

ROCKINGHAM FARM, AVONMOUTH, 1993-1997: MOATED ENCLOSURES ON THE NORTH AVON LEVEL

By Martin Locock

This paper reports the results of survey and excavation on several medieval and post medieval settlements near Rockingham Farm on the Avonmouth Levels north west of Bristol. In addition, a buried landsurface was recorded which may date to the Roman period.

Introduction

Rockingham Farm comprises an area of about 60 acres near the coastline of the North Avon Level, on the northern side of the Avonmouth industrial complex; the site lies along the banks of the Salt Rhine, east of the A403 Aust-Avonmouth road (Figure 1). In 1993, Western Properties Ltd and AMEC Developments began to develop the site

as The Severn Gate distribution park. A desk-based assessment identified a number of known interests (see Table 1 and Figure 2).

In 1994, fieldwork commenced with survey (Sites 1-5) and evaluation (Sites 2 and 4); further survey of Site 2, and a watching brief on rhine cutting, took place in 1995. In 1997, the site was purchased by Burford Western Estates Ltd, and GGAT undertook further investigation of Site 2, a survey of Site 6, and an evaluation north of the Salt Rhine. The project was entirely funded by the developers; a full report is being prepared for submission to *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*.

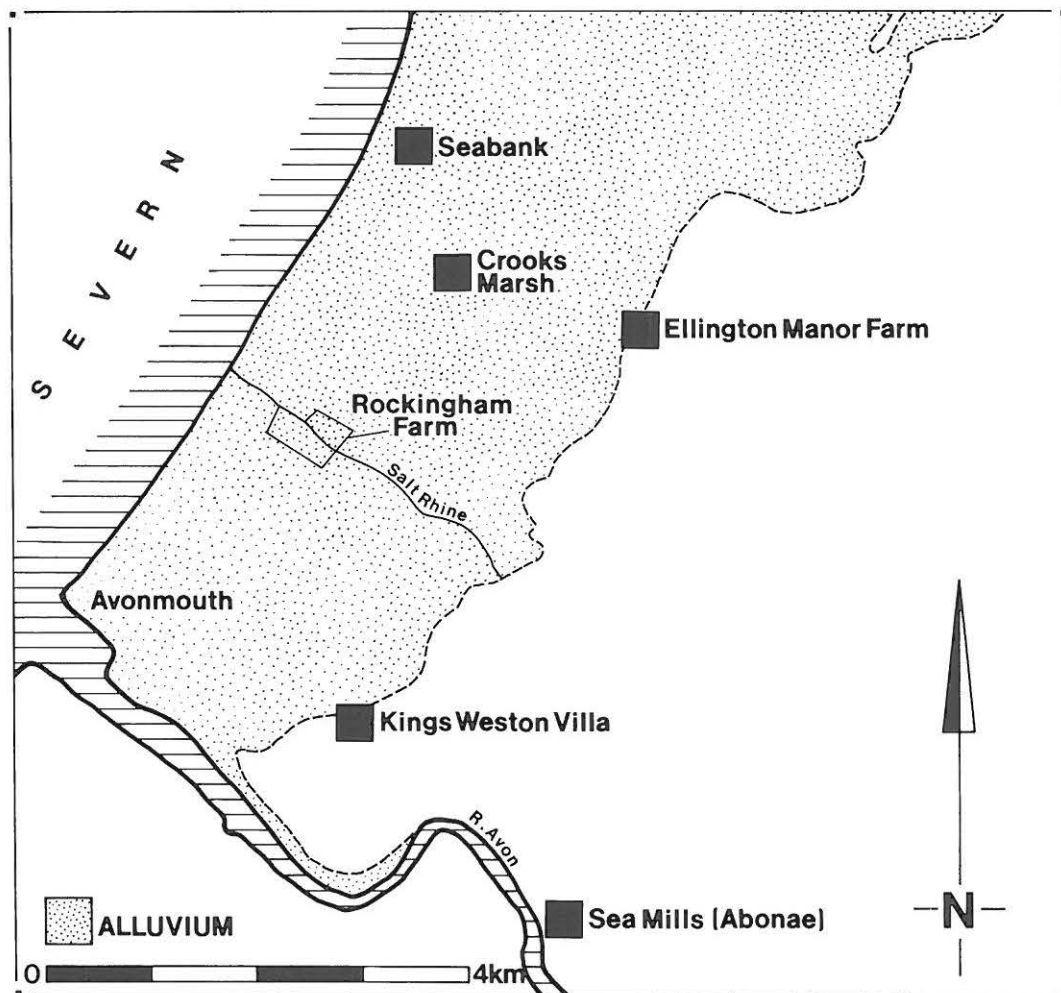


Figure 1: Rockingham Farm and the North Avon Level, showing sites mentioned in the text

Table 1: Archaeological sites in the Rockingham Farm development

Site	ASMR	NGR	Description	Date
1	9233	ST 5273 8091	Rockingham Farm	post medieval
2	5215	ST 5280 8085	Moated site (Rockingham Farm II)	medieval/post medieval
3	5216	ST 5317 8066	Earthworks (Coldharbour I)	post medieval ?
4	5217	ST 5327 8058	Earthworks (Coldharbour II)	post medieval
5	-	ST 5315 8051	Earthworks (Cold Harbour III)	undated
6	5218	ST 5336 8042	Earthworks (Old House Ground)	post medieval

A number of boreholes and trial pits across the site have established the depth of bedrock (18 m) and the sequence of alluvial clays and peat, with occasional sand noted, particularly near the Salt Rhine. The uppermost peaty clay, when plotted across the site (Figure 1) reveals that at this stage (perhaps 1000-500 BC) the proto Salt Rhine channel formed a broad sloping valley, with a deeper inlet at the west (coastal) end of the site.

Site 2: Rockingham Farm II (Figure 3)

The earthworks at Rockingham Farm II take the form of a rectangular ditched enclosure aligned north-south, adjoining the south side of the Salt Rhine. Selective excavation was undertaken in 1994 and 1997.

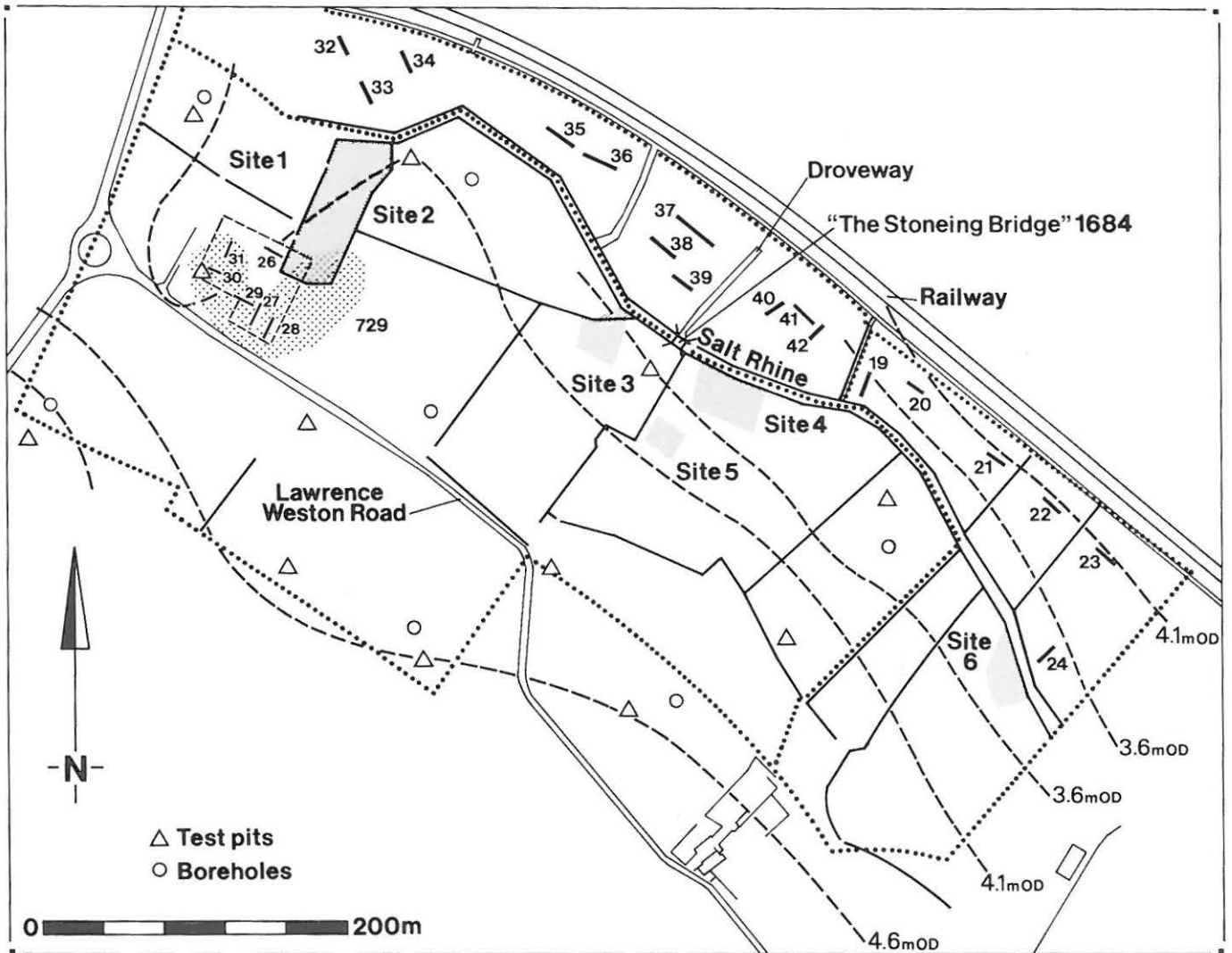


Figure 2: Rockingham Farm development, showing sites 1-6 and buried topography. Contours show level of upper peaty clay horizon. Also shown is extent of soil surface 729

Phase 1 (Roman-early Medieval)

(Figures 2-3)

The natural ground surface was a yellow-brown clay. Trench 25 revealed a lower blue-grey clay deposit with iron mottling (609), presumably alluvial silts of the Upper Wentlooge Formation. This was overlain by a band of gleyed blue-grey clay without mottling, 0.08 m deep, with a lens of organic material within it (610). A similar

sequence was found to the southwest of Site 2 (area shaded on Figure 1), where the gleyed layer with organic lenses was noted at 5.2 m OD (729); the organic lenses appeared at both the upper and lower surface of the layer. In Trench 25, the layer dips sharply to the west, reflecting the presence of a pre-existing ditch (626).

A small linear gully was found in Trench 13 (532), 0.3 m wide, containing daub and bone fragments, below the platform deposits, but well

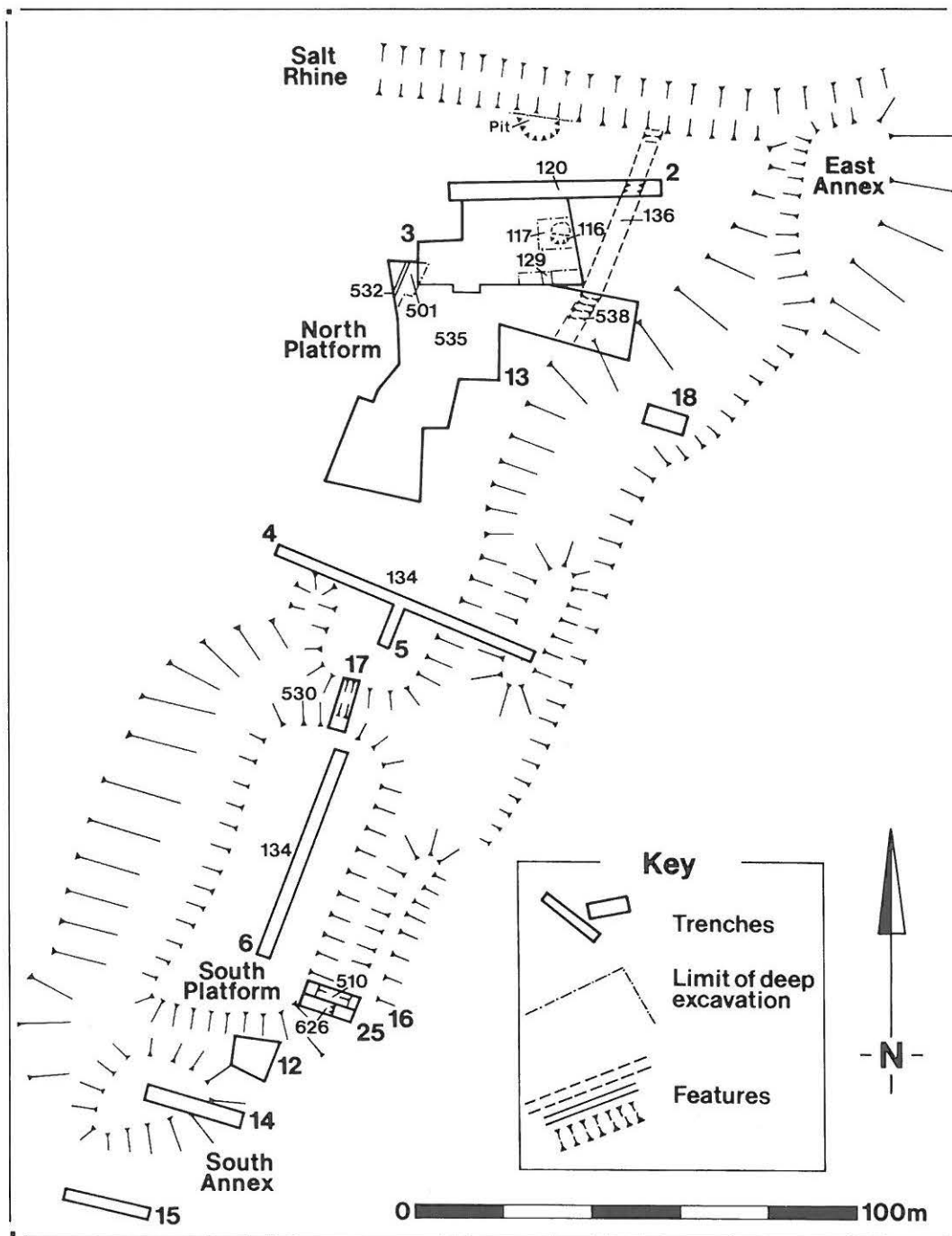


Figure 3: Site 2, showing Trenches 2-6, 12-18 and 25, and Phase 1-3 features

above the Roman horizon. This suggests some sort of pre-moat occupation, and also indicates that post-Roman flooding created some 0.8 m of silting.

No Roman material was recovered from features, but two metal finds were found in residual contexts: a bronze plate brooch with red and blue enamelling, of 2nd century date, and a bronze shield stud, similar to examples from the German *Limes*, also of 2nd-century date.

Phase 2 (Platform construction) and Phase 3 (Medieval occupation) (Figure 3)

The raised area forming the platform is re-deposited alluvial silt, 0.4 m thick, and presumably represents upcast from the adjacent ditches. The earliest ditches seen in Trenches 16/25 and 17 were 2 m – 3 m wide and 1 m deep, cut into the grey-brown alluvium (510, 520).

On the east side of Trench 3, where the higher ground of the platform begins to slope downwards, a layer of clay silt was revealed, containing charcoal fragments and sherds of 13th-15th century pottery. Associated with this surface was a flat-bottomed pit (116); the lower part had been burnt, and it was lined with clay silt (132) containing ash and charcoal. The fill contained fragments of charcoal, burnt daub and bone, and sherds of 13th-14th century pottery. Trench 2 revealed a deposit of dark clay silt containing charcoal (120). At the east end, a ditch (136) was intersected. There was no indication of occupation on the South Platform and South Annex.

In addition to the pottery from Phase 3 features (from Bristol and Nether Stowey potteries), residual medieval finds included a 13th century bronze finger ring and a Portuguese coin (a *ceitil* of Alfonso V, 1438-1481).

Phase 4 (Early post-medieval) and Phase 5 (Late post-medieval)

A series of yard surfaces were laid down between the 16th and 18th centuries. A farmhouse is shown on a 1772 plan of the area; the location where the farmhouse was predicted to lie produced considerable quantities of wall-plaster with charcoal, but very little stone or pantile. The preferred interpretation is that the building shown was a non-stone structure, probably built in the

late medieval or early post-medieval period. To the west were yard surfaces. A substantial robbed-out wall was found, perhaps the boundary wall shown on the 1772 estate map. Re-cutting of the silted ditches was identified in Trenches 16 and 17.

By 1841, the farm had been abandoned, and the latest pottery from the site suggests that this may have happened at about the beginning of the 19th century. It may later have been used for agricultural purposes.

Discussion

Medieval moated sites had a range of social and economic contexts, but most are thought to have been established as 'defensible homesteads' by those in the lower seignorial and upper freeholder ranks. The medieval archaeological evidence from Site 2 suggests this level of occupation; the finds, particularly the ring, are noteworthy in this respect.

The medieval tithing of Weston St Lawrence contained at least two manorial holdings, probably on the solid geology. Slightly below the lesser manorial level was a class of prosperous freeholder and it is perhaps at this stratum of society that one can best envisage Site 2. It is possible that this coastal warth-land offered more opportunity for the creation of freehold properties: similarly, assarts are frequently associated with moated sites.

Occupation was always restricted to the north half of the North Platform; it may be that the Roman ditch (626) in Trench 25, on the line of the east ditch, imposed a layout on the subsequent moat, and thus encouraged the creation of a larger feature than was needed.

Sites 3, 4, 5 and 6 (Figure 2)

Sites 3-5 lie to the east of Site 2. The three enclosures are set in a complex surrounding landscape of slight earthworks, including trackways, field boundaries and plough ridges. A bridge across the rhine (*the stoneing bridge*: see Fig. 2) is recorded in 1684; the driveway continues on the north bank of the rhine. On Site 4, four trenches were excavated in 1994. The trench across the main sub-rectangular pond within the enclosure revealed that the pond and its adjacent bank were lined by limestone rubble.

Overlying this was a deposit of clay silts containing plaster and charcoal, which yielded a considerable quantity of artefacts, spanning the 16th and 17th centuries, with one or two sherds of late medieval pottery. There was no indication of occupation later than the early 18th century.

Site 6 was a trapezoidal ditch enclosing a platform on which some rectilinear features were visible. The relationship between the main ditch and the surrounding ridge-and-furrow suggests that they were contemporary. Documentary evidence suggests that the site was occupied in the early post-medieval period: the field appears as 'Old House Ground' in the Southwell Estate Book of 1772, but no building is shown. A late medieval-early 18th century cottage or farm building may therefore be the most likely identification of the site.

Rockingham Farm (Site 1)

The modern farm lay to the east of Site 2. A survey of the wall foundations and yard surfaces, and the elevations of the standing walls, was carried out in 1994. The oldest building appears to be late 17th or 18th century in origin, probably reflecting a gradual shift from the moated site.

North of the Salt Rhine

In 1997, the development was extended north of the Salt Rhine. Evaluation revealed an unbroken alluvial sequence; there was no trace of the Roman horizon found at Site 2.

Discussion

The Roman Levels

Nowhere on the North Avon Levels has produced the gleyed drowned soil and organic horizons seen at Rockingham Farm, although a comparable layer has been found at Hill Farm, Goldcliff, where the organic material has been identified as reed ash (Locock 1996 and this vol.). The evidence for extensive reed beds at Rockingham does not in itself argue for an important site, and the ditch found at Site 2 is of small size, but the finds show that a substantial settlement must lie close to Site 2, presumably just to the east. The 'inlet' branching off the Salt Rhine, demarcated by the ditch, might suggest a landing place, and

from the mouth of the Salt Rhine it would be simple to sail along the coast to *Abonae* (Sea Mills), Aust, and Gloucester, or across the Severn to Caerleon and Caerwent.

The medieval landscape

A substantial proportion of the modern ground surface retained traces of ridge-and-furrow earthworks prior to machine ploughing. It has been suggested that it had an early, medieval, origin. A study of the area between the Salt Rhine and the Mere Bank showed a correlation between parts of the Great Madam common pasture which were unenclosed strips, and areas without ridge and furrow; Lawler (1993, 6) notes 'None of the areas in which uninclosed strips had survived contained ridge-and-furrow, although ridge-and-furrow was generally present in the fields surrounding the uninclosed lands. What makes this particularly significant is that there are a number of other chance survivals of a few uninclosed strips within the Lawrence Weston fields and invariably these appear as gaps in the plot of ridge and furrow'. Thus, for the area south of the Salt Rhine, it would appear that the ridge-and-furrow is not medieval in origin.

Although Sites 3-6 can be assigned to the late medieval/ early post-medieval period, Site 2 is firmly medieval. The finds suggest an origin in the 13th century; it is interesting that the evidence from Seabank, to the north, implies that occupation on the Levels was becoming possible in the 12th century (Insole 1996, 104).

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NOTE

Since the above text was prepared (in November 1997), the organic horizons described in Phase 1 (shown on Figure 1 as soil surface 729) have been dated by AMS, necessitating a revision of the interpretation as this volume goes to press; a fuller discussion will be presented in due course.

Two samples were submitted, from the organic lenses at the top and bottom of context 729, the 0.08 m thick gleyed clay band at 5.2 m OD. The upper date is 2830 \pm 70 uncal. BP (Beta-118379), yielding a two sigma range of 1158 - 812 cal BC. The lower date is 3060 \pm uncal BP, yielding a two sigma range of 1398 - 1132 cal BC (using the Groningen calibration program).

Thus the assumption that 729 is a Roman ground-surface must be discarded, and a late Bronze Age date substituted. While it is surprising to find the ground-surface of this date only 1.2 m below the present ground level, this is broadly in accord with evidence from the Seabank effluent pipeline (which crosses the southern limit of Figure 1), where a watching brief by BARAS in 1997 located an organic clay (presumed soil) at 4.4 m OD, dated to 3700 - 2200 cal BC (BARAS report 265/1998). These dates imply that the vast majority of alluvial deposits at this point were deposited by the Neolithic (bedrock lies 16 m below the present ground surface), and that later prehistory saw three phases of stabilisation and soil growth. It should be noted that the organic lens and gleyed clay do not necessarily imply oxic conditions, and so a saltmarsh environment is probable (palaeoenvironmental analysis is currently being carried out by the University of Wales Lampeter).

There remain two issues: the Roman ground level, and the possible feature noted at Site 2. Having observed large numbers of sections through the deposits above layer 729, we can say with confidence that no upper stabilised horizon is visible. Either no stabilisation occurred (which seems improbable), or the soil was masked by the post-depositional processes of the Wentlooge Formation (which can certainly be demonstrated elsewhere). It now seems likely that the apparent vertical cut seen in the section of Trench 25 below the medieval ditch is the result of post-depositional compression; as noted, the organic bands do not behave as layers should, and have been subject to some distortion.

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