

EXTRACT:

A flint wielding population wandered around Ireland ten thousand years ago. This period is defined by archaeologists as the Old Stone Age, 8000 – 7000 BC. Little evidence of these early inhabitants remains, and little is known of them. It is generally said that they 'came from' Scotland or Western Britain, but this may only be because to Irish academics everything 'comes from' somewhere else. Then, within Ireland, this thought continues, things newly arrived change and, by some unexplained process, they become 'Irish'.

What precisely defines this Irishness is not explained either. Concepts such as tribal consciousness and the interplay between that and the spirits of the land have been avoided. Such concepts are politically incorrect. Dangerous racial and nationalistic tensions lurk beneath the surface of the Irish psyche . . .the veneer of euro-thought must be maintained lest these tensions explode into chaos. This is why the nature of Ireland, both ancient and modern, remains so obscure and mysterious. Our understanding has been hampered by fear of what we may discover. We are in the position of trying to explain the motor car, while denying the existence of wheels.

But back to way back then. No doubt then, ten thousand years ago, life was lived in a form of quiet chaos. Quiet because there were really far too few people around to make for lively wars and cultural clashes. Though after about five thousand years things began to look up. A new influx 'came from' Britain and continental Europe, a people with the then new fangled polished stone axes. Not exactly the cutting edge of technology by our terms, but technology with sufficient cutting edge to cut down forests and get things going in agriculture.

They grew wheat and barley. And they kept sheep, and goats, and cattle. They lived in little groups, in huts. These huts, this making of their own space, this was the essential difference between them and their predecessors. The earlier flint wielding people were no doubt more in tune with nature, being part of nature themselves. But the new polished stone folks were coming to be in tune with themselves. The concept of their humanity grew in them, and they started to see their soul. And they became aware of the spirit. So they built huge tombs. Megalithic. Big stones. Really really big stones!

Those tombs that the ancients built are in fact very different from each other and fall into fairly definable classifications. In actual big-stone-speak we are talking of the period around 4000 – 2000BC. Conventional archaeological thinking has it that during this period 'waves' of new cultures arrived in Ireland, bringing with them new styles of tombs. Perhaps. But we must remember also that cultures change through internal dynamics. And ideas travel independently of mass migrations. A few hundred years after Christ there were Christian Holy Men on remote islands off the west coast of Ireland. It is a long way from Jerusalem to

Inishkea. But news has always travelled fast. Bad news is notoriously speedy, but faster still is news of hope, and the possibility of eternal life... salvation!

Hope, and no doubt the possibility of eternal life inspired our ancestors to build their great stone tombs. Magnificent structures, particularly compared to the huts in which they spent their lives. Different priorities in those days. Our modern goal is to live in a nice house and OK, to hell with it if down the road there are neglected graveyards full of degenerate vandals. We don't care. That's death down there, nothing in that for us.

In ancient Ireland it was different. There was nothing much in life for anyone, nothing of a material nature. But there were frequent glimpses, even visions, of the beyond, the spirit world. Magic was commonplace. And the driving force of life was to move into that 'beyond', that spirit world, to be at one with the mystery. Though they probably didn't phrase it quite like that.

Then along came the Bronze Age. From about 2000 BC – 500 BC this new metal was the thing. Other metals too. Gold. And the working of copper, apart from its use in bronze, was widespread. New ideas and technologies blossomed. Big stone structures became out of fashion. Except for big stone circles, many of which in Ireland are felt to date from this period. These circles were for ritual, no doubt unpleasant to our modern minds, and perhaps also for quasi-astronomical observation, certainly inaccurate to our modern methods. The Bronze Age folks also erected standing stones, though it's not easy to tell the dates of these. Frankly it's not easy to tell the dates of anything to do with big stones, a thousand year margin of error is quite acceptable to archaeologists. As with that of economics, this is one of those professions which is always proved wrong by the next generation.

Goodbye to the great days of great stones then around 1000 BC. And then sometime about 500 BC came iron. Now we're talking modern times. The Iron Age peoples were just like us. They built houses and habitations and we know all about them, what they ate, what they did in the afternoon and so forth, except we know little or nothing about their burial customs or tombs. Perhaps they were too busy with their other constructions, such as hill forts and stone and earthen raths. These very numerous Iron Age structures merge with those of the early historical period, a time which itself brings the first hints of Christianity. And at the first hint of Christianity, this book stops. Not for religious reasons, and certainly not because it is a clean cut-off point where things changed completely straight away. Far from it, things changed very gradually. Christianity took a very long time to get below the surface. And how far below the surface it did ever get is hard to judge. On the very day this introduction is being written, there appears in the newspapers a report. A donkey has been found slaughtered on Dublin's Howth Head. Police say it appears to have been a 'seasonal ritual'.

Beneath the surface, what lies beneath the surface? One thing that rests, though 'rests' is not the right word, one thing that bubbles there is certainly the story of Ireland. Made up of history, and of lies and hopes and poetry in various measure, the story weaves this way and that and changes. It changes only to reappear hundreds of years later, thousands of years later. And when it re-appears we see that it is still the way it was before it had changed,

we thought, forever. The heart of the story is what we call myth, mythology. But whatever it is, and whatever it is called, it is not easy to grasp or understand. It exists in what the aboriginal Australians call 'dreamtime', a concept itself difficult to understand.

A then fashionable international historian wrote some years ago that we were at 'the end of history'. Developments in the world since then have demonstrated that we were, in fact, at the end of such historians' notions. Whatever, it is now fashionable to suppose that we are at the end of mythology, that such things belong to the past, and that there they lie, fossils. To be studied, categorised, numbered in university departments. Researchers roam remote regions recording old stories from old people. Valuable, no doubt, but perhaps more revealing would be research into the young people who slaughter donkies in seasonal rituals. Few investigate them, other than moronic tabloid reporters, hopeful that there may be naked women involved. People who might arrive at answers, who can think, they are afraid to think. Perhaps they're right. Perhaps, waiting to be born, as the poet said, there really is a beast. We cannot really know, though many have suspicions. One certainty among the doubts and suspicions. Somewhere in ancient Ireland the truth is hidden. Whether that truth be one of beast, or of beauty, of darkness, or of light... a foolish modern question.



Rather than jumping right in and splashing around in a meander of philosophic essays and conjecture, this guidebook is structured into three parts. Appropriately enough, no doubt, the threesome nature of truth being well rehearsed in many world cultures, including that of Ireland. Separate aspects of existence, but interlocking, and each one merging strangely with the other.

Part One here deals with the physical remains of Ireland's past, and goes on to look at what we know of the the stories and beliefs of those times. Yes the physical remains are shadowy, decayed, and this diffusion is reflected in how the stories tell. It can be confusing. Perhaps best to look at how we feel when faced with such things, rather than build a clunky jigsaw of understanding. Feelings are based in a deeper level of the mind than understanding.

Part Two takes us on a wander around Ireland, identifying and describing specific locations of importance to the story of ancient Ireland. Yes a few of these places jump out of the tourist industry at us, but here they are dealt with in somewhat different manner, attempting to put such major locations into the context of meaning of their own times. The majority of locations identified are far more obscure, and are chosen as representative of countless others. In an ancient country like Ireland one can't throw a stick into a field without it landing on a story.

Part Three is an A to Z of ancient Ireland, a collection of interesting information on many aspects of the topic. Previous editions of this book have featured a similar listing or dictionary or whatever it is, and indeed it is perhaps the most pirated and plagiarised piece of writing ever produced by the present writer. Information gleaned from it has found its way into

numerous publications, academic tomes and popular guides alike. And it's all over the internet.

Ah sure! The pirates have their reward.

Read on.

1 THE ANCIENT WORLD

MONUMENTS & ARTIFACTS

'Monuments' is an archaeological term for structures left on the landscape by earlier civilizations. 'Artifacts' is a word used to describe moveable objects created by such civilizations. The essential difference used to be that 'monuments' are usually too big to move. Though, when Ireland was rich a year or so ago, and building motorways and the like, many structures were bulldozed out of existence. Now that we're poor again, more or less our default position, that destruction is thankfully over.

Artifacts have always been moved about. Decorated stones and suchlike have been carried away to new sites at the whim of landowners. Objects found in the field have invariably been whisked away to museums or private collections. In pre-Independence the British Museum was the ultimate destination of many items, and since then the National Museum in Dublin has been their last resting place. Until very recently very few artifacts have been on view in their locality of discovery. Nowadays there are several small local displays, some times with items on loan from larger collections elsewhere. Structures on the landscape can be loosely classified as:

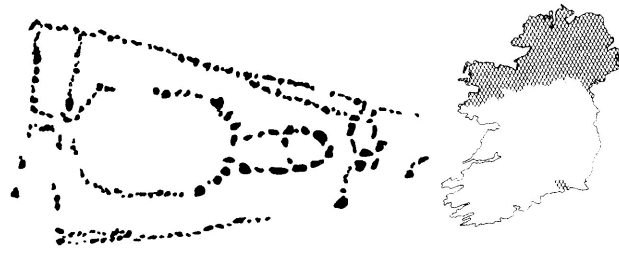
Megalithic Tombs

Built of large stones, these consist of a burial chamber or chambers, constructed with large uprights and roofed over in stone. These were originally contained within a cairn (heap of stones) or an earthen mound, with access through an entrance. In most cases the covering cairn or mound is gone, leaving only the large stones. These structures are commonly called Dolmens, Cromlechs or 'Druids Altars'. Archaeologists divide them into the four classifications as listed below:

Court Tombs

date from before 3000 BC. They are so called because of the open court at the entrance to the tomb. This was used for religious ceremonies. Court tombs generally are aligned to face east. Burials were cremated and grave goods such as pots and arrowheads were placed with the ashes of the interred.

Below left, *Ground plan of Court tomb at Creevykeel, Co Sligo.* **Below** right, *Distribution of Court Tombs.*



Portal Tombs

are a simple form of gallery-tomb consisting of at least three upright stones bearing one or more capstones. These are the characteristic 'dolmens' of which there are around 150 in Ireland. They generally date from the years 2500 to 2000 BC.

Below left, Ground plans of portal tombs at Proleek, Co.Louth and (bottom left) Kilfeaghan, Co.Down. Uprights shown black, capstone outlined.

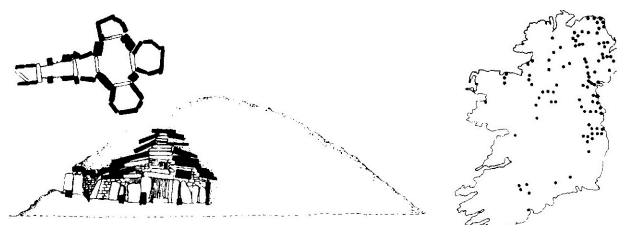
Below right, Distribution of Portal Tombs. _



Passage Tombs

These consist essentially of a round mound or cairn with a passage leading from the edge to a chamber within. Along with the Portal and Court tombs they belong to the Neolithic age (c4000-200 BC). Newgrange is a characteristic example of a passage tomb; many were faced with white quartz and generally they are found in concentrations. Around 300 survive.

Below left, Carrowkeel, Co.Sligo, Passage Tomb. Plan of Chamber (top left), Section through mound showing extent of passage. **Below right**, distribution of Passage Tombs.

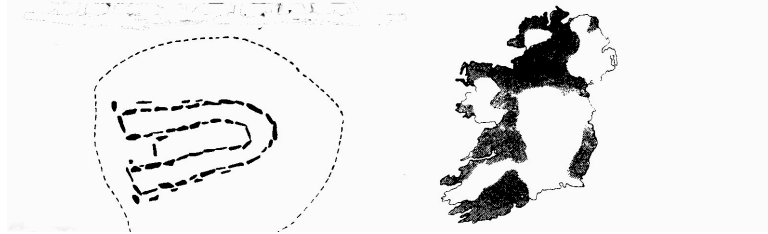


Wedge Tombs

Belonging to the Early Bronze Age (after 2000 BC), these are essentially a chamber that often narrows and lowers towards the back. The entrances generally face the winter setting sun. There are around 400 surviving (with over 100 in Co.Clare's

Burren area). It is felt these wedge tombs were built by the first Celtic- speaking peoples coming from France.

Below left, *Ground plan of Wedge Tomb at Island, Co.Cork. (Dotted line shows original extent of cairn).* **Below** right, *distribution of Wedge Tombs.*



Mounds, Cairns And Barrows

Circular mounds or cairns of rounded profile and various size are found widely. Generally burial-mounds, they may cover many different types of burial from different eras. In addition to some of those listed on previous pages, burials in mounds may be in cists. These were stone boxes made of slabs, of Neolithic origin, the burials being accompanied by pottery. Bronze Age Cist burials are also found under round mounds, these usually smaller than the Neolithic. Ringbarrows are low mounds with encircling ditch and bank, diameter from 4 to 20 metres. These can occur in clusters and are generally of Bronze or Iron Age date.

Ringforts

By far the most numerous monument on the landscape, an estimated 30 to 40 thousand of these structures have been identified. Their construction ranges over the whole period from Neolithic to Mediaeval date. Ringforts comprise a circular area of usually around 25m to 50m in diameter surrounded by an earthen bank thrown up from a ditch immediately outside. Some are oval or D-shaped, some have more than one bank or ditch. These ringforts are the 'raths' so common in Irish placenames.

Stone Forts

In some areas the bank mentioned above is replaced by a massive stone wall. These types of ringfort are called a caher, cashel or stone fort and well preserved examples may have terraces and steps in the inner face of the wall. The majority, however, are only traces of stone in a circular pattern, the walls having been taken away for later purposes.

Hillforts And Promontory Forts

Some early forts were constructed so as to take maximum advantage of natural features such as low hills and promontories. These structures are generally assigned to the Iron Age, consisting of banks and ditches enclosing either the top of a hill or

cutting off headland or promontory. In some cases these banks were replaced by massive stone walls and defensive works.

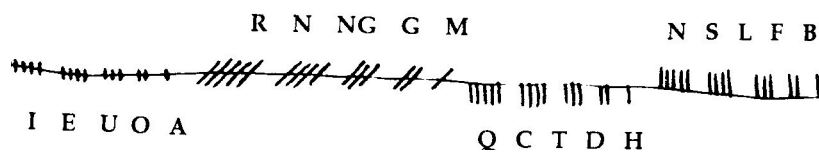
Stone Circles

Numbering around 180, stone circles are found in two main groups, Mid-Ulster and Cork-Kerry. There are a small number in Dublin, in Wicklow and at Lough Gur and a few elsewhere. The Cork-Kerry circles tend to be the most physically impressive, ranging from 4 to 17 metres in diameter with up to seventeen stones. Circles are found in combination with alignments and burials and would be contemporaneous with Wedge tombs, (see previous pages). Functions of circles is obscure, but on balance would appear to be for ritual purposes. Theories concerning astronomical observations are generally discredited. The Cork-Kerry circles are generally axial, aligned roughly southwest, with large portal stones and a flat 'axial stone' opposite.

Standing Stones

Of widespread occurrence, these vary in height up to a maximum of around 5 metres. The periods and purpose of their creation is somewhat obscure; this would not necessarily be the same in all cases. Tomb-markers, Sign-posts, Commemoration-stones or objects for ritual practice, the standing stones may have fulfilled all of these functions. Some are obviously phallic in appearance, others appear in what some describe as 'male' and 'female' pairs.

Still others have inscriptions written on them in Ogham Writing



which is an ancient alphabet consisting of dots and strokes cut along the edge or edges of the stone. The majority of ogham stones are in Counties Cork, Kerry and Waterford, frequently also found lying flat or used as lintols in souterrains or other later structures.

Alignments

Found in two groups, mid-Ulster and Cork-Kerry. Ulster alignments tend to be made up of a large number (up to 25) of low stones, those in Cork-Kerry are of larger stones, but smaller in number. Alignments tend to be in areas commanding a wide view and tend to be run in a northwest-southwest direction.

Holed Stones

A certain number, not great, of stones have holes perforated through them. Usually round, fist sized, the holes' purpose is not clear though there is a definite connection with folklore about fertility, childbirth and love-making. Hands were clasped through holes to seal love bargains. Pieces of cloth were also passed through and, in certain cases, a healer would lay hands on the afflicted through the hole.

Bullauns

These are hemispherical depressions cut in rock or loose boulders, from fist-sized to up to 50 cm in diameter and half as deep. Their function is almost certainly ritual and magical. In modern times they are used in association with turning/cursing stones. These are loose, usually ovoid coconut-sized stones placed in the bullaun. These are 'turned' in certain manners for purposes of prayer, healing or cursing, dependent on local tradition.

Petroglyphs

Patterns and decorations carved or inscribed on rock or loose boulders which are likely to be associated with Bronze Age people. Motifs include concentric rings, spirals and circles. Interpretation of the 'meaning' of these occupy many but convincing explanations are slow to emerge. It is generally felt that they were of magical/ritual significance.

THE PEOPLE, THEIR STORIES & BELIEFS

The fact that there are great gaps in our knowledge of the past should not lead us to the conclusion that there was chaos and anarchy. Early Ireland was a highly structured society. Ruled by a warrior aristocracy, the grades of this society ranged downwards through the military nobility, the craftsmen, and the peasants. The military were the *flaithi*, patrons of the craftsmen, who were the *oes dana*, a category which included poets, lawyers, historians and doctors as well as metalworkers and so forth. The proletariat were the *grad fine*; lowest on the rung were slaves, a male being known as *a mug*, a female as *a cumhal*. Many *cumhals* were concubines and influential people in society.

The *file*, 'poet', was a member of the craftsman class and his position has dictated the type of mythology that has been passed down to us. Generations of these professional storytellers were attached to the courts and households of both prominent individuals and factions and their stories naturally concerned the doings of the leading classes. What the masses were up to, we have little idea. We do know that they were tied to their overlords by a complex system of mutual obligation, but of their way of life, their ideas, little has emerged.

The actual link between classes were particularly noteworthy. Not serfs, the lower orders could separate from their overlord, he from them likewise, provided certain conditions

were met. Groups of families made up *tuaths*, and groups of these made up the provincial kingdoms. Anciently there was five of these but until around the eleventh century AD there was no 'High King'. Each province was autonomous. Gratifyingly there was no 'civil service' or bureaucrats other than single individuals known as *rechtaire*, in charge of revenues. A special judge, *Bretim Rig*, supervised the king to ensure he stayed within the law, The legal system was sophisticated but incomprehensible to modern man in that there was no state law as such. Order was maintained by a system in which transgressors answered to the transgressed. Individuals were assigned 'value'; relatives would be compensated accordingly. Owed money, a man would sit outside his debtor's house, starving himself. The debtor was put under an obligation to himself starve until the matter was resolved. If he ignored the hunger-striker he lost honour. If the striker died, the debtor was more or less an outcast so complete was his loss of honour. And this was the nub. In their society this 'honour' occupied much the same position as money does in ours. Without honour, a man was living in the ancient equivalent of cardboard city.

THE MANUSCRIPTS

Christianity brought to Ireland the habit of scribes, monks and scholars recording information in manuscript form. The stories of mythology, hitherto passed down orally (see Types of Tales, [page XX](#)) were now written down in monasteries and places of Christian learning. Although drawn from the same class as the poets and bards of the old order, these educated Christians were obviously determined to impose a Christian veneer upon the pagan tales. Odd references to Christian themes abound, and a particular effort was made to ensure that the chronology of the Tales fitted into the Biblical scheme of things. That noted, the surviving early manuscripts are in fact the only source available to us, as, with the collapse of the Gaelic Order in the middle ages, the educated oral tradition faded away, surviving only in patches of folklore and superstition. The manuscripts that survive largely bear evidence of themselves having been copied from older books now lost, as indeed is the bulk of early Irish literature, mainly destroyed in the 17th and 18th centuries by deliberate policy of the English Penal Laws in efforts to eradicate Irish culture. Huge numbers of books had already been destroyed between the 8th and 11th centuries during the Viking raids. All our main surviving manuscripts date from after that period. These major manuscripts are the following:

Leabhar na hUidre known as 'The Book of The Dun Cow'. This is an 11th Century manuscript apparently compiled at Clonmacnoise. It is now in the Royal Irish Academy.

Leabhar Laigneach translated as 'The Book of Leinster'. This is a 12th Century manuscript compiled at a monastery in Terryglass, Co. Tipperary. Housed in the Royal Irish Academy. It also contains the *Dinnseanchas*, meaning 'The Lore of

Placenames', which is a topography of Ireland and a guide to geographical mythology. This also contains a version of *Leabhar Gabhala translated as 'The Book of Invasions'*. (This appears in several mss., of which there is a 17th century compilation by Micheal O'Cleirigh).

'The Book of Ballymote' is a 14th Century manuscript also in the Royal Irish Academy. This contains 'The Book of Rights'.

'The Yellow Book of Lecan' is another 14th Century manuscript housed in Trinity College, Dublin.

'The Great Book of Lecan' is a 15th Century manuscript housed in the Royal Irish Academy.

'Rawlinson MS B502' is the catalogue name of an important manuscript housed in Britain's Bodleian Library.

In addition to these there are many other manuscripts to which scholars refer. Surprisingly, some 70 years after Ireland's re-emergence as an independent nation, there are many hundreds more which remain unedited or untranslated. The scholars Kuno Meyer and Eleanor Hull calculated around the year 1900 that there were up to 300 tales and sagas buried forgotten in unresearched manuscripts - the majority of these remain in similar condition today. That noted, a massive amount of work has been carried out on the manuscripts, not least by non-Irish researchers in the latter part of the last century and the early part of our own. This work includes direct translations into modern Irish, English and other languages, plus commentaries and analysis.

MYTHOLOGY AND HISTORY

Mythology is holistic history. It merges the story of events with that of spiritual experience and understanding. A blend of the magic, and the mundane, of darkness and of light, mythology portrays humanity as a whole. It spans generations, linking ancestors to descendants, identifying friends, warning of enemies, connecting peoples to their territories.

Fiercely tribalistic, nationalistic, pantheistic, animistic, chauvinistic, mythology contains a whole lot of these 'istics', these characteristics considered dangerous and undesirable by various establishments. The ideas in mythology are subversive, it is felt, they undermine the proper order of things. They cannot be classified. Neither bureaucracy nor religion can be built upon them. Such free-floating ideas are dangerous. In reality, of course, neither 'properness' nor 'propriety' have anything to do with mythology. It just is. Apart from judgements, it is morally neutral. More reason for disliking it. Those who order modern man's affairs and thoughts counter mythology by a combination of ignoring it and, when it inevitably emerges, damning it as sheer nonsense, and likely the work of the devil to boot. But the answer to the question, Irish Mythology, what is it all about ?

Big question, small page. But certainly we do know it's all about a far wider world than merely Ireland or the Irish. As with religions, at the heart of all mythologies there is a universal, a simplicity, a flame of truth. Throughout the world this flame has ignited very different fires. At the heart of these fires the flame remains the same. Irish mythology is Celtic mythology. The Celts are a people who appear in recorded history in the sixth century BC, though their migrations took place at a far earlier date, over a period from around 2000BC. From their base in central Europe,

they spread westwards to the Atlantic coast, into Spain, and northwards to Britain and Ireland. Later they moved south to Italy, east along the Danube, reaching Galatia in Asia Minor. A multi-ethnic collection of peoples, from our vantage point we can look back and see them linked by language and art, and by a common opposition to Imperial Rome. We see them like this because we understand language and art, and we know how political systems clash, blend, and change. Our grasp of spiritual forces is less precise. We have no idea why the Celts created their particular mythology. A garrulous, aggressive, argumentative but imaginative people (sound familiar?) the Celts were, in fact, exceedingly strange. Their mythology mirrors this strangeness.

Nothing here is quite what it seems. One picture is the frame of another. An idea moves aside, to reveal a question. The answer to the question may be a joke, or a nonsense, or it could be true. But if it is true, you may have been deluded. And if it is a joke, you may be laughing at yourself. You will never know precisely, but you will find yourself increasingly fascinated and interested in learning more. To learn, of course, you have to be given the opportunity. And up to recent years modern western man (a category which includes the Celts, despite contrary propaganda), modern western man has not been given this opportunity to learn about his mythology. Different machine-made Gods have occupied his attentions. Now, these Gods rusting, decrepit, running out of fuel, man is digging around in what remains of his spirit, searching.

This search frequently leads to an awakening of interest in the old Gods and Goddesses, and to attempts to understand just what it was the ancients believed, what made them tick. We find that though early man knew nothing of our sciences and systems, he was very far from being ignorant. Knowledge obscures, just as it reveals. Modern man has an immense store of knowledge... and little or no understanding of what it means. Ancient man didn't know very much, but throughout the world he came up with a strangely coherent set of ideas. The old Gods and Goddesses went by different names in differing societies and cultures, but on analysis they turn out to be much the same. Though distinctly Irish, our Irish pantheon will be instantly recognisable to most Europeans.

END OF EXTRACTS

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