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The Old Stone Crosses of Congresbury: historical and photographic study

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Churchyard cross and Refectory, Congresbury 1827 (Piggott collection)

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Abstract

Congresbury village and churchyard crosses have been portrayed on many occasions by antiquarians, especially the former, being far more obvious to the passing visitor than the cross tucked away in the churchyard. It is unusual for a parish to have remains of both village and churchyard crosses surviving, especially now that work by Broomhead has cast doubt on the date of the supposed village cross at Wraxall.

Acknowledgements

YCCCART are most grateful to Congresbury Parish Council and St Andrew's parish church, Congresbury for access to the churchyard cross – the village cross is in the public highway.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCCART) is one of a number of Community Archaeology teams across North Somerset, supported by the North Somerset Council Development Management Team.

The objective of the Community Archaeology in North Somerset (CANS) teams is to carry out archaeological fieldwork, for the purpose of recording, and better understanding, of the heritage of North Somerset.

The fieldwork for this report has been carried out with repeated visits by the author since 1974.

For further information on CANS, see http://cansnetwork.co.uk

Site locations



Fig 1: Locations of Congresbury churchyard (to west) and village (east) crosses

Congresbury churchyard cross lies in the churchyard of St Andrew's parish church, 25m SE of the corner of the south aisle chapel of the church, at ST43606374. The village cross stands at the junction of Broad Street and High Street, at ST43736381. Both are in the village of Congresbury in North Somerset, some 15km SW of the city of Bristol.

Land use and Geology

The churchyard cross lies on an island of the Mercia Mudstones, as seen when new graves are cut in the modern extension to the churchyard; the village cross on the alluvial clays of the Northmarsh, which here overlay the Mudstones.

The former is in the current churchyard of Congresbury, although the area around the cross itself has not been in active use for burials for some decades. The latter is in the public highway, next to a busy main road.

Historical and archaeological context

Medieval stone crosses were a fashionable subject of antiquarian enquiry from the mid 19th century, when Pooley was studying those of Gloucestershire (Pooley 1868) and Somerset (Pooley 1877). Some of the latest work on a whole county was that of Watkins on the crosses of Herefordshire (Watkins 1930). Sequences of reports on other counties have been published, but few have recently been examined using modern archaeological techniques.

Congresbury churchyard cross has featured on several occasions in county-wide recordings, such as those in the Braikenridge collection in the archives of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, and has featured in a number of post cards and other illustrative material (e. g. Tozer 1989).

A similar interest in recording has been experienced by Congresbury village cross, although being in the centre of the village and (before 1928 and the rebuilding and realignment of Congresbury bridge) on the main Weston-super-Mare to Bristol road, it has attracted more non-antiquarian attention than that in the churchyard.

The lack of recent academic study of these structures means that most of the ideas surrounding their construction and use (such as the strange persistence of belief in churchyard crosses being earlier than the church which they serve, which they almost never are) are 19th century in origin, and reflect the academic standards and ideas of that period.

The 'Old Stone Crosses of Somerset' was written and published in the late 19th century (officially in 1877, although his research seems to have been carried out during the previous decade) by Dr Charles Pooley.

Pooley was a doctor at the Weston Sanatorium (now the 'Royal Sands' on Weston-super-Mare sea front) and lived in Raglan Crescent in Weston. He spent much of the 1860s and '70s travelling the lanes and byways of Somerset seeking out these fascinating monuments in churchyards, by waysides, over springs: he chatted with the local vicars and rectors, many of whom studied antiquities in their often remote parishes, where often they might be the only well-educated person in the place.

His documentary study seems, by today's standards, very slight, although to be fair his book was never intended as anything but 'notes', and he did achieve his plan, which was to make people far more aware of these structures, and to make certain they were better conserved, and in this, he largely succeeded.

Pooley retired to Cheltenham not long after the publication of his book, and a saddening letter now bound into the copy of the Old Stone Crosses in Nailsea library reveals that at the end of his life, he was completely blind.

The name 'stone cross' covers a multitude of sins (if you'll pardon the phrase): it can mean anything from a crude cross cut into a natural boulder (there is one on the border of the parishes of Culbone and Porlock, in far Exmoor) to a huge complex building erected for a market shelter (such as that in the market place at Cheddar).

The medieval form of cross, which broadly speaking consists of a set of steps, a socket and a shaft (all broadly, but not strictly, radially symmetric), supporting and displaying a small carved head with crucifixion and other scenes, is universal throughout the surviving Somerset crosses (with the exception of the special category of market crosses, which also incorporate a shelter over the

steps - still radially symmetric, however).

The heads usually depicted a crucifixion scene on one side, and a second scene, often of the BVM holding the child Christ, on the other. The more ornate often also included figures on each side of the head as well, often figures of a knight and / or bishop.

Because of the religious symbolism of the carved heads, these were ruthlessly destroyed in the iconoclastic times of the Reformation and 17th century civil war. This was carried out so thoroughly that only four survive on their shafts in Somerset – Stringston and Spaxton near Bridgwater, Wedmore and Chewton Mendip. Pooley identified several heads or fragments of heads surviving elsewhere, and my research has raised this total to about 20.

Churchyard crosses are built for complex, inter-related reasons, but briefly, these seem to be

- 1 As a common memorial to all the dead of the churchyard
- 2 As a gathering point for the spreading of news and proclamations

3 As the last site of common celebration on the procession around the parish on Palm Sunday (Russett, in prep).

The crosses in churchyards are certainly always connected in the public mind with preaching: at Craswell and Llanveynoe in Herefordshire, Watkins (1930) recorded seats constructed outside the church, apparently for the use of congregations listening to preaching at crosses. Such seats exist at Spaxton and Glastonbury. This seems to have been unusual, and presumably other congregations stood (or maybe just sat on the grass). This was clearly the case with other crosses, such as that in Iron Acton churchyard in South Gloucestershire, where a small railed space is provided for the accommodation of the preacher.

One main function of the churchyard cross, however, seems to have been as the final station on the Palm Sunday procession before re-entering the church (see Watkins 1930, for a discussion of this). The result of such use is that many of the crosses have (and other presumably once had) affixes or drill holes or other features facing the church path, and which would have been used to hold decorations and possibly the pyx on Palm Sunday. Such a use is remembered in the name Yew Cross at Wookey, near Wells. This also implies that the cross was very likely to have originally been sited beside the path to the church door in use in the medieval period, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the south door. Fieldwork indicates that it is almost always sited (when in its original position) to the right of the path as the door is approached (as it is at Congresbury). This may imply that churchyard crosses not in this position have been moved at some time - this is certainly the case with Orchard Portman, near Taunton, where contemporary drawings during the 1840s document the move. In other cases, the path may have moved away from the cross, although this seems to be less likely to happen often.

During the period of the Reformation, a practice known as 'Creeping to the cross' was at first supported by King Henry VIII in 1539, then in 1546, Archbishop Cranmer drafted an edict (which the King never signed) for the banning of the practice along with other major religious festivals. After Lord Protector Somerset's edict for the destruction of all shrines and pictures of saints in July 1547, the blessing of foliage on Palm Sunday and 'Creeping to the Cross' were both banned in February 1548.

A few crosses, of course, have been moved into churchyards to protect them from destruction (such as Bishops Lydeard): others have made the opposite journey (Evercreech, for example), while some have dodged about the village (such as Meare), and in these cases, their original function cannot be readily assumed.

Village crosses ('market crosses') are rather more simple to understand, largely being central to trade and exchange (both of goods and of information and news) in the village.

Many crosses acting as market crosses have an interesting relationship to their market place, and to events there. Both sheltered and open crosses are frequently seen as sites for the sale of small produce, or where stalls can be erected. Frequently, and especially just beyond living memory, they were perceived as the appropriate place for market women to sit, (as opposed to the men who walked around the market trading livestock) and the frequency of the occurrence of the name 'Butter Cross' (supplemented by several occasions where name and records imply the existence of a cheese market) imply that the market function of crosses may have been seen as a domestic / female / enclosed role, as opposed to the agricultural / male / open role of the rest of the market. This is a large subject, and one that might be investigated further. In this context, it is interesting to see a letter of Sir Edward Hext of Low Ham to Ralph Rixdon, vicar of Kingsdon, in 1615, concerning Somerton market cross, and which includes the lines:

'...but also will (at myne owne Chardge) build a fayre Crosse, that the people maye sytt drye to sell their butter, Cheese, Appells, oatemeale, Cabbage, rootes and other such thinges, as are solde at a Crosse...' (Berry 1992: 110)

Time and again, the relationship of village crosses, High Crosses and crosses in suburbs of towns like Wells to markets is unmistakable (examples can be found in Wells, Frome, or Taunton). Presumably, the erection of a market cross would be part of the equipping of a market place, as would the erection of shambles, or allocation of places for stalls.

A class of market crosses with shelters around them may be developed from the simpler medieval forms: at Bridgwater, a wooden shelter used to convert a simple form into a market cross was ordered to be dismantled in 1724; Cheddar has a minutely narrow stone shelter that is very clearly an afterthought, and possibly, even in its origins, constrained by the narrowness of the roads that completely surround it. Later crosses, however (Shepton Mallet, for example) have an integral plan, and by the time of Somerton (attributed by Pooley to 1673, but probably early seventeenth century – see above), the shelter has become the more important element. At least in Somerset, none of the large market houses have been confused with crosses (unlike, for example, Ross on Wye), although there has been confusion over the former market house and market cross at Wells, and the naming of Dunster Yarn Market as a cross is perhaps just as unlikely.

The former existence of a class of secular shelter-market crosses, at (for example) Milverton, Nether Stowey and the surviving Somerton, which appear never to have borne religious symbols is clear, however. While it is quite possible that these succeeded former smaller medieval structures, this cannot be taken for granted: only in the case of Somerton is there known documentary evidence for a cross in the market place before the building of the market cross, although it might be assumed that both Milverton and Nether Stowey were important enough market centres to have warranted such crosses themselves. Dunster Yarn Market may have been the successor to the Butter Cross outside Dunster, which was probably moved from the town centre to its current wayside site, although the later history of this cross is not yet clear.

Through the medieval period (certainly until after 1499, when Yatton cross was supposedly made), the construction of the traditional form of cross indicates a major role in the life of the community. At some time in the sixteenth century however (and in a very short period of time), a remarkable paradigm shift occurs: with the Reformation, removal of monasteries, and the establishment of Anglicanism, the crosses were perceived as symbols of religious decadence, and the carved heads especially so: sixteenth and seventeenth century iconoclasm became the new perception of the

crosses: popish and superstitious idols, they were to be brought down (although the fact that many of the carved heads were carefully hidden either intact or with the fragments gathered together, by building into walls - presumably by individuals concerned for the preservation of the religious features on the stones - indicates a significant, if minority, resistance to this idea).

As far as it is possible to tell, for the next century or so, the crosses were left to fall apart, with depredations for stone (such as at a boundary cross in Merriott in 1573 – SRO DD/TMP box 6, Court Books) recorded incidentally.

Ironically, at the same time, large sums were being expended on market crosses. Shepton Mallet cross is vital to the understanding of this phenomenon. It was constructed around 1500 (as was Glastonbury market cross), and it was originally crowned with a religious carving, indicating the continuing perception of even large structures as didactic and multi-purpose. Glastonbury was different: at the top of this structure was the equivocal figure of 'Jack Stagg', an apparently naked male figure bearing a shield, hardly an orthodox Christian symbol.

The market crosses continued to be made, and it is difficult not to relate the differing attitudes to this construction and the destructive attitude to smaller crosses, with the transition from late monastic and feudal to capitalist and market economic structures in larger society. As the purpose of the market place cross became more economic and less religious, so the structure became less overtly like a medieval cross and more like a shelter, until the arrival of such structures as Dunster Yarn Market, Milverton and Nether Stowey, which bear virtually no resemblance, and yet bear a clear developmental relationship to what has gone before, hence the retention of the name 'market cross'.

As the eighteenth century wore on, an interest in the picturesque began to develop, and at the end of the century, drawings such as those of Glastonbury depict 'shattered crosses', picturesque in the extreme state to which 200 and more years of neglect had brought them. Some were better maintained: Cheddar market cross was repaired many times during the 17th century, and even protected from traffic: it is noticeable that by this time, the expenditure involved in setting out stalls on market day was carefully recorded in the churchwardens accounts, the cross no doubt being viewed as an asset, commodified into a market building (SRO D/P/Ched various).

The eighteenth century also contributed to the picturesque of the crosses by contributing sundials, square dials and balls, and various other finials to replace the missing carved heads, as indeed happened to the cross in the village at Congresbury. The structures were clearly regarded as decorative features of the village landscape, symbols not of the power of Christianity, but of the largesse of the Lord of the Manor. It is hard not to also see the change from a religious and basically cyclical view of the world, to a linear, rationalist one, in the large number of sun-dials that appeared on the heads of crosses (even in churchyards, and despite the fact that they were still well-known to be of former religious significance).

Further discussion of origins and meanings of crosses are in Russett (in prep)

Congresbury churchyard cross

The churchyard cross at Congresbury is probably on its original site in the churchyard. When Pooley examined the cross in the 1870s, he described it thus:

The churchyard cross is a fine specimen of fourteenth century work. Two stages of it only are preserved - the steps, which are three in number, octagonal, and with sunk facings and weatherdrip mouldings and splays; and the socket, which is an equal-sided octagon, with deep drip and a set-off at base. It stands east of the south porch of the church.

The basement measures 4 ft. each face, by 1 ft. 7 in. in height; the second step, 2 ft. 9 in. each face, by 1 ft. 1 in. in height; and the third, 2 ft. each face, by 1 ft. in height. The socket is 2 ft. 5 in. in height, and 2 ft. 10 in. square at base. (Pooley 1877)



Fig 2: Congresbury churchyard cross (from Pooley 1877)

This is somewhat damning with faint praise. The cross is of freestone (Jurassic limestone, probably from Doulting) throughout.

The cross has deteriorated since Pooley's day, despite being declared a Scheduled Monument (Avon 19). In 1974, apart from this, it looked exactly as Pooley had portrayed it. Although Rutter (1829) does not describe this cross, he does depict it with no less than five steps, although it is not certain how accurate his drawing is (Rutter 1829: 35). The earliest known depictions of this cross were in 1827, and are to be found in the Piggott collection in the library of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (Fig 3 below; cover artwork)

A slightly later (and far more accurate) drawing of the 1840s (Braikenridge 1840x1850 – Fig 4 below) shows the cross in a dilapidated and overgrown state, with large gaps between the stones, but otherwise much as in Pooley, with the possible exception of detail of the top of the socket, where the earlier drawing appears to show an octagonal section above the string which now forms the top of the socket. The cross is certainly in the same position as today, and was missing its shaft as early as that date. There must presumably have been a restoration between 1840 and the



Fig 3: Churchyard cross and church, Congresbury (Piggott collection 1827)

A photograph of 1899 (Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society 45 (1899) p30) shows the cross in good condition. None of the nineteenth century illustrations clearly show the splay at the foot of the first step.



Fig 4: Churchyard cross in 1840 – 50 (Braikenridge collection)

The top of the socket is unusual, in that it has a large square shallow recess in it, rather than a traditional socket. How this fitted a shaft is not clear, although it may have been that the stone recorded in Braikenridge and now not in place was that carrying the shaft mortise.

The adjacent yew tree has grown over and around the cross since 1974, and there is some argument for trimming it back to avoid damage to the stone.

In 1974, there were vague stories to the effect that the cross was traditionally called 'Congar's candlestick' (in the same way that they yew tree in the churchyard was traditionally 'Congar's walking stick'), although I have subsequently been unable to confirm this, and it may have been a story manufactured in the '70s (a time of much antiquarian invention).

Photographic survey

This was carried out in 1974, 1990 and 1994 by VR. Detailed photographic survey is retained in the Vince Russett and YCCCART archives.



Fig 5: Churchyard cross in 1994 (Vince Russett 1994) (scale = 1.0m)

There are no traces of iron fittings or drill holes in the steps or socket of the cross, but these may have been removed during uninformed 'restorations' since the medieval period.

The hollow top to the socket is (Fig 6 below), as far as I am aware, unique: all other sockets have either a shaft, the remains of one, or a deep mortise for a shaft, either round (rarely) or square (usually) in section. Quite how the Congresbury cross socket functioned is unclear. It is, of course, possible that the socket has been hollowed out for some purpose after the shaft was demolished: in many areas, there is folklore based around the sockets being filled with vinegar to disinfect coins during trade at a time of plague – this could even reflect alteration of the top of the socket because of knowledge of, or even belief in, such tales.



Fig 6: The unusual hollow top to socket of churchyard cross (Vince Russett 1994)

Congresbury village cross

Pooley (1877) also recorded this well-known cross. Until comparatively recently, this cross was very much the centre of village life, with 20th century photographs showing it as the focus of the weekly market and the meeting place of the local hunt. It's role in the village today is largely symbolic, although it is noticeable that the symbol chosen to represent the village on the 21st century village signs 'Congresbury / St Congar's Village' is the image of a village cross.

The cross is first drawn in the 1820's when it was in the middle of the cross-roads where Broad Street and High Street met the Weston-Bristol road.



Fig 7: The view over Congresbury's medieval bridge (removed 1928) to the village cross, standing at the cross-roads (Piggott collection)

The site of the cross was also recorded in one of the earliest maps of the village, a copy of the de Wilstar 1736-9 manorial maps.



Fig 8: Map of Congresbury village (late 18th century) showing site of the cross at the village centre. Note the stream crossing High Street by the cross and running along Broad Street

At this time, the cross could be easily seen along any of the roads, and its centrality is evidenced by the fact that (for example) the 1796 perambulators of the parish met at the cross before setting off for the parish boundary '..Friday morning 20th May 1796 at half past 9 o'clock set off from Congresbury Cross..' (BRO 33041 BMC/4/20 (a))



Fig 9: Congresbury village cross in 1827 (Piggott collection)

The Piggott collection also contains the earliest known detailed depiction of the cross (Fig 9 above). While the depiction of the 'star-plinth' (see below) is unsure, the basic details of the cross (including that it had just four steps) are clear. If there had been another two steps, as Pooley says, they would surely have been visible in this pre-metalled road times. The nature of the affix at the top of the shaft is not clear from the drawing, but it appears to bear two lines of text – 'CONGRESBURY / MARKET' perhaps?

The next depiction of the cross was in the 1840s, by Braikenridge (Fig 10 below). While the scale of the cross is rather exaggerated (the human figures are reduced to not much more than a metre tall – hobbits in Congresbury, any one?) - the business and usage of the cross as a place to sit and gossip is probably very apt. The female figure at the lower right seems to have a bag with her: is this a depiction of something being sold at the cross?



Fig 10: Congresbury village cross in c1840 (Braikenridge collection)

Pooley recorded the cross in the 1870s, and his text is dutifully breathless:

The Village Cross is a structure of later date - fifteenth century, and is in a fair state of preservation. Its plan is octagonal. The Calvary consists of four steps -formerly six - two being buried by the raising of the roadway. The present basement is benched, and has a deep drip. The socket is of very large dimensions, proportioned to its original lofty elevation. Its square base is worked to an upper octagon by high- shouldered convex broaches at the angles.

It rests on a plinth of a character not unlike that of Yatton, being octagonal and splayed, with its angles obliquely chamfered to bold projecting nosings. The shaft is a tall tapering monolith,

capped by a modern square block of stone with a ball on the top. It is mortised with lead into the socket.

Measurements:

Measurements:

	Step	05			Soc	ket			5	haf	t	
	Eaci	h face	He	ight	Heig	-			Hei ?			uare base
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Basement 2nd step 3rd step 4th step 5th step	6 9 5 9 4 0 3 0 2 2	9 6 6	1 1 1 1 1	3	2	10	3	9	14	0	1	0

The Cross is the property of the Charity Trustees of the Corporation of Bristol, by right of their being lords of the manor.

No repairs have been done to it of late years. (Pooley 1877: 124)

Pooley is the first to mention the so-called 'star-plinth' upon which the sockets of a few, more decorated (and thus later?) of the crosses in North Somerset rest, notably those of Yatton, Dundry and Wraxall, although Wick St Lawrence village cross has something very similar. These may be an indicator of date, or even of coming from the same late medieval workshop, but more geological work needs to be done before this can be proven.



Photographic survey

This was carried out by the author at various times between 1974 and the present. Copies of all photographs (including that of a subtle restoration and repointing in 2000) are kept in the Russett and YCCCART archives.



Fig 12: Village cross in 1994 (Vince Russett)

Although road resurfacing has crept up the lowest step, the cross is in otherwise good condition, and sometimes over-eager schemes to 'restore' the cross have by and large been resisted. This cross, a Scheduled Monument (Avon 111), formerly belonged to the Charity Trustees of Bristol Corporation as Lords of the Manor, but was handed back to the parish in the early 1970s. It is well preserved, but the story that there are two further steps below the road surface seem not to be based on any hard evidence. Six steps would be very unusual for a stone cross in Somerset. The deep drip on the lowest step that Pooley mentions was almost entirely gone by 1973, although its last traces could just be seen: they are now covered by subsequent tarmac. Its former existence is a powerful argument for there only ever having been four steps: certainly, only four are shown on Braikenridges drawing of c1840-50 (Fig 10 above).

As Pooley noted, the socket rests on a Dundry / Wraxall type plinth, and although this is very worn, there do not appear to be any broken out-dowels in the points, unlike Dundry. The shaft is as portrayed by Pooley, with one small drill-hole about 0.8m above the stops. The dial cube does not appear to have any fixings for a sundial, and may be purely decorative.

Rutter (1829: 35) describes the cross as having '...*five tiers of steps, surmounted by a tall shaft with arms*...', implying that possibly the cross was capped with a Latin finial, or that it had direction arms attached. This would imply that the dial and ball dates from between c1828 - c1845, when it was illustrated in Braikenridge's Collinson (Braikenridge 1840x1850) with the modern head arrangement. The current dial stone may be modern: it seems to have a smaller upper section, and this is not shown in the nineteenth century depictions of the cross, or Tozer's photograph of c1930.

At this period, and well into the twentieth century (the date on the nearby river bridge is 1928), the road from Bristol to Congresbury ran directly to the cross-roads where the cross stands, so it was very much in the middle of the village, rather than as now, where alterations have left it some 40m from the main road. There is an early photograph of this cross (albeit not very detailed) in Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society 45 :30, (1899), which seems to show the cross in very good condition at that time. A number of early photographs also appear in Tozer (1989), the earliest being from 1906, and one of 1908 confirming the good state of the cross seen in that of 1899.

The cross is a Grade II* Listed Building, whose List description runs:

Village cross. fifteenth century with nineteenth century shaft finial. Limestone. Octagonal on plan, with four tiers of steps (formerly 6 - two are buried by the raising of the road level) up to square socket which has broached shoulders. Shaft square on plan also has broached shoulders and is 3 metres high. nineteenth century finial to shaft apex with block base and ball. The whole structure is 6 metres high, and forms an important visual element at the head of Broad Street opposite the Ship and Castle Inn (q.v.). The cross is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, Avon no. 111.' (DCMS List 1981).

A much damaged account roll of the Chapter Manor for 1388 records a number of grants of land lying within the lord's garden (SRO DD/CC 131910a/6). As this land comprised the demesne lands of the parsonage it is possible to locate it to the area bordering Broad Street on the east. Similar entries in fifteenth century compoti record various dwellings within this area. An early nineteenth century map of the Chapter land in this area shows what would appear to be regular house plots on its eastern side. The unusual width of this street, together with the late fourteenth century market cross at its northern end (described as "*le polecross*" in the accounts noted above), would suggest that this was a deliberately planned arrangement, and perhaps, the origins of the cross itself. (Broomhead, forthcoming)

The Brinsea Stones

It is apposite to include here a brief note on the very high-quality pre-Conquest carved stones found in 1995 in the foundations of a building under conversion in Brinsea Road, Congresbury. These striking late saxon carvings (see below) were at the time interpreted as being parts of a Saxon cross.





Fig 13: Two of the Brinsea Road stones (Mike Bedingfield)

They are now believed to be portions from a shrine to St Congar, that formerly stood in the parish church of St Andrew. (Oakes and Costen 2003).

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