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THE BATAVIANS: MYTHICAL FATHERS OF DUTCH REPUBLICANISM
ORIGIN OF A NEW NATIONAL DISCOURSE

Origin of a myth

It is no coincidence that Jonathan Israel's majestic study of the Dutch republic starts when it does, in 1477. With the full title *The Dutch republic. Its Rise, Greatness and Fall 1477-1806* it is exactly in that year 1477 that we, with Israel, might see the rise of Dutch republicanism. Among historians it is, since long, the constitutional manifestation of the Burgundian state in crisis. With the acceptance and proclamation of the so-called Groot-Privilege (General Privilege) of the Low Countries, Mary duchess of Burgundy made the first break with her father's policy of centralisation and state unification. According to this Privilege, which later, during the Revolt and the Republic, was called upon as the first constitution of the new independent state, the ruler of the Low Countries was no longer allowed to appoint civil servants from 'abroad', i.e. from Burgundy, in those Northern provinces; only their own citizens who spoke the local language should be in government. And, among many more concessions, on every occasion of tax-request and policy-making the local and general States should be heard (Blockmans 1985). In bureaucratic terms the privilege brought about a major shift, in that especially after Mary's premature death in 1481 under the regency of her husband, Maximilian of Habsburg, son of the then emperor Frederick III, the court at Brussels was now ruled by a new bureaucracy of lower Dutch aristocracy. From that point on, famous names like Bergen, Nassau, Croy played a major role in the duke's decisionmaking, families whose sons less than a century later would play a role in the revolt against their prince. From the point of view of state-formation it was this bureaucratic change which has been seen as of vital importance for the failure of the Burgundian-Habsburg state (Hugenholtz 1964/Cools 2000). That Maximilian was in trouble in the Northern parts of his Burgundian legacy can only be too easily concluded from the many economic and tax disasters and the social unrest and upheavals which confronted him there in the 1480s and 1490s. Economically, the subsequently so prosperous provinces of Holland and Zeeland continued to go through rough and poor times until the Miracle year 1566, as often plagued by sea and riverfloods and mouse- and rat epidemics that we, this day, are only too happy the modern Dutch dykes fail

only occasionally - and it was only by abandoning the many Catholic holidays and working longer and harder that the Calvinist Dutch in that century gradually built up greater economic prosperity (Noordegraaf 1985). So with the constitutional crisis of 1477, the bureaucratic shift of the eighties and nineties that followed and lack of bread and plenty of poverty under the people the central state so cleverly and brilliantly built up by the Burgundian dukes started to waver and failed under their less fortunate Habsburg successors.

The ambiguous character of the unification process of 1516-1549 in the Northern provinces of the Netherlands, and of the preceding war between Holland and Gelderland in the years 1506-1508, was mirrored in the humanist controversies surrounding the birth of the Batavian myth. This myth, the alluring notion that the ancient Batavians described in Tacitus - heroic, virtuous and freedom-loving who, under their leader, Claudius Civilis, had successfully revolted against the Romans - had lived in the Northern Netherlands, or part of it, had begun to assume important political and cultural undertones in Dutch humanist circles in the years around 1500 (Tilmans 1992; Israel 1995, 57).

Ever since Ivo Schöffer wrote his article 'The Batavian myth in the 16th/17th century' it has been very well known that the Dutch used this myth of origin as a legitimization of their revolt against Spain (Schöffer 1975). Rembrandt's painting "The conspiracy of Julius Claudius Civilis" (1661) was the centrepiece in the 17th century cityhall, the present Royal Palace, of Amsterdam. But what is not very well known, and what is more of an antiquarian misconception, a notion which up to the present day proves very difficult to challenge, is the major conceptual shift which this myth brought about from its very beginning in the first decade of the 16th century. The persistent traditional view was, and is, that with the discovery of Tacitus' *Germania* a humanist squabble developed over the problem who was who under the German tribes and that only with the Revolt the Batavian claim of the Dutch won the status of a political myth (Bejczy 1996; Haitsma Mulier 1996).

From the outset the Batavian myth was a potent factor in building a new, broader sense of patriotic identification with Holland as a political, moral and cultural entity. Reading Tacitus today it is difficult to imagine the vast importance his short mention of the mysterious Batavians was going to win in subsequent Dutch political thought (*Germania* 29; *Historiae* 4.12 and *Annales* 2.6) Mysterious indeed, for contemporary archeology agrees on the fact that nothing specific about this tribe can be found and that therefore their original location remains a complete riddle. Rhetorical

humanism and narrative fiction, as it were, went hand in hand to build a national myth in the sixteenth century. But the degree of truth is not of primary importance. Rather it is what is exemplary for thinking and public acting that is of the greatest interest. Erasmus was the first Dutchman to publish about it. In the very final proverb of his *Adagia* published by Aldus Manutius in 1508, Erasmus wrote about *Auris Batava*, the Batavian ear. This expression was used by Martial in his *Epigrammata* as a synonym for lack of taste. In his commentary Erasmus cited Tacitus's *Historiae* on how the Batavians, a brave German tribe of the Chatti, had been driven from their original home to settle in the Low Countries, where their exceptional military virtues made them useful allies to the Roman conquerors. Erasmus stressed that the 'very noble island of the Batavians' mentioned by Tacitus was in fact Holland, his birthplace. In a laus patriae similar to Virgil's *Georgica* writing in honour of his fatherland from far-off Venice, he turned the jibe of auris Batava into a positive virtue. Thus although the Batavians were not as learned or as cultivated as other peoples, they were honest and serious, their country was rich in terms of farming and fishing, and their cities were morally upright.

Although the lack of civilisation weighed heavily upon the shoulders of 16th century Dutch humanists, the fact that Erasmus identified the Tacitean nobilissima insula Batavorum with Holland was a major factor in the take-off of the Batavian myth in the early sixteenth century. The keyfigure in the full development of the myth was Erasmus's teacher, the historian Aurelius, and key-work to set the myth in the mental framework of the 'Batavian' nation was a vernacular chronicle of Holland which appeared in the heart of Batavia, Lugdunum Batavorum, or Leiden, in 1517 and which is commonly known as the *Divisiekroniek*. This work was for Dutch historical consciousness what was Guicciardini was for Italy, or Robert Gaguin for France, or Hartmann Schedel for Germany, or Polydore Vergil for England. The fact that it remained the schoolbook of history till the end of the eighteenth century made its influence even more lasting. The importance of the full-scale Batavian myth which it contains cannot therefore be overestimated. But which components constituted part of the myth as early as 1517? There is first the invention of a new name for the country, Batavia, and its founding father, the German exiled prince Bato. Then there is the elaborate identification, with the help of philology, archeology and history, of the classical Batavians with the present Dutch. The story is lifted above mere antiquarianism when the author depicts the morally utopian society of the former Batavians. It is the chapter 'concerning the ancient customs, morals, traditions and

dress of the Hollanders, their garments, clothes, food and drink' which Aurelius upholds to his fellow countrymen.

Let's look in more detail at this Batavian society. What sort of political ideal does it entail? The Batavians were originally free fishermen and farmers, and divorce and adultery were unknown among these Batavian country folk. Strict monogamy prevailed and women were inseparable from their husbands, in peace and war. The young men were raised as brave soldiers who were only allowed to shave their beards after they had killed their first enemy in battle. The men carried their weapons at all times, at festivals and even at their monthly meetings: 'They held meetings every month, this council was open to all. Everyone could speak freely and say what they felt without fear of repercussions'. Then the prince and his nobles and elders came to a conclusion; but they did not dictate decisions, their rule was that of educators. If the assembly was satisfied they showed this by raising their swords above their heads and clashing their weapons against each other. And if they were not pleased they shouted their disapproval with loud cries. ' In wartime the whole nation was mobilised, women and children included - the latter encouraging the men in battle and nursing those who returned wounded

It is also interesting to note that Aurelius considered Holland's economy to be totally based on fishery and cattle farming, and that he ignored the growing contribution of urban industry and trade to Holland's prosperity:

'It is true that some countries have mines producing gold, silver, iron... But Holland has three mines of gold which are better than all the industries of the world, and they produce an incalculable amount of money. Firstly, there is the tremendously profitable herring fishery, and the export of dried fish to many different countries. The other lucrative industry is the sale of horses, oxen, cow and sheep... And thirdly, the huge amount of butter, cheese and other dairy produce found in Holland and exported throughout the world, even to those new islands they seem to be finding almost every day.'

By 1515, however, when this is written, half of Holland's population already lived in cities, and it was no longer the land of farmers and fishermen Aurelius pictured it as being. In fact, what had always struck foreign visitors was the predominance of the cities in the flat landscape. The Italian humanist Chrysostomus of Naples wrote of Holland's 36 various cities that 'one hardly can turn in any direction without one's eye settling on a building of some sort'.

Aurelius' description of the Dutch landscape is, without any doubt, inspired by

other Italian descriptions of Holland. We find clear reminiscences of Luigi Marliani's *De Hollandiae sive Bataviae laudibus epistola*, written between 1504 and 1508 to his Antwerp patron Jerome Busleyden, a letter which has also been of considerable influence on Erasmus' *Auris Batava*:

'With wealth and Queen Cash horns of plenty filled with charms and loveliness came to happy Belgium, a perfect, joyous state which lacks nothing, apart from the fact that when poverty disappeared the people's morality also went. That is why, whomever you compare them with, the Belgians are well treated, clean and elegant, except when you place them beside the Batavians. For I cannot express my admiration for this island enough, whether for its extraordinary qualities, its beauties, or its prosperity.'

And then he talks at length of this man-made country, facing the threatening sea with dykes, dunes and windmills, about ice-skating in winter when the Dutch move around on iron feet, 'so fast that you would think that teams of Icaruses and Deadaluses were flying around'; he talks about cities so rich and beautiful that 'there is nowhere ugly enough to spit, unless in some ugly face'; and he considers this Dutch nation 'more amphibian than terrestrial' richer and wealthier, through fishing, shipping and industry, than any other nation.

What is interesting about the reception of this foreign idea of Holland - apart from the amusing, and already archetypal picture of the clog-shod nation - is that Dutch humanists like Aurelius and many after him, pick up the natural richness of their Batavian country, but at the same time, and always in the context of the Batavian myth, abhor the richness and wealth of the cities, and see these as a source of corruption and discord. It is also very clear from the depiction of ancient Batavia that the cities are considered as something invented and introduced, as founded obviously, by the Roman rulers, as something not authentically Batavian. In this 'country' variation of civic humanism, Batavia was a land of free and equal farmer soldiers and virtuous women, led by an aristocracy and a prince-educator. Although the political role of the cities becomes of greater importance with the Revolt, e.g. in the work of Janus Dousa and Hadrianus Junius, the arcadian ideal of Batavia is very persistent, right into the seventeenth century, in historiography and rhetorical treatises. This vision has been more or less overshadowed by the juridical interpretation of the Batavian myth by Hugo Grotius. In his treatise *De antiquitate reipublicae Batavae* (1610) Grotius claimed a continuity between present-day Dutch society and its political structure and that of the Batavians. Also the cities fitted in that continuous, unchanged picture: he claimed them

as being Batavian institutions. It is also here that the Batavian myth has got its full constitutional meaning, in the sense that it served as a historical argument for the independent Batavian or Dutch republic.

But the picture of the rural and rather rough Batavians, ever so virtuous, persisted, and is especially clear from visual representations of ancient Dutch society. It posed in itself the problem of civilisation, or rather uncivility, already touched upon by Erasmus in the Batavian ear. The Batavians were strong and brave and get even stronger and braver as the century moves on. The humanist and politician Daniel Heinsius, in his funerary lecture for Janus Dousa, poet, historian, but also politician and military commander in the Revolt, talked of Leiden as the New Athens. The inhabitants of Holland, his fellow Batavians, get the stature of supermen,

'hardly born already used to the sea, fighting storms and wind, thunder and lightning. In short all that can cause death, they do ignore. They don't live at the sea, but, so to speak, in the sea, for they not only are the best in shipping but also in rowing and Tacitus doesn't mention if they use their arms or oars. Ever since antiquity the Britons have fled their fleet.'

But the fact remains that Tacitus had said already that they suffered from gula and that they lived in frugalitas, in sobriety, a thing which the liver- and kidney tortured Erasmus, so much more beneficiary of Burgundian wine and the Italian sun, could not deny. The Dutch are inclined to too much eating and drinking, and that unfortunately not of the best sort. The Tacitean gula keeps bothering the Dutch humanists throughout the century. In the descriptions the Batavians get a whole range of possible epithets, - *Feroces, Truces, Animosi, Fortissimi, Veteres militiae magistri, Populi virtute praecipui, Fidelissimi, Statura proceri, Nobilissimi, Socii imperii Romani, A primevo aevo laudis et gloriae populus, Laudis et gloriae cupidi. Quondam duces Germaniae atque Galliae in bello quod gerebant contra Romanos, Audacissimi, Immetuentissimi, victoriosi, veteres multorum bellorum victores, validissimi artus exercitus tributorum expertes* -, but never they reach the status of being civilised, *culti*. The Batavian ear keeps bothering them and there is a fast literature on how to turn this for the good through humanist education, also in a political sense.

It must be clear by now that, at the origin of the Batavian myth, the resistance theory and claim of sovereignty so important in the seventeenth century, were not at all at stake. The revolt of Claudius Julius Civilis and his farmer soldiers was a matter of finance and violation of privilege and custom, not of law - a violation of freedom of taxes by the emperor - and a matter of military pride and patriotism. So what was the

political language that this new historical myth tried to convey? In the depiction of a virtuous arcadian Batavian society in which every male adult participated in political life and every citizen, male or female in military life, we see a national variation of the Italian civic humanism. However, the greatest political value of the Batavian myth from the outset was that of building a broader sense of being a political, moral and cultural entity, and of founding the collective idea of being a Dutch nation. The Batavians were set out, through history, against and above all their neighbours, and that they had a claim to pre-eminence within the Habsburg empire. It is precisely this new concept of natio and patria which proved to be the potent factor in the new nationbuilding process, in which Holland took the lead.

A new fatherland-concept

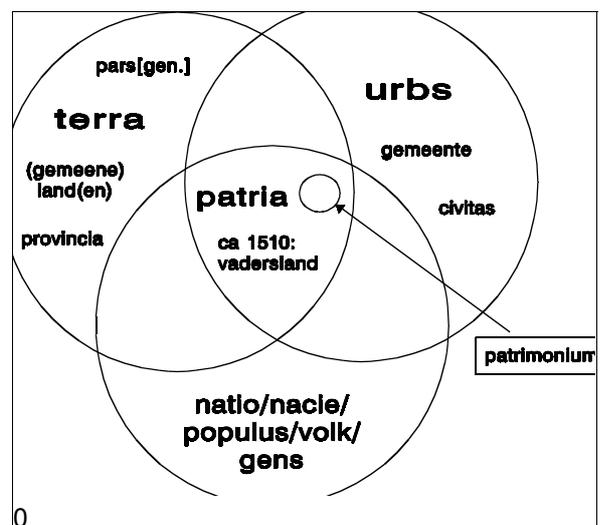
Let's look more in detail what the conceptual development of fatherland literature that the words fatherland and nation are early-modern inventions. In a recent collection of essays, *Vergankelijkheid en Bedrog*, the well-known historian Ernst Kossmann stated that the middle ages were a period 'that did not know at all the concept "nation".' This view has actually a long tradition, with representatives like Simon Groenveld and the art-historian Scheller, writing 'Whether the elites of Holland, Gelre and Utrecht had at the time [i.e. 15th century] developed something like what we call 'a national feeling' or 'a collective sense', seems very questionable. The concepts 'nation', 'patria' of 'motherland' still had to be developed.' The most influential opinionmaker in this negative view on patriotism in the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands has been the famous Johan Huizinga, with his essay 'Uit de voorgeschiedenis van ons Nationaal Besef' (On the prehistory of our national consciousness), written in 1912. Using Burgundian court-historians like Monstrelet, Froissart, Commines and Thomas Basin he wrote: 'In vain we look, even in the best historiographers of the fifteenth century, for the expression of political ideas.' And: 'They (the historians) don't know the concept state and neither do they know the concept of nationality in the sense of a stately union. The most commonly used term "nation" is still without any political consciousness and indicates only a certain cohesion of dialect and manners, men "d'ung habit et d'ung language". Nations are e.g. the Frisians, the Flemish, the Gueldrians...'

We do find the idea of the seventeen provinces of the Netherlands, but we cannot conclude a political message from this. At the end of his long essay Huizinga

concludes therefore that the preconditions for the emergence of a Burgundian-Dutch national consciousness in the fifteenth century was lacking. The historiographers don't conceive it in terms of state or fatherland, but only in terms of heretage and princely possessions. The consciousness, at the Burgundian court, of being French and of sharing in France's high fame, impeded the emergence of a separate Dutch national consciousness at this early stage, according to Huizinga.

What is missing in Huizinga's analysis, and which has been repeated ever since its first formulation, is the conceptual development in the non-court historiography, originating in the periphery, in the Netherlands itself. As we look at it now it seems rather odd to look for a Netherlandish national consciousness at the court-level. The language development on fatherland was the other way round: not from top to bottom, but from bottom to top, that is from the provinces against the central state. In this general conceptual development of the patria against the prince there is a very striking difference between the Northern Netherlands and the Southern Netherlands. Elsewhere I have made an extensive study of this conceptual development but here I will constrain myself to six main observations relevant for our argument here:

1. The traditional view that with the coming of humanism there was a paradigmatic switch from the celestial patria to the terrestrial patria is not confirmed in the historiography of the Netherlands: in all of the provinces we find before 1500 proof of an emotional attachment to one's country or city-state, although the terminology used for this varies from province to province.
2. The semantic field of the patria-concept shows a remarkable continuity in the period before and after 1500. We represent this field for the Burgundian-Habsburg period in the historiography of the Netherlands in Figure 1:



Within the historiography of the individual provinces, however, there is a wide variety of what could be called the 'conceptual stretching' (Sartori 1970) of the concept patria. In some provinces the semantic field of patria includes all three circles, in others only one or two. The historiography of the province of Holland shows the most elaborate, integrated and 'stretched' patria-concept, in the early-sixteenth century, in which the terms patria, natio, provincia and civitas are connected to one another. It is also here that we find the earliest equivalents of the terms in the vernacular. As early as 1510 we find use of the word vadersland for the unity of Holland. This is the only one of all the other seventeen provinces where the term patria is linked up with that of natio, the collective and historical inhabitants of the country. Elsewhere, like in the free Friesland, the connection is made between patria and gens. In Louvain and Guelders the term patria is only applied to the cities, urbes, and not to the whole of the country, whereas in Brabant and Flanders there is a vivid exchange of the terms terra, civitas and patria, but none whatsoever of the term natio or people of the country. This is a striking point in the longterm continuous dynastic orientation of Flemish and Brabant historiography, throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth century, and with the lack of a strong city-historiography the development of national consciousness, in the South, certainly lagged behind that of the province of Holland.

3. It is under the Habsburg rulers that we can see the development of new names for the patria, names which have a political content or meaning: Batavia, Belgium and Nederlanden. Much as the concept of patria stretches in the course of the fifteenth and

sixteenth century, the content of these new names also stretches in the course of time to bigger political units. Batavia starts out to be the provinces of Holland, Zeeland and Utrecht and gradually starts to comprise the whole of the later Republic. The term Belgium is first only used to indicate the South (Hadrianus Barlandus), but in 1519 it means the whole of the Habsburg Netherlands (Reinier Snoy). In a curious poem on auris Batava by Petrus Hondius we even find the plural Belgia (Isaac 1600). The term Nederlanden we find from 1490 onwards, from the onset more a geographical than a political unit. The most important stimulus for the politicisation of the patria-concept came, without any doubt, from the new national myth and polemic on Batavia. This polemic transcended the borders of the different provinces precisely because it was a debate among humanists working in the North and South of the Netherlands: Montanus, Frederici, Dorpius, Erasmus, Aurelius, Barlandus, Geldenhouwer, Heda.

4. It is clear from this that under Habsburg rule the patria-concept becomes more important and outspoken in the Netherlands, and that here, we can speak, with Graus, of 'eine Intensivierung des Eigenbewusstseins...., das sich bereits gelegentlich als nationales, die Standesgrenzen berschreitendes Bewusstsein artikulierte und dabei historisch argumentierte' (Graus 1986, 51).

The patria-concept was clearly argued and founded historically, but of what political discourse does it form part? I'd happily take on board a quote from Viroli that without patriotism there is no republicanism, but we cannot turn this axiom around into: with patriotism goes republicanism (Viroli 1995). However, the plea for patriotic duties, the arguments for patriotic love as a virtue, given in the historiography discussed here, are not essentially different for the ones we know from the political pamphlets later used in the Revolt. The reasoning is mainly negative: what happens if the unifying love of the country of all citizens falls behind or even away? With quotations of Sallust's *Bellum Iugurthinum* 'Concordia res parvae crescunt, discordia maxime dilabuntur' and Cicero's *De Amicitia* 'Quae domus tam stabilis, quae civitas tam firma est, quae non odiis et dissidiis funditus possit everti', the dangers of civil discord for the country are shown. The opposite of pietas patriae or amor patriae is civil discord: 'Propter te civis insurrexit in civem, amicus in amicum, frater in fratrem, filius in patrem et matrem, et plateae civitatum humano sunt sanguine malefactae....' (Leydis 1620, p. 274)

This is one side of the medal: love of the country provides internal harmony. The reverse is far more aggressive: patriotic virtue is almost synonymous with military virtue; the validity of the medieval 'pro patria mori' becomes reinforced in humanist discourse, but not in service of the prince so much as being characterised as a virtuous

common good of the people, the collective citizens of the country, the 'natie'. In accounts of the Batavian revolt, Julius Claudius Civilis, prince of the Batavians, of noble blood and royal birth, appeals to the national military duty of his people to fight the deterioration of the Roman administration, the corruption of the foreign bureaucrats, and the violation of the alliance which guaranteed the Batavian freedom from levy or taxes. The parallel with the provincial reaction against the succession of Mary of Burgundy, resulting in the G4(i)11.87715(i)21.882.2175(t)7.84154(h)1575(.2057(B)16.61

1992; Van Gelderen 1999) and it became the essence of personal political freedom both during and after the Revolt. We don't seem to find this concept before 1566, however, and what we find instead is the argument that the love of freedom and the protection of it through active, i.e. military citizenship, is protected by God (Scriverius, *Batavia illustrata*, 103). Did we see that the Batavians in the course of the century get the status of military supermen, from the very beginning if this national myth they certainly have the status of the elected people: like the Jews there country was already ruled 'under Mozes' times" by kings (*Divisiiekroniek* f.91v). Only later, during the Revolt, this argument is elaborated and we find the parallel of the liberation of the Dutch with the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt under Mozes (Marijke Spies 1999).

5. What we cannot discuss here in detail, but what is obviously of major importance in the spread of the new ideas, is the ideological strength of imagery in the propagation of this new national myth. Already before 1500 we see desperate attempts in Dutch historiography to construct a national myth by giving pictures of Troy and genealogies of Trojan descendants the Dutch heraldic lion. But once the Batavians entered the Dutch scene they proved a much more rewarding source of historical representation and the first illustrated histories, showing the lifestyle of the ancient Dutch, appeared.

6. Finally, Huizinga and many after him, totally underestimated the political dynamic of the new national myth, and especially of the patria-concept developed therein. Indeed, contrary to Huizinga, I would argue that this new national myth, with its republican language, was, from the onset, a very active factor in the evolution of the new state. More arguments for this statement can be seen in the comparison with the development of the political language in the Southern Habsburg Netherlands, where in constitutional practice - the semi-independent cities - and theory the republican tradition was stronger than in the North, but where a national myth of origin and a collective point of historical and political identification were absent. The princely conservatism proved stronger there. Why was this the case?

In the South the patria-concept suffered, in a way, from the strength of the commercial cities. The historiography of Flanders, for example, remains dynastically oriented throughout the Burgundian-Habsburg period. Whereas we find a very strong sense of patria in very early writing (12th century), with the development and growing political power of the cities this conceptual development falls behind that of the city-oriented concept respublica or communitas. It is for the cities that a myth of origin is invented, that is the well-known Trojan origin, but although this myth offered the Flemish cities nobility and equality vis-a-vis the sovereign, the Burgundian duke and

Habsburg emperor, they did not endow a notion, a concept of collectivity and identity as the Batavian myth had done in the North. It was through a new political genre, mirrors-of-magistracy, dealing with the character and problem of the respublica, that political thinkers in the South tried to develop civic virtue and identity. At the same time, there is a mainstream of humanist writing in the South, defending the princely propaganda of the Joyous Entries.(Tilmans, in press)

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