)	Events in Bitlis &	Ottoman Imperial &	Ottoman-Safavid
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	Related to Abdal Khan	Regional Events	Relations
1636	Abdal Khan refuses to send provisions to the Ottoman garrison in Van. ⁸	Sultan Murad IV is actively preparing for the Baghdad campaign.	Tensions remain high over control of Iraq and the Caucasus.
1638-1639	Abdal Khan does not participate in the Baghdad campaign and fails to congratulate Sultan Murad IV upon his victory. ⁸	Sultan Murad IV successfully reconquers Baghdad from the Safavids.	The Ottoman victory at Baghdad leads directly to peace negotiations.
1639			Treaty of Zuhab (Qasr-i Shirin) is signed, establishing a formal, albeit tense, peace and defining the Ottoman-Safavid border. ¹⁰
1640-1648	Abdal Khan continues to rule Bitlis, expanding his influence and consolidating his power. ⁸	Reign of the troubled Sultan Ibrahim; rise of powerful court factions.	A period of "unequal peace" begins, with the Ottomans as the recognized superior power. ¹²
1648-1687		Reign of Sultan Mehmed IV begins, marked by the influence of the Valide Sultan and later the Köprülü Grand Viziers. ¹	The Ottomans give their blessing for a Safavid campaign against the Mughals, demonstrating complex diplomatic maneuvering. ¹²
1654-1655	Abdal Khan's conflict with Van merchants and his alleged closeness to the Yazidis provide a pretext for intervention. ⁴	Melek Ahmed Pasha is appointed governor (Wāli) of the Van Eyalet. ³	
July 1655	Melek Ahmed Pasha launches a punitive campaign against	The campaign is witnessed and chronicled by Evliya	

	Bitlis. Abdal Khan is deposed and his son Ziyaeddin is installed as the new emir. ³	Çelebi, who is in Melek Ahmed Pasha's retinue. ³	
1656	Melek Ahmed Pasha is dismissed from his post. Abdal Khan returns to Bitlis, has Ziyaeddin killed, and retakes power. He briefly holds Evliya Çelebi as a hostage. ³	Political instability at the Ottoman court leads to frequent changes in provincial governorships.	
c. 1665	Abdal Khan is demoted from his position as Emir of Bitlis. ¹⁶	The Köprülü era of centralized administration is in full effect, with less tolerance for autonomous lords.	
c. 1667-68	(Contested) One school of thought holds that Abdal Khan was executed in Istanbul on the orders of Sultan Mehmed IV. ¹⁶		
c. 1673	(Contested) Another school of thought, based on archival evidence, suggests Abdal Khan was pardoned, returned to rule Bitlis as a co-emir with his son, and died of natural causes around this time. ⁸		

Part I: The Imperial Context: A Transformed Empire and its Unsettled Frontiers

Section 1.1: The Ottoman State in an Age of Crisis and Adaptation

The Ottoman Empire of the mid-17th century was an entity undergoing a fundamental restructuring. Historians have increasingly moved beyond the outdated "decline" thesis, reframing this period as one of "crisis, adaptation, and transformation".¹ The patrimonial state, defined by the absolute and personal authority of the sultan, was evolving into a more bureaucratic and politically complex system. The era of the warrior-sultan leading armies in the field had largely passed. Dynastic politics had changed dramatically with the abandonment of royal fratricide and the practice of princes governing provinces. This led to a system where multiple adult male heirs of the Ottoman dynasty resided in the palace, making individual sultans more replaceable and vesting sovereignty more in the dynasty as a whole.¹ Consequently, power became more diffuse, contested among powerful factions within the Istanbul court, including the Valide Sultan (Queen Mother) and the Şeyhülislâm (the chief religious authority).¹ The violent deposition and regicide of the reform-minded Sultan Osman II in a Janissary uprising in 1622 was a stark demonstration of this new political reality, cementing the shift away from a system of absolute monarchical power.¹ The long reign of Sultan Mehmed IV (1648-1687), which formed the backdrop to the Bitlis revolt, was initially marked by this instability. It later saw the rise of the formidable Köprülü family of grand viziers, who from 1656 onward spearheaded a series of administrative and military reforms aimed at reasserting central control and fiscal stability.¹

This political transformation was driven by, and ran parallel to, significant military and fiscal challenges. The empire was adapting to the age of gunpowder warfare by moving away from the traditional Timar system of cavalry fiefs. This system was gradually disestablished in favor of raising modern armies of musketeers, primarily an expanded Janissary corps.¹ This shift necessitated a quadrupling of the state bureaucracy to manage the more efficient collection of centralized tax revenues required to pay the larger standing army.¹ This new military-fiscal structure placed immense strain on the treasury. Furthermore, the empire was embroiled in major, costly wars on its European front, most notably the long and draining Cretan War against the Republic of Venice (1645-1669).¹ This intense focus of military and financial resources on the Mediterranean front created a power vacuum and a degree of inattention on the eastern frontiers, a condition that a savvy and ambitious peripheral lord like Abdal Khan could readily perceive and exploit. His defiance was thus not an isolated act but a calculated risk, predicated on an astute reading of the empire's broader strategic preoccupations and internal political flux.

Section 1.2: The Enduring Rivalry: Ottoman-Safavid Relations after the Treaty of Zuhab (1639)

For over a century, the Ottoman Empire's eastern frontier had been defined by its epic rivalry

with the Safavid Empire of Iran. This conflict was fought over strategic territories like Iraq and the Caucasus, but it was profoundly intensified by a deep ideological and religious schism between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shia Safavids.¹⁰ The Treaty of Zuhab, signed in 1639 following Sultan Murad IV's successful reconquest of Baghdad, brought an end to decades of destructive, large-scale warfare.¹⁰

However, the treaty did not inaugurate an era of genuine peace but rather a new phase of managed rivalry. It established what has been termed an "unequal peace," in which the Ottomans were the recognized superior power.¹² This new hierarchy was explicitly codified in diplomatic protocol; for instance, the Ottoman Grand Vizier was accorded a rank equivalent to a king and could correspond directly with the Shah, a privilege not extended to his Safavid counterpart.¹² This formalized subordination, while stabilizing the frontier, was a political reality that proud, independent-minded rulers in the region may have found difficult to accept. In this tense geopolitical landscape, the mountainous region of Kurdistan held paramount strategic importance. Sultan Murad IV himself articulated this view, stating, "Allah created Kurdistan to protect my empire like a strong barrier and an iron castle against the mischief of evil Iran".² The loyalty of the powerful Kurdish emirs was therefore a cornerstone of Ottoman security policy. In exchange for fealty, military support against the Safavids, and the protection of vital trade routes, the Ottoman Porte granted these hereditary rulers significant administrative, judicial, and fiscal autonomy.¹⁹ This arrangement created a delicate balance of power, but it also meant that the most powerful Kurdish lords, like the Emir of Bitlis, existed in a state of perpetual negotiation, capable of leveraging their strategic position to maximize their independence. Abdal Khan's refusal to congratulate Murad IV for the very victory that sealed the Treaty of Zuhab can be seen not as a mere diplomatic slight, but as a profound political statement—a symbolic rejection of the treaty's outcome and an assertion that Bitlis would not passively accept this new, formalized imperial hierarchy.⁸ The treaty, intended to bring stability, had paradoxically created the conditions for a new kind of conflict centered on sovereignty and status.

Part II: The Principality of Bitlis: A Bastion of Kurdish Autonomy

Section 2.1: The Rozhîkî Dynasty and the Legacy of the *Sharafnama*

The Principality of Bitlis was no fleeting creation of Ottoman frontier policy. Its rulers, the Rozhîkî (also Rozagî or Rojaki) dynasty, traced their origins to a tribal confederation that had conquered the strategic city of Bitlis and its environs in the 10th century.⁴ For centuries, the emirate navigated the turbulent politics of the region, intermittently falling under the sway of

larger powers like the Aq Qoyunlu and the Safavids before reasserting its independence.⁴ Its formal relationship with the Ottomans was cemented after the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, when the Rozhîkî princes allied with Sultan Selim I against the Safavids, earning the title of "Noble Khans" and securing their status as hereditary rulers of a semi-independent vassal state.⁴

The dynasty's profound sense of its own legitimacy was powerfully articulated by one of its most famous scions, Emir Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi (r. 1578–1597). A formidable historian and intellectual, Sharaf al-Din authored the *Sharafnama* (completed c. 1597), the single most important work on the history of the Kurdish dynasties.²⁵ In this seminal text, he advanced a genealogy for the Rozhîkî line that bypassed recent allegiances to Turkish or Persian overlords, instead claiming direct descent from the pre-Islamic Sasanian emperors of Persia.²⁵ This was a potent assertion of an ancient, royal legitimacy that was entirely independent of, and predated, both the Ottoman and Safavid states. This legacy of sovereignty, codified in the *Sharafnama*, formed the ideological bedrock upon which his descendant, Abdal Khan, would build his own assertive and independent-minded rule.

Section 2.2: The "Golden Age" of Abdal Khan

The nearly fifty-year reign of Abdal Khan (c. 1618–1664) is remembered as a "golden age" for the Principality of Bitlis.²⁶ Contemporary accounts, from the Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi to the French merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, paint a picture of a remarkably powerful and cultured ruler. Tavernier described him as the most powerful Kurdish prince of his time, one who was effectively independent and did not acknowledge the authority of either the Ottoman Sultan or the Safavid Shah.⁴ Evliya Çelebi, despite being part of the army sent to subdue him, was clearly captivated by the khan, praising him as a *hezârfen*—a "master of a thousand arts" or a renaissance man.⁷

According to Evliya, Abdal Khan was a polymath: a poet, a patron of literature, a skilled physician, a clockmaker, a goldsmith, and an architect.⁷ He was fluent in Kurdish, Persian, Turkish, and Arabic.⁸ His most famous possession was a legendary library filled with books in multiple languages, the looting of which Evliya witnessed with regret during the 1655 Ottoman campaign.³ Under his rule, Bitlis became a vibrant center of culture and commerce. The emirate played a significant role in regional trade, particularly in agricultural goods and as a hub for Armenian merchants who constituted the main minority population.²⁷ Militarily, the emirate was formidable; European travelers noted Abdal Khan's ability to call upon a militia of up to 12,000 cavalymen to defend his territory.⁴

The court of Bitlis cultivated a sophisticated "Persianate" culture, a common feature of the broader region stretching from the Balkans to India.⁴ Persian was the language of the elite, used for administration, poetry, scholarly works, and diplomacy with the Safavid court.⁴ This cultural orientation was more than a matter of taste; in an era of increasing Ottoman administrative and linguistic centralization, it was a subtle but powerful assertion of cultural

sovereignty. By aligning his court with a prestigious, non-Ottoman imperial tradition, Abdal Khan was implicitly resisting complete absorption into the Ottoman sphere and reinforcing a distinct identity and legitimacy for his emirate, rooted in the ancient Sasanian heritage claimed by his ancestors.

Part III: The Path to Rebellion: Escalation and Confrontation (1636–1655)

Section 3.1: Early Acts of Defiance

The conflict between Abdal Khan and the Ottoman state did not erupt suddenly. It was the culmination of nearly two decades of escalating tensions and increasingly bold acts of insubordination by the emir. The first major recorded incident occurred in 1636, when Abdal Khan refused a direct order to send grain and oats to provision the Ottoman fortress at Van. This was not a minor oversight but a direct dereliction of his duty as a vassal lord responsible for supporting the imperial military infrastructure in his region.⁸

The most significant and unforgivable act of defiance came in 1638-1639. As Sultan Murad IV waged his momentous campaign to reconquer Baghdad from the Safavids, Abdal Khan, unlike other loyal Kurdish emirs, failed to join the imperial army.⁸ Even more egregious was his subsequent refusal to travel to Diyarbakir to personally congratulate the victorious Sultan. This was a profound diplomatic and personal insult that Murad IV, a famously stern ruler, would neither forgive nor forget.⁸ Ottoman sources indicate that the enraged Sultan ordered his commanders to "take revenge" on the "disloyal emir" of Bitlis for this flagrant display of disrespect.⁸ Although immediate retribution was delayed, the incident marked Abdal Khan as a rebellious figure in the eyes of the Porte and set the stage for future conflict.

Section 3.2: The Governor and the Khan: Melek Ahmed Pasha vs. Abdal Khan

The direct confrontation was finally precipitated by the appointment of Melek Ahmed Pasha as the governor (*Wāli*) of the Van Eyalet in 1655.³ Melek Ahmed was a high-ranking and experienced Ottoman statesman of Abkhazian origin, who had previously served as governor of major provinces like Diyarbakır, Mosul, and Damascus.²⁹ He was also deeply connected to the imperial center, having served as Grand Vizier and being the husband of Kaya Sultan, a daughter of the late Sultan Murad IV.³⁰ Furthermore, he was the uncle and patron of the traveler Evliya Çelebi, who accompanied him on his posting to Van.³

The ensuing conflict can be understood as a clash between two powerful and determined figures, each representing an opposing principle of governance. Melek Ahmed Pasha embodied the centralizing impulse of the Ottoman state, tasked with enforcing imperial authority and bringing unruly peripheries to heel. His ambition was to depose the independent-minded Abdal Khan and fully integrate the strategic territory of Bitlis into the standard Ottoman provincial system, ending its special autonomous status.¹⁴ Abdal Khan, in contrast, represented the fierce resilience of local, hereditary power, determined to protect the centuries-old autonomy of his emirate.

Section 3.3: The Pretext for War: Accusations and Propaganda

To justify a military campaign against a powerful Sunni Muslim vassal, the Ottoman authorities required a compelling pretext. A series of official justifications (*casus belli*) were formulated to frame Abdal Khan as a threat to imperial order and stability. One set of accusations came from merchants based in Van, who claimed that the emir was illegally confiscating their property and disrupting regional trade.⁴ This charge conveniently painted him as a predatory and lawless ruler whose actions harmed the economic interests of the empire. A far more potent and politically sophisticated accusation was that of Abdal Khan's "closeness with the Yazidis".⁴ In the 17th-century Ottoman world, this was a deeply damaging charge. The Yazidis were a non-Muslim, Kurdish-speaking religious minority who were frequently persecuted by orthodox Muslim authorities. Their unique faith was often misunderstood and maligned as heretical or even "devil-worship".³⁴ Leveling this accusation against a prominent Sunni emir like Abdal Khan was a powerful political weapon. It served multiple strategic purposes: it provided a religious justification for a war that was fundamentally about political centralization; it aimed to alienate Abdal Khan from other Sunni Kurdish emirs and the broader Muslim population, thereby undermining potential alliances; and it branded him as an unorthodox and untrustworthy ruler, unfit to govern a sensitive frontier province bordering Shia Iran. The "Yazidi" accusation was a classic example of using religious and sectarian rhetoric to achieve clear geopolitical objectives, delegitimizing the target and mobilizing support for military intervention.

Part IV: The Revolt of 1655–1656: An Eyewitness Account

Section 4.1: The Campaign Against Bitlis

In the summer of 1655, Melek Ahmed Pasha launched his punitive expedition against Bitlis.

The campaign is known in remarkable detail thanks to the vivid, first-hand account of Evliya Çelebi, who marched with the Ottoman army.³ As the imperial forces advanced, Abdal Khan, seemingly unable to muster a force sufficient to meet them in open battle, fled his capital. The Ottoman army entered Bitlis without a major siege. Evliya describes the events that followed, including the systematic looting of the emir's palace. He gives a poignant account of the dispersal of Abdal Khan's famous library, a treasure trove of knowledge and culture, which was plundered by the soldiers.³ Following the capture of the city, Melek Ahmed Pasha moved to secure Ottoman control. He deposed the fugitive Abdal Khan and oversaw the "election" of his son, Ziyaeddin, as the new emir. This was a clear demonstration of imperial power, replacing a defiant ruler with a presumably more compliant one, thereby transforming the emirate into a puppet state under the direct control of the Ottoman governor in Van.³

Section 4.2: The Khan's Return

The Ottoman victory of 1655 proved to be remarkably short-lived, a testament to the fragile and personalized nature of imperial control in the periphery. In 1656, due to political machinations and intrigues at the court in Istanbul, Melek Ahmed Pasha was abruptly dismissed from his post as governor of Van.¹⁵ The moment the strong hand of the imperial governor was removed, the entire political situation in Bitlis reversed.

Upon hearing the news of his rival's dismissal, Abdal Khan made a dramatic return from his exile. He re-entered Bitlis, where his authority was evidently still recognized by the local populace and elites. In a grim turn of events, his son Ziyaeddin, the Ottoman-installed ruler, was killed—according to some accounts, by Abdal Khan himself through a cunning trick—and Abdal Khan resumed his rule as emir.⁸ This swift reversal demonstrated that the 1655 campaign had not fundamentally altered the local power structure; it had merely suppressed it temporarily. The loyalty of the people of Bitlis remained with their hereditary ruler, not with the distant imperial center or its appointed proxies. During this period, Evliya Çelebi, who had returned to Bitlis on official business, found himself in a precarious position. He was briefly taken hostage by the restored Abdal Khan, an episode that provides some of the most intimate and compelling details about the khan's court and personality in the entire *Seyahatname*.³

Section 4.3: Through the Eyes of Evliya Çelebi: A Dual Perspective

Evliya Çelebi's account of the Bitlis affair is a masterpiece of early modern travel literature, precisely because of its complex and often contradictory perspective. As an official and kinsman of Melek Ahmed Pasha, Evliya was an agent of the Ottoman state, and his narrative ostensibly chronicles an imperial mission to punish a rebellious vassal. Yet, his portrayal of Abdal Khan is suffused with a profound and unmistakable admiration.⁶

Throughout his narrative, Evliya seems far more impressed by the culture, wealth, and

personal charisma of the Kurdish "rebel" than by the imperial apparatus he served. He describes in lavish detail the sumptuous banquets hosted by the khan, served on "golden and silver dishes and porcelain and onyx and celadon bowls," declaring that no modern sultan had offered such a feast.⁶ He marvels at the khan's court, where the servants were "Circassian and Georgian slaves, dressed and adorned with jewels," looking like "peacocks from paradise".⁷ He praises Abdal Khan's many skills and his intellectual prowess, contrasting sharply with the often-brutal realities of the military campaign.⁷ This tension in Evliya's writing—the loyal Ottoman official who cannot hide his fascination with the defiant Kurdish prince—makes the *Seyahatname* a uniquely valuable historical source. It reveals the human complexities behind the political conflict and suggests that the lines between imperial authority and local grandeur were often blurred in the eyes of those who witnessed them directly.

Part V: Aftermath and Legacy

Section 5.1: The Fate of Abdal Khan: A Historiographical Controversy

The ultimate fate of Abdal Khan following his restoration to power in 1656 is a subject of significant historical debate, with conflicting narratives reflecting the different facets of Ottoman statecraft. The existence of this controversy itself highlights the complex calculations the empire had to make in dealing with powerful peripheral lords.

One school of thought, prominent in several scholarly works, presents a narrative of ultimate imperial retribution. According to this view, Abdal Khan's defiance could not be tolerated indefinitely, especially during the centralizing Köprülü era. Around 1665, he was formally demoted and exiled to Istanbul. There, in 1667-68, he was executed on the direct orders of Sultan Mehmed IV.¹⁶ This account emphasizes the triumph of the centralizing state and its capacity to eventually punish even the most powerful challengers to its authority. It aligns with the image of an empire reasserting absolute control over its domains.

However, a contrasting view has emerged from studies of Ottoman archival documents. This revisionist narrative argues that Abdal Khan was never executed. Instead, after a period in exile, he was pardoned by the Sultan. In a remarkable display of political pragmatism, he was eventually re-appointed as co-emir of Bitlis, ruling alongside his son. According to this interpretation, he died of natural causes around 1673.⁸ If accurate, this account points to a more nuanced and flexible Ottoman policy. It suggests that the Porte may have calculated that co-opting a chastened but still influential Rozhîkî ruler was a more effective and less costly method of securing the volatile Safavid border than direct military occupation, which could create a dangerous power vacuum. The debate over Abdal Khan's death thus reflects the two competing impulses within Ottoman governance: the ideological drive for absolute centralization versus the pragmatic necessity of utilizing established local elites to maintain

order.

Section 5.2: The End of Autonomy?: The Status of Bitlis after the Revolt

Regardless of Abdal Khan's personal fate, his revolt marked a turning point for the Principality of Bitlis. Formally, its long history as a semi-sovereign entity came to an end in 1655. With the Ottoman campaign, the emirate was officially integrated into the administrative structure of the Van Eyalet (province), losing its special status.⁴

However, the distinction between *de jure* status and *de facto* power remained crucial. Even after the revolt, the Rozhîkî dynasty was not eliminated. The fact that the Ottomans installed Abdal Khan's son as his successor in 1655, and may have later pardoned and reinstated Abdal Khan himself, shows a continued reliance on the hereditary ruling family to govern the region. While their formal autonomy was curtailed, the Rozhîkîs likely retained significant local influence and continued to play a central role in the governance of Bitlis. The broader system of autonomous Kurdish emirates, while weakened, would not be fully dismantled until the sweeping centralizing reforms of the 19th century, which sought to abolish such hereditary principalities across the empire.² The revolt, therefore, represented not a final death blow, but a critical step in the long, gradual process of incorporating the Kurdish periphery into the direct administrative framework of the Ottoman state.

Section 5.3: Conclusion: The Revolt in Historical Perspective

The mid-17th-century Bitlis revolt, led by the formidable Abdal Khan, stands as a quintessential example of the complex and often contradictory nature of Ottoman imperial governance. It was a conflict born from the empire's own systemic changes, the unresolved geopolitical tensions with Safavid Iran, and the enduring power of a local dynasty unwilling to surrender its centuries-old autonomy. The defiance of Abdal Khan was both a product of and a challenge to an empire in transition—an empire whose central authority was being redefined and whose focus was often directed thousands of miles away to its European frontiers. The story of the "Lion of Bitlis," filtered through the uniquely intimate and ambivalent lens of the traveler Evliya Çelebi, transcends a simple narrative of rebellion and suppression. It reveals a world where the lines between loyalty and defiance, center and periphery, were constantly being negotiated. Abdal Khan was at once a vassal of the Sultan and a sovereign in his own right, a "rebel" in the eyes of Istanbul and a cultured "renaissance prince" to those who entered his court. His struggle against the centralizing forces of the Ottoman state, personified by the governor Melek Ahmed Pasha, serves as a powerful historical reminder that the Ottoman Empire was not a monolithic entity of absolute command. Rather, its vast history was shaped by a continuous, dynamic, and often violent negotiation of power between the imperial center and its many powerful and resilient peripheries.

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