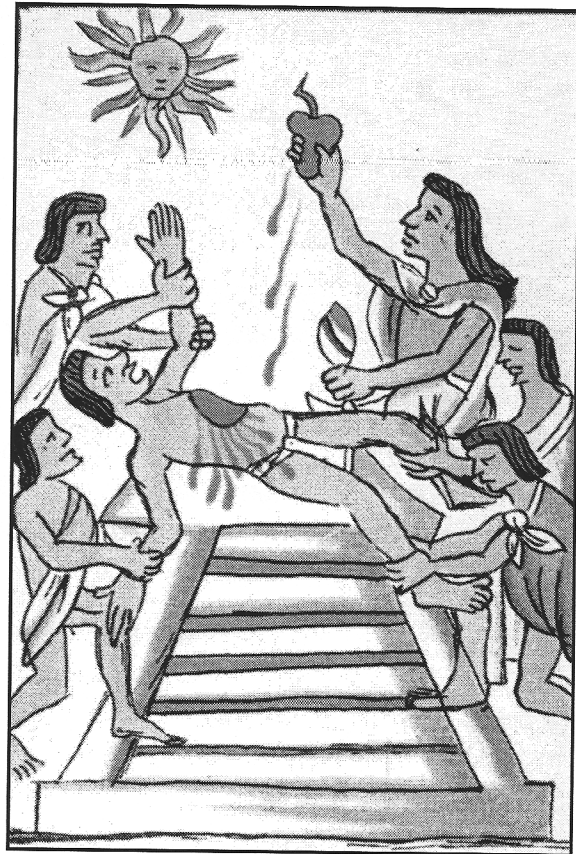
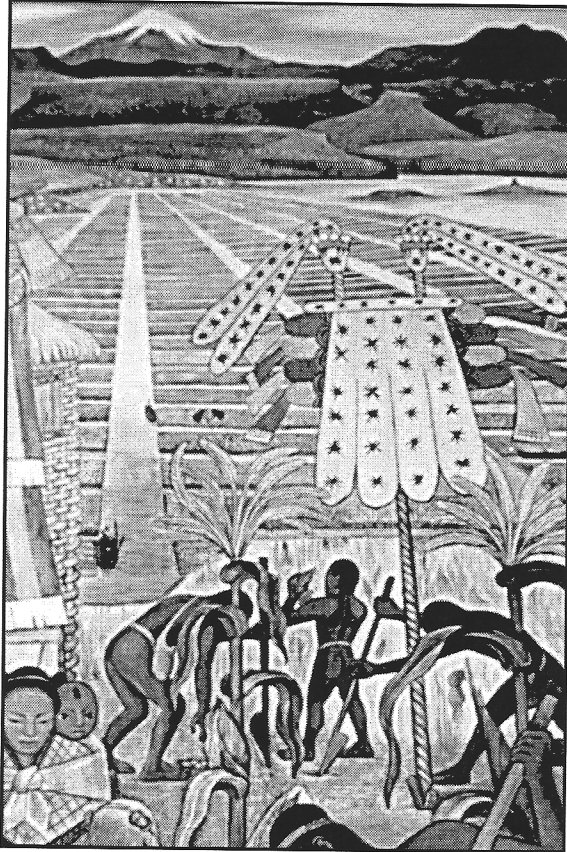


# The Aztecs: Should Historians Emphasize Agriculture or Human Sacrifice?

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**Overview:** In the 1400s and early 1500s, the Aztecs dominated the region around modern-day Mexico City. At their peak, they controlled the lives of some ten to 20 million people. Not always well loved by other groups in the area, the Aztecs created a society that surprised and impressed the Spanish conquistadors who arrived in 1519. The purpose of this Mini-Q is to examine parts of Aztec society and decide what we should emphasize when telling the Aztec's story.

## The Documents:

Document A: Growth of the Aztec Empire (map)

Document B: *Chinampas* Agriculture

Document C: Diego Rivera Mural

Document D: The Scale of Sacrifice

Document E: A Young Scribe's Impression of Ritual Sacrifice

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

## Hook Exercise: What Should History Say about A Society?

When historians study a culture or civilization, they need to sort and categorize information in terms of its importance. Which characteristics are primary and which ones are secondary? Which facts represent what is truly essential for understanding a society?

**Directions:** Imagine that you are a famous cultural historian and writer. *International Times Magazine* asks you to write an article about life in the United States in the early 21st century. The article can't be very long, however, so you have to choose your topics carefully: They have to give a balanced and representative view of modern American life.

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Read the following list of generally agreed upon facts about modern-day America. Choose the five that you will write about in your article. Ask yourself, "Which facts are most important? Which ones accurately describe the United States?" Be ready to discuss your choices.

- ☐ The U.S. remains the number-one destination for immigrants from all over the world.
- ☐ The U.S. has the highest murder rate of any industrialized country in the world.
- ☐ Most adult Americans own their own car; many own two or more.
- ☐ Polls show that the vast majority of U.S. citizens believe in God.
- ☐ There is a great deal of sex and violence in the media.
- ☐ More African-American males are in prison than are in a four-year college.
- ☐ The United States has millions of acres of protected wilderness parks and forests.
- ☐ A growing number of minority men and women in the U.S. hold elected office.
- ☐ Most large U.S. cities have a symphony orchestra.
- ☐ Some bosses of U.S. corporations earn 100 times more than the governors of some states.
- ☐ Almost every child in the U.S. has the opportunity to receive a free public-school education.
- ☐ Most Americans are overweight.
- ☐ Some states in the U.S. allow people of the same sex to get married; many states prohibit same-sex marriage.

## The Aztecs: Should Historians Emphasize Agriculture or Human Sacrifice?

At the same time that the Renaissance was unfolding in Europe, the Aztecs were creating a remarkable world-class society in the Americas. The years were 1350 to 1519. The place was roughly the site of present-day Mexico City.

Frequently, we begin our study of the Aztecs in 1519 because that is the year Hernan Cortes and 500 Spanish **conquistadors** (“con-kees-ta-doors”) first entered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (“ten-och-teet-lan”). However, we are interested in Aztec culture before the Spanish arrived. It is the **pre-conquest** Aztecs that will be the focus of this Mini-Q.

Understanding any civilization is challenging because civilizations are complex. We should not expect a smoothly ironed history. There will be wrinkles—some triumphs, some losses; some beauty, some ugliness. And historians will disagree about what to emphasize.

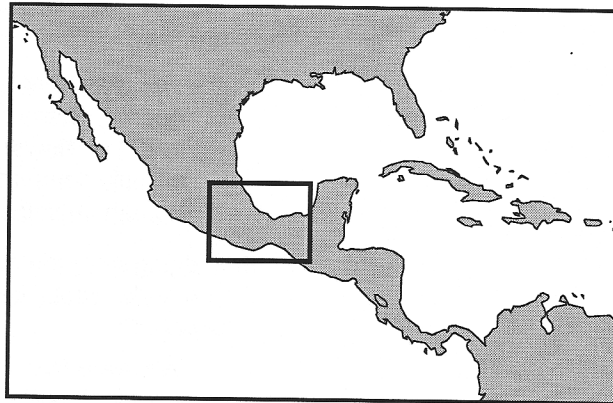
On the basic geography, there is no disagreement. The Aztecs lived in a geological basin in central Mexico that is about the size of Rhode Island. Surrounded by high mountain peaks, the basin extends 80 miles from north to south and 49 miles from east to west. In Aztec times, the basin collected water that formed five interconnected shallow lakes which provided splendid irrigation for farming. In the middle sat Tenochtitlan, an urban island built on landfill, and home to 300,000 people. Climate in this high region was unpredictable, with wet summers and dry, frost-filled winters. However, with the help of their calendars and their gods, the Aztecs managed to cope quite well.

The Aztecs first migrated to the shores of Lake Texcoco around 1100 CE. At the time they numbered about 10,000 people. When

they arrived, there were already many groups of farmers living in the lake area of central Mexico. The Aztecs were distrusted and disliked because they tended to push others out of their way. Eventually, after centuries of aggression, they were totally in charge. By 1434, they were demanding **tribute** and military support from people throughout the region. They were also busy developing a remarkable agricultural system called **chinampas** (“chin-ahm-pahs”). Because of their strong military and agricultural success, Aztec leaders were able to rule some ten million people.

Giving the Aztecs direction and purpose was a religion that included at least 128 major

**deities**, including gods of rain, fire, water, corn, the sky, and the sun. The gods were recognized by a cycle of festivals and ceremonies that involved feasting, dancing, and human sacrifice. The most important god, **Huitzilopochtli** (“weet-zee-lo-poch-



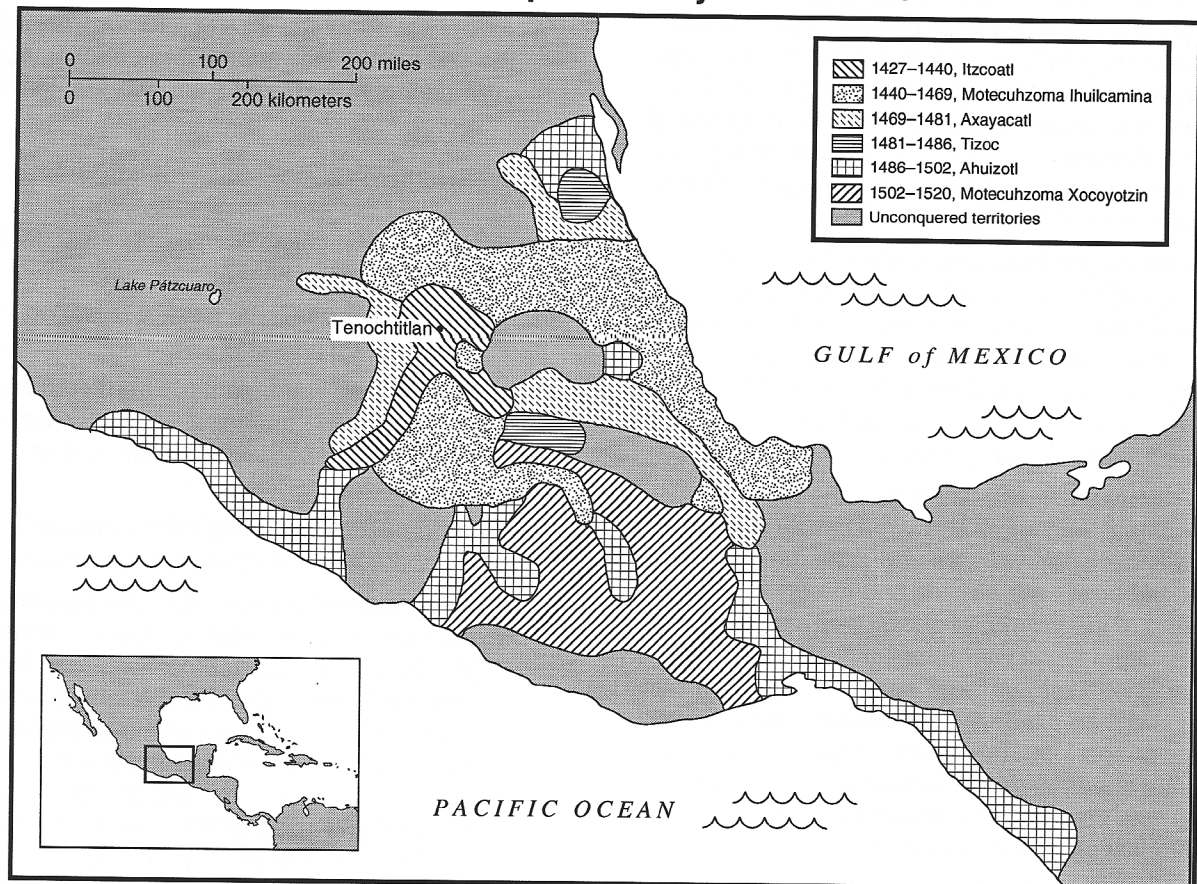
tee”), was the Aztec sun god, who struggled to keep the night at bay and to bring warmth to the world. Huitzilopochtli needed strength in order to carry out his duties and the Aztecs believed that human blood and hearts provided the necessary nourishment. This led to some disturbing practices.

And so we come to our task. It is stated above that history has its wrinkles, its dark moments. Examine the five documents that follow and draw your own conclusions about the Aztecs. Then develop your answer to our question: *The Aztecs: Should historians emphasize agriculture or human Sacrifice?*

## Document A

Source: Map created from various sources.

## Territorial Acquisitions by Aztec Rulers



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**Note:** Aztec warriors had the reputation of being fierce fighters, and most territories shown on the map were acquired by force. Independent territories on the map were sometimes the result of a deliberate policy that unoccupied lands remain available for future “flower wars” in order to provide an ongoing supply of “flowers” (captured sacrifice victims).

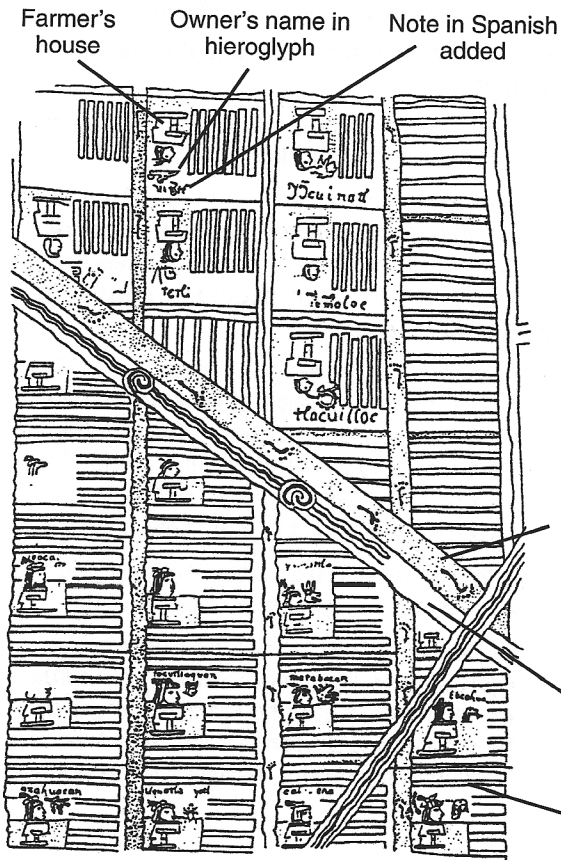


## Document B

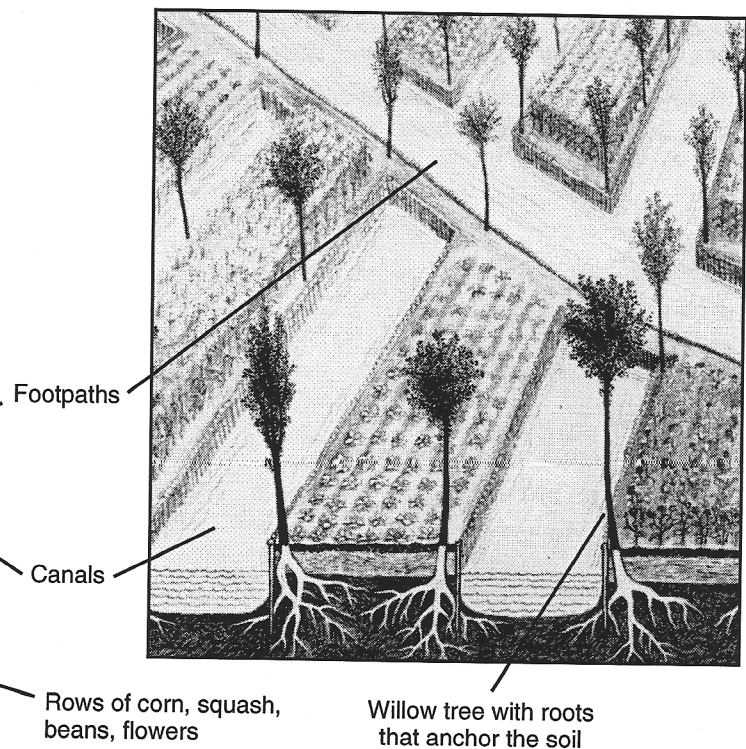
Source: Peter N. Stearns et. al., *World Civilizations: The Global Experience*, Addison Wesley, 2001.

In and around Lake Texcoco, the Aztecs developed an ingenious system for irrigating agriculture called *chinampas*. These were floating islands approximately seventeen feet long and one hundred to three hundred thirty feet wide that rested in reed frames that were anchored to the bottom of the lake. Willow trees were planted at intervals to provide shade. Approximately twenty thousand acres of *chinampas* were constructed [around Tenochtitlan] and the yield from them was high: four corn crops per year were possible.

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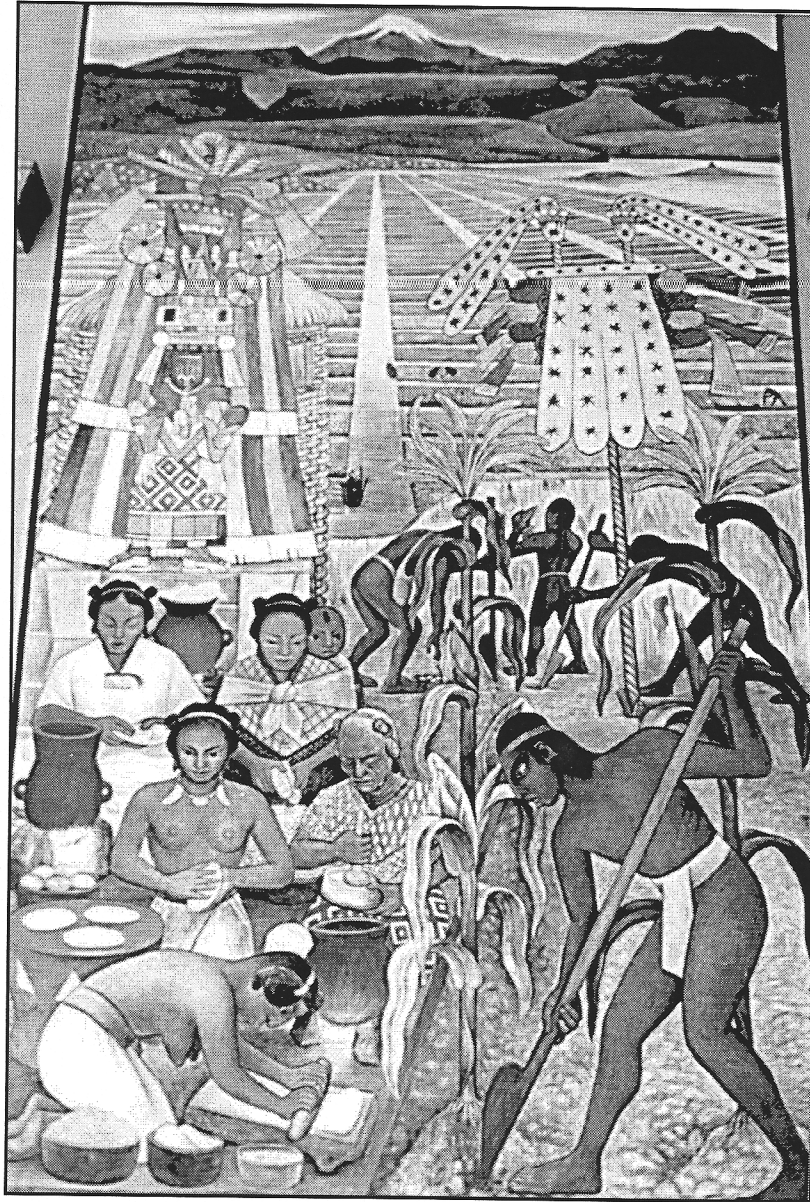
Sources: Drawing at left from the Aztec manuscript *Matricula de Tributos*, circa 1542. Drawing below from David Carrasco and Scott Sessions: *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*, 1998.



## Document C

Source: Mural by Mexican artist Diego Rivera, circa 1929. National Palace, Mexico City.

## Diego Rivera Mural



**Note:** The mural shows the Basin of Mexico during Aztec times. The men at the right plant and harvest the maize (corn) while the women on the left grind and roll it into tortillas. Behind them is a person dressed as a corn goddess. Rows of *chinampas* plots stretch across the lake as far as the eye can see. Two great volcanoes rise above the scene.

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## Document D

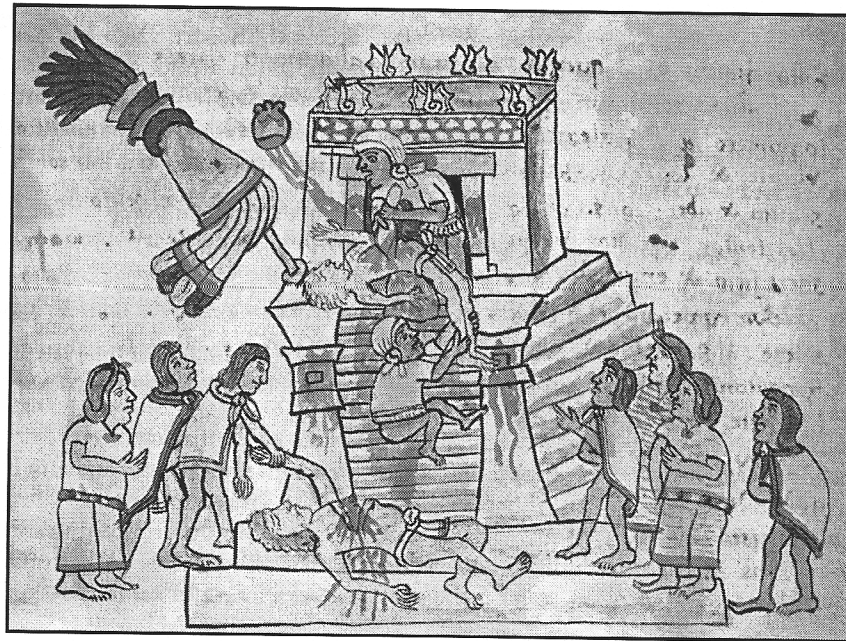
**Source:** Friar Diego Duran, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, 1581.

**Note:** Diego Duran was a Spanish priest who lived in Mexico. His book is one of the earliest Western accounts of the history and culture of the Aztecs.

The prisoners taken at Teuclepec were brought out. Motecuhzoma and Chihuacoatl ["chi-wah-coat-el"] began to sacrifice them, slicing open their chests and extracting their hearts. First, they raised the hearts to the sun, then they threw them into the shrine before the gods. This sacrifice began at midday and ended at nightfall. Two thousand three hundred men were killed and their blood bathed the entire temple and stairway. Each time the priest cut out a heart, they rolled the body down the stairs.

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**Source:** *Codex Mendoza*, 1542. The *Codex Mendoza* was commissioned by the Spanish Viceroy of Mexico in 1541 to provide King Charles V of Spain a clearer idea about his new subjects. The illustrations in the *Codex* were drawn by Aztec artists. The text was written by Spanish priests.



## Document E

**Source:** Friar Bernardino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, II, circa 1555.

**Note:** Bernardino de Sahagun was a Spanish priest who interviewed Aztecs about their lives and culture. This is a 17-year-old Aztec scribe's impression of ritual sacrifice, as told to the friar sometime after 1529.

*When I saw this ceremony last year as a member of the priestly school, I was amazed by the physical beauty of the enemy warrior who was killed at the end of the festival. This seasoned warrior, whom we change from a human into the god Tezcatlipoca ["tehs-cah-tlee-poh-cah", the god of war], can have no blemish upon his body, and he is treated like our most royal family member during the long year leading up to his sacrifice. During that time he is given all the finest luxuries from the nobles' storehouses, including foods, clothes, teachers, women, and instruction. He walks among us as a living god, and I was impressed and felt pride for my altepetl [village] when the younger people stopped their work or play and were mesmerized by him and his entourage of servants and guards as they strolled through the city or rode in the canoes along the canals.*

*Many of us become attached to this living god, and a terrible sadness comes over some of the women when, at the end of the year, he is taken to Chalco and dismembered in public view. Let me share with you my images and memories of what happened last year when I followed his every movement. It will help me prepare my paintings in the book of sacred history.*

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