

Khosrow in Jerusalem: Sasanians, Romans, and the Removal of the True Cross

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e-Sasanika 18
2017

The Roman- Persian War of the seventh century that lasted for almost three decades was very influential in shaping the future of the region and the two empires. In many ways, it was much more than just a conflict over territory and wealth, rather a religious war which is sometimes suggested to have been the First Crusade.¹ Not only do the Roman sources constantly refer to their emperor as the “Beloved of Christ” and the Persian king as the “God-hated khusrō”² who has come to destroy their “Christian” Empire,³ but we can see that the Persian king himself is quite aware of the role of religion in the conflict. Among many of Khosrow’s actions which could have had a religious motivation, his removal of the True Cross from Jerusalem and transferring it to Iran is the most important and in many ways puzzling one. It has been suggested, given the other actions of Khosrow II Aparviz such as minting image of cross on the back of his coins or having Christian wives, that this Sasanian monarch had a Christian tendency.⁴ He seems to have been in very good relation with Christians of Iran⁵ and shows favor to Christians in his newly conquered territories, albeit only to a certain group, the non-Chalcedonian ones.⁶ His eventual downfall, result of a *coup d’état* against him by his son with the assistance of the nobility, helps this conclusion. After all, the Zoroastrian nobility would not very much have appreciate a king who had Christian tendencies or might have even converted to Christianity in secret.

While Khosrow’s supposed Christian tendencies sound like a reasonable explanation for his actions, it is not an entirely convincing one. After all, none of the primary sources accuse Khosrow of having any sudden Christian tendencies, nor do they suggest that these tendencies turned the nobles of his county against him. What seems to be the main reason behind their dissatisfaction

¹ Daryaee, Touraj. *Sasanian Iran: Portrait of a Late Antique Empire*. Costa Mesa: Mazda publisher, Inc., 2008, p 88.

² *Chronicon Paschale*. 727.15-734.17 (taken from Greatrex and Lieu. pp.220-223)

³ G. Greatrex and Samuel N.C. Lieu, *the Roman Eastern Frontiers and the Persian Wars, part II AD 363-630*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. P.199. “Heraclius roused his troops for battle by emphasizing the religious nature of the struggle against a barbarian who had plundered the holy sites of Christianity”

⁴ T. Daryaee, 2008.p.90.

⁵ Noeldeke, Therdor. *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden*. Persian translation by Zaryab, Abbas, Tehran: Pajoheshgah-e-olum-e- ensani va motaleat-e-farhangi, 1378.(1999) p. 309

⁶ G. Greatrex and Samuel N.C. Lieu, 2002. P. 185



is the prolonged war and the ensuing chaos that had exhausted the Iranians and had drained the treasury, causing widespread disapproval of Khosrow's actions.⁷ In fact, the man they put in place of Khosrow, his son Kavād II Shiroe, is mentioned to have had a Christian mother and in some cases, he shows even more tendency toward Christianity and is certainly praised more by Christian sources than his father.⁸

It is of course important to keep in mind the ulterior motives of each of these sources. For example, one could argue that it is of no surprise that none of the Christian sources, especially the Roman accounts, talk of Khosrow's possible conversion or perhaps his interest, positive interest, in Christianity. The Roman propaganda machine is hard at work trying to make this war into a religious battle and in order to achieve that they naturally have to cast Khosrow II in the role of the anti-Christ.⁹ Labeling him a Christian or a Christian enthusiast would suddenly transfer this horrible enemy into a "brother" and hence change the entire narrative. The idea of the Roman emperor, "the Beloved of Christ" fighting on behalf of the Christians and Christ against the infidel, fire worshiping king of the Persians would not make much sense if the fire worshiper had become a Christian or had shown positive interest toward Christianity. More importantly, if the Persian king had been arrested and executed because of his secret conversion to Christianity he then would be a martyr worthy of reverence and not the constantly cursed enemy.

However, as we move away from the Roman sources, the "silence" about Khosrow's Christianity is just as present in the writings of Armenian historian of seventh century Sebeos. Sebeos writes in accordance with all other accounts about Khosrow's downfall and how it came as the result of people's dissatisfaction with the prolonged war and the chaotic situation of the county. Surprisingly enough he does mention the conversion of another Sasanian king, that of Khosrow II's grandfather and namesake Khosrow I Anushirvan;¹⁰ a claim almost completely unsupported by any historical evidence. So it is not all that hard for Sebeos to even make up stories about an Iranian king converting to Christianity, yet there is no mention of such a thing about Khosrow II Aparviz.

Another important source which gives us detailed description of this war is the Syriac "*Chronicle of Khuzistan*," written from a Nestorian Christian point of view and a very valuable source since it gives us the information that the Roman sources either did not have access to or chose to ignore, probably due to their biases against the Iranians. It talks about the Christian wives of Khosrow, and the attention Khosrow pays to the church, and him honoring the newly elected Catholicos and most importantly the close relationship between Khosrow and his Christian minister Yazdin who is called "defender of the church."¹¹ However, *The Khuzistan Chronicle* is equally empty of any suggestion that Khosrow might have had a Christian tendency and in fact at one point

⁷ G. Greatrex and Samuel N.C. Lieu, 2002, pp. 217-218

⁸ *The Khuzestan chronicle* (taken from Greatrex and Lieu. p. 236.)

⁹ Stoyanov, Yuri. *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross: the Sasanian Conquest of Jerusalem in 614 and Byzantine Ideology of Anti-Persian Warfare*. Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011. P.64

¹⁰ Sebeos, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*. Translated, with notes, by R. W. Thomson; historical commentary by James Howard-Johnston. Liverpool University press, 1999. pp.9-10

¹¹ *The Khuzistan Chronicle* (taken from Greatrex and Lieu, 2002) PP.230-233

mentions that he is only being nice to Christians because of Emperor Maurice and in the end he is the enemy of “our people.”¹²

Another source native to the realm of the Sasanian monarch is the writings of the Muslim Iranian historian of ninth century, Tabari, who is the least hostile toward Khosrow II or the Sasanians in general and the least interested in creating the image of the anti-Christ for Khosrow. Yet he too never accuses Khosrow of any open or secret conversion, neither does he mention any dislike of Khosrow II among his subjects or the Zoroastrian clergy out of fear of him abandoning the good religion. Tabari gives a detailed account of why Khosrow aroused the animosity of his subjects toward himself but nowhere does he mention the issue of religion.¹³

He mentions a message sent by Shiroe to his father, now the deposed king, in which Khosrow is accused of many misdeeds. Among these is the unnecessary removal of The True Cross for which, according to Shiroe, neither Khosrow nor his people had any use.¹⁴ Nowhere does Shiroe accuse his father of turning his back on the religion of their ancestors or being a traitor to their faith. Neither does he even suggest an ulterior motive behind removal of the cross. In fact he is just angry at what he clearly considers to be a pointless action, removal of an object which Khosrow as a non-Christian did not need.

An issue worth noting in different accounts, both hostile and friendly to the Iranians, is that none accuses Khosrow of disrespecting the Cross or destroying it. Indeed, all agree that he kept it with honor and in safety.¹⁵ Only Antiochos Strategos’ account of the sack of Jerusalem differs from other sources in this matter, providing us with episodes of Persians disrespecting the cross and mocking it.¹⁶ Antiochos also provides the only plausible, indeed the only direct explanation, for Khosrow’s removal of the True Cross from Jerusalem and taking it to Persia for safe-keeping, although he does not obviously consider it an object worthy of veneration and allows it to be disrespected by his soldiers. Based on this account, Khosrow’s action was motivated by his Christian wife, probably Shirin, who as a Nestorian Christian had asked his husband to bring the Cross to Iran.¹⁷ This account is quite interesting, since if we are to believe Peter Brown’s suggestion that Khosrow had entrusted the Cross to the Nestorian Christians of Iran,¹⁸ the mention of a Nestorian wife here provides an interesting motivation for its removal by Khosrow. In this account, then, Shirin is not just a wife of the King, rather a clear representative of her community, the Nestorian Christians, and their influence and position in the Sasanian state. It is possible that it was the most influential Nestorian in the kingdom, the king’s wife, who

¹² *The Khuzistan Chronicle* (taken from Greatrex and Lieu, 2002) , PP. 232

¹³ T. Noldeke, 1378.pp. 377-378

¹⁴ T. Noldeke, 1378.pp.384-386

¹⁵ Christiancen talks about khosrow II bringing the true cross with much celebration to a newly built treasury in the capital. Christensen, Arthur. *L’Iran sous les Sassanides*, Persian translation by Yasemi, Rashid, Tehran: Negah, 1384(2005) p.435. Noldeke in his commentary on Tabari mentions that removal of the cross angered all Christian.(Noldeke, 1378.pp. 379-380) However, he does not say anything about cross being disrespected except if we consider the very act of relocation, a disrespectful one.

¹⁶ Antiochos Strategos. PP.510-511

¹⁷ Antiochos Strategos. P.513

¹⁸ Brown, Peter. *The World of Late Antiquity AD 150-750*. London and New York: Norton, 1971. pp. 172

petitioned him for the cross, however, here she could be a representative of her community, petitioning the king on behalf of the Nestorians of Iran and that it was as a favor to Nestorian Christians that Khosrow brought the Cross to Persia. This seems to fit well with Peter Brown's analysis that the existence of the Cross in Persia was an achievement for Eastern Christians a community which not only included Shirin but also Yazdin the famous minister.¹⁹

Although Khosrow II himself is a Zoroastrian and is ruling over a Zoroastrian kingdom, his reasons for deciding to favor the Nestorians of Iran and giving them a boost in status are not hard to understand. Why would not a king who realized the permanent and irreversible advancement of Christianity in his territories, at least try to nurture a native Christian community of his country? He could at least be sure of their loyalty and obedience to him instead of the Roman Emperor. This could also help us understand the reason behind Khosrow's favoring of non-Chalcedonian Christians in his newly acquired territories. In this way, Khosrow not only would have strengthened his empires' native Christian community, but could also eliminate the position of the Roman Emperor as the only royal benefactor of Christianity.

Khosrow II most likely was very much aware of the fact that the existence of Christianity was a permanent reality and he was well aware of the existence of Christians all over the kingdom of Iran. By the year 591, when Khosrow came to power, we have an almost two hundred years old Christian community in The Fars province the, birth place of the Persian Empire.²⁰ He was also most likely aware of the dominance of the Christian population in the regions bordering the Sasanian state, regions that Khosrow II might have wanted to add to his dominion.

By the time of Khosrow's reign, days of the persecution and Christian Martyrs are long gone and whether by force or out of genuine interest, the Sasanian king had clearly recognized and decided to protect the Christian church of Iran, so much that the election of the new patriarch took place in the royal palace in the capital in Ctesiphon.²¹

That Khosrow wanted to have a good relationship with Christians is clear and not hard to notice. A very clear sign of it is the symbol he uses on the back of his coins in Egypt. He mints his coins with the Sasanian symbol of the sun and the crescent on one side and a cross on the other.²² He is after all expanding his territories into what are overwhelmingly Christian regions of Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Anatolia. He knows that Christians make up a large number of the natives of these lands, much more than he can ever hope to completely eradicate even if he ever wished to do so. Even before the start of the war, the newly reinstated king Khosrow II expanded the religious policy of his grandfather, in which Zoroastrians are forbidden from converting to another religion, to Christians as well.²³ This is a very important pro-Christian move for now the king has

¹⁹ A. Christensen, 1384(2005).P.434

²⁰ Walker, J.T. *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: university of California press, 2006.pp. 102.

²¹ Walker, 2006, P. 87

²² Greatrex and Lieu 2002.pp.196-197

²³ A. I. Kolesnikov. *Iran nakanune arabskogo nashestvija*, Moscow: University Press, 1969 (Pers. Trans: *Ērān dar Āstāne-ye Yoreše Tāziyān*, Persian translation by M. R. Yahyāii, Tehran: Agah Publications, 1357 HS/1978). pp. 175-



expanded his protection which was traditionally only reserved for the official religion of the kingdom, to another religion.

After coming to terms with the reality of the existence of Christianity, Khosrow might very well have had the desire to be the leader of all Christians and in fact attack the Romans with the same weapon that they had used against him and his empire. He is smart enough to understand, however, that this goal is extremely complicated and cannot be achieved by only taking the Cross or ruling over the birthplace of Jesus. He is a Zoroastrian himself and regardless of what he might have believed personally, he is forced to keep a Zoroastrian front or he would be in deep trouble with the nobles of his own country, his generals and perhaps even his own family members. The description of Kolesnikov of a feast in Khosrow's court, soon after he has regained the throne, is very helpful in showing us how important the Zoroastrian belief of the king was for the courtiers and the clergy. In the feast Khosrow II wears a robe, sent to him by Maurice who has just helped him regain his throne, with Christian symbols on it. Although this is considered to be a purely political move done out of respect, and perhaps even fear, for Maurice, it still angered the Zoroastrians.²⁴ If the act of putting on a robe with Christian symbols had angered the Zoroastrian nobility, Khosrow II would certainly not have survive for 38 years on the throne had he shown any public interest toward Christianity. What we can clearly conclude is that this Iranian king had kept enough of a Zoroastrian front and most likely also a Zoroastrian heart to have satisfied the Zoroastrian clergy and nobles of his kingdom. This alone is enough of a reason why he would never be able to replace the Roman Emperor, a man who clearly and strongly professes his Christian faith, as the ruler of all Christians.

This could be remedied, however, by choosing a version of Christianity not celebrated by the Roman state and in fact persecuted and exiled by them. For the Nestorian Christians of Iran as for all the other non-Chalcedonian Christians, The Cross of Jesus is just as holy and important as it is for Roman Christians who call it, "Tree of Our Lives." Yet non-Chalcedonians are referred to as heretics by the man who claimed the leadership of all Christians. From time to time, when helping their cause, Romans would put up a friendly front for the eastern Christians and would even use them to feed their propaganda machine, lamenting their suffering under the non-Christian ruler of Iranian kings.²⁵ Yet, when they had served their purpose they would return to being the inferior and heretic Christians that the Romans believed them to be. Now, however, with this Iranian king, they would have had the chance to become an accepted, indeed royally sanctioned, members of the Christian world and keepers of The True Cross.

They are far more likely to consciously or unconsciously forget about Khosrow's lack of real Christian beliefs and settle for his kindness and consideration of Christians in hope of becoming a stronger community. In fact, we see that following the Iranian conquest of the Roman territories, the anti-Chalcedonian bishops who had previously fled the Roman persecution move back and even regained their positions, obviously having an easier time with the non-Christian

176. (Kolesnikov believes that the reason behind this decision was the important role that the Christians played in Sasanian society.)

²⁴ Kolesnikov, 1969. pp.173-174

²⁵ Stoyanov, 2011. P.40-41

Shahanshah than with the Christian emperor.²⁶In fact it is suggested that the Sasanians owe some of their victories to the local people's dissatisfaction with the official Christian church of Constantinople.²⁷

Aside from being the rejected version of Christianity by the Romans, non-Chalcedonian version has another advantage for Khosrow as well. Not only the Christians of Iran are mainly Nestorians but also the Christians living in the border of Rome and Iran are mostly non-Chalcedonian as well. While Khosrow II might be ambitious enough to think of capturing the heart of the Roman Empire and in fact at one point he does go all the way to Jerusalem and Egypt, the neighboring regions such as Syria are more logical for him to capitalize on.

What could farther demonstrate that the deposition of Khosrow and the *coup d'état* against him was not in any way a religious issue is that the son and successor whom the clergy and nobles help put on the throne is in fact more likely to have had Christian tendency and even Christian beliefs not to mention possible Christian and even Roman blood. If the widespread legends about Khosrow and his Christian wives are in any way true then we should consider their testimony that the mother of Shiroe was one of these Christian women, the "Roman Maria" as *the Khuzistan chronicle* calls her, a Christian and the supposed daughter of Emperor Maurice.²⁸The same Chronicle praises Shiroe as a good king under whose rules Christians had a good life and the text is even trying to excuse his actions after becoming king by claiming that he was not personally responsible for the murder of his brother Merdanshah, son of Khosrow and Shirin.²⁹

It is also clear that Shiroe has his own personal agenda and strong reason for betraying his father. Far from being the champion of Zoroastrianism who wants to fight the evil secretly Christian king and restore the good religion, he is simply a prince not too happy about being passed over in favor of his younger brother.³⁰ Shiroe's reverence and positive tone towards the Roman emperor, whom he calls "our brother" in his letter, and the friendly attitude of Heraclius toward him, is enough to show us that Shiroe did not run his political campaign on the promise of attacking Christianity or bringing back religious zealotry, rather on bringing back peace and prosperity. He also follows his friendly words with even friendlier deeds when he releases the Christian prisoners including the patriarch Zachariah.³¹

Shiroe being son of Maria also helps us to see Khosrow's favoritism toward his other, and reportedly younger, son Merdanshah in a new light. It is hard, if not impossible, to argue that Merdanshah is being favored by his father because he had a Christian mother since he is hardly the only son with that characteristic. It is more likely that Merdanshah being the son of his reportedly favorite wife, the famed Shirin, was the reason behind king's favoritism. Shirin's legendary love story with the king survives to this day in the Classical Persian poetry composed many centuries after the fall of the Sasanian dynasty.

²⁶ Greatrex and Lieu, 2002. P.185.

²⁷ Kolesnikov,1969.p.201

²⁸ *The Khuzestan Chronicle*.(taken from Greatrex and Lieu.p.230); Noldeke, 1378.p. 305; A. Christensen, 1384.p.474

²⁹ *The Khuzestan Chronicle*.(taken from Greatrex and Lieu.p.236)

³⁰ Theoph. AM.6118 (325.10-327.16) (taken from Greatrex and Lieu.p.223)

³¹ Theoph. AM.6118 (325.10-327.16) (taken from Greatrex and Lieu.p.224)



Given this famous love story between Khosrow II and Shirin, We might be tempted to consider Khosrow's love for his favorite wife as a moving force behind many of his decision including the transfer of the Cross and instead of trying to find a political motive behind his decision, consider it a more personal one. Indeed even Antiochos seems to imply that love of Shirin was the reason behind the decision. Looking at the situation this way can lead us to conclude that not only the issue regarding the Cross but the decision to favor Non-Chalcedonians as well was influenced by Shirin. Tabari mentions Shiroe's list of accusations that he brings up against his father, among them the condemnation for taking too many women but only paying attention to Shirin. Here again we have an image of a weak king too occupied with one woman who then naturally would gain great influence over him. This fits well with the above conclusion about Merdanshah and that his advantage was not having Christian blood but rather having Shirin's blood. The main problem with this argument, however, is the existence of more than one anti Chalcedonian sect and the clear evidence that they were not always on the best of terms with each other. While for the Romans all anti Chalcedonian Christians were heretics and not that different from each other, in the East there is a clear distinction between these groups and equally clear understanding about who belongs to which sect. We also know that while Nestorians are considered to be the native Christian community of Iran, Jacobite Christians also have their rise to power in the Sasanian court something that seems to have greatly bothered the Nestorians.³²

Kolesnikov talks about the increasing influence of the Monophysite Christians, Jacobites, and along with it an interesting claim about Queen Shirin being the supporter of the Jacobite bishops.³³ This claim, which is also repeated by Noldeke,³⁴ clearly contradicts Antiochos' account in which Shirin is called a Nestorian. We might not be able to come up with a definite answer as to what Shirin's faith was yet either way we can draw the same conclusion. What we know for sure is that each of these groups had their time as the favorite as well as their fall from the grace, and the Queen can naturally belong to only one of these sects. This information helps us to conclude that reason why one group became the favorite is most likely not an issue centered on Shirin, but more connected to political policy of Khosrow Parviz. This could help us understand the degree of complexity that the decision regarding the Cross as well as most of Khosrow's other tactical decisions had and how they were certainly not as simple as an attempt to please his wife. The conclusion about Khosrow's motives for taking The Cross is to a degree challenged if we follow the career of one of his generals, one who removed the cross from Jerusalem, and eventually a king of Iran himself. Shahvaraz who replaced Shiroe on the throne after he killed Shiroe's infant son, Ardashir III, and took the crown for himself, is said to have immediately returned the cross to Jerusalem.³⁵ This is very puzzling, for if Khosrow II liked the idea of having The Cross for himself and used it to give more legitimacy to "his Christians," then why would not Shahvaraz who knows he has to deal with the same Christian community, see the benefit in having The Cross in his possession? It should be noted that the return of the True Cross could have very

³² Kolesnikov,1969.p.181

³³ See reference 32.

³⁴ Noldeke,1378 .P.379

³⁵ Sebeos, 1999. p. 88; Greatrex and Lieu, 2002.pp.227-228



well been one of the conditions of Heraclius in exchange for giving his support to Shahvaraz and his cause.³⁶

This episode could also help us see another possible motivation for Khosrow's actions regarding the Cross. A motivation more political than religious and also one that Shahvaraz, as an ally and friend of Roman Empire, did not have. Removing The True Cross and keeping it in Iran as a form of hostage. While most sources are empty of any response from Khosrow as to why he took the cross, the 11th century Iranian historian Bal'ami, offers an explanation. In response to his son's question as to why he removed the cross, Khosrow says, "as long as that wood was in our possession and in our treasury, we would have an advantage over them (Romans)"³⁷ and he goes on to advise his son not to return it.

The idea of taking something precious and keep it hostage could here enter into the equation especially given the information we have of hostage policy of the Romans and Sasanians in relations with each other. According to A.D. Lee it was a common act for the Romans to ask for hostages from foreign rulers and keep them in their custody for several years. These hostages were usually members of noble houses and they served as reassurance for the promise that was made by their government. The practice of hostage taking was also a way for them to show power and force the other side to acknowledge their superiority.³⁸ Having this in mind, it is not hard to see the possibility that the cross of Jesus is being viewed by Khosrow as a hostage.

However, this particular hostage policy seems to have been the standard policy of Roman in dealing with the pre-Sasanian rulers of Iran, Parthians as well as their neighbors to the north. During the Sasanian times the evidence point to a different type of hostage policy being developed. According to Lee, the hostage issue for the Sasanian's was more pragmatic and less symbolic; while the hostages are still members of the elite and all signs indicate that they have been treated respectfully during their captivity, they were taken hostage for a more specific reason than just a sign of subordination and for a more specified period of time. For the Sasanians, hostages served as a guarantee of a certain promise and were released after the promise was fulfilled.³⁹ Having this in mind it might be hard to see a conscious desire in part of Khosrow II to cast the Cross in the role of the hostage since we have no reference to the cross being used as a bargain tool by Iranians. More importantly, even during the Parthian times one of the major motivations for taking hostages, aside from show of power, was to expose the future ruler or influential figure, to Roman life and culture so that they could eventually have a more Romanized and naturally Roman friendly ruler on the enemy's throne.⁴⁰ In this particular case obviously no such intentions could exist.

³⁶ Sebeos, 1999.p. 88; Greatrex and Lieu, 2002.pp.88 (Sebeos claims that Heraclius made the return of the cross his prime request from the new Iranian king.)

³⁷ Balami.*Tarikh-e-Balami. Volume II.* Edited by Mohamad Taghi Bahar. Tehran: Tabesh Press, 1353(1974).p.1178

³⁸ A.D. Lee, "the Role of Hostages in Roman Diplomacy with Sasanian Persia." *In Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (1991), p. 366.

³⁹ A.D. Lee, 1991. P. 369

⁴⁰ A.D. Lee, 1991.P. 366



What we could certainly conclude from all these is that there were many different layers in what motivated Khosrow to remove the cross and also to do every other pro Christian act that he does. It was not as simple as being a hidden Christian or simply in love with his wife. Instead he appears to have been a very calculating king who saw many different ways of holding on to his power in each different place. In the end, more than anything else, he seems to be interested in holding on to his power, as well as increasing the size of his kingdom and the number of people who were his subjects. This goal first and foremost would have required a much weakened Roman Empire as well as a counter attack against the propaganda of the Romans who were trying to expand their own rule by claiming the leadership of all Christians. Empowering his own Christian subjects, who were already an important and growing community, was one of his many acts in hope of building a stronger and more loyal kingdom. His clear, and successful, attempts in creating a balance between the different Christian communities of Iran⁴¹ further demonstrates the calculating and thoughtful nature of his actions rather than any ideological motive which could have fueled his political decisions.

⁴¹ Y. Stoyanov, 2011.P.65

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