

**O**LMEC HEADS are different from one another. Even at a single glance one can easily distinguish identifying features that set Colossal Head 1 at Tres Zapotes apart from Heads 1, 3 and 4 (all of which, again, are different from one another) at La Venta. These differences are apparent in spite of the family resemblance described by Stirling, the man who discovered what are today known as the La Venta Heads. He affirmed that all the heads carried distinctively "grim expressions (1940:332)."

It is important to draw attention to the superficial way in which these heads have been described. Negligence persists and affects the way we appreciate La Venta Head 3. This article will deal specifically with the mouth of this Colossal Head, in an effort to correct inadvertent yet fundamental errors that have been perpetuated for some time.

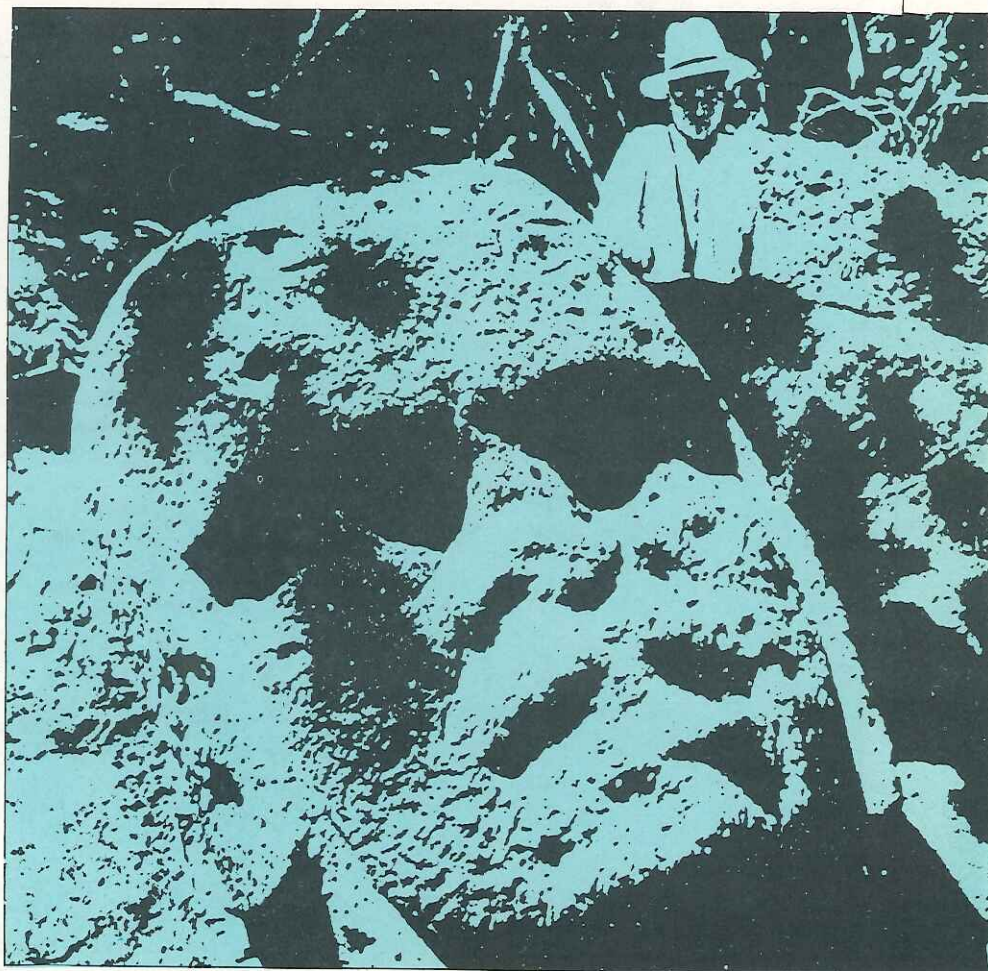
It is known that the Colossal La Venta Heads 2, 3 and 4 were found on the northern limits of the site in an east-west linear pattern. Stirling, in his book *Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico* (1943:57) writes about Head 3: "This is the most eastern of the three heads placed in a row north of the great mound. It is flatter than the other heads at the site and the style is somewhat different. The fact that the face has suffered considerable erosion may enhance this individual appearance." A strange assumption: a stone sculpture improving with the weather.

Stirling goes on to talk about the feature that interests me: "The mouth is shown with the lips parted." And that is all he says. He published a photograph of the Head, which I will discuss later (fig. 1).

Kubler (1962:67) also discusses the Colossal Heads. He says, "A second group of faces can be

# La Venta: the mouth of Colossal Head 3

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*Photograph published by Stirling of Colossal Head 3 at La Venta.*

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distinguished by parted lips, communicating an expression of speaking animation. Two in this group are spherical and two are long-headed. The long head ones (La Venta 3 and San Lorenzo 2) are more lively than the round heads (La Venta 2 and 4). La Venta 3 has [...] deeply shadowed lips, suggestive of emotional tension."

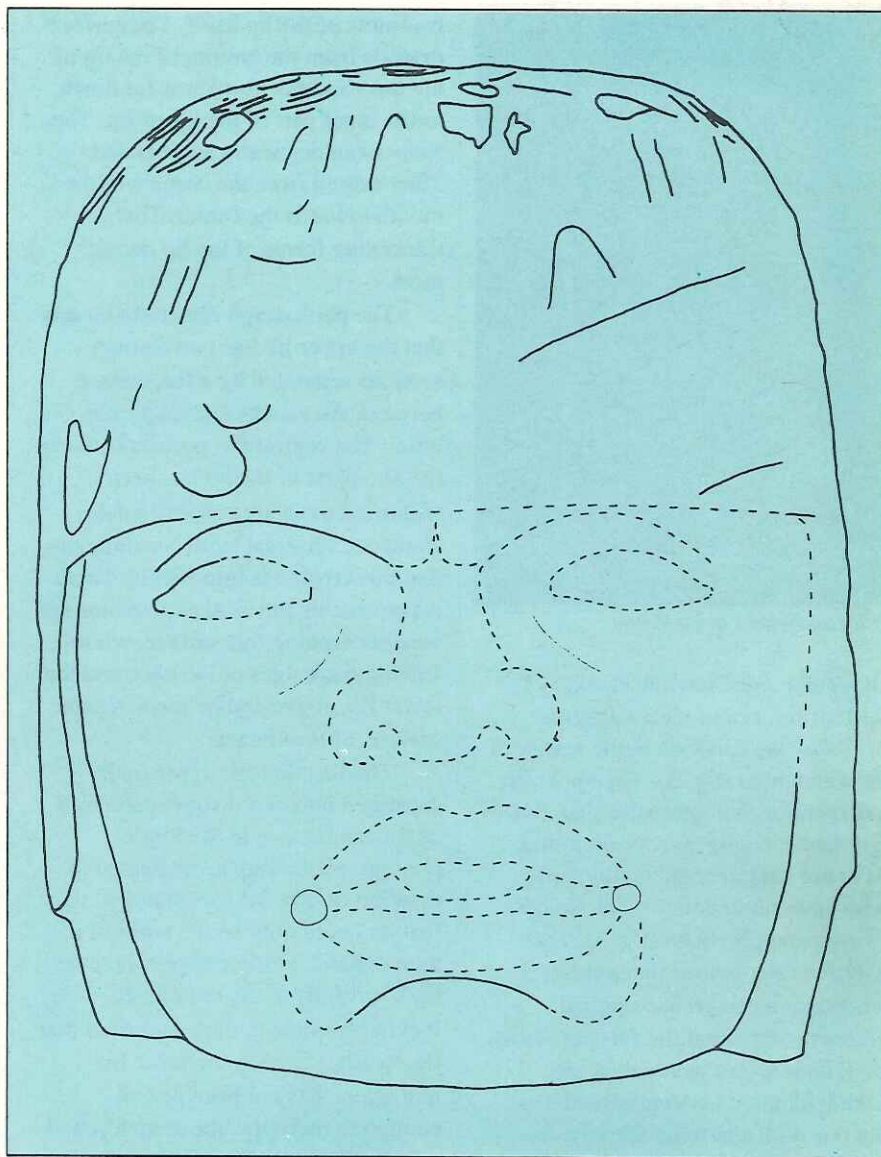
Although Kubler's account is somewhat more accurate, he still overlooks the mouth's specific features, which will be discussed later.

In 1967, Clewlow, Cowan O'Connell and Benemann published *Colossal Heads of the Olmec Culture*, where they make a series of erroneous affirmations about the face of La Venta Head 3. These assertions have unfortunately been taken as truth since that time.

In the same book was also published a drawing of Head 3 where they used dotted lines to indicate an assumed structure of the mouth. Their illustration represents forms existing only in their imaginations, and that gives us grounds to doubt whether they ever saw the monument they describe first hand (fig. 2). The misconception has been perpetuated, since the illustration seems to have become an *official* image of the Head.

The authors who published the sketch included the following description of the La Venta Head 3: "It is impossible to ascertain what features were sculpted on the left side of the face since this side is severely eroded [...] Erosion on the nose is also great. However, it does appear that it was narrower across the bridge than those of the other La Venta heads and that in profile it was slightly snubbed."

They write about the feature that concerns me: "Since the upper lip has almost disappeared, it is impossible to ascertain its original shape, or the distance between the upper edge of the lip and the nose. It would seem



Sketch published by Clewlow et al. of Colossal Head 3 at La Venta.

probable that the mouth of LV3 was open, and that the lower lip was U-shaped."

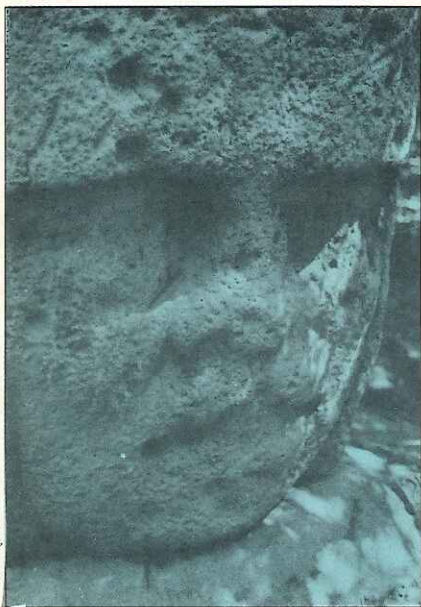
The truth of the matter is that the above words are dead wrong. The upper lip is far from having disappeared and its shape is easily observed. Also, it is not at all difficult to determine the exact distance from the lip to the nose. There is no doubt that the mouth is open. The lower lip does not call for conjecture as it can be seen clearly.

After Clewlow et al.'s work, there has not been much new correct information about that head and its

face. Thus, for example, Wicke (1971:102) identifies the Colossal Heads with the following: they have "thick lips, wide noses and fat cheeks." The mouth of La Venta 3 is described as being open. A series of stylistic classifications are applied. Soustelle (1986:47) affirms, "The La Venta Heads 2 and 3 have flattened faces."

In summary, Stirling, Kubler and Wicke, when dealing with the mouth of La Venta 3, identify one fact: it has open lips. Kubler adds that the lips are deeply shadowed. Soustelle ignores it





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Colossal Head 3 at La Venta.

altogether and Clewlow et. al., as I said earlier, accumulate nonsense.

Now we can look at the reality of the monument (fig. 3). The upper lip has specific characteristics that, due to ignorance, negligence, or prejudice have not been recognized by those who have studied them. The lip has two separate sections (fig. 4). The feature is so obvious that guides, who explain the archaeological pieces to visitors at the *Parque Museo de Villahermosa* where they are found, identify La Venta Head 3 as the one with a harelip. Clearly, the heads do not require the attention of an expert to describe their real characteristics.

Ignoring these clearly visible features becomes truly incomprehensible when one looks at the photograph that Stirling published of the Head, where they are obvious beyond any doubt (fig. 1).

The Head was illuminated in order to be able to clearly see the shapes and shadows of its features. The nose can be clearly seen by the shadows thrown by the tip of the nose and the nostrils. Underneath the nose, a well lit wide surface indicates that there is no interruption other than the

two parts of the lip itself. The surface extends from the bottom of the tip of the nose and the nostrils as far down as the inner part of the lower lip. The shapes can be clearly appreciated. They extend from the corners of the mouth towards the center. The thickening forms of the lip do not meet.

The photograph illustrates clearly that the upper lip has two distinct sections separated by a flat surface between the cheeks and under the nose. The central flat portion between the two parts of the lip has been identified as an area eroded by the elements. Physical evidence indicates that this erosion is impossible. There is no possible physical explanation for weather eroding this surface, while leaving the bulges of the nose and the lower lip, above and below this same surface, almost intact.

The fact that the upper lip is separated into two distinct parts by a space can be seen in Stirling's photograph, though he neglected to mention or take into account that this feature could only be the work of a human hand. Furthermore, when we look carefully at the mouth, we inevitably come to the conclusion that the weather erosion the piece has undergone has not been severe enough to merit the above mentioned scholars' conclusions. I maintain that the shape and volume of the nose are easily perceived. There is no need for guessing. There is a lump on the cheeks dividing them from the flat surfaces surrounding the mouth and a virtually exact form of the mouth.

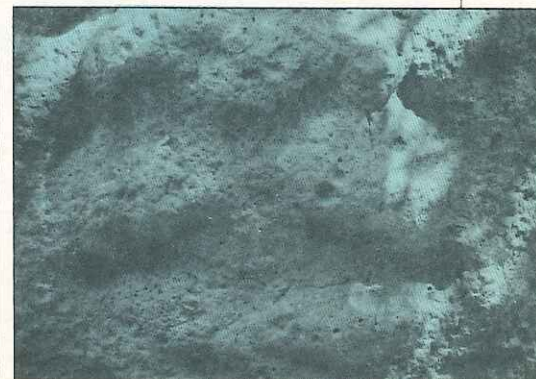
Having established the above, I will now endeavor to interpret the meaning of the representation of the upper lip on La Venta Head 3 and to support my explanation with solid facts. When I analyzed (Bonifaz Nuño, 1986:45) Covarrubias's iconographical description (1946:168-170) that sought to prove the "Olmec

influence on the evolution of the rain gods' jaguar masks" (fig. 5), I formulated the following theory: "If the face marked with letter 'A' in Covarrubias's description had been the source for all the others (which is now undisputable), one would have to conclude that the so-called *Olmec mouth of the jaguar* is not a mouth at all. It is not even a serpent's mouth, as Luckert (1976: pass.) proposes, but the stylization of two serpent's mouths that touch."

Practical proof of my theory followed: A great Olmec stone face, whose most significant feature is its mouth, was located at the Universidad Veracruzana's Anthropology Museum in Xalapa, in the State of Veracruz. I described the piece in detail (Bonifaz Nuño, 1989: 78-87). The mouth is formed by two serpent's heads that meet precisely in the middle of the upper lip (fig. 6).

Thus, it was the Olmec themselves who clarified the meaning of the trapezoidal shaped mouth which appears frequently in their stylized human images, and is often mistakenly identified as that of a jaguar. The wide upper lip can be explained by the need to create an appropriate space for the figures of two serpent heads that face each other.

When the Olmec carve lifelike faces, such as the Colossal Heads at La Venta, we observe the same wide upper lip. This is the feature that led



Mouth of Colossal Head 3 at La Venta.

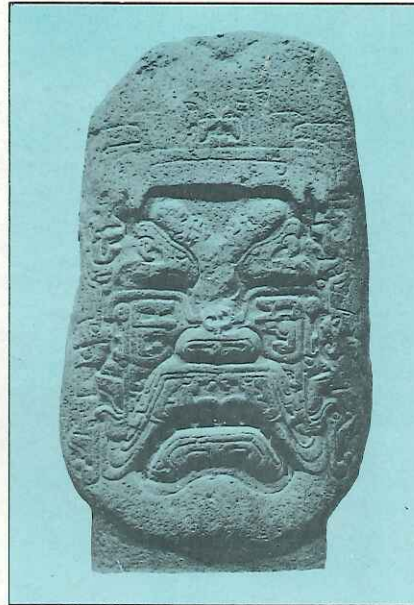
Vicente Quiñonez



the first scientists who mentioned them (Melgar, José, 1869: 292; Chavero, Alfredo, 1887: 63-64) to identify the heads as those of Africans. Thus, if both the stylized Olmec faces, as well as the lifelike one, have a wide space above the upper lip, and if it is clear that this space is created for two ophidian heads, we can assume the fact that an analogous wide space is intended to achieve the same end result.

Olmec Colossal Heads have wide upper lips in order to accommodate two facing snake heads. A glance is enough to observe how the image of two serpents' heads seeking each other would fit naturally into the space. The artistic sculpting of Colossal Head 3 affirms this without

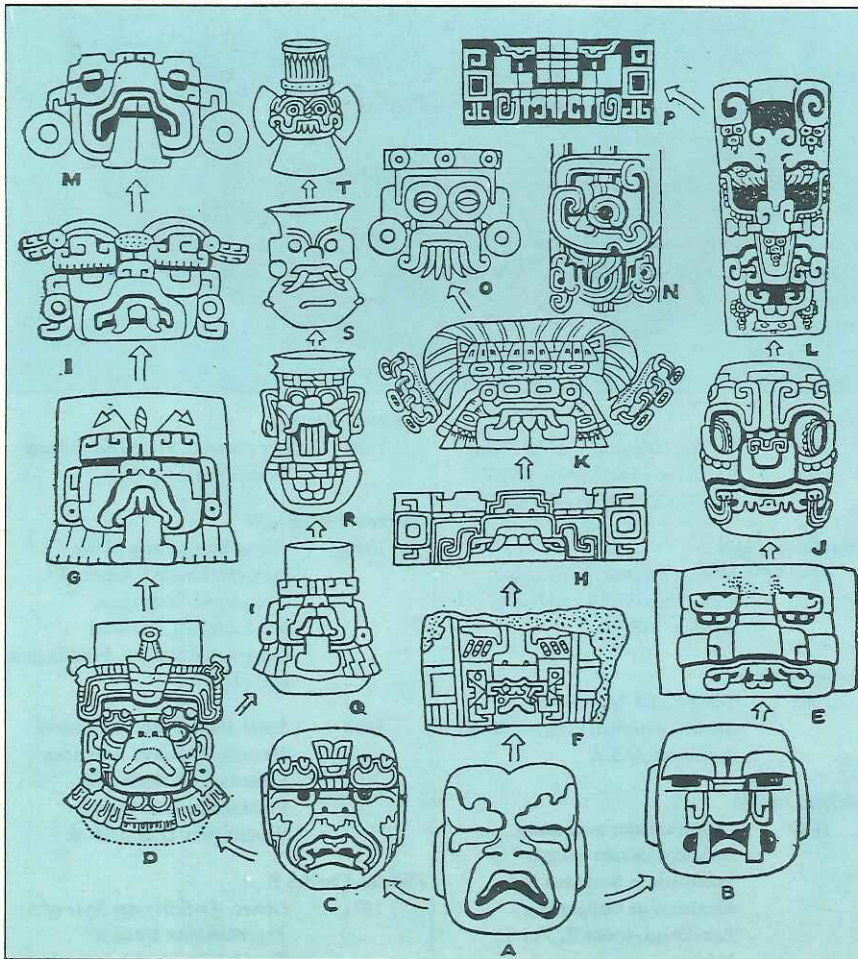
Antonio Vizcaino



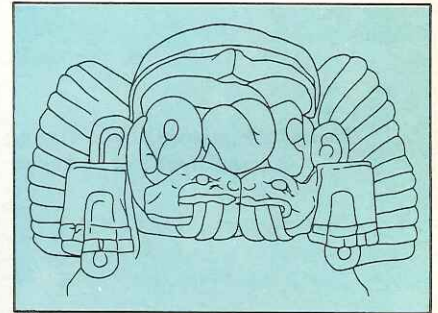
Olmec figure at the Universidad Veracruzana in Xalapa.

leaving any room for doubt. The two parts of the lip suggest the image of two serpents' heads on their way to a shared encounter.

When we compare the mouth on the face of this Head with that on the stone face at the Universidad Veracruzana's Museum of Anthropology, the evidence is clear. The iconographical features of the face found in Veracruz and the Aztec Tlaloc in the Uhde Collection at the Berlin Museum of Ethnography led me to call the Veracruz face *Tlaloc Uhde Olmeca* (fig. 7). The similarities between the two faces speak for themselves. The double lip of La Venta's Colossal Head 3 illustrates my logic.



Miguel Covarrubias' iconographical wheel.




Aztec Tlaloc from the Uhde Collection, Berlin.

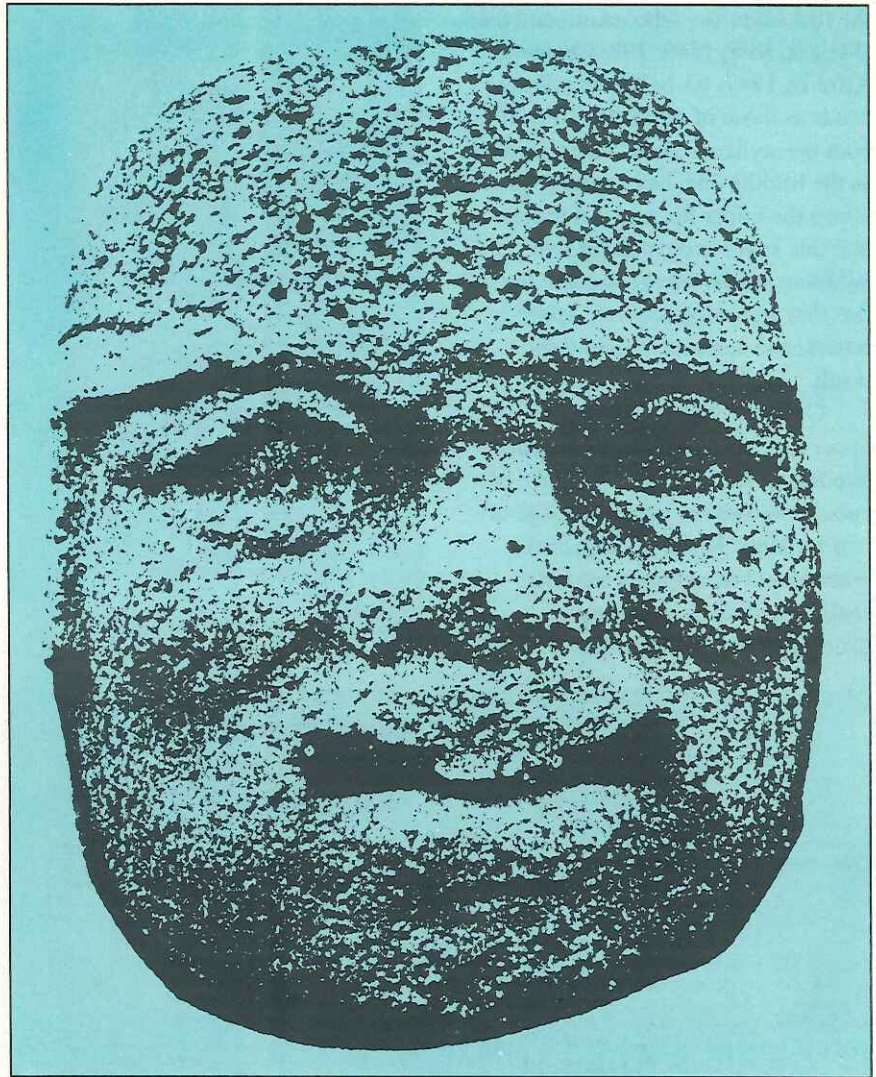
At this point, it would be important to consider whether the sculptor carving the divided mouth did so intentionally from the very outset, or, whether the idea was to suggest a concept, well known at that time, upon completion. This concept, known as "intentional destruction", is the exact opposite of how it sounds: it is a constructive ritual that, in the modified figure, open the doors of communication for universal harmony.

If the sculptors intention was the latter, then we can assume that the final sculptor of the La Venta Colossal Head 3 was the gifted one, clarifying decisively the fundamental significance of the shape of the mouths on the Colossal Heads. The double serpent trait was clearly exposed.



This assumption can be confirmed by examining the current appearance of the La Venta Colossal Head 2. The deliberate chipping of the upper lip creates, in a slightly less conspicuous fashion than on Head 3, the appearance of two ophidian heads with their mouths coming together. Knowing this, it is impossible to look at Head 2 without noticing the feature. Those who can only view photographs of the Colossal Heads, be forewarned that the very best photograph available was published by Stirling in 1943 (fig. 8) 

*Photograph published by Stirling of Colossal Head 2 at La Venta.*



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