

# Sun Worship in Odisha

## (With Special Reference to Sun Temple at Konark)

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### Abstract

The ancient Indian literature gives a vivid account of sun worship. But only 6th/7th century CE onwards temples dedicated to Sun are found at different places in India. In Odisha also, the tradition of Sun worship goes back to the early Vedic period which reached its climax at the Sun temple, Konark during 13th century CE. The epigraphic, literary and archaeological evidence found from all parts of Odisha suggest the existence of a number of temples dedicated to Sun God between 7th to 13th century CE. The Biranchi Narayan temple at Palia and temple at Kaupur in Bhadrakh district, the wooden temple of Biranchi Narayana at Buguda in Ganjam district, the ruins of a Sun temple near Soro in Balasore district are a few examples, besides the numerous Sun images reported from all over Odisha. The most majestic example of personification of Sun God, however, is the Sun temple at Konark. Many legends are found associated with not only the construction of the temple, but also the etymology of the name 'Konarka'. Be that as it may, the conception of the monument as a chariot of the Sun God shows that the man who conceived the sublime design was an architect of genius. Both the Vimana and Deula (Sanctum) and Jagamohana or Mukhasala (Porch) stand on a common majestic platform. The main temple which originally enshrined the presiding deity has disappeared but a portion of the bada still remains. What we see today is only the Jagamohana or the frontal porch. A detached naṭamandira stands in front of the Jagamohana, little away on the eastern side, which speaks volumes about the superb artistic craftsmanship of Odisha. The world heritage site, Konark in Odisha, along with all other sites, are mute testimony to the glorious tradition of our Culture. And it is our responsibility to conserve, preserve & safeguard these monuments for the future generations to come.

**Keywords:** Sun Worship, Konark, Temple, Architecture, Sculptures, Legends.

Sun, the source of all energies on earth, has been worshipped by human beings since ages. Known by various names,

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manifested in different forms— from a simple circle in Rock-Art to the complex Karnak temple in Egypt, Sun's presence is felt throughout the world.

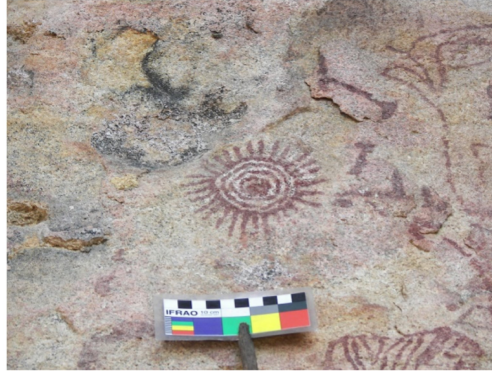
## 1 Sun worship in the world

In [Egypt](#), Sun worship reached its zenith around the 16th-14th century BCE during the reign of [Akhnaton](#). The Sun was represented by [Aton](#) as the solar orb and was called by various names such as Ra, Re, Atan, Horus, Hathar, Tum etc. The [Assyrians](#) worshipped him under the name 'Marduk'. During [Graeco-Roman culture](#), he was worshipped in the anthropomorphic forms of [Helios](#) and [Apollo](#).

The Sun worship also reached its height and most evolved form with the Aztec (Mexico), Maya and [Helios](#) and [Inca](#) civilizations of South America. The Inca culture was totally based on worship of the Sun. The Chinese believed that there existed ten Suns, appearing in the sky by turn and carried across the heaven by a chariot drawn by dragons and driven by their mother. The Japanese call their country 'Nippon' which literally means 'Origin of the Sun'. The [Sumerians](#) (3000 -1400 BCE) are arguably the very first Sun worshippers. They call their Sun God as [Utu](#). In Iran, in the post-[Zoroastrian](#) epoch, where he was known as [Mithra](#). He is the same as the Vedic Sun God Mitra (See figure 1a).<sup>[4]</sup>



(a) Mithra, Zoroastrian Sun God



(b) Rock Art, Isco, Jharkhand. Neolithic period



(c) Sun Symbols on Pot-sherds from Mohenjo Daro



(d) Silver Punch Marked Karsapana Coins, Magadha Janpad, 6th Century B.C.E.

Figure 1

## 2 Sun worship in India

Sun worship in India dates back to hoary antiquity. In the Pre-historic and proto-historic periods, Sun is represented symbolically on rock-art (See figure 1b), pottery, seals and sealings, in various forms viz. circle, semi-circle, wheel, lotus and svastika etc.<sup>1</sup> There are a few paintings on the rock shelters belonging to the Neolithic period (Pikhlial) which contain representation of the Sun as an object of worship. The appearance of the Sun symbol on different materials from Harappan culture reveals the tradition of Sun worship in the Indian subcontinent (See figure 1c).

The ancient Indian literature also gives a vivid account of sun worship. The simple adoration of the Sun in his various aspects constitutes a special feature of religious life of early Vedic India. The Vedic Aryans adored him as Āditya, Sūrya, Savitā, Mitra, Viṣṇu, Puṣan, Bhaga, Aryamā, Rohita, Vivasvān etc. In the later Vedic period different forms of Sun for different purposes have been clearly stated in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad. In post-Vedic period, Āditya became the general name of the Sun. Epics like the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata as well as the writings of Paṇini and Patañjali, Sauras have been recognized as a separate sect along with other sects like Śāktas, Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas and the Gāṇapatyas. During the Rāmāyaṇa period, Sun worship was most prominent as the Sun was the family deity of Raghu dynasty that was also known as Sūryavaṃsa. In the Mahābhārata, Sun has been described as the highest God and equated with Indra, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Rudra which clearly denotes the pre-eminence of Sun among the Gods. The Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa describes the Sun as the Lord of the Gods and places him at par with Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva.<sup>2</sup> The Buddhist literature like Anguttara Nikaya<sup>3</sup>, Dighanikaya<sup>4</sup> and the Mayura Jataka<sup>5</sup> describe the Sun as the God of highest or-

<sup>1</sup> E.O. James, *Beginning of Religion*, 1958, p. 22

<sup>2</sup> Markandeya Purana, Vol. IX, 1910, pp. 62-63

<sup>3</sup> Anguttara Nikaya, Vol. IV, p. 100

<sup>4</sup> Digha Nikaya, 11, 260, Tr. by T.W. Rhys Davids, 1910

<sup>5</sup> Jataka No. 159



der. The Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya<sup>6</sup> and Indica of Megasthenes<sup>7</sup> mention the prevalence of Sun worship in India. The tradition continues in later periods which were depicted in coins, epigraphs, temple sculptures, plaques etc. At a much later stage, the personification of the Sun God was materialized in the shape of temples at Multan, Modhera, Kanauj, Mathura, Martand, Katarmal, Ranakpur, Kumbhakonam etc.

The early Punch-marked coins (See figure 1d) dated between 6th-2nd century BCE bear rayed discs representing Sun throughout India.<sup>8</sup> The Sun and moon in their natural forms are also found depicted on the coins of the Pandyas and Western Kshatrapas. The numismatic evidence confirms the literary and epigraphic authenticity. The Gupta epigraphic records testify the existence of many Sun temples. The Mandasor inscription of the time of Kumaragupta I, refers to the construction of a Sun temple by a guild of weavers in 436 CE at Dasapur (Malwa), Madhya Pradesh.<sup>9</sup> The Indore copper plate records the endowment of Devavisnu in 465 CE for the regular lighting of a Sun temple at Indore (U.P.).<sup>10</sup> The Gwalior inscription of Mihirakula mentions the erection of another temple at Gopadri (Gwalior). The Deo-Barnaka inscription of the time of Jivitagupta II, a later Gupta king, refers to the existence of a Sun temple about 38 km. southwest of Arrah in Bihar. Unfortunately, none of these have been found.

Personification of the Sun God is already adumbrated in the Vedas and other classical texts like the Upanishad, Dharmasāstras and Brahmanas. The conception of the Sun God takes more tangible form in the Puranas. According to Varaha, Skanda and Bhavishya Puranas, three important places of Sun worship are Udayachala (Konark), Kalapriya (Kalpi) and Multan (Multan). The earliest reference of Sun temple in orthodox literature in India is available from 5th/6th century CE. The Skanda Purana and Bhavishya Purana for the

<sup>6</sup> Kautilya, Arthashastra, 3rd Edition (Mysore), 1920

<sup>7</sup> J.W. Mc Crindle, Ancient India, pp. 105-106, fn. 1

<sup>8</sup> P.L. Gupta, Coins, 2000, pp. 18-19

<sup>9</sup> R.C. Majumdar, Ancient India, 1981, p.67

<sup>10</sup> J. Fleet, CII, Vol. III.

first time referred to the Sun temple established by Samba at Mulasthan (Multan) which may have been built in the Saka-Kushana period (2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE). The temple of Jandial at Taxila (2nd century BCE) appears to have enunciated the worship of fire and Sun of Mithraic tradition. These temples must have been made of perishable materials, as a result, there is hardly any trace of their existence now. Its only from 6th/7th century CE onwards, temples dedicated to Sun God can be seen at different places in India.

### 3 Sun worship in Odisha

It is a well-known fact that the Sun Cult reached its climax at the Sun temple, Konark during 13th century CE. But the tradition of Sun worship in Odisha goes back to early Vedic period. The archaeological evidences suggest that the symbolic aspect of the Sun was known from the depiction of solar symbols on potsherds of the excavated site of Manamunda in Boudh<sup>11</sup> district and Golabai in Khordha district.<sup>12</sup> The Punch-marked coins bearing the Sun symbols discovered at many places of Odisha from 5th to 3rd century BCE, suggest the prevalence of some sort of Sun worship here.

The epigraphic evidence also throws light on the Sun worship in Odisha. The Kapilesvar copper Plate Inscription records the invocation of Sun God along with other Gods.<sup>13</sup> The Sumandala copper plate of Prithivi Vighraha (569 CE) is the earliest record which throws light on the existence of an early form of Surya upasana in which the Maharaja called himself sahasrarasmi padabhakta (a devotee of Sun).<sup>14</sup> The Sonepur charter of Janmejaya I Mahabhavagupta informs that he donated a gift of the village for maintenance of Aditya Bhat-taraka Devakula.<sup>15</sup> The stone inscription of Nilesvara tem-

<sup>11</sup> C.R. Mishra & S. Pradha, Manamunda: Preliminary Report, 1999, p.1; S.C. Behera, Manamunda: Interim Excavation Report, 1982, pp.16-22

<sup>12</sup> B.K. Sinha, 'Excavations at Golbai', Puratattva, No. 23, 1994, pp. 49-50

<sup>13</sup> John Beams, Indian Antiquary, 'Copper Plate Grant of Kapilesvar in Orissa', 1876, pp. 56-58

<sup>14</sup> I.H.Q., Vol. XXVI, D.C. Sircar, p.77

<sup>15</sup> Epigraphia Indica, Vol. XXIII, pp. 249-55

ple in Narayanapuram (Andhra Pradesh) refers to an image of Aditya or Sun enshrined there during the rule of Ganga king [Rajaraja-I](#).<sup>16</sup> Besides, the inscriptions of Early Ganga kings mention the construction of a Sun temple at Arsavalli in Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh during the time of Devendra Varma (7th century CE).<sup>17</sup> The epigraphic, literary and archaeological evidence found from all parts of Odisha suggest the existence of a number of temples dedicated to Sun God between 7th to 13th century CE. Some noteworthy Sun temples of Odisha are noted here.

The [Biranchi Narayan](#) temple at Palia in Bhadrakh district is well-known for an image of Chaturmukhi Surya (See figure 2a).<sup>18</sup> A temple dedicated to the Sun God was erected at Soro in Balasore district which is now in ruins. A fragmentary inscription on the back of the image of Sun God, found from Gandibedha near Soro, now preserved in the Odisha State Museum, reads “Somakulatilaka Sri Karnarajadeva”.<sup>19</sup>

It is believed that the name Soro has been derived from Soura which is an attribute of Surya. The temple at Kaupur in Bhadrakh district on the bank of river Salandi dedicated to Lord Biranchi Narayana is now in utter ruins. Two images from here shows the Sun God standing on chariots drawn by seven horses. From the ruined temple at Khiching in Mayurbhanj district, two beautiful images of the Sun God, datable to 10th century CE, have been discovered. From here a Navagraha Chakra has been found, where the nine planets are represented on a broad rim of twelve spoked wheels which rests on its side on a lotus pedestal. The famous surviving wooden temple of Biranchi Narayana at Buguda in the district of Ganjam belonging to late medieval period informs about the prevalence of the cult during 15th century CE. The structure, partially made of wood, is first of its kind found in Odisha. The unique, composite deity of Surya-Narasimha at Nrisimhanath temple in Bargarh district is datable to 9th

<sup>16</sup> JAHRS, Vol. VI, Pt. 3 & 4, p. 244

<sup>17</sup> K. S. Behera, Konarak: The Heritage of Mankind, Vol. I, 1997, p. 2

<sup>18</sup> T.e. Donaldson, Hindu Temple Art of Orissa, Vol. II, 1987, p. 695

<sup>19</sup> I.O., Vol.-IV, 1966, pp. 265-267; E.I., Vol. XXXIII, pp. 273.



(a) Chaturmukha Surya, Palia, Bhadrak



(b) Surya-Narasimha, Nrisimhanath, Bargarh district, Before & After Conservation

Figure 2

/10th century CE.<sup>20</sup> In this image, Nrisimha wears a gumboot which is very similar to Surya. Such concept of syncretic deity is available in Hayasala temples of Karnataka (See figure 2b).

Besides these, the traces of a few more temples, dedicated to the Sun God are also available at Shergarh, Champesvara, Paikapada, Salebhata, Suvarnapur etc. Many more might have gone into oblivion by now.

The availability of Sun images carved in different temples of Odisha dedicated to different Gods and Goddesses bespeak volumes about adaptability and popularity of Sun God in Odisha in the past. A few noteworthy among them are the two images of Sun God each on a chariot drawn by seven horses at Kaupur, Sun image at Dasasvamedha Ghat at Jajpur (a

<sup>20</sup> S. Mishra, Nrisimhanath: An Archaeological Perspective, 2015, pp. 59-60



Sakta Centre), a detached broken image of Surya from Lakshamanesvara temple, Bhubaneswar (6th century CE), Sun images of Parasuramesvara and Vaital temples, Bhubaneswar (7th century CE), images of 9th century CE from Suklesvara, Mallikesvara (10th century CE), images from Varahi temple, Chaurasi, Patalesvara temple, Paikapada, two images of Hara-Surya from Lingaraj temple, Bhubaneswar, etc.

Sun images belonging to Jaina and Buddhist pantheons are available from the relief frieze of Ananta Gumpā, Khanda-giri and a composite deity of Lokeshvara of Buddhist pantheon datable to 11th century CE, now housed in Asutosh Museum, Kolkata. In addition, there are two broken standing images in the form of Utsavamurty, holding lotus in the hands, preserved in Sri Jagannath temple, Puri.<sup>21</sup>

## 4 Konark

Sun worship in India reached its zenith at [Konark](#) with the construction of the [Sun Temple](#) (See figure 3a). Many legends, poems and traditions are associated with it. One of them attributed the construction of the Sun temple near Chandrabhaga to Samba, son of Lord Krishna, after getting rid of incurable leprosy.<sup>22</sup>[1]

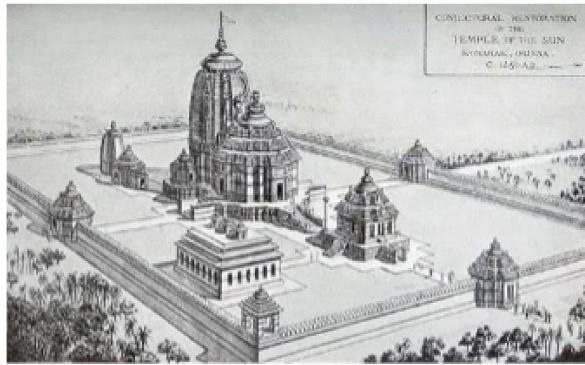
The [Madalapanji](#), the Chronicle of the [Jagannath temple](#), Puri mentions that a temple of Sun God was built at Arka Kshetra by one Purandara Kesari of the Kesari dynasty.<sup>23</sup> But it was Narasimha Deva I (1238-1264 CE) during whose reign the temple at Konark was built. He was the son of Anangabhimadeva III and queen Kasturi Devi, who belonged to Eastern Ganga dynasty that ruled Odisha from 1112 to 1435 CE. It is regarded as the greatest achievement and the crowning glory of his career. According to the Asankholi Plate<sup>24</sup> of Narasimhadeva II dated to 1295 CE, the temple was built

<sup>21</sup> Ellice Bener et.al, Konarka, 1972, p. 1109

<sup>22</sup> Samba Purana, 42, 2 J, Bombay, 1899

<sup>23</sup> Bishan Swarup, Konark, p. 5, Proceeding of India Historical Records Commission, Vol. XXXII, pp. 87-88

<sup>24</sup> Epi. Indica., Vol. XXX, pp. 109-128



(a) Conjectural View of Sun Temple, Konark



(b) Sun Temple, Konark



(c) Outer View of Sun Temple, Konark



(d) Surya, Sun Temple, Konark

Figure 3

at Konarka (Konark) for the Sun God (See figure 3b). King Narasimha humbly mentions the temple as ‘Mahata-Kutira’ (the great cottage) dedicated to the Sun God in the corner of Trikona, identified with the modern village, Tikona on the bank of river Kushabhadra.[?,1]

There are many speculations relating to the construction of the temple. There is no evidence to explain the selection of the site for building the edifice. The purpose of erecting this

stupendous temple is also unknown. Probably it was for his deep devotional fervour that motivated him for erecting such a grand structure. Further, Surya is believed to be the healer of diseases and bestower of wishes from very early times. In this connection mention may be made that king Narasimha Deva I, was known as Langulia (one having a tail). Probably he had some kind of physical deformity for which he wanted to get cured by building a temple of Surya. Some scholars surmise that the monument was erected as a memorial by the ambitious monarch after his successful victory against the Muslims. He seems to have had some genuine regard for Sun as reflected in the name of his son, Bhanudeva (the first solar name in the royal lineage).<sup>[1,2,16,5]</sup>

However, Narasimhadeva I was not the first person to choose Konark for the construction of the Sun temple. Konark was a famous centre of Sun worship from a very early times of which mention have been made in various Puranas such as Bhavisya Puranas, Skanda Puranas, Markandeya Puranas, Varaha Puranas, Samba Puranas, etc. The Brahma Puranas categorically calls it Konaditya or Konarka in Utkala.<sup>25</sup> The Madalapanji, as already noted above, ascribes Purandara Kesari of Kesari dynasty with the construction of Sun temple at Konark and the establishment of 8 Brahmin villages there.<sup>26</sup> Al-Beruni, in his account, refers to Arku tirtha and Udravisaya on sea which definitely are transcripts of Arka tirtha and Odra Visaya respectively.<sup>27</sup> Thus in all probability, Konark was an important centre of Sun worship much before 13th century CE. Both Brahma Purana and Kapilasamhita describe kshetra of Konaditya and Mitravana situated on the bank of Chandrasarita (Chandrabhaga).

Etymology of the name Konark has been described variously by scholars. According to Cument the name Konark is derived from Kronos, the Mithraic Sun God representing

<sup>25</sup> Brahma Purana, R.C. Hazra, *Studies in the Upa Puranas*, Vol. I, 1968, p. 106

<sup>26</sup> Madalapanji, Prachi Edition, p. 12

<sup>27</sup> K.C. Panigrahi, *Chronology of the Bhaumakaras and the Somavamsis of Orissa*, 1981, p. 71

time.<sup>28</sup> Konark literally means the Sun (Arka) of the Corner (Kona)<sup>29</sup> – the Corner Sun. Brahma Purana<sup>30</sup> described the deity of this place as Konaditya where Aditya is just another term for Sun and Kona means Corner. Bhavisya Purana refers to the presiding deity as Kona Vallabha. Be that as it may, the name and fame of Konark, as a holy place of Sun God, was there from a very long time. Thus, the existence of an earlier temple before the present one cannot be denied. Narasimhadeva I choose this place for his magnificent work of art for obvious reasons. The glory of this temple as a grand monument had spread far beyond the limits of Odisha by 16th century CE, which is amply borne out by the visit of the great Vaishnava saint Sri Chaitanya (1486 to 1533 CE). Its description also appeared in Ain-i-Akbari of Abul Fazal,<sup>31</sup> the Chronicle of Mughal Emperor Akbar.

## 5 The sun temple

The conception of the monument as a chariot of the Sun God (See figure 3c) shows that the man who conceived the sublime design was an architect of genius. There are twenty-four wheels on both sides and seven horses placed in front to pull the chariot. The magnificent wheels are the crowning glory of the temple. These wheels carved on the solid platform convey a sense of mobility which imparts a monumental grandeur, unique in the realm of art. These twenty-four wheels possibly represent the twenty-four fortnights of the year. Each wheel is elegantly embellished and there is considerable variation in the treatment.<sup>[1,2,5]</sup>

Both the Vimana and Deula (Sanctum) and Jagamohana or Mukhasala (Porch) stand on a common majestic platform. The disposition of the platform is particularly pleasing for its plan with several angles and many horizontal divisions. The platform is highly embellished with a series of narratives and

<sup>28</sup> F. Cument, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, 2012, p. 108

<sup>29</sup> D. Mitra, *Konark*, p. 3

<sup>30</sup> *Brahma Purana*, Op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Abul Fazal, *Ain-I-Akbari*, Tr. by H.S. Jarrett, 1989, p. 141



friezes with men and animal in religious, celestial, mythical moods with depiction of usual vertical segments of a temple like pabhaga, talajangha, bandhana, uparajangha and baranda at the top. The platform has three stairways in three directions.

The porch or jagamohana has been built on a low pista. The bada is pancharatha in plan with five horizontal divisions viz., pabhaga, talajangha, bandhana, uparajangha and baranda. The projected raha in the front, north and south sides, are provided with entry doorways. One of the striking features of the Jagamohana is its massive form. The decorative mouldings and individual sculptures are bold and distinct.

The pyramidal roof of the jagamohana presents recessed three tiers. Another unique feature of the jagamohana is the provision of free-standing sculptures of female musicians and dancers on the terraces above the lower and middle tiers. The mastaka consists of a beki with projected bands, a second beki also with projected bands, amla khapuri and the crowning kalasa (now missing).par The main temple which originally enshrined the presiding deity stands on a common pitha along with jagamohana. Its soaring superstructure has disappeared but a portion of the bada still remains up to parsvadevatas with medium restoration. The disposition of pabhaga and bada are the same to both jagamohana and deul. But they differ from baranda level in execution and it assumed curvilinear spire. The bada contains astadikpalas, depiction related to the king's life, vyalas, richly decorated floral patterns. The lower jangha of raha enshrines three life-size parvadevatas on the south, west and north.[1,?] The simhasana (throne), made of chlorite stone inside the sanctorum (garbha griha) for the presiding deity, is richly carved with men, animals and other decorations of superb workmanship There are three subsidiary temples (disha deula) in front of parsva devatas on the south, west and north. Three life-size chlorite images of Surya in three central niches of the temple on the north, south and west sides as side deities (parsvadevatas). Made of chlorite stones, all the parsvadevatas, represent Surya as Morning Sun, Midday Sun and Setting Sun (See figure 3d). In front of the

eastern flight of the porch, is a pillared hall on a high platform. The detached structure is believed to have been used as natamandira. The top of the platform is approachable by four flights of steps, made in the centre of four sides. The edifice has as usual vertical divisions on the bada. The roof of the nata mandira, presumably a pyramidal one, has now completely disappeared. The interior of the natamandira is reached by a flight of three steps in the centre of the four sides. There are four central openings, each flanked by pillars. The pillars and the hall are replete with sculptures of dancers and musicians. Depiction of a male musician with a short inscription on the pedestal amply supports the identification of the structure as Natamandira. There are also such sculptures on the walls of the Jagamohana. The Aruna Stambha, which was originally standing in front of the eastern stair case of the Jagamohana, has been shifted to Puri and is placed in front of the Jagannath temple. The antiquity of Sun worship in India is evident from the above description. The world heritage site, Konark in Odisha, along with all other sites, are mute testimony to the glorious tradition of our Culture. And it is our responsibility to conserve, preserve & safeguard these monuments for the generations to come.

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