

Archaeology Under Dictatorship

** Archaeology under dictatorship: A complex relationship. Explore how authoritarian regimes impact archaeological research, from propaganda to destruction. Discover the ethical dilemmas and unforeseen consequences. Uncover suppressed histories and hidden narratives. archaeology dictatorship history politics Archaeology, the meticulous uncovering of past civilizations, is inherently intertwined with the socio-political landscape of its time. When that landscape is dominated by a dictatorship, the discipline faces unique and often profound challenges. The relationship between archaeology and dictatorship is complex, ranging from outright destruction of cultural heritage to the strategic manipulation of archaeological findings for political gain. This nuanced relationship requires careful examination to understand its lasting impact on our understanding of the past. It's a field where uncovering the truth is often as difficult as excavating ancient sites. While it's difficult to posit any *advantages* to conducting archaeology under a dictatorship, certain situations might appear to offer superficially positive circumstances. These are usually outweighed by the ethical and scholarly implications.

The Perversion of Archaeological Narrative

Dictatorships often utilize archaeology to bolster their own legitimacy and narratives. Archaeological sites and artifacts are frequently co-opted for propaganda purposes. A regime might selectively promote discoveries that support its ideology, ignoring or suppressing findings that contradict its official narrative. For example, a regime emphasizing nationalistic purity might highlight findings that support a narrative of unbroken indigenous heritage, while actively suppressing evidence of multiculturalism or external influences. This manipulation distorts historical understanding and perpetuates a biased view of the past. This manipulation isn't limited to overt propaganda. Subtle distortions can be just as damaging. The selection of research topics, the interpretation of findings, and even the funding allocated to projects can all be influenced to fit the prevailing ideology. This creates a skewed archaeological record, difficult to rectify once the dictatorship has fallen.

Suppression of Dissenting Voices and Research

Academic freedom is often the first casualty under a dictatorship. Archaeologists who challenge the regime's narrative or whose research contradicts its ideology risk severe repercussions, including imprisonment, exile, or even death. This suppression of dissenting voices leads to a chilling effect on research, limiting the diversity of perspectives and interpretations. Many potentially groundbreaking discoveries might never see the light of day. The lack of academic freedom also hampers collaboration and the free exchange of ideas, vital to the advancement of any scientific field. International cooperation is often restricted or impossible, isolating national archaeological programs and hindering progress.

Destruction of Cultural Heritage

Perhaps the most devastating impact of dictatorship on archaeology is the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage. Regimes may demolish sites deemed incompatible with their ideology or simply to erase traces of previous eras. This can involve the destruction of entire cities, temples, or other monumental structures, resulting in an irreplaceable loss of information about the past. This is not solely limited to physical destruction. The looting and illegal trafficking of artifacts, often facilitated or even encouraged by dictatorial regimes, also constitute a profound loss of cultural heritage. |

Type of Destruction | Examples | Long-term Impact | |||| | Deliberate demolition | Destruction of ancient cities to build modern ones, removal of statues considered "unpatriotic" | Irreversible loss of architectural and historical knowledge | | Neglect and lack of preservation | Abandonment of sites, leading to deterioration and looting | Gradual loss of information due to damage and theft | | Looting and illegal trafficking | Removal of artifacts from their context, often sold on black markets | Disrupted archaeological context and loss of provenience information |

The Challenges of Post-Dictatorship Archaeology

After a dictatorship falls, the task of reconstructing a truthful and complete archaeological record is monumental. It requires not only the physical recovery and preservation of damaged sites and artifacts, but also the painstaking piecing together of a fragmented narrative. The recovery process is often hampered by a lack of resources, political instability, and the lingering effects of the previous regime's manipulation and destruction. Furthermore, the uncovering of past atrocities committed by the dictatorship adds another layer of ethical complexity to the work.

Ethical Dilemmas in Post-Dictatorship Archaeology

Post-dictatorship archaeology presents significant ethical dilemmas. How can researchers accurately reconstruct a past deliberately manipulated or destroyed by a repressive regime? Who owns the past and who has the right to interpret it? How can the needs of the nation's citizens be reconciled with international standards of archaeological ethics and practice? These questions are not merely theoretical but require careful consideration in the actual practice of post-dictatorship archaeology. Impactful Ending: The legacy of archaeology under dictatorship is a stark reminder of the fragility of cultural heritage and the power of ideology to shape our understanding of the past. While the challenges are immense, the unwavering dedication of archaeologists, both during and after periods of repression, remains a testament to the enduring human desire to understand our shared history, even amidst political turmoil. Their work, often conducted under perilous circumstances, is crucial not only to preserving our past but also to informing a more just and equitable future. FAQs: **1.** How does the political climate impact funding for archaeological projects under a dictatorship? **Funding is often diverted to projects that align with the regime's ideology, while projects deemed subversive or irrelevant are starved of resources. International funding sources might be restricted or entirely cut off, leading to a significant decline in research capabilities.** **2.** Can archaeological findings be used to prosecute individuals responsible for cultural destruction under a dictatorship? **Yes,**

archaeological evidence, along with other historical documents and testimony, can be used in legal proceedings to establish the culpability of individuals responsible for destroying or looting cultural heritage. This requires thorough documentation and careful analysis of the context of the destruction. 3. What role does memory play in the recovery of archaeological sites after a dictatorship? **Oral histories and community memory are essential for piecing together the narrative of destruction and recovery. Local knowledge can identify lost sites, reveal hidden stories, and aid in the interpretation of artifacts. Collaboration with local communities is crucial for a comprehensive and ethical approach.** 4. How can we ensure the ethical and responsible preservation of archaeological sites and artifacts in politically unstable regions? **International cooperation is vital. This includes establishing international legal frameworks for the protection of cultural heritage, coordinating efforts to prevent looting and illicit trafficking, and providing support to local authorities and researchers in protecting and preserving vulnerable sites.** 5. How can modern archaeological practice prevent the manipulation of findings to support a particular political agenda? **** Strict adherence to scientific methods, transparent documentation, rigorous peer review, and open access to data can mitigate the risk of ideological manipulation. International collaboration and the involvement of diverse research teams can also ensure a plurality of perspectives and interpretations.**

Archaeology Under Dictatorship: Unearthing the Past in Oppressive Regimes

The earth holds secrets, whispering tales of forgotten civilizations and vanished peoples. Archaeology, the meticulous excavation and study of these remnants, offers a unique window into our collective human story. But what happens when the very ground you're digging is controlled by an iron fist? Archaeology under dictatorship is a complex, often fraught, and profoundly revealing field. It's a world where scientific inquiry grapples with political agendas, where the desire to understand the past clashes with the need to shape the present and future.

When we think of archaeology, we often picture dusty trowels, ancient pottery shards, and intrepid explorers. And while those elements are certainly present, the context in which archaeological work takes place can drastically alter its purpose, its methods, and its very outcomes. Dictatorial regimes, by their very nature, seek to control narratives. They often manipulate history to legitimize their power, to foster a sense of national pride, or to demonize perceived enemies. Archaeology, with its tangible links to the past, becomes an irresistible tool in this ideological arsenal.

The Politics of the Past: Why Dictatorships Love Archaeology

Dictatorships rarely engage in archaeological endeavors for purely academic pursuits. The past, for these regimes, is not an open book to be explored but a carefully curated exhibit to be presented.

There are several compelling reasons why authoritarian leaders often champion archaeological projects:

1. **Legitimizing Power and National Identity:** One of the most common tactics is to unearth and promote a glorious ancient past that supposedly predates the current regime. This creates a sense of deep historical roots and a grand national narrative that the current leadership claims to embody and protect. Think of regimes that suddenly "discover" ancient empires that mirror their own ambitions, or those that emphasize a unique cultural heritage to differentiate themselves from neighboring nations or the "international community."
2. **Creating a "Us vs. Them" Mentality:** Archaeology can be used to construct a narrative of ancient conflict or cultural superiority. By highlighting perceived historical grievances or emphasizing the achievements of a particular ethnic or national group, dictatorships can foster a sense of shared destiny and external threat. This can be a powerful tool for mobilizing the population and justifying policies that may be isolationist or aggressive.
3. **Eradicating "Undesirable" Histories:** Conversely, archaeological evidence that contradicts the desired narrative can be suppressed, ignored, or actively destroyed. Pre-existing populations, minority groups, or inconvenient historical periods that don't fit the regime's propaganda are often deliberately erased from the historical record, both in textbooks and on the ground.
4. **Boosting National Prestige and Diplomacy:** Grand archaeological discoveries can also serve as a propaganda coup on the international stage. Showcasing impressive ancient monuments and artifacts can project an image of a cultured and historically significant nation, potentially attracting tourism and even diplomatic goodwill, despite the regime's internal policies.

The Archaeologist's Dilemma: Navigating Ethical Minefields

For archaeologists working within or under the influence of a dictatorship, the situation is far from simple. They face a constant tightrope walk between their professional ethics and the demands of the state. This often leads to:

1. **Controlled Research Agendas:** Funding and permits are rarely granted without a clear understanding of what kind of discoveries the regime wants to see. Projects that explore potentially sensitive topics or challenge existing narratives may be actively discouraged or outright forbidden.
2. **Propaganda-Driven Interpretations:** Findings are often presented in a way that serves the regime's agenda, regardless of the actual evidence. Archaeologists may be pressured to interpret artifacts or inscriptions in a manner that supports state ideology, even if it means twisting or omitting crucial details. This can lead to what some scholars call "archaeological propaganda."
3. **Suppression of Dissenting Voices:** Archaeologists who attempt to publish research that contradicts the official line or who speak out against the manipulation of heritage can face severe repercussions, including job loss, blacklisting, or even imprisonment. The fear of reprisal can lead to self-censorship.
4. **The Exploitation of Sites:** In some cases, dictatorial regimes may prioritize rapid excavation

for show or for the extraction of valuable artifacts rather than for rigorous scientific study. This can lead to the destruction of context and the irreversible loss of crucial information.

Case Studies: Archaeology Under Different Dictatorships

History offers numerous examples of archaeology being co-opted by authoritarian regimes. Examining these cases provides crucial insights into the mechanisms at play:

Nazi Germany and the Mystical Past

The Nazi regime, obsessed with an Aryan master race and a romanticized Germanic past, heavily invested in archaeology. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, established institutions like the Ahnenerbe ("Ancestral Heritage") to search for evidence of ancient Germanic superiority. They sponsored excavations, particularly in regions with supposed Germanic connections, seeking to unearth artifacts and validate their racial theories. This often involved misinterpreting findings, fabricating evidence, and even plundering sites for propaganda purposes. The focus was less on objective historical inquiry and more on creating a mythical past to legitimize their present-day ideology.

Stalinist Soviet Union and Socialist Realism

In the Soviet Union under Stalin, archaeology was also subject to ideological control. While the regime initially promoted the study of ancient cultures to highlight the diverse history of the Soviet peoples, this was always within the framework of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Discoveries that supported the narrative of class struggle or the progression towards communism were lauded, while those that challenged it were often suppressed or reinterpreted. Later Soviet periods saw a more nuanced approach, but the underlying political sensitivity of interpreting the past remained.

Modern Authoritarian Regimes and Heritage Management

Even in the 21st century, we see the continued manipulation of archaeology by authoritarian states. regimes might use the discovery of ancient cities to bolster claims to disputed territories, or they might showcase impressive archaeological sites as a means of deflecting international criticism of human rights abuses. The preservation of heritage can become a tool for projecting an image of national strength and continuity, masking underlying instability or repression. The control of heritage sites, such as Angkor Wat in Cambodia or various sites in the Middle East, can be tied to nationalistic fervor and the legitimization of ruling elites.

The Resilience of Science and the Hope for the Future

Despite the immense pressures, the spirit of archaeological inquiry is remarkably resilient. Many archaeologists working under dictatorships continue to do their best to conduct sound research, even if it means working with limited resources, under constant surveillance, or with the understanding that their findings may be distorted. They often find subtle ways to preserve data, to

protect sites from destruction, and to subtly communicate more nuanced interpretations to a wider audience.

Furthermore, the international archaeological community plays a vital role. By sharing information, providing support to threatened colleagues, and condemning the politicization of heritage, they can help to mitigate some of the damage. International conventions and organizations, while often limited in their direct power, can create a framework for ethical practice and advocate for the protection of archaeological sites as shared human heritage, not merely national property to be exploited.

The study of archaeology under dictatorship is a sobering reminder that the past is never truly neutral. It is a battleground, a source of identity, and a tool for power. By understanding how authoritarian regimes manipulate archaeology, we gain a deeper appreciation for the importance of scientific integrity, academic freedom, and the preservation of a truthful and unadulterated historical record for all of humanity. The trowel may be guided by state directives, but the earth itself continues to whisper its authentic stories, waiting for a time when they can be heard without distortion.

Archaeology under dictatorship represents a complex and often troubling intersection of power, history, and cultural memory. While archaeology is fundamentally a discipline dedicated to uncovering and interpreting the material past, its practice within authoritarian regimes reveals how state control can shape, distort, or suppress historical narratives to serve political ends. This dynamic underscores the profound influence that governance has on the preservation and presentation of heritage.

The Political Weaponization of the Past

In dictatorships, archaeology is frequently instrumentalized as a tool of ideological propaganda. Regimes often selectively excavate, interpret, and promote certain archaeological findings while suppressing or erasing others that challenge their legitimacy or contradict state-sanctioned histories. For instance, monumental sites may be emphasized to construct a mythologized national origin story, whereas evidence of indigenous resistance, colonial exploitation, or pre-dominant cultural identities might be downplayed or hidden. This manipulation transforms archaeology from a neutral scientific inquiry into a strategic instrument for consolidating power and forging a controlled collective memory.

Case Studies: Archaeology in Authoritarian Contexts

Historical examples illuminate how dictatorships have shaped archaeological discourse. Under Nazi Germany, archaeologists were enlisted to support racist pseudoscience, promoting theories of Aryan supremacy through distorted interpretations of ancient European cultures. Similarly, in Maoist China, archaeological research was tightly regulated to align with revolutionary narratives, emphasizing class struggle and peasant heroism while minimizing religious or imperial legacies. In

Latin America, military juntas often restricted or redirected archaeological work to legitimize territorial claims or suppress indigenous claims to land and cultural heritage. These cases reveal a recurring pattern: under authoritarian rule, archaeology becomes less about understanding the past and more about shaping the future.

Preservation Amidst Repression

Despite the risks, archaeology under dictatorship also embodies resilience and quiet resistance. In many cases, scholars and local communities engage in covert or constrained efforts to safeguard heritage from deliberate destruction or ideological erasure. underground documentation, clandestine conservation, and oral preservation of traditional knowledge stand as acts of defiance. Even when state control is pervasive, pockets of scholarly integrity persist, maintaining a fragile continuity with the past. These efforts highlight the enduring human desire to remember and honor history, even when official channels seek to silence it.

Applications and Broader Implications

Understanding archaeology under dictatorship offers critical insights for both scholars and society. It reveals how cultural heritage is never neutral but deeply entangled with power, ideology, and identity. This perspective enriches archaeological methodology by urging researchers to critically examine sources, question biases, and acknowledge suppressed narratives. Moreover, it underscores the importance of protecting archaeological sites and knowledge from political manipulation, reinforcing heritage as a shared human legacy rather than a tool of control. In an era of rising authoritarianism and cultural nationalism, these lessons are more urgent than ever. Looking ahead, the future of archaeology under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian conditions hinges on strengthening transparency, international collaboration, and ethical stewardship. Digital technologies, such as 3D scanning and global databases, offer new ways to document and share heritage beyond physical sites vulnerable to destruction. Strengthening legal protections and fostering civil society engagement can help safeguard archaeological integrity. Ultimately, archaeology under dictatorship reminds us that the past is not merely a collection of artifacts—it is a battlefield of memory, identity, and truth, demanding vigilance, care, and unwavering commitment to truth.

Archaeology, the meticulous study of the past through material remains, often finds itself in a precarious position when confronted with authoritarian regimes. The very act of unearthing history, of interpreting the narratives of bygone eras, can become a potent tool – or a dangerous weapon – in the hands of dictatorships seeking to legitimize their power, erase inconvenient truths, or construct a national identity tailored to their political agenda. This article delves into the complex and often fraught relationship between archaeology and dictatorship, exploring how these regimes manipulate the past to serve their present, the ethical quandaries faced by archaeologists working under such circumstances, and the long-term consequences for both historical understanding and national memory.

The Ideological Weaponization of the Past

One of the most pervasive ways dictatorships engage with archaeology is through its ideological appropriation. Authoritarian leaders frequently seek to establish a deep, often mythologized, historical lineage for their regimes, connecting themselves to glorious ancient civilizations or heroic national founders. This strategy serves multiple purposes: it imbues the current regime with an air of inevitability and destiny, portraying it as the natural successor to a powerful past. It also provides a potent counter-narrative to any opposition, suggesting that any challenge to the regime is a betrayal of national heritage.

Constructing National Identity and Glorifying Ancestors

Under dictatorships, archaeological discoveries are often curated and presented to the public in a way that reinforces a specific, often nationalistic, version of history. Excavations might be prioritized in locations deemed ideologically significant, with findings selectively emphasized or even fabricated to support pre-determined narratives. The regime's founding figures or ideologies might be anachronistically projected onto ancient rulers or events, creating a sense of historical continuity that legitimizes their contemporary rule. This can involve extensive state-sponsored propaganda, monumental construction projects referencing ancient architectural styles, and the rewriting of history textbooks. Think of how certain regimes have co-opted pre-Islamic or pre-colonial empires to bolster their claims to ancient glory, often glossing over the complexities and multiculturalism of those periods.

Erasing and Rewriting Uncomfortable Histories

Conversely, archaeology under dictatorship can also be a tool for erasure. Periods or figures that contradict the regime's desired narrative are often ignored, suppressed, or actively vilified. Archaeological sites associated with dissenting movements, minority groups, or periods of perceived national decline might be deliberately neglected, their artifacts dispersed, or their very existence denied. This selective approach to history allows dictatorships to present a more palatable and politically convenient past, effectively sanitizing their national story. The systematic destruction or suppression of evidence pertaining to certain historical events, such as mass atrocities or periods of internal conflict, is a chilling example of this manipulation.

The Role of Propaganda and Nationalism

Archaeology becomes a crucial component of state propaganda. Museums are transformed into showcases of national pride, with carefully curated exhibitions designed to evoke awe and reverence for the nation's ancient past. Public discourse surrounding archaeological findings is tightly controlled, ensuring that only interpretations aligned with the regime's agenda reach the wider population. This creates a powerful feedback loop where the state-sanctioned interpretation of the past reinforces nationalistic sentiments, which in turn bolsters the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime. The emphasis on "national treasures" and the protection of heritage often

becomes a rallying cry for national unity, deflecting attention from contemporary social and political issues.

Ethical Dilemmas for Archaeologists

For archaeologists working within or in collaboration with authoritarian states, the ethical landscape is fraught with peril. The pursuit of knowledge, the bedrock of archaeological practice, can be compromised by political pressures, censorship, and the imperative to produce findings that serve the state. This presents a profound moral quandary: how does one conduct responsible archaeological research when the findings are destined to be instrumentalized for political ends?

Navigating Political Interference and Censorship

Archaeologists may find themselves under immense pressure to interpret their findings in a particular way, to omit certain data, or even to falsify evidence to align with the regime's narrative. Reporting on sensitive discoveries, such as evidence of past human rights abuses or the presence of marginalized communities, can be impossible or dangerous. The fear of reprisal – loss of funding, job termination, or even imprisonment – can lead to self-censorship, where researchers avoid controversial topics or interpret their findings with extreme caution. This compromises the integrity of their work and ultimately distorts our understanding of the past.

The Pressure to Produce "Useful" Discoveries

Regimes may direct archaeological efforts towards specific goals, such as finding evidence of ancient claims to disputed territories or uncovering artifacts that can be used for international diplomacy or tourism. This can lead to a prioritization of politically motivated projects over scientifically significant ones, diverting resources and attention from more crucial areas of research. The pressure to deliver "groundbreaking" discoveries that align with the state's agenda can overshadow the meticulous, long-term process of archaeological investigation.

Collaboration or Complicity?

The question of whether to collaborate with regimes that engage in the politicization of archaeology is a deeply divisive one within the archaeological community. Some argue that by working within the system, even under duress, archaeologists can at least gather some data, preserve some sites, and perhaps even subtly introduce more nuanced interpretations. Others contend that any collaboration, however well-intentioned, lends legitimacy to an authoritarian regime and its manipulation of history, making them complicit in the distortion of the past. This debate is particularly acute when considering international collaborations, where Western archaeologists might be tempted by access to significant sites, but at the risk of being perceived as endorsing problematic regimes.

Consequences and Legacies

The impact of archaeological manipulation under dictatorship extends far beyond the immediate political landscape. It can have lasting consequences for historical scholarship, national memory, and the potential for reconciliation.

Distorted Historical Narratives for Future Generations

When archaeological evidence is selectively presented or distorted, it creates a fundamentally flawed understanding of the past. Future generations, relying on the available scholarship and public narratives, will inherit these skewed interpretations. This can perpetuate nationalistic myths, hinder critical historical inquiry, and make it difficult to address the unresolved issues and traumas of the past. The deliberate suppression of evidence can create "dark ages" in the historical record, leaving gaping holes in our understanding of human societies.

Hindering Post-Dictatorship Reconciliation

In the aftermath of a dictatorship, the carefully constructed historical narratives can become major obstacles to reconciliation. The official glorification of a particular past can clash with the lived experiences and suppressed memories of those who suffered under the regime. Unearthing the unvarnished truth about sensitive historical periods, including instances of oppression, collaboration, or resistance, becomes a critical but often challenging task. The archaeological record, when finally examined with academic freedom, can unearth evidence that contradicts the former regime's propaganda, leading to painful but necessary re-evaluations of national identity.

The Fight for Truth and Academic Freedom

The struggle to reclaim and reconstruct a more accurate historical understanding after a period of authoritarian rule often involves dedicated archaeologists and historians who work tirelessly to uncover suppressed evidence, challenge official narratives, and advocate for academic freedom. International support and collaborative efforts can play a vital role in assisting these endeavors, ensuring that the past is understood in all its complexity, not just as a tool for political expediency. The efforts to decolonize archaeological practices and to ensure that local communities have agency in interpreting their own heritage also become even more crucial in the wake of such manipulation.

In conclusion, archaeology under dictatorship is a stark illustration of how academic disciplines can be bent to serve political agendas. The allure of a manufactured past, the desire for ideological control, and the suppression of inconvenient truths all contribute to a dangerous confluence of power and history. The ethical challenges faced by archaeologists, the lasting distortions to historical narratives, and the complexities of post-dictatorship reconciliation underscore the vital importance of academic freedom and the unwavering pursuit of historical truth, even when the past itself is under siege.

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And often, that quiet availability is what makes it valuable. Knowledge does not have to be chased when it is already close at hand.

Questions & Answers About archaeology under dictatorship

No	Question	Answer
1	How did dictatorships typically exploit or suppress archaeology for their own agendas?	Dictatorships often manipulated archaeological findings to legitimize their rule, emphasizing nationalistic narratives or historical claims. They might promote discoveries that supported their ideology while suppressing or reinterpreting those that didn't, often using archaeology for propaganda and to forge a desired national identity.
2	What ethical dilemmas did archaeologists face when working under authoritarian regimes?	Archaeologists under dictatorships often grappled with the ethical dilemma of whether to participate in projects that served the regime's propaganda, potentially compromising academic integrity. They also faced risks to their safety, academic freedom, and the preservation of sites if they refused or pursued research deemed inconvenient by the state.
3	Can archaeology under a dictatorship ever lead to positive outcomes, despite the oppressive context?	Occasionally, even under dictatorships, archaeological work can inadvertently uncover crucial information that later challenges the regime's narratives or contributes to broader historical understanding. Some discoveries, despite their initial political framing, can eventually be re-contextualized by the global academic community for their genuine scientific value.

4	What are some historical examples of dictatorships using archaeology for nationalistic purposes?	Nazi Germany heavily promoted archaeological research to support its racial theories and claims of Aryan superiority. Similarly, Fascist Italy exploited Roman heritage to bolster its imperial ambitions. Stalinist Soviet Union also utilized archaeology to construct a narrative of a glorious, unified past that served the Communist Party's ideology.
5	How does archaeology conducted under dictatorship differ from archaeological research in democratic societies?	In democratic societies, archaeological research is generally driven by academic inquiry, peer review, and open access to information. Under dictatorship, research is often state-controlled, prioritizing political goals over scientific rigor, with restricted access to data, potential censorship, and limited academic freedom, making true independent scholarship challenging.

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