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2. Nature(s) of Power:

Environment, Politics and Prestige on Brijuni Islands in the Twentieth Century

Milica Prokić and Hrvoje Petrić

With their past as layered as a slice of Esterházy torte, to researchers Brijuni are irresistible – if at times a bit rich. Embodying two archetypes from the island lore: that of the enchanting paradise, and that of an elite private haven, they are iconic. Their flora and fauna are a whimsical combination, bringing Jan Breughel the Elder's Earthly Paradise to mind and coming with a pedigree to boot. Brijuni's zebras, elephants, white fallow deer and crowned cranes, Chinese palms and mandarins were gifted by the world leaders, or brought by the islands' exclusive residents from their exotic world-wide travels throughout the last century and a bit before. More recently, the talking cockatoo from these smallish islands in the Northern Adriatic conversed with the likes of Caroline of Monaco and John Malkovich.

Brijuni had served as a summer residence to affluent Roman families of antiquity, as a spa resort for Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and as a polo playground to Nazi and Fascist propagandists Goebbels and Alfieri. As for the post-World War II period, they could well be Yugoslav socialism's Mediterranean nod to Princess Margaret's digs on Mustique: after all, during Josip Broz Tito's reign as Yugoslavia's life-long president, Margaret's sister Elizabeth II frequented both. On Brijuni Tito also hosted world leaders including Brandt, Selassie, Pahlavi or Nasser, and celebrities such as Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor or Sophia Loren.

However, there were times when the idyll and the lavishness were intersected with long periods of the islands being pestilence-ridden locales of death, forsaken by humans. This is exactly what they were before their twentieth-century iteration of luxury and prestige. Then, an Austrian steel magnate embarked on an extensive landscape (re)making mission to reclaim the islands from malarial mosquitoes and turn them into a holiday destination for high society. This extensive project established Brijuni as a fascinating hybrid result of an interplay (and powerplay) of environment and society.

Introduction

The fourteen islands of Brijuni (or Brioni) lie opposite the city of Pula across the narrow Fažana channel, framing the west coast of the Istrian Peninsula in present-day Croatia. Because of its beauty, mild Mediterranean climate and rich historical heritage, Istria is often referred to as *terra magica*, and the 740 hectares of emerald-green Brijuni are seen as the region's crown jewels.¹ Geologically speaking, Brijuni are composed of horizontal layers of cretaceous limestone.² Their human past is remarkably layered too: inhabited by humans at least since the Neolithic Age (around 4000 BC), the islands harbour abundant traces of the various forces and cultures that claimed them through the millennia. Over the course of the twentieth century alone, the islands changed hands several times. Austrians held Brijuni during the final decades of the Habsburg rule; Italians in the interwar period; Nazi Germany in World War II; socialist Yugoslavia in the post-war era up until the country's dissolution in the 1990s. Though the twentieth-century accounts about Brijuni reflect how these conflicting political forces (each in its own way) shaped life on the islands, they all agree on one thing – painting a picture of the small archipelago as an extravagant earthly paradise which attracted international VIPs including political leaders, royalty and celebrities.

Brijuni's landscape played the starring role in this international spectacle of fame and power. Recalling life on the islands in the 1900s and 1910s, when Istria was part of the 'Austrian Riviera' and Brijuni the site of a luxurious spa for European aristocracy, memoirist Maria Lenz Guttenberg, the wife of Brijuni's resident physician Otto Lenz, wrote of them as 'islands of eternal spring'. On the Brijuni of her recollections, flowers bloomed even in winter, 'shielded from the winds in the old Venetian quarries', with a 'new spectacle' of colours and scents announcing itself each season.³ In 1936, in the period of Fascist Italy's rule over Istria, during which the islands retained their status as an exclusive holiday destination for blue bloods and economic elites, Edith Haspel, a guest from New Orleans, wrote about the transformative power of the islands' environment. She gushed about the beauty of the landscape and

- 1 Stella Fatović-Frenčić, 'Brijuni Archipelago: Story of Kupelwieser, Koch, and Cultivation of 14 Islands', *Croatian Medical Journal* 47 (3) (2006): 369–71, at 369.
- 2 Josip Roglić, 'Brijunski otoci', *Enciklopedija Jugoslavije 2* (Zagreb: Jugoslavenski leksikografski zavod, 1982), pp. 455–56, at 455.
- 3 Maria Lenz Guttenberg, *Izgubljeni raj. Brijuni* (Zagreb: Antibarbarus – Nacionalni park Brijuni, 2007), p. 41.

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the tranquillity of the sea ‘freeing visitors’ personalities’ and turning women into ‘beautiful sun-kissed queens’ the moment they set foot on the islands.⁴ Upon his visit to Brijuni several decades later, in 1989, the *New York Times* journalist Henry Kamm described the curious legacy of the islands’ time as second home to Yugoslavia’s president-for-life, Josip Broz Tito: an island menagerie where ‘Jawaharlal Nehru’s and Kenneth Kaunda’s gift antelopes ... cavort among Sekou Toure’s zebras, while Muammar el-Qaddafi’s camels graze under the gaze of Indira Gandhi’s elephants’.⁵ All this, in a forest of native holm oak and Mediterranean plants, olive, cedar, lemon and mandarin trees, home to hundreds of bird species including songbirds and peacocks, surrounded by a sea swarming with fish and diverse marine fauna, has made Brijuni a place where the lavish environmental diversity matches and mirrors societal affluence.

When sociologists and political geographers refer to *landscapes of power*, they see their role as fourfold: ‘to show who is in charge; to remind people of dominant ideologies or economic interests; to broadcast a statement about the status of a place; and to engender a sense of loyalty to a place, an elite or a dominant creed’.⁶ In her book *Landscapes of Power*, Sharon Zukin examines how political and economic power shapes the places we inhabit. Looking at the locales such as the industrial complexes and malls of American suburbia, or Disney World, she defines landscape as ‘not only ... physical surroundings’ but also ‘an ensemble of material and social practices and their symbolic representation’.⁷ Environmental historians, such as Cynthia Radding in her book *Landscapes of Power and Identity*, also consider the materiality of such landscapes. Rather than seeing it as a static image, Radding examines landscape through ‘the tension between human and natural agencies’ over time.⁸

In a kindred manner of thinking, the following chapter examines Brijuni

4 Nataša Urošević, ‘Brioni rivista illustrata di sport e mondanità (1929–1940) – Models of Media Promotion and Branding of the Brijuni Islands as the Destination of Sport, Health and Culture’, *Fažanski libar* 5 (1) (2012): 57–68, at 64.

5 Henry Kamm, ‘Tito’s Retreat Goes Public’, *The New York Times* 29 Jan. 1989.

6 Martin Jones, Rhys Jones and Michael Woods, *An Introduction to Political Geography: Space, Place and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 119.

7 Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1991), p. 16.

8 Cynthia Radding, *Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and The Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 3.

in the context of islands as power-soaked landscapes. As Godfrey Baldacchino notes, islands lend themselves particularly well to various forms of exclusivity, including havens for the rich, the famous and the mighty.⁹ With this perspective in mind, the chapter looks at how power has shaped the landscape or, more pertinently, the *islandscape* of Brijuni in material terms. Drawing on diverse materials, including archaeological finds, memoirs, journals and periodicals, it seeks to identify the key aspects of Brijuni's islandness that made them the chosen place for flaunting and displaying political and economic power over millennia. In particular, it discusses Brijuni in the twentieth century, when the islands were a place where power was forged and wielded, as alliances that shaped global politics were made in the shade of their ancient olive groves.

From splendour to swamp: The power of mosquitocratia

Brijuni have a long history as a landscape of prestige and economic power. The abundant remnants of ancient Roman villas show that Brijuni were a summer refuge of affluent patricians. The remains of the most impressive one are located on Veli Brijun, or Great Brijun, the largest island in the archipelago. Some scholars think that the villa could have been an emperor's summer residence because of its prominent position at the centre of the Verige Bay, its mighty walls and its rich interior decorations, frescoes and mosaics, and also because Roman emperors indeed used to build summer houses in Istria, starting with Augustus in the first century AD.¹⁰ In antiquity, Brijuni were also an important centre of maritime trade. Remnants of a large irrigation system, the largest in Istria at that time, oil presses, and 75 preserved trees of an ancient olive grove also point to a rich tradition of viticulture and olive cultivation on the islands.¹¹

9 Godfrey Baldacchino, 'The Lure of the Island: A Spatial Analysis of Power Relations', *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 1 (2) (2012): 55–62, 55.

10 Štefan Mlakar, 'Brijunski otoci (Brioni)', *Likovna enciklopedija Jugoslavije* 1, no.1 (Zagreb: Jugoslavenski leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 1984), p. 194.

11 Anton Vitasović, 'Ostaci antičkog maslinika u šumi na padinama brda Antunovac', *Fažanski libar* 3 (1) (2008): 53–56; Vesna Girardi Jurkić, 'Rimski vodoopskrbni sustavi na fažanskom priobalju', *Fažanski libar* 5 (1) (2012): 39–40.

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Figure 1.
The 1,600 year-old olive tree on Veli Brijun still bearing fruit. Photograph by the author, Hrvoje Petrić.



Figure 2.
The beach in Verige bay with the remnants of a Roman villa in the background. Photograph by the author, Hrvoje Petrić.

Over the centuries after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Brijuni changed hands several times: from the Benedictine Order that brought a Slavic population to the islands for the first time, to the Knights Templar who further fortified the islands, to the Patriarchate of Aquileia that held the islands in the thirteenth century, and to the Venetian Republic that ruled them from the fourteenth century on.¹² The olive and vine cultivation which had dominated in antiquity were replaced by growing grain, cattle rearing, salt production and stone quarrying in medieval and early modern times. According to Petar Kopic's (Pietro Coppo) 1540 work *Del sito de l'Istria*, 'the limestone of Brijuni yielded nicely to shaping, and was therefore often used as building material for 'the splendid constructions of Venice'.¹³ Built into the mighty walls of the metropolis, the islands' stone thus represented a material bond with the centre of power, even at times when the islanders were separated from its main currents by the islandness of their home.

The islands' terrain, however, was arguably better suited to viticulture and olive cultivation than cattle rearing and grain growing. What is more, the salt production in combination with the insular, warm and verdant environment of Brijuni brought about the proliferation of mosquitoes – a powerful force that disrupted human habitation of the islands for centuries.

As many island studies scholars argue, islands amplify any phenomena they foster, natural and cultural alike – from plant and animal endemism to peculiarities in human communities.¹⁴ The same is true for pestilence, particularly devastating when it hits island spaces. This can be readily observed on Brijuni, as plague and malaria decimated their human population in several merciless bouts over the course of the islands' history.

The earliest mention of the plague on Brijuni can be found in sources from the thirteenth century.¹⁵ It came back to wipe out the humans again

12 Ivan Ostojić, *Benediktinci u Hrvatskoj i ostalim našim krajevima* (Split: Benediktinski priorat Tkon, 1965), pp. 171–72; Đuro Fabjanović and Robert Matijašić, 'Brijunski otoci', *Istarska enciklopedija* (Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2005), p. 101.

13 Mlakar, *Brioni*, p. 15; Jasenka Gudelj, *Europska renesansa antičke Pule* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2014), p. 27.

14 See, for example, Peter Conrad, *Islands: A Trip through Time and Space* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009); Robert H. MacArthur and Edward O. Wilson, *The Theory of Island Biogeography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

15 Ivan Rudelić, 'Kuga', *Istarska enciklopedija* (Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2005), p. 425.

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in 1412, after which the islands had to be repopulated from scratch. In 1504, when the church of St Roch, the protector from plague, was built on Veli Brijun, the pestilence returned, as it did also in 1590 and 1631.¹⁶ The fragility of human existence on the beautiful, yet at those times also deadly, islands is reflected in a source from 1681 which notes that the people of Brijuni are poor and ‘do not live long’ because of the unfavourable climate conditions and diseases.¹⁷

Indeed, the mild and pleasant climate of the islands was both the boon and the bane of the islanders’ lives: the warmth and the abundant greenery as well as the human-made, frequently abandoned salterns made Brijuni perfect breeding grounds for mosquitoes. In this sense, the struggle for power on Brijuni was often not just between various human armies and other forces that claimed the islands. Of equal importance for the everyday lives of the islanders since the introduction of salterns was the struggle between the humans and the various species of mosquitoes, spearheaded by the deadly, malaria-bearing *anopheles*. The mosquitoes were at times decisively victorious in this multispecies struggle for dominion.¹⁸ Running from the disease, the people of Brijuni would abandon the islands, leaving the uncleared marshes to grow over, the salterns to turn to swamps, and the mosquitoes to breed freely. The humans would come back each time, trying to combat and re-conquer more-than-human nature and reclaim the islands as a human domain. The *mosquitocratia*, as we could perhaps define the non-human sovereignty on Brijuni of the time, would, however, kick back with malaria, perpetuating what was a vicious circle for the islanders: disease–abandonment–return–disease.¹⁹

Glory and splendour of antiquity, raging plague and malaria in the times of Aquileia and Venice, and the resulting intermittent inhabitation

16 Mlakar, *Brioni*, p. 16.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

18 The power of *anopheles* has also commanded attention of environmental historians such as J.R. McNeill, who discusses them as one of the ‘key actors in the geopolitical struggles of the early modern Atlantic world’ in his seminal work *Mosquito Empires*. And though ‘malaria helped turn the fortunes of nations’ there, it could not wipe out or chase away all the humans of this vast region. In the insular micro-world of Brijuni, however, the *anopheles* at times reigned supreme. See J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 3.

19 Dubravka Mlinarić, ‘Medicinski aktivizam Roberta Kocha na Brijunima kao dio ekološko-gospodarske vizije “jednog starog Austrijanca”’ *DG Jahrbuch* 17 (1) (2010): 65–80, at 67–68; Fabjanović and Matijašić, ‘Brijunski otoci’, 101.

and abandonment depending on the epidemic status can point us towards Brijuni's fluctuating strategic importance for whichever centre of power claimed the islands. On the cusp of the nineteenth century, after the end of the Venetian rule, there is no mention of human domiciles on Brijuni. The islands experienced a temporary slide to the periphery, suspended in a power-limbo of the whole Istrian region: between the fading influence of the collapsing Venice, the Habsburgs who looked to expand to this part of the Adriatic, and Napoleon, who managed, however briefly, to claim the islands in 1805. Interested in Brijuni because of their strategic position, Napoleon asked Governor Auguste Marmont to map the archipelago and carry out a population census for the purposes of the restoration of human domiciles in 1807. The plan was, however, never realised; only five years later the islands came under Austrian rule.²⁰

The importance of the city of Pula grew in the period that followed, as it developed into the main port of the Habsburg monarchy by the second half of the nineteenth century. With it, Brijuni swept back to the front and centre of military power. The islands became part of the military defence system of the empire, with seven new fortifications built on them.²¹ At first, the archipelago was seen strictly as a good strategic spot: no mind was paid to the melioration of the 'wild and malaric islands', nor to the betterment of life of their scarce human population.²² However, fortifying Pula (and Brijuni) strengthened imperial interest in the region and led to the construction of a railway connecting it to the imperial heartland. The railway construction, in turn, laid the foundations for the development of tourism.

Nataša Urošević, historian of tourism and a leading authority on Brijuni, noted in one of her works that 'the completion of the Southern Railway in 1857, connecting Vienna with Trieste, brought the Viennese upper classes to the Adriatic'. Further development of the railway from Divača down to Pula in 1876 provided access into Istria, the coast of which was soon to become the swanky 'Austrian Riviera', hosting international aristocracy and Austrian royalty.²³ Within this social and infrastructural shapeshift of

20 Mirko Urošević, *Brioni. Kulturno-povijesni vodič* (Zagreb: Vjesnik, 1985), p. 18.

21 Štefan Mlakar, 'Brionska ostrva', *Vojna enciklopedija 2* (Beograd: Redakcija Vojne enciklopedije, 1959), p. 73.

22 Guido Calza, *Pola* (Roma-Milano: Alfieri & Lacroix: cca 1920), p. 65.

23 Nataša Urošević, 'The Brijuni Islands – Recreating Paradise: Media Representations of an Elite Mediterranean Resort in the First Tourist Magazines', *Journal of Tourism*

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the Istrian landscape, Brijuni would transform from malaric swamps to the centre of splendour and the meeting place of those who wielded political and economic power in Europe. However, this was not before the concluding battle against the islands' *mosquitocratia*, which, as we shall see in the following section, was finally defeated by a steel magnate with gargantuan ambition, a physician with a research project and a forester with exceptionally green fingers.

From swamp to splendour: One's own, personal Eden

In 1893, the Austrian steel magnate Paul Kupelwieser acquired the malaria-ridden and scarcely populated Brijuni.²⁴ After visiting Istria he noted 'the unusual economic backwardness of the country' and 'wished to be[come] personally engaged in the advancement' of the region, now defined as 'the Austrian south'.²⁵ Kupelwieser's ambition, which took the form of a colossal holistic project of (re)making the landscape of Brijuni, was on the one hand driven by this personal mission and on the other by prospect of economic gain from tourism. Some scholars, like Dubravka Mlinarić, also hypothesise that Kupelwieser's yearning was to create a utopia to contrast with the life he knew: 'as an industrialist who lived in the environmentally vulnerable and polluted part of Europe, in the steel centres of Austria, Germany and Bohemia [he] found a welcome counterpoint in melioration of the Brijuni swamps and turning them into an environmental paradise' of his own making.²⁶ In his 1918 memoir, *Aus den Erinnerungen eines alten Österreichers* (*Memories of an old Austrian*), Kupelwieser noted: 'I had a strong feeling that one could, using reason, patience, and of course significant financial resources, make this lump of land healthy, fecund and ... beautiful.'²⁷ On his first visit, he noted 'a lone cypress tree', 'ten oak trees' along the small, silt-filled swampy

History 6 (2–3) (2014): 122–38, at 123; Josip Orbančić, 'Željeznice', *Istarska enciklopedija* (Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2005), p. 921.

24 'Paul Kupelwieser', National Park Brijuni Website: <https://www.np-brijuni.hr/en/explore-brijuni/persons-worth-knowing-about/paul-kupelwieser> (accessed 15 Feb. 2024).

25 Urošević, 'Recreating Paradise', 126.

26 Mlinarić, 'Medicinski aktivizam Roberta Kocha', 66.

27 Paul Kupelwieser, *Iz sjećanja starog Austrijanca. Aus der Erinnerung eines alten Österreichers* (Wien: Verold & co., 1918); Parkovi Hrvatske, 'Brijunske priče: Sjećanja Paula

port, 'a few old olive trees, and plethora of laurel bushes along the very few existing paths', as well as 'two small vineyards in a very bad state' as the only flora to speak of – arguably perceiving the weeds and wild shrubbery of the old swampy salterns not as flora but as the uncharismatic habitat of the non-human enemy.

At the time of the purchase, it was said that one only had to stay on the islands for a couple of hours to contract a bad case of malaria. This was what happened to Kupelwieser when he first went to inspect his new property, nearly costing him his life.²⁸ Undiscouraged, Kupelwieser decided to eradicate malaria from the islands, without the use of insecticide.²⁹ Serendipitously, his personal experiment aligned with the research of Robert Koch, pioneering German physician, microbiologist and bacteriologist, who was at the time deep into the study of the causes of malaria.³⁰ Immediately intrigued by 'the dynamic, multifaceted, and in many ways contradictory ecosystem of Brijuni,' Koch accepted Kupelwieser's offer to set up a research base on the islands.³¹ Though the concept of *islands as laboratories* for the study of both environmental and social processes has been abundantly discussed within island studies, perhaps to the point of oversaturation, it is too fitting to the story of Brijuni not to be mentioned here. The enclosed environment of the Brijuni islands indeed worked as a discrete laboratory for Koch, as well as for other scientists who followed, working on malaria and other research themes, including marine biology and microbiology.³²

Koch's insular, vanguard anti-malaric programme was an absolute success. Within a year, from 1901 to 1902, there were no more new cases of malaria on Brijuni, following meticulously undertaken quinine treatments of the islands' population and commuting labourers, the clearing of the maquis and the draining of the swamps.³³ As the malaria-bearing *anopheles* were

Kuppleweisera': <https://www.np-brijuni.hr/hr/istrazi-brijune/brijunske-price/sjecanja-paula-kupelwiesera> (accessed 15 Feb. 2024).

28 Kupelwieser, *Brijuni*, pp. 35, 43; Mlakar, *Brioni*, p. 17.

29 Mlinarić, 'Medicinski aktivizam Roberta Koča', 66.

30 Rudelić, 'Robert Koch', *Istarska enciklopedija* (Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2005), p. 402.

31 Mlinarić, 'Medicinski aktivizam Roberta Koča', 66.

32 Lenz Gutttenberg, *Izgubljeni raj. Brijuni*, pp. 120, 144.

33 Ivica Vučak, 'Dr. Otto Lenz i suzbijanje malarije na Brijunima', *Liječničke novine* 93 (1) (2010): 56; Milan Radošević, *Smrt na krilima siromaštva. Tuberkuloza i malarija u Istarskoj provinciji 1918–1940*. (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2015), p. 156.

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eradicated with the disappearance of their swamp habitat, so were all other mosquito species. This quickly made Brijuni the preferred, as opposed to the generally avoided, place to visit in the summer.³⁴

Seven years prior, Kupelwieser had begun work on creating the flora of Brijuni anew with the help of Slovenian forestry expert and estate manager Alojz Čufar. Kupelwieser learned of Čufar's talents by chance, and promptly wrote to offer him the landscaping job in 1893 which, among other things, entailed (re)creating the Brijuni arboretum.³⁵ Čufar soon came to the islands with his wife and children and immediately began planting a large experimental forest of pine, cypress, almond, Chinese palm trees and magnolias, using seeds acquired from London and Paris, alongside 600 vine saplings.³⁶ By the time Koch had implemented his programme, the beautiful green forest with lavish Mediterranean flora and exquisite exotic flowers thrived in Čufar's hands, while the old, abandoned stone quarries were turning into promenades interconnected by shady footpaths. Over the course of about two decades, with Čufar's expertise and practice, the islandscape was transformed into an English-style park.³⁷ Swamps, mosquitoes and salty wetlands yielded, as Kupelwieser noted in his memoir, 'so my wish to make the islands as beautiful as possible would come true'.³⁸

Born in 1843 in Vienna, just before the wide-scale uprisings known as the 1848 revolutions in the Austrian Empire, Kupelwieser's childhood coincided with the advent of English-style urban landscapes in Central Europe: landscapes which Robert Rotenberg defines as *gardens of liberty*, where everything grows with seemingly minimal grooming. In his seminal work *Landscape and Power in Vienna*, Rotenberg observes that 'the [Viennese] metropolitan landscape provided a mirror for social relations'.³⁹ Indeed, away from the metropolis, in his newly acquired insular outpost, Kupelwieser was bending to his wishes the nature he found, as a nod to the Viennese gardens of his youth, albeit with the Mediterranean and other exotic flora. In other words, through this act of careful botanical curation, Kupelwieser

34 Kupelwieser, *Brijuni*, p. 127.

35 Ibid., pp. 53–55.

36 Ibid., p. 39.

37 Urošević, 'Recreating Paradise' 126.

38 Kupelwieser, *Brijuni*, p. 59.

39 Robert Rotenberg, *Landscape and Power in Vienna* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 20.

groomed the islands to become the new social space for the metropolitan elites – away from the metropolis but adhering to its rules. The space he created by overpowering the swampy nature of the islands was to serve the purpose of attracting the rich and the powerful to his personal Eden.

Soon after the decisive human victory in the multispecies scramble for power over the islands, Brijuni turned into a large building site. The Brioni Hotel with fourteen rooms was built as early as 1901, alongside a few luxurious villas, a boat house, the beautiful Saluga lido, a solarium and tennis courts. Kupelwieser, who poured lavish amounts of money into his project, did not shy away from experimentation in this expensive infrastructural adventure. His initial plans included a Brijuni-exclusive underwater aqueduct that would, alongside the islands' own post office with a newly-designated postcode, a telephone and telegraph line, underscore the archipelago's self-reliance and distinctiveness from the mainland. The aqueduct project, complete with an elaborate pipe system and specially appointed plumber (who was also a diver) quickly flopped.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the islands were otherwise fast taking shape as an exclusive health resort whose target clientele was the who's who of the Austrian high society.

'Taming the South': The royalty returns

As the premises developed, the gardens thrived and new animals were introduced, including axis and fallow deer and other game, advertisements in travel journals spread word of the empire's new idyllic, luxurious health resort, reflecting the common goal of Austro-Hungarian state administration, entrepreneurs and travel writers to market the new Riviera.⁴¹ The 1908–1909 issue of the *Almanach der österreichischen Riviera* (*Almanac of the Austrian Riviera*) sought to build up Brijuni's prestige by praising them in the highest terms:

A nature park in the highest style with hundreds of cozy places, baths and natural terraces facing the sea; old quarries transformed into tropical gardens; thirty-five kilometres of avenues lined with rare trees, a paradise for strollers and cyclists. Those favouring hunting would be delighted by hundreds of rabbits romping in the meadows and thousands of pheasants, crawling

40 Lenz Gutttenberg, *Izgubljeni raj. Brijuni*, p. 54.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 128

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in the bushes ... no predators, no poisonous snakes and no automobiles on the whole island! Pula got the loveliest Sunday outing resort, a unique kind of spa, a garden by the sea, a rarity, perhaps only comparable to the Isle of Wight, but in eternal spring, suited to both the healthy and sick.⁴²

The same edition of the *Almanach* portrayed Kupelwieser's cultivation of Brijuni as an 'exciting and dramatic struggle against nature'.⁴³ Another travel publication, *Illustrierte Österreichische Riviera-Zeitung* noted that 'those who visit the island today cannot imagine how much money, energy and expert knowledge was invested to bring Brijuni to today's state of *civilisation* [our emphasis]'. The 'harmonious' combination of '[t]he ancient and the modern times, the Nordic culture and the magnificent Mediterranean vegetation' turned Brijuni 'into what they once were – a happy paradise', gushed the *Riviera-Zeitung*.⁴⁴

Therefore, through taming the unruly shrubbery of the islands, another sort of 'taming' was also underway: the archipelago turned into an outpost of the Austrian 'cultural mission' on the Eastern Adriatic. Nataša Urošević notes that the travel literature of the turn of the century reflected 'imperialistic ambitions and power relations during a time when imperial ideology, and the entire modernist developmental philosophy reached its apogee'.⁴⁵ Indeed, both the ambitions and the power relations in question were tangible on the islands. They were obvious, for example, in the selection and presentation of content in the travel magazines. Written in German and richly illustrated with high-quality photographs, the publications indicated that 'specific cultural, social and ethnic groups were targeted'.⁴⁶ The clientele of the 'happy paradise', built on the premise of the 'Nordic' element providing modernity, civilisation and culture, was therefore in its first iteration unsurprisingly homogenous. Before the First World War it was 'almost exclusively Austrian

42 Emil Bayer and Franc Krbalek (eds), *Almanach der österreichischen Riviera 1908–1909* (Laibach: Dragotin Hribar, 1908), p. 24. Translation from Urošević, 'Recreating Paradise', 129.

43 Nataša Urošević, 'Fažansko područje u prvim turističkim publikacijama', *Fažanski libar* 7 (1) (2014): 95–120, at 109.

44 *Illustrierte Österreichische Riviera-Zeitung* 6–7 (1905): 47–48, trans. by Urošević: 'Fažansko područje u prvim turističkim publikacijama', 108.

45 Urošević, 'Recreating Paradise', 125.

46 *Ibid.*, 130.

and consisted primarily of the entourage of the Imperial Court'.⁴⁷ In 1910, Franz Ferdinand himself visited for the first time, alongside his wife Sophie, and even considered buying land on the islands for their own residence.⁴⁸

It did not take long before the islands also attracted a 'cosmopolitan colony of artists and intellectuals'. The archipelago's own travel magazine, *Brioni Insel-Zeitung* (published between 1910 and 1914) reported a visit by the writer Thomas Mann and his wife in May 1911. This visit was not Mann's last, some hypothesise: 'it is very likely that the action in the novel *Death in Venice* (1912) was conceived on Brijuni, where just that summer the islands' newspaper broke the disturbing news of an outbreak of Asiatic cholera in Trieste'.⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud arrived for the first time in the summer of 1912 and kept coming back.⁵⁰ The growing leisure empire flexed its power, flaunting, through a guest list (*Kurliste*) published with each issue of the *Insel-Zeitung*, the 'frequent and extended stays of Habsburg imperial family' and the 'leading artists and other celebrities', alongside Kupelwieser's 'close relations with European heavy industry and banks' and high military circles.⁵¹

A number of hotels of the highest standard were built to match the soaring popularity of the resort, totalling some 330 rooms and about 500 beds. Industrialists such as Hugo Stinnes also built private villas on Brijuni. In 1912, a sleeper wagon was added to the fast Vienna-Pula train, enhancing tourist accessibility.⁵² The opening of the region's first indoor swimming pool with heated sea water, connected to each hotel room by a heated corridor, marked the 1913 season.⁵³ The millennia-old building traditions of Istria, including the archaeological finds in situ, however, seemed not to have impressed the owner, as 'Nordic culture and skills' were implemented in the construction of all the new buildings without exception: Kupelwieser hired young Viennese architect Eduard Kramer who also devised the urbanistic

47 Ibid., 132.

48 Nataša Urošević, 'Brijuni kao destinacija kulturnog, zdravstvenog i ekoturizma – kako graditi održivu budućnost na lokalnoj turističkoj tradiciji', in *Paul Kupelwieser na Brijunima*, ed. by Brigitta Mader and Bruno Dobrić (Pula: Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile u Puli, 2021), pp. 169–88.

49 Urošević, 'Recreating Paradise', 134.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 133–34.

52 Ivan Blažević, *Povijest turizma Istre i Kvarnera* (Opatija: Otokar Keršovani, 1987), p. 99.

53 Urošević, 'Recreating Paradise', 135.

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plan of the whole tourist centre. The whole project thus embodied the new power relations – putting the ancient cultural heritage squarely in the past, with the Roman ruins contextualised as part of the tourist offer, complementing the luscious park of Mediterranean flora, while the ruling power of the Habsburg Empire was materialised and displayed through the newly built infrastructure.⁵⁴

This was, however, soon to change as the Great War brought the crumbling of the empire, and therefore also a rupture for Kupelwieser's colossal project. In 1917, with Brijuni reinstated as part of the Austrian defence system and serving as a submarine base, Emperor Charles I came to Brijuni with his entourage – the last Habsburg to visit before the collapse of the monarchy. After the war, the islands, alongside the rest of Istria, came under Italian rule.⁵⁵ Paul Kupelwieser died in the spring of 1919. He was succeeded by his son Karl, who took over the venture. Under him, the islandscape of Brijuni was reconfigured to better suit the power relations of the interwar period, as well as the new dominant ideology of the region.

Fascist playground: The sting of nature, the dung of prestige

The first couple of years of the interwar period looked dire for the recreation business on Brijuni, though the summer of 1920 saw the return of the pre-war regulars from Vienna and Trieste, at least those whose coffers were not depleted by after-war inflation. Karl Kupelwieser therefore decided to cast the net wider in terms of the targeted clientele. In 1922 he created an eighteen-hole golf course on Veli Brijun, taking advantage of the natural grass cover of the island (a rarity in this part of the Adriatic), to attract wealthy English and other international guests.⁵⁶ Business grew further as word of mouth reached Rome and Milan from where new guests started to arrive in 1923–24.⁵⁷ The English followed suit.

As before the war, Brijuni were a rendezvous of the rich and famous. The

54 Viki Jakaša Borić and Biserka Dumbović Biluš, 'Kompleks hotela Neptun (Brioni) na Brijunu Velom – izgradnja i transformacije', *Portal. Godišnjak Hrvatskog restoratorskog zavoda* 10 (1) (2019): 131–43.

55 Lenz Gutttenberg, *Izgubljeni raj. Brijuni*, pp. 64–65, 68, 70, 77–79.

56 *Fažanski libar*, p. 57.

57 Lenz Gutttenberg, *Izgubljeni raj. Brijuni*, p. 82.

pastimes on offer developed accordingly: in 1925, the Polo Club di Brioni was founded. English naval officers shipped their own horses from Malta for the game which would be watched by the 'elegant international crowds', as noted by painter Hermann Ebers, himself a regular.⁵⁸ Baron Rothschild, who was the president of the Viennese polo club, kept his eighteen horses on Brijuni for several months a year in the interwar period.⁵⁹ After the day of sport events, the guests enjoyed dances, masked parties and open air concerts.⁶⁰ A casino opened in the interwar period too. Movie, sport and literary stars such as George Bernard Shaw or the boxing champion Gene Tunney rubbed shoulders with international royalty such as Prince Takamatsu, reconfirming the islands' pre-war prestige.⁶¹

This time around, the shaping of the islandscape reflected a new dominant ideology of the region, as well as the new owner's allegiance. The island travel journal of the time, *Brioni Rivista Illustrata di Sport e Mondanità* (*The Brijuni Review of Sport and Leisure*) ran a special issue on Karl Kupelwieser, emphasising his 'feelings of Italianity', which 'led him, from the very first signs of fascism, to sympathise openly with what was to become the movement of renewal of national life'. Having lived on the islands since his youth, Kupelwieser Jr considered himself Italian and was an avid fascist throughout his life. *Rivista* even reported that, out of fear that the islands would become 'infected by Bolshevism', Kupelwieser replaced almost all his foreign (largely Slavic) staff with Italians, many of whom were fascists, reportedly 'making arrangements with the Fascio of Pula for the establishment of the Fascio on Brijuni'.⁶²

Its shiny surface notwithstanding, Kupelwieser's management sank ever deeper into financial trouble. As the enterprise became unable to pay salaries to its employees and declared bankruptcy shortly after, the Kupelwieser family lost all rights over the islands and had to leave. The devastated Karl Kupelwieser committed suicide in 1930.⁶³ The islands passed into the ownership of the Italian state.

Despite the new owner, the enterprise itself did not change much:

58 Ibid., pp. 100, 106.

59 Blažević, *Povijest turizma Istre i Kvarnera*, p. 259.

60 Urošević, 'Brioni rivista illustrata di sport e mondanità (1929–1940)', 64.

61 Urošević, 'Recreating Paradise', 136.

62 Ibid., 137.

63 Blažević, *Povijest turizma Istre i Kvarnera*, pp. 220, 259–60.

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the affluent guests, the elegance, the polo games and the fascist ideology remained the islands' trademarks in the interwar era.⁶⁴ 'While the world struggled with the Great Depression and totalitarian regimes gained power in Europe', Urošević notes, 'high society on Brijuni invented new forms of entertainment such as elegant parties on luxurious yachts and battle ships of the British Mediterranean fleet.'⁶⁵ The islands became one of the biggest and the most sought-after polo and golf centres in Europe, not least because of the Italian military school for polo founded in 1934.⁶⁶

While in the pre-war period the islands were advertised as a health spa and sanatorium for those suffering from neuralgia and migraines, asthma, scrofula and other ailments of body and soul, the islands' business model under Karl Kupelwieser evolved into one of a 'sports haven'.⁶⁷ Besides favouring younger and more able-bodied patrons, this pivoting also changed the landscape, adding more sports courts and changing the dynamics of life and leisure on the islands. For example, polo, with its more-than-human players, generated large amounts of dung. Maria Lenz Guttenberg who lived on Brijuni from 1904 noted in her memoir *Izgubljeni raj* (*The Lost Eden*) the changes in the landscape:

[i]t is different [now] when horses incessantly gallop across the shallowly planted grass, ripping the flowers out root and stem. Because of the exuberant horse dung, the flies have multiplied enormously, and the stinging horse flies in particular bother walkers.⁶⁸

The dung, however, did not seem to dim the prestige of the fascist playground. In August 1939, German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and his Italian counterpart, Minister of Culture Dino Alfieri, attended a polo tournament on Brijuni after enjoying a walk in the gardens.⁶⁹ As Urošević notes, 'in the last preserved issues of the *Rivista*, "[t]he new life of the dream islands" was projected in the context of the fascist state, a continuation of the prestige and power of the Roman Empire.'⁷⁰ Veli Brijun's ruins of Roman

64 Lenz Guttenberg, *Izgubljeni raj. Brijuni*, pp. 108–09.

65 Urošević, 'Recreating Paradise', 135.

66 Blažević, *Povijest turizma Istre i Kvarnera*, p. 200.

67 Ibid., 192.

68 Lenz Guttenberg, *Izgubljeni raj. Brijuni*, p. 85.

69 Ibid.

70 Urošević 'Recreating Paradise', 138.

villas were now seen as the embodiment of this continuation, rather than a mere element to complement the Mediterranean flora of Kupelweiser Senior's English-style garden. Italian fascist leaders thus built their own villas on Veli Brijun, using them as summer residences until the beginning of the Second World War.⁷¹ For instance, the Duke of Spoleto and Aosta, between 1941 and 1943 the king of the Nazi puppet Independent State of Croatia, acquired one.⁷²

The Second World War halted all tourism on the islands. Following the 1943 capitulation of Italy and the subsequent German occupation, the hotels were looted and emptied as the entirety of their valuables, including furniture, were shipped to Germany.⁷³ As Brijuni were turned into a submarine base during the war – this time a German one – they suffered Allied bombardments on several occasions.⁷⁴ Towards the end of the war, the Germans retreated from Pula to Brijuni, which provoked further bombardments of all the buildings in the port.⁷⁵ The archaeological sites were, however, spared as the islands came under the dominion of the Southern Slavs, following the victory of their partisan guerrilla over the Nazis. Thus, for the first time in Brijuni's history, the Slavic locals went from being servants and labourers to becoming power holders themselves.

The (very important) people's islands: State-Making on Brijuni in the Tito era

The post-World War II era saw Istria become part of the newly forged People's Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, and Brijuni snapped up for the summer home of the freshly retired commander of the partisan forces and the country's future life-long president Josip Broz Tito.⁷⁶ During Tito's reign, however, Brijuni remained everything but the 'people's': they retained

71 Mlakar, *Brioni*, p. 19.

72 Tajana Ujčić, 'Dva otoka narodnih dobara. Podržavljenje imovine u Istri na primjerima otoka Sv. Andrija kraj Rovinja i Brionskog otočja (1945–1947/1948)', *Vjesnik Istarskog arhiva* 25 (1) (2018): 159–181, at 161.

73 Lenz Guttenberg, *Izgubljeni raj. Brijuni*, pp. 113, 114.

74 Raul Marsetič, *I bombardamenti Alleati su Pola 1944–1945*, (Rovigno – Trieste, Centro di Ricerche Storiche, 2004), p. 137.

75 Lenz Guttenberg, *Izgubljeni raj. Brijuni*, p. 114.

76 Kamm, 'Tito's Retreat Goes Public'.

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a strictly VIP status throughout the socialist period and were out of reach for the masses.⁷⁷ Moreover, in this time they were not only Tito's exclusive summer residence, but also a venue for many historic political meetings.⁷⁸ From an exclusive Austrian resort, where the power wielders gathered for leisure, and a fascist playground where power was flaunted and paraded, the islands now became the place where power was forged in earnest: they became the centre of Yugoslav state-making and a hotspot for meetings that shaped alliances of global import.

In 1956, the leaders of the countries which would several years later form the Non-Aligned Movement, an initiative crucial for Yugoslavia's international status in the Cold War period, met on Brijuni. India's Prime Minister Nehru and Egyptian Prime Minister Nasser visited the islands and signed a declaration effectively founding the movement.⁷⁹ The event was meticulously planned. In the international media image of Tito's Brijuni meeting with Nehru and Nasser, no details were to reveal the opulent aristocratic past of the islands. This meant that the looks of most buildings on the islands needed to be transformed in the greatest of haste. The task was given to Slovenian architect Vinko Glanz. Pressed for time to get rid of the traces of the bourgeois past, while on the other hand striving to display a historical continuity with the region's culture, Glanz opted for a compromise: a combination of modern and classical architecture – a new(ish) material manifestation of the power relations in the islandscape.⁸⁰

Notwithstanding this cosmetic 'de-splendouring', Tito's era seamlessly clicked into the image of Brijuni as a place of prestige. The islands continued to be a meeting spot of royalty and celebrities from all over the world in the decades to come. Queen Elizabeth II visited in 1972, Chancellor Willy Brandt of West Germany in 1973 and King Hussein of Jordan in 1978. As reported by the BBC journalist Frank Partridge, they were 'entertained in decidedly un-Communist manner', with Tito '[c]utting a dash for the

77 Milica Prokic, 'Contrasting the "Sunny Side": Goli Otok and the Islandness of the Political Prison in the Croatian Adriatic'. In *Environmentalism in Central and South-eastern Europe*, ed. by Hrvoje Petric and Ivana Žebec Šilj (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2017), pp. 206–07.

78 Urošević, 'Recreating Paradise', 138.

79 Franjo Radišić, *Spomen područje Vanga* (Zagreb: Privredni vjesnik, 1986), pp. 13–50; Ivan Blažević, 'Vanga', *Istarska enciklopedija* (Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2005), p. 855.

80 Jakaša Borić and Dumbović Biluš, 'Kompleks hotela Neptun', 137.

cameras, kitted out in double-breasted suits from New York's Fifth Avenue'. Internationally known as a bon vivant, a womaniser with penchant for food, film, expensive cigars, hunting and golf, Tito took his pleasures seriously too. His glamorous friends and Brijuni guests included Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, who played the role of Tito in a lavishly financed 1973 partisan film *The Battle of Sutjeska*.

Rounding his caricature of the communist 'playboy president', Partridge described 'Tito's glassy, open-plan villa [with] brilliant white walls, futuristic furniture and artwork, including a Picasso, [being] so 1960s it could be the villain's lair in a James Bond movie'.⁸¹ While Brijuni were strictly VIP until Tito's death in 1980, the coastal part of the mainland opposite the islands was also only accessible to a hand-picked few. It was designated as a vacation resort for people close to the government helm, high-ranking army and police officers, and members of the Central Committee of the Yugoslav Communist League: a further solidification of Brijuni's role as the seat of power.⁸²

When on Brijuni, Tito spent time horse-riding, attending to his growing zoo and visiting the cultural heritage and monuments, vineyards and orchards. He also relished growing flowers and especially liked the islands' rose groves.⁸³ On Vanga Island, Tito began his own landscaping project with a small orchard containing lemons, mandarins and other rare and exotic plants, which he brought from his various world travels. The landscaping was done with a nod to the local peasant style of drywall building, enthusiastically carried out by the island personnel, as well as by members of the Yugoslav army who were a constant presence on Brijuni of that time.⁸⁴ The fruit was distributed to childcare institutions across Yugoslavia.

Presenting Tito (and Yugoslavia) with a live gift became a custom among the members of the Non-Aligned Movement. Joining Nehru's antelopes, Sekou Toure's zebras and Qaddafi's camels, Sony the elephant arrived to Brijuni in 1974 as a two-year-old baby, followed by his female companion Lanka, as present to Tito from the Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi.

81 Frank Partridge, 'Inside Tito's Luxury Playground', *BBC News*, 8 Aug. 2009: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/8189530.stm (accessed 15 Feb. 2024).

82 Peroković, 'Od Kupelwiesera do male ribarske akademije', 59; D. Duda, 'Komunisti kao turisti. Godišni odmor u vili CK SKH u Fažani', *Fažanski libar 7* (Fažana: Općina Fažana, 2014), pp. 137–45.

83 Urošević, *Brioni. Kulturno-povijesni vodič*, p. 72.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

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Figure 3.

Detail of Brijuni safari park with zebras. Photograph by the author, Hrvoje Petrić.

These remarkably political animals bore manifold meanings for Yugoslavia, but more resoundingly for Tito himself: an emblematic display of his diplomacy, an exotic token of thriving international relations, ‘an accessory to [his] personal charm and the symbol of his widely known love for animals (notwithstanding his also widely known passion for hunting)’.⁸⁵ Until his death in 1980, Tito’s residence within a ‘non-aligned’ safari park and presidential exotic gardens thus embodied a final iteration of Brijuni as a landscape of power in the twentieth century.

85 Prokić, ‘Contrasting the “Sunny Side”’, 213.

Conclusion

In 1983, when they were declared a national park, Brijuni became open to the wider public for the first time in their modern history.⁸⁶ The islands' past is today meticulously curated and advertised mainly as a combination of natural and archaeological wonders, Kupelwieser's man-made Eden and Tito's hedonist haven. Tourists are able to engage both with the animate and non-animate remnants of Brijuni's history – from Koch's microscope which he used to research the causative agent of malaria on the islands, to the chatty, over half-a-century-old cockatoo Koki, Tito's 1977 birthday gift to his granddaughter Saša.⁸⁷ Apart from entertaining visitors by saying profanities in Croatian, Koki often reminds the public that he is also a witness of history, saying phrases in Tito's voice and words like 'Tito' and 'Stari' (one of Tito's nicknames).⁸⁸ Tito's villas and golf courses are regularly maintained. Some animals from the Brijuni safari park were stuffed after death, so a large collection of taxidermy developed, and has been on display since 1986, a constant reminder that, in places like Brijuni, not even animals or plants are apolitical: rather, they are a materialisation of the power relations that shaped the archipelago over time.⁸⁹

The long-exclusive Brijuni represent a space with at least two degrees of enclosure. One comes from their environmental trait – that of islandness. Another is that of exclusivity, power and prestige. The combinations of these traits seeped into their islandscape, shaping it in various ways. Their islandness at times made Brijuni the locus of an intra-species scramble for power: a prodigiously deadly place for humans, where they had been annihilated several times over by the *mosquitocratia* and pestilence-bearing microbes. Islandness combined with prestige and exclusivity, embodied in the human-made interventions and infrastructure, transformed the small archipelago with each incarnation of power: from the emperors' place of leisure to one man's experimental garden of Eden peppered by Viennese-style hotels, a self-given prize for a 'civilising mission'; the laboratory where *mosquitocaratia* was

86 Vesna Klunić, '25 godina turizma u nacionalnom parku Brijuni', *Fažanski libar* 4 (1) (2011): 105–12, at 105.

87 Prokić, 'Contrasting the "Sunny Side"', 212.

88 'Koki the cockatoo', Brijuni National Park Website: http://www.np-brijuni.hr/en/natural_heritage/fauna/koki_the_parrot (accessed 15 Feb. 2024).

89 Prokić, 'Contrasting the "Sunny Side"', 213.

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vanquished; the playground of the proponents of the fascist ideology; and the menagerie of international political influence. In all these incarnations of their islandscape, Brijuni have been a place where nature and power relations are impossible to pull asunder. Their interplay has created head-spinning abundance, whimsical diversity and unlikely cohabitations, the history of which is as layered as the limestone sediments of which the islands are formed.

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