

# *The Ancient Cities of the Usumacinta*



The Grand Plaza with Stela 2 to the right. Yaxchilán. Photo: Elsie Montiel

## Notes from an Old Field Diary

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In December 1983, battered by the torrential rains caused by cold fronts along the Chiapas Lacandon Jungle, we were excavating the first stairways that lead from the Great Plaza to the heights of Building 33 in Yaxchilán. During our work, we located the box of stela 2, an eroded monument found by the Austrian explorer Teobert Maler at the end of the nineteenth century. The stela dates from A.D. 615 and shows the features of a long forgotten ruler of Yaxchilán, perhaps the father of Bird Jaguar III, a personage of the legendary dynasty that restored its line in the mid-seventh century.

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#### YAXCHILÁN

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Yaxchilán is splendidly placed on a curve on the left bank of the Usumacinta River. Its architects took good advantage of the succession of natural terraces parallel to the river to erect the most splendid of buildings. Today, the traveler to the ancient city enters by way of the Grand Plaza, passing by a series of subterranean galleries under Building 19, called the Labyrinth because of the intricacy

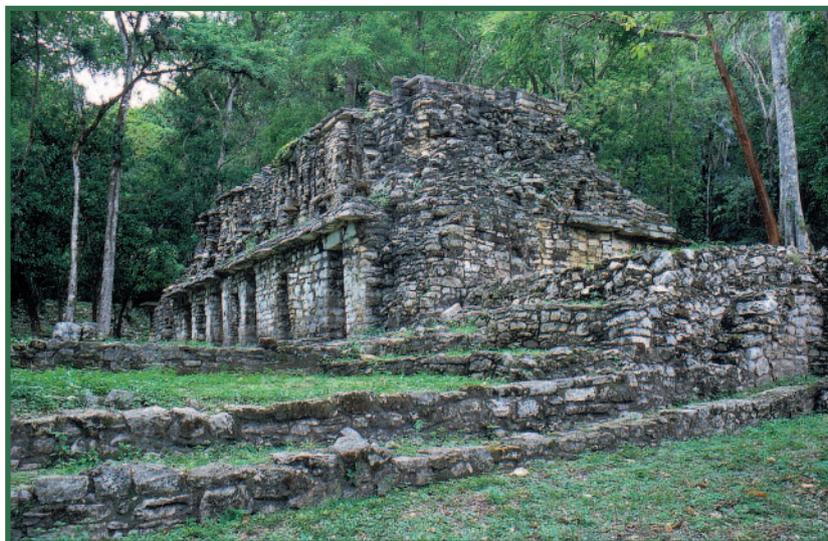
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of its corridors. The trip, in the dark, suffocating humidity of its hallways, evokes the experience of a journey into the depths of the underworld, Xibalbá. An entryway for those who, divining the shadows at the end of the road, will be allowed to push to one side the veil covering the world of the ancient Maya, a world of presences and essences that once populated that jungle.

Crossing the threshold, we see the Great Plaza, separated from the river by several buildings, among them, the *temascal* or steam-bath house, a small structure with wide built-in stone benches used for ritual ablutions; Building 16, on whose lintels Bird Jaguar IV, disposed to be represented, along with his mother and his consort, invoking the Vision Serpent; the ball game, a court where the sacred contest took place between the celestial powers and those of the underworld, whose constant clashes maintained order in the cosmos; and, finally, a modest palace complex, whose corners are now inhabited only by the murmur of the river. At the center of the Great Plaza is Stela 1, *axis mundi* or center of the earth that celebrates the end of a period in the reign of Bird Jaguar IV, and also indicates the way to Building 33, his most elaborate work.

As we prepare to put Stela 2 back in its original position, we never stopped thinking about the unidentified personage carved on it, whose



Building 19, Yaxchilán. The traveler reaches the main plaza passing through its subterranean galleries.  
Photo: Elsie Montiel



Stela 1, detail. Yaxchilán. Photo: Elsie Montiel

epigraphic records, just like those of his probable son Bird Jaguar III, continue to be lost in the obscurity of time and the rubble

of the buildings. We know that after the beginning of the government of Mah k'ina Cranium II in the year A.D. 526, there is a prolonged silence in the Yaxchilán inscriptions until Shield Jaguar I took the throne in A.D. 681. He, together with his son Bird Jaguar IV, recovered part of that memory, marked by the oblivion that characterized the Mayan lowlands for almost the entire sixth century and the first third of the seventh.

In the sixth century, the years-long alliance between the governing elites of Tikal and Caracol dissolved, causing political destabilization in the region and giving the reign of Calakmul the opportunity to extend its influence over a larger area. Thus, while the Tikal line found refuge in the Petexbatún region, other cities fought to control the strategic enclaves in the Usumacinta basin and the lowlands of Tabasco, dominions that would pave the way to obtaining important resources and the possibility of exchanging them with other Mesoamerican provinces. In that context lived Bird Jaguar III, who faced not only the old rivalries with the neighboring kingdom of Piedras Negras and its allies, but also with the powerful kingdom of Palenque under the command of K'inich Janaab' Pakal I (Pakal the Great). At the

end of the conflict, he managed to achieve for himself and his successors dominion over the Yaxchilán lines.

The few monuments whose inscriptions refer to Bird Jaguar III were erected by his son and grandson. These inscriptions state that he occupied the Yaxchilán ceremonial center between A.D. 630 and A.D. 681, a period in which Building 7 and the palace

complex made up of Buildings 10, 11, 12 and 74 were erected. Older constructions were found in the Little Acropolis, a group of buildings situated on top of a hill to the northwest of the site, suggesting that they were originally ordered built by Bird Jaguar III to use as a residence. The final constructions, together with Buildings 42 and 44, were erected under the supervision of Shield Jaguar I, whose architectural program was dedicated to consecrating his military feats and proclaiming his links to his divine ancestors.

Stelas 3 and 6, commissioned by Bird Jaguar IV, show the sublime moment in which Bird Jaguar II made an offering of his blood, a rite with which Mayan rulers commemorated the turn of the *katún* after taking the throne.<sup>1</sup> For the ancient



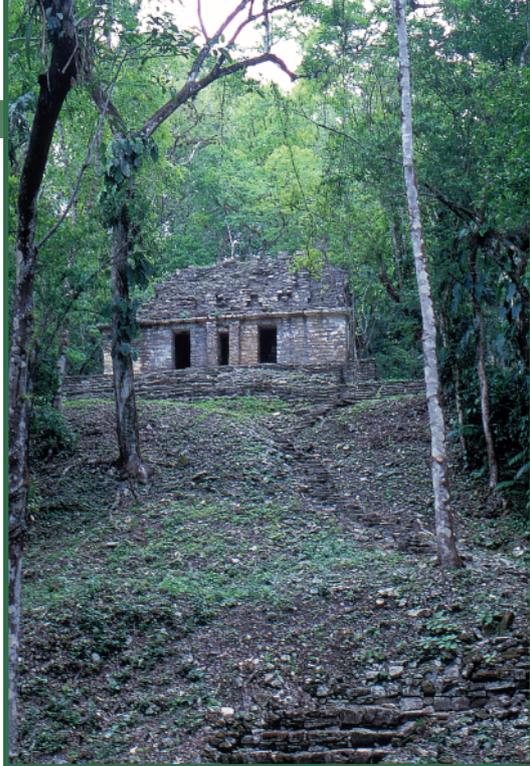
Glyphs from Building 33. Yaxchilán. Photo: Rubén Vázquez

Mayan imaginary, the blood offering, whether in the solitude of the private chambers or in a lavish public ritual, was a transcendental event through which it was possible to open up the prodigious doorway of communication with ancestors and gods. The rites of passage such as birth, the transition to puberty or death, as well as the events that affected people's reality such as rulers being enthroned, preparations for battle or the culmination of certain calendar cycles required ablutions and the mortification of the flesh.

To do this, men perforated their penises and women their tongues using sharp obsidian knives or the spiny tail of the stingray, which, when blessed, were possessed by the spirit of the Perforator God, thus becoming objects of power. The blood from



Bird Jaguar IV, Building 33. Yaxchilán. Photo: Rubén Vázquez



Building 30. Yaxchilán. Photo: Elsie Montiel

the self-sacrifice was collected on strips of *amate* paper to be consumed in the blackened burner, in whose evanescent column of smoke, mixed with the aromatic *pom* (copal resin), emerged the materialization of the Serpent Vision, considered the manifestation of the divine ancestors, who was consulted about the signs of the universe. The ostentation of these public ceremonies at the height of the Mayan culture can be seen in the Bonampak murals.

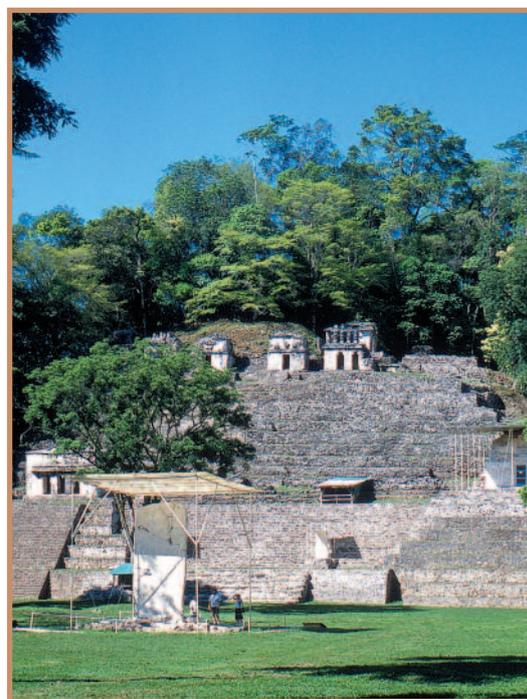
## BONAMPAK

The ancient city of Bonampak occupied a narrow valley crisscrossed by many streams that feed into the Lacanjá River. It is barely 25 kilometers south of Yaxchilán and separated from it only by some craggy mountains. The architects used one of the high places to recreate the founding passage of the sacred mountain. On its northeast side, they planned a series of terraces and erected the buildings of the Acropolis. One of the outstanding edifices is the Temple of Paintings, which dominates the large plaza at its feet and in whose center is the *axis mundi*, Stela 1, which shows the figure of the last known ruler, Chaan Muan II.

To him we owe the iconographic work of the Temple of Paintings done to celebrate his third anniversary in the ceremonial center in A.D. 791.

Chaan Muan II had himself depicted in Room 1 dancing in rich, sumptuous clothing. Parallel to that, another ceremony is taking place in which one of the figures holds a child in his arms, showing it to a group of nobles. The scene, which has been interpreted as the presentation of the successor in a dynastic line, is still debated by the epigraphers, since while the erection of the building commemorates the event, the ceremony is not mentioned in the inscriptions.

Room 2 recreates a cruel, bloody battle culminating in the capture of victims for sacrifice in the year A.D. 792, jealously observed from the firmament by the personification of Venus the evening star, the warrior power that boasts its own captives. Room 3 evokes what may be the paroxysm of the celebration in the public plaza in which a group of dancers executes the steps imposed by the grave beat of the *tunkul*, or drum, accompanied by rattles and trumpets, while other figures, perhaps guided by mystical rapture, offer up their blood, as does a group of women who, in the intimacy of the site, are seen perforating their tongues and wearing ribbons around their necks as a sign of their devotion.



The entrance to Bonampak. Photo: Elsie Montiel



Left: Stela 1, Chaan Muan II (detail); center: Stela 2, Chaan Muan II and Yax Rabbit (detail); right: Lintel, Chaan Muan II subduing a captive, Temple of Paintings. Bonampak. Photos: Elsie Montiel

Chaan Muan II's iconographic project included other monuments. Stela 2, in addition to depicting his enthronement in A.D. 776, shows him preparing for his self-sacrifice, assisted by his mother, standing in front of him, and his consort, Madame Yax Rabbit, a prominent member of the Yaxchilán line; both of them are holding the vessels with the instruments used to bleed him. Stela 1 commemorates his first celebration in A.D. 782, in which Chaan Muan II is wearing a breastplate of sea shells. Stela 3 depicts the second anniversary in which, wearing a headdress in the shape of a serpent, he is holding a dart launcher in his hand and has a captive prostrate at his feet. On the lintels that close the openings in the wall of the Temple of Paintings, in addition to having himself depicted subduing a captive, the sovereign shared this sig-

nificant space with Shield Jaguar II of Yaxchilán, his most important ally and the brother of Madame Yax Rabbit. Another figure offers us a glimpse of the past, reminding us of a victory by his grandfather, Withered Eye Jaguar II, who in about A.D. 740 made relations with the kingdom of Lacanjá closer to stop the attacks of the kingdom of Sak Tz'i.

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Like in Yaxchilán, in Bonampak only a vague memory remains of its first rulers; their memory, chiseled in stone, is today dispersed and fragmented among museums and private collections or lost in the rubble of the ancient city.

This memory, broken and dispersed, tells us that around A.D. 641 Bonampak defied the con-



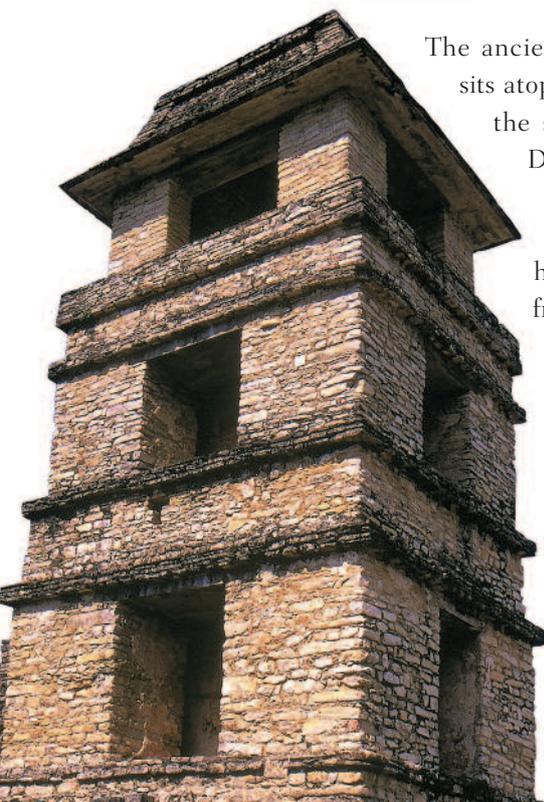
The Presentation in Room 1, Temple of Paintings. Bonampak. Photo: Elsie Montiel

ditions imposed by the sovereigns of Piedras Negras, who, using the complicity and alliances plotted from the halls of Calakmul, managed to extend their domains and take over the river region of Tabasco, therefore limiting Palenque's expansionist aspirations to control that territory. Thus, the lord of Piedras Negras known as Ruler 2, sadly remembered on Bonampak's monuments as Nik' Moo Tul (Flower Macaw Rabbit), at only fifteen took prisoner and sacrificed Hun Ek' Tut' (One Star Parrot), the divine lord of Bonampak.

Piedras Negras's Panel 2 was erected in A.D. 658 to commemorate the death of Yo 'nal Ahk I, the father of Ruler 2. It also seems to salute the presentation of his son as successor in the dynasty, a ceremony which the nobles of Lacanjá and Yaxchilán attended, as did the ruler of Bonampak, Moyil Chaan K'awil (Last? Heaven God), about

whom it is difficult to fully understand if he was imposed in the ceremonial center or whether, after the death of his predecessor, he preferred to opt for prudence and maintain a weak political equilibrium. At the end of the seventh century, Bonampak's ceremonial center was occupied by Ah Chuh Uul Yaxún Bahlam (Lord? Moon Bird Jaguar), whose efforts managed to consolidate his alliance with Lacanjá when he sponsored the enthronement of Ah Bahlum Uh (Jaguar Moon). Everything seems to indicate that these cities were clearly subordinate to the influential kingdom of Piedras Negras, which managed to establish broad territorial power that reached all the way to the rivers of the north, the valley of Lacanjá to the west and the high Usumacinta to the south, whose domination by Palenque in the early eighth century would be eclipsed years later by the incursions by the lords of Toniná.

## PALENQUE

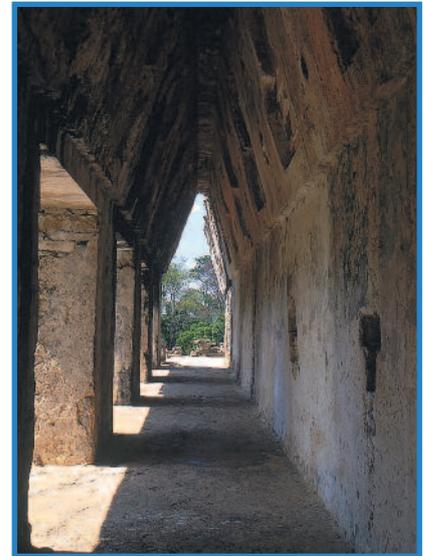
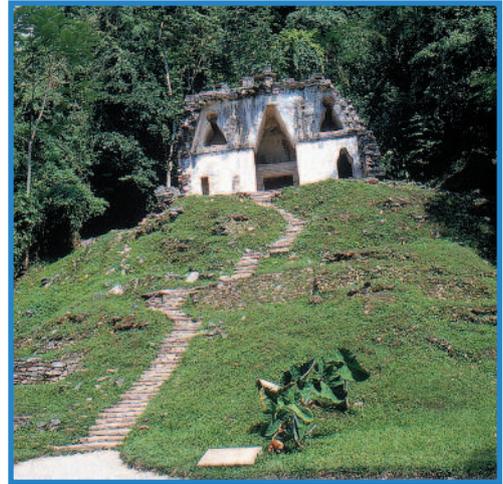


The Tower. Palenque. Photo: Rubén Vázquez

The ancient city of Palenque sits atop a mesa located on the slopes between the Don Juan and Palenque mountain ranges that separate the highlands of Chiapas from the broad floodplain of Tabasco. Palenque's scenery is particularly attractive because it seems to have been modeled as a labyrinth of ravines covered by exuberant tropical vegetation barely broken by the rumor of the many streams that crisscross it, among the largest of which are

the Motiepa, the Balunté, the Murciélagos, the Picota and the Otolum. The Otolum was re-routed in order to build the heart of the city, for which the architects designed a vaulted aqueduct that channeled its waters to a place very close to the Temple of the Lion (also known as The Beautiful Relief) and then re-released them near the ball game court, at whose exit a relief in the form of a lizard is still visible. At that point, the water begins its descent, through a succession of wells and waterfalls, and then flows into the complex network of the Chacamax and, finally, the Usumacinta.

Outstanding among the great buildings of this ancient Chontal city are the Palace and the Temple of the Inscriptions, without doubt both emblematic of Palenque and both erected during the reign of K'inich Janaab' Pakal I, who ascended to the throne in A.D. 615 when he was only 12 and the kingdom was totally crestfallen after its clashes with the overwhelming Calakmul kingdom. It is to be supposed that in those years in the distant city of Yaxchilán, Bird Jaguar III was being born, whose destiny began to be carefully plotted by the able hands of the divine powers in the expecta-



Upper left: view from the Temple of the Cross. Upper right: Temple of the Foliated Cross. Lower left: Temple of the Inscriptions. Photos: Elsie Montiel  
Lower right: the interior of the Palace. Photo: Rubén Vázquez

tion that the conjunction of the heavenly sign would indicate the moment of his encounter, when Venus, the star of war, would shine on the horizon.

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The Palace, the administrative center and the residence of Palenque’s sovereigns, was built in two important stages. The first completed an enormous platform on the plaza, erected toward the end of the sixth century and in the beginning of the seventh, perhaps during the reign of Madame Yohl Ik’nal, the first woman who occupied Palenque’s ceremonial center in the year A.D. 583, according to the epigraphs. The best known remains of this ancient construction are the so-called “underground”, among whose dark galleries visitors to the city can still wander.

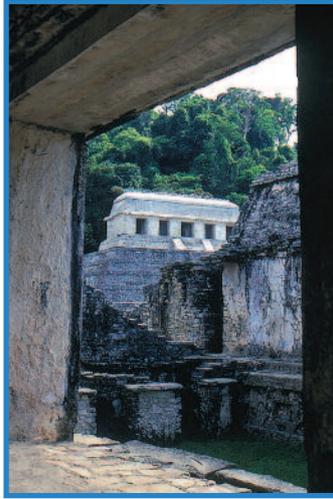
The ruler K’inich Janaab’ Pakal I was responsible for the second great transformation of this architectural complex; he ordered the original platform to be covered with huge amounts of filling material in order to build Houses E, B, C and A, with very beautiful curved vaults. The rest of the buildings would be erected later. House E, also known as the *sak nuk naah*, or “house of the white skin”, was fitted out as a throne room, where the “jaguar mat” was kept, which is why it was decorated with a relief that shows the moment this ruler ascended to the throne accompanied by his mother, Madame Sak K’uk’ in the year A.D. 615.

The eastern patio of the Palace, bordered by Houses B, C and A, is also known as “the house of the captives”, where K’inich Janaab’ Pakal I reasserted his regional power, showing in a series of reliefs his

most important prisoners, humiliated and subjected to public scorn. While many of the texts seen there are still obscure, we can suppose that K'inich Janaab' Pakal I made a strong alliance with Nuun Ujol Chaak from Tikal to deal with Calakmul's expansionist ambitions.

K'inich Janaab' Pakal I's next great architectural undertaking was the building of the Temple of Inscriptions, the door through which he would go to begin his road to Xibalbá. He built the temple against the northern slope of a hill southwest of the Palace, where he first erected a nine-terrace base that represented the floors of the underworld. On top of that, he built a temple with three monumental panels in its interior, on which the sovereign described his divine genealogy, emphasizing that he was the son of Madame Sak K'uk', who he compared to the first mother of the gods of creation and the guardian deities: the Triad of Palenque. From the top of the building, the visitor descends to the funeral chamber taking two steep staircases covered by a succession of 13 vaults which symbolize the levels of heaven. In this world view, the manifestation of the divine and its links to the secular sphere, the borders between history and myth blur, legitimatizing the exercise of power by the Mayan sovereigns.

K'inich Janaab' Pakal I died before concluding his funeral monument, which was finished by his son, K'inich Kan B'alam II, who also presided over the funeral and mandated placing the body inside a sarcophagus on which were sculpted the portraits of his parents, his children and other rulers. An enormous slab with the carved figure of the sovereign was placed on top of the sarcophagus. This can be read in two ways. First, that it is a representation of the deceased in his fall toward the underworld, where the sovereign, transformed in his essence into a nocturnal sun, is received in the jaws of the monster *cauac*, the symbol of the sacred mountain, on his road to Xibalbá. Second, that it represents his rebirth as the god of corn emerging



View of the Temple of Inscriptions from the Palace. Photo: Rubén Vázquez

from the jaws of the monster of the earth. Finally, the sarcophagus where his remains lie is connected to the surface by a conduit that reaches the entire length of the stairway that may have allowed him to communicate with the secular world through his manifestation as Serpent Vision.

K'inich Kan B'alam II ascended to the throne in A.D. 684. Under his leadership, Palenque dominated the land that reached to the banks of the upper Usumacinta and the small communities of La Mar and Anaité. Among

the buildings erected during his reign, perhaps the most important are those that make up the Group of the Crosses, an impressive architectural complex constructed to commemorate his ascension to the throne, in which he shares the scene with the triad of the creator gods.

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The buzz of the biplane sounds through the ravines, accompanying its trip over Yaxchilán's improvised landing strip as it wends its way to the heights. The field work is finished. The pilot's able turns around the winding river allow us to see some of the buildings distributed along the Great Plaza through the shrubbery. There they remain, just like the rubble of other constructions, as part of the memory of its ancient inhabitants, waiting for the patient scrutiny of all those willing to penetrate their arcane mysteries. **MM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The turn of the *katún* is like the turn of the century. The *katún* is one of the classical Mayan measurements of time, which begins on a mythical date in the past set at 13.0.0.0.0 4 Ahau 8 Cumku. The first number represents the *baktúns* (the equivalent of 144,000 days or 400 years); the second the *katúns* (the equivalent of almost 20 years); the third the *tuns* (a 360-day year); the fourth, the *uinals* (28-day months); and the last, the *kíns* (days).

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