



Monastic communities and nature conservation: Overview of positive trends and best practices in Europe and the Middle East

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The origin of a resilient lifestyle close to nature

The origin of Christian monasticism is to be found eighteen centuries ago in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria, during the time these countries formed part of the Roman Empire. Indeed, it is in the Egyptian deserts where the oldest Christian monasteries are still thriving. From the earliest times, the ideal of the monastic life was closely connected to an aspiration to return to the terrestrial Paradise. More or less complete solitude in the wilderness – usually associated with asceti-

cism, under harsh conditions – was sought so that an aspirant might progress spiritually and attain to holiness, developing a deep harmony with nature by approaching, or even recovering, 'the Adamic state'. The idea expressed by St John Damascene, a Church Father, that 'Nature is the icon of the face of God' is highly significant when one recalls the sacramental nature accorded to icons in the Eastern Christian Churches and the veneration they receive.

From the first centuries of monasticism, two main lifestyles developed,

< Rila Natural Park, Bulgaria. The outstanding alpine forests around the Rila Monastery bear testimony of the long-lasting 'holy unity between Nature and the monastery', wished for by its founder Saint Ivan of Rila.



Well tended vegetable gardens and orchards like those near the monastery of Xenophontos, Athos.

which have remained almost unchanged until the present day: community life – cenobitic – and isolated life – hermitic. Hermitism and cenobitism are usually seen as complementary paths. Hermits are often fed by monastic communities, and in some monasteries all monks become hermits during some part of their lives. In other communities, a hermitic life is an option only for those who feel attracted to it. In any case, a hermit devoted to silent prayer and contemplation in solitude is the prototype of the human being in deep harmony with nature. In the words of one hermit, ‘hermits live a cosmic experience of communion with nature’ (Mouizon, 2001). No wonder, therefore, that from the fourth century onwards numerous historical records describe the lives and feats of holy monks and hermits who befriended wild animals, such as lions, bears, wolves or poisonous snakes, and it is recorded that some were even fed by them (Macaire, 1993). Similar phenom-

ena are found in Asia, where monasticism, both cenobitic and hermitic, developed much earlier within different branches of Buddhism and Hinduism.

The expansion of monastic settlements occurred rapidly, and by the end of the first millennium thousands of monasteries were thriving in Europe and the Middle East. The impact of these monastic communities on spirituality, art, science and culture has been widely acknowledged and documented (Krüger et al. 2007; Kinder, 2002, etc.), and their legacy has been, and still is, a research topic for numerous journals. However, the positive impact of these communities in the management of natural resources and nature conservation has received much less attention, despite the fact that the monasteries often developed very successfully what we would currently call ‘sustainable practices’.

Given the fact that the founders of monasteries deliberately sought out solitary

or 'wild' terrain, the longevity of many communities is impressive. Obviously, in desert or arid areas, the survival of the community depended on the development of highly sophisticated and efficient water management and gardening techniques. The first Christian monastery, St Catherine's, founded in 337 AD, is located at the foot of Mount Sinai, an extremely arid region. It has been continuously active ever since, coming under the protection of Islamic law in the seventh century. In 2002 the monastery itself was included in the Saint Katherine Protectorate, one of the largest protected areas of Egypt (Grainger and Gilbert, 2008). A further example is St Anthony's, founded in 356 AD, shortly after the saint's death. Situated on al-Qalzam Mountain near Al Zaafarana, Egypt, the monastery has enjoyed continual occupancy and today is a self-contained village with gardens, a mill, a bakery, and five churches. Similarly to other Egyptian Coptic monasteries, St Anthony's is currently experiencing a revival; its monastic population has grown considerably in recent years, attracting a large number of pilgrims. Many monks of St Anthony's monastery nowadays spend the last part of their lives as hermits in nearby caves.

Such examples are not unique. The result of centuries of prudent resource management by monasteries was the creation of a wide variety of extensive and harmonious monastic landscapes, well adapted to different ecosystems, from the taiga of Siberia to the North African deserts, from the Alps or the

Carpathian mountains to the coastal wetlands of the Mediterranean, many of which have been well conserved until the present day. In actuality, hundreds of modern protected areas have been established over ancient monastic landscapes that still retain their quality and biodiversity. Most of these protected areas are managed as Protected Landscapes, equivalent to the IUCN category V, which is the most common category of protected areas of Europe (Mallarach, 2008). This noteworthy fact provides an additional proof of the effectiveness of these types of community-conserved areas. Almost 50 monasteries (usually including part of the lands they historically managed) have been inscribed in the UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites to this day, additional evidence of the global significance of these monastic settlements. Even though most of these sites are classified as 'Cultural', some are Mixed – 'Natural and Cultural' – such as Mount Athos, Greece, or Studenica, Serbia; and in fact, more could also be classified as 'Mixed', as most of the remaining sites retain significant natural heritage value at either global or national levels.

Indeed, sustainability went hand in hand with monasticism from an early time. Among the Benedictines, for example, whose order was established by St Benedict in the sixth century (and whose flourish from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries led to the birth of orders such as the Cistercians, Camaldolensians, Carthusians, etc.), agricultural and forestry management

practices were sophisticated and diverse. St Benedict set an early example of sustainability; the Benedictine communities had to pass on their lands in at least as fertile a state as when they found them. Experts nowadays can single out a forest which was managed by a Benedictine, Cistercian or Camaldolensian monastic community identifying good-practice techniques that were used. In fact, the sustainable forest practices of the Camaldolensians, in the extensive forest lands of the Apennines, were the foundation of the Italian legislation on forestry (Fr. P. Hughes, pers. comm.), and the area around the monastery of Camaldoli, including its *Sacro Eremo* – hermitage – has been included in the National Park of the Casentine Forests. Cistercians, on the other hand, established their settlements in lowlands, usually next to rivers and water bodies, developing sophisticated systems for harnessing the renewable energy of water (Leroux-Dhuys, 1999).

Because of the alms and donations they received, coupled with careful and efficient management, many monasteries ended up managing large tracts of land and water reserves, sometimes hundreds of square kilometres in size. It is estimated that in many European and Middle East countries monastic communities were responsible for 10 to 25 per cent of the productive area. Moreover, medieval monastic gardens set the example for the establishment of botanical gardens and pharmaceutical gardens in post-medieval European and Middle Eastern towns (MacDougall, 1986). Following the rule of 'Ora et Labora' (Pray and Work), monastic communities have always been eager to develop efficient self-sufficient strategies which allow them to devote most of their time to prayer, meditation and contemplation.

Hermitages, on the other hand, have been traditionally located in wild or rugged country, providing solitude and

The Miracle Monastery, Spain. The spring blessing of water is held at dawn, after a long silent walk listening to the birds singing, during the spring session of the course on Nature and Spirituality, in El Miracle Nature Reserve.



natural shelter, such as in caves. The hermitic domains can be considered a kind of nature reserve, i.e. IUCN protected area categories I or III. The inclusion of some of these hermitages on the periphery of the monastic protected landscapes resulted in a very balanced ecological pattern, which can be still found in many regions. Monastic settlements containing scattered small monasteries of different sizes, with assorted hermitages and monks' cells, in some cases created or maintained astonishing landscapes, like those of Cappadocia in Turkey, and in other cases led to the construction of imposing buildings in the midst of almost pristine natural areas, like the Grand Chartreuse, France. The well known 'Carmelitan deserts' usually located in rugged and isolated natural areas, are a special type of hermitic-based landscape, established from the seventeenth century to host a certain number of temporary hermits in solitary places in Spain, where a number of modern protected areas have been established, such as the Natural Parks of Desert de les Palmes and Las Batuecas (Ruiz & Husillos, 2008).

The historical peak of monastic expansion varied among regions. While in the Middle East, North Africa, and Ireland the zenith was reached in the fifth and sixth centuries, the apogee of monasticism in many Western and Central European countries was not reached until the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries; Russia also enjoyed its heyday during the 1500–1600s. However the history of monasticism is not, of

course, one of steady evolution. Aside from occasional disruptions due to wars or pillage, the worse setbacks suffered by monastic communities of Europe came after the French Revolution (and the secularisation movements), leading into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For political or economic reasons, the governments of many European countries – liberal or communist – banned religious organisations or enforced severe prohibitions on their activities, usually confiscating monastic properties. As a result, many monasteries were abandoned, sacked or destroyed. These measures had severe repercussions not only on monasticism itself, as is well known, but also on nature conservation – a fact which has been less well documented. Some monastic forests carefully managed for centuries were razed to the ground in few decades (Urteaga, 1989), numerous traditional varieties of vegetables were lost, and much 'traditional ecological knowledge' and many related best practices, which had been prudently developed over centuries, were rapidly forgotten.

Later, when the political situation improved, and a certain tolerance for religion was redeveloped, a monastic resurgence occurred in most European countries, which led to the partial – in most places – recovery of what had been lost.

Nowadays, it is estimated that there are more than 5000 monastic communities in Europe and the Middle East, and over 80 000 monks and nuns, clear proof of the amazing resilience of this

way of life. This figure does not include the Catholic friar orders, which usually are located in urban areas, although some of them, like the Franciscans, had originally very tight bonds with nature.

Currently, most of the former European communist countries are experiencing a recovery and/or expansion of monasticism, as can be seen in Belarus, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, the Ukraine, etc. The largest monastic population in Europe is actually to be found within the Natural Park of Vanatori-Neamt, in northeast Romania, which includes over 2000 monks and nuns (Catanoius, 2007), organised in self-sufficient communities, either in monasteries or small monastic villages. New foundations are frequent, and the expansion of the historic monasteries is currently common in this part of Europe. On the other hand, the only monastic republic of the world, Mount Athos (the Garden of the Holy Virgin, as it is called by its inhabitants), located in north-eastern Greece, reached its lowest ebb in the 1970s. Since that time, however, the intake has been increasing steadily, and it currently has about 1700 monks, with all its 20 autonomous monasteries fully restored (Speake, 2002).

Despite the general trend of secularisation, and the decline that a number of monastic communities are still experiencing, new monastic settlements are currently being established in different parts of Europe and the Middle East (often within protected areas), and new efforts are underway to recover and protect sacred natural sites. Some examples are briefly discussed below.

- Within certain protected areas of Romania new monastic settlements are being established, e.g. Skitul Sihla, Agapia Veche, etc. At the same time, new monastic villages are developing around the old monasteries of Agapia and Varatec, these being the largest monasteries of the Orthodox world and yet unable to cope with the large numbers of new aspirants.
- Some monasteries in the Balkans are being restored, after many years or even centuries of neglect, e.g. those of Skadar Lake, Montenegro; moreover, some abandoned monasteries in Muslim dominant countries are being recovered, e.g. Mar Musa in Syria.
- There is an unexpected recovery and renewal of hermitism in the mountains of many European countries, but, as well as in Lebanon, where for example in Ouadi Qashida (the Holy Valley) the Maronite Church's spiritual cradle people from different religious backgrounds make retreats in natural caves guided by Maronite nuns (Mgr Samir Mazloum, pers. comm.). In Italy alone it is estimated that over 300 hermits are permanently living in the wilderness, and over 2000 temporary hermits take retreats in natural areas, staying there for a period that varies from a few months to a few years (Denwahl, 2004).
- Several new Orthodox monasteries have been established in Western, culturally Catholic European countries, such as the Solan, Saint Antoine-le-Grand, and Cantauque monasteries in France.
- The recovery and restoration of di-

verse ancient Coptic monasteries in desert areas, e.g. those of Wadi Mur, in Egypt.

- The recent establishment of new monastic orders with ascetic lifestyles within or very close to nature, often referred as the Green Cathedral, e.g. the Little Sisters/Brothers of the Lamb, France, whose members live from alms.
- The unexpected recovery of ancient pilgrimage routes, connecting old and new monasteries, e.g. a number of branches of the Way of Saint James (Camino de Santiago) in northern Spain, and many more in the Carpathians, Romania and Hungary.
- The intensification of efforts by the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, among others, to conserve sites sacred to Christianity, including some outstanding sacred natural sites, like Mount Tabor, the Mount of the Blessings, or the shores of Lake Tiberias, threatened by development pressures and projects.

Despite this impressive resurgence of interest in monasticism and the value of community spiritual life in nature, one must also acknowledge the fact that during the twentieth century a number of existing or new monastic communities adopted lifestyles not fully coherent with spiritual principles regarding nature and the environment. The reasons for this are diverse, and include such factors as the influence of the surrounding secular society, a lack of discernment concerning the environmental and social impact of new technologies and practices, and often,

it must be admitted, an insufficient theology of Creation.

Nowadays, most monastic communities are aware of these contradictions and many are working to improve their coherency, following the guidelines of their spiritual leaders. The size of these communities may vary widely, from a few members to a few hundred individuals, either male or female, but usually are made of a few dozen men or women. The principle of self-sufficiency is widespread, especially among Orthodox and Coptic communities. In former times the same could be said of the monastic communities of the Roman Church, but some have now abandoned manual labour for intellectual work.

In terms of leadership and vision, the highest spiritual authorities also have demonstrated a commitment to nature conservation. H.A.H. Bartholomew I is widely known as the 'Green Patriarch', having developed numerous and very significant initiatives at different levels (Bartholomew I, 2003), including some for improving the awareness of monastic communities of environmental issues (Nantsou, 2009), while the last two Catholic Popes have coined the key concept of 'ecological conversion', insisting in their messages on the need for a radical change of lifestyle to reduce consumption and increase respect for Creation (Benedictus XVI, 2010).

In fact, monastic communities nowadays are in a very good position to maintain or develop best practices re-

lated to nature conservation. After all, such practices are part of their history, and most communities have kept records of this; and many monastic communities are producing very fine organic products, such as cheese, beer, wine, liqueur, herbal remedies, incense, etc., or outstanding quality crafts, like icons, rosaries, or pottery. Others are still engaged in farming, animal husbandry, fishing or forestry. All of these activities, naturally, presuppose a spiritual and ecologically responsible approach to the relationship between man and nature, which is, as we have seen, at the very heart of the monastic life.

Values and principles

Christian monastic communities have been established for more than ten centuries in most of Europe and the Middle East. They are, without question, the oldest democratic and self-organised communities of this part of the world to have a continuous positive impact on nature conservation. This significant, but often overlooked, historical fact can be explained, in part, because monastic communities are based on principles which are deeply coherent with environmental sustainability, such as:

- Stability, discipline, asceticism, sobriety, 'poverty'
- Reducing material needs; increasing time for prayer, contemplation and meditation
- Orientation not to material profit, but to spiritual benefit

- The idea of communal rather than private property; the concept of monks as custodians or stewards, never owners
- Cherished values which include: sacredness, silence, solitude, harmony, beauty
- Aiming for perfection, or excellence, in the spiritual and material domains
- Creation/Nature as an image/manifestation of God/Divinity/the Sacred, or as a Teacher. Creation as a gift to be safeguarded and bestowed on future generations
- All natural living beings living in permanent praise of their Creator

The values that monastic communities embrace are, therefore, very removed from the mainstream values of Western materialistic societies, and indeed in this sense the monks may be said to share common ground with most traditional communities or indigenous peoples of the world.

Some have criticised the inhabitants of monastic communities for 'abandoning the world', which is of course partially true, but what is even more true is the fact that secluding themselves from society, these men and women strive to live in spiritual communion not only with other human beings, but with the entire existence. According to the authorities of the Mar Mousa monastery, Syria, 'the second priority is Evangelical simplicity, a way for living in harmony and complete responsibility with the Creation and the society that surround us (...) with an aesthetic of justice and gratification' (excerpt from the official web site).

Therefore, 'the actuality of monasticism is that – like it or not – it embodies within the religion that which is of a spiritual and contemplative essence, extreme and absolute (...), [that which] shows to the world that happiness is not in some remote place, outside ourselves (...) but now and here, where we are with God. In the face of a dehumanised world, the monk represents what our true measures are' (Schuon, 1967).

Except for a few orders that have chosen to remain completely silent, like the Carthusians, most monastic communities use a variety of tools and strategies to communicate their values to society, including the way they understand the Creation and their virtuous relationship with all living beings. They may choose to use traditional channels, new technologies, or both, depending on orders, context and circumstances, although they usually aim at exclusive audiences. Traditional religious tools, like retreats, seminars, counselling, publication of books, articles, and sacred art, are often combined with modern tools, like symposia, websites (see a short selection below), DVDs, CDs, guided tours, interpretation centres, etc. Although few monasteries have explicit communication goals related to nature conservation, it is indisputable that all the values they communicate (including their own example) have a positive impact on their target audience, by increasing respect for nature and encouraging others to adopt simpler, more sustainable lifestyles.

Protected areas and monastic communities: diversity of contexts

Most of the oldest and largest remaining monastic lands of Europe are found inside protected areas of international value (like the Natura 2000 network, established by the European Union based on bioregional criteria), such as the entire Athos peninsula in Greece, or Saint Otilia in Germany. Indeed, many monastic lands are effectively managed as protected areas, even without designation, as clear examples of community-conserved areas. Some protected areas have been promoted or created by monastic authorities, such as the Natural Park of Rila, Bulgaria, nested inside the national park, or the Natural Area of National Significance of Poblet, Spain.

Land ownership is partially being devolved to some monastic communities in some of the former communist countries, which may include portions of already existing protected areas, such as in the Natural Park of Vanatori-Neamt, Romania, or in the National Park of Rila, Bulgaria.

Some monastic communities have been recovering sacred sites, including sacred natural sites, like the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, that manages numerous sacred sites in Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece, or the Benedictines who manage a number of calvaries, like the landscape complex of Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, in Poland, a World Heritage Site. Other mo-

nastic communities are at the service of pilgrimages, like the Way of Saint James (the first pilgrimage in the world to become a World Heritage Site), which stretches for more than one thousand kilometres through Northern Spain, fostering the development of numerous protected areas along the way (Mallarach, 2005).

On the other hand, protected areas including monastic communities have very diverse ownership and governance systems and styles, involving boards, planning and management regulations, public use requirements, etc. For instance, the territory of Mount Athos is the largest Natura 2000 and Mixed World Heritage Site of Europe fully managed by monastic communities. In most cases, however, monastic communities are not allowed to participate in the boards of governance.

The Natural Park of Montserrat, Spain, where the Abbot of the main monastery is the Vice-President of the Board, or the Poblet Nature Reserve, Spain, where the Prior of the Monastery of Poblet was recently elected President of the Board, are quite exceptional, but could be replicated in other protected areas with monastic communities. Of all the European and Middle East Christian monasteries that have been declared Cultural and/or Natural-Cultural World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, only 40 per cent of them are managed by monastic communities, the rest being managed by governmental institutions responsible for cultural heritage. Such institutions often consider monastic complexes as museums or cultural facilities.

Finally, another trend that needs to be addressed when discussing the European context is the recent creation of some Buddhist monasteries (mostly related to Zen and Tibetan Buddhism) to which an increasing number of Europeans feel attracted. Almost all of these new monasteries are very committed towards nature conservation and environmental respect. At the same time, however, there is an intriguing complementary trend: the creation of new Roman Catholic monasteries in Asian countries, such as Vietnam or Korea, where Buddhism has been the dominant religion for many centuries.

Positive trends

From the environmental point of view, a number of significant positive trends can be identified among the monastic communities in Europe and the Middle East during the last years. A selection of these trends, each with a few examples, is briefly discussed next.

- Development of organic farming in numerous monasteries, such as the Rieunette and Solan monasteries, France; Hosios Lukas and Chrysopigi monasteries, Greece; Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, Italy; Solan, France, and many monasteries of Romania, guided by Pierre Rabhi, the French leader and activist on organic farming, under the patronage of the Orthodox Patriarch of Romania (Rabhi, 1996). Other monasteries like those of Frauenthal and Hauterive Switzerland, or Cystersów, Poland, have been developing best practices in animal husbandry.



The Holy Island of Arran, UK. Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrimages walking in silence across the hills have become a feature of this Scottish landscape.

- Development of sustainable practices on forestry, for instance inverting coppice oak wood to high forest, combining sustained yield with biodiversity and beauty concerns, such as in Simonopetra Monastery, Mount Athos (Kakouros, 2010), or Stift Heiligenkreuz, Austria.
- Sensitising visitors vis-à-vis nature and the environment, e.g. including spiritual principles and connecting spirituality and nature in all educational and retreat activities, for instance in the Buddhist monasteries of Plum Village, France, or the Holy Island of Arran, United Kingdom, and the monasteries of Camaldoli, Italy, and the Virgin Mary of Rodia, Greece; Solan, France; plus a number of inter-religious initiatives, like the Ecosite of Avalon developed by the Institute Karma Ling in France.
- Reducing fossil fuel use as much as possible, sometimes with the explicit goal to reach zero consumption and emissions, e.g. Münsterschwarzach or Marienstatt in Germany; establishing or maintaining efficient water management, e.g. monasteries of Wadi el-Natroun, Egypt; or including strict environmental criteria in all new monastic buildings, such as the monasteries of Siloe, Italy, and Himmerod, Germany.
- Building, restoring or adapting hermitages or places for retreats within protected areas, providing an additional layer of protection, e.g. Les Ermites de Marie, within the Nature 2000 site of Les Albères, France.
- Restoring ancient medicinal gardens and old herbal pharmaceutical remedies and processes, e.g. in Vatopedi, Mount Athos or Stična and Prečastiti Gospod Opat Janez Nowak, Slovenia.
- Including spiritual principles in the planning and management of protected areas, e.g. in Poblet, Spain,

and Rila, Bulgaria. The main aim of the Natural Park of Rila is 'to guarantee and preserve the holy unity between nature and the Monastery, [and] its rebirth as spiritual and cultural centre of the country'.

- It is also worth noting the creation of new monastic orders within the Roman Church going back to their Christian roots, emphasising harmony with nature, simplicity, and life in nature, with minimal resources and impact, like the Monastic family of Bethlehem (a new formulation of the Carthusians); the Little Sisters/Brothers of the Lamb, or the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal.
- Some monastic communities have decided moving from urban settings to protected areas, to develop an eco-friendly lifestyle, such as the Benedictine Stanbrook Abbey that moved to North York Moore National Park, England.
- At the same time, an interest in the

theology of nature has blossomed, as has also the dialogue between science, specially frontier disciplines, and theology. These trends are not confined to Europe or the Middle East, but are more or less global. For instance, it is noteworthy that the theme of the third Inter-religious Dialogue between Christian and Buddhist monastic orders held in the monastery of Gethsemani, Kentucky, USA, in 2008, was 'Monasticism and the Environment' (Mitchell & Skudlarek, 2010). It is appropriate to recall that the Benedictine Community of Montserrat welcomed the first workshops of The Delos Initiative, and that the proceedings of the workshop were the first joint publication between the Abbey of Montserrat – which has the oldest printing house of Europe – and IUCN, a clear sign of cooperation (Mallarach, & Papayannis, 2007)

The Vatopedi Monastery, Athos, Greece. To feed the large vegetarian community of the monastery and her guests, the large greenhouse, heated with wood from nearby forests, makes vegetable production possible during the long winter.



Conclusion

An analysis of the management of natural resources by monastic communities in diverse ecosystems, throughout history, is of great interest from a nature conservation point of view. Such an analysis provides one of the best documented examples, in this part of the world, of effectively managed community-conserved areas that have created, and maintained for centuries, a diversity of beautiful, harmonious, productive and biodiverse landscapes, in very different ecosystems, from the Arctic to the tropics.

In particular, those concerned with IUCN Category V – Protected Landscapes – could benefit greatly from the experience of monastic communities over the ages in the management of forests, pastures, and croplands, not to mention the use of renewal energy, in particular, hydro-power.

Furthermore, the renewed interest in environmental coherence of many Christian – and also Buddhist – monas-

teries in Europe and Middle East is a promising trend. Their message, grounded in solid spiritual principles, and extensive traditional management practices that cover many centuries, provides a living example of resilient sustainable life for many other communities to follow.

For all these reasons, the conservation community ought to pay more attention to this enduring class of community conserved areas, to identify the lessons that may be learned for other protected landscapes in general, as well as for other types of protected areas, especially those with religious or spiritual meaning or significance, such as sacred natural sites or sacred landscapes. In particular, the practices that many monastic communities have developed so as to be as coherent as possible from an environmental point of view, within technologically developed countries that are ostensibly following opposite trends, should be encouraged and widely disseminated.

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