

Rediscovering Romanian Traditions in the Context of America's Saint Valentine's Day
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The paper is a comparison between Western Valentine's Day and Romanian Dragobete in terms of history and traditions. It starts with a parallel between *The Catholic Encyclopedia* and Simeon Florea Marian's ethnographic research at the end of the 19th century, a major step for the Catholics in America to fill the lack of proper information regarding the Catholic Church, and a first step for Romanians to discover their unwritten past. The second part will deal with references to literature, old and new customs in both countries until the end of the 20th century, with Valentine as a model of globalization, and the rediscovery of an almost lost Dragobete as a Romanian response to the so-called Americanization.

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th seems to have encouraged serious research in both America and Romania regarding the Catholic religion in the first case, and the national spirituality in the second.

Enthusiasm reigned on both sides of the Atlantic among English-speaking teachers, lecturers, clergymen, authors and publishers, as well as Romanian-speaking theologues, ethnographers, teachers and folklorists. Their joint work resulted in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* in America, and in many legends and folkloric collections in Romania.

The major problem for Catholics when preparing such an important project was the lack of objectivity and accuracy, or the marginalization of Catholic subjects in previous Encyclopedias, as the quotation from 'The Making of the Catholic Encyclopedia (1917)', states:

"The need of a Catholic Encyclopedia in English was manifest for many years before it was decided to publish one. Editors of various general Encyclopedias had attempted to make them satisfactory from a Catholic point of view, but without success, partly because they could not afford the space, but chiefly because in matters of dispute their contributors were too often permitted to be partial, if not erroneous, in their statements." (The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1)

The major problem for Romanians when searching their unwritten past was the fear to lose the most authentic traditions with the coming of (western) civilization. This fear is expressed in the "Introduction" written by Iordan Datcu for Simion Florea Marian's 1899 book *Sărbătorile la Români*:"

"In the last decades of the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th, there was this strong belief that popular productions were being replaced by the progress of civilization, a belief that not only concerned, but also deeply worried, and that if a much serious research did not happen, there would be a huge loss, since what had been collected until then was little and irrelevant" (Datcu, V).¹

Each of these scientific achievements had its main figures to guarantee for the work. On the American side we have Charles G. Habermann, Professor of Latin and Librarian of the College of the City of New York, Edward A. Pace, Professor of Philosophy in the Catholic University, Condé B. Pallen, Editor, Rt. Rev. Thomas J.

Shanan, the Professor of Church History in The Catholic University, and John J. Wynne, Editor of the Messenger. To this it must be added the approval and assistance of the Apostolic Delegate and of the members of the Hierarchy, his Eminence Cardinal Farley, together with contributors from abroad, making it: “an international work of reference on the constitution, doctrine, discipline and history of the Catholic Church”. Or, as the ‘Original Preface’ from 1906 states:

“The Catholic Encyclopedia, as its name implies, proposes to give its readers full and authoritative information on the entire cycle of Catholic interests, action and doctrine. [...] In all things the object of the Encyclopedia is to give the whole truth without prejudice, national, political or factional. In the determination of the truth the most recent and acknowledged scientific methods are employed, and the results of the latest research in theology, philosophy, history, apologetics, archeology, and other sciences are given careful consideration”. (The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1)

The main figures on the Romanian side are, Minister of Education Titu Maiorescu, writer Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, writer Nic. Densușianu, writer A. Gorovei, writer Iuliu A. Zanne, distinguished teachers such as Ion Micu Moldovan, Gr. Crețu, Gr. G. Tocilescu and Cristea N. Țapu. And the most famous of all, we should mention theologian and ethnographer Simion Florea Marian.

In one of its short articles, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* introduces us to the three Saint Valentines that the Catholic Church admitted, as they had appeared in the early martyrologies. The first was a priest at Rome, the second, a bishop of Interamna – (Terni), while the last one was lost somewhere in Africa:

“...and these two seem both to have suffered in the second half of the third century and to have been buried on the Flaminian Way, but at different distances from the city. In William of Malmesbury’s time what was known to the ancients as the Flaminian Gate of Rome and is now the Porta del Popolo, was called the Gate of St. Valentine. The name seems to have been taken from a small church dedicated to the Saint which was in the immediate neighborhood. Of both these St Valentines some sort of Acta are preserved but they are of relatively late date and of no historical value. Of the third Saint Valentine, who suffered in Africa with a number of companions, nothing further is known.” (The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1)

In his studies of Romanian holidays, Simion Florea Marian approached the subject in an original way at a time when the general opinion was to eradicate the superstition when researching our folklore: his formation as a theologian and an ethnographer at the same time, made him aware of, and fully interested in, both Christian and Pagan elements. He was praised for having based his arguments on facts that could be checked. In his *Sărbătorile la Români*, we have two short studies regarding the Dragobete, one that makes it synonymous to ‘Aflarea capului Sf. Ioan’, on the 24th of February, and one that places it on the 1st of March, as a synonymous to ‘mărțișor’ and calls it ‘cap de primăvară’ or ‘cap de vară’. And in a third and fourth article, this time about ‘Baba Dochia’, we have a lot of legends about her, from Basarabia, Bucovina and Muntenia, but only two mention Dragobete Iovan or Dragomir, as her son, both being in Muntenia.

The *Catholic Encyclopedia*’s article, as well as Simion Fl. Marian’s studies, further speak about the respective Days in both countries.

We have, on the one hand, a Valentine's Day originated during the Middle Ages in England and France based on the "conventional belief" that "on 14 February, i. e., half way through the second month of the year, the birds began to pair" and we are given a quotation from English writer Chaucer in his *Parliament of Fowles*:

"For this was sent on Seynt Valentyne's Day
Whan every foul cometh there to choose his mate"
(The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1)

The next mention of Valentine's Day both in the French and English literature is from the 14th and 15th centuries, in the 34th and 35th *Ballades* of the poet John Gower, which "deal in various ways with the passion of love", written in French. And there is a quotation taken from the *Paston Letters*:

"And cousin mine, upon Monday is Saint Valentine's Day and every bird chooses himself a mate, and if it like you to come on Thursday night, and may provision that you may abide till then, I trust to God that ye shall speak to my husband and I shall prey that we may bring the matter to a conclusion." (The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1)

We have, on the other hand, the Romanian myth, '*Sburătorul*', "a nice demon, a teenage Eros that provokes the torments and the desires of the first love to young girls" (Călinescu, 60) according to George Călinescu in his article from *Istoria Literaturii Române de la Origini până în prezent*.² The difference between this myth and the Dragobete is the fact that this is its literary version. And, as with the medieval literature of Valentine's Day, here we have the Romanian 19th century literature, beginning with I. Eliade Rădulescu.

"All Romanian poets, beginning with I Eliade Rădulescu, have been writing about this myth in different ways. Some thought they were supposed to inspire these productions in a Romantic source, which was wrong, because some of these poets were not even aware of the Occidental theme. The only Romantic element was based on popular traditions" (Călinescu, 60).³

Speaking about traditions, we should pass on from *The Catholic Encyclopedia* to more recent 20th century sources. In my view, Tudor Pamfile's explanation that "as usually when speaking about the folkloric production, the legends about Saints are confusingly different, even those about one and the same Saint"⁴ (Pamfile, 8) could apply to America and help us understand the appearance of so many stories about Saint Valentine and his deeds, as well as the reasons of the 14th of February and the customs.

If at the end of the 19th century we only had three martyrs called Saint Valentine, and a date chosen when birds mate, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, we also have the alleged reasons for martyrdom, as well as a Pagan origin of the Feast, the Roman Lupercalia. Let's follow another of Romanian Tudor Pamfile's explanations, that "legends stand for the power of creation and the fantasy of the people"⁵ and that:

"...people felt the necessity – Tudor Pamfile writes – to add to the standard, rigid character of the Gospel, to add to what 'The Saints Lives' offered. The people felt the necessity to assign wonderful deeds to the Saints, extraordinary issues that astonish; when the people – Tudor Pamfile writes – did not hear those amazing stories about a Saint, to justify 'the big ceremony' the church dedicates him, the people invented merits

for that Saint, created him stories and linked him to certain beliefs. [...] The martyrdom for the true faith, people say, does not entitle veneration – all Saints suffered, it was said, and if such veneration is just for some, those few must have had some other gifts, too” (Pamfile, 8).⁶

In my view, this is not only a Romanian way of seeing its religious past, but it could also be applied to the multitude of legends surrounding Saint Valentine.

He is known in the world for “refusing to give up his Christian faith” (Catholic Online, 1), for “defiance during the reign of emperor Claudius” (Catholic Online, 1). Some think he “was killed during the persecution of Emperor Aurelius” (wikipedia, 1), and that he “secretly performed marriage ceremonies” (Brunner, 1), “fell in love with the daughter of his jailer, whom he cured from her blindness” (Brunner, 1), or “died while helping save faithful Christians from Roman prisons” (Raposa, 1) and “he not only chose to be a priest, but was believed to have been a leader of the Christian underground movement” (Brinker, 1). The last version I will mention here belongs to the Dark Ages, and speaks about “an imprisoned priest [...] Local children missed him during his imprisonment and would throw flowers into his cell through the prison bars” (Raposa, 1). The ‘History Channel’ tells us that “he actually sent the first ‘valentine greeting’ himself. [...] The stories certainly emphasize his appeal as a sympathetic, heroic, and, most importantly, romantic figure. It’s no surprise that by the Middle Ages, Valentine was one of the most popular saints in England and France” (historychannel, 1)

What seems to be certain is his existence, proved by archeologists who “have unearthed a Roman catacomb and an ancient church dedicated to Saint Valentine” (Catholic Online, 1), and the decision of the Catholic Church from 1969 to “remove the feast days of saints whose historic origins were questionable” (Brunner, 1), Saint Valentine among them. Today we also know about its first representation, in the Nuremberg Chronicle, “a great illustrated book printed in 1493” (Catholic Online, 1), and we can see him in pictures with birds and roses.

The Catholic Encyclopedia made no mention of any Valentine’s Day pagan origins or traditional and modern customs. However, much recent sources, (wikipedia, Brunner, Brinker, the ChatamJournal, Raposa, Cline, the HistoryChannel), give the Roman Lupercalia as the true beginning of the celebration of love. According to the article ‘February Fertility Festivals’ from the wikipedia:

“In Ancient Rome, the Day of February 15 was Lupercalia, the festival of Lupercus, the god of fertility, who was represented by two half-naked young men, dressed in goat skins. As part of the purification ritual, the priests of Lupercus would sacrifice goats to the god, and after drinking wine, they choose two young men to run through the streets of Rome holding pieces of the goat skin above their heads, striking anyone they met with the goat hide. Young women especially would come forth voluntarily for the occasion, in the belief that being so touched would render them fruitful and bring easy childbirth.” (wikipedia, 1)

Another Roman custom that passed to France and Britain with the Roman soldiers and was kept during Middle Ages, was the “lottery”, which meant that young men were supposed to draw out from a box the names of available maidens and accept the girls as their lovers as long as the festival lasted or even more.

It seems that when Christianity began to spread, Pope Gelasius I declared Saint Valentine on the 14th of February in order to counter the “lottery” practices of Pagan

Lupercalia, even though, according to the same ‘February Fertility Festivals’ from the wikipedia, “this practice is not attested in any sources from that era”. (wikipedia, 1)

Until it reached North America in the 19th century and became ‘the’ love holiday in the 20th century, Valentine’s Day passed through High Middle Ages’ romantic love from the Chivalry Age. The courtly love this era was famous for kept the lottery idea, but implied an exchange of gifts and the bachelor’s bounded duty to attend and protect his valentine for that year, wearing her name in his sleeve, a good omen for love and, maybe, for a wedding. (cf. Wikipedia, 1)

Later, in the 15th century, the idea of drawing names from a box disappears and we have the young French Duke of Orleans writing love poems for his wife, from the Tower of London. The poems are considered real valentines. (cf. wikipedia, 1)

The 17th century adds flowers to the love letters custom, the example also coming from France, where the daughter of Henry IV is said to have given a party in honor of St. Valentine. According to ‘wikipedia’, “Each lady received a beautiful bouquet of flowers from the man chosen as her valentine.”

The middle of the 18th century in England can be synthesized in Poor Robin’s Almanac’s printed verses from 1757:

This month bright Phoebus enters Pisces,
The maids will have good store of kisses,
For always when the fun comes there,
Valentine’s Day is drawing near,
And both the men and maids incline
To choose them each a Valentine;
And if a man gets one he loves,
He gives her first a pair of gloves;
And, by the way, remember this,
To seal the favour with a kiss.

This kiss begets more love, and then
That love begets a kiss again,
Until this trade the man doth catch,
And then he doth propose the match,
The woman’s willing, tho’ she’s shy,
She gives the man this soft reply,
“I’ll not resolve one thing or other,
Until I first consult my mother.”
When she says so, ‘tis half a grant,
And may be taken for consent.

(wikipedia, 1)

Like the Roman soldiers that brought with them the ancient Lupercalia-Valentine traditions in England, the British emigrants brought the festivity to North America in the 19th century. Here Ester Howland made the first mass-produced valentines, shortly after 1847. To this, the 20th century added all manner of gifts, besides exchanging cards, such as roses, chocolates and jewelry starting with the 1980s, usually from a man to a woman. (cf. wikipedia, 1)

As we will see in this last part of my research, neither the name nor the customs of Saint Valentine and his celebration came from either Europe or America, to Romania, until the end of the 20th century:

“In Romania, the traditional day for lovers is Dragobete, which is celebrated on February 24. It is named after a character from Romanian folklore who was supposed to be the son of Baba Dochia. Part of his name is the word “drag” (dear), which can also be found in the word “dragoste” (love). In recent years, Romania has also started celebrating Valentine’s Day, despite already having Dragobete as a traditional holiday. This has drawn backlash from many groups, particularly nationalist organizations like Noua Dreaptă, who condemn Valentine’s Day for being superficial, commercialist and imported western kitsch”. (wikipedia, 1)

The main difference between universal Saint Valentine’s Day and Romanian Dragobete is not Christian versus Pagan origins, if we consider the Lupercalia as the beginning of love celebration in the West, but some interesting old Romanian traditions mentioned in Simion Florea Marian’s 1899 book, *Sărbătorile la Români*. This is also the only source of information about the Dragobete, until Ion Ghinoiu’s *Sărbători și obiceiuri Românești*, written and published in 2004, in the context I’ve already mentioned above.

I will start with Simion Florea Marian’s study, “the only Romanian ethnographer” (Datcu, V) in the Romanian Academia, as B. P. Hașdeu called him in his answer to Marian’s reception speech. Like the contributors to *The Catholic Encyclopedia* in the United States, Marian distinguished himself through the various areas of research, a new approach in his studies, the accuracy with which he investigated “ethno folkloric areas until then virgin” (Datcu, V) ⁷ and through the talent that brought a record number of volunteer contributors and fellow-workers.

In his first article called ‘Dragobetele’, he places this day in Muntenia, South of Romania, especially in Gorj and Olt. Here it is described as “a nice holiday for the boys and unmarried girls, and even for men and young women.” (Marian, 237) ⁸ We had no lottery custom mentioned here, but boys and girls who woke up in the morning, combed their hair, put fresh linen, and, if the weather was fine, went to pick up snowdrops and wood, first the girls, than the boys. Otherwise they gathered at their relatives and friends houses. It was believed that birds and animals mated on this 24th of February. The Romanian ancient belief behind this celebration was that in this day they had to “make the Dragobete”, that is, to have fun and meet the opposite sex in order to be able to fall in love and be loved the whole year. And S. Fl. Marian mentions here the huge importance love had for country girls.

“Then, there is so much competition among country girls to fall in love, and so much happiness among their mothers when seeing them surrounded by innocent love, that they often envy each other and they even quarrel, the one remained without love strongly reproaches to the other that she had cast a love spell upon herself, and another spell upon her, to be hated, not to be loved by boys.” (Marian, 237) ⁹

Another custom, that had actually disappeared at the time he wrote the book, told that this was the day for boys and girls to embrace and kiss each other and become husband and wife after they had understood each other as brother and sister.

In his second article related to Dragobete, this was celebrated in the first day of March, the Romanian “mărțișor”. The tradition here said that unmarried girls should get

snow water and wash themselves with it all the year in order to become beautiful and loving. The importance of the snow water for our folklore is discussed here through a wonderful quotation from Iosif Vulcan, which reminds me of our fairy-tales.

“But how is one supposed not to dearly wait for the March snow? Born from the fairies’ smile, it brings their beauty on earth, and who cleans herself with this water becomes as beautiful as the fairies themselves, who charm even Prince-Charming. This is the legend I was once told by a slim girl, with a charming little mouth and fire in her eyes. She believed it then. That’s why she enjoyed so much taking the snow in March. To clean herself with it. To have something of the fairies’ smile. To become herself as beautiful as the fairies. She believed it then, for she was only fifteen. Today.....I am sure she can’t tell one snow from the other. Still I could bet you anything you like that – even if she doesn’t believe in the fairies’ smile any more – she still picks up the snow in March. What for? Because the endless wish of all women is to always remain beautiful”. (Marian, 317)¹⁰

Besides this snow, the tradition said that unmarried women should also look for wild strawberry flowers in the woods and take the water from these flowers and wash themselves with it so that they could be liked at parties. And here we have some verses that sum up this old belief the way Poor Robin’s Almanac’s verses summed up the British attitude towards Valentine’s Day:

Wild strawberry flower,
In the month of March,
May everybody love me,
May you destroy every trouble! (Marian, 317)¹¹

Unlike the many legends surrounding Saint Valentine and his Valentine’s Day in the 20th century and, unfortunately, unlike its spreading all over the world, there are no more studies about Dragobete, except for several articles in recent newspapers and a few sites on the web, all of whom repeat Ion Ghinoiu’s article “Dragobete, fiul Dochiei, zeu al dragostei pe plaiurile românești”, from his 2004 book, *Sărbători și obiceiuri românești*. Here Dragobete is compared with the Greek God of love, Cupid, and the flowers the girls had to pick up are different, but the unmelted snow still remains. The reason for celebration is the same with the English and the French one in the middle ages, the birds mate and build their nests. And he significantly ends his argument with a sentence that sums up the context I was talking about earlier:

“Unfortunately, some try to replace this beautiful day of love, born on Romanian land, still alive in the villages from Oltenia, intimately connected to the rhythms of nature (the flowering of the spring flowers, the mating of birds) with Saint Valentine, an imported holiday, that appeared few years ago on the cities’ sidewalks and squares”¹²

I conclude by saying that the idea for this paper came to me as a response both to those Romanians who only have Valentine’s Day as the one day for celebrating love, and to those of us who see in this Day a real threat to our Romanian Dragobete. And, taking into account that the first time I heard about our Dragobete was a few years ago, on the TV news on PROTV, and much more ever since, this year’s concert dedicated to it included, I decided that, on the contrary, American Valentine’s day proved an excellent opportunity to me to (re)discover my apparently forgotten national tradition.

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1. “În ultimele decenii ale secolului XIX și în primele decenii ale secolului XX, este adesea exprimată, nu doar cu preocupări, ci și cu adâncă îngrijorare, convingerea că producțiunile populare pier în fața avansului civilizației, și că dacă nu se purcede la o cercetare adâncită paguba va fi imensă, fiindcă ceea ce se culesese până atunci era puțin și irelevant.” (Datcu, Iordan, ‘Introducere’, Sim. Fl. Marian, *Sărbătorile la români*)
2. “...un demon frumos, un Eros adolescent, care dă fetelor pubere turburările și tînjirile întîmpei iubiri” (Călinescu, George, ‘Epoca veche’, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*)
3. “Începînd cu I. Eliade Rădulescu, nu este liric român care să nu fi reluat mitul în diferite chipuri. Unii au crezut că trebuie să ducă aceste producții spre o sursă romantică, ceea ce este fals, fiindcă unii din poeți nici măcar n-aveau noțiunea temei occidentale. Singura notă romantică este întemeierea pe tradiții populare.” (Călinescu, George, ‘Epoca veche’, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*)
4. “Ca în genere în creația folclorică, și legendele despre sfinți sunt de o diversitate derutantă, chiar acelea despre unul și același sfânt”. (Pamfile, Tudor, *Sărbătorile la Români*)
5. “Legendele sunt o mărturie a puterii de creație a poporului, a fanteziei sale.” (Pamfile, Tudor, *Sărbătorile la Români*).
6. “...poporul a simțit nevoia – scrie Tudor Pamfile – să treacă dincolo de caracterul tipizat, normat, osificat al textelor Evangheliștilor, dincolo de ceea ce ofereau Viețile Sfinților. Poporul a simțit nevoia să le confere sfinților fapte minunate, însușiri care uimesc, însușiri excepționale “când poporul – scrie Tudor Pamfile – n-a aflat despre un sfânt acele povestiri tari, cari să îndreptățească “marea slujbă” cu care biserica îl proslăvește, poporul i-a născocit merite acelui sfânt, i-a urzit povestiri și l-a legat de anume credințe. Cu chipul acesta, sfântul își are vaza sa întemeiată de ceva. Martiriul pentru dreapta credință, după socotința poporului, este puțin lucru, pentru a da dreptul unei venerațiuni; toți sfinții au pățimit, s-a zis, și dacă totuși nu toți sunt cinstiți deopotrivă, “trebuie să mai fi avut și alte daruri” ((Pamfile, Tudor, *Sărbătorile la Români*).
7. “zone etnofolclorice până atunci virgine” (Datcu, Iordan, ‘Introducere’, Sim. Fl. Marian, *Sărbătorile la români*)
8. “...este o zi frumoasă de sărbătoare pentru băieții și fetele mari, ba chiar și pentru bărbații și femeile tinere.” (Marian, Simion Florea, ‘Dragobetele’, *Sărbătorile la Români*)
9. “Apoi, între fetele de la țeară este atîta întrecere de a fi îndrăgostite și între mamele lor atîta bucurie când văd că fetele lor sunt incunjarate de dragoste nevinovată, că de multe ori se invidiază și chiar se naște gălceavă pentru aceasta, în care cea căzută din dragoste strigă celeilalte că ea a umblat după farmece de și-a făcut de dragoste, iar ei i-a făcut, tot prin farmece, de urăciune, ca să nu o îndrăgostească băieții.” (Marian, Simion Florea, ‘Dragobetele’, *Sărbătorile la Români*).
10. “Dar cum să nu fie așteptată cu drag neaua de mărtisor? Născută din surâsul zânelor, le aduce pe pământ frumusețea lor, și cine se spală cu ea devine și dânsa așa de frumoasă ca zânele, cari încântă și pe Făt-Frumos. Așa mi-a povestit o dată această legendă o zveltă copiliță, cu farmec pe guriță și cu foc în ochii ei. Atunci și ea credea aceasta. De aceea aduna cu atîta plăcere neaua în mărtisor. Să se spele cu ea. Să aibă și dânsa ceva din surâsul zânelor. Să fie și dânsa așa de frumoasă ca zânele. Atunci credea și ea, căci era numai de 15 anișori. Astăzi însă.....sunt sigur că dânsa nu face multă deosebire între neaua de cutare și cutare lună. Cu toate acestea însă aș putea să mă rămășesc cu oricine că – deși n-o mai crede venită din surâsul zânelor – totuși adună și neaua de mărtisor. Pentru ce? Pentru că dorința cea fără fine a femeilor este de a rămâne pururea frumoase.” (Marian, Simion Florea, ‘Dragobetele’, *Sărbătorile la Români*, citat din Iosif Vulcan)
11. ‘Floare de fragă / Din luna lui Marț / La toată lumea să fiu dragă / Urăciunile să le desparți.’ (Marian, Simion Florea, ‘Dragobetele’, *Sărbătorile la Români*.)
12. “Din păcate, această frumoasă zi a dragosteii, născută pe pământ românesc, încă vie în satele oltenești, intim legată de ritmurile naturii (înfloritul florilor de primăvară, împerecherea păsărilor) se încearcă a fi înlocuită de Sf. Valentin, sărbătoare de import, apărută de câțiva ani pe trotuarele și piețele publice ale orașelor.” (Ghinoiu, Ion, ‘Dragobete, fiul Dochiei, zeu al dragosteii pe plaiurile românești’, *Sărbători și obiceiuri românești*)

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