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IRAN V. PEOPLES OF IRAN (1) A GENERAL SURVEY

IRAN

v. PEOPLES OF IRAN

In the following discussion of “Iranian peoples,” the term “Iranian” may be understood in two ways. It is, first of all, a linguistic classification, intended to designate any society which inherited or adopted, and transmitted, an Iranian language. The set of Iranian-speaking peoples is thus considered a kind of unity, in spite of their distinct lineage identities plus all the factors which may havefurther differentiated any one group’s sense of self. These include: (1) divergent specializations in economic organization, environmental adaptation, and other aspects of material culture, emergent differences in oral traditions and folkways; (2) hand in hand with the preceding: different conditioning by already established populations encountered in the area of settlement or absorbed in the course of migrations; (3) further conditioning by the later introduction of non-Iranian-speaking populations. These factors, fostering some degree of diversity within a region’s society, may have worked toward distinctions in dialect, social organization, law, religion, and other aspects of culture. The management of marked regional diversity, in the absence of an established political infrastructure, would have been especially challenging to the earliest efforts at a real hegemony by the Medes and the Persians.

Secondly and inevitably, “Iranian” also acquires the broader sense of “[a people] resident on the Iranianplateau,” since the ethnicity of various peoples who are only briefly mentioned in historical sources often is not definitely known. In qualification of the first point, difference in language is not viewed as necessarily a barrier to community cohesion and communications.

This entry is divided into three sub-articles:

v(1). *a general survey* of major peoples of Iran from the ancient times to the present.

v(2). a survey of major ethnic groups in *the pre-Islamic period*.

v(3). *the Islamic period* (forthcoming).

v(1). A General Survey

Anthropological research. If we begin by seeking to define the category of race in ancient times, an important model used by physical anthropologists is the cephalic index of relationship between head length to head breadth, which differentiates different peoples with dolio-, meso-, and brachycephalic skulls. This category is applied to the three races in popular parlance—Caucasian or white, Negroid or black, and Mongoloid or yellow. The earliest evidence of human habitation reveals that the people of the present countries of Iran and Afghanistan were overwhelmingly Caucasian in race with little trace of Negroid or Mongoloid mixtures. Applying the cephalic index to Caucasoids in Europe, we find that in the north the population was predominantly long-headed or doliocephalic, sometimes designated as Nordic, while in Middle Europe the majority of people were round-headed or mesocephalic, also called Alpines (Coon, 1971, passim). In the south were wide-heads or Mediterraneans, so-called after the sea around which most of them lived. On the Iranian plateau the most ancient populations had perhaps a dominance of brachycephalics with fewer Alpine or Nordic types. This discussion of race, however, tells us little about peoples in historical times or the present, when physical characteristics have been mixed.

Since people are distinguished by language or social structure (settled, nomadic, tribal), these are the categories to which our analysis is devoted. The earliest inhabitants of the Iranian plateau were hunters and gatherers (see PALEOLITHIC AGE at *iranicaonline.org*); presumably they spoke a range of languages and dialects, of which we have no information. After the Neolithic

revolution, estimated to have been about the eighth millennium B.C.E. on the plateau, we find settlements and traces of material culture, primarily pottery, which reveal little of the inhabitants' identity. One can only say that differentiation between agriculturists and pastoralists occurred at much the same time, but the development of extended families into clans and tribes must have taken place much earlier. One may presume that tribal organization continued to be the basis of social forms in both villages and pastoral groups, and we can begin to speak of linguistic divisions; some clans may have developed dialects of a shared tribal language. What was the population of the plateau before the coming of the Aryans?

Arrival of the Iranians. A general picture of the peoples of Iran at the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E. might be reconstructed, from cuneiform sources of Mesopotamia and from later relics, as follows: in the southern plains (Khuzestan) were the Elamites (see ELAM), who extended to the east perhaps as far as Sistān and in the north possibly to the Alborz mountains. It would be more accurate to say that Elamite culture and influence reached so far, as may be inferred from remains of material culture and traces of proto-Elamite writing. Obviously many dialects and forms of social life existed, but the basic racial features of Caucasoids remained constant. Above Elam, the expanse of territory of the peoples north and west across and beyond the Zagros was labeled vaguely as "Gutium" (q.v. at *iranica.com*) by the states of Mesopotamia from the third millenium on. This convenient term would continue in use down to the arrival of Persian rule in Babylon (as on the Cyrus cylinder, in Pritchard, 1974, pp. 315-16).

In the north, the Caspians and other tribes or sub-tribes lived in the Alborz mountains and on the southern shores of the Caspian seacoast in relative isolation and independence—a condition which persisted in varying extent into the Islamic period. In the northwest of Iran, in Azarbaijan, and extending into Anatolia, were probably the ancestors of historical peoples who would exert important influence on the arriving Iranians—namely, the Manneans (successors in the Zagros and Lake Urmia region, if not lineal descendants, of the Hurrian people of the 3rd-2nd millenia) and the Urartians (the dominant people of the Caucasus in the early first millenium). The fortified town excavated at Ḥasanlu (q.v.) in Azarbaijan provides valuable glimpses of the economic and cultural interaction across these regions and with Assyria.

The population of eastern Iran and Afghanistan about 2000 B.C.E. is virtually unknown, so conjecture is rife. We may suppose that, similar to the Elamites in

the southwest, here the people of the Indus valley civilization, possibly proto-Dravidians, dominated the east, at least in culture and influence. North of the Hindu Kush range it is conceivable that ancestors of the Hunzakut, the Burushaski-speaking people of present-day Hunza (in Northern Areas, Pakistan), had a presence so far to the west. Some scholars have suggested that, previous to the expansion of the Indo-European speakers, a family of peoples extended from the Atlantic Ocean to India, the relics of which were, or are, the Basques, Etruscans, Rhaetians, some Caucasian peoples, and the Hunzakut plus the Dravidian Brahuis of Baluchistan (Berger, 1998, pp. 1-25). This is an unproved theory, and we can only say that it is most probable that the Indo-European speakers did not come upon empty areas in their expansion on the Iranian plateau but found earlier, unrelated inhabitants. The role of these people in conveying new culture, both material and other, to the arriving Indo-Europeans is a subject of much speculation. This holds true especially for those settled in the northeasternstaging ground for entry to the plateau—i.e., the area termed the Bactriana-Margiana Archeological Complex (for overview, see Possehl, 2002, pp. 215-36, with lit.). A long period of contact there between the settled agriculturists and the Indo-Iranians to the north may have been characterized by a symbiosis similar to that between Bactrians and Scythians (see below, “Pre-Islamic Period”) in and after the Achaemenid period. The Indo-Europeans, as their migration proceeded southward, also must have benefited from the existence of routes linking Bactria with other trading points across Iran.

The Semitic and Hamitic peoples of the Near East and Africa are not in the purview of our investigation, even though small numbers of Semites did move onto the plateau at various times.

The expansion of the Indo-Europeans in the second millennium B.C.E. changed the face of Iran. The IE languages are usually divided into two major groups, the centum (western) and the satem (eastern), from the Latin and Avestan words respectively for the number 100. The following is a speculative reconstruction but has a good chance of verisimilitude. It seems that the earliest migration of the Indo-Europeans from the reputed homeland in south Russia was by the centum group, some of whom in the early second millenium moved into Anatolia (the Hittites, contributing to the complex mix of ethnic groups in Asia Minor), others into western China (the Tokharians). This movement may have injected Nordic racial elements into the existing populations. A few tribes of centum-speakers (some perhaps subsumed under

the label “Gutians” in cuneiform sources) could have come onto the Iranian plateau, but we have no evidence, as we do for the next migration, that of the Indo-Iranians (or Aryans). The latter were the first satem-speaking Indo-Europeans who moved south from their supposed homeland in present-day Kazakhstan. In the second half of the second millennium B.C.E. in northern Mesopotamia, the kingdom of Mitanni had Indo-Iranian elements, who displayed elements specific to Indo-Aryan culture (see, e.g., INDRA). They possibly were to be found only among the ruling class or as specialists in horse warfare. Perhaps their predecessors in western Iran and the Zagros from the 18th century B.C.E., the Kassites (q.v.), shared a common lineage with them. As for movements in the east, the present-day Dardic speakers of northern Pakistan (see DARDESTĀN) are claimed to be descendants of the Indo-Iranians who first moved into the subcontinent.

Undoubtedly these early Indo-European speakers mixed with the local population and for the most part were absorbed into it. At the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E. numerous Iranian-speaking tribes, coming from the northeast, expanded over the plateau, giving their languages to the indigenous peoples rather than being absorbed. One of the factors which enabled the Iranians to prevail was their mastery of horseriding. Although horses had been used previously to pull wagons or chariots, it was probably the Scythian/Saka Iranians on the steppes of southern Russia who evolved their earlier practice of riding horses to control sheep or cattle into a military application as cavalry. This innovation enabled them to display a mobility surpassing that of other formations. By the time of the establishment of the Achaemenid empire the spread of Iranian languages and dialects was proceeding apace.

The Iranian dahyus *“lands.”* The Achaemenids Darius I and Xerxes I proclaimed themselves in their inscriptions “king of lands holding many/all peoples” (e.g., XPa 7-8, DNa 10-11). Later, in Sasanian times, Šāpur II calls himself “lord of kings and peoples” (*regum et gentium dominum;* Ammianus Marcellinus, 19.1.6). These claims, during and after the period when tribal organization was the paramount societal form, are well verified by the classical sources. From the earliest Old Persian and Avestan sources, the sense of “people” and “land” seem intertwined in the term *dahyu* (q.v.). Some Achaemenid dahyu names, indeed, are the plural form of an ethnonym and may carry little geographical precision (e.g., Sakā Tigraxaudā; see table, Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 56-57). Subsequently, with the advent of sovereign states,

anadministrative terminology was imposed on the dahyus, while their ethnographic realities endured. (For the evolution of the Sasanian term *šahr* "land, satrapy" rendered with the flexible Greek term *éthnos*, see the Arsacid *regna*, Pliny, *Historia naturalis* 6.29.112, *regiones* in the list of Amm. Marc., 23.6.14.)

From the list of satrapies of the empire in Herodotus and Darius's Bisotun inscription, the peoples of the plateau may be described as follows: in the west the Medes occupied the vast area from Fārs to the Caucasus mountains. In the mountainous regions of the Zagros descendants of the Manneans and others continued to speak their languages and practice their customs, while Caspians continued to live in the Alborz mountains and the Caspian seacoast. In Fārs and Kermān the Persians were mixing with Elamites, some of whom still retained their language and beliefs in the Zagros mountains. Farther to the southeast the Iranian tribe of Zranka occupied Sistān and surroundings, and moving on to the east one finds the Harauvati or Arachosians in the present day Kandahar region. To continue, at this time the Thataguviya or Sattagydians and the Gandāra people probably were Indo-Aryans. The Iranian tribes which settled in the northeast were the Parthians in present-day Khorasan, the Haraiva or Arians dominated the Hari Rud basin, while the Bactrians had occupied the rich lands on both sides of the Amu Darya. The Sogdians and Khwarazmians were Iranian tribes who settled north of the river.

Admittedly this is only a sketch of the Iranian peoples on the plateau, with Sakas/Scythians (a generic term for people on the Eurasian steppes) in the north. Nonetheless the satrapies indicate the various tribes with different languages, dialects, customs, clothes, etc. in the middle of the first millennium B.C. After the fall of the Achaemenid empire, Greeks and Macedonians migrated onto the plateau, but in smaller numbers than the Arabs much later. Their contribution to the cultural development of the Iranians, however, was significant.

The first centuries of the common era saw changesengendered by the migration of tribes from the north, the Parni, who were absorbed by the Parthians, and theSakas in the east. The last were soon joined by Kushans, who originally may have spoken Tokharian although,according to their writings, they soon adopted the Bactrian language of the settled folk whom they conquered. The last movement of tribal Iranian speakers from the north was that of the Chionites and Hephtalites (qq.v.), where the first traces of

Altaic speakers appear. In present Afghanistan and northwest India at the same time, the Kidarites (*q.v.), who claimed descent from the Kushans, maintained rule for almost a century.

In the northwest after the fall of the Assyrian empire in 612 B.C. refugees moved to the mountains of eastern Anatolia and gradually to the Lake Urmia region where the modern Assyrians lived until recently. Armenians from the west dominated the Urartians and others, giving their language to the peoples in northern Azarbaijan and in the Caucasus. The descendants of the Medes, speaking many dialects (see below, vi. IRANIAN LANGUAGES AND SCRIPTS) occupied most of the present provinces of eastern and western Azarbaijan. The Iranian-speaking Kurds had not expanded into Azarbaijan in the pre-Islamic period but were confined to the Zagros mountains. Such was the situationbefore the Arab conquerors.

The Islamic period. The 7th century C.E. saw new invaders, the Arabs from the west and later Turks from the north. The number of Arabs and Arameans (called Nabaṭ in Arabic) who settled in Iran and mixed with the local population is difficult to determine, for we have little information about the tribes in western Iran. In Khorasan and Central Asia, however, it has been estimated that the number of Arabs who settled among the local population may have reached almost a quarter million (Daniel, Sharon). Likewise the much smaller number of Africans, mainly brought as slaves, or who settled on the coast of the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, is difficult to determine. In any case, the Turks who came, especially beginning from the tenth century, moved in sufficient numbers to change the linguistic map of the whole area. Whether the ease of learning Turkish, as compared with Arabic, was a reason for the adoption of Turkish by Iranian speakers is uncertain, but it may have been one of the factors in the adoption. The final invasion brought few Mongols to Iran, but they left their traces in the Berberi (or Hazāra in Afghanistan) population. Probably the migration of Baluch tribes from Turkmenistan and Khorasan to the southeast, where they are found today, was impelled by the Turkish tribes who inundated the region and remain there today as Turkmen. By the time of the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century the peoples of Iran came to form their present state.

The only measure of ethnic diversity that appears inofficial statistics is identification by the language normally used at home: Iranian languages, including Persian, Luri (Lori), Kurdi (Kordi), Gilaki and Māzanda-rāni, and Baluchi (Baluči); and non-Iranian languages, including Azeri Turkish, Arabic,

and Turkmeni.

For Afghanistan, which has perhaps one third of Iran's population, but is less nationally integrated, no reliable data is available, but the number of generally recognized identities is larger. According to a rough estimate (U.S. Library of Congress, *Afghanistan, Country Studies*, Washington, D.C., 1986, pp. 104-16; for recent data see its website) the main ethnic groups, which are politically the most important, include Pashtun (Paštun; 40 percent, mainly of Dorrāni and Ḡilzi tribal groups; qq.v.), Tājik (*q.v.; 25 percent), Hazāra (q.v.; 18 percent), Uzbek (*q.v.; 6 percent), Aymāq (q.v.; 4 percent;), Turkmen (*q.v. 2.5 percent), Baluch (2 percent), many smaller groups such as Arab, Kirghiz (Qerḡiz), Wāḵi, Fārsiwān, Nurestāni, Brahui, Qezelbāš, Kābuli and Jāt. In the Central Asian successor states of the Soviet Union with about 30 million population, where such identities have been shaped by seventy years of strong government control under the Soviet nationalities policy, little differentiation of identity remains besides Tājik, Yaḡnobi, Kazak, Kirghiz, Turkmen, Uzbek, and Pāmiri (for detailed surveys, see AFGHANISTAN iv. ETHNOGRAPHY; CENTRAL ASIA ii. DEMOGRAPHY; and under individual ethnic groups).

The largest group of people in present-day Iran arePersians (*q.v.) who speak dialects of the language called Fārsi in Persian, since it was primarily the tongue of the people of Fārs. A number of dialects exist in the province including Lāri spoken in Larestān, Baškerdi (q.v.) on the eastern border with Kermān and Baluchistan, where the inhabitants are settled in villages, and other minor dialects. It is not the intention here to discuss dialects (see vi. below), but it should be noted that along the coast in the past speakers of Swahili were reported, presumably migrants from Africa. Also the presence of Negritoes, as speakers of Baluchi dialects, has been claimed on the eastern coast of Baluchistan, Again these may be descendants of slaves. Among the people of Fārs, as well as elsewhere, are Gypsies (q.v.), and they were mainly traveling musicians. In addition to their own language of Indian origin they speak Luri or Persian. Their number is unknown but small, and many have left Iran since the revolution of 1979.

The Lurs (*q.v.) occupy areas of northern Fārs and the southern Zagros range, and the best known of them are the Baḵtiāris (q.v.) who, known as Lur-e Bozorg, live to the west of Isfahan and speak a Luri dialect (Morgensen and Nicolaisen, eds.). They are divided between the Čahar Lang in the north and the Haft Lang in the south, and they have included settled Persian speakers in the confederations they have formed over the years. Others of this linguistic

group are called Mamasani and Kuhgiluya (*qq.v), while the other major dialect is spoken by the western Lurs in the mountains known as Lur-e Kučak. Other names are applied to sub-groups of the Lurs, such as the Boir Aḥmadi and Došmanziāri (qq.v.). It is difficult to know the number of Lurs, since many settled people in their territories do not consider themselves Lurs, but an estimate of the total number of Lurs may be close to four million (see Table 1). In addition to the Lur confederations, the Turkic-speaking tribes of Fārs also were united in a confederation under the main band of nomads, the Qašqāʾis (*q.v.), beginning in the 18th century. Both Lurs and Turks for the most part have given up their nomadic life for a settled one. At present there may be about half a million Turkic speakers in southern Iran, and their dialects are closely related to the Azeri Turkic language.

The Kurds live north of the Lurs in the Zagros mountains, up to and over the frontiers with Armenia and the Republic of Azarbaijan. They speak many dialects, but these are divided between two major groups, Kormānji (northwestern) and Sorāni (southwestern). The Kurds mostly live in villages or towns, although a small number are still pastoralists, but tribal allegiances are still strong among all Kurds. They are estimated at about five million, but since many live in Tehran or other cities, it is difficult to know how many consider themselves as Kurds. Most Kurds are Sunnis, but in the southern areas in Kermānšāh Province one finds Shiʿites and followers of sects such as Aḥl-e Ḥaqq (q.v.) and Yazidis (*q.v.). About half a million Kurds live in northern Khorasan, having been moved there by the Safavids. Many Kurds consider themselves descended from the ancient Medes, and even use a calendar dating from 612 B.C., when the Assyrian capital of Nineveh was conquered by the Medes (see *KURDISTAN).

The Turkish speakers of Azarbaijan (q.v.) are mainly descended from the earlier Iranian speakers, several pockets of whom still exist in the region. A massive migration of Oghuz Turks in the 11th and 12th centuries gradually Turkified Azarbaijan as well as Anatolia. The Azeri Turks are Shiʿites and were founders of the Safavid dynasty. They are settled, although there are pastoralists in the Moḡān steppe called Ilsevan (formerly Šāhsevan) numbering perhaps 100,000; they, as other tribes in Iran, were forced to adopt a settled life under Reza Shah. Other Turkic speakers—Turkmen, Qajars, Afšārs, etc.—are scattered in various regions of western Iran. The number of Turkic speakers in Iran today is estimated about 16 million. Most of the Azarbaijanis call themselves and are referred to as Turks but also insist on

their Iranian identity, buttressed not only by the religious bond—being mostly Shiʿite in contrast to the Sunni Turks of Anatolia—but also by cultural, historical, and economic factors.

The long and complex history of Azari (q.v.), a major Iranian language and the original language of the region, and its partial replacement with Azeri Turkish, the present-day language of Azarbaijan, is surveyed in detail and with a wealth of citations from historical sources elsewhere in the *Encyclopaedia* (see Azarbaijan vii). Although the original Azari gradually lost its stature as the prevalent language by the end of the 14th century, the fact that the region had produced some of the finest Persian writers and poets of classical Persian, including Qaṭrān of Tabriz, Neẓāmi of Ganja, Ḵāqāni of Širvān, Homām of Tabriz (q.v.), Awḥadi of Marāḡa, Zayn-al-ʿĀbedin of Širvān, Maḥmud of Šabestar, Ṣafi-al-Din of Urmia, ʿAbd-al-Qāder of Marāḡa, etc., has induced literary historians to talk of “The School of Azarbaijan” (Rypka). The significant contribution of this school to the preservation of the memory of a fecund shared culture capable of producing unique masterpieces of narrative and panegyric poetry is a matter of common knowl-edge. The tradition continues to this day, producing such diversely significant poets as Iraj Mirzā (q.v.), Šahriār, Raʿdi Āḏaraḵši, and Esmāʿil Amirḵizi (q.v.), and the writer and dramatist Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Sāʿedi.

The geographic position of this fertile region has also contributed to the preservation of a common identity with the rest of the country. The eventful modern history of Azarbaijan, and its contribution to the progressive movements in modern Persian history, most notably the Constitutional Revolution (q.v.), and to the development of institutions such as the press, has shown how highly influential it has been in shaping the history of modern Iran and its national identity. A survey of the nationalbiography of eminent Iranians would show a high percentage of people of Azarbaijani origin appearing in different spheres as ranking politicians, clerics, merchants and military commanders, including such outstanding scholars as Sayyed Ḥasan Taqizadeh, Aḥmad Kasrawi, Moḥammad-ʿAli Tarbiat, Reżāzādeh Šafaq, and such prominent educators and social thinkers as Mirzā Ḥasan Rošdiya, Kāẓemzādeh Irānšahr (q.v.), Taqi Arāni (q.v.), and Moḥammad Naḵjavāni among others. Also included is a large number of high ranking officials and statesmen, such as the influential prime ministers, Ebrāhim Ḥakimi, Maḥmud Jam (qq.v), ʿAli Soheyli, and Moḥammad Sāʿed. Confirmed and vocal Iranian nationalists, these scholars and statesmen had made significant contributions

to the territorial integrity of Iran during the troubled periods of 1905-20 and 1941-46, when the country was in the midst of revolution, civil war, and foreign occupation.

In Azarbaijan Armenians and Assyrians (qq.v.) have been mentioned; the former lived in villages north of Salmās up to the border of the country, and the Assyrians in villages west of Lake Urmia. Both have left these regions, and few remain, mainly in Tehran, Urmia, and other cities. Their place has been taken mostly by Kurds. On the Caspian Sea coast, in Gilān (q.v.) and Māzandarān (*q.v.), and in the Alborz mountains, live descendents of Caspian peoples (q.v.), speaking Persian dialects with remnants from earlier tongues (see GILAKI).

The Arabs of Khuzestan and the coast of the Persian Gulf are both urban and pastoralists, or fishermen on the Gulf. Although, after the Arab invasion of Persia in the 7th century, many Arab tribes settled in different parts of Iran, it is the Arab tribes of Khuzestan (Ḵuzestān) that have retained their identity in language and culture to the present day. But here as in the case of Azarbaijan discussed earlier, the ethno-linguistic characteristics of the region must be studied against the long and turbulent history of the province, with its own local language *ḵuzi* (hence the Khuzestan referred to by early geographers, including Ebn Ḥawqal, pp. 249-59), which may have been of Elamite origin (Soucek, p. 196) and which gradually disappeared in the early medieval period. The influx of Arab tribes from outside the province was also a long-term process. There was a great influx of Arab-speaking immigrants into the province from the 16th to the 19th century, including the migration of the Banu Kaʿb and Banu Lam (Soucek, p. 204; Perry, pp. 131-52). It was also during the Safavid period that the term ʿArabestān began to be used to designate the province, until replaced again by Khuzestan during the reign of Reza Shah, who put an end to the separatist aspirations of Shaikh Ḵazʿal, the head of the Kaʿb tribe. There were also renewedattempts in vain by the Iraqi regime during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) to generate Arab nationalism in the area but without any palpable success (see ARAB iv)

Thus the mosaic of peoples living in Iran today reflects the central geographical situation of the country throughout history, frequently described as a crossroads of Eurasia. Although many languages and dialects are spoken in the country, and different forms of social life, the dominant influence of the Persian language and culture has created a solidarity complex of great strength. This was revealed in the Iran-Iraq War when Arabs of Khuzestan did

not join the invaders, and earlier when Azeris did not rally to their northern cousins after World War II, when Soviet forces occupied Azarbaijan. Likewise the Baluch, Turkmen, Armenians and Kurds, although with bonds to their kinsmen on the other side of borders, are conscious of the power and richness of Persian culture and willing to participate in it.

See also AFGHANISTAN; ANTHROPOLOGY; ARAB; Azarbaijan; BAḴTIAÚRI, BALUCHISTAN; CAUCASUS; CENTRAL ASIA; ETHNOGRAPHY; IRAN i; IRAN vi; IRAN vii.

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