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*The role of the military in political transitions:  
from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day*

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## Volume II





# The role of the military in political transitions: from the 18th century to the present day

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# THE ENLIGHTENED NAVY AND THE ORIGINS OF SPANISH LIBERALISM

*David GARCÍA HERNÁN* (Spain)

## **Abstract**

The role of the navy and the Spanish sailors of the Enlightenment era, in relation to the political changes that were coming, has been little studied in comparison with its historical relevance. The men protagonists of this history, and the institution in general, played crucial roles in different orders, both indirectly in terms of the development of a new culture of service to the State and society, as well as in direct participation in the events.

Although politically, men such as Mazarredo, Escaño, Ciscar or Valdés, for example, came to have different positions (sometimes with differences only in nuances), they were all united by a common denominator that would prove to be fundamental for great social and, with them, political changes to take place: experimental sciences had to be irremediably the basis for the development of the navy and navigation in general, far above the traditional and already obsolete, in the face of technological advances, of the classic schemes of blood and family inheritance.

Merit and competence were making their way with the application of empirical science as an unavoidable necessity of the new times, and now, training in mathematics, physics, geography, astronomy, etc. became essential for the commanders of the army, which opened up possibilities of participation in the core of the highest decisions that would have their social and political consequences, at the whim of the new national and international changes.

When there was a political alteration of great importance, such as the Abdications of Bayonne and the intervention of French forces in the Peninsula, the events created

different political options. Some sailors remained faithful to the legality established in Bayonne, others opposed the French invaders, and others, moreover, took an active part, both ideologically and in the field of action with the work of political regime change that the Cortes of Cadiz of 1812 implied, with the appendix of the so-called liberal Triennium of 1820-1823. The result was that those changes would not have taken place, or at least they would have done so in a very different way, without the active participation of those sailors trained in the cultural and social universe of the Enlightenment.

**Key words:** Armada, Spanish navy, Gabriel Ciscar y Ciscar, Antonio de Escaño, Cayetano Valdés, Mazarredo, José de Mazarredo, Cortes de Cádiz, Liberalism, Enlightenment, Ferdinand VII

Few subjects have been so scarcely studied, in relation to the historical significance they had, as the leading role of the navy and the naval officers of the Enlightenment in the revolutionary changes that took place in the origins of Spanish liberalism.

Many great seafarers are practically forgotten; and, above all, an overview of all these naval officers who played a fundamental role in bringing about the revolutionary political changes at the beginning of the Contemporary Age is missing.

It must be taken into account that, although they were formed in the Ancien Régime, their thoughts and actions were major protagonists of the enormous changes that were coming -and in which they actively participated- in the transition from absolute monarchy to liberalism.

Whether they were committed liberals, Frenchmen or collaborators of the absolutist King Ferdinand VII, the enlightened ministers had important elements in common. Practically all of them came from the privileged classes of the Ancien Régime<sup>(1)</sup>, from the middle and lower nobility, so that, in the political changes, they were able to act "from within the system"<sup>(2)</sup>. But in practically all of them, their education and their eminently scientific and, in many cases, humanist character was also a dominant feature. It was evident that they shared many scientific and professional concerns.

To all this, it should be added that the Navy and, specifically the enlightened naval officers, had two absolutely essential and revolutionary roles in the events that unfolded after 1808. On the one hand, the military role against the Napoleonic invader, not

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1. As Bernaola recently pointed out, most of them were hidalgos Íñigo Bernaola Martín, *Liderazgo Naval y redes profesionales. El equipo de José de Mazarredo (1776-1814)* (Madrid, Sílex Ediciones, 2020).

2. As has happened on other occasions in the history of Spain, such as when Franco's Cortes voted in 1976 in favor of political reform.

recognizing the abdications of Bayonne, and, on the other hand, the political role, against the permanence or not of absolutism.

### **Empirical science as a necessity**

Technological advances in the world of warfare in the 18th century broke many traditional patterns that had come a long way. Towards the end of the Ancien Régime, science and technology, especially in the Navy, became absolutely fundamental. Mathematics, in addition to other empirical sciences, now occupied a privileged place in the training of officers, who, when it came to the execution of military and naval campaigns, it was of little use to descend from three generations of nobles. This inevitably led to the protagonism of an important group of officers who were responsible for making the process a reality. In the decade of the seventies of the 18th century is when the new navigation systems were put into practice (with the new marine chronometers or the method of lunar distances) that made the acquisition of mathematical and astronomical knowledge obligatory.

The great scientific naval officers of the 18th century, such as Jorge Juan, Antonio de Ulloa, or Alejandro Malaspina, were succeeded by other technical seafarers who lived at the end of the 18th century and in the first -decisive- years of the following one.

### **Scientists and humanists. Gabriel Ciscar's main role**

If all these naval officers we have just mentioned had their importance for the creation of this new intellectual environment of changes in the Navy based on mathematics and empirical sciences, those scientific sailors who also had a humanistic profile in their studies and research, would generally have even more importance.

Antonio Valdés, who would play a leading role in the resistance to the Napoleonic invaders, in addition to his promotion of Spanish nautical science, extraordinarily encouraged libraries, literary works<sup>(3)</sup>, the Navy Museum<sup>(4)</sup> and, in general, culture among all members of the Navy<sup>(5)</sup>.

The multifaceted Vargas Ponce, passionate about mathematics, but also a "sailor, historian, pedagogue, writer and politician" according to Hugo O'Donnell. He was a member of the Real Academia de la Historia and of two significant institutions of his time, the Real Sociedad Matritense de Amigos del País and the Academia de Bellas Artes<sup>(6)</sup>.

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3. Cesáreo Fernández Duro, *Armada española desde la unión de los reinos de Castilla y de Aragón* (Madrid, 1895).

4. Gárate Córdoba "Antonio Valdés" in *Diccionario biográfico español* (Madrid, RAH, 2013).

5. José María Blanco Núñez, *La Armada Española en la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII* (Madrid, Izar. Construcciones Navales SA, 2001), 2001.

6. Hugo O'Donnell, "José de Vargas y Ponce", in *Diccionario biográfico español* (Madrid, RAH, 2013).

Antonio de Escaño would be another main character -even more- in this process. He was a great theoretician of the issues of his profession from the study of experimental physics and its application to nautical science, as well as history, also reaching the Royal Academy of this discipline<sup>(7)</sup>.

But perhaps the marine scientist who, while also influencing decisively the liberal revolutionary process, was more outstanding for his training and his enlightened writings was Gabriel Ciscar. He was, above all, a man of science who believed in man's ability to understand the laws of nature and thus banish false superstitions<sup>(8)</sup> and the irrational explanations of "astrologers, diviners, alchemists and somnambulists". It was essentially based on the experimental method and observation. And, as a good enlightened man, the dimension of the application of science played a fundamental role. In his plan for the application of the sciences, the treatises he recommends are a compendium of the most advanced scientific production of the time. He was also an expert in Physics and Nautical Science, and his enormous prestige led him, as a Spanish representative, to the International Congress of Weights and Measures of 1798 in Paris, and he made the new Decimal Metric System<sup>(9)</sup> known in Spain. Ciscar's humanistic profile is also beyond doubt. Further to his incursions into poetry, he defended the Castilian language for the explanation of science, and advocated the study of philology and the need to know other languages.

### **The definitive triumph? of merit and ability**

Both Ciscar and the scientific-humanist naval officers mentioned above were of enormous importance in making effective -at last- the idea, which came precisely from the Renaissance, of superimposing competence and merit over blood and lineage to obtain merit and order the social hierarchy.

Despite the fact that the recently created Order of Charles III was at first betraying its own principles of merit and virtue (lineage was still fundamental to obtain it), the enlightened sailors and scientists of the late eighteenth century demonstrated with their deeds that the order could really be adorned with the essence for which it was created. In fact, Ciscar himself would be a characteristic example. The king would make him a knight pensioner of the Order of Charles III in 1807. Evidently, for his very clear merits that we have just mentioned very succinctly. For his part, the prestige of Antonio Valdés, sailor and scientist, was so great that he was promoted to Captain General in 1792, in spite of being the thirteenth candidate of the lieutenant generals in terms of seniority in the job.

7. José Vargas y Ponce, *Elogio histórico de D. Antonio de Escaño* (Madrid, Editorial Naval, 1962)

8. Emilio La Parra López, *El regente Gabriel Ciscar. Ciencia y Revolución en la España romántica* (Madrid, Compañía Literaria 1995).

9. Íñigo Bernaola Martín, *Liderazgo Naval y redes profesionales. El equipo de José de Mazarredo (1776-1814)* (Madrid, Sílex Ediciones, 2020).

Antonio de Escaño in his immense work on the necessary reforms in the Navy fought hard for the recognition of merit. And nothing is more revealing of all this than the fact that Escaño himself was able to get so far in the Navy, and in the politics of his time, without any contact or patron who could support him in his career<sup>(10)</sup>.

## The revolution in the resistance to the invader

The Napoleonic invasion of the Peninsula in 1808 brought with it transcendental military and political consequences that, ultimately, could lead to the achievement of a constitutional regime. In this important process, it was the Navy chiefs who had the greatest influence on the development of the main events<sup>(11)</sup>. One only has to look at the proportion of professional sailors, Navy officers, in the composition of the successive regencies or provisional governments.

It is perfectly perceptible in these convulsive times that events from that year onwards followed one another in a dizzying succession and overcame any matured political project that could have been imagined. But it must be taken into account that the socio-professional and cultural basis of the enlightened naval officers and their attitude towards the model of society was well present, and undoubtedly determined many of the behaviors in such difficult circumstances. It was a time of -inevitable- political ups and downs, which moved according to the circumstances, which made that in some moments outstanding enlightened seafarers followed a political path to take another one later according to those circumstances. Most of them, however, were going to defy "revolutionarily" the legal authority established after the abdications of Bayonne and were going to oppose the government of Joseph Bonaparte.

In this context, there are a series of great naval officers who not only opposed the Bonapartist authority in a revolutionary way, but also promoted the incipient political program of liberalism by participating, in one way or another, in the legislative and governmental work of the Cortes de Cádiz. Especially three outstanding figures that would have in the following years a great revolutionary protagonism: Gabriel Císcar, Antonio de Escaño and Cayetano Valdés.

The latter, faced with the immense gravity of the events of Bayonne in 1808, was to change his fundamental status as a scientist for that of a politician, participating first in the National Defense Board of Cartagena, organizing the defense of the entire Kingdom of Murcia<sup>(12)</sup>. His great prestige led him to form part of the Supreme Central Governing Board of the Kingdom, organizing and dictating important measures for national defense.

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10. Luis Delgado Bañón, "Antonio de Escaño y García de Cáceres, teniente general de la Armada", in *La armada y sus hombres en un momento de transición. Cuadernos Monográficos del Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval* (Madrid, 54, 2007).

11. Jose Antonio Ocampo Aneiros, "Antonio de Escaño y García Cáceres", in *Diccionario biográfico español* (Madrid, RAH, 2011).

12. Emilio La Parra López, *El regente Gabriel Císcar. Ciencia y Revolución en la España romántica* (Madrid, Compañía

As far as Antonio de Escaño is concerned, we must remember, first of all, that in the scenario of surrender at Bayonne, Escaño adopted the position of loyalty to his country over his personal loyalty (to the also great scientific sailor Mazarredo). From the beginning of the Napoleonic occupation, Antonio de Escaño took part in clandestine meetings against the French, soon becoming the navy's leading member in political and military actions in the national theater<sup>(13)</sup>. And, already in his refusal to be part of the government of Joseph Bonaparte, the intrinsic presence of his concept of national sovereignty is noticed. He went so far as to write to the authorities: "Since it has not yet been verified that the Nation or the greater part of it has recognized the new government and constitution, of which I am not aware either, I cannot take the oath that is required".

The Supreme Central Junta named Escaño Secretary of State and Universal Office of the Navy, and from that position, giving quick and functional orders to prepare the Navy for the imminent French invasion, he also directed the operations by which many of the chiefs and officers of the Navy, in addition to the seafaring troops, became part of the army cadres. Escaño and, in general, the Navy would thus become the main bastion of defense against the invader after the battle of Bailén (1808).

Finally, Cayetano Valdés joined General Blake's army, being wounded in the battle of Espinosa de los Monteros in December 1808. The following year, already in his "natural environment" which was the Navy, he would be appointed Lieutenant General, Captain General and Political Chief of Cadiz, fighting there bravely against the French in such difficult times<sup>(14)</sup>.

### Liberal ideology in enlightened seafarers

As for the political ideology, the identification of important sailors of the Enlightenment with the principle of national sovereignty is very clear. Precisely Gabriel Ciscar, clearly imbued with this principle for the nation not to carry out what Ferdinand VII had sworn on the respect to the constitution of Cadiz of 1812. In this defense he used the word Nation with capital letters. For his part, Antonio de Escaño, who had shown great interest in the events of the French Revolution and who had imbibed much enlightened and forbidden reading<sup>(15)</sup>, not only mentioned, also several times, the words "Nation" and "National" also with capital letters in a representation to the king on the problems of the foreign invasion<sup>(16)</sup>. However -and this is very significant in terms of his break with

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Literaria 1995); María Teresa Blanco Torres, *Gabriel Ciscar y Ciscar* (Madrid, Fundación Ignacio Larramendi, 2017).

13. Luis Delgado Bañón, "Antonio de Escaño y García de Cáceres, teniente general de la Armada", in *La armada y sus hombres en un momento de transición. Cuadernos Monográficos del Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval* (Madrid, 54, 2007).

14. José Cervera Pery, "El capitán general de la Armada Cayetano Valdés Flores, un marino liberal" in *La Armada y sus hombres" in La armada y sus hombres en un momento de transición. Cuadernos Monográficos del Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval* (Madrid, 54, 2007).

15. José Vargas y Ponce, *Elogio histórico de D. Antonio de Escaño* (Madrid, Editorial Naval, 1962)

16. Archivo Histórico Nacional. Estado, 3002, 14.



the Ancien Régime- he defends the call to courts in a single branch, without convening them in particular and privileging the branches of the clergy and the nobility, thus calling for a convocation in Cadiz without strata<sup>(17)</sup>.

Cayetano Valdés is also a fervent defender of the Cortes, stating that except for religion and the person of the Sovereign, everything can be discussed and debated in these Cortes, which proclaim national sovereignty and have an extensive list of rights and liberties<sup>(18)</sup>.

Beyond their inclination - albeit moderate - to the concept of national sovereignty, these enlightened scientific sailors would also become champions of revolutionary reforms in aspects that had been the mainstays of the Ancien Régime: attacks on the institution of the entailed estate, suppression of the Inquisition and the requirement of nobility for entry into the Army and the Navy<sup>(19)</sup>, for example.

But even more significant is their position with respect to the nature of international politics. Far from continuing in this sense with the traditional line of the Ancien Régime and its essentially dynastic perspective of foreign relations, they interpreted them in a liberal, national key. They had a rationalized vision of foreign policy; especially with regard to the extreme importance of trade and realpolitik, referring to the ambitions of other nations.

## Political positions

As for their political positions and the positions they held, several of them participated in different provincial boards and in the Central Board, and some in the regencies. Antonio de Escaño played a leading role in the creation of the first regency in Cadiz. Once Escaño was appointed regent, he in turn appointed another naval officer in whom he had total confidence for the post of Secretary of State and of the Office of the Navy: Gabriel Ciscar. A year later, Ciscar himself was appointed regent in the new regency.

With the return of the king from France in 1814, the whole liberal scenario disappeared and very few naval officers were part of the new administration; although, evidently, the return to the constitutional regime after Riego's liberal uprising in 1820 would change the political panorama. Even if Cayetano Valdés had fallen into disgrace with the return

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17. Luis Delgado Bañón, "Antonio de Escaño y García de Cáceres, teniente general de la Armada", in *La armada y sus hombres en un momento de transición. Cuadernos Monográficos del Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval* (Madrid, 54, 2007). As significant as it is known, this question of the arithmetic of the votes by arms had been absolutely decisive in France in May 1789 for the collapse of the States General and the constitution of the National Assembly.

18. For Cervera Pery, in this way the historical romantic line is consecrated by identifying the program of the liberal revolution with the content of the Constitution of Cadiz. José Cervera Pery, "El capitán general de la Armada Cayetano Valdés Flores, un marino liberal" in *La Armada y sus hombres* in *La armada y sus hombres en un momento de transición. Cuadernos Monográficos del Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval* (Madrid, 54, 2007).

19. Emilio La Parra López, *El regente Gabriel Ciscar. Ciencia y Revolución en la España romántica* (Madrid, Compañía Literaria 1995);; María Teresa Blanco Torres, *Gabriel Ciscar y Ciscar* (Madrid, Fundación Ignacio Larramendi, 2017).

of Ferdinand VII, after the events of Cabezas de San Juan he was appointed governor of Cádiz. He would later hold the post of Minister of War with the cabinet of Argüelles and would be a deputy in the 1822-1823 legislature. Likewise, Gabriel Ciscar would now be promoted to Lieutenant General of the Navy and would be Councilor of State. In the decisive moments of June of 1823 he would again be part, together with Cayetano Valdés and Captain General Gaspar Vigodet of the regency -provisional- created to carry out the forced transfer of Ferdinand VII to Cádiz before the advance of the absolutist armies of the Holy Alliance<sup>(20)</sup>.

Faced with their triumph, the so-called Ominous Decade began with radical repressive measures such as the death penalty for the three aforementioned regents and the confiscation of their assets, although they were able to save their lives by taking refuge abroad. The presence of liberalism was thus extinguished during those ten repressive years, and only the death of the monarch and the arrival of a new regime with María Cristina would give political protagonism to those who remained prepared for it.

### **The navy as a weapon of war for political change**

On the other hand, in the war against the French armies, there is no doubt that the role of the Navy was also fundamental. In the defense of Cadiz, it had, of course, played a decisive role for many reasons, not the least of which was the type of warfare required in that theater of operations. A kind of naval warfare was carried out in which the Royal Navy already had a valuable experience of more than twenty years. The knowledge of the aquatic labyrinth of the area was key for the defense of Cádiz, taking into account that the arsenal of La Carraca had become a real fortress. Likewise, the Regency was clear about the transcendence of the strategic vision of the sea domain, so much importance was given to naval transport and aquatic communications, especially with England, Lisbon and, above all, the Indies. It was thus possible to establish an extraordinary coordination in the peninsular theater with couriers aboard fast frigates, which made the resistance reasonably viable<sup>(21)</sup>.

A very successful naval policy was carried out: to assure the vital communications with America and the Philippines and to concentrate naval power in a force that came to have 200 gunboats that were very effective in that network of canals of the Cadiz redoubt, besides collaborating, among many other tasks, with the British squadron in the blockade of the Bay of Biscay<sup>(22)</sup>. Escaño, together with Castaños (who was in charge of land matters), was the main protagonist in the defense of Cadiz.

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20. José Cervera Pery, "El capitán general de la Armada Cayetano Valdés Flores, un marino liberal" in *La armada y sus hombres en un momento de transición. Cuadernos Monográficos del Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval* (Madrid, 54, 2007).

21. Luis Delgado Bañón, "Antonio de Escaño y García de Cáceres, teniente general de la Armada", in *La armada y sus hombres en un momento de transición. Cuadernos Monográficos del Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval* (Madrid, 54, 2007).

22. José María Madueño Galán, "Vázquez de Figueroa, marino patriota", in *Diccionario biográfico español* (Madrid, RAH, 2013).

Cayetano Valdés, together with Squadron Leader Topete, also played an outstanding role in the defense of Cádiz, especially in command of the subtle forces, patrolling the intricate canyons and thus keeping the French forces at bay<sup>(23)</sup>.

## Epilogue

With the victory of absolutism, Cayetano Valdés (along with the other two members of the regency) was condemned to death. He was able to escape with his life, taking refuge in Gibraltar and then moving to London, where he remained for ten long years of forced exile. With the amnesty decreed by the queen governor in 1834, once Ferdinand VII was dead, he returned to Spain and was made Captain General of the Navy and National Hero of the kingdom according to the Royal Statute of that year, although he would die only a few months later<sup>(24)</sup>.

Gabriel Císcar would not leave exile. After living six years at the expense of a pension granted to him by the Duke of Wellington, he sadly died in Gibraltar on August the 12th, 1829<sup>(25)</sup>.

The naval officer Juan María de Villavicencio, who had been appointed Captain General of the Navy in 1817 during the absolutist period, in October 1823 came to accompany Angoulême to receive the king released by the liberals. In the same month, he was reinstated as Director General of the Navy. From this favorable position, Villavicencio interceded with the king so that, although everyone knew the important role that the Navy had played in the constitutional movement, in view of the many other patriotic services it had performed, it would not be persecuted. The king promised and, this time, he did keep his word, the navy being one of the institutions that suffered the fewest losses and hardships in the sad period that followed until the definitive arrival of liberalism, although without the recognition of so much struggle and political dignity<sup>(26)</sup>. This transcendental function of the enlightened Navy in the origins of Spanish liberalism would remain for History.

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23. José Cervera Pery, "El capitán general de la Armada Cayetano Valdés Flores, un marino liberal" in *La armada y sus hombres en un momento de transición. Cuadernos Monográficos del Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval* (Madrid, 54, 2007).

24. José Cervera Pery, "El capitán general de la Armada Cayetano Valdés Flores, un marino liberal" in *La armada y sus hombres en un momento de transición. Cuadernos Monográficos del Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval* (Madrid, 54, 2007).

25. María Teresa Blanco Torres, *Gabriel Císcar y Císcar* (Madrid, Fundación Ignacio Larramendi, 2017).

26. Marcelino González Fernández, "Juan María de Villavicencio", , in *Diccionario biográfico español* (Madrid, RAH, 2013).

## Author's short CV

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David García Hernán is Professor of Modern History at the Carlos III University of Madrid. D. in this specialty from the Complutense University in 1992 and Corresponding Academic of the Royal Academy of History of Spain, he is the author of several research books on nobility and war published by prestigious publishers, such as *"La nobleza en la España moderna"* (Istmo, 1991) and *"La cultura de la guerra y el teatro del Siglo de Oro"* (Sílex, 2006).

He is also the author, together with Enrique García Hernán, of the book *"Lepanto: el día después"* (*Lepanto: the day after*), which was awarded the 1993 Army Prize; he is also the author of a widely distributed manual: *"Historia Universal: XXI capítulos fundamentales"* (Sílex, 4 editions).

In recent years he has published several books on Europe in the 16th century: *"Carlos V. Imperio y frustración"* (Editorial Paraninfo), *"Humanismo y sociedad del Renacimiento"* (editorial Síntesis); and, continuing with that aforementioned line of research on the Cultural History of War, in the editorial Cátedra in 2019, *"La guerra y la paz. A Cultural History"*.

David García Hernán is also the author of more than a hundred articles and chapters on these subjects that have been published in History and Literature journals in general, such as *"Hispania"*, *"Historia Social"*, *"Cuadernos de Historia Moderna"*, *"Gladius"*, *"Obradoiro de Historia Moderna"*, *"Mediterranea. Ricerche Storiche"*, *"Bulletin Hispanique"*, *"Revista de Historia Naval"* etc.; and has given numerous conferences in Spain and abroad.

He has been and is Principal Investigator of several competitive projects. He has also held teaching positions, such as Director of the Department of Humanities at the University Carlos III of Madrid, and research positions, such as Scientific Collaborator of the Institute of Naval History and Culture, and President of the Spanish Association of Military History (ASEHISMI), a position he currently holds.

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