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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***Naskh and context in contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics**Mohamad Abdullah Alsaied¹, Wadeema Ghanem Bin Hamoodah Al Dhaheri¹, Ahmed Laklimi¹, Fatma Hussain Ali Ahmed Al Ali¹ & Majed Alderei¹¹Mohamed bin Zayed University for Humanities, United Arab Emirates*Correspondence: mohamad.alsaied@mbzuh.ac.ae**ABSTRACT**

This study reexamines a central question in contemporary Qur'anic studies: should naskh be treated as an indispensable mechanism for resolving apparent tensions among verses, or can many alleged instances be explained through context and established interpretive categories? Using comparative textual analysis, the study traces the changing scope of naskh in selected classical and modern works and examines the marked contraction of lists of abrogated verses among later scholars, including Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Suyūfī, and Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī. It argues that this divergence reflects, in part, the historical conflation of abrogation with specification (takhṣīs), restriction (taqyīd), clarification (bayān), and legislative gradualism. Drawing on Ibn 'Āshūr's interpretation of Q 2:106 and his attention to context and maqāṣid, the article proposes four conditions for a defensible claim of abrogation: an irreconcilable legal conflict, reliable chronological evidence, a ruling that originally indicated continuity, and a later revealed ruling that replaces it. Where these conditions are absent, reconciliation and contextual differentiation should take priority. This framework preserves the coherence of Qur'anic discourse while retaining naskh as a limited category within Islamic legal theory. It also provides a more precise basis for research and teaching on the abrogating and abrogated.

KEYWORDS: naskh, Qur'anic hermeneutics, context, Ibn 'Āshūr, maqāṣid, textual coherence

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1. Introduction

The motivation for this study arises from a marked discrepancy in the historical enumeration of Qur'anic verses alleged to have been abrogated. Early claims sometimes expanded the number of abrogated verses into the hundreds, whereas later scholars increasingly narrowed the scope of accepted cases, with Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Suyūṭī, and Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī offering far more restricted lists. This sharp divergence, together with the tendency in some works to confuse abrogation with other interpretive mechanisms such as specification, restriction, and clarification, makes it necessary to revisit the theoretical foundations and practical limits of naskh.

The central problem of the study is not whether abrogation is conceivable within Islamic legal theory, but how it should be defined, proven, and applied. A broad and loosely controlled use of naskh may fragment the Qur'anic message and close interpretive possibilities, especially when the concept is used to claim that verses of peace have been superseded by what is commonly called the verse of the sword. A more disciplined approach, by contrast, can preserve the integrity of the Qur'anic discourse while still acknowledging the historical reality of legislative development.

Accordingly, the study asks four interrelated questions:

1. To what extent is the classical doctrine of abrogation indispensable for interpreting the Qur'an, and to what extent did it develop historically as a means of resolving apparent contradictions?
2. How did selected classical scholars formulate and delimit naskh, and what evidentiary assumptions supported their arguments?
3. How can Ibn 'Āshūr's interpretive lens allow what has traditionally been labelled abrogated to be reread as context, gradualism, or specification while preserving textual coherence?
4. What might a revised theory of abrogation look like if it emphasizes the adaptability of interpretation and limits fragmentary readings of the Qur'an?

The study has four objectives: to examine the definitions and evidentiary criteria of naskh in selected classical works; to identify the principles of context, maqāṣid, and legislative gradualism in Ibn 'Āshūr's interpretation; to distinguish genuine abrogation from specification, restriction, clarification, and differences of circumstance or addressee; and to formulate a more precise framework for research and teaching on naskh.

The significance of the study lies in protecting the overall coherence of the Qur'anic text from an overly rigid application of abrogation that may divide the Qur'anic message into active and inactive fragments. It also responds to reductionist and polemical readings that deploy naskh to support predetermined positions. By placing naskh within the broader frameworks of context, maqāṣid, and disciplined legal reasoning, the study seeks to sustain continuity with the tradition while correcting excessive or insufficiently evidenced applications of the doctrine. This connection between interpretive method and social consequence is consistent with comparative research showing that balanced engagement with religious texts can support coexistence and intercultural understanding (Alsaied & Almheiri, 2025).

2. Methodology and Scope

This study uses qualitative comparative textual analysis. It examines selected discussions of naskh in al-Shāfi'ī's *al-Risālah*, al-Suyūṭī's *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Ibn al-Jawzī's *Nawāsikh al-Qur'ān*, and Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī's *al-Fawz al-kabīr fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*. The analysis focuses on definitions, evidentiary criteria, and the changing enumeration of verses classified as abrogated.

The classical material is then read through the hermeneutical lens of Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn 'Āshūr. The study analyzes his interpretation of Q 2:106 and his use of context, the objectives of the Shari'ah (maqāṣid al-shari'ah), legislative gradualism, and textual coherence. Contemporary studies are used to clarify the wider methodological debate and to illustrate the consequences of broad and restricted definitions of naskh. The study is conceptual rather than an exhaustive verse-by-verse survey; its examples clarify the proposed criteria but do not constitute a complete catalogue of disputed cases.

The first section examines the definition, boundaries, and historical expansion of naskh in selected classical sources. The second develops a contemporary rereading through Ibn 'Āshūr and relates it to recent

hermeneutical debates. The conclusion sets out the resulting criteria and their research and pedagogical implications.

3. Naskh in the Classical Construction: Definition, Boundaries, and Legal-Theoretical Formation

3.1. The Concept of Naskh and Its Methodological Boundaries in the Uṣūlī and Exegetical Tradition

In the Islamic legal and exegetical sciences, naskh is defined as a legislative mechanism governed by epistemic controls. It concerns the transition of a ruling from one stage to another, so that the lifting of a ruling represents a change in legal responsibility, not an instability in the text or a contradiction in meaning. This definition requires a methodological distinction between the abrogation of a ruling and the abrogation of recitation. The former concerns legal obligation, whereas the latter belongs to debates about textual transmission and the history of the Qur'anic text. When these two matters are treated without sufficient differentiation, the technical use of naskh may expand in ways that confuse legal reasoning with questions of narration and textual preservation. A further distinction must be made between abrogation and other forms of scriptural clarification, including specification, restriction, exposition, generality and detail, and contextual qualification. Contemporary studies have shown that the expansion of lists of abrogated verses in some works is connected to the conflation of naskh with these interpretive tools, or to the tendency to treat abrogation as the default solution for every apparent tension before exhausting legitimate possibilities of reconciliation (Yılmaz, 2016, pp. 353, 355, 357–358).

The discipline of naskh, as established by the uṣūlī tradition, rests on two governing principles. The first is the presence of a genuine contradiction that cannot be removed through a valid method of harmonization recognized by Arabic usage and the contexts of revelation. The second is certain knowledge of chronological sequence, since abrogation is a judgment concerning legislative succession and not merely a semantic difference between two texts. In this respect, attention to occasions of revelation, order of revelation, and historical context becomes an epistemic condition for identifying an abrogating and an abrogated text. A claim of abrogation has little methodological value where the order of the two discourses is unknown or disputed (Yılmaz, 2016, pp. 360–361).

On this basis, methods of reconciliation must precede the claim of abrogation. A general expression should be read in light of a specific text, an absolute statement in light of a restricted one, and different occasions, addressees, and circumstances must be considered as long as these paths remain productive and consistent with Arabic usage and the objectives of the discourse.

Within the early formation of this perspective, al-Shāfi'ī stands out in al-Risālah as one of the first scholars to formulate naskh as a later divine address that lifts a previous ruling and replaces it with another. At the same time, he is careful regarding the source of this lifting. He argues that the Qur'an is abrogated only by the Qur'an, while the Sunnah does not abrogate the Book in the sense of annulling it; rather, its function is explanation and faithful conformity to the Book (Al-Shāfi'ī, 2021, pp. 2–3).

In this conception, naskh is an intentional legislative transition rather than a mere difference in meaning. Its rationale may be understood through gradualism and attention to the circumstances of those addressed. A claim of naskh therefore requires evidence that reconciliation is impossible and that the chronological sequence is reliably established.

The methodological distinction between abrogation and specification is especially important. Specification preserves the general meaning outside the specified case, while abrogation lifts a ruling after it had applied for a period of time and replaces it through a subsequent address. From a closely related exegetical angle, Ibn 'Ashūr, in his interpretation of the verse of abrogation (Q 2:106), states that the term āyah in this context refers primarily to its ruling, whether the wording remains or is removed; he defines naskh as the lifting of a legal ruling by a revealed discourse. This narrows the field of abrogation to legal rulings and protects the textual structure from uncontrolled cancellation (Ibn 'Ashūr, 1984, vol. 1, pp. 654–661).

Accordingly, naskh in its disciplined methodological form becomes a sign of legislative order and gradual development rather than a tool for making Qur'anic texts cancel one another. Its study therefore shifts from simply counting allegedly abrogated verses to examining evidentiary conditions and the proper limits of application.

3.2. The Development of the Debate and the Divergence of Enumerations: Why Claims of Abrogation Expanded and Contracted

Once the concept of naskh is distinguished from its neighboring interpretive mechanisms, the historical debate reveals that the major difficulty was not the theoretical possibility of naskh as a legislative mechanism, but the extent of its actual occurrence and the boundaries of its application. This difficulty appears clearly in the fluctuation between inflated and restricted enumerations. Modern surveys of the debate note that some proponents of abrogation adopted a broad conception that placed the number of abrogated verses close to five hundred, and in some cases used claims such as the verse of jihād abrogating numerous verses, thereby transforming naskh into a broad interpretive tool for settling apparent tensions (Mawejje, 2024, p. 635).

By contrast, another trend sought to restrict abrogation by reexamining the examples. Al-Suyūṭī is reported to have limited the number of abrogated verses to twenty, Ibn al-Jawzī to twenty-two after critical review, while Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī reduced the certain cases to five specific verses (Al-Dihlawī, 1986, p. 93; Al-Suyūṭī, 1974, vol. 3, pp. 72, 77; Ibn al-Jawzī, 2003, vol. 2, p. 634).

The differences are not merely numerical; they arise from deeper conceptual and epistemological factors. A significant part of the expansion resulted from the broadening of the term naskh itself. Contemporary studies of the debate explain that naskh was historically used in a wide sense that included what later scholars classified as specification, restriction, or clarification, rather than strict legislative annulment. It is therefore unsurprising that the lists differ sharply once the operational definition changes. This also explains why some scholars within Islamic studies refer to multiple definitions of naskh and why a number of historically classified cases can be returned to other semantic and legal mechanisms. After this conceptual refinement, the list of defensible cases contracts substantially (Moch, 2022, p. 2).

Alongside the terminological factor, there is an epistemological condition related to chronological proof. A claim of abrogation depends on knowing which text is earlier and which is later, while the chronological order of many verses remains a matter of ijtihād. Scholars differ in their reliance on occasions of revelation, historical indicators, and transmitted exegetical reports. As a result, some lists appear to be school-based classifications rather than decisive conclusions. This ambiguity is especially clear in the famous example of the so-called verse of the sword or the verse of fighting. Some lists attribute to it the abrogation of a large number of verses—sometimes estimated at about seventy, and in other studies at more than one hundred—revealing that the disagreement concerns not only the verse itself but also its scope, context, and conditions of application (Mawejje, 2024, p. 635; Moch, 2022, pp. 5–6).

For this reason, recent research increasingly replaces the question, How many verses are abrogated? with the more fundamental question, What is the criterion for establishing abrogation? Such an inquiry requires proof of genuine contradiction, knowledge of chronological sequence, and verification that harmonization is impossible according to the rules of language and context. It must also remain alert to the possibility that expanding abrogation can be used to privilege one discourse over another in legal or polemical contexts. Contemporary hermeneutical criticism, especially in the case of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, shows that the issue reaches beyond numerical enumeration to the structure of the text, the boundaries of its canon, and the historical movement of meaning (Moch, 2022, p. 6). A recent study of four methodological paradigms in Orientalist Qur’anic scholarship likewise demonstrates the importance of locating interpretive claims within their intellectual premises and historical contexts rather than treating them as neutral descriptions of the text (Alsaied et al., 2026).

The expansion of abrogation lists generally follows from a broad definition and flexible application, whereas their contraction follows from a narrower definition and stricter evidence. These lists are therefore products of scholarly reasoning and remain open to critical review.

4. Contemporary Hermeneutical Rereading through Ibn ‘Āshūr

4.1. Ibn ‘Āshūr and the Interpretation of the Verse of Abrogation: Disciplining the Concept through the Wisdom of Legislation and Gradualism

Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ‘Āshūr’s interpretation of the verse of abrogation—“Whatever verse We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring forth one better than it or one similar to it” (Q 2:106)—offers a foundational and corrective approach that restores naskh to its legislative function within the revelatory order and prevents

it from becoming an instrument for suspending texts. Ibn ‘Āshūr begins by clarifying the meaning of the verse within its discursive context, stressing that what is intended is the ruling of the verse, not merely its wording (Ibn ‘Āshūr, 1984, vol. 1, pp. 654–661).

For Ibn ‘Āshūr, the passage concerns the wisdom of legislative transition and changing legal responsibility, not the erasure of the Qur’anic text or the annulment of its recitation. He distinguishes between the abrogation of rulings within one legal dispensation and the abrogation of previous religious laws, where certain rulings of an earlier dispensation may be superseded without implying the cancellation of the original recitation of its scripture. This distinction keeps naskh within the field of legislation and its historical purposes.

Ibn ‘Āshūr also explains the linguistic meaning of naskh as the removal of one thing by another together with replacement. He therefore treats the existence of a substitute as central to the phrase “We bring forth one better than it or one similar to it.” The lifting of a ruling is not the natural expiration of a term or the end of a previously stated benefit; rather, it is an intentional movement from a ruling that appeared to have continuing force to a later ruling that replaces it. Its “better” character may lie in greater suitability to the addressees, greater ease of compliance, or fuller realization of the intended objective, while its “similarity” may preserve the same objective through a different legislative means suited to changing circumstances.

His explanation of the phrase “or cause it to be forgotten” likewise points to leaving a ruling aside or delaying its public activation at a particular stage, not to a deficiency in divine preservation. The center of the verse is therefore the pedagogical and transitional governance of legislation, not a doctrinal problem concerning the text.

One of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s most important evidentiary conditions is that the allegedly abrogated ruling must originally indicate continuity. If a ruling is limited by a purpose, circumstance, exception, or later clarification of an initially general or ambiguous statement, it should not be called abrogation. It belongs instead to forms of clarification that do not require legal lifting. This criterion narrows the field of naskh and shifts the debate from the enumeration of cases to the criteria of proof (Ibn ‘Āshūr, 1984, vol. 1, pp. 654–661).

On this basis, inherited examples can be reorganized. Gradual legislation may be understood as a staged transition in legal responsibility that takes account of the community’s readiness and social transformation. If naskh is established, it is therefore part of legislative pedagogy aimed at welfare and ease, not evidence of contradiction within the discourse.

Ibn ‘Āshūr’s method also gives priority to paths of reconciliation before claims of lifting, including specification, restriction, context, occasions of revelation, and gradualism. Many cases reported as abrogation may in fact be corrections of social practice or misunderstandings of the scope of Qur’anic expressions. This is consistent with Ibn ‘Āshūr’s broader maqāṣid-oriented method, which views rulings as means for realizing higher interests rather than isolated sentences that exclude one another. A focused analysis of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ similarly shows that Qur’anic meaning emerges through the relationship between lexical choice, rhetorical composition, and the structural unity of the sūrah (Alsaied, 2024).

This reading is supported by Salīmah Kuwayr’s study of the verses considered abrogated by Ibn ‘Āshūr in Sūrat al-Baqarah. Kuwayr concludes that Ibn ‘Āshūr often returns claims of abrogation to specification, restriction, or the annulment of a practice rather than the lifting of a Qur’anic ruling. He also links legislative transformation to gradualism and ease, thereby reducing fragmentary readings that employ abrogation to set some verses aside in favor of others (Kuwayr, 2015, pp. 26–27).

Ibn ‘Āshūr’s interpretation of the verse of abrogation thus becomes a rigorous critical standard: naskh is a legislative transition conditioned by replacement, chronological succession, and the impossibility of reconciliation. Otherwise, the default position is to preserve the continued relevance of both texts within their respective scopes. This protects the coherence of Qur’anic discourse and prevents naskh from becoming an interpretive shortcut for bypassing difficulties rather than resolving them in a disciplined manner.

4.2. Contemporary Hermeneutics and the Problem of Employing Naskh: Toward a Balance between Historical Conditions and Uṣūlī Discipline

Contemporary Qur’anic hermeneutics places naskh at the intersection of uṣūl al-fiqh, the history of tafsīr, and debates about interpretive authority. In this literature, naskh is examined both as a legal category and as a mechanism that can create a hierarchy of meanings by assigning continuing authority to one verse and limiting

the legal operation of another.

From this perspective, some critical studies of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd suggest that the broad traditional use of naskh was sometimes connected to the consolidation of interpretive orthodoxy. Once a verse is described as abrogated, it can be functionally removed from active evidentiary circulation and understanding may be redirected toward alternatives chosen by the exegete or jurist (Moch, 2022, pp. 4–6).

Yet the essence of the problem does not lie in the possibility of naskh itself, but in the conditions of establishing it and the limits of its use. Modern surveys indicate that the debate often turns on the distinction between genuine and apparent contradiction, the possibility of reconciliation through specification, restriction, or multiple circumstances, and certainty regarding the order of revelation as a necessary epistemic condition for claiming later abrogation (Mawejje, 2024, pp. 634, 637).

This last condition reveals a recurring methodological difficulty: a number of examples commonly found in abrogation lists do not rest on an agreed chronological sequence. The claim of abrogation in such cases becomes closer to a school-based preference than a definitive judgment. This opens the door to more economical interpretations, such as reading the discourse in relation to a specific setting, connecting it to occasions of revelation, or treating it as gradual legislation rather than cancellation (Yılmaz, 2016, pp. 360–361).

At the same time, contemporary works with a critical yet tradition-oriented posture argue that conflating abrogation with other mechanisms is the source of many exclusionary uses of the doctrine. Early Muslims sometimes used the term naskh in a broad sense that included clarification and specification, whereas later technical usage increasingly settled on lifting a ruling through a subsequent ruling. This historical shift helps explain why lists expanded and why they differ so widely (Parrott, 2018, pp. 6–10).

The early uṣūlī construction in al-Shāfiʿī provides an example of how naskh can be regulated within revelation. It is a later address that lifts an earlier ruling in a legislative, not polemical, manner. At the same time, al-Shāfiʿī warns against treating naskh as an easy solution for every difference in meaning and maintains the relationship between the Qurʾan and the Sunnah as one of explanation rather than cancellation (Al-Shāfiʿī, 2021, pp. 1–2, 18–19).

The so-called verse of the sword is therefore a revealing example. The widespread claim that it abolished the general discourse of peace is not, in careful analytical accounts, supported by strict fulfillment of the conditions of abrogation. Rather, it often relies on a selective reading of context that overlooks the fact that verses of fighting themselves are governed by causal and historical restrictions. Harmonization through specification and the plurality of circumstances is therefore closer to the method of legal reasoning than a claim of comprehensive cancellation (Parrott, 2018, p. 18).

On this basis, a balanced approach may be proposed. It integrates the historical condition and uṣūlī discipline: the first requires examination of the contexts of revelation and the ordering of the discourse before any claim of lifting; the second makes naskh the last interpretive tool after all valid possibilities of reconciliation have been exhausted, while also requiring the existence of replacement and a clear direction of legislative transition. This balance receives applied support from Ibn ʿĀshūr’s reading of the verse of abrogation, where he directs the meaning of “Whatever verse We abrogate” toward the ruling of the verse and connects naskh to the wisdom of gradualism and facilitation rather than to the elimination of texts (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 1984, vol. 1, pp. 654–661).

This approach is further supported by specialized research on Ibn ʿĀshūr, which concludes that he often returns claims of naskh to specification, restriction, or clarification and confines genuine abrogation, where established, to a pedagogical and legislative function (Kuwayr, 2015, pp. 26–27). Naskh therefore should not be treated as a hermeneutical weapon that strips the Qurʾan of its maqāṣid-based layers, nor as a modern slogan for dismissing the tradition altogether. It is a tool governed by evidence and conditions, capable of supporting a more coherent reading that protects the unity of the discourse and reduces polemical misuse.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The distinction between abrogation and context is methodological rather than terminological. A defensible interpretation must preserve the coherence of Qurʾanic discourse while accounting for legislative history and the inherited scholarly tradition. The sources examined show that naskh did not always operate with fixed boundaries: it could denote legal replacement, while broader usages also encompassed specification, restriction,

clarification, and gradualism. This variation helps explain the substantial disagreement over the number of abrogated verses.

One of the most important findings of the study is that many claims of naskh that became common in general circulation are in fact alternative interpretive solutions that could have been framed within uṣūlī concepts such as general and specific, absolute and restricted, specification, occasions of revelation, and variation in addressees. Historically, however, these were often gathered under the broader title of naskh, especially when the purpose was to resolve apparent conflict quickly in pedagogical or polemical settings. Modern discussions of uṣūl al-tafsīr confirm that some contemporary treatments of naskh remain superficial or instrumental, which increases the need to restore the concept to its strict epistemic conditions.

The study has also shown that reconstructing the debate should not be limited to proving or denying naskh. Rather, it should redescribe its scope and function. On one hand, a disciplined normative reading presents naskh as a manifestation of divine wisdom in legislation and gradualism when it is properly understood. It does not require dismantling the Qur’anic value system or annulling its universal principles. On the other hand, contemporary hermeneutical readings alert us to the possibility that naskh can become a mirror of historically conditioned methods of producing meaning, and that expanding it excessively may close interpretive possibilities or impose a single reading.

At the level of the interpretive lens adopted by the study, Ibn ‘Āshūr emerges as a model that combines fidelity to the tradition with strong attention to context and maqāṣid. His approach allows verses to remain active within their proper communicative fields without forcing an announcement of cancellation whenever an apparent tension arises. His interpretation of Q 2:106 provides a central point of reference: the Qur’anic text itself is invoked in the debate, but its function is not reducible to cancellation; it is better understood within a broader legislative and pedagogical discourse.

A revised theory of naskh cannot succeed if it merely replaces the term abrogation with the term context without criteria. Clear differentiating standards are required: when is the relationship between two texts genuine abrogation under strict conditions, and when is it specification, restriction, gradualism, clarification, a temporary ruling, or a change in addressees? Such discipline prevents a shift from the classical excess of expanding naskh to the opposite excess of rejecting it altogether without clarifying the object of disagreement.

The study therefore retains naskh as a limited legal category subject to four conditions: an irreconcilable legal conflict, reliable chronological evidence, an earlier ruling that indicated continuity, and a later revealed ruling that replaces it. If any condition is absent, specification, restriction, clarification, gradualism, or contextual difference should be considered first. This framework reduces unsupported claims of cancellation and preserves the internal coherence of Qur’anic discourse.

6. Research and Pedagogical Recommendations

Future research should distinguish the technical uṣūlī definition of naskh from its broader early usage. Studies that compare historical lists should identify the definition applied by each author before treating numerical differences as substantive disagreement.

Verse-level studies should document the chronology of the relevant passages, identify their addressees and circumstances, and test specification, restriction, clarification, and gradualism before concluding that a ruling was abrogated.

Teaching materials should present naskh alongside the neighboring uṣūlī categories with which it has historically been confused. Comparative exercises can require students to justify why a case constitutes abrogation rather than specification, restriction, clarification, or a change of circumstance.

Discussions of the so-called verse of the sword should avoid generalized claims that it abrogates the Qur’anic discourse of peace. Any such claim must identify the precise verses involved and satisfy the same evidentiary and chronological conditions required in other cases.

Further comparative work should examine how claims of naskh distribute interpretive authority and affect the continued evidentiary use of verses. This inquiry should remain anchored in the primary exegetical and uṣūlī sources rather than treating contemporary theory as a substitute for textual evidence.

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