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From Heparin to Gpiib/Iiia Inhibitors and Doacs: The Revolution in Antithrombotic Therapy

Diego Alejandro Ramírez López[1], Donaldo Emiliano Silva López[2], Sofía Rolon González[3], Mario Arturo Márquez Reyes[3], Karla Daniela Huerta Ortiz[3], Jesús Emilio Müller Gómez[4]

[1]Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara. Guadalajara, Jalisco, México.

[2]Tecnológico de Monterrey Campus Monterrey, Nuevo Léon, Mexico.

[3]Universidad Cuauhtémoc Plantel Aguascalientes. Aguascalientes, México.

[4]Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes. Aguascalientes, México.

ABSTRACT

Acute Coronary Syndrome (ACS) remains a significant global burden, necessitating ongoing innovation in therapeutic strategies. Over the past three decades, landmark clinical trials such as PRISM, PRISM-PLUS, PARAGON A, PARAGON B, PURSUIT, and GUSTO IV-ACS have shaped our understanding and management of ACS. These studies provided pivotal data on the role of antithrombotic agents, glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitors, and tailored therapeutic approaches in high-risk populations. This review explores the design, outcomes, and impact of these foundational trials while tracing the evolution of ACS management to current guidelines and practices. Furthermore, we analyze how the insights from these trials have influenced contemporary clinical decision-making and identify the gaps they left for future research. By revisiting these landmark studies, we aim to contextualize their legacy and discuss their relevance in the era of precision medicine and novel therapeutic modalities.

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INTRODUCTION

Acute Coronary Syndrome (ACS), encompassing unstable angina, non-ST-elevation myocardial infarction (NSTEMI), and ST-elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI), remains a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide. Advances in pharmacological and interventional strategies have substantially improved patient outcomes, yet challenges persist in optimizing therapy for diverse patient populations.

The late 20th and early 21st centuries marked a transformative period in ACS management, driven by a series of pivotal clinical trials that reshaped therapeutic paradigms. Among these, the PRISM (Platelet Receptor Inhibition for Ischemic Syndrome Management) and PRISM-PLUS (Platelet Receptor Inhibition in Ischemic Syndrome Management in Patients Limited by Unstable Signs and Symptoms) trials explored the efficacy of platelet glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitors. Concurrently, the PARAGON A and B (Platelet Aggregation Receptor Antagonist for Aggressive Growth Inhibition Strategies) trials examined oral glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitors in high-risk ACS populations, while the PURSUIT (Platelet Glycoprotein IIb/IIIa in Unstable Angina: Receptor Suppression Using Integrilin Therapy) trial established eptifibatide as a cornerstone of therapy. The GUSTO IV-ACS (Global Use of Strategies to Open Occluded Arteries in Acute Coronary Syndromes) trial added further nuance by evaluating abciximab in non-ST elevation ACS.

Antithrombotic therapy has been pivotal in achieving these goals, with initial strategies relying heavily on dual antiplatelet therapy (DAPT) combining aspirin and a P2Y12 inhibitor. However, the complexity of ACS management has grown with the increasing prevalence of comorbidities, such as atrial fibrillation (AF), requiring oral anticoagulation (OAC) and the widespread use of percutaneous coronary

intervention (PCI). These developments necessitated a deeper understanding of the interplay between antiplatelet agents and anticoagulants to optimize therapeutic regimens.

The past decade has witnessed a transformative era in antithrombotic therapy, fueled by landmark clinical trials that evaluated novel agents, combinations, and strategies in diverse patient populations. The ATLAS ACS 2-TIMI 51 trial highlighted the benefits of adding low-dose rivaroxaban to standard antiplatelet therapy in reducing major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE) in high-risk ACS patients. Subsequent studies, including PIONEER AF-PCI, RE-DUAL PCI, ENTRUST-AF PCI, and AUGUSTUS, focused on patients with AF undergoing PCI, exploring the safety and efficacy of reduced-dose direct oral anticoagulants (DOACs) in combination with antiplatelet agents.

Additionally, the COMPASS trial expanded the scope of secondary prevention, demonstrating the superiority of rivaroxaban plus aspirin over aspirin alone in patients with stable atherosclerotic disease. These findings challenged traditional paradigms and underscored the potential of tailored antithrombotic regimens to improve outcomes across the spectrum of coronary artery disease.

Despite significant progress, the implementation of trial findings in clinical practice remains complex, necessitating individualized approaches that consider patient-specific risks of thrombosis and bleeding. This review delves into the key trials that have shaped contemporary ACS management, evaluates their implications, and explores ongoing challenges and opportunities in optimizing antithrombotic therapy.

Analysis of Clinical Trials

The PRISM and PRISM-PLUS trials were instrumental in highlighting the potential of glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitors, specifically tirofiban, in reducing ischemic events in patients with ACS. PRISM demonstrated a reduction in composite endpoints of death, myocardial infarction, or refractory ischemia compared to heparin, while PRISM-PLUS revealed the additive benefit of tirofiban in combination with heparin. However, the increased bleeding risk observed in the combination therapy group underscored the need for careful patient selection.1,2,3,4

The PARAGON A and B trials represented a bold step toward oral glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibition, focusing on xemilofiban. PARAGON A, though promising in its hypothesis, failed to achieve a statistically significant reduction in ischemic events. PARAGON B expanded on these findings but similarly fell short due to a high incidence of bleeding and suboptimal efficacy. These trials highlighted the challenges of translating intravenous glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibition into an oral formulation, ultimately halting further development in this direction.5

The PURSUIT trial solidified the role of eptifibatide, a short-acting glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitor, in high-risk ACS patients undergoing percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI). PURSUIT's findings demonstrated a significant reduction in mortality and myocardial infarction at 30 days, establishing eptifibatide as a key therapeutic option, particularly in the catheterization laboratory setting.6

GUSTO IV-ACS sought to extend the benefits of abciximab to patients with non-ST elevation ACS managed medically without early PCI. Contrary to expectations, the trial revealed no significant reduction in ischemic events, while bleeding complications remained a concern. This highlighted the importance of matching therapeutic intensity to the patient's risk profile and treatment strategy.7

Contemporary Implications: These landmark trials laid the groundwork for modern ACS management but also revealed critical limitations in the therapeutic strategies of their era. The transition from glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitors to dual antiplatelet therapy (DAPT) with aspirin and P2Y12 inhibitors, such as clopidogrel, prasugrel, and ticagrelor, has become the standard of care, driven by improved efficacy and safety profiles. Additionally, the advent of direct oral anticoagulants (DOACs) has provided new avenues for managing ACS patients with atrial fibrillation or other thromboembolic risks.7

Despite these advancements, challenges persist in balancing ischemic and bleeding risks, particularly in older adults and those with renal impairment. Ongoing research focuses on precision medicine approaches, leveraging biomarkers and genetic profiling to tailor therapy. Moreover, novel agents targeting inflammatory pathways and platelet signaling hold promise for further reducing residual risk in ACS patients.4,5,6

By revisiting the contributions and limitations of PRISM, PRISM-PLUS, PARAGON A, PARAGON B, PURSUIT, and GUSTO IV-ACS, we gain valuable insights into the evolution of ACS management. These trials not only advanced the field but also underscored the iterative nature of clinical research, paving the way for innovations that continue to refine patient care today.5,6,7

The management of Acute Coronary Syndrome (ACS) has undergone remarkable advancements in recent decades, particularly with the advent and refinement of antithrombotic and anticoagulant therapies. Several pivotal clinical trials have shaped our current understanding and therapeutic approaches to optimizing outcomes while minimizing adverse events such as bleeding. This analysis delves into six key trials—ATLAS ACS 2, PIONEER AF, RE-DUAL PCI, COMPASS, ENTRUST AF, and AUGUSTUS—to elucidate their contributions to ACS management and the current state of care.7

ATLAS ACS 2 Rivaroxaban in ACS: The ATLAS ACS 2-TIMI 51 trial investigated the use of rivaroxaban, a direct oral anticoagulant (DOAC), in patients with recent ACS. The study demonstrated that low-dose rivaroxaban (2.5 mg twice daily) reduced the composite endpoint of cardiovascular death, myocardial infarction, or stroke compared to placebo. However, this benefit came with an increased risk of major bleeding and intracranial hemorrhage.8

Significance: ATLAS ACS 2 provided a foundational understanding of incorporating low-dose anticoagulation into post-ACS management, particularly for patients at high ischemic risk and low bleeding risk. It highlighted the potential role of DOACs beyond traditional dual antiplatelet therapy (DAPT).8

PIONEER AF: DOACs in Atrial Fibrillation and PCI: The PIONEER AF-PCI trial assessed rivaroxaban in patients with atrial fibrillation (AF) undergoing percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI). The trial compared rivaroxaban-based regimens with standard warfarin plus DAPT. Rivaroxaban was associated with significantly lower bleeding rates without an apparent increase in ischemic events.9

Significance: This trial demonstrated the feasibility of using DOACs instead of vitamin K antagonists in patients requiring anticoagulation and antiplatelet therapy, thus paving the way for tailored antithrombotic regimens in complex clinical scenarios.9

RE-DUAL PCI: Dabigatran in AF and PCI: The RE-DUAL PCI trial evaluated dabigatran-based regimens versus warfarin in AF patients undergoing PCI. Dabigatran dual therapy (dabigatran and a single antiplatelet agent) significantly reduced bleeding complications compared to triple therapy with warfarin.10

Significance: RE-DUAL PCI reinforced the paradigm shift towards minimizing triple therapy duration and embracing dual therapy in high-risk bleeding populations, aligning with contemporary ACS guidelines.10

COMPASS: Extended Antithrombotic Therapy: The COMPASS trial explored rivaroxaban (2.5 mg twice daily) plus aspirin versus aspirin alone in patients with stable atherosclerotic vascular disease. The combination significantly reduced cardiovascular death, stroke, and myocardial infarction, albeit with increased major bleeding.11

Significance: COMPASS extended the scope of DOACs to stable but high-risk atherosclerotic disease, offering a preventive strategy that bridges secondary and tertiary prevention in chronic coronary syndromes.11

ENTRUST AF-PCI: Edoxaban in AF and PCI: The ENTRUST AF-PCI trial investigated edoxaban plus a P2Y12 inhibitor compared to warfarin-based triple therapy in AF patients undergoing PCI. The edoxaban-based regimen was non-inferior in preventing bleeding complications without compromising efficacy in ischemic outcomes.12

Significance: ENTRUST AF-PCI further validated the safety and efficacy of DOACs as an alternative to warfarin in the complex interplay between AF and ACS requiring PCI, emphasizing patient-centered therapy.12

AUGUSTUS: Balancing Bleeding and Thrombotic Risks: The AUGUSTUS trial examined apixaban versus warfarin in AF patients with recent ACS or PCI, alongside aspirin or placebo. Apixaban reduced bleeding events compared to warfarin, and omitting aspirin further reduced bleeding without significantly increasing ischemic events.13

Significance: AUGUSTUS underscored the importance of minimizing bleeding risk through reduced antithrombotic intensity, influencing modern practice to prioritize DOACs and avoid aspirin in select patients.13

The cumulative insights from these trials have revolutionized ACS management, particularly in patients requiring concomitant anticoagulation. Current guidelines increasingly emphasize individualized therapy, guided by risk stratification for thrombotic and bleeding complications. The role of DOACs has expanded from secondary prevention to the interface of ACS and atrial fibrillation, with a focus on dual therapy regimens.10,11

However, challenges persist, including identifying optimal candidates for extended anticoagulation, integrating novel biomarkers for risk assessment, and addressing residual thrombotic risk in high-risk populations. Future research may explore the integration of emerging antithrombotic agents, machine learning algorithms for personalized therapy, and strategies to mitigate bleeding risks further.12

By building upon the robust evidence base established by ATLAS ACS 2, PIONEER AF, RE-DUAL PCI, COMPASS, ENTRUST AF, and AUGUSTUS, clinicians can continue to refine ACS management to achieve an optimal balance of efficacy and safety. This journey underscores the dynamic interplay of innovation and clinical application in cardiovascular medicine.13

SYNERGY Trial

The SYNERGY (Superior Yield of the New Strategy of Enoxaparin, Revascularization, and Glycoprotein IIb/IIIa Inhibitors) trial was a landmark study evaluating enoxaparin versus unfractionated heparin (UFH) in patients with non-ST-elevation acute coronary syndrome (NSTE-ACS). Conducted in the early 2000s, this randomized, open-label trial enrolled over 10,000 patients undergoing early invasive management. The primary endpoint was a composite of all-cause mortality or nonfatal myocardial infarction (MI) at 30 days.14

SYNERGY demonstrated non-inferiority of enoxaparin compared to UFH, with a similar incidence of the primary endpoint. However, a notable increase in bleeding complications was observed with enoxaparin, prompting concerns about balancing efficacy and safety. These findings emphasized the need for individualized anticoagulant selection, particularly in high-bleeding-risk populations.14

OASIS-6 Trial

The OASIS-6 (Organization to Assess Strategies in Acute Ischemic Syndromes) trial focused on the role of fondaparinux versus placebo or UFH in patients with ST-elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI). This trial, involving over 12,000 participants, stratified patients based on their eligibility for reperfusion therapy (thrombolysis, primary percutaneous coronary intervention [PCI], or no reperfusion).15

The study revealed a significant reduction in death and reinfarction rates at 30 days with fondaparinux compared to control groups. Importantly, fondaparinux showed a lower incidence of major bleeding, reinforcing its safety profile. These findings established fondaparinux as a valuable anticoagulant, particularly in patients managed conservatively or with thrombolysis.15

STEEPLE Trial

The STEEPLE (Safety and Efficacy of Enoxaparin in PCI Patients, an International Randomized Evaluation) trial explored the safety and efficacy of enoxaparin versus UFH during elective PCI. The study enrolled over 3,500 patients and assessed major bleeding as the primary endpoint, with secondary endpoints including ischemic events.16

STEEPLE demonstrated a significant reduction in major bleeding with enoxaparin compared to UFH, without compromising ischemic outcomes. This trial reinforced the concept that enoxaparin offers a safer anticoagulation alternative in PCI settings, contributing to its widespread adoption in contemporary practice.16

ISAR REACT 3 Trial

The ISAR REACT 3 (Intracoronary Stenting and Antithrombotic Regimen: Rapid Early Action for Coronary Treatment 3) trial evaluated the efficacy and safety of bivalirudin versus UFH in patients undergoing elective PCI. Conducted in the late 2000s, the study included over 4,500 participants and focused on 30-day composite endpoints of death, MI, or urgent target vessel revascularization.17

Bivalirudin demonstrated non-inferiority to UFH in preventing ischemic events, with a significantly lower incidence of bleeding complications. This trial underscored the advantages of bivalirudin, particularly in patients at high risk for bleeding, and solidified its role in contemporary PCI protocols.17

ATOLL Trial

The ATOLL (Acute STEMI Treated with Primary Angioplasty and Intravenous Enoxaparin or UFH to Lower Ischemic and Bleeding Events at Short- and Long-term Follow-up) trial was a multicenter study comparing intravenous enoxaparin to UFH in STEMI patients undergoing primary PCI. The primary composite endpoint included death, MI, procedural failure, or major bleeding at 30 days.18

Although ATOLL did not meet its primary endpoint, secondary analyses suggested significant reductions in mortality and major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE) with enoxaparin. These findings sparked discussions about optimal anticoagulant regimens in STEMI, particularly in the era of contemporary antiplatelet therapies and radial access.18

Current Context and Future Directions

The cumulative insights from these trials have profoundly influenced the management of ACS. Anticoagulant selection now emphasizes balancing efficacy with bleeding risk, guided by patient-specific factors such as comorbidities, access site (radial vs femoral), and the extent of ischemic burden. The adoption of radial access, potent P2Y12 inhibitors (e.g., ticagrelor, prasugrel), and shorter dual antiplatelet therapy (DAPT) durations has further optimized outcomes.15,16

In contemporary practice, fondaparinux remains preferred for its favorable safety profile in medically managed STEMI and NSTE-ACS. Enoxaparin has supplanted UFH in many PCI settings due to its predictable pharmacokinetics and reduced bleeding risk. Bivalirudin, although less commonly used, is reserved for specific populations at high bleeding risk or with contraindications to heparins.17

Future research aims to refine antithrombotic strategies further, incorporating novel agents and precision medicine approaches. Ongoing trials are exploring the integration of direct oral anticoagulants (DOACs) in ACS and the role of genotype-guided antiplatelet therapy.17,18

The SYNERGY, OASIS-6, STEEPLE, ISAR REACT 3, and ATOLL trials collectively highlight the evolution of anticoagulant and antithrombotic strategies in ACS. While each trial addressed distinct aspects of management, their findings underscore the dynamic interplay between efficacy and safety. As the field progresses, integrating these historical insights with emerging evidence will continue to refine ACS management and improve patient outcomes.18

CONCLUSION

The clinical trials PRISM, PRISM-PLUS, PARAGON-A, PURSUIT, GUSTO IV-ACS, and PARAGON-B represent pivotal steps in the evolution of antiplatelet and anticoagulant therapy for patients with Acute Coronary Syndrome (ACS). These studies were foundational in shaping early strategies for reducing ischemic events, although their findings also highlighted limitations in efficacy, safety, and patient selection that have informed subsequent innovations in ACS management.

Early trials, such as PRISM and PRISM-PLUS, focused on glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitors (e.g., tirofiban), demonstrating their capacity to reduce ischemic complications in high-risk non-ST-elevation ACS (NSTE-ACS). PRISM-PLUS particularly highlighted the importance of combining antiplatelet and anticoagulant therapies, though it also underscored the need to carefully balance bleeding risks. These findings laid the groundwork for incorporating glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitors into early invasive strategies, particularly in high-risk patients undergoing percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI).

PARAGON-A and PARAGON-B trials investigated the direct thrombin inhibitor, lamifiban. While these studies demonstrated some reduction in ischemic events, the magnitude of benefit was modest, and the increased bleeding complications raised concerns about the safety of broad application. These trials highlighted the complexity of

achieving a balance between effective thrombotic prevention and bleeding risk, particularly in patients with varying clinical profiles.

The PURSUIT trial focused on eptifibatide, another glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitor, and showed significant reductions in death and myocardial infarction in patients with NSTE-ACS. This trial reinforced the role of glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitors in contemporary ACS care, particularly in the early phases of invasive management.

GUSTO IV-ACS investigated the use of abciximab, a monoclonal antibody glycoprotein IIb/IIIa inhibitor, in patients with NSTE-ACS managed conservatively. The lack of benefit in reducing ischemic outcomes highlighted the importance of selecting therapies based on the invasive versus conservative management strategies, marking a turning point in the selective use of potent antiplatelet agents.

Collectively, these trials paved the way for modern ACS management by emphasizing the importance of early and aggressive antiplatelet and anticoagulant therapy in high-risk subsets. However, they also underscored limitations, including the risks associated with increased bleeding and the challenges of applying these therapies across diverse patient populations.

In the present day, the insights from these landmark trials have been integrated into practice with greater precision. Modern ACS management incorporates tailored antithrombotic strategies, leveraging newer agents like P2Y12 inhibitors (clopidogrel, ticagrelor, prasugrel) and direct oral anticoagulants (DOACs), which offer superior safety and efficacy profiles compared to earlier therapies. The lessons learned from these trials also emphasized the importance of individualized risk stratification to optimize therapy based on ischemic and bleeding risks.

While the field has progressed significantly, challenges remain, including further refinement of therapy duration, addressing residual ischemic risk in high-risk populations, and improving access to advanced therapies worldwide. Future directions in ACS care will likely focus on precision medicine, integrating genetic, biomarker, and clinical data to provide truly individualized treatment strategies.

The legacy of PRISM, PRISM-PLUS, PARAGON-A, PARAGON-B, PURSUIT, and GUSTO IV-ACS continues to resonate in modern ACS care, reflecting a dynamic journey of innovation and adaptation that has significantly improved outcomes for patients with this life-threatening condition.

The clinical trials ATLAS ACS 2, PIONEER AF-PCI, RE-DUAL PCI, COMPASS, ENTRUST AF-PCI, and AUGUSTUS have collectively transformed our understanding of antithrombotic therapy in the context of Acute Coronary Syndrome (ACS), particularly in patients with overlapping conditions such as atrial fibrillation (AF). These studies have emphasized the importance of balancing ischemic protection with bleeding risk reduction, guiding a paradigm shift from traditional dual and triple antithrombotic therapy to more tailored, patient-specific regimens.

The journey began with ATLAS ACS 2, which demonstrated that low-dose rivaroxaban could significantly reduce ischemic events in post-ACS patients, albeit at the cost of increased bleeding. This trial introduced the concept of using direct oral anticoagulants (DOACs) in ACS, opening new avenues for secondary prevention. Subsequent trials, such as PIONEER AF-PCI, RE-DUAL PCI, and ENTRUST AF-PCI, extended these findings to patients with concomitant AF undergoing PCI. These studies consistently highlighted the efficacy of DOAC-based regimens in reducing bleeding complications without compromising ischemic outcomes, challenging the historical reliance on vitamin K antagonists and triple therapy.

The COMPASS trial expanded the application of DOACs to patients with stable atherosclerotic disease, redefining long-term secondary prevention strategies by demonstrating the superiority of low-dose rivaroxaban combined with aspirin over aspirin monotherapy. Meanwhile, the AUGUSTUS trial underscored the safety of apixaban-based dual therapy in AF patients with recent ACS or PCI, providing strong evidence to support omitting aspirin in select patients to further reduce bleeding risks.

Currently, the management of ACS incorporates insights from these landmark trials, prioritizing individualized therapy based on thrombotic and hemorrhagic risk stratification. The use of DOACs has become central in specific patient subgroups, marking a significant departure from traditional approaches. Guidelines now advocate shorter durations of triple therapy, the preferential use of DOACs over warfarin, and a focus on minimizing antithrombotic intensity where feasible.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain, including the need for refined risk prediction tools, optimization of therapy in complex populations, and addressing disparities in access to advanced treatments globally. Future directions will likely explore novel antithrombotic agents, precision medicine approaches, and enhanced integration of patient-specific factors into therapeutic decision-making.

These trials collectively represent a critical evolution in ACS care, bridging the gap between innovation and clinical application and ensuring improved outcomes for patients with this multifaceted and high-risk condition.

The collective insights from clinical trials such as SYNERGY, OASIS-6, STEEPLE, ISAR-REACT 3, and ATOLL have profoundly influenced the management of Acute Coronary Syndrome (ACS), highlighting the continuous evolution of anticoagulation and antithrombotic strategies. These studies emphasized the delicate balance required between reducing ischemic complications and minimizing bleeding risks, a cornerstone of contemporary ACS management.

Initially, the focus was on refining traditional therapies like unfractionated heparin (UFH) and integrating low-molecular-weight heparins (LMWHs), as evidenced by SYNERGY. Subsequent innovations introduced novel agents like

fondaparinux in OASIS-6, offering improved efficacy and safety profiles, particularly in patients with resource-limited access to invasive therapies. Trials like STEEPLE and ISAR-REACT 3 further underscored the importance of tailoring anticoagulation intensity to individual patient risk profiles, paving the way for safer procedural outcomes. The ATOLL trial demonstrated the benefits of enoxaparin in primary percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI), reinforcing its utility in specific high-risk populations.

In the present era, the lessons learned from these trials have translated into guideline recommendations that prioritize patient-specific strategies. Current ACS management embraces the integration of modern anticoagulants, risk stratification tools, and evidence-based protocols, ensuring that treatment is both effective and safe. However, challenges remain, including optimizing therapy in patients with comorbidities, achieving greater global accessibility to advanced treatments, and further reducing bleeding complications.

These landmark trials laid the foundation for the dynamic landscape of ACS care. As clinical research continues to innovate, future directions will likely focus on precision medicine approaches, novel biomarkers, and advanced therapeutic agents to further enhance outcomes in this critical and complex patient population.

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