

## RELEVANT INFLUENCES OF SICULO-ARABIC DIALECT ON THE SICILIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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**Abstract:** *Relevant influences of Siculo-Arabic dialect on the Sicilian language and culture.* This paper will examine the influences on the Sicilian language and culture due to the Arab domination and some examples of linguistic contamination in toponomastics and in maritime terminology. Sicily lived a complex social, cultural, political and religious history under its 445 years of foreign domination, with a mosaic of Arabic (Muslim, Christian and Jewish), Sicilian and Greek-speaking communities and the Romance speakers during the Norman rule. The Islamic rule (827-1091) is one of the most significant periods in Sicilian history. The term "Siculo-Arabic", used for the first time by the historian Michele Amari (1880) to make reference to a corpus of historical, archaeological, architectural and philological material, could be also used to give a name to a language variety which emerged during the Islamic period and continued existing during the Norman reign and until 1300. It was spoken by Arabs and Berbers by indigenous people who became Muslims and also by those who were in contact with Arabs for commercial purposes. Unlike Islamic Spain, Sicily lacks the historical, literary and religious documents that might give evidence to the Muslim presence on the island, but we can assume that Arabic culture left its trace in Sicilian traditions and lexicon, especially for what concerns the impact on agricultural and maritime terminology. Arabic must have been a lingua franca in the field of commerce and administration in Sicily, spoken by scribes, legal officials, merchants and traders. The port towns of Sicily, considered as the emporia of Mediterranean sea, were the first place where foreign people got in contact with the local community.



**Rezumat:** *Influențe relevante ale dialectului siculo-arabic asupra limbii și culturii siciliene.* Această lucrare va examina influențele dominației arabe asupra limbii și culturii siciliene, cu exemple concrete în cadrul contextului lingvistic și al toponomasticii siciliene. Sicilia are o istorie complexă sub raport social, cultural, politic și religios fiind dominată 445 de ani de sisteme culturale alogene și dispune de un mozaic al culturii arabe, siciliene, grecești și romane. Contextul islamic dintre 827 și 1021 reprezintă una dintre cele mai reprezentative perioade istorice din evoluția culturală a acestei regiuni. Termenul siculo-arabic este utilizat pentru prima dată de istoricul Michele Amari pentru a se referi la materialul istoric, arheologic, arhitectural și filologic și poate fi utilizat în denumirea unei varietăți lingvistice care emerge din perioada islamică și continuă să existe până în 1300. Aceasta a fost vorbită de arabi și berberi, de populația indigenă care devine musulmană și, de asemenea, de toți locuitorii care intră în contact cu sistemul cultural arab prin filtrul activităților comerciale. Spre deosebire de Spania islamică, Sicilia nu dispune de documente istorice, literare și religioase care ar putea atesta prezența sistemului cultural islamic în insulă, dar putem considera că sistemul cultural arab și-a lăsat amprenta în tradițiile și lexicul sicilian, mai ales în practicile agricole și în terminologia maritimă. Araba trebuia să fie o lingua franca în contextul activităților comerciale și în cele administrative de pe insulă, fiind vorbită de scribi, oficiali și comercianți. Orașele port din Sicilia s-au format în locurile unde populația alogenă a intrat în contact cu populația autohtonă.

**Key words:** *siculo-arabic dialect, influence, culture, language, toponomastics, Italy*  
**Cuvinte cheie:** *dialect siculo-arabic, influență, cultură, limbă, toponomastică, Italia*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine the influences on the Sicilian language and culture due to the Arab domination and some examples of linguistic contamination in toponomastics and in maritime terminology. Language is a source of identity: linguistic evidence alone can contribute a great deal of information about past historical events. Language can be recognized as part of a culture and a historical thing in itself, something handed down from generation to generation in a community and a means by which people clearly identify themselves in groups and distinguish themselves from others. For these reasons linguistic definitions and classification of peoples are commonly the clearest and most convenient bases for anthropologists and historians. Sicily lived a complex social, cultural, political and religious history under its 445 years of foreign domination, with a mosaic of Arabic (Muslim, Christian and Jewish), Sicilian and Greek-speaking communities and the Romance speakers during the Norman rule. The Islamic rule (827-1091) is one of the most significant periods in Sicilian history. The sources regarding the Arabian domination of Sicily may be divided into literary and documentary sources (Johns, 2006). Administrative documents did not survive and so in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the great scholar Michele Amari collected literary, geographical, biographical and historical accounts of Muslim Sicily and published *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula* (1880) and *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia* (1854-1872), which are still invaluable sources for the study of the Muslims of Sicily today, more than 100 years later (Maurici, 1995). Part of his work is out of date, but it still stands as the only historically valid account of the topic. As evidence of linguistic contacts among Arabs and Sicilian inhabitants and of the importance of considering languages as historical sources, Michele Amari, in his works, counted about 328 names of certain Arab derivation spread throughout the Sicilian territory: 209 were in the Val di Mazara, 100 in the Val di Noto and 19 in the Val Demone (Varvaro, 1981).

## 2. THE ARABS IN SICILY

The Arab settlement in Sicily lasted more than two centuries, it brought a sizeable cultural heritage and a deeply religious experience that influenced the history of the island for all its duration. The Arab invasion of Sicily can be remembered as the last enduring conquest made by Muslims (Amari, 2002). The Arab penetration into Sicily started in the middle of the 7th century (Ruta, 2007). In 625, Caliph Othmàn landed on the island with his army and fought in vain against the Byzantines. A second invasion was attempted by the African governor but that too ended unsuccessfully. At the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, however, thanks to the Byzantine officer Euphemius, who requested the support of the emir of Aghlabid in the conquest of Sicily, the Muslim forces prepared for the expedition.

They were led by Asad ibn al Furāt and landed in Mazara del Vallo in June 827 where the Byzantine army was defeated and obliged to retreat to Castrogiovanni (Enna). Euphemius died during a first unsuccessful attack on Siracusa, and then both Mineo and Agrigento were defeated. After Euphemius was killed in 828, the Sicilian conquest became a totally Arab undertaking. The Arabs continued their *jihad* even after Asad died. In the decade following the conquest of Palermo (in summer 831) all western Sicily (Val di Mazara) was conquered. Overcoming the eastern part of the island took longer, Messina was attacked and defeated in 842, then Modica (845), Ragusa (849), Castrogiovanni (859), Noto (864) and finally Siracusa (878) when the whole island came under Arab control. From then to the time of the Norman conquest (1060) various Arab military dynasties ruled Sicily, the Aghlabid, the Fatimid and the Kalbid (Amari, 2002).

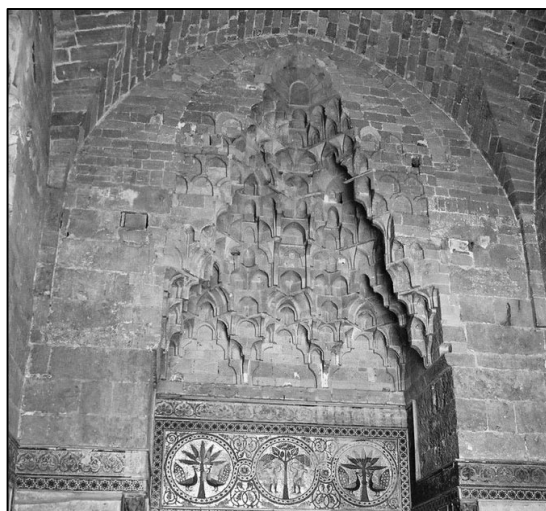
## 3. ARAB CULTURE IN SICILY

The conquest of Sicily enriched the history and culture of western Arabs. They created deep roots in the Sicilian civilisation, giving life to a new culture whose vivid influence can still be felt today. It didn't perpetrate only plunder and destruction, but after their arrival the Muslims maintained the original structure of the cities and the conquerors and local population lived in peaceful coexistence, except for the bloody conquests of Castrogiovanni and Taormina, when men, women and children were massacred. Apart from these tragic episodes, the Arab conquest contributed to urban revival and the development of the western part of Sicily. The eastern side, on the other hand, preserved its original urban characteristics longer and Arab penetration remained marginal. We can say that at least until the year 902 the expression "Muslim Sicily" did not quite fit the bill. In fact, before then, cultural, religious and ethnic differences divided local population from the Arabs. The conquerors who settled in Sicily themselves came from different parts of Islam and local people too couldn't be considered Sicilians because they were from the Roman-Mediterranean areas or from the Byzantine empire and they spoke Greek or Latin. As well as Christians and Muslims there were also Jews, who had lived in Sicily for centuries.

As previously mentioned, the submission of the people to the new occupiers often came about through agreement. The Arabs gave them a say in how to live their lives, even though they wanted to integrate them into their social structures; they allowed them *aman* (security), so that the Christians were protected (*ahl adh dhimma*) and free to express their religion, keep their traditions and possessions in return for a personal tax, called *giziah* and a land tax, the *kharag* (Maurici, 1995).

#### 4. ARAB INNOVATION

The memory of the presence of Arabs in Sicily can easily be perceived everywhere, especially in the agricultural sector. They left a strong imprint on Sicilian life and the benefits of the Islamic domination made Sicily one of the most advanced civilisations in the world and the meeting point between East and West, thanks to innovations in the field of science, agriculture, medicine, philosophy, art and poetry. Agriculture in particular had an unprecedented development and the plains around Palermo were completely transformed. Once they conquered Palermo in 831, the Muslims introduced various new products: cotton, hemp, linen, vegetables, pulses, sugar cane, citrus fruits, dates, saffron, pistachios and black mulberries (that were used to make silk) (Maurici, 1995). They succeeded in introducing a new agrarian system, new plants and innovative methods that were part of an unusual social and economic organisation. The presence of words of Arab origin in agrarian terminology is evidence of the deep contribution of these technologies to the life of the island. The objects of daily use later found in rural Arab settlements were mainly coins and glazed pottery, made with an already ancient technique. Crude pottery was decorated with a lead-based paint and then finished in a kiln. An architectural style known as Arab-Norman developed during this era, particularly in Palermo. It originated from the collaboration between Arab artists and artisans who built and decorated the architectural structures and the Norman nobles who commissioned them. Today we can admire magnificent palaces like the *Zisa* (photo 1), the *Cuba*, and the *Cubola* (Maurici, 1995) or the famous *San Cataldo* church (photo 2).



*Photo 1: Muslim Sicily Muqarnas decoration and mosaics.  
La Zisa Palace, Palermo  
(source: author's personal photos, 2011)*



*Photo 2: San Cataldo Church, Palermo.  
(source: author's personal photos, 2011)*

## **5. HISTORICAL TIME LINE OF THE ARAB CONQUEST IN SICILY**

In 807, the North African Arabics found the Mattanza-the ritual trapping and killing of bluefin tuna; in 827 the Saracens conquer Sicily. Tthen, in 902, the Saracens plant sugarcane, citrus, rice, bananas, mulberries, date palms, pistachios, watermelon, and apricots. They figure out how to make ice cream. Irrigation methods are instituted in Sicily and agriculture flourishes. In 1060, the Norman Conquest begins, led by brothers Roger and Robert Hauteville, while in 1091 all of Sicily and the Calabrian Peninsula fall to Norman rule.

## **6. SICULO-ARABIC**

The question of language in Sicily under Arab and Norman rule is complex. At that time there were different linguistic communities and there was not only one linguistic variety: one type of linguistic community was isolated culturally and linguistically from Islam and Arabic; a second had a common cultural affiliation in which Muslims were brought up with a common Arabic language; and a third was very similar to Islam and spoke a form of Arabic but remained affiliated to Christianity (Agius, 1996). In western Sicily there seems to have been a melting pot due to linguistic contacts and the need of the local

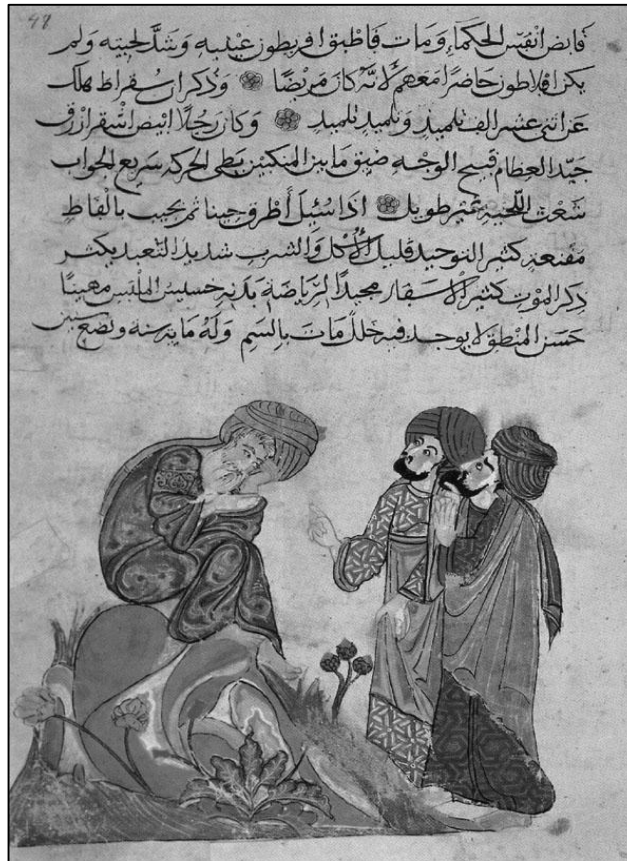
people to learn Arabic. This need was probably linked to the prestige of the idiom of the conquerors, to the usage of Arabic as the language of trade and administration and in reverence to the sacred idiom of Islam (Elgibali, Badawi, 1996). The term “Siculo-Arabic”, used for the first time by the historian Michele Amari (1880) to make reference to a corpus of historical, archaeological, architectural and philological material, was also used by D.A. Agius (1996) to give a name to these language varieties which emerged during the Islamic period and continued to exist during the Norman reign and until 1300. They were spoken by Arabs and Berbers, by indigenous people who became Muslims and also by those who were in contact with Arabs for commercial purposes. Unfortunately, as Agius confirmed, there is historical and textual evidence of this mixture but there are no documents to support this spoken variety as we can find in *Andalusian* Arabic. It is difficult to find corroborating evidence of *Siculo-Arabic*, so it remains speculative, but to avoid the discussion of the issue would mean to deny the possibility of such a variety and of any further inquiry. We cannot say that the *Siculo-Arabic* language and consequently the Islamic religion in Sicily began in 827 and ended in 1091, as with the period of Arab domination.

They lasted longer than the historians claim. What is certain is that some of the common people may have been bilingual, speaking both Arabic and Sicilian dialects or perhaps Arabic and a Greek dialect, since there were a significant number of marriages between Christian women and Muslim men. People who had a bilingual ability to read (but probably not to speak) another language, were court officials, scribes, religious clerics, teachers and Sicilian Jews. As mentioned before, Arabic must have been a *lingua franca* that people were forced to use in the field of commerce and administration because their own languages were mutually unintelligible. Those who used this *lingua franca* also started to add some of its features to the Sicilian variety. It was full of “material” terms, (linked to agriculture, food, traditions) but also toponomastic and anthroponomastic terms. But where did people speak *Siculo-Arabic*? The port towns of Sicily, considered the *emporium* of the Mediterranean, were without doubt the first places where foreign workers were in contact with the Sicilian community. Arab fishermen must have established contacts with Sicilians long before the beginning of the Arab reign in the same way that Sicilian sailors ventured along the coasts of the Mediterranean. Because of their geographical position, the ports of Messina, Palermo and Trapani attracted people from all over the world and they can be imagined as places of cultural and linguistic exchange. This led to the development of a pidgin variety used for trade and commerce, which probably had a simplified structure and a smaller vocabulary (photo 3) compared to a developed language (Agius, 1996).

## 7. LINGUISTIC CONTAMINATION

The greatest and most enduring impact of Arabic on the current Sicilian language can be seen in the lexis rather than in grammar and phonetics (Varvaro, 1981). Nevertheless, in the process of learning and imitating the spoken word during the Arab domination, local speakers probably changed sounds and transferred the grammatical patterns of the technical terms they borrowed. Grammatical markers are reduced to a minimum but features become regularized, such as the loss of grammatical gender, using one form of the verb and an increase of lexical transparency (Agius, 1996). Siculo Arabic expressions, according to Varvaro (1981) could be distinguished in: lexical terms which spread throughout the

Mediterranean thanks to the prestige of the Arabic civilisation and Arabic words which, due to bilingualism became part of the local Romance language.



**Photo 3:** Socrates and his students. Miniature from *al - Mubashshir ibn Fātik*, 1200, Istanbul, Topkapi (source: Maurici, 1995)

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Mediterranean thanks to the prestige of the Arabic civilisation and Arabic words which, due to bilingualism became part of the local Romance language. In spite of the difficulty in distinguishing between the various terms, the scholars Pellegrini and Caracausi, on the basis of Michele Amari's work, produced a list of all probable linguistic contaminations of Arab origin in Sicilian dialect in different fields like toponomastics, geography, agriculture, units of measurement, food recipes, textile products, maritime terminology. In the following paragraphs there is a brief description of Sicilian terms and their original Arabic corresponding terms.

### 8. 1. Toponomastics

Arabization in the field of toponomastics was deep-rooted. The names of mountains (*gebel*), water sources (*fawara*) headlands, (*ras*) villages (*racal* and *manzil*) and castles (*qala*) can be cited as evidence. The Greek name of Panormos (the city of Palermo) changed in *Balarm*; Drepanis (the ancient name of Trapani) changed in *Itrab.n.is*, Agrigentum (Agrigento) changed in *G.r.g.nt* and then in *Girgenti*, and finally Castrum Hennae (Enna) became *Qasr Yanan* and then *Castrogiovanni*. The ancient Lilybeum (Marsala), on the other hand, was completely renamed and became *Marsa Allah* (the port of Allah) (Maurici, 1995).

### 8. 2. Agriculture

In Sicilian agrarian terminology, especially in the field of irrigation systems, we can find: *Senia* (from the Arabic *saniya*), a water lifting wheel; *Cubba* (from the Arabic *qubbah*) a dome used to cover a water source; *Fischia* (from *fisqiyah*) used as a water tank and similar to the *Gebbia* (from *gabiyah*); *Garraffu* (from *garraf*) was the watergate of the mill (Caracausi, 1983).

### 8. 3. Food recipes

The famous Italian sweet marzipan was probably of Arab origin and its Arabic name was *mahsaban* (Pellegrini, 1989). It was probably linked to sweets and wood because the original meaning of the Sicilian *marzapani* was a little wooden box to keep marzipan fresh. Other names of food from Arabic are:

- *Càlia*, toasted chickpeas that were often offered during baptism or wedding parties (from the Arabic *qaliyya*);
- *Cubbàita*, a sort of jam made with almond, walnuts and honey. It was a traditional sweet and came from the Arabic *qubbayta*;
- *Cùscusu*, made from tiny granules of durum wheat and still used today, came from the Arabic *kuskus*;
- *Tria*, from the Arabic *itrīya*, was an ancient way of making pasta.

### 8. 4. Textile products

Many examples of linguistic contamination are also evident in the textile field. For example the word *bernussu*, the traditional cloak with a hood, comes from the Arabic *barnus*, and *barracani* was of a kind of woollen cloth (from the Arabic *barrakàn*); *burdum* (from the Arabic *bardī*) was another type of cloth and *bufuta* (from *busut*) was used to describe a blanket or a carpet (Maurici, 1995).



### 8. 5. Units of measurement

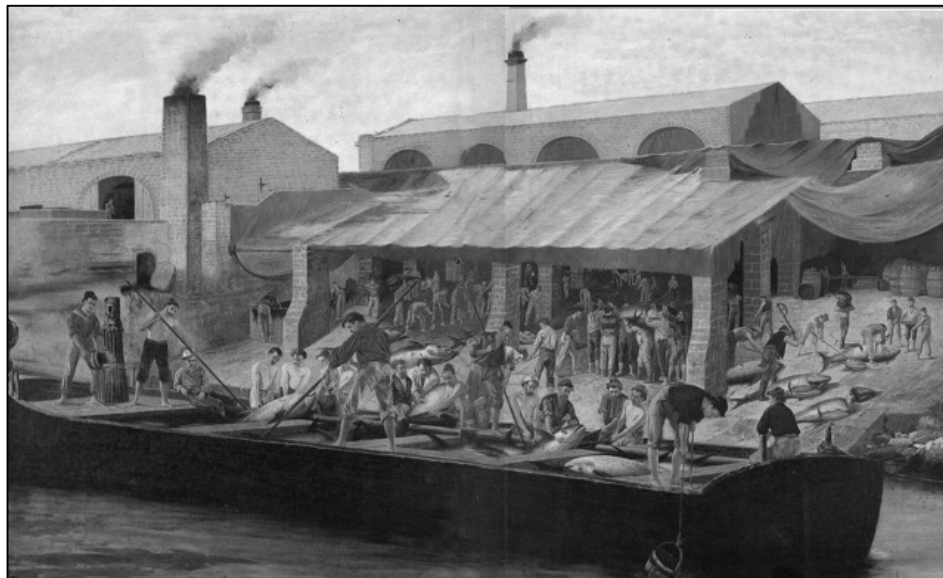
In the brief Siculo-Arabic dictionary, there were many terms referring to units of measurement, especially in the field of trade and commerce. The word *cafisu*, for example, was the tank used to measure the quantity of olive oil and comes from the Arabic *qafiz* (Pellegrini, 1962).

## 9. THE ANCIENT RITUAL OF TUNA FISHING AND MARITIME TERMINOLOGY

Regarding seafaring terminology and nautical terms Arabic influence in Sicily is at its most evident in the vocabulary regarding the ancient ritual of tuna fishing. The tradition of tuna fishing, known as *Tonnara*, has deep roots; it originated in the Phoenician age and was spread by the Arabs in Sicily, Sardinia and Spain. Originally the tuna was caught individually during the month of May, but with the new system the tuna entered a series of underwater chambers that led to “the chamber of death”. The nets were raised inside this chamber by men in boats, tied together to form a large square pool. When the nets brought the tuna to the surface, men harpooned and dragged them into the boats. This method lasted more than a thousand years and today the ritual of *Mattanza* (the killing of the tuna) is still performed in the Sicilian *Tonnara* of Bonagia (Trapani) and on the island of Favignana (Famoso, 2005). The *Tonnara* of Favignana was founded by Arabs in 807 (Von Ginkel, 2010) (photo 4). To get back to the terminology, the term *tonnara* has a Latin origin, but Arabic also acknowledged the greek/latin form (*thynnos/tunnus*) with the term *tūn* (Pellegrini, 1989).

The ritual of tuna fishing followed precise rules, timing and strictly disciplined movements. It required highly specialized skills and specific tasks for each member of the crew. The undisputed leader of the whole operation was the *Rais* or *Capurraisi*, (from the Arabic *ra'is*); he decided how to run the *tonnara* and was helped by his *calafati* (probably from the Arabic *qilf* or *qalfata*), fishermen who were part of the equipment, inside their *musciari* (from the Arabic *minšar* o *manšar*), little boats used during the operation (Caracausi, 1983).

Once nets were set in place, they sang songs of praise during the time it took for the fish to move into them. During the ritual of *mattanza*, dozens of tuna would be captured with the water turning red with their blood. Other terms referring to maritime terminology were: *Caìccu* (from the Arabic *kaīk*), a barge boat; *Sciroccu* (from the Arab *ašarūq*), the wind that blows from the south or southeast originating in the desert-air over Northern Africa (Pellegrini, 1962); *Libbanu* (from the Arabic *libān*), ropes used inside the boats; *Sciàbica* (from the Arabic *šabaka*), a kind of boat and a term for the nets (Pellegrini, 1989). The Arab influence on Sicilian life and culture lasted until 1300 and remained in all the above described fields. Then it suffered a rapid decline simply because of the cultural change during the Aragon occupation of the island. From that moment on, the Arab culture and language lost their past strength, but traces have resisted in some remote areas where they can still be found today.



*Photo 4: Tonnara of Favignana, painted by Antonio Varni, 1876*  
(source: *Libreria Internazionale Il Mare*, web site)

## 10. CONCLUSIONS

The Arab influence on Sicilian life and culture lasted until 1300 and remained in all the above described fields and in many other contexts. Then it suffered a rapid decline simply because of the cultural change during the Aragon occupation of the island. From that moment on, the Arab culture and language lost their past strength, but traces have resisted in some remote areas where they can still be found today, strengthening the links between Sicily and North Africa.

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