Past Present: The Village Potters of Cyprus
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Past Present
The Village Potters of Cyprus
by Gloria London

Pottery dating is an essential tool of archaeological research.

Almost a century ago, Sir Flinders Petrie developed a system to date pottery based on changes in ceramic style (Petrie 1891). Pottery dating has since become an essential tool of archaeological research. The chronological value of pottery derives from changes in form and surface finish. Each archaeological period has its own ceramic style or styles. Changes in style contribute to an understanding of social issues, such as how, where, by whom, and for whom the pots were made (Franken 1986: 7; London 1985, 1987a).

In addition to recognizing chronological distinctions, can we identify wares made in different but contemporaneous communities? For instance, can we determine if two cooking pots belong to different pottery manufacturing centers operating at the same time rather than two different archaeological periods? These questions can be addressed by ethnoarchaeologists who study traditional potters to observe pottery techniques passed down from one generation to the next (Kramer 1985;

Cyprus is an ideal location for such research because pottery production has been a Cypriot industry for 7,000 years. Today, village potters continue to produce utilitarian shapes — jugs, juglets, jars, cooking pots, pita plates, incense burners, ovens, flower pots — along with a small percentage of wares for sale to tourists. Cypriot juglets destined for foreign markets resemble the ceramic assemblages uncovered throughout the ancient Near East, and rural and urban potters of today continue this millennia-old tradition of foreign trade.

As a Fulbright Fellow in 1986, I lived in two pottery-producing villages — Kornos and Agios Dimitrios — and conducted seven months of ethnoarchaeological study. I observed, photographed, and interviewed potters while collecting quantitative data on vessel sizes, proportions, quantities produced, numbers of pots fired together, sales and distribution. Kornos, which has a population of 1,800 and lies in the foothills south of Nicosia, has a 200-year history of pottery production and supplies urban and rural communities. In contrast, Agios Dimitrios (population 140), a remote village high in the Troodos Mountains and a three-hour drive from Kornos, serves a rural clientele primarily.

During my seven-week stay in the mountains, I also visited Kaminaria (population 200), a village not recorded in previous surveys, and Phini (population 800), east of Agios Dimitrios. In Kaminaria, the pottery industry once involved as many as 20 potters. Unused kilns still stand among the houses in the village, where now only one potter continues the tradition. In Phini two women produce wares exclusively for tourists. More than 25 years ago, R. Hampe and A. Winter (1962: 79) photographed a potter and her husband working in Klirou, southwest of Nicosia in the Troodos foothills, but pottery is no longer manufactured there.

The Potters

Male and female potters flourished until four decades ago, but now the tradition is mostly carried on by women (London 1987b). Today 23 traditional potters work in four villages — Kornos, Agios Dimitrios, Phini, and Kaminaria. All of the potters are older than 50, and all but two are women. In the past, men either made the full repertoire or specialized in the largest shapes, such as ovens (fourni), large storage jars (pitharia), and basins (dani). Today, one man in Kornos and another in Agios Dimitrios smooth and finish pots shaped by their wives, and the one in Agios Dimitrios also builds jars.

In Kornos, 10 of the 13 potters belong to the Kornos Pottery Cooperative, which was formed in the mid–1950s. The other three work independently. The Cooperative sells clay to its members while the private potters acquire clay from other
Male and female potters flourished until four decades ago, but now the tradition is mostly carried on by women.

Ten Ways to Use a Sherd

As a practical guide, the following rules about pitharia may be of use to potters. Pitharia are not  storage containers. They serve a wide variety of domestic and industrial purposes. In the home pitharia once served as bath tubs and as saunas for new mothers. In the larder, they contain wine and dry foodstuffs. To make wine, grapes ferment in pitharia. The vessels are also used for the production of zivania, a Cypriot eau de vie, or brandy. In the courtyard, pitharia are placed on their sides and encased in mudbrick to serve as stoves. They might also be used as planters for small trees and plants. Broken pitharia serve as trash cans or wash basins for clothes.

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Ten Ways to Use a Sherd

Residential recycling is regularly practiced in each of the pottery-producing villages. For broken pottery, this means that every sherd and cracked pot can be reused. Sherds are not found in large quantities near the potters’ workspace. Instead, the sherds are sold to builders, who use them as chinking material in stone walls to fill in the space between the stones, thereby creating a colorful and attractive building. Sherds are used as tempering material or filler for sun-dried bricks. To prevent tables from wobbling on the uneven stone and earth-packed floors, sherds are wedged under the table legs. Potters mix crushed sherds with water to create a paste for repairing broken pottery. Kiln doors and roofs are closed with sherds or broken pots. Potters use sherds to separate pots from the kiln floor and walls during each firing. They also use sherds to carry charcoal from their homes to ignite the kiln. Sherds are found in vegetable gardens where they stand upright to protect young plants from wind. In cemeteries, sherds and broken pots protect candles from wind.

Local red and white clays, derived from gabbroic sources, provide an abundant and suitable raw material for open and closed handmade forms of all sizes. For the past 200 years, Kornos potters have mined clay deposits within the village, but now a building contractor excavates clay from a hill 30 minutes away. In Agios Dimitrios, small quantities of clay are dug out of the surrounding mountain slopes and transported on the backs of donkeys. To a large extent, urban potters rely on imported clays and glazes for their wheel-thrown and molded wares.

In the first step of preparation, the clay (chomah) is dried outside in the early morning sun. Large stones and pieces of organic material are removed prior to crushing. In Kornos, one woman uses electrical equipment to grind the clay for all members of the cooperative, and then each potter mixes her own clay with water—the ratio of clay to water is approximately 4:1—and uses a pug mill to force air from the clay. Potters pile the clay in a pilos and use it immediately, not allowing it to age.

Percentages of pottery types produced in Kornos and Agios Dimitrios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vessel type</th>
<th>Kornos (N = 1880)</th>
<th>Agios Dimitrios (N = 686 pots)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jars</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round cooking pots</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat cooking pots</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ovens</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casseroles (no lid)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jugs</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flower pots</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goat milking pots</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incense burners</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorated pieces</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pita plates</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking pot lids</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashtrays</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellanea</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Jars and jugs form a larger part of the production in the mountain pottery than in Kornos whose wares are geared for a more urban clientele.
or sour. Before working with the clay, it is blessed by prayers.

In the mountain villages potters and their spouses, using a wooden stick (koupani or matsola), manually pound a mixture of red and white clays together for 15 to 30 minutes. It is then passed through a metal sieve for 20 minutes. The potters mix the clay powder with water in a shallow wooden trough (skafi), using either a long-handled, wooden shovel or their feet. Three-and-a-half buckets of powder, mixed for 15 minutes with the shovel, produce a small pile of clay one meter in height. A photograph taken in Kornos more than 50 years ago depicts a skafi, but now only private potters use them.

**Manufacturing Technique**

To manufacture all forms, one basic technique prevails in all villages. Potters combine hand modeling with coiling and scraping to create each piece. They use a small turntable, trochos, that can be rotated clockwise or counterclockwise with the side of the foot. It is not a kick wheel, however; the pottery is not wheel thrown. All shapes—open and closed, large and small—are coil built.

The first step involves centering a solid cylinder of clay on a “bat” held securely by three dabs of clay on the trochos. The bat is made of bark (felllos), wood, or stone (marmaro). The potter forces a small hole into the cylinder with one finger, then her knuckle and finally her fist. By enlarging the opening, she creates a flat-based form with thick lower walls. Coils increase the height in a process known as the interrupted technique of manufacture. The potter rolls the clay between her hands to create a short, snake-like band of clay, or coil. Each coil is added individually to increase the height of the pot. Drying intervals, during which the potter removes from the trochos the incomplete form on the bat, interrupt work on each piece. For small and medium-sized vessels, stage one involves shaping the full height—from base to rim—by adding coils to the initial form modeled from the cylinder of clay. Larger pieces are built halfway up and allowed to dry before adding more coils. Every potter always has many pots at various stages of manufacture. Initially the lower bodies are quite thick.

All vessels, except the smallest, are often bound with rope, wool, string, or strips of cloth during the first two stages. The rope supports the wet clay and is removed before the excess clay is scraped from the lower bodies. Although all of the rope’s physical traces disappear, its use is the origin of intentional incised patterns mimicking rope marks that are common to modern and ancient domestic wares. To complete the last step in stage one, potters in Kornos incise a pattern on the vessel’s shoulders and/or rims, after which the pot is set aside to dry slightly.

In the second stage, small and medium pots are repositioned on the trochos so that handles can be added to each jug (kouza), cooking pot (kourelli, koumnoudi tou klefticou, tsouka, and piniada), juglet (ellinakia or touristika), and incense burner (kapnistiri). Once the rim and shoulder are sufficiently dry, but not totally dry, they can support the weight of the heavy handle. [Wet clay does not adhere well to dry clay.] To make these same shapes, potters in Agios Dimitrios and Kaminaria first add handles and then decorate the upper body and allow the pieces to dry.

*This photograph, taken about 50 years ago, depicts a skafi, which is used for mixing clay and water. Photograph courtesy of the Joan du Plat Taylor archival material at CAARI.*
In stage three, the potters unwind the string from the pots before scraping away the excess clay from the base. The bases must be dry before the potter can complete this stage.

In stage three, the excess clay from the lower body and base is scraped away. To complete a juglet, the potter holds the piece in her hand to thin the base and pinches a clay coil into place for the ring base. Although the juglet is rotated in the hand, the base is symmetrical and even. When creating a large piece, the potter first opens a large cylinder of clay and gradually increases its height by adding coils. This process can last several days or even a week before a flower pot (glastra), jar (koumna), or oven (fourni) is finished. Few potters are able to lift the heavy clay to return it to the trochos after it is removed for the first drying period, so they add more coils, one or two at a time, by walking around the piece.

**Firing**

Firing pottery is a delicate procedure for which the Cypriot potters display great expertise. Early in the morning 100–400 leather hard pots are stacked in the kiln (kamini). Larger pieces stand directly on the grid-like floor of the upper chamber. Cooking pots, jugs, jars, and smaller objects fill in every void around the larger shapes to fully utilize the kiln space.

Each member of the Kornos
Pottery Cooperative uses the communal kiln to fire her own wares every second or third week, potters sometimes share the kiln with older women who produce fewer objects, or with the one cooperative member who specializes in small, intricate multiple vases and juglets.

The private potters in Kornos start the kiln fire using the traditional method. Three pine cones are carefully arranged in a triangle at the mouth of the fire box. With an incense burner containing hot charcoal and olive leaves, which have been blessed in church, the potter makes the sign of the cross three times over the pine cones. She then sprinkles leaves and coals over the cones, adds twigs, and the fire starts. In Kornos, olive wood is preferred, although any available wood can be used; the best wood produces the least fumes, smoke, and ash. Members of the Kornos Pottery Cooperative, on the other hand, use a kerosene-soaked cloth to ignite the fire.

Firing a kiln requires most of the day. A small controlled fire, fueled with twigs, dries the pots for several hours before larger branches are added. Large logs, 15 centimeters [almost 6 inches] in diameter, are added between eight and ten hours after the fire is started, and they create a roaring fire that will last for two or three hours. The potter peers into the small openings, called eyes, of the kiln to determine when the pots acquire the desired color.

To close down the kiln, the logs are pulled out of the fire and doused with water to be sold later as charcoal. Pots are left in the kiln overnight, until transportation can be arranged, as the kiln is the safest place for the fragile, fired wares.

Potters formerly traveled to village fairs to sell their pots or exchange them for agricultural products. Potters from Agios Dimitrios would visit the western part of the island in late summer or early autumn, and those of Kornos would go to the eastern area. Today, potters in Agios Dimitrios hire a truck or a driver to deliver the wares to their rural and urban customers—private individuals and shopkeepers. In Kornos, shopkeepers drive up to the kiln as soon as it is opened to purchase the entire load or part of it.

Archaeological Implications
The purpose of ethnoarchaeological investigation is to record the traditional pottery industry before it disappears and to seek the answers to specific issues related to archaeological ceramics, such as: the material correlates of pottery production; the disposal and disposition of broken pots; the sources of regional diversity in ceramic forms and decoration; and the production rate.

Material correlates of the pottery industry and pottery production locations. Most sites of ancient pottery production have remained undetected, despite advances in archaeological techniques. Buildings are known from every archaeological period, but little evidence of pottery manufacturing has been identified. What clues might archaeologists look for to uncover such evidence?

Today, traditional pottery manufacturing in Cyprus, a cottage industry, is found throughout the residential areas of the village, such as in the courtyards or in small, windowless rooms attached to the main structure. In the case of the Kornos Pottery Cooperative, manufacturing takes place at the edge of the village.

Several factors contribute to the dearth of artifacts from pottery production in domestic settings. In the summer months, pottery is made in domestic courtyards, where other chores are carried out as well—the workspace is multifunctional. In November, with the onset of the rainy season, all evidence of pottery-making disappears as the potter prepares her courtyard for winter [London 1989]. Neither clay nor wood are stockpiled, given the limited indoor area and the lack of storage space, and only the kiln remains visible.

Charcoal and wasters, or misfired pots, are the two by-products of pottery production. The charcoal is sold and the wasters are few because of the minimal loss rate during firing and the reuse of sherds [see accompanying table]. Perishable organic material—wood, bark, string, cloth, and cane—decomposes. In Cyprus and the Philippines [London 1987a],

To complete an oven, the Kornos potter walks around the piece repeatedly to smooth the rim. She uses wooden tools to smooth and finish the upper body and rim. After the lower wall is sufficiently dry, a hole is cut and a spout-like accessory is added to serve as a flue. In the foreground, an oven is drying. Once dry, it will be turned upside down so the potter can scrape the base.
many of the metal tools and parts—thin, iron scraping tools, nails, and ball bearings of the wooden turntables—are reused, recycled, and reshaped artifacts, making it difficult to associate them exclusively with the pottery industry. Old unused kilns are dismantled, except for the lower part, to make room for new structures in the residential area, and the building materials—bricks and stones—are reused. This same practice occurs in Egypt [Nicholson and Patterson 1985].

What then characterizes pottery-production locations? Two aspects of the Cypriot case study offer clues for archaeologists in search of ancient pottery work places. The domestic setting of this seasonal industry for the traditional full-time potter suggests that the remains of ancient pottery workshops might be identified within the confines of domestic courtyards or in small, dark rooms lacking agricultural or storage equipment. Despite the absence of winter stockpiling of clay, microscopic analysis of the floor could reveal the presence of unfired clay. Unlike our disposable society, the recycling of objects in antiquity may have been the norm. Tools found in a room used by potters would include fragments of reused and reshaped artifacts.

Sources of regional diversity in the ceramics industry. The village potters of Cyprus produce a repertoire of coil-built, red-firing wares that can easily be distinguished from the wheel-thrown brown- or white-firing wares made by the urban potters. Can one also identify in which of the village potteries the products were made?

All village potters in Cyprus use locally available clay, the same
This Kornos potter, who specializes in small, decorated pieces, holds a juglet in her hand while smoothing the surface with a cane tool.

manufacturing technique, and create wares with incised decorations, but it is possible to identify differences in an industry spread among three villages (excluding Phini, where tourist-oriented wares predominate). This is important for the study of ancient pottery. If one can understand differences in the traditional pottery industry today, the same criteria may assist in identifying diversity in ancient wares within an archaeological period.

Despite an overall homogeneity of vessel shapes and surface treatments, regional diversity permeates all aspects of pottery making. Intervillage variation includes clays, equipment, decoration, repertoire, kilns, and the distribution of the finished products (London 1987a). In Kornos, potters use red clay; those in the mountains mix red and white clays. For the past 50 years, if not longer, turntables in Kornos have had a square head; those used in the mountains have had a round head.

Of greater significance, differences in the tools used for decoration result in decorative motifs indicative of each village. The spliced cane tool creates a rosette pattern found exclusively in Kornos. A roulette pattern is typical of other Kornos potters but not those of the mountain communities. In Agios Dimitrios, potters decorate pots with combed, solid, or slashed zigzags. The Kaminaria potter prefers complex, combed patterns, and she alone decorates the lids of cooking pots. Although the tools, fashioned from organic materials, would not survive archaeologically, their imprint in the clay reveals the origin of the pots and the tradition of their makers.

Not only does the decoration vary for each village, but nuances in the order of applying the handle and decoration differentiate the wares. In Kornos, the potters apply handles after decorating the shoulder; this interrupts, smears, and covers part of the incised pattern. In the mountains, handles are attached before decorating the piece, and the potters carefully arrange the incised pattern between the handles. This small but important detail enables one to determine the regional derivation of incised wares without chemical or mineralogical testing. Other features allow one to identify the origin of a pot. Handles on cooking pots vary from village to village. One can
Chronological differences in pottery can be detected by excavating sites that span the centuries.

distinguish between wares made in separate but contemporaneous communities by looking for subtle surface nuances.

Regional variations in the repertoire, manifest in the vessel types produced and the quantities made, reflect the diversity of lifestyles in Cyprus today. For their urban and rural clientele, Kornos potters make a higher percentage of flower pots and decorated pieces than do the potters in the Troodos, where the rural customers need jars and goat-milking pots (galettiria). The two distinct markets for Kornos and Agios Dimitrios pottery are the result of differences in the lifestyles of the present-day Cypriot, not of lesser knowledge or skill on the part of the potter.

Kiln shapes and their locations are other variable factors. In Kornos, kilns are square-bodied, built on level ground, and have permanent roofs and a side door through which pots are usually stacked. In Kaminaria, Agios Dimitrios, and Phini, the top-loading circular kilns lack a permanent roof and are built adjacent to a slope to facilitate loading. After the pots are stacked, old roof tiles, sherds, and metal sheeting are added to create a roof and preserve the heat, while the outermost layer of bark and wood serves as additional fuel to that placed below in the fire box.

A study conducted 25 years ago shows that the Klirou kiln has a permanent roof and a side door [Hampe and Winter 1962: plate 45], a square-headed turntable and rosette patterns are used [Hampe and Winter 1962: plate 48: 5 and 49: 6], and the vessel is decorated before adding the handle. The potter, born in Kornos where she learned to make pottery, brought the Kornos traditions with her to Klirou. In contrast, the homogeneity of the mountain potteries is striking.

Ethnoarchaeological study suggests that, for the past 200 years—and maybe longer, given the wide range of subtle difference in all aspects of pottery making—two regional traditions emerged in the southern part of the island. A lowland tradition, in the Troodos foothills, prevails at Kornos and until recently at Klirou. Phini village is the center of the mountain tradition where the potters from Agios Dimitrios learned the craft.

Have there always been two traditions, one in the lowland and another in the mountains, or were there many more traditions? Was pottery once made in every village or in every household at certain periods of history or was the work confined to a relatively small number of locations?

For example, in the Middle Cypriot I period [around 1900 to 1800 B.C.E.], pottery production was the domain of craft specialists [Herscher 1975: 44] and probably was not carried out in every village. Potters who lived in a few communities sold or traded their wares for basic commodities, perhaps at village fairs as in the recent past (Christodoulou 1959: 101–2; London, Egoumenidou, and Karageorghis 1989: 65). The paucity of excavated kilns and pottery workshops might be indicative of the small number of places producing pottery, both in the past as in the present.

Can a handful of pottery-producing communities supply the entire population? What is the output of each potter and each village? Based on the quantitative data, 1,880 pots are produced in Kornos each month, 522 of which are cooking pots. From Kornos alone, 10,000 to 11,000 coil-built pots, 3,000 of them cooking pots, can be sold during the six-month pottery-making season.

Sources of variation in traditional pottery. In Cyprus, pottery made in two contemporaneous villages varies sufficiently in the tools, raw materials, decoration, and type frequency to make it easy to recognize the two geographically distinct yet coexisting traditions. These differences are not chronologically significant. To the contrary, they serve to highlight the contemporaneity of two regional traditions.

A second source of variation concerns stylistic changes and modifications of the repertoire. Those are indicative of time rather than origin or place of manufacture. Jugs with incurving rims represent an older version of the ones made today with flaring rims and necks. Ring bases no longer appear on jugs, only juglets. The roulette-incised patterns from Kornos have almost disappeared but are still made by the oldest practicing potter. The multifunctional pitharia [see accompanying sidebar] are in decline as are the decorative motifs—rope molding, names, dates, and other patterns—found on the large jars. Two-handled jugs (stamni) and goat-milking pots are rarely made today. These changes represent chronological distinctions resulting from developments within the indigenous society.

In the study of ancient pottery, changes in the decoration, modifications of vessel forms, and the gradual disappearance of shapes from the repertoire are usually understood as evidence of the passage of time. In Cyprus, these chronological markers can also help explain the social and
economic relationship between the pottery-producing communities and their clientele. Differences in pottery result from transformations and differentiation within the society rather than from external influences. As the older potters decrease in number, so do certain incised patterns and vessel forms. As the rural population diminishes, so does the need for specific objects once made of clay.

For archaeologists, chronological differences in pottery can be detected by excavating sites that span the centuries. But to recognize nontemporal differences related to social distinctions it is important to excavate contemporaneous sites that span the physical landscape. To reconstruct ancient societies requires both.

Conclusion

Ethnoarchaeological study of traditional Cypriot potters helps reveal the factors that influence variation in ceramic form and finish. Some of the differences have chronological implications while others relate to the place of origin, family ties, and the accepted tradition of making pottery. Why do the potters decorate their wares? To make them look better was one response. Why do potters use specific patterns and not others? The patterns in the clay and the vessel shapes are a permanent statement expressing community, belonging, and continuity.

For the archaeologist, homogeneity and variation in pottery provide evidence not only of the manufacturing tradition but also of the economic and social catalysts that stimulate changes in ceramic form and finish.

Acknowledgments

As traditional potters are gradually disappearing in all parts of the world, I appreciate the help of everyone who contributed to this ethnoarchaeological study of Cypriot potters. Financial support from the Fulbright Commission guaranteed completion of the project, and I want to thank the late Renos Kamenos, former Executive Director of the Fulbright Commission, as well as his successor, Daniel Hadjitoffi. Vassos Karageorghis, Director of the Department of Antiquities, generously offered encouragement and help, and his dedication to preserving the archaeological and historical landscape of Cyprus will enrich future generations.

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To the potters, my hosts, and the village presidents, who shared with me their homes, hospitality, and expertise in pottery production, I express my sincere thanks. In an effort to preserve the traditional pottery of Cyprus, I assembled a collection of traditional pottery for the Cyprus Museum.

The editorial assistance of Lydie Shufro and Pauline Albenda is acknowledged with thanks and appreciation.

Notes
1An early reference to local pottery production can be found in the eighteenth-century writing of G. Mariti, an Italian priest sent to Cyprus to learn about the wine industry, who refers briefly to the potters of Korns [Nicolas 1984: 58]. Max Ohnefalsch-Richter [1891, 1893] along with Magda Ohnefalsch-Richter [1913], J. du Plat Taylor and O. Tufnell [1930], and A. Pieridou [1960] have shown interest in the traditional pottery industry.

Hampe and Winter [1962] gave an excellent although brief description of the Cypriote traditional potters, as part of their survey of Mediterranean potters. Among those who have visited the potters in the last two decades are R. H. Johnston [1974], M. Yon [1985], and R. E. Jones [1986].

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