

## Did Daniel Defoe do Dutch?

*Ton J. Broos*

When Dutch King William III started his Glorious Revolution and took over the English Throne, one of his admirers was the now world famous writer Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe* and many other literary works, from pamphlets to novels. In his biography one often finds reference to Holland or the Low Countries, the Dutch and even the Dutch language. Claims are made that he learned the Dutch language and travelled to Holland. However, evidence of this is hard to come by. In 1701, he published *The True-Born Englishman* in defense of William III, to counter xenophobic attacks. How deep was Defoe's interest in Dutch culture?

American Lucius L. Hubbard, collector of imaginary travelogues, found in a curious work entitled *The Mighty Kingdom of Krinke Kesmes* a precursor of *Robinson Crusoe*, which was published eleven years later in 1719. Closer inspection does not prove Hubbard's claim of Defoe's plagiarism. There is no evidence that Defoe could read Dutch, although we do find a few Dutch books in his library. Besides, many travelogues, fictitious or not, can be pointed out as examples of a widening horizon in the minds of writers and publishers. Defoe's description of pirates is considered, as well as his novels *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*. There might be references to Holland and the Dutch, but there is no overwhelming evidence that he read or translated from Dutch sources for his works. His political leanings were favouring William III and after the king's early death he followed the politics of the Low Countries usually in matters of trade and certainly preferring the protestant cause.

Key terms: Daniel Defoe; King William III; Krinke Kesmes; Lucius L. Hubbard; Imaginary Voyages.

On November 1, 1688 there was a strong wind from the east in the English Channel.<sup>1</sup> This favoured the Dutch fleet, which was carrying William III from Hellevoetsluis to Torbay, where he was to land and take over the English throne.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a paper given at the annual CAANS-ACAEN meeting in Waterloo on May 27, 2012.

He brought fifty-three warships, ten fireships and about four hundred other vessels to transport troops, supplies and horses. The entire taskforce was four times the size of the Spanish Armada. “The army was made up of 10,692 regular infantry and 3,660 regular cavalry, plus gunners of the artillery train and five thousand gentleman volunteers – expatriate Englishmen, Huguenots and other sympathisers. On top of this there were 9,142 crew members and a further ten thousand men on board the transport vessels” (Jardine 2008, 8). There were 7,000 horses and the fleet “carried a mobile smithy for shoeing horses and repairing weapons, ten thousand pairs of spare boots, a printing press and a large quantity of printing paper” (Jardine 2008, 8).

Jardine’s vivid description adds that the press was immediately set to work and “[a] hastily written eyewitness account was rushed into print and distributed throughout the area” (2008, 16). William, on his white horse, made a fantastic spectacle, with many gentlemen in armour and even “two hundred blacks brought from the sugar plantations of the Netherlands in America (Surinam), all dressed in white, turbaned and feathered” (Jardine 2008, 16). They successfully marched to London, thus establishing King William III as the victor in this Glorious Revolution, the triumph of Protestantism over Catholicism. “The Dutch invasion of 1688 was a brilliantly stage-managed sequence of events, forever vivid in the memory of those who witnessed them”, writes Jardine (2008, 26). She does not mention that one of those witnesses is a now world famous author. His name was Daniel Defoe.

Daniel Defoe (1660[?]-1731) was an English journalist, poet, novelist, spy and merchant (Backscheider 1989; Booksfactory n.d.; Britain UnLimited n.d.; Jokinen 2007; Richetti 2005). He was bankrupt four times, placed in the pillory for sedition, and is often credited with inventing the modern novel. The son of a Puritan tallow chandler named James Foe, Defoe was a prolific author. He published over 560 books and pamphlets and is considered to be the founder of British journalism. As a very young boy he must have witnessed the plague year in London in 1666 and Michiel de Ruyter and the Dutch fleet sailing up to Chatham to defeat the English on their own territory.

Thirteen-year old Daniel was not admitted to either Oxford or Cambridge Universities as his father did not take an oath of loyalty to the Church of England. He was sent to the excellent Dissident academy at Newington Green, administrated by Reverend Charles Morton. From him, Defoe learned a great deal as the standard of Morton’s teaching was almost parallel to that of any English University. Scholars agree that Defoe’s literary style was based on Morton’s clarity, simplicity and ease in writing. Along with his study in classics, he learnt Latin and Greek as well as Spanish, French, Dutch and Italian. This, in fact, helped him in his career as a pamphleteer and a writer.

The assumption about his language skills of the anonymous author of one of the many websites (Booksfactory 2013) makes one curious: How does he/she know that Defoe learned Dutch? Other sources speak of him knowing Dutch also, but what do we know? Where is the proof? How can we find out? We have no contemporary written proof that he wrote Dutch, like we have of James Boswell, who studied Dutch in Utrecht in 1764, and left us with some interesting examples (Barfoot & Bostoën 1994).<sup>2</sup> Of course most foreign noblemen or noble women did not speak Dutch nor tried to, because even the Dutch nobility preferred French, and most scholars conversed in Latin. But then again, Daniel Defoe was not a nobleman.

Defoe established a business of his own in 1683 when he started a firm dealing in the export of wine, tobacco, and hosiery. A few years later, we see him dealing in civet cats and pantiles. Biographer Paula Backscheider makes an interesting observation:

Defoe's knowledge of pantiles and civet cats suggests that he may have gone to Holland for a short business trip at least, but the numbers of Dissenters educated there and of English merchants who regularly visited the continent confuse the issue. Even had he been in Holland, Defoe probably would have had to hire a Dutch foreman or overseer.

(Backscheider 1989, 64)

Others have him travelling for business to Holland also, even in exile in Rotterdam after the Monmouth rebellion, speculating that he met the established Scottish community there (Richetti 2005, 10). However, I am not aware of any evidence of his stay in the Low Countries.

That same year 1683 was the beginning of his political pamphleteering, which he combined with his commercial enterprising: "His publishing record indicates that he had also invested heavily in the political fortunes of William III" (Schonhorn 1972, xii). According to his biographer Richetti, the dynastic shift from James II to William of Orange was the most important political moment in Defoe's life. Not only did Defoe ride out to greet William III when he landed at Brigham on November 5, 1668, he also took part in the ceremonies in London that welcomed the new king on October 29, 1689 on Lord Mayor's Day. As journalist John Oldmixon eyewitnessed: "Among these Troopers, who were for the most part Dissenters, was Daniel Foe, at that time a Hosier in Freeman's Yard, Cornhill" (Backscheider 1989, 47). He became the champion of William III's cause, "whose memory he continued to revere all his life in his writing" (Richetti

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<sup>2</sup> See Barfoot & Bostoën (1994) for some amusing Boswell quotes in Dutch. Backscheider (1989, 15) does mention that Morton taught "modern languages" but does not specify Dutch as one of them. It is not impossible.

2005, 12). Although Defoe was clearly a supporter of the king and his policies, Richetti states that whether Defoe was actually an intimate counselor of William's is "like so much else in his life uncertain" (Richetti 2005, 13). Still, he wrote more than a dozen tracts supporting his foreign policy. Defoe's second most popular work, the January 1701 poem *The True-Born Englishman* (Defoe 1703),<sup>3</sup> was written in defense of William III, to counter what he saw as "the pernicious slanders and xenophobic attack" in the Whig journalist John Tutchin's poem *The Foreigners* (Richetti 2005, 12). It said much about his tolerance, as he confronted the opponents of the monarch, who attacked Dutch William III for employing foreigners and being a foreigner himself.

This country is full of stereotypes, says Defoe: for instance: "Rage rules the Portuguese and Fraud the Scotch, / Revenge the Pole and Avarice the Dutch" (Defoe 1703, 188). He continues in a long litany and scolds his countrymen thus:

These are the heroes that despise the Dutch,  
And rail at new-come foreigners so much,  
Forgetting that themselves are all derived  
From the most scoundrel race that ever lived;  
A horrid crowd of rambling thieves and drones,  
Who ransacked kingdoms and dispeopled towns,  
The Pict and painted Briton, treacherous Scot,  
By hunger, theft, and rapine hither brought;  
Norwegian pirates, buccaneering Danes,  
Whose red-haired offspring everywhere remains,  
Who, joined with Norman-French, compound the breed  
From whence your true-born Englishmen proceed.

(Defoe 1703, 191)

Although we have heard often about the Dutch being great consumers of alcohol, which probably stemmed from the same anti-Dutch sentiment of the Dutch uncle and double-Dutch variety, Defoe has a counter attack by saying:

An Englishman will fairly drink as much  
As will maintain two families of Dutch

(Defoe 1703, 198)

And in another quote he is unambiguous about whose side he supports:

William's the name that's spoke by every tongue,

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<sup>3</sup> There are many versions, editions and websites with the complete text, but the one from *Luminarium* (Jokinen 2007) seems to be the most extensive. Although the first edition is dated 1701, I used the more extended version of 1703 given on this website.

William's the darling subject of my song.

(Defoe 1703, 210)

The main objective is clear already from his introduction:

But when I see the town full of lampoons and invectives against Dutchmen only because they are foreigners, and the King reproached and insulted by insolent pedants, and ballad-making poets for employing foreigners, and for being a foreigner himself, I confess myself moved by it to remind our nation of their own original, thereby to let them see what a banter is put upon ourselves in it, since, speaking of Englishmen ab origine, we are really all foreigners ourselves.

(Defoe 1703, 178)

And:

but to disown our descent from them, talking big of our ancient families, and long originals, and stand at a distance from foreigners, like the enthusiast in religion, with a "Stand off; I am more holy than thou!" — this is a thing so ridiculous in a nation, derived from foreigners as we are, that I could not but attack them as I have done.

(Defoe 1703, 179)

It is tempting to quote much more from this pamphlet and apply it to today's political discourse in many countries, but that leads us away from our subject. Let me just quote Defoe's last line: "personal virtue only makes us great" (Defoe 1703, 218). The pamphlet had ten reprints in the same year, it had a Dutch translation by Jacob Campo Weyerman in 1720,<sup>4</sup> and remains one of the most popular of Defoe's many works, second only to *Robinson Crusoe*. This last work of course gave him everlasting fame, but by the time *Crusoe* appeared in 1719, his hero William III had already died in 1702.

How deep was Defoe's interest in Dutch? Did he read Dutch? Yes, said Lucius L. Hubbard, a regent at the University of Michigan, lawyer, geologist and collector of imaginary travelogues, such as *Gulliver*, *Robinson Crusoe* and many others. With an interest in German and Dutch originals, he purchased a curious Dutch book in 1920. The title, translated into English, reads: *The Description of the Mighty Kingdom of Krinke Kesmes. Discovered by Mister Juan de Posos and from his Writings Compiled by H. Smeeks* (Smeeks 1708).

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<sup>4</sup> A very free selection was published in Weyerman's *Rotterdamsche Hermes* nos. 13-17 in 1720, analyzed and republished by Broos (1983).



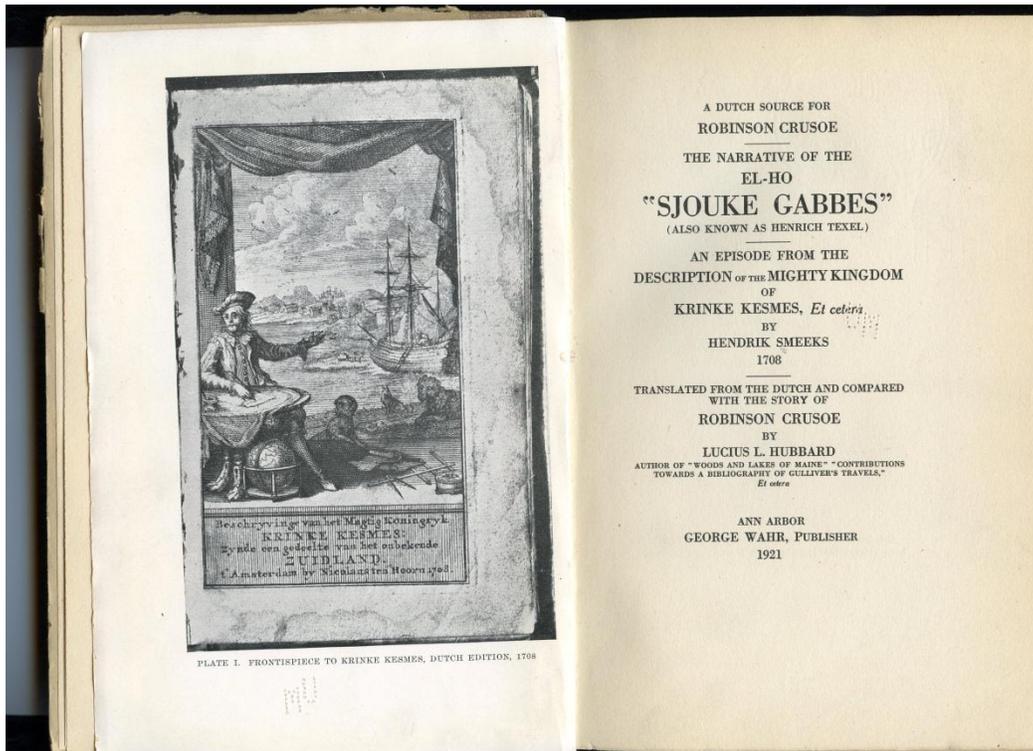
Title page. H. Smeeks. 1732. BESCHRYVINGE Van het Magtig Koningryk KRINKE KESMES. Etc. Reprinted with permission, Hubbard Collection of Imaginary Voyages, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan, Hubbard PT 5679 .S8 B5 1732.

Krinke Kesmes is an anagram of the writer Henrik Smeeks and this work was considered by Hubbard and others to be the source for Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.



Frontispice. H. Smeeks. 1708. Beschryvinge van het Magtig Koningryk KRINKE KESMES: Zynde een gedeelte van het onbekende ZUIDLAND. Reprinted with permission, Hubbard Collection of Imaginary Voyages, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan, Hubbard PT 5679 .S8 B5.

Hubbard's extensive investigation led him to publish in 1921 a work called: *A Dutch source for Robinson Crusoe. The Narrative of the El-Ho "Sjouke Gabbes" (also known as Henrich Texel). An Episode from the Description of the Mighty Kingdom of Krinke Kesmes, Et cetera, by Hendrik Smeeks, 1708. Translated from the Dutch and compared with the story of Robinson Crusoe.*



Title page. Lucius L. Hubbard. 1921. *A Dutch Source for Robinson Crusoe etc.* Ann Arbor, MI: George Wahr. Reprinted with permission, Hubbard Collection of Imaginary Voyages, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan, Hubbard PT 5679 .S8 B51 1921.

One strong argument seemed to be that the Dutch book was published in 1708, eleven years before *Robinson Crusoe*, and could be called the oldest European desert island story. It is “a hybrid work, a mixture of novel, imaginary travel story, and utopian vision, permeated with the Enlightenment ideals of freedom, equality, and fraternity” (Hermans 2009, 330). This characterization differs from Defoe’s work and we have to limit our textual comparison to fragments. Hubbard set about to translate a part of the story, in which a young boy, whom he calls Sjouke Gabbes, is stranded on a desert island. The Dutch boy goes through the routine of finding shelter, shooting birds and looking for fresh water. Hubbard finds passages that could be linked and interpreted, but do not follow the story line: “On the way I thought I saw a mast behind a dune, with its top sticking out above. I thought also that I saw footprints, but these again disappeared” (Hubbard 1921, 16-17) compares to the following fragments from *Robinson Crusoe*: “and looking out to Sea in hopes of seeing a ship” and: “I was exceedingly surpriz’d with the Print of a Man’s naked Foot on the Shore” (Hubbard 1921, 16-17).

One could question Hubbard’s familiarity with 18th century Dutch: he puts “[sic]” after “*quam*” (Hubbard 1921, 166) and “*ontrent*” (Hubbard 1921,

163) although both are correct spellings for the Dutch words *kwam* ‘came’ and *omtrent* ‘around’. More examples can be given and nowhere are there paragraphs or sentences that are verbatim translations to prove plagiarism. A man on an island is bound to look for water, food and shelter, and this is also described in other stories published at the time. Scholars like Staverman, Ullrich, Secord, and Buijsters have refuted Hubbard’s arguments and nowadays it is not really a serious consideration (Broos 1992, 19).

A strong case against Hubbard is also the fact that he was unable to prove that Defoe could read Dutch. The fortunate result of Hubbard's interests is that we possess in Ann Arbor at the university of Michigan some 140 early Dutch travelogues and four editions of *Krinke Kesmes*, including the only extant 1732 edition. The special collections library is very proud of its Hubbard collection of *Imaginary Voyages*.

This would be the end of the matter, until Australian author David Fausett published *The Strange Surprising Sources of Robinson Crusoe* in 1994. He claims that Smeeks’ story “textually seems to be a direct precursor to, and probably model for, that of Defoe” (Fausset 1994, 97). Fausett rightly points to the extensive Dutch maritime activity, especially in the Australian waters, and he is correct that Dutch sources are always overlooked. However, he forgets that there are other stories in similar vein preceding Smeeks’ – one can think of Henry Neville’s *The Isle of Pines* (London 1668), Gabriel de Foigny’s *La Terre Australe Connue* (Geneva 1676), and Denis de Vairasse’s *Historie der Sevarambes* (Amsterdam 1701). Travel literature followed the mood in the age of discovery and went in all kinds of directions, including fantasies in theology and philosophy, and desert islands regarded as utopia or dystopia (Broos et al. 1992).

Defoe was a product of his time. He loved a good adventure and the last sentence on Robinson Crusoe’s title page says that he was “delivered by Pirates”. This gives me a bridge to a publication attributed to Defoe: *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates*, published 1724.<sup>5</sup> One of his sources was a Dutch work called *De Americaensche Zee-roovers* ‘The American Sea-robbers’ by A. O. Exquemelin. Exquemelin was a French Huguenot, who had sailed from France to the West-Indies. Unfortunately for him (perhaps not for his patients), he had to leave again because he was a self-made and not a

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<sup>5</sup> There remains discussion about the authenticity of Defoe’s authorship in favor of Nathaniel Mist. Defoe occasionally wrote for his weekly *Mist* Journal. Editor Schonhorn follows John Robert Moore, who argued that Captain Charles Johnson is Defoe’s pen name, based on style and ideas and interests. Defoe-specialist Paula Backscheider includes the work in her bibliography of works by or attributed to Defoe p. 620. She writes that Defoe published extensively on crime and criminals and “[a]t first most of his serious attention went to pirates, for they discouraged trade and colonization” (Backscheider page 477).

registered surgeon. In Amsterdam he succeeded in the medical profession, but also as a storyteller of his adventures and encounters with pirates. This was food for a keen publisher called Jan ten Hoorn, who just happened also to have *Krinke Kesmes* in his fund of popular books. This led some researchers to the idea that Exquemelin was a corruption of 'Enrique Smeex'. We now know that these are two different people, although both were surgeons, a profession that seems to generate storytellers.<sup>6</sup>

There are no indications or references that Defoe ever met them, or was acquainted with them. Did he read their books? Not likely in Dutch, but there seems to be little doubt that this prolific writer with an inquisitive mind as a journalist, as a visitor to Newgate goal, who knew sailors like Alexander Selkirk, must have come across the appealing stories about pirates and privateers. Defoe's collection of pirates has no Dutch examples and he has a reason for this:

I have not so much as heard of a Dutch Pyrate: It is not that I take them to be honester than their Neighbours; (...) The Reason I take to be, that after a War, when the Dutch ships are laid up, they have a Fishery, where their Seamen find immediate Business.

(Schonhorn 1972, 5)

Is there anything Dutch in *Robinson Crusoe*? Not much, although we find several references to the Low Countries, starting with the description of his own life on the first page: "I had two elder brothers, one of whom was lieutenant-colonel to an English regiment of foot in Flanders, formerly commanded by the famous Colonel Lockhart, and was killed at the battle near Dunkirk against the Spaniards" (Ross 1974, 27). He refers to the Battle of the Dunes of 1658 and William Lockhart (1621-75) who at the age of 13 had joined the Dutch army, before his English career. No other references bring Holland, the Low Countries or Dutch connections to life in his most famous novel.

Neither is there any evidence that Defoe plagiarized or 'borrowed' from the Dutch *Krinke Kesmes* via another language. A translation into German was not published until after *Robinson Crusoe*, in 1721, as *Der Hollaendische Robinson Crusoe*, proving that the name Robinson appealed to readers and had become a publisher's dream title (Buijnsters 1975, 60-61).<sup>7</sup> Was he able to read the far from easy Dutch text? We might find an indication in his book collection. There happens to be a catalogue of the combined libraries of Daniel Defoe and a

<sup>6</sup> H.de la Fontaine Verwey published about Exquemelin (De la Fontaine Verwey 1976, 171-191) and Buijnsters after dismissing Defoe's plagiarism, also rejects the Exquemelin theory, originated by Hoogewerff (Buijnsters 1975, 56).

<sup>7</sup> Titles like *De Haagsche Robinson*, *De Walchersche Robinson* and *De Gevallen van den jonge en oude Robinson* are just a few examples of Dutch 'robinsonades' published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Phillips Farewell (Heidenreich 1970). With the uncertainty of ownership in mind, we do find a few publications in Dutch: the Dutch-English dictionary by famous Dutch Quaker and historian William Sewel, published in 1691, an old and new testament, a book on Amsterdam's business ventures, the well-known painters' biographies by Houbraken (1718), and a *Historie der Sevarambes* by D.Vairasse d'Allais (1701), an utopian novel. The skepticism of the catalogue's editor is obvious when he states:

There has been some speculation on whether Greek, Dutch, German, Spanish or Portuguese were among the languages he knew (...) On survey, one finds in this collection a considerable number of books in Spanish, but few written in Dutch or German and only one in Portuguese. (...) his atrocious way of spelling names and words of other languages too, shows that he can have had no more than just a smattering of these. Even so, as a linguist, he probably compared fairly well with most of his contemporaries.

(Heidenreich 1970, XXVI)

Lastly, for other Dutch inspirations, we could consider a Defoe novel of 1724 called *Roxana, the fortunate Mistress*, in fact a 'fallen woman', who travels all over Europe and after meeting a sympathetic Dutch merchant, especially to Holland. She becomes a merchant in jewelry, lives in The Hague, but dies in debtor's prison, albeit a good Christian, in Amsterdam (Defoe 1982). This adventurous or picaresque novel of sorts is another example of Defoe's friendly attitude towards the Dutch. Likewise, in 1722 he wrote a wonderful story of the then famous *Moll Flanders*, who, according to the title page,

was born in Newgate, and during a Life of continued Variety for threescore Years, besides her childhood, was twelve year a whore, five times a wife (whereof once to her own brother), twelve year a thief, eight year a transported felon in Virginia, at last grew rich, lived honest and died a penitent.

(Kelly 1973, 1)

The straightforwardness and bawdy details of the title page could well have been Dutch. Her story was translated into Dutch in 1752 as *De Levensgevallen en Bedryven van Vlaamsche Mie* (1752).

So, to answer the question of my title: did Daniel Defoe "do Dutch"? The answer is: yes and no. His interest in politics seems clearly on the side of Dutch king William III. After the king's death, he stays on his political line. In later years, an occasional pamphlet may be more critical towards a Dutch political move, often regarding trade, while definitely supporting a protestant cause. It is

certainly not unrealistic to suppose that he travelled to the Low Countries for business, although scholarly biographers are less certain about this than the more superficial websites.

There is only very slim and circumstantial evidence that Defoe read Dutch. His education contained ‘modern languages’ which could include Dutch, but however flattering it might be for the Dutch, I do not think this likely. The intriguing story of *Krinke Kesmes* has a desert island fragment, but this remains too vague and unspecific to stand out as unique among other examples of similar stories that were known internationally. It does not compare stylistically, and I do not think that a stylometric comparison will change this outcome. While *Robinson Crusoe* has been studied and dissected in innumerable ways, *Krinke Kesmes* has only more recently been brought to light among Dutch and a few international scholars. To quote the author of *Krinke Kesmes*, (after Gracian): “Whoever discovers, will be Master” (Fausset 1995, 95).

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