PREHISTORIC

BRITAIN

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Introduction

Britain has been intermittently inhabited by members of the *Homo* genus for hundreds of thousands of years and by *Homo sapiens* for tens of thousands of years. DNA analysis has shown that modern humans arrived in Britain at least 25,000 years ago, before the commencement of the last Ice Age. This evidence also shows that, as the next (and last) Ice Age encroached from the north, the first humans living in Britain then retreated to Southern Europe when much of the continental land mass became covered with ice or frozen as tundra.

Because so much of the Earth's water was trapped in ice, the sea's level was about 127m (417ft.) lower than it is today. Consequently, Britain was joined to Ireland by an exposed "land bridge," making transit between those regions more practical as boats were no longer needed for the journey. The lowered sea level also joined Britain to Continental Europe by an area of dry land, known today as Doggerland. After the end of the last Ice Age (c. 9500 BC), Ireland once again became separated from Britain due to the rising tides. Later (c. 6500 BC), Britain was also cut off from the rest of Europe by the same phenomenon, albeit at a much higher level.

As shown by archaeology, *Homo sapiens* had reoccupied Britain by c. 12,000 BC, as the climate became warmer and more hospitable. By c. 4000 BC, the island was populated by people with a Neolithic culture. However, none of the pre-Roman inhabitants of Britain had any known, surviving, written language. Because no literature of pre-Roman Britain has survived, its history, culture and way of life are known mainly through archaeological finds. Though the main evidence for the period is archaeological, there is a growing amount of genetic evidence, which continues to change. There is also a small amount of linguistic evidence, from river and hill names, which is covered in the articles on the Pre-Celtic and Celtic cultures.

The first significant written record of Britain and its inhabitants was made by the Greek navigator Pytheas, who explored the coastal region of Britain c. 325 BC. However, there may be some additional information on Britain in the "Ora Maritima," a text which is now lost but which is incorporated in the writing of the later author Avienus. Archeological evidence demonstrates that ancient Britons were involved in extensive maritime trade and cultural links with the rest of Europe from the Neolithic onwards, especially by exporting tin that was in abundant supply. Julius Caesar also wrote of Britain in c. 50 BC after his two military expeditions to the island in 55 and 54 BC. The 54 invasion was probably an attempt to conquer at least the southeast of Britain but failed.

Located at the fringes of Europe, Britain received European technological and cultural achievements much later than Southern Europe and the Mediterranean region did during prehistory. The story of ancient Britain is traditionally seen as one of successive waves of invasion from the continent, with them came different cultures and technologies. More recent archaeological theories have questioned this migrationist interpretation and argue for a more complex relationship between Britain and the

Continent. Many of the changes in British society demonstrated in the archaeological record are now suggested to be the effects of the native inhabitants adopting foreign customs rather than being subsumed by an invading population.

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The Palaeolithic Period

(c. 2.5 million to 20,000 years ago)

Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) Britain is the period of the earliest known occupation of Britain by humans. This huge period saw many changes in the environment, encompassing several glacial and interglacial episodes greatly affecting human settlement in the region. Providing dating for this distant period is difficult and contentious. The inhabitants of the region at this time were bands of hunter-gatherers who roamed Northern Europe following herds of animals, or who supported themselves by fishing.

Recent scientific evidence (2006) regarding mitochondrial DNA sequences from ancient and modern Europe has shown a distinct pattern for the different time periods sampled in the course of the study. Despite some limitations regarding sample sizes, the results were found to be non-random. As such, the results indicate that, in addition to populations in Europe expanding from southern refugia after the last glacial maximum (especially the Franco-Cantabrian region), evidence also exists for various northern refugia.

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Lower Palaeolithic Period

(older than 200,000 years ago)

There is evidence from bones and flint tools found in coastal deposits near Happisburgh in Norfolk and Pakefield in Suffolk that a species of *Homo* was present in what is now Britain c. 800,000 years ago. At this time, Southern and Eastern Britain were linked to continental Europe by a wide land bridge allowing humans to move freely. The current position of the English Channel was a large river flowing westwards and fed by tributaries that later became the Thames and Seine. Reconstructing this ancient environment has provided clues to the route first visitors took to arrive at what was then a peninsula of the Eurasian continent. Archaeologists have found a string of early sites located close to the route of a now lost watercourse named the Bytham River which indicates that it was exploited as the earliest route west into Britain.

Right - Boxgrove handaxes at the British Museum

Sites such as Boxgrove in Sussex illustrate the later arrival in the archaeological record of an archaic *Homo* species called *Homo heidelbergensis* c. 500,000 years ago. These early peoples made Acheulean flint tools (hand axes) and hunted the large native mammals of the period. They drove elephants, rhinoceroses and hippopotamuses over the tops of cliffs or into bogs to more easily kill them.

The extreme cold of the following Anglian Stage is likely to have driven humans out of Britain altogether and the region does not appear to have been occupied again until the ice receded during the Hoxnian Stage. This warmer time period lasted from c. 300,000 until 200,000 years ago and saw the Clactonian flint tool industry develop at sites such as Barnfield Pit and Baker's Hole in Kent. The period had produced a rich and widespread distribution of sites by

Palaeolithic standards, although uncertainty over the relationship between the Clactonian and Acheulean industries is still unresolved.

This period saw also Levallois flint tools introduced, possibly by humans arriving from Africa. However, finds from Swanscombe and Botany Pit in Purfleet support Levallois technology being a European rather than African introduction. The more advanced flint technology permitted more efficient hunting and therefore made Britain a more worthwhile place to remain until the following period of cooling known as the Wolstonian Stage, 352,000-130,000 years ago. Britain first became an island c. 350,000 years ago. Early Neanderthal remains were discovered at Pontnewydd Wales in 1981 which have been dated to 230,000BP, and are the most North Westerly Neanderthal remains ever found anywhere in the world.

However, there is little evidence of human occupation during the subsequent Ipswichian Stage (Eemian Stage elsewhere) between around 130,000 and 110,000 years ago. Meltwaters from the previous glaciation cut Britain off from the continent during this period which may explain the lack of activity. Overall, there appears to have been a gradual decline in population between the Hoxnian Stage and this time, suggesting that the absence of humans in the archaeological record here was the result of gradual depopulation.

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Middle Palaeolithic Period

(c. 200,000 to 45,000 years ago)

From 180,000 to 60,000 there is no evidence of human occupation in Britain. From 60,000 to 40,000 Britain was grass land with giant deer and horse, with woolly mammoths, rhino and carnivores. Neanderthal man had arrived in Britain by c. 40,000 years ago.

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Upper Palaeolithic Period

(c. 45,000 to 10,000 years ago)

This period is often divided into three subperiods: the Early Upper Palaeolithic (before the main glacial period), the Middle Upper Palaeolithic (the main glacial period) and the Late Upper Palaeolithic (after the main glacial period). Evidence of Neanderthal occupation of Britain is limited. The earliest evidence for modern humans in North West Europe is a jawbone discovered in England at Kents Cavern in 1927, which was re-dated in 2011 to between 41,000 and 44,000 years old. The most famous example from this period is the burial of the "Red Lady of Paviland" (actually now known to be a man) in modern day coastal South Wales, which in 1823 was the first human fossil ever discovered anywhere in the world, and was re-dated in 2009 to 33,000 years old.

Right - Robin Hood Cave Horse, from Creswell Crags

A final ice age covered Britain between around 70,000 and 10,000 years ago, with an extreme cold snap between 22,000 and 13,000 years ago called the Dimlington stadial (with the Last Glacial Maximum at around 20,000 years ago). This may well have driven humans south and out of Britain altogether, pushing them back across the land bridge that had resurfaced at the beginning of the glaciation, possibly to a refuge in Southern France and Iberia. Sites such as Gough's Cave in Somerset dated at 12,000 BC provide evidence suggesting that humans returned to Britain towards the end of this ice age, in a warm period known as the Dimlington interstadial, although further extremes of cold right before the final thaw may have caused

them to leave again and then return repeatedly. The environment during this ice age period would have been a largely treeless tundra, eventually replaced by a gradually warmer climate, perhaps reaching 17 degrees Celsius (62.6 Fahrenheit) in summer, encouraging the expansion of birch trees as well as shrub and grasses.

The first distinct culture of the Upper Palaeolithic in Britain is what archaeologists call the Creswellian industry, with leaf-shaped points probably used as arrowheads. It produced more refined flint tools but also made use of bone, antler, shell, amber, animal teeth, and mammoth ivory. These were fashioned into tools but also jewellery and rods of uncertain purpose. Flint seems to have been brought into areas with limited local resources; the stone tools found in the caves of Devon, such as Kent's Cavern, seem to have been sourced from Salisbury Plain, 100 miles (161 km) east. This is interpreted as meaning that the early inhabitants of Britain were highly mobile, roaming over wide distances and carrying 'toolkits' of flint blades with them rather than heavy, unworked flint nodules, or else improvising tools extemporaneously. The possibility that groups also travelled to meet and exchange goods or sent out dedicated expeditions to source flint has also been suggested.

The dominant food species were equines (*Equus ferus*) and Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*), although other mammals ranging from hares to mammoth were also hunted, including rhino and hyena. From the limited evidence available, burial seemed to involve skinning and dismembering a corpse with the bones placed in caves. This suggests a practice of excarnation (also known as "defleshing" and refers to the burial practice of removing the flesh and organs of the dead) and secondary burial, and possibly some form of ritual cannibalism. Artistic expression seems to have been mostly limited to engraved bone, although the cave art at Creswell Crags and Mendip caves are notable exceptions.

From 12,700 to 11,500 years ago the climate became cooler and dryer, in what is known as the Younger Dryas period. Food animal populations seem to have declined, although woodland coverage expanded. Tool manufacture in the Final Upper Palaeolithic revolved around smaller flints, but bone and antler work became less common. Typically there are parallel-sided flint blades known as "Cheddar Points." There are scrapers, some of which are annoted with what may be calendars. However, the number of known sites is much larger than before and more widely spread. Many more open air sites are known, such as that at Hengistbury Head.

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Mesolithic Period

(c. 10,000 to 5,500 years ago)

About 10,000 years ago the ice age finally ended and the Holocene era began. Temperatures rose, probably to levels similar to those today, and forests expanded further. By 9,500 years ago, the rising sea levels caused by the melting glaciers cut Britain off from Ireland and, by c. 6500 to 6000 BC, the plains of Doggerland were submerged and continental Europe was cut off for the last time. The warmer climate changed the Arctic environment to one of pine, birch and alder forest; this less open landscape was less conducive to the large herds of reindeer and wild horse that had previously sustained humans. Those animals were replaced in people's diets by pig and less social animals such as elk, red deer, roe deer, wild boar and aurochs (wild cattle), which would have required different hunting techniques. Tools changed to incorporate barbs which could snag the flesh of an animal, making it harder for it to escape alive. Tiny microliths were developed for hafting onto harpoons and spears. Woodworking tools such as adzes appear in the archaeological record, although some flint blade types remained similar to their Palaeolithic predecessors. The dog was domesticated because of its benefits during hunting, and the wetland environments created by the warmer weather would have been a rich source of fish and game. It is likely that these environmental changes were accompanied by social changes. Humans spread and reached the far north of Scotland during this period. Sites from the British Mesolithic include the Mendips, Star Carr in Yorkshire and Oronsay in the Inner Hebrides. Excavations at Howick in Northumberland uncovered evidence of a large circular building dating to c. 7600 BC which is interpreted as a dwelling. A further example has also been identified at Deepcar in Sheffield, and a building dating to c. 8500 BC was discovered at the Star Carr site. The older view of Mesolithic Britons as nomadic is now being replaced with a more complex picture of seasonal occupation or, in some cases, permanent occupation. Travel distances seem to have become shorter, typically with movement between high and low ground.

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The Mesolithic-Neolithic Transition

Though the Mesolithic environment was of a bounteous nature, the rising population and ancient Britons' success in exploiting it eventually led to local exhaustion of many natural resources. The remains of a Mesolithic elk found caught in a bog at Poulton-le-Fylde in Lancashire show that it had been wounded by hunters and escaped on three occasions, indicating hunting during the Mesolithic. A few Neolithic monuments overlie Mesolithic sites but little continuity can be demonstrated. Farming of crops and domestic animals was adopted in Britain around 4500 BC, at least partly because of the need for reliable food sources. Hunter-gathering ways of life would have persisted into the Neolithic at first but the increasing sophistication of material culture with the concomitant control of local resources by individual groups would have caused it to be replaced by distinct territories occupied by different tribes. Other elements of the Neolithic such as pottery, leaf-shaped arrowheads and polished stone axes would have been adopted earlier. The climate had been warming since the later Mesolithic and continued to improve, replacing the earlier pine forests with woodland.

In 1997, DNA analysis was done on a tooth from a Mesolithic Cheddar Man from c. 7150 BC whose remains were found in Gough's Cave at Cheddar Gorge. His mitochondrial DNA was of Haplogroup U5, a subclade of Haplogroup U (mtDNA) found in only 11% of modern European populations, suggesting he (and maybe his clan) had migrated to Britain from outside of Europe.

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The Neolithic Period

(c. 4000 - 2000 BC)

The Neolithic was the period of domestication of plants and animals. A debate is currently being waged between those who believe that the introduction of farming and a sedentary lifestyle was brought about by resident peoples adopting new practices, and those who hold the opinion that it was effected by continental invaders bringing their culture with them and, to some degree, replacing the indigenous populations.

Analysis of the mitochondrial DNA of modern European populations shows that over 80% are descended in the female line from European hunter-gatherers. Less than 20% are descended in the female line from Neolithic farmers from the Middle East and from subsequent migrations. The percentage in Britain is smaller at around 11% . Initial studies suggested that this situation is different with the paternal Y-chromosome DNA, varying from 10-100% across the country, being higher in the east. This was considered to show a large degree of population replacement during the Anglo-Saxon invasion and a nearly complete masking over of whatever population movement (or lack of it) went before in these two countries. However, more widespread studies have suggested that there was less of a division between Western and Eastern parts of Britain with less Anglo-Saxon migration. Looking from a more Europe-wide standpoint, researchers at Stanford University have found overlapping cultural and genetic evidence that supports the theory that migration was, at least, partially responsible for the Neolithic Revolution in Northern Europe (including Britain). The science of genetic anthropology is changing very fast and a clear picture across the whole of human occupation of Britain has yet to emerge.

Pollen analysis shows that woodland was decreasing and grassland increasing, with a major decline of elms. The winters were typically 3 degrees colder than at present but the summers some 2.5 degrees warmer.

The arrival of farming and a sedentary lifestyle as shorthand for the Neolithic is increasingly giving way to a more complex view of the changes and continuities in practices that can be observed from the Mesolithic period onwards. For example, the development of Neolithic monumental architecture, apparently venerating the dead, may represent more comprehensive social and ideological changes involving new interpretations of time, ancestry, community and identity.

In any case, the Neolithic Revolution, as it is called, introduced a more settled way of life and ultimately led to societies becoming divided into differing groups of farmers, artisans and leaders. Forest clearances were undertaken to provide room for cereal cultivation and animal herds. Native cattle and pigs were reared whilst sheep and goats were later introduced from the continent, as was the wheat and barley grown in Britain. However, only a few actual settlement sites are known in Britain, unlike the continent. Cave occupation was common at this time.

The construction of the earliest earthwork sites in Britain began during the early Neolithic (c. 4400 BC - 3300 BC) in the form of long barrows used for communal burial and the first causewayed enclosures, sites which have parallels on the continent. The former may be derived from the long house, although no long house villages have been found in Britain - only individual examples. The stone-built houses on Orkney - such as those at Skara Brae - are, however, indicators of some nucleated settlement in Britain. Evidence of growing mastery over the environment is embodied in the Sweet Track, a wooden track way built to cross the marshes of the Somerset Levels and dated to 3807 BC. Leaf-shaped arrowheads, round-based pottery types and the beginnings of polished axe production are common indicators of the period. Evidence of the use of cow's milk comes from analysis of pottery contents found beside the Sweet Track.

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Middle Neolithic Period

(c. 3300 BC - c. 2900 BC)

The Middle Neolithic (c. 3300 BC - c. 2900 BC) saw the development of cursus monuments close to earlier barrows and the growth and abandonment of causewayed enclosures, as well as the building of impressive chamber tombs such as the Maeshowe types. The earliest stone circles and individual burials also appear.

Different pottery types, such as Grooved ware, appear during the later Neolithic Period (c. 2900 BC - c.2200 BC). In addition, new enclosures called "henges" were built, along with stone rows and the famous sites of Stonehenge, Avebury and Silbury Hill, which building reached its peak at this time. Industrial flint mining begins, such as that at Cissbury and Grimes Graves, along with evidence of long distance trade. Wooden tools and bowls were common, and bows were also constructed.

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The Bronze Age

(c. 2200 to 750 BC)

This period can be sub-divided into an earlier phase (2300 to 1200) and a later one (1200-700). Beaker pottery appears in England around 2475-2315 BC along with flat axes and burial practices of inhumation. With the revised Stonehenge chronology, this is after the Sarsen Circle and trilithons were erected at Stonehenge. Believed to be of Iberian origin, (modern day Spain and Portugal), Beaker techniques brought to Britain the skill of refining metal. At first the users made items from copper, but from c. 2,150 BC smiths had discovered how to make bronze (which was much harder than copper) by mixing copper with a small amount of tin. With this discovery, the Bronze Age arrived in Britain. Over the next thousand years, bronze gradually replaced stone as the main material for tool and weapon making.

Britain had large, easily accessible reserves of tin in the modern areas of Cornwall and Devon in what is now Southwest England, and thus tin mining began. By c. 1600 BC the Southwest of Britain was experiencing a trade boom as British tin was exported across Europe, evidence of ports being found in Southern Devon at Bantham and Mount Batten. Copper was mined at the Great Orme in North Wales.

The Beaker people were also skilled at making ornaments from gold, silver and copper, and examples of these have been found in graves of the wealthy Wessex culture of Central Southern Britain.

Early Bronze Age Britons buried their dead beneath earth mounds known as barrows, often with a beaker alongside the body. Later in the period, cremation was adopted as a burial practice with cemeteries of urns containing cremated individuals appearing in the archaeological record, with deposition of metal objects such as daggers. People of this period were also largely responsible for building many famous prehistoric sites such as the later phases of Stonehenge along with Seahenge. The Bronze Age people lived in round houses and divided up the landscape. Stone rows are to be seen on, for example, Dartmoor. They ate cattle, sheep, pigs and deer as well as shellfish and birds. They carried out salt manufacture. The wetlands were a source of wildfowl and reeds. There was ritual deposition of offerings in the wetlands and in holes in the ground. There was some debate amongst archaeologists as to whether the 'Beaker people' were a race of people who migrated to Britain *en masse* from the continent, or whether a prestigious Beaker cultural "package" of goods and behaviour (which eventually spread across most of Western Europe) diffused to Britain's existing inhabitants through trade across tribal boundaries. Modern thinking tends towards the latter view. Alternatively, a ruling class of Beaker individuals may have made the migration and come to control the native population at some level. Genetics suggests that there was only a small influx of people to Britain at this time, around a few percent.

There is evidence of a relatively large scale disruption of cultural patterns which some scholars think may indicate an invasion (or at least a migration) into Southern Great Britain c. the 12th century BC. This disruption was felt far beyond Britain, even beyond Europe, as most of the great Near Eastern empires collapsed (or experienced severe difficulties) and the Sea Peoples harried the entire Mediterranean basin around this time. Some scholars consider that the Celtic languages arrived in Britain at this time, but the more generally accepted view is that Celtic origins lie with the Hallstatt culture.

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The Iron Age

(c. 750 BC - 43 AD)

In c. 750 BC iron working techniques reached Britain from Southern Europe. Iron was stronger and more plentiful than bronze, and its introduction marks the beginning of the Iron Age. Iron working revolutionised many aspects of life, most importantly agriculture. Iron tipped ploughs could churn up land far more quickly and deeply than older wooden or bronze ones, and iron axes could clear forest land far more efficiently for agriculture. There was a landscape of arable, pasture and managed woodland. There were many enclosed settlements and land ownership was important.

Right - Wandsworth Shield,
in the Insular version of La Tène style,
2nd century BC

It is generally thought that by 500 BC most people inhabiting the British Isles were speaking Common Brythonic, on the limited evidence of place-names recorded by Pytheas of Massalia and transmitted to us second-hand, largely through Strabo. Certainly by the Roman period there is substantial place- and personal name evidence which suggests that this was so; Tacitus also states in his Agricola that the British language differed little from that of the Gauls. However, it has been suggested that a form of English may have been spoken in Eastern Britain at this date; this theory is not widely accepted. Among these people were skilled craftsmen who had begun producing intricately patterned gold jewellery, in addition to tools and weapons of both bronze and iron. It is disputed whether Iron Age Britons were "Celts", with some academics such as John Collis and Simon James actively opposing the idea of 'Celtic Britain', since the term was only applied at this time to a tribe in Gaul. However, placenames and tribal names from the later part of the period suggest that a Celtic language was spoken. The traveller Pytheas, whose own works are lost, was quoted by later classical authors as calling the people "Pretanoi", which is cognate with "Britanni" and is apparently Celtic in origin. The term "Celtic" continues to be used by linguists to describe the family that includes many of

the ancient languages of Western Europe and modern British languages such as Welsh without controversy. The dispute essentially revolves around how the word "Celtic" is defined; it is clear from the archaeological and historical record that Iron Age Britain did have much in common with Iron Age Gaul, but there were also many differences. Many academics still use the term to refer to the pre-Roman inhabitants of Britain for want of a better label.

Iron Age Britons lived in organised tribal groups, ruled by a chieftain. As people became more numerous, wars broke out between opposing tribes. This was traditionally interpreted as the reason for the building of hill forts, although the siting of some earthworks on the sides of hills undermined their defensive value, hence "hill forts" may represent increasing communal areas or even 'Elite Areas'. However some hillside constructions may simply have been cow enclosures. Although the first had been built c. 1500 BC, hill fort building peaked during the later Iron Age. There are over 2000 Iron Age hill forts known in Britain. By c. 350 BC many hill forts went out of use and the remaining ones were reinforced. Pytheas was quoted as writing that the Britons were renowned wheat farmers. Large farmsteads produced food in industrial quantities and Roman sources note that Britain exported hunting dogs, animal skins and slaves.

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The Late pre-Roman Iron Age (LPRIA)

The last centuries before the Roman invasion (c. 43 AD) saw an influx of mixed Germanic-Celtic speaking refugees from Gaul (approximately modern day France and Belgium) known as the Belgae, who were displaced as the Roman Empire expanded c. 50 BC. They settled along most of the coastline of Southern Britain between c. 200 BC and AD 43, although it is hard to estimate what proportion of the population there they formed. A Gaulish tribe known as the Parisii, who had cultural links to the continent, appeared in Northeast England.

From c. 175 BC, the areas of Kent, Hertfordshire and Essex developed especially advanced pottery-making skills. The tribes of Southeast England became partially Romanised and were responsible for creating the first settlements (oppida) large enough to be called towns.

Right - The Stanwick Horse Mask,
La Tene style mount,
British, 1st century AD, 10 cm

The last centuries before the Roman invasion saw increasing sophistication in British life. About 100 BC, iron bars began to be used as currency, while internal trade and trade with continental Europe flourished, largely due to Britain's extensive mineral reserves. Coinage was developed, based on continental types but bearing the names of local chieftains. This was used in Southeast England, but not in areas such as Dumnonia in the west.

As the Roman Empire expanded northwards, Rome began to take interest in Britain. This may have been caused by an influx of refugees from Roman occupied Europe, or Britain's large mineral reserves. See Roman Britain for the history of this subsequent period.

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