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Maecenas and the Battle of Actium—Again

In this paper I argue that Maecenas did not go to Actium in 31 BC¹, but instead remained in Rome managing affairs on behalf of Octavian as he had been doing since 36 BC. No ancient prose writer puts Maecenas at Actium, and poets offer weak corroboration in light of what is known about Maecenas' activities in the 40s and 30s. Dio (50.9.2) states that Antony intended to invade Italy when he left Egypt in 32 BC², and uncertainty as to how the confrontation would turn out makes it unlikely Octavian left the city without someone to oversee his interests. By extension, Horace was not likely with Octavian at this time, or at least we should not assume as much from *Epod.* 1 and 9³.

Throughout the late 40s and early 30s Octavian relied on Maecenas to prevent an alliance between Antony and Sextus Pompeius and to regain Antony's trust when tensions between the triumvirs mounted. Soon after Octavian's victory at Perusia Maecenas helped arrange the political marriage between Octavian and Scribonia (*BCiv.* 5.6.53), whose father, Scribonius Libo, was the father-in-law of Sextus Pompeius, and Maecenas worked on Octavian's behalf to bring about the Treaty of Brundisium (*BCiv.* 5.7.64). In 38 BC when Octavian found himself facing several crises including a secret alliance between Sextus Pompeius and Antony, he sent Maecenas to Athens to renegotiate an alliance with Antony (*BCiv.* 5.10.92). Maecenas' participation in the Treaty of Tarentum is mentioned both by Appian (*BCiv.* 5.10.93) and Plutarch (*Ant.* 35.2-3), and is possibly the mission that inspired Horace's "Journey to Brundisium," in which Maecenas' diplomatic talent is singled out⁴.

¹ For recent accounts of Actium with bibliographies, see Lange 2009 and 2011; Gurval 1995. For the naval battle and Antony's strategy, see Murray 2012, 232-244.

² Murray 2012, 242 with note 65. The importance of this information will be clear below.

³ See, for example, Tarn 1931, 173-199; Setaioli 1993, 81-91; Nisbet 2007, 11-12 and 1984, 1-18; Pelling 1986, 177-181; Wistrand 1958; Kraggerud 1984; Wilkinson 1933, 2-6; Hartman 1913, 26-31; Fraenkel 1957, 74-76; Gurval 1995, 135-160.

⁴ *Sat.* 1.5.27-29: *Maecenas optimus atque / Cocceius, missi magnis de rebus uterque / legati, aversos soliti componere amicos*; see Syme 1939, 254; Ehlers 1985; Fedeli 1992.

After the Treaty of Tarentum, Maecenas' activities center on his management of Rome. Appian twice indicates that Maecenas was with Octavian in 36 BC while the latter battled Sextus Pompeius in Sicily, and both times Maecenas is seen being sent back to Rome to maintain order in the city. In July of 36 BC Octavian's fleet was badly damaged by a storm, and while he made the necessary repairs he sent Maecenas to Rome to deal with the Pompeian faction (*BCiv.* 5.11.99). Maecenas returned to the fleet at an unspecified time, but when Octavian suffered a severe defeat in mid-August, he again sent Maecenas to Rome, this time to quiet revolutionaries who were inciting the people to riot (*BCiv.* 5.12.112). At the same time a revolt was in progress in Etruria (Dio 49.15.1), and Maecenas' influence in that area may have been of use in suppressing a potentially dangerous disturbance⁵.

Dio Cassius' first mention of Maecenas coincides with Appian's account that Maecenas was sent to Rome to quiet unrest. According to Dio, starting in 36 BC, a year in which there was no aedile or urban prefect at Rome, Maecenas, a Roman knight, managed affairs in Rome and Italy "then and thereafter for a long while" (καὶ τότε καὶ ἔπειτα ἐπὶ πολὺ, 49.16.2). In fact, the picture we have of Maecenas from 36 to 29 BC is that of an unofficial *praefectus urbi* with powers that foreshadowed the functions of future *praefecti urbi* and *praefecti praetorio*⁶, powers that would have lapsed whenever Octavian was in Rome, though between Naulochus and Actium he was frequently away⁷.

Maecenas was entrusted, along with Agrippa, to read important dispatches of Octavian before they reached their destination, and he was given a duplicate of Octavian's signet ring to reseal documents after making whatever changes he felt appropriate (Dio 51.3.5-7). Pliny (*NH* 34.10) mentions that Maecenas had his own signet ring inscribed with the image of a frog, a seal that was known and feared because it was used for collecting taxes. As late as the time of Nero, Maecenas was remembered for his appearances in the law courts, the Forum, and at public assemblies, performing the duties of Caesar in Caesar's absence (*Sen. Ep.* 114.6).

The second time Dio mentions Maecenas occurs during events immediately following Actium, when recently discharged veterans started to mutiny. Octavian sent Agrippa to Italy to deal with the situation because he feared the veterans would despise Maecenas, then in charge of Rome and Italy, because of his equestrian status (51.3.4-5). It is no surprise the veterans would have little respect for Maecenas, not just because he lacked senatorial standing⁸, but also because he lacked military standing. Pliny uses Maecenas as a source on Octavian's illness at Philippi (*NH* 7.148), but makes no claim

⁵ Watson 1994, 99.

⁶ E.g. Tac. *Ann.* 6.11.2; Dio 49.16.2; 55.7.1; Hor. *Sat.* 2.6.23-58; Vell. Pat. 2.88.2. See Reinhold 1988, 40-41, and Cresci 1995, 174-175.

⁷ See Stein 1928, 210; Avallone 1963, 15-16; Cadoux 1959, 153.

⁸ See Cresci 1995, 169-176 for possible reasons why Maecenas remained an *equus*.

that Maecenas was an eyewitness, much less a participant in that battle. Appian twice places Maecenas with Octavian during the latter's battle against Sextus Pompeius (*BCiv.* 5.11.99; 5.12.112), but, as seen above, both accounts show Maecenas being sent back to Rome to manage affairs in the city, which are responsibilities more in keeping with the diplomatic and administrative skills supported in ancient sources. Tacitus mentions no military service and on one occasion contrasts Maecenas' administrative efforts at Rome with Agrippa's military efforts during the time of the civil wars (Tac. *Ann.* 14.53; cf. *Ann.* 6.11.2.). So noteworthy was Maecenas' management of Rome that Dio mentions it again in Maecenas' obituary (55.7.1-6), a glowing account of Maecenas' life and achievements that includes references to his gentleness and popularity, but no reference to military service or activity.

Propertius claims (2.1.25-26) that if he were inclined to write epic, he would skip mythological and past wars to recount Caesar's deeds, and Maecenas would come second (*Caesare sub magno cura secunda fores*). Propertius lists Caesar's battles, Mutina, Philippi, Perugia, Naulochus, Actium, Alexandria (26-34), and adds that his Muse would weave amid Caesar's arms Maecenas' loyalty in peace and war (*te mea Musa illis semper contexeret armis, / et sumpta et posita pace fidele caput*, 35-36). He does not say that Maecenas participated in any of these battles, only that Maecenas deserves credit for his loyalty. Later Propertius expresses approval for Maecenas' indifference to military and official honors, and tells Maecenas that loyalty will be his trophy (*Maecenatis erunt vera tropaea fides*, 3.9.34). In both poems Propertius elevates and ennoble Maecenas' non-combatant yet vital role in Octavian's successes that accords with other sources⁹.

The only time Maecenas is hailed as a great soldier occurs the *Elegiae in Maecenatem*, but problems regarding the date, piecemeal transmission, and purpose of the poems are enough to raise doubts regarding the value of any unique information they convey. Whether one accepts that they are the product of rhetorical schools dating to the Neronian or Flavian period¹⁰, or were written close to their purported date not long after Maecenas' death in 8 BC¹¹, the *Eleg. Maec.* contain no information that cannot be traced back to Augustan writers with one exception: the anonymous poet celebrates Maecenas' military prowess and depicts him as actually participating in every battle mentioned by Propertius except for Mutina¹². The panegyric elements are exaggerated

⁹ Richardson 1977, 214. Camps 1967 observes at Prop. 2.1.36 that *sumpta ... pace* is "a phrase coined on the analogy of *sumere arma* (or *bellum*) perhaps to suggest that Maecenas' services to Caesar in the management of civil affairs were on a par with the services of others in warfare."

¹⁰ Schoonhoven 1980, 39-68 and 1983, 1799-1809.

¹¹ Amat 1997, 79-84.

¹² *Eleg. Maec.* 1.40-48: *miles et Augusti fortis et usque pius: / illum piscosi viderunt saxa Pelori / ignibus hostilis reddere ligna ratis; / pulvere in Emathio fortem videre Philippi; / quam nunc ille tener, tam gravis hostis erat / cum freta Niliacae texerunt lata carinae, / fortis erat circa, fortis et ante ducem, / militis Eoi fugientia terga secutus, / territus ad Nili dum fugit ille caput.*

throughout, and even those who argue that the *Eleg. Maec.* were written near the time of Maecenas' death are hesitant to take these verses as proof that Maecenas was an outstanding soldier¹³. On the contrary, as suggested long ago, it is more likely that the poet simply misunderstood Propertius 2.1.24-36, rather than that all other contemporary and later historical sources, which come to stress his decadence and softness¹⁴, completely overlooked Maecenas' bravery in battle¹⁵.

Apart from the *Eleg. Maec.*, the only other ancient sources used to support the idea that Maecenas was at Actium in the summer of 31 BC instead of at Rome are Horace's *Epod.* 1 and 9¹⁶. In *Epod.* 1 Maecenas is seen making arrangements to accompany Octavian as he faces his most recent and greatest military challenge:

Ibis Liburnis inter alta navium,
amice, propugnacula,
paratus omne Caesaris periculum
subire, Maecenas, tuo. (1-4)

Horace declares he will follow Maecenas wherever he goes, to the Alps, the Caucasus, or the extreme reaches of the West, and his proclamation of loyalty to Maecenas reflects the oath of loyalty that Italy had recently sworn to Octavian (*Res Gest.* 25.2). The poetic vow to follow a friend to the ends of the earth is hardly based in reality¹⁷, and the real gesture of accompanying a friend into danger to show loyalty could not have outweighed the importance of Maecenas' presence at Rome during Octavian's final confrontation with Antony¹⁸. Nor should it be assumed that Horace would have committed a serious faux pas by beginning his collection of epodes with intense and dramatic images of Maecenas preparing for dangers that the world knew he never encountered¹⁹. Octavian received the oath of loyalty of all Italy in 32 BC, and in the spring of 31 he summoned senators and knights to Brundisium to prepare to cross over to Greece²⁰. The poetic date of *Epod.* 1 is around this time, and Horace captured the spirit of the *coniuratio totius Italiae* in this programmatic poem and, while the approaching showdown

¹³ Ellis 1907, 17-19 and Miller 1941, 48-55 and 115-117 argue for an early date for the poems, but doubt they are proof of Maecenas' military service. Cf. Wistrand 1958, 19.

¹⁴ See Byrne 1999, 21-40 and 2006, 81-111.

¹⁵ See Müller 1868, 654-659 and Hartmann 1913, 28.

¹⁶ E.g. Wistrand 1958, 18; Kraggerud 1984, 29-31; Watson 1987, 119-129; Cairns 1983, 80-93.

¹⁷ E.g. Catullus 11; cf. Tarrant 2007, 69; Nisbet-Hubbard 1978, 97; Gold 1987, 119.

¹⁸ Wistrand 1958, 17-18 argues that Maecenas did not stay at Rome where he was needed because it was the moral code of the day for a friend to accompany another into battle.

¹⁹ For this view see, e.g. Kraggerud 1984, 27; Nisbet 1984, 10 and 2007, 12; Hanslik 1962, 339.

²⁰ Aug. *Res Gest.* 25.2; Dio 50.11.5; see Brunt-Moore 1967, 67-68.

at Actium was likely the inspiration, the ends of the earth to which Horace will follow Maecenas are kept intentionally vague²¹. Horace's loyalty to Maecenas was not confined to Actium, and the friendship declared in the first poem provides a fitting introduction to the collection as a whole²².

Those who place Maecenas and Horace at Actium take *Epod.* 9 to be an eyewitness account of events and tactics that anyone at Actium would have easily understood, but which greatly confuses modern readers²³. Horace's description of Antony's army, the sun shining on Egyptian mosquito nets, the songs for Caesar from Amyntas' Gauls who had defected from Antony, and the ships "summoned to the left"²⁴ (*sinistrorsum citae*) are all, some would claim, the result of Horace's view of the battle rather than his skill at turning popular and common knowledge into poetry. In particular, lines 35-36 *vel quod fluentem nauseam coerceat / metire nobis Caecubum* are thought to show that the poem was composed at sea just after Actium, with the celebrants still on board their ship feeling the uneasy effects of seasickness²⁵.

Epod. 9 begins with the question:

Quando repostum Caecubum ad festas dapes
victore laetus Caesare
tecum sub alta — sic Iovi gratum — domo,
beate Maecenas, bibam
sonante mixtum tibiis carmen lyra,
hac Dorium, illis barbarum? (1-6)

These lines give no indication where anyone is or what the circumstances are, only that the time has not yet come to celebrate Octavian as victor, on which occasion it would be fitting to drink this particular Caecuban wine and to hear this particular combination of songs, which together would actually produce a discordant sound that "both anticipates and corresponds to the shifts of tone in the course of the epode, shifts in tone

²¹ The specifics of *Epod.* 1 are so vague that Thompson 1970, 328-334 is able to reintroduce the suggestion first made in 1845 by T. Dyer that the preparations undertaken by Maecenas and related by Horace do not refer to Actium, but to Naulochus.

²² Fraenkel 1957, 69; Wilkinson 1933, 4. Mankin 1995, 49.

²³ See Gurval 1995, 137-160 for a review of the scholarship and analysis.

²⁴ See Lange 2011, 619-620 for *sinistrorsum citae*; cf. Gurval 1995, 147-152 with notes for differing interpretations of *Epod.* 9.19-20.

²⁵ See Fraenkel 1957, 71-75 for a description and rejection of Bücheler's 1878 seasickness theory, and esp. 72 notes 3 and 4 for a preponderance of philologists, as opposed to historians, who accept Bücheler's findings. Wistrand 1958, 34-35 and Pelling 1986, 181 suggest Horace watched the battle from Octavian's hill camp on Mikalitz. Nisbet 1984, 17 imagines that Maecenas had a special ship suited to his tastes.

that will not be fully realized until the final call for wine at the poem's end²⁶. Next the reader is reminded of the celebrating that occurred after Octavian's naval victory against Sextus Pompeius, which anticipates the same victor's success against Antony (7-10). In that "recent" (*nuper*) naval battle, Sextus Pompeius had threatened to enslave Romans with the help of slaves; now a woman threatens to enslave Rome, and a Roman soldier actually serves her wrinkled eunuchs. Mention of Roman standards amid Egyptian mosquito nets turns the reader's attention to the grim scene at Actium before the battle; suddenly the battle starts and is quickly over, as the reader rejoices with Horace in the triumphant comparison of Octavian to the victors of Carthage²⁷. The reader next follows the sad plight of Antony as he sails off in whatever direction he might be heading or taken²⁸, and then the reader is brought back to the present celebration:

capaciores adfer huc, puer, scyphos
 et Chia vina aut Lesbia,
 vel quod fluentem nauseam coerceat
 metire nobis Caecubum.
 curam metumque Caesaris rerum iuvat
 dulci Lyaeo solvere. (33-38)

The reason for a celebration is Octavian's initial naval victory at Actium²⁹, but the context for *Epod.* 9 is a symposium, and Horace employs the well-known nautical metaphor in which a symposium is portrayed as a ship at sea: just as sailors experience nausea when the sea stirs up, so symposiasts experience nausea when drinking becomes excessive³⁰. Here the poet and reader have raced from Rome to Actium, then back in time when other naval battles were celebrated, then forward in time to Actium to see Antony sailing off: the rising nausea from the emotional ride combines with overdrinking, and the effect is "seasickness." According to Slater, the nautical metaphor in this poem accomplishes three things: it recalls the Greek tradition (e.g. Archilochus, Alcaeus) behind the *Epodes*, it introduces a humorous twist because Horace's reader like the imagined guests have been at sea "as they followed the description of the pursuit of Caesar's enemies over the Mediterranean," and it explains the "slightly repellent" use of *fluentem nauseam*, here referring not to actual seasickness, but the seasickness-like effects of over-

²⁶ Gurval 1995, 143-145.

²⁷ Scipio and Marius; see Gurval 1995, 153-154.

²⁸ Tarn 1931, 176 uses Horace's uncertainty as to Antony's destination as proof he was not at Actium. Gurval 1995, 155-156 draws attention to the mood these lines evoke: "Antony's condition is more pitiful than disgraceful."

²⁹ Tarn 1931, 176; Wilkinson 1933, 4; Bartels 1973, 306-307; Gurval 1995, 153.

³⁰ For the metaphor in Greek poetry, see Davies 1978, 72-95; Slater 1976, 161-170 includes both Greek instances of the metaphor and Horace's use of it in *Epod.* 9.

indulging at a symposium, for which certain wines proved useful³¹. The symposium-ship metaphor also works with Gurval's suggestion that the Caecuban called for at the end of the poem is meant "to check the poet's nausea and to help him forget." As foreshadowed in the discordant combination of Dorian and Phrygian music, the poem throughout "displays an intense and mixed emotional reaction to the campaign at Actium": joy and relief for Octavian and disgust and pity over the whole situation present "a personal and complex response to a critical and still confused situation"³². Horace's original audience, familiar both with the Greek context and the actual events leading up to and including Actium, would have appreciated the poem's shifts in tone that capture good reasons to celebrate as well as the gravity of civil war without thinking it was written as an eyewitness account of the battle.

The *Eleg. Maec.* and *Epod.* 1 and 9 cannot prove Maecenas was at Actium, but several factors support the opposite view, starting with the timeline that followed the battle. Antony's troops surrendered a week after the battle (Plut. *Ant.* 68.3), and most were incorporated into Octavian's legions, after which men over the age of military service from both forces were sent back to Italy without pay or dispersed to prevent trouble (Dio 51.3.1-2). The discharged veterans who helped Octavian achieve victory were angry that they had received no payment, and not long after they began to mutiny (Dio 51.3.3-4). Suspicious that the veterans would despise Maecenas, to whom Rome and the rest of Italy had then been entrusted (ὥ και τότε ἦ τε Ρώμη και ἡ λοιπή Ιταλία προσετέτακτο), because of his equestrian status, Octavian sent Agrippa to Italy as if on other business (Dio 51.3.5). After Octavian was certain the veterans would cause no trouble, he took care of affairs in Greece and participated in the Eleusinian mysteries (Dio 51.4.1), which would have taken place late September or early October.

It took a week for Antony's forces to accept that their leader had abandoned 19 legions and 12,000 horsemen without planning to return (Plut. *Ant.* 68.2-3). Assuming Maecenas was at Actium, he would not likely have been sent back to Rome until it was clear that the worst of the danger was over and that a land battle, which is how the war was expected to be decided, was no longer a threat³³. It is not impossible that a week after the battle Octavian merged Antony's forces with his own; that Maecenas went back to Rome; that Octavian dismissed the veterans from both armies; that the veterans reached Italy, started grumbling over lack of pay, and began to mutiny; that Octavian realized that Maecenas' equestrian status might be an impediment and sent Agrippa to intervene; and that Octavian felt satisfied the danger was over in time to settle other matters and then celebrate the mysteries. But if Maecenas was needed in Rome soon

³¹ Slater 1976, 168-169; Fraenkel 1957, 73.

³² Gurval 1995, 158-159.

³³ Lange 2011, 620-621. Tarn 1931, 176-177 suggests "*curam metumque Caesaris rerum*" in *Epod.* 9 refers to Octavian's concern over Antony's land army.

after initial success, how much more important would his presence have been if things had gone differently and Antony's forces had landed in Italy?

It is easy to forget that Antony's ultimate plan for the 20 legions, 12,000 cavalry, and 500 warships and 300 transport ships was to take Italy³⁴, and long before September 2, Octavian or Agrippa would have learned that Antony had special ships built to do just that³⁵. Most of the ships Antony used for fighting were the same size as the ships Agrippa commanded at Actium³⁶. But Antony also had some larger ships built for this occasion, which only made up about 6% of his fleet but which, had Antony made it to Italy, would have been devastating. Those few, unusually large ships, whose prows with impressive battering rams were displayed on Octavian's victory monument as if they made up half of Antony's fleet³⁷, were meant for siege warfare against harbor cities³⁸. Their battering rams could break through the defenses of coastal cities like Brundisium or Tarentum, places that Antony knew well and would have wanted to take quickly upon reaching Italy³⁹.

Antony suffered a number of setbacks over the summer, but the day of battle he still had reason to believe he could break his ships past Agrippa's ships and regroup⁴⁰. Although risky because they were not intended for pitched naval battle, Antony included his larger ships in the lineup because they would still be useful when he attacked Italy⁴¹. Not knowing how the war in Greece would turn out⁴², and being aware of Antony's intentions to break through harbor defenses and bring the fighting to Italy indicates that someone like Maecenas was needed at Rome to maintain order and quiet unrest, as he had done before.

³⁴ Dio (50.9.2); see Murray 2012, 235 with note 44.

³⁵ For different ships in Greek and Roman warfare that took their names for the way oarsmen were grouped on them, see Murray 2012, 6-9; the few unusually large ships that Antony had at Actium are described as "midsized polyremes."

³⁶ Murray 2012, 235-236. These are "fours" and "fives," which for centuries Romans preferred to anything larger because they were better at ship-to-ship battle; see Murray 2012, 225-227 and 236.

³⁷ See Murray and Petsas 1988, 28-35 and 1996, 335-350.

³⁸ Murray 2012, 223-224 stresses the liability midsized polyremes posed in sea battles but their effectiveness in "cracking cities' defenses" once they reached harbors.

³⁹ See Murray 2012, 241-244, where he also notes that Antony was personally familiar with cities along the east coast of Italy having served in 48 BC with Caesar when Caesar walled off half of Brundisium's harbor with pontoon boats causing Pompey to flee, and later when Antony himself had to head up to Tarentum when he was not allowed to enter Brundisium.

⁴⁰ Murray 2012, 238.

⁴¹ Murray 2012, 242.

⁴² Macrobius (*Saturn.* 2.4.29-30) relates that a man trained crows to hail the victor, one saying "*ave, Caesar victor imperator*," the other saying "*ave, victor imperator Antoni*."

Dio (50.11.5-6) states that Octavian gathered important senators and equestrians at Brundisium both to prevent rebellion if left unattended and to show off the numbers of support for his cause. Special exemption for citizens of Bononia, clients of Antony (Suet. *Aug.* 17.2), from declaring for Octavian is just partial proof of Antony's continued influence in Italy⁴³. The attempt to force so many men of importance to accompany him to Greece shows that Octavian was concerned about the situation at Rome in his absence, and rightly so considering Lepidus' son's conspiracy soon after Actium⁴⁴.

In the absence of reliable evidence placing Maecenas at Actium and in view of his known ability to manage and protect Octavian's interests, it is safe to conclude that in the summer of 31 BC Maecenas was doing what he had been doing since 36 BC, governing Rome and Italy in Octavian's absence. Maecenas might have ventured as far as Brundisium along with other important men of Rome, thereby displaying the loyalty that was important to Octavian⁴⁵. With Maecenas possibly was Horace, who could have found inspiration for *Epod.* 1 during preparations for the procession. But Octavian had to know Antony planned to use special ships to breach harbor walls and bring the fight to Italy. The threat was too great and the outcome too unpredictable in spring of 31 BC for Octavian to leave Rome and Italy without someone he could trust representing his interests, and that someone was Maecenas.

⁴³ Hartmann 1913, 30-31.

⁴⁴ App. *BCiv.* 4.6.50; Vell. Pat. 2.87.1, 2.88.1; Liv. *Per.* 133. See Woodman 1983, 237; Syme 1986, 35; Gowing 1992, 133.

⁴⁵ Thompson 1970, 328; Miller 1941, 116. Scholia at *Epod.* 1.7 mentions that Octavian allowed Horace to stay behind (*dicitur enim Caesar Augustus dedisse Horatio militiae vacationem, cum aliis negasset*). While there is no reason to take this statement seriously, the context for it could be that Horace was known to have been at Rome assisting Maecenas, who was busy performing the day-to-day, routine functions described in *Sat.* 2.6.23-58. In *Sat.* 2.6.23-58 Horace describes the time-consuming responsibilities of city life as the result of his friendship with Maecenas and the settlement of veterans from Actium (*quid? militibus promissa Triquetra / praedia Caesar an est Itala tellure daturus?*). The poetic setting of the poem is apparently soon after Actium, and there is no hint of recent service abroad.

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