The LILIA project: ion beams for hadrontheraphy

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Abstract

The LILIA (Laser Induced Light Ions Acceleration) experiment is now running at the SPARCLAB facility of the Frascati INFN laboratories. The aim of LILIA is to study, design and verify a scheme which foresees the production, the characterization and the transport of a proton beam toward a stage of post acceleration (high frequency compact linac). A description of the experimental set up is given in this paper together with the first evidence of proton acceleration with the laser FLAME.

Introduction

In the past few years, various interesting experiments have been started in order to study the interaction of ultrahigh-power laser pulses (with intensities beyond 10^{18} W/cm^2 and duration time ranging between 40-1000 fs) with thin solid films (thickness of the order of 0.5-100 μm) of different elements both metallic (Au, Cu, Pd, Al) and dielectric (polymers). These experiments have shown that, as a result of the laser-target interaction, protons and ions with energies up to 60 MeV are emitted. These protons, mostly originated by contaminated hydrocarbon surface used as target, are accelerated due to their higher charge-mass ratio with respect to other ions. Nevertheless, it is possible even to accelerate various species of ions by etching the target utilizing different methods. The total number of accelerated particles is strongly correlated to the specific target conditions and the experimental set-up: typical values are in the range from 10^9 to 10^{12} particles for laser pulse.

Laser driven acceleration is characterized by specific interesting properties, which mark a strong difference with respect to the traditional accelerating techniques. The most relevant features may be summarized in the following points: a) the possibility to accelerate ions at tens of MeV in very

compact structures (of the order of a few tens of microns) due to the very high electric fields available with respect to the size of classic accelerators; b) an excellent beam quality with a transverse emittance less than 10^{-3} *mm·mrad*; c) a very short duration of the proton bunch (of the order of a few *ps*); d) the possibility to synchronize the proton beam with the laser beam up to a scale of a few *fs* to obtain multiple, synchronized sources of different particles (electrons, protons) and radiation (monochromatic *X* rays).

Due to these considerations laser driven acceleration holds the promise of compact accelerating structures which may be useful in different applications such as medicine (radioisotope production for PET, hadrontherapy), nuclear physics, inertial fusion (proton induced fast ignition), advanced diagnostic (proton imaging of fast electromagnetic fields) or material properties analysis and advanced imaging applications.LILIA is an experiment of light ions acceleration trough laser interaction with thin metal targets to be done at the FLAME facility, which is now running in Frascati [1,2]. LILIA, in particular, is finalized to study, design and verify a scheme which foreseen the production, the characterization and the transport of a proton beam toward a stage of post acceleration (high frequency compact linacs). Up to now the maximum operating laser intensity is limited to 10^{19} W/cm^2 due to the lack of a parabola with a focal length shorter than the current used. In this configuration, according to the interaction theory by short pulse laser and to performed numerical simulations, we expect a proton beam with maximum energy of a few MeV and a number of proton/shot up to 10^{10}-10^{12}. When FLAME phase II performances will be available (Short focal length OA Parabola: waist≈2.5µ, I≈10^{21}W/cm^2) , we might select a bunch at E = 30 MeV with a narrow spread ΔE and still have a reasonable number of protons (10^7 - 10^8). This opens a very interesting

perspective for applications such as hadrontherapy in connection with a post-acceleration stage in order to reach energies up and beyond 100 MeV.

Theory

In the majority of experiments for proton accelerations, the regime occurring is the so called TNSA (Target Normal Sheath Acceleration). The laser pulse heats the electrons and ionizes the medium. Next the electrons diffuse around the target building an intense electric field. This field accelerates the free protons present on the target surfaces, both in the forward direction (from the rear side) and in the backward direction (from the front surface).The protons energy depends on the electrons temperature and it has an exponential spectrum due to the thermal distribution of the electron energy. For a given laser, the intensity is

$$I = \frac{2P}{\pi w^2} \, [W/cm^2] \qquad (1)$$

where *P* is the laser peak power and *w* is the pulse waist value. It is convenient to introduce the dimensionless parameter:

$$a = \frac{eA}{mc^2} = 0.85 \times 10^{-9} I^{1/2} \left[W^{1/2}/cm \right] \cdot \lambda [\mu m] \quad (2)$$

where *A* is the maximum value of the vector potential. If *a>1*, the electron quivering motion in the laser fields is relativistic. Let us consider a *1D* laser pulse moving on the *z* direction, the electron temperature (expressed in *eV*) can be estimated from the kinetic energy as $T = mc^2(\gamma - 1)$ where $\gamma = [1 + (Pz/mc)^2 + a^2]^{1/2}$ and P_z is the longitudinal momentum. If *a>>1* we obtain that *T/mc²~a*. In*1D* geometry, the electrostatic potential can be computed by solving the Poisson equation for a Maxwellian electron distribution. The protons maximum energy can be obtained estimating the maximum value of the electrostatic potential at the target-vacuum interface. After some simplification, the proton maximum energy results approximately proportional to:

$$E_{max}(MeV) = \xi_0 a \qquad (3)$$

where $\xi_0 \sim 2$ for a simple one dimensional model. For very short pulses, the scaling found theoretically and in recent experiments (Dresden), keeping the waist fixed, is

$$E_{max} \propto I^{0.8}$$

with a proportionality constant depending on the power, focal spot and target thickness. As a consequence, eq. (3) should be replaced with

$$E_{max}(MeV) = \xi a^{1.6} \qquad (4)$$

where the ξ depends on the wavelength and strongly on the thickness. The constant value is $\xi \sim 0.16, 0.085, 0.02$ for a target of thickness $h=0.5, 5, 20\ \mu m$, respectively according to the dependence found in the Dresden experiments. For the highest power $P=100$ TW and a waist of $2.5\ \mu m$ corresponding to $I=10^{21}\ W/cm^2$ and $a=22$, the maximum energy obtained with a target of $5\ \mu m$ thickness is $E_{max}=12\ MeV$ whereas the average energy is $E_0=1.7\ MeV$. Dresden experiments and numerical investigations (see Fig. 1) show how the proton maximum energy drops significantly increasing with the target thickness.
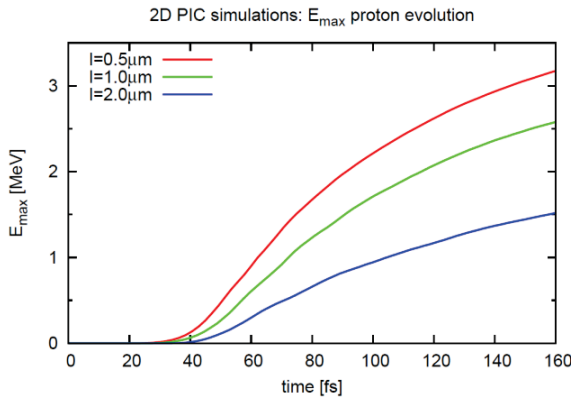

Fig. 1 Energy growth with time for a 2D simulation with P= 85 TW and a=5 for a solid target with $n=80n_c$ and a thin hydrogen layer. The 3D result can be expected to be one half of the present one

One of the limits of the proton energy achievable in the TNSA regime is related to the fraction of the initial laser energy. absorbed by the electrons of the target. If a large enough layer of plasma near its critical density can be added in front of the solid

target, the energy coupling between the laser pulse and the target is strongly enhanced resulting in higher energy protons. Recent numerical investigations considered solid targets with a foam layer added on the front surface, showing that these targets allow to double the value of the highest proton energy reachable.

The highest energy value $E_{max}=6\ MeV$ for the bare metal target agrees with the scaling (4) of Dresden experiments. The proton energy spectrum in the TNSA regime is exponential with a cut-off

$$\rho(E) = \frac{dN}{dE} = \frac{N_0}{E_0} e^{-E/E_0} \cdot \theta(E_{max} - E) \qquad (5)$$

where N_0 is the total number of protons while $<E>=E_0$ is the average energy. The number of protons in a given small energy interval is

$$n(E, E+\Delta E) = \int E\left(\frac{dN}{dE}\right) dE \cong N_0 \left(\frac{\Delta E}{E_0}\right) e^{-E/E_0} \qquad (6)$$

The average energy is related to the electron temperature and $E_0 \propto a$, but it is considerably smaller than the maximum energy. As a consequence, if a quasi monochromatic bunch has to be selected close to the maximum energy, the corresponding number of protons is a small fraction of the total. In the case of the Dresden experiment it has been shown that for $E_{max} = 12\ MeV$ and $N_0 = 10^{12}$ with $E_0=1.7\ MeV$, the fraction of particle with $E = 10\ MeV$ and $\Delta E = 0.1$ MeV would have only 1.6×10^8 protons

The experiment

The FLAME facility has been fully operational in the middle of 2012 for the first test experiments of electron Laser Wakefield Acceleration (LWFA). In October 2012 it has been possible to install the components for the proton acceleration experiment (LILIA).

As of now the maximum laser intensity is limited to $10^{19}\ W/cm^2$ due to the lack of a parabola with focal length shorter than the present one. In this configuration, according to performed numerical simulations, we expect a proton beam with maximum energy

of few MeV (10 MeV is as of now the maximum energy allowed by the local authorities for the place where the experiment is located) and total intensities up to 10^{10}-10^{12} protons/shot. Although these values are modest compared to the present state of art, nevertheless their scientific relevance is very important due to the fact that we will have, with a reasonable effort, a real laser driven source that will play the role of a test facility as far as emission process control and repeatability and post acceleration studies will be involved. In LILIA phase I we plan to perform a parametric study of the correlation of the maximum TNSA accelerated proton energy, with respect to the following parameters:

- Laser pulse intensity (in the range $10^{18} - 5 \; 10^{19}$ W/cm^2)
- Laser pulse energy (in the range 0.1-5 J)
- Laser pulse length (in the range 25 fs-1ps)
- Metallic target thickness (in the range 1-100 µ).

In such a frame we would like to deeply investigate the experimental scale rules within the possibilities offered by the FLAME facility. Moreover, this will provide the opportunity to get experience in the development of diagnostic techniques and in target optimization. The possibility to produce a real proton beam able to be driven for significant distances (50-75 cm) away from the interaction point and which will act as a source for further accelerating structures will be also investigated.

When FLAME phase II performances will be available (Short focal length OA Parabola: waist ≈ 2.5 µm, $I \approx 10^{21} W/cm^2$), we might select a bunch at $E = 30 \, MeV$ with a narrow spread ΔE and still have a reasonable number of protons ($10^7 \sim 10^8$). This opens a very interesting perspective for applications such as hadrontherapy in connection with a post-acceleration stage in order to reach energies up and beyond $100 \, MeV$. Indeed if

a sufficient current intensity can be reached at 30 MeV with a narrow spread $\Delta E/E \sim 1\%$ and a good beam quality after transport, energy selection and collimation, the protons bunch might be post-accelerated after injection in a high field linac (Fig.2), as the one developed for the INFN ACLIP project (suitable for medical applications) [3].
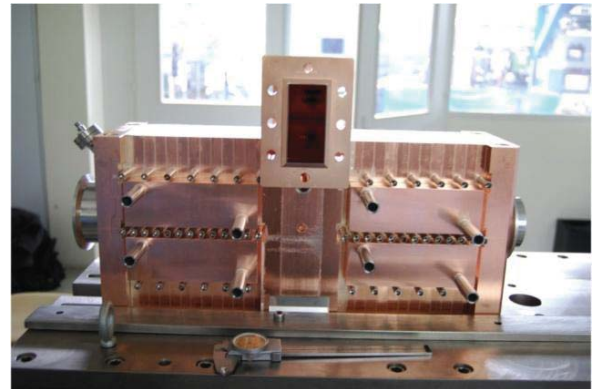

Fig. 2 The INFN ACLIP Linac

The mechanical setup

The SL-LILIA experiment has been designed to be housed in the interaction chamber available at the exit of the laser compressor in the FLAME bunker. The layout of the first phase of the experiment is shown in Fig. 3 and it foresees:

- a special designed optical breadboard, with standard metric holes format, to allow the definition of a common reference plane level and the assembly of components within the chamber;
- a multi shot target holder able to be remotely moved in x-y-z directions and rotated along the z-axis with respect to the laser beam. This will allow a very accurate positioning of the targets with respect to the laser beam and the possibility to perform multi shot experiments without having to open the vent of the chamber to replace the already used targets. The target holder has been designed for the use of aluminum foils

(pure up to 99.0%) with thickness as low as *1 μm* and the possibility to provide up to 20 usable shots. The position accuracy of the targets with respect to the laser beam is of the order of *20 μm* for the translation stages and of 0.1 degrees for the rotation stage. The alignment of the targets with respect to the power laser beam will be accomplished using alignment lasers and devoted optical windows in the chamber;

- a remotely movable multi-detector holder able to house 6 stacks of radio-chromic detectors to be used close (*50 mm*) to the interaction point. A fixed lead foil (*3 mm* thick) is used to avoid the damage of stacks adjacent to the one of interest for a specific laser shot;

- the availability of multiple detectors copes with the possibility to perform multiple experiments on different targets in a very short time, minimizing the fluctuations in the laser beam characteristics;

- a more accurate analysis of the energy distribution of the produced ions will be carried out at a fixed emission angle with a Thomson parabola (TP) spectrometer with its related detectors. A *150 mm* diameter vacuum window in the interaction chamber at an angle of 120 degree with respect to the laser beam will allow the positioning of the TP.
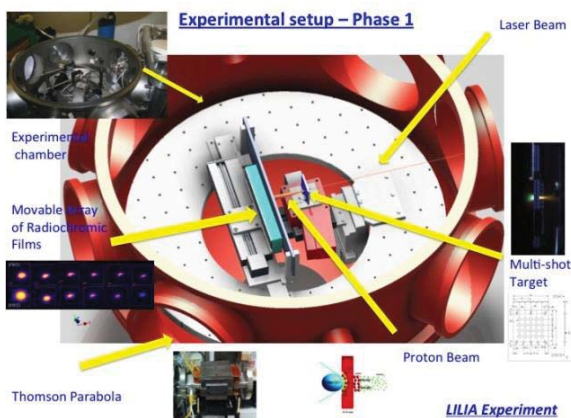

Fig. 3 Sketch of the LILIA mechanical setup

The ion detectors

Radio-chromic films

Radio-chromic detectors involve the direct impression of a material by the absorption of energetic radiation, without requiring latent chemical, optical, or thermal development or amplification. Detectors based on this phenomenon are available as films of different shape and build. They are obtainable as stacks of one or more subtle layer of sensitive material (usually a few microns thick) with intermediate polyester and adhesive layers to act as mechanical support. A radio-chromic film changes its optical density as a function of the absorbed dose. This property, along with the relative ease of use, led to adopt these detectors as simple ion beam transverse properties diagnostic tools. More sophisticated analysis procedures and more complex configuration of these detectors (usually stacks of many films) may give an estimation of energy distribution of the ions in the beam. Two specific commercially available detectors have been considered for the first measurements we are going to do: they are provided by Gafchromic company and named HD-810 and MD-55. The first type is a single layer film with a dynamic range from 0 to 250 *Gy* while the second one is a double layer film with a 60 *Gy* maximum dose value.

An analysis procedure based on the reading of the exposed films using a commercial scanner (Epson V750 Pro, maximum optical density 0-4), a calibration correlation with a ISO21550 reference target, along with the conversion curves optical density-dose provided by Gafchromic, lead us to an evaluation of the maximum error in the determination of the true dose of the order of 20%. This value is rather large and it is due both to intrinsic fluctuations in the film sensitivity in the production process and to errors in the image measurements.

A model has been developed for the reconstruction of the ion beam energy spectrum from readings of films arranged in a

stack. For a maximum energy of 10 *MeV* and a stack of 10 films, test cases give up energy distribution characterized by errors of the order of 25-30%.

The above considerations lead us to the idea to use radio-chromic films just in the first stages of the measurements, in order to provide us a rough idea of the emission process and of the dynamic range of energies and intensities we'll have to deal with.

Thomson Parabola spectrometer

A Thomson spectrometer has been designed and realized within the LILIA collaboration by the LNS group. The main characteristics may be so summarized:

- Analysis of proton and carbon beams (Q= +1 to +6) from 0.1 to 10 *MeV*;
- very compact design [160x144x150 mm^3];
- high magnetic field (tunable) up to 1850 *gauss*;
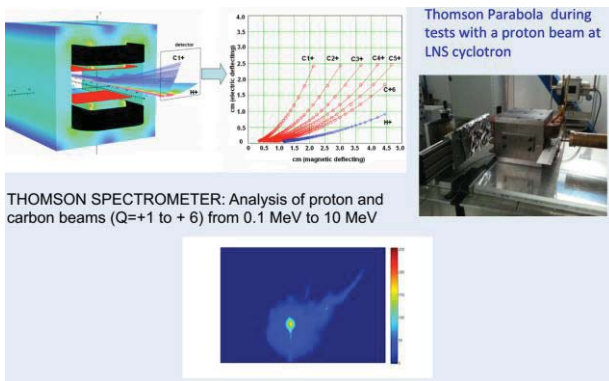- high electric field (tunable) up to 20 *kV/cm*.

Fig. 4 Thomson Spectrometer for laser plasma facility

Solid state detectors

In addition to the more traditional passive radio-chromic films, or MCP detectors, active solid-state detectors have been studied and tested. They would give a real time information which of course is extremely important to control and change the experiment parameters.

Our basic aim has been the possibility to study and develop a silicon based detector, position sensitive and based on a matrix of simple PIN diodes. These detectors are

154

thought for the focal plane of the Thomson Parabola Spectrometer, being possible to arrange a 2D array with proper spatial resolution. After a laser shot, a pulse of ions reaches a single pixel of this matrix after being deflected by the TP. The pixel identifies ions with the same Z/A ratio and the same energy. The measure from the pixel is done by integration, with a delayed coincidence with respect to the laser pulse.

The main advantages of this sort of detectors with respect to a scheme that foresees a MCP and a CCD camera, may be pointed out in the following:

- the lower sensitivity of the detector is as low as a single proton charge;
- the capability to work in a rough vacuum environment;
- the availability of low-medium cost detectors;
- the flexibility to design specific geometric configurations able to suit the experimental requirements.

Different materials and structures have been considered and partly characterised: silicon photodiodes (PD), monolithic silicon telescope (MST) and SiC diodes.

Commercial silicon photodiodes (Hamamatsu) are relatively cheap and available in linear array, monolithic silicon telescopes (STm) offer two fully depleted diodes for optimum particle discrimination and large energy range, SiC diodes are radiation hard.

Tests have been performed on the two silicon structures at INFN-LNS and INFN-LNL with 30 *MeV* proton beam for the first (PD) and 1-5 *MeV* proton beam and 60 *MeV/u* carbon beam for the second (MST). The results show that charge collection is optimal in the fully depleted structure (MST), being the other affected by long tails and partial collection. SiC diodes are built on a low doped epitaxial layer and their response to high energy ions passing through will be verified soon.

We plan to further develop and test some of these detectors, but we still have to face the problems which arise from their use in an

extremely high noise environment, as the one present in the surroundings of the laser-target interaction.

Beam Focusing and Transport

The problem to immediately focus the emitted protons in order to obtain a useful beam and to transport it from the interaction region toward external measurement or post-acceleration facilities will be faced both from the numerical computation and experimental point of view. The following general considerations must be taken into account to deal with this item. The excellent emittance is the result of very short initial burst duration and very small "virtual" source size. However, proton beams emerging from a laser-driven target have typically a broad energy spectrum and large, energy dependent, divergence angle (typically 40-60 degrees depending on laser and target parameters). The inherent large divergence and the energy spread can make it hard to utilize the full flux of the proton beam for applications and indeed for further transport and beam manipulation. The manipulation of proton beams gives new challenges due to the high bunch charge and nature of the beams. This means it requires innovative approaches to enable beam control. The possibility to drive a laser emitted proton beam using a scheme based on a pulsed solenoid has been reported in literature [4]. We considered this approach really interesting and we carried out very preliminary simulation runs to define the main features of the components involved.

In our research we will focus on a scheme that foresees a pulsed high field solenoid to collimate the beam directly behind the target foil. This method will provide a first formation of the proton beam very close to the target. Then, it would be necessary to add a second stage to accomplish the final formation of the beam and its transport to a reasonable distance from the source (500-700 *mm*). This goal may be reached using a

magnetic chicane to filter the unwanted beam component and a conventional beam transport scheme based on high gradient permanent quadrupoles. Elements characterized by gradient values up to 200 *T/m* with small sizes (8 *mm* internal bore and 30 *mm* external diameter), are commercially available.

A start-to-end simulation from laser interaction to a post acceleration stage has been performed according to the scheme of Fig.5. It has been shown by 3D simulations that various acceleration mechanisms may allow to reach 60 MeV for the cutoff energy of protons.
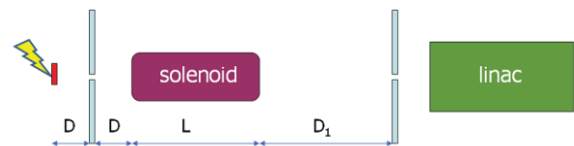

Fig. 5 Scheme of the transport line

A 30 MeV bunch with 2 ~ 3 % spread with over 10^8 protons can be selected with a simple transport line and over 10^7 can be post-accelerated up to 60 MeV with a compact linac [5, 6]. The LILIA experiment is intended to prove that the proposed scheme is applicable and to provide a possible candidate for medical applications.

Preliminary experimental results

During autumn 2012 the mechanical set up has been installed and aligned in the interaction chamber (Fig.6). The FLAME beam has been focused on the target and preliminary test have been carried out. During these tests we were limited for technical problems in the laser power that was of the order of 2 joules. Nevertheless, we have obtained the first experimental evidence of proton acceleration at the FLAME facility.
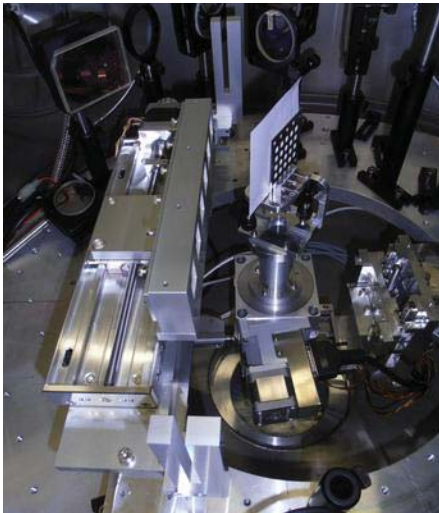
Fig. 6 *The remotely movable radio-chromic detectors and the multi-shot target holder*

Behind the multi-shot target two different detectors are placed: an EBT3 radio-chromic film by Gafchromic films or a CR-39 plastic polymer. The Figures 7 and 8 show the first pictures of the EBT3 and CR-39 impressed by protons emitted from a 3 μm Al target with a 1.5 Joule laser shot.
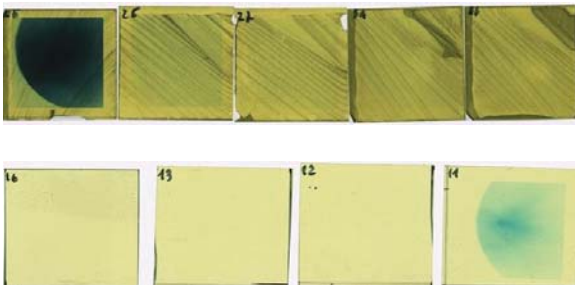

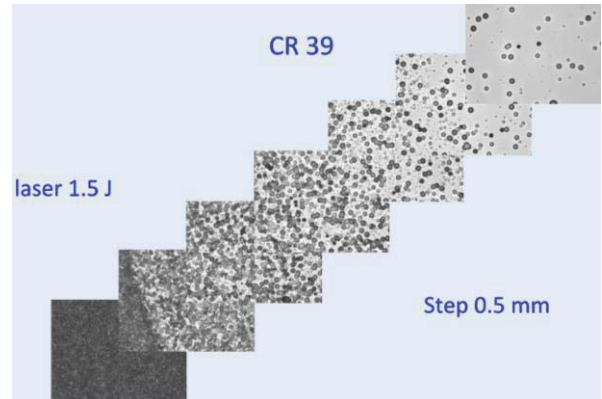Fig. 7 *Impressed EBT3 radio-chromic films*

Fig. 8 *CR39 film. The pictures are taken in different position of the exposed film with 0.5 mm steps. The CR39 film, also shielded to stop debris, shows a damaged black region in correspondence of the collimated emitted particles and the evidence of scattered protons in the surrounding area*

The radio-chromic detector was shielded by a 6 μm thick aluminum foil in order to protect it by the light emission during the laser interaction. From the obtained results we can derive a lower limit for the maximum energy of the emitted protons of at least 1.6 MeV.

Acknowledgements

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