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The Myth of the Hero: Classical and Medieval Epic
A Report on a Conference

ON OCTOBER 26 AND 27, 1978, the Medieval Studies Group of Brown University, in conjunction with Classics and Comparative Literature, held a conference on "The Myth of the Hero." The conference consisted of introductory remarks by Albert Cook, two guest lectures (by Gregory Nagy of Harvard University, and Joseph J. Duggan of the University of California, Berkeley), and nine fifteen-minute talks by members of the Brown faculty.

Given the broad subject area covered by the conference, the following summaries of papers presented may be of interest to readers of *Olifant.* Six of the abstracts are (with minor alterations) authorial: those by Bossy, Elliott, Nagy, Nash, Mathiesen, and Segal. The others were prepared by A.G.E. and approved by the authors.

The opening address by Professor Cook was devoted to "Some Thoughts on How to Discuss Epic Poetry." After reflections, more philosophical than philological, on the formula and its relation to metaphor, the speaker turned to epic content, stressing, however, the omnipresent continuum between form and content: the actions of the hero that the poem describes correspond to type, as do the phrases of the poem and the kind of address in which it is cast. Cook then reviewed various characterizations of the hero (with reference, *inter alia,* to the works of Lord, Finnegan, Aarne-Thompson, Lord Raglan, and Dumézil). But the subject tends to spread into adjacent domains. A study of epic illustrates in a secondary way how comprehensive, how fertile in connections with the society it depicts, a heroic poem may be. This broadness may be taken to sponsor the two further questions Cook raised:

(1) How do erotic motives and developments govern the epic poem? Dumézil had found that three functions—the ruling-priestly, the warring, and the commercial-agricultural—underly the Indo-European societies for whom our most elaborate evidence tends to be the epic poem. These functions are all busy ones—of peace and war; epics, moreover, do center on military action. Nevertheless many epic poems contain the erotic motif in some deep, if tangential, manner.

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(2) Is the epic simply "a long poem" then? This second question implies the further question of the persistent philosophical component of epic poetry. Hesiod is a contemporary or even a predecessor of Homer; he begins one of his inquiries by mounting a definition of truth in a powerful tripartite form that has considerable generalizing power, as Piero Pucci has shown. A systematic mythology, a systematic anthropology, and a systematic guide for the conduct of social interaction and agriculture are all to be found in him, at least incipiently. There is much that amounts to philosophy in the *Mahabharata,* and the *Poetic Edda* leans heavily on the powers inherent in wisdom. Extending this strain into more sophisticated times would allow us to include the poems of Ovid and Dante among the "philosophical" epics, to say nothing of Blake's prophetic books. The observation that the "truth" poets present theories about the force of love closes the circle, to join Cook's first question with his second.

Finally, then, it will not do simply to define the epic hero in a circular fashion as the military hero. "The long poem" may well be the more adequate category since we find military heroes more purely in ballads, in byliny, and in short epics like the *Lay of Igor's Campaign.* Since all long poems present amalgams, we could simply say that a military campaign may serve as one organizing principle for the amalgam. We have either left the epic hero, or we have extended him.

In the discussion of Cook's paper, three points were brought out: (1) A poem, in fact, becomes epic when it *allows* for the intrusion of the erotic and the philosophical. (2) There is a large rhetorical cluster of poetry to which the epic belongs. (3) We should ask what is the ultimate message, not the code. In *An Anatomy of Criticism,* Frye was not interested in the message; we should be.

Subsequent papers at this conference dealt with three major topics, the first of which was devoted to archetypes of the epic hero: Do they exist? What determines them?

In "A Medieval Literature Almost Without Heroes," Robert Mathiesen examined the literature of Orthodox Slavs. If by "hero" we understand a person having "superhuman virtue, a heroic and divine kind of nature" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* VII, 1), who thereby enjoys a great advantage over mankind in general in his body and mind (Aristotle, *Politics,* VII, 14), then medieval Slavonic literature rarely depicts heroic individuals, and it never depicts them as a type.

Such an absence cannot be due to ignorance of heroes: the folklore, or preliterate verbal art, of the Slavs in question is replete with heroes, and indeed with oral epic poetry. The oral tradition knows even a technical term for the hero as a type; in Slavonic, however, there is no standard term which might correspond to *hērōs* in Greek or Latin, although much of Slavonic literature comprises translations, mostly from Greek. Instead there are other, more interesting reasons for the absence of the hero as a literary type. (1) The Orthodox concept of a saint differs from the Catholic with respect to heroism. In the two Orthodox cultures (Greek and Slavonic), unlike the Latin Catholic culture, the saint is not so much a hero of the Christian faith as a miracle-worker or intercessor. (2) The structure of medieval Slavonic literature differs from those of medieval Latin and Greek literatures because it did not inherit the system of genres of Classical Antiquity (which continued to support the hero as a literary type in medieval Latin and Greek).

One can even identify an anti-heroic tendency in medieval Slavonic literature: several of the canonized Slavic saints were competent soldiers who refused to fight and thus suffered death without offering resistance. Moreover, the work which most closely approaches the pattern of Greek or Latin epic, the *Oration on Prince Igor's Campaign,* has as its protagonist a warrior whose campaign brought not only him, but all Russia to grief. One can argue that the author of this *Oration,* while praising Prince Igor (probably to his face), subtly condemns the passion for honor and the exercise of military valor in the pursuit of honor which brought Prince Igor to this pass.

In a paper devoted to "Youthful Age Paradigms in the *Iliad,"* Laura L. Nash studied the way the paradigm of the youthful hero may shape the narrative of the *Iliad,* especially in the treatment of Achilles. Youthful heroes are technically minor characters in the *Iliad,* where the mature warrior bears the brunt of war, but their presence provides an essential sounding board for the heroic code and age-related social functions. Frequently paired with the old, the young hero's impulsive but brave response to war stems from an immaturity of judgement which must be tempered by the experienced, strategic counseling of the older warrior (on a pattern similar to the Near Eastern Wisdom literature). Frequently, however, the impetuosity of the youthful hero prevails and results in his death.

While death is common coinage in the *Iliad,* the death of the young is perceived as especially poignant, and the strictness of age character-ization combines with the special pathos of this particular instance to provide a vivid and commonly understood motif expressing profoundest grief. Nash cited four examples from the *Iliad:* (1) Patroclus dies "leaving behind manliness and youth *(hēbēn),"* despite the fact that he is a grown man (16.855ff.). (2) Although Achilles is younger than Patroclus, his grief is compared to that of a father mourning a son who died on his wedding day (i.e., a youth) (23. 222ff.). (3) The vignette of young Harpalion's death is capped by the image of his father sorrowfully following the funeral bier back to Troy. Here pathos is at its fullest, even to the disruption of plot: the father, Pylaemenes, had died 100 lines earlier (13. 643ff.). (4) Andromache's lament for Hector, "Husband *(aner),* you perish a youth *(neos)"* is hardly metaphorical. Rather, figurative time of life is transformed into reality by the extreme distress of grief (24. 724ff.). The equation of untimely death with the death of the young man indeed explains the ambiguities of Achilles' age, for his heroism is in constant anticipation of his untimely death and transforms the perception of his entire career at Troy into that of a young man.

Three papers dealt with the morphology of the hero and the narrative grammar of epic. In "A Space Odyssey: From Ithaca to Kiev," Patricia Arant compared the Russian oral epic *Dobrynja* to the adventures of Odysseus and Telemachus in the *Odyssey.* The Russian work is primarily concerned with the unexpected return of the hero after a long absence from home, just as his wife is to marry another. Such "return songs" are among the most popular verse narratives in the Russian oral tradition.

Numerous narrative details in the account of Dobrynja closely parallel the adventures first of Telemachus, then of Odysseus. It is not a question of direct influence. Such similarities suggest inherent peculiarities of oral traditional literature, even though we cannot explain conclusively why the place of the thematic material, within narratives that share similar story patterns, tends to be inviolate even over a period of thousands of years, regardless of how this material functions within its own narrative.

In a paper devoted to "The *Roland* and Natural Narrative," Bruce A. Rosenberg reviewed work by William Labov, Joshua Waletzky,

and Mary Louise Pratt, in order to postulate that a psychological and cultural—i.e., "natural"—fundamental operates on all recapitulations of experience and on the ways in which we create fictional experiences and receive and interpret them.

The plot structure of the *Roland* can be compared with those of other stories of defeated heroes—Gawain in the alliterative *Morte Arthure,* Leonidas and his Spartans at Thermopylae, Byrthno at Maldon, Custer and his forces at the Little Big Horn, to name only a few. The episodic similarity of such independently conceived narratives should tell us something about their contentual nature. All are stories in which a prestigious hero is defeated in battle and his men annihilated; from this seemingly simple kernel all the rest of the episodes spring "naturally."

When we wish to fabulate the defeated hero—in this instance the hero gloriously beaten—our dramatic options are limited. This has been the case from the earliest fictions we know, emanating from widely distributed regions where epics of defeat were created, or developed, polygenetically, from the Old Testament to nineteenth-century America. Given a particular kernel of belief, certain features of the narrative in a particular sequence expressing that kernel tend inevitably to emerge. How we depict a hero's life and death, then, is a matter as much psychological and cultural as it is literary.

The last paper on the general topic of narrative grammar was by Charles Segal: "Ovid, Metamorphosis, and the Hero." Whether or not Ovid's *Metamorphoses* should be considered an epic, the poem reinterprets epic heroism in two ways: (1) it parodies or deliberately distorts elements in the heroic tradition, and (2) it conflates heroic epic with other genres and styles, especially the erotic themes of elegy, the wit and learning of Hellenistic narrative, and didactic poetry. The treatment of Perseus in *Met. 4* and Peleus in *Met.* 11 are typical instances of this deflation of the epic hero. Where there is not actual parody, the disposition of the material undercuts traditional epic heroism. Thus the leitmotiv which leads from the foundation of Troy to the foundation of Rome in books 11-15 is virtually lost amid the erotic tales which punctuate the narrative.

Metamorphosis itself is at variance with epic heroism. Segal suggested five ways in which this contradiction operates: (1) dissolution

of identity in the fluidity of transformation; (2) downward movement from culture to nature rather than the reverse pattern which characterizes the classical epic tradition; (3) the dissolution of the unique personal immortality of fame into the generic continuity of nature; (4) lack of a single exemplar of heroism and the resultant fragmentation of myth into a larger number of narrower paradigms embodying smaller, more private segments of experience; (5) lack of a central narrative focus. Ovid does, however, introduce a new idea into the heroic tradition, namely the notion of the artist as hero. The eternal fame of the hero gives way to the eternal fame of the poet, the theme which ends the *Metamorphoses.*

The final group of papers presented at this conference considered the hero vis-à-vis the thematics of other genres: comedy, romance, hagiography. In "Female Anti-Heroes? The Case of the *Nibelungenlied,"* William Crossgrove noted the conflict between contemporary, courtly values, and archaic, heroic virtues in that poem. Yet the innate artistic integrity of the poet is so strong that a system he does not accept asserts itself from the material.

Who then is a Germanic-heroic figure in the *NL*? Siegfried? If naïveté bordering on stupidity is a heroic virtue, yes. Gunther? If indecisiveness, weakness, and general shallowness of character is a virtue, yes. Hagen? He is the one usually thought of, but he is a cowardly murderer, and he brings down his entire kingdom with him. Kriemhild? In terms of what she does, she is the leading candidate, but she is woman. If we look at her analogue, Gurun in the *Atlakvia,* we see that she can truly be conceived of as a hero. In the *NL,* however, Kriemhild, together with Brunhild, is systematically downgraded, allegedly by a conservative poet who, yearning for the old ways and resenting the intrusion of romance values into epic, upgraded Hagen at Kriemhild's expense.

The "Lament," which follows the *NL* in all the older manuscripts, presents a more favorable view of Kriemhild. The piece is generally held to be a courtly accretion because of the sentimentality and bad style, but this may be a serious distortion (cf. the view of Curschmann that the writing down of the *NL* itself may have been inspired by the "Lament"). The "Lament" holds that Hagen was the evildoer par *excellence* and not worthy of admiration; on the other hand, Kriemhild was really "the hero," and all that held her back was that as a woman, she was physically unequipped for the rôle.

Crossgrove concluded: (1) The darkening of Kriemhild's reputation is contrary to the heroic tradition. (2) This devaluation is not derived, literarily, from the courtly attitudes of the High Middle Ages, but in a broader social sense it is so derived. The corollary of putting a woman on a pedestal is that she must stay there. (3) The minstrels transmitting the *NL* material shared the general woman-hating attitude of their age, but they could not afford to dispense entirely with strong women, so they made Brunhild laughable and Kriemhild monstrous. (4) Since Hagen has so long had the benefit of the doubt vis-à-vis the rôle of the hero, perhaps we should begin looking at Kriemhild in her true magnificence.

Spanish epic tradition was discussed by Barbara Weissberger: "From Epic to Romance: The Failure of the Cidian Ideal." In the *Poema de mio Cid,* one of the most outstanding of the Cid's many virtues is his *mesura,* his grave restraint or reserve, a quality which sets the Cid apart from his enemies and their excesses of speech and action. The poet frequently presents his hero first in reflective silence and then relates the Cid's dignified, laconic response.

Mesura, however, takes on a further political, dimension in the light of the lord-vassal relationship, the crux of the epic. The poet uses it to propagandize for the vigorous pursuit of the *Reconquista.* In order to oppose the infidel, Castile must remain united and strong. It is the duty of the monarch to maintain that unity. Therefore King Alfonso's initial error of listening to the slander of one faction of nobles and unjustly exiling the leader of another must be corrected so that the king can resume his proper rôle. The Cid's *mesura* becomes an all-important diplomatic tool in this process since it is his carefully maintained restraint that allows him to catch Alfonso's conscience. The hero's character and career together become a Castilian *speculum principis* for the new ruler.

Several of the motifs used to portray heroic *mesura* in the *Poema de mio Cid are* also found in the late fifteenth century romance. *Carcel de Amor* by Diego de San Pedro. In an extensive epic *excursus* to an otherwise standard sentimental plot, San Pedro gives a vivid portrait of an unjust, despotic monarch who believes slanderous accusations against a loyal vassal and his own daughter, whom he condemns to death for adultery. Despite repeated diplomatic overtures of the hero and his allies, the king insists on a legalistic interpretation of the law and an unnaturally harsh punishment of his daughter. The *mesura* of those who approach

him is negated by his profound *turbación,* confusion, and passion. The hero is driven to lead his vassals in a general uprising against the state.

The key to negated *mesura* in this romance is also propagandistic. As a converted Jew writing around 1492, Diego de San Pedro is criticizing the recent institution of the Inquisition by the Catholic kings, an act which dashed any hopes for a peaceful coexistence among the three cultures in Spain. The confused, unjust, repressive King Gaulo of the romance is the counterpart to Alfonso VI in the epic. But in the fifteenth century, monarchic absolutism was not influenced by heroic *mesura.*

A paper by Alison Goddard Elliott, "Can a Saint Be a Hero? Hagiography and Epic," began with a consideration of objections (raised by Bernard Huppé) against positing a close relationship between hagiography and epic. Examples from Prudentius' *Peristephanon* (esp. *Per.* V, the martyrdom of St. Vincent of Saragossa), and the *Vie de saint Alexis* (in the twelfth-century "epic" version of MS S) show that hagiography can depict epic heroes.

One may object, first, that warfare is central to the epic: Qualities other than spear-rattling may define heroic action, and wars may be fought on more than one battlefield. Though the saint's heroic combat is a manifestation of divine will, the choice to engage in it is his. Furthermore, the dominant metaphor of much hagiography is the Pauline one of *militia Christi* (cf. the *Te Deum:* "Te martyrum candidatus laudat *exercitus").* Secondly, saints' lives do not show heroic action, yet the martyrs were the heroes of early Christianity; to revere saintly rather than secular heroes does not, in itself, constitute a total rejection of the classical past as Festugière *(La Sainteté)* has shown. In the third place, it is sometimes said that epics, unlike saints' lives, cannot contain miracles. Yet we must distinguish miracles not only by quantity but by quality; we must consider their narrative function. If the traditional hero is not a miracle-worker, he is one for whom miracles are worked. Divine intervention is a motif common in works considered by all to be epics—the *Iliad,* the *Aeneid, Roland.*

Not all saints, or even all martyrs, were heroes of epic potential. Those who were, however, have less in common with Aeneas than they do with the heroes of vernacular epic, heroes prepared to die for their faith in the fight against the infidel. One feature which the martyr's passion shares

with medieval, but not with classical, epic is unambiguity of ethos—"Paien unt tort e chrestïens unt dreit," the *Song of Roland* confidently proclaims. Evidence of the influence of hagiography can be found in the structure of medieval epic (in the theological debates which sometimes preface battles, for example) and in the characterization of the angry, impetuous hero. Finally, hagiography is a popular genre, the stories retold many times by poet and preacher alike. One need not postulate direct written influence on the epic singers.

The *Roland* and other French epics were discussed in a paper by Michel-André Bossy: "Heroes and the Power of Words in the *chansons de geste."* Two types of verbal encounter shape the hero's career in the early *chansons de geste:* (1) the battlefield confrontation in which the hero insults his enemies and praises the violence he has or will inflict on them; (2) the council-scene confrontation in which the plain binary opposition between Christian society and its pagan antithesis unfolds into a contradiction within society itself. In the first type of confrontation, insult and praise form a single verbal gesture deemed consonant with heroic action; analogies readily suggest themselves with the function of the saint's defiant speech in hagiography. In the second type of confrontation, heroic discourse is splayed by quandaries that propel it along oblique, divergent rhetorical paths. It becomes, in a word, problematic. The Oxford version of the *Song of Roland* provides emblematic instances of such rhetorical compulsion: Roland's well-known "inconsistency" in his two speeches to Ganelon just after being nominated to the rear guard *(laisses* 59 and 60) and the two arguments between Roland and Oliver concerning the horn—especially the second, in which Oliver ironically reproduces Roland's earlier rhetorical posture.

The splaying of heroic discourse is correlated, at the level of plot structure, with figures which invert the primary categories of conflict (Christian versus pagan).These figures are either Christian renegades, like Ganelon, Isembart, and Esturmi, or pagan converts, like Bramimonde and Guibourc. These two turncoat types are converses of each other. In relation to the primary antithetical categories they delineate a thematic chiasmus, as A. Pasqualino, P. Zumthor, and P. Van Nuffel have observed. Individual *chansons* give prominence to one or the other diagonal in the chiasmus, but the genre as a whole makes alternative use of both.

Given the fixity of the primary categories, the turncoat types function as mediating elements. The figures embodying them covertly enjoy a more fluid status, even when the poets publicly deny it. Narratively as well as ideologically, they constitute a certain zone of exchange which increasingly endows the *chanson de geste* with generic flexibility, not to say instability. The Cycle of William of Orange is instructive in this respect. Around the figure of Guibourc successive poets evolved a gamut of peripeteias fostering, for example, confusions of identity and discourse *(Aliscans)* or the intrusion of erotic declamations *(Prise d'Orange).* The figure of William himself becomes modified in the process: he resorts to disguises and verbal deceits *(Aliscans, Charroi de Nîmes, Prise d'Orange).* By adopting some of a turncoat's features, this supple character instigates parodic adaptations of heroic language and prompts the *chanson de geste* to draw on the idioms of romance and comedy.

The first of the two invited lectures was given by Gregory Nagy, who discussed "Hesiod's Five Ages of Mankind: Alternative Perspectives of the Hero." In the *Works and Days,* Hesiod divided mankind into five "ages," each identified (with one exception) with a metal and associated with a moral quality.

Genos 1	gold	superior	*díkē*
Genos 2	silver	inferior	*húbris*
Genos 3	bronze	inferior	*húbris*
Genos 4		superior	*díkē*
Genos 5	iron		*húbris* and *díkē*

The myth of the five "ages" or "generations" in the Hesiodic poem represents, as Jean-Pierre Vernant has shown, not only a diachronic scheme of man's evolution (or better, devolution) but also a synchronic scheme of his very condition. On the synchronic level, the oppositions between Genos (= "generation") 1 and 2 and between 3 and 4 put Genos 5 into focus as a quintessential expression of the human condition, where all the polarities of the other "ages" converge into a single "age" of conflict and struggle.

As Erwin Rohde argued many years ago in his irreplaceable *Psyche,* the combination of Genos 1 and 2 also presents a composite picture of the hero as he exists on the level of Cult. For Nagy, the

combination of Genos 3 and 4, in turn, presents a composite picture of the hero as he exists on the level of Epic. In particular, the descriptions of Genos 3 and 4 correspond to the epic traditions of the *Seven against Thebes* and the *Epigonoi* respectively, and allusions to both these traditions appear in the *Iliad* itself.

The Hesiodic perspective on the epic hero is closer to the traditions of the Cyclic *Aithiopis* than to those of the Homeric *Iliad.* This is not to say, however, that the *Aithiopis* traditions are later and less archaic than those of the *Iliad.* In fact, the reverse is true, even though the *Iliad is,* of course, an earlier composition. Ultimately, Nagy hopes to show that the *Iliad is* an artistic synthesis of alternative epic traditions as represented by Hesiodic "generations" 3 and 4.

Joseph Duggan gave the second lecture, "Heroism in the Medieval Romance Epic: Kinship, Honor, and the Social Functions of the Ideal Warrior." Duggan pointed out that the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Poema de mio Cid* both concern themselves with foundation myths—the *Cid* with the new Spanish kingdom of *Reconquista* times, born of the union of Leon and Castile, and the *Roland with* Charlemagne's empire and its political heirs.

The relationship between literature and history underlies conceptions of the epic to a greater extent than it does notions of other genres. By reading the *Cid* with greater attention to its social aspects and to the relationship between military and economic history, we can approach a realization of the poet's deeper intentions.

The *Poema de mio Cid* reveals an extraordinary concern with money. The exiled Cid achieves reintegration into the social fabric through economic power. The Cid is possibly a bastard but is allowed to rise to the dignity and rank which other heroes (such as the heirs of Carrión) could claim by birth. In this sense, the epic is a tale of the transmutation of courage into economic power, and then of wealth into lineage, the highest in the land. As such, it is a message to the lesser nobles of Castile: If the Cid, whose line of descent was sullied and who was exiled from his land, could lift his kin to the level of royalty (an event for which the details of the poem do not correspond to history) through his participation in the *Reconquista,* then other nobles of his class could legitimately aspire to the

same heights of success by invading Arab-controlled lands, which enjoyed the most flourishing economy in Europe at the time.

An obscure reference to the Cid's bastardy (I. Michael, ed., vv. 3379-80 and note) resembles a similarly fleeting reference in the Carolingian foundation myth as it is set forth in the Oxford *Roland.* The reference occurs in the mention of St. Giles ("for whom God made the document which is in the church of Laon"), who witnesses the events at Roncevaux *(Roland,* vv. 2095-98). The full story of the "document" is contained in the *Karlamagnús saga,* which recounts the incestuous union between Charlemagne and his sister Giselle, a tale without historical basis, since Giselle was only 21 in 778, hardly old enough to have had a son of the maturity of Roland at Roncevaux. Roland's death alters the rôle played by Charlemagne; from an indecisive sovereign, he becomes the peremptory champion of Christendom, victorious over Baligant. Grief at losing Roland has purged him of the last remnants of weakness deriving from his sin.

In attempting to see beneath the surface of an epic poem, one should avoid at all costs the facile expedient of neglecting philology and history. Anthropology has much to teach us about the workings of men's minds in medieval society, which was in many ways closer to what are sometimes termed primitive cultures than it was to Athenian or Roman antiquity or to our own. But history is always the key, both because the texts themselves are a form of history, and because we are so far removed from them in mentality that only historical research can give us the insights which will allow us to approach them with sympathy and understanding. While historians of Romance epic formerly sought to perceive the kernel of historical truth preserved in each work, we would be better advised to put our energies into explaining just how the poets have *distorted* history, and what forces led them to do so.

To medieval Frenchmen about to heed Pope Urban's exhortation that they follow the footsteps of the epic Charlemagne in recovering the Holy Land from the Saracens, Roland is an exemplary hero, not in spite of his flaws but because of them. His lineage is incestuous; nevertheless he finds salvation; so can any sinner. To Castilians whose lords had to resort to unique forms of land tenure in order to encourage the repopulation of border territory left untended by the retreating Arabs, the Cid is an ideal

model, achieving for his descendants access to the highest levels of society although he may be a bastard. For both of these heroes, deprived as they were of the perquisites of irreproachable ancestry, honor was acquired through their own actions, and that is perhaps as close as one can come to a definition of secular heroism for the twelfth century.

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