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Archaeology in the Third Reich. Academic scholarship and the rise of the ‘lunatic fringe’ *Uta Halle*

Abstract

In the 1920s, and especially during the Third Reich, the ‘lunatic fringe’ of prehistoric archaeology – in this case a group of pseudoscientists that used and created archaeological evidence to found their religious and political visions of the early past – has had a great influence on German archaeology. This group, often called archaeological *Schwarmgeister* (‘fanatic dreamers’), attempted with varying success to gain influence by occupying party positions and by initiating excavations that might not have occurred otherwise. By focusing on the activities of two pseudoscientists – Wilhelm Teudt and Hermann Wille – as case studies, it becomes clear that they reinforced the existing division (Ahnenerbe versus Amt Rosenberg) within professional archaeology. The reactions from academic archaeologists turn out to have been diverse. The theories of Wilhelm Teudt on the Germanic *Externsteine* were accepted by some professional archaeologists. At the megalithic graves in the Oldenburg area, where Hermann Wille was active, this did not happen. After 1945 their work was used in the accusations that the assistants of Amt Rosenberg especially had been involved in unscientific research. This accusation did not correspond with contemporary reality but was the result of the struggle for power and influence within the group of academic archaeologists that continued in post-war Germany.

Keywords

National Socialism; pseudoscience; historiography; SS-Ahnenerbe; Amt Rosenberg

Introduction

After 1945 historiography on academic research in prehistory was dominated by one main topic: the position of the SS as an organization that had protected true science. The article ‘Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung in der Urgeschichtsforschung’ (Scholarship and world view in prehistoric research) in *Die Kunde* in 1950 by K.H. Jacob-Friesen was no exception to this rule. In this article Jacob-Friesen, who was director of the Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum in Hanover and one of the most famous German archaeologists, accused members of the Amt Rosenberg of lending local pseudoscientists their support and a willing ear (Jacob-Friesen 1950, 4). It was an accusation which at that time was often uttered, especially by the former assistants of the SS-Ahnenerbe. A nuanced analysis of archaeology

during the Third Reich can, however, reveal a different state of affairs, as will be shown in this paper here with two examples.

Jacob-Friesen's article of 1950 was not his first publication on pseudoscience. Already in 1934, the second year of the Third Reich, he had published an essay in the same journal entitled 'Waren die Riesensteingräber wirklich "germanische Gotteshäuser"?' (Were the megalithic graves really 'Germanic sanctuaries?') (Jacob-Friesen 1934a). In the same year, he had written the article 'Hellseher in der Urgeschichtsforschung' (Clairvoyants in the research of prehistory) (Jacob-Friesen 1934b). Both times he reported on activities of what nowadays is known as the 'lunatic fringe' of prehistoric archaeology: in this case a group of pseudoscientists that used – and created – archaeological evidence to found their religious and political visions of the early past. In the 1930s many prominent German prehistorians occupied themselves with this group, which had influenced German prehistoric research since the mid-1920s. To describe their position, these archaeologists often used the expressions *unheilvolle Phantasten* ('dangerous visionaries') or *Schwarmgeister* ('fanatic dreamers'). The latter expression, introduced by Martin Luther during the Reformation as a polemic term for his opponents, designates people with opinions that differ from the official voice. Three persons in particular were characterized with this epithet: Wilhelm Teudt, Hermann Wille and Herman Wirth, and not without reason. Like no others, they challenged traditional archaeology with their speculations, and through their high contacts.

What exactly had happened around the time when Jacob-Friesen wrote his reports, and why were German prehistorians in the period from 1925 to 1934 so worried about the activities of pseudoscientists in archaeology? To answer these questions it is necessary to give a short overview of the development of German prehistoric archaeology since the beginning of the 1920s, including the then existing subdivisions and rivalries. At the beginning of the Weimar Republic, pre- and protohistoric archaeology was not a well-funded discipline in Germany. But from the mid-1920s this situation altered: German archaeology was profoundly professionalized. The first chair in prehistory was established in 1928 at Marburg and around the same time at the universities of Berlin, Königsberg, Breslau, Halle and Tübingen the first students educated in prehistory were given doctors' degrees. In many parts of Germany the new academic prehistorians came across educated laymen who for many years had been conducting serious research. These laymen had decisively shaped archaeology since the mid-19th century by voluntarily taking care of monuments as well as by implementing museum education programmes. But the first generation of academic prehistorians also had to face many problems. They encountered an unsatisfactory labour market and the rise of a 'lunatic fringe' of archaeology. People like Teudt, Wille and Wirth developed implausible and unscientific theories on archaeological monuments and attempted to convince the interested public as well as some archaeologists of their ideas. It was in the mid-1920s that the rise of these pseudoscientists began.

After 1933 the situation changed dramatically. Academic archaeological research became divided into two rival groups, Amt Rosenberg and

SS-Ahnenerbe, while the rise of pseudoscientists continued with special vigour. The pseudo-archaeologists succeeded in taking advantage of the new structures of power. Through their connections with leading Nazis they were able to execute their goals of research and thus to influence German archaeology in various ways. Excavations were conducted in order to verify speculative ideas, findings were interpreted falsely or kept secret, and prehistorians were denounced or even spied upon.

Two case studies will be presented here to illustrate these complex developments. They analyse the activities and work of two of the three pseudoscientists already mentioned: Wilhelm Teudt and Hermann Wille. Teudt was well known for discovering ‘Germanic sanctuaries’ in countless natural monuments, the most prominent being the *Externsteine*, a bizarre sandstone rock formation in north-west Germany. Wille became a celebrity because he recognized ‘Germanic sanctuaries’ in the north German megalithic graves. Those within the Oldenburg area, especially those at Kleinenkneten, stood at the centre of his theories. Teudt and Wille had in common that they were able to attract huge public attention with their assumptions and thus triggered archaeological investigations at the two sites. They were both so successful in the promotion of their ideas that the effects are still felt today.

Case study 1: Wilhelm Teudt and the *Externsteine*

The *Externsteine* located 12 km south-east of Detmold, a small town in the former Free State of Lippe, today the *Kreis* of Lippe, consist of four rocks (rocks 1–4) of marine Osning sandstone, which as a result of tectonic activity 65 million years ago were tipped almost vertically. Erosion by the Wiembecke River, climatic influences during the Saale ice age and rock-mining during the Middle Ages and modern times gave the rocks their very unusual appearance (Figure 1). The four rocks have therefore attracted many individual researchers since the sixteenth century. Their attention was often directed at the spaces hewn out of the rocks: the cave at the base of rock 1 and the room at the top of rock 2 (the tower rock). The small coffin rock (*Sargfelsen*) with the arcosolium near rock 1, and a carving in rock 1 showing how Jesus was lifted from the cross, were also the subject of research. Several dates have been proposed for the carving formation: the early 9th century (Matthes 1982; Mathes and Speckner 1997), the early 12th century (Fuchs 1934), and the year 1250 (Großmann 1993). The debates centred on the question of whether the *Externsteine* were a Germanic sanctuary destroyed by Charlemagne or ‘just’ a place used by Christians for pilgrimage and seclusion (Halle 2002).

After 1926 the debate on the *Externsteine* intensified and became the subject of media attention as a result of the activities of the former evangelical parson Wilhelm Teudt (Figure 2), who had lived in Detmold since 1920. After Teudt had given up his position as parson he dedicated himself to research on heredity and the Germanic people. It was undoubtedly clear to Teudt that the rock formation was a ‘significant witness of ancient Germanic culture, reflecting . . . the cultural level of our ancestors in times immemorial’ (Teudt 1929, 16).¹ Initially he was primarily interested in the room located at the top of rock 2. He was convinced that during the days around the summer



Figure 1 Reconstruction of the results of the excavations at the *Externsteine* (rocks 1–4) in 1937 (photo Staatsarchiv Detmold).

solstice, the ‘men’ would gather there to observe ‘the first lights from great stars ascending over the opposite hills’ (Teudt 1929, 20). Teudt attributed an astronomical function to this room because there was a round window in its east wall from which on the 21st of June the sunrise could be observed. The carving in rock 1 also attracted Teudt’s attention. After some correspondence with Herman Wirth he interpreted the crooked tree in the relief as *gebeugte Irminsul*, i.e. a symbol of the main Saxon saint. The charismatic Wilhelm Teudt was able to gather a group of about 1,000 adherents in the *Vereinigung der Freunde germanischer Vorgeschichte* (Society of Friends of German Prehistory). Teudt’s followers came from all over Germany. Among them were important economical and industrial patrons such as Mathilde Merck (the pharmaceutical industry) and the Darboven family from Hamburg (coffee roasting). Wilhelm II, the former German emperor who was living in exile in the Netherlands, was also interested.

As a result of Teudt’s activities near the *Externsteine*, tensions grew. The teacher Emil Altfeld, a member of the Scientific and Historical Society of Lippe, criticized Teudt’s theories with backing from the social-democratic state government of the Free State of Lippe. Professional archaeologists such as Karl-Hermann Jacob-Friesen (Wegner 2002), Carl Schuchhardt and Gustaf Kossinna (Grünert 2002, 313) also vented their criticism on Teudt. Speaking of chimerical excrescences, they tried to explain the inconsistencies of Teudt’s theories to the public. Finally, in 1928 or 1929, the regional government of the Free State of Lippe decided to assign to Münster archaeologist August Stieren the maintenance of archaeological monuments in Lippe because they did not want Teudt to gain more influence. For the same reason, the government decided to have Stieren excavate at the rocks. In April 1932 an excavation was undertaken, but only completely disturbed layers were found (Halle



Figure 2 Wilhelm Teudt (1940) (photo Staatsarchiv Detmold).

2002, 120–24) The researchers involved hoped that the situation would soon calm down, yet the opposite occurred. Teudt and his followers continued to consider themselves victims of traditional science.

From 1933 onwards, as a result of changed political circumstances, the archaeological *Schwarmgeister* suddenly found wide support amongst various political VIPs at state and Reich level. In spring of 1933 Teudt was able to construct a *Heiligen Hain* (Holy Yard) around the *Externsteine*. The small pond laid out at the rocks in 1836 was to be drained and the track between rocks 3 and 4 was to be paved (Halle 2002, 150–52). The construction work was combined with an excavation. In order to settle financing and organization, the *Externsteine-Stiftung* (Externsteine Foundation) was founded, with Heinrich Himmler as a member of the managing committee (Halle 2002, 180–83). Teudt recommended an excavation director to the national socialist state government according to Himmler's preferences. Teudt's choice was Julius Andree, a geologist and party member who belonged

to the department of Amt Rosenberg through the Reichsbund für deutsche Vorgeschichte (Society for German Prehistory).

The first excavation took place in spring and summer of 1934. At the end of the summer, the Detmold teacher Emil Altfeld alarmed some professional prehistorians (Halle 2002, 232). He had observed that Teudt's protégé Andree made obvious mistakes and worked with false interpretations in order to prove the theories of Teudt. Altfeld's assessment of the excavation was that the things happening 'equal a danger to the reputation of prehistorical research' (Halle 2002, 232). Although Andree belonged to the Amt Rosenberg, Teudt used his connection to Himmler and activated the SS to examine the excavation results (Halle 2002, 149–252). The result was a meeting between archaeologists of the Amt Rosenberg, Julius Andree and members of the SS, which took place in Detmold in April 1935. As a result of the presence of the SS no one dared to start discussing the false interpretations. For that reason the employees at the Provinzialmuseum in Hanover – as well as Schuchhardt – refrained from discussing the *Externsteine* (Halle 2002, 257–60).

The second campaign at the *Externsteine* was conducted in 1935, now under SS supervision (Halle 2002, 257–60). In 1936 Andree published a short article about the two excavations in *Germanenerbe* (Germanic heritage), a magazine of the Amt Rosenberg of non-specialist and propagandistic nature (Andree 1936a), and in the same year he published his book *Die Externsteine. Eine germanische Kultstätte* (The Externsteine. A germanic cult place) (Andree 1936b). In both publications he presented interpretations that were similar to Teudt's theories (Halle 2002).

In 1943 the former Hanover archaeologist Kurt Tackenberg (Halle 2003), who by then was associated with the SS-Ahnenerbe and held a chair of prehistory at Bonn, ordered the investigation into the *Externsteine* excavation results. This order, however, was never carried out (Halle 2002, 498–501). The result was that the public considered Teudt's theories as archaeologically proven. During the Third Reich these theories were presented to the public during countless guided tours. The *Externsteine* also figured in propagandistic events, for example in the propaganda film *Hermannsland* of 1936, which was also produced in Dutch for the upcoming wedding of Lippe's Prince Bernhard and the Dutch Crown Princess Juliana. The SS also used the site as a place where the *Treueid* (oath of loyalty) to Himmler could be sworn. One particular meeting, on 9 November 1938, became notorious. During this *Reichspogromnacht*, SS men returning from a gathering at the rocks burned down the synagogue in Detmold (Hartmann 1998, 651–52).

Case study 2: Hermann Wille and the megalithic graves in the Oldenburg area

As the first archaeological investigations of the first half of the 19th century had revealed 'only things which indicate burials', the megalithic monuments in the Oldenburg area were generally considered to be graves (Oldenburg and Greverus 1837, 16). At the same time these megalithic graves were defined as 'symbols of a national identity', later also as metaphors of a 'racial bond' (Fuhrmeister 1999). In the 1920s the Oldenburg megalithic graves triggered the attention of the so-called *Schwarmgeister*, the most important of them



Figure 3 Hermann Wille (1935) (photo Bundesarchiv Berlin).

being the architect Hermann Wille (Figure 3). Wille was born in Oldenburg in 1881 and attended primary school there. In the beginning of the following century he received higher education at the trade school in his home town. In the First World War he fought in Flanders, in the Balkan states and near Verdun. Since 1920 he had been active in the political groups that were concerned with the Germanic past. He became for example a member of the Deutschvölkischen Schutz- und Trutzbund. From that time on the path of his life was similar to Teudt's, although differences are noticeable regarding cooperation with the NSDAP. While Teudt was admitted to the party as late as 1937, Wille can be considered an 'old party comrade' given his 1930 entrance.²

After the First World War Wille worked in Berlin as an architect and, according to his own words, he received numerous commissions from Jewish

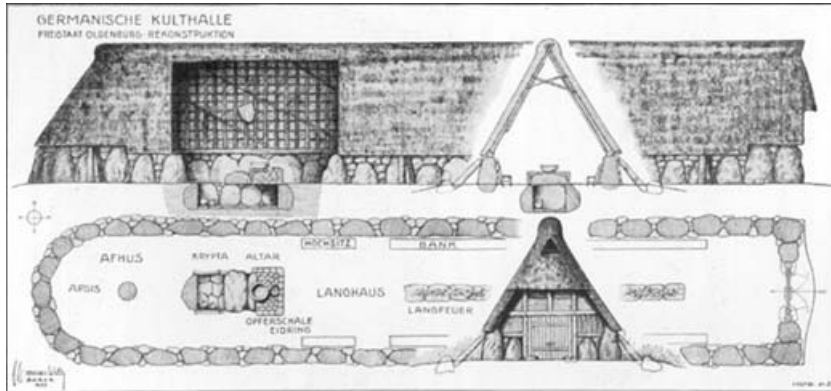


Figure 4 Reconstruction of a megalithic grave by Hermann Wille (after Wille 1933, 157).

citizens. This abruptly ended when he entered the party. Due to ‘a lack of contracts’ he had to close his Berlin office in 1930. He returned to Oldenburg where he devoted himself to the prehistory of the area.³ In 1937 he described his motivation as follows:

Due to my affection for knowledge of our ancestors’ culture, for many years I have been conducting independent research on pre- and early history in our North German homeland. The result of my work is a book entitled *Germanische Gotteshäuser zwischen Weser und Ems* [Germanic Sanctuaries between Weser and Ems]...I have also held speeches...on Germanic culture.⁴

In his book, Wille’s vision of megalithic monuments is very clear. He viewed them as the ‘base of a roofed religious assembly hall’ (Wille 1933, 119) and characterized them as ‘architectonic structures... which the leader or ruler... built with his people as a religious assembly hall to honour the gods’ (Wille 1933, 126). Wille described the exterior in the following manner (Figure 4): ‘The religious assembly hall was a long and plain building with a high thatched roof which almost reached the ground’ (Wille 1933, 130). Regarding the interior partitioning he made the following description:

Three-fourths consist of the assembly room, in which cult and sacrificial celebrations took place. The remaining one-fourth was where priests stored cult objects and temple treasures. The sacrificial altar was located in front of the priest’s room. The remains of the ruler lay underneath it in a deep grave (Wille 1933, 143).

To Wille, the ‘deep grave’ also symbolized the archetype of the Christian crypt (Wille 1933, 151). A part of the megalithic graves in Kleinenkneten he interpreted for example as an ‘apse’ (Wille 1933, 151). He was sure that the religious assembly halls were a necessity during very cold winters or in other periods when the weather did not permit sacrifices at holy altars in the open air (Wille 1933, 130).

It is not known when Wille first went public with his theories. Probably this was the lecture entitled 'Germanic temples in the Early Stone Age' that he held in May 1933 for the Gesellschaft für germanische Vorgeschichte (Society for Germanic Prehistory) in Berlin. Just two weeks later, in June 1933, Wille presented his ideas on the 'Germanic sanctuaries' at the first Nordischen Thing in Bremen, a meeting of right-wing persons interested in Germanic prehistory (Lutzhöft 1971, 272–73). Wille's vocabulary revealed his connection to the *Blut und Boden* ideology of the Reichsbauernführer Richard Darré. He was soon to be employed full time on the latter's staff. One of his tasks was to guide the Reichsnährstand (State Food Department) through the Oldenburg megalithic graves. Again an archaeological *Schwarmgeist* seemed to arise.

Discussion of the megalithic graves, however, went in another direction than had been the case with the *Externsteine*. There were similarities, but the scientific community reacted in a different way. Experts, like Jacob-Friesen, started criticizing Wille's work right after its publication. Jacob-Friesen wrote that it was irresponsible to spread throughout the world 'theories as novel truths without having checked all publications' (Jacob-Friesen 1934b, 6). In the closing sentence of his article, Jacob-Friesen summarized his opinion once again very clearly: Wille's written 'stuff' was the 'saddest piece of work I have seen in a long time' (Jacob-Friesen 1934b, 6).

After these public expressions Wille felt a victim of traditional science. In order to produce evidence for Wille's controversial theories, an excavation at one megalithic grave was arranged by the Oldenburg government as early as 1933. Financial aid was given by the Deutsche Notgemeinschaft der Wissenschaften on the condition that the excavation was to be led by Jacob-Friesen and Tackenberg (Michaelsen 1978, 217). At first, excavation of the Steinkimmen grave was planned, but then the Oldenburg Museum for Natural History decided for scientific reasons to investigate the Kleinenkneten graves instead (Michaelsen 1978, 217). The excavation began in the spring of 1934 with Jacob-Friesen as its director. The Oldenburg government also invited Hermann Wille to participate in the fieldwork.⁵ Wille, however, refused, not only because of his workload in the Stabsamt of Reichsbauernführer Darré, but also to protest against Jacob-Friesen's directorship.⁶ Just a few weeks into the excavation, the direction changed – Jacob-Friesen resigned due to other work demands. Because at the same time Jacob-Friesen's assistant Tackenberg was appointed professor at Leipzig, the direction of the Kleinenkneten excavation was passed on to Karl Michaelsen, director of the Museum at Oldenburg and NSDAP member since 1931. The difficulties between Wille and Jacob-Friesen could now have been over, but thanks to Wille's paranoia they continued with undiminished vehemence. Wille wrote, for example, to Herman Wirth in winter 1935,

In spring 1934, Professor Jacob was assigned by Hanover to examine the megalithic grave Kleinenkneten to find out whether the squarely built stone wall could have been the base of a roofed religious assembly hall. Jacob did not finish this task.... Jacob's excavations were not able to disprove anything, because otherwise the results would have become public. Jacob's followers and especially the lecturer Michaelsen gave in to the idea

of completely concealing the negative excavation results and reconstructing the stone foundations according to their wishes.⁷

This was, however, not true. Michaelsen many times presented his excavation results to a scientific audience, for instance at the conference of the Nordwestdeutscher Verband für Altertumskunde (North-west German Society of Antiquity) of April 1935 and at a meeting of the Reichsbund für deutsche Vorgeschichte in October 1935 in Bremen. At the first conference, Michaelsen had given a short review of the first part of the excavation at Kleinenkneten. Carl Schuchhardt, leader of the conference, later remembered with satisfaction that the results of the excavation were identical to those he had given in 1915: “Mighty family-grave and monuments for the dead” (Schuchhardt 1935, 254–56). In 1937 Michaelsen published the report ‘Großsteingräber im Oldenburger Land’ (Megalithic graves in Oldenburg) in the journal *Germanen-Erbe*. There he spoke of a ‘wide burial chamber’ (Michaelsen 1937, 11). But this report also contained plain propaganda. For example, he interpreted the artistic expressions of the builders of the graves as a mirror of the hereditary racial spirit or as proof of the cultural superiority of the Nordic ancestors (Michaelsen 1937, 11).

The last time Michaelsen published a report on the Oldenburg graves was in 1978 in the *Oldenburg Jahrbuch* (Oldenburg yearbook) (Michaelsen 1978). If his published article in *Germanen-Erbe* is left unconsidered, his work is devoid of Nazi ideology.⁸

Concluding remarks

The case studies of the *Externsteine* near Detmold and the megalithic graves near Oldenburg show clearly why Jacob-Friesen and other traditional researchers in the early 1930s discussed both in print and in lectures the problem of the *unheilvolle Phantasten* and the *Schwarmgeister*: the theme was simply one of the topical subjects in German prehistory. The disputes between the *Schwarmgeister* and academic prehistorians faded as the Second World War broke out. After 1945 discussions of the megalithic graves of the Oldenburg area were almost absent. This resulted from increasing consensus on the subject within academic archaeology from the mid-1930s onwards as well as from the character of Wille, who was a lone fighter lacking the charisma to bind a large retinue. The *Externsteine*, however, continued to make the headlines after 1945 as a ‘Germanic sanctuary’. Previous disputes between academic prehistorians and local *Schwarmgeister* were, however, only a marginal subject of this discussion.

I hope to have demonstrated that a nuanced historiography of archaeology during the Third Reich may produce some unforeseen results. One, which has been discussed in this paper, is the observation that the open and free discussion of the excavation results from the *Externsteine* completely ceased because of SS intervention. Despite such gains of insight, in Germany the scholar conducting research on the history of the discipline during the Third Reich is confronted time and again with the question of why he or she deals with these topics, as scholarly research has thoroughly disproved the assumptions on the *Externsteine* and on the megalithic graves. This may be

true, but ideas taken from Wille's and Teudt's assumptions are still virulent today. In 2001 an information leaflet was available at a restaurant near the megalithic graves of Oldenburg. It characterized these monuments as the 'cultural achievement of Nordic people' and the question of whether they should be seen as 'religious assembly halls of our ancestors' was still posed. Since the 1990s people have been gathering at the *Externsteine* for the summer solstice in increasing numbers (in 2002 there were over 1,000 visitors). They represent esoteric or neo-pagan groups, but most likely also include members of right-wing organizations. Only recently, the Nationale Jugend made an excursion to the *Externsteine* during Kamaradschaftstreffen 2001 (Friendship Meeting 2001). To conclude, National Socialist ideas are thus passed on in an unreflected manner at both places. Presenting results of archaeological research in the context of the history of the discipline remains therefore important for the confrontation of this phenomenon.

Notes

- ¹ This and all other translations from non-English sources are my own.
- ² Personal record of Hermann Wille, 15 February 1937. Bundesarchiv BDC Berlin Materialien Wille.
- ³ Report from Wille's interrogation by the Gestapo on 8 December 1938. BA BDC Berlin Materialien Wille.
- ⁴ Personal record of Hermann Wille, 15 February 1937. Bundesarchiv BDC Berlin Materialien Wille.
- ⁵ Bundesarchiv BDC Berlin Materialien Wille.
- ⁶ Letter, Wille to Suffert, 31 July 1934. Staatsarchiv Detmold L 115E Nr. 31.
- ⁷ Letter, Wille to Wirth, 24 January 1935. Bundesarchiv BDC Berlin Bestand Ahnenerbe Materialien Wille.
- ⁸ Nevertheless, due to his closeness to the Amt Rosenberg he was recently counted among the group of 'propagandists' (lecture by G. Wegner, 'Zwischen Ideologie und Wissenschaft. Archäologische Forschung in der NS-Zeit am Beispiel der Megalithkultur', Helms-Museum Harburg, 11 March 1998). In Michaelsen's defence it may be noted, however, that he refused an offer to switch to the SS-Ahnenerbe.

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