



## Research Article

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# Slavic Scholar and Educator Pyotr Bezsonov (1827-1898): A Life and Legacy

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### Abstract

Nowadays the name of Pyotr Bezsonov, the acknowledged in pre-revolutionary Russia scholar, is known to but a narrow circle of researchers as some myths and stereotypes about him have proved difficult to overwhelm. Yet, he traced in the history of Slavic studies as an assiduous collector of ancient Russian and Slavic literature works and explorer of Bulgarian, Belarusian and Serbian folklore, folk songs in particular, a scrutinizer of the Slavic languages and dialects, a talented pedagogue and editor. Based on the genuine sources, such as letters, documents and memoirs, as well as nineteenth century publications, which have become the bibliographic rarities, this article aims to present the revised biography of the scholar through revealing the hitherto unknown or underestimated facts of his life and research activity; also, to highlight his achievements in the field of Slavic history, literatures and linguistics; finally, to determine the place deserved by Bezsonov in Russian and European culture as a whole. The special attention is given to the Kharkiv period, related to the years of his professorship at Kharkiv University.

**Keywords:** Bezsonov (Bessonov), Slavic folklore, folk songs, Slavic languages and dialects, old Russian and Slavic literatures

## 1. Introduction

Pyotr Bezsonov, a remarkable researcher of Slavic folk antiquity, connoisseur of a number of languages, including the ancient ones, historian, archivist, ethnographer, museum expert, librarian and public figure, was repeatedly maligned and mercilessly mistreated by some of his colleagues who had a certain influence on public opinion at that time. After 1917 Russian revolution, the spelling of his surname was changed into 'Bessonov', and the year of his birth is often indicated incorrectly. The destroyed grave in the former Kharkiv city cemetery turned out to be now, like hundreds of others, under the feet of people walking through the territory of a modern Molodezhny park. Moreover, the charges of Bezsonov's opponents in his excessive Slavophilism were pronounced and are still being pronounced as an accusation. The long-lasting tradition of explicit distortion of the facts of Bezsonov's personality and activity has already been described by one of the authors of this article in the preface to the collection of Bezsonov's works, published for the first time since the end of the nineteenth century (Kaplin, 2010). In this article, we are focused on revealing the hitherto unknown or underestimated facts of his life and research activity; we also aim to highlight his achievements in the field of Slavic history, literatures and linguistics, and to determine the place deserved by Bezsonov in Russian and European culture as a whole.

## 2. Research Methodology

The research was conducted in the borders of the literary-historical approach; therefore, the combination of scientific methods was used: the archival research method provided the necessary documents for the further analysis; the historical and biographical methods were used while researching the primary and secondary sources in order to restore the facts of Bezsonov's biography and create an accurate picture of his life; the hermeneutic method provided the comprehensive and precise interpretation of the facts; the literary-historical method made possible the evaluation and interpretation of literary works in the historical context of the epoch.

## 3. Research Results & Discussions

### 3.1 Education & early career

The information concerning Bezsonov's childhood and youth is obscure and fragmentary. It is known that he was born on June 4 (16), 1827, in Moscow, in the family of a priest and law teacher of the boarding school for noblemen at the Imperial Moscow University (Ivask, 1911, p. 67; Personal Archive of Professor Bezsonov; Vladyko, 1989). Years of study at the Moscow Theological Seminary provided him with a serious religious education, knowledge of a number of ancient and modern languages. He graduated from the seminary in 1846, and in the same year he became a student of the historical and philological faculty at Moscow University. Soon, Bezsonov alongside with his friend Bartenev (*The Russkiy Arkhiv* journal publisher since 1863) was among the best students of professor Shevyrev. At the same time, his first critical writings, which included a review of Hanka's publications, appeared in the press.

During the following years, Bezsonov, with his fellow students, plunged into studying ancient Russian and Slavonic literatures. He compiled name indices to Old Russian chronicles, precisely the *Laurentievsky Letopis'* (*The Laurentian Codex*) and the *Russkaya Pravda* (*The Russian Justice*). In 1848-1849, with his inherent thoroughness, he copied the first part of the extensive extracts from various sources by the hitherto almost unknown Croatian Catholic of the seventeenth century Krijanić, preserving, according to experts, their language, spelling and punctuation features (Goldberg, 1958). Turning to the extracts from Krijanić's, he thus was the first who brought his name into contemporary scientific circulation.

Bezsonov studied Slavic languages at the university initially under the guidance of Grigorovich

and Bodyansky; also, he corresponded extensively with many Slavs and leading Slavic scholars. In 1851, Bezsonov graduated from the faculty of history and philology as the first candidate, but continued to improve his skills in ancient languages, Slavic dialects and Sanskrit at the university. He also published profound source investigations and was heavily engaged in translations.

Meanwhile, he revealed the *Czech Chronicle* in the archive, and soon after that he discovered the ancient parchment manuscript *Czech Bible* dated by the fifteenth century. Bezsonov compiled the bibliographic description of the latter and wrote a historical and philological study on Czech translations of the *Holy Scripture*. Due to lack of funds, the manuscript remained unpublished, but the researcher subsequently donated a number of rarities to the Prague Museum. He informed Hanka about his findings, who reported the news in press (Bezsonov, 1870, p. 248).

### 3.2 The “Bulgarian” period

Bezsonov showed particular interest in the Bulgarian language and songs and, undoubtedly, achieved significant results, although it is worth mentioning that certain attempts had been made in studying Bulgarian folklore in Russia before him. Indeed, Venelin was the pioneer in collecting and exploring Bulgarian folklore, which had been previously practically unknown not only in Russian and European scholar circles, but also in Bulgarian ones. Venelin succeeded to record about fifty Bulgarian folk songs. After returning to Moscow in 1831, he intended to edit an anthology of Bulgarian folklore, and therefore requested a renowned Bulgarian public figure Aprilov of assistance in obtaining additional information. Aprilov appealed to some Bulgarian scholars, including the enlightener Hegumen Rilski, who turned out to have a significant number of folklore records. Unfortunately, the premature death in 1839 prevented Venelin from carrying out the plan.

An unprecedented merit in the implementation of Venelin’s intention belongs to Bezsonov. And there is no wonder in this. Actually, he was the first in Russia to scrutinize the modern Bulgarian language in historical connection with the Medieval Bulgarian and Church Slavonic. He studied the Medieval Bulgarian writing predominantly from manuscripts in book depositories and local sources, compiling a “portfolio of extracts” for the history of the language (Protocol zasedaniya, 1881, p.6). With great difficulty and expense, he managed to comprise an ample library of modern Bulgarian editions. Besides, he continued to improve his language skills through the intensive communication with numerous Bulgarians, who, when coming to Moscow, were always greeted with his sincere hospitality and support – as a result, he mastered Bulgarian “as proficiently as Russian” (Protocol zasedaniya, 1881, p.7). Notably that in 1852, the Russian Academy of Sciences published a volume of Bulgarian proverbs and sayings, which he had edited (Bezsonov, 1852).

Indeed, he had a pervasive plunge into the Bulgarian folklore. In student years, he was friends with Katranov, a young Bulgarian linguist and folklorist, who died prematurely in 1853 of tuberculosis. Faithful to the memory of his deceased friend, Bezsonov published twenty-two folk songs, recorded by Katranov. Also, he made out the preserved papers of Venelin and, having supplemented them with Aprilov’s and some other collectors’ comments, as well as including several separate publications from Russian and foreign editions, he edited a corpus of Bulgarian folk songs (in two issues), which became the most complete collection of songs at that time and which contained valuable references, which indicated the original sources and the names of those who had written the songs down (Bezsonov, 1855). In addition to the songs from the collections of Venelin, Veltman and Katranov, the Bezsonov’s work included the songs compiled by Aprilov, Kipilovsky, Knyazhesky, Gerov and Peshakov, as well as the songs published in the magazine *Moskvityanin* and other periodicals. Also, the first issue contained his research “Serbian and Bulgarian Epic in mutual relations, historical and topographical”.

Bezsonov’s analysis of grammar of the modern Bulgarian language, published in the second issue of the aforementioned collection, also contributed considerably in Bulgarian study in Russia. The essay was written with a practical purpose – that is, to introduce the basic grammatical features of the Bulgarian language and help students of Bulgarian folklore read and translate songs. Bezsonov was among the first scholars who created a practical guide to those who studied the Bulgarian language. In

his essay, he dwells on various ways of the new Bulgarian spelling, for instance, he analyses the results of the influence of various spelling schools in Bulgaria; also, he surveys the main Bulgarian dialects (eastern and western) and proposes a brief description of the phonetics and morphological structure of the Bulgarian language in comparison with Church Slavonic and Serbian. Even Soviet historians, who did not favour Bezsonov, claimed that that study “for a long time remained the main and most authoritative source on Bulgarian folklore in Russia” (Slavyanovedeniye, 1988, p. 115).

In 1856, Bezsonov’s “Bulgarian Songs” were awarded an honorary review by the Imperial Academy of Sciences. However, there had been collected much more material than published. Having examined Venelin’s papers, Bezsonov alongside with Venelin’s cousin Molnar published them, with a biographical introduction, in the second edition of the first volume “about the Bulgarians” (Bezsonov, 1856). Also, in the *Moskvityanin* magazine, Bezsonov described Venelin’s travelling to Bulgaria (Bezsonov, 1856a). However, Venelin’s most complete biography remained unpublished and has been stored in Bezsonov’s archive.

### 3.3 Late 1850s-70s activity

At the same time Bezsonov studied profoundly the Serbian language and folklore. His article “Lazaritsa, folk songs, traditions and stories of the Serbs about the fall of their ancient kingdom”, published in the *Russkaya Beseda* journal (Bezsonov, 1857), was translated into Serbian, and the author was elected a corresponding member of the Serbian Scientific Society.

Bezsonov successfully managed to combine his extensive research and publishing activity with the academic one. Since 1857, in the building of Moscow University, he began to teach Slavic languages (Czech, Polish, but especially Serbian and Bulgarian), for free for all comers, using authentic literary texts, with thorough historical, ethnographic and philological explanations, perusing grammar and practicing students’ oral speech.

In 1858, Bezsonov became a senior advisor to the Moscow Synodal Printing House. He studied the history of printing manuscripts and published a number of works on this subject (Bezsonov, 1856b; 1859), which were highly appreciated (Lamanskiy, 1859, p. 4). Indeed, it was he who, as it was mentioned above, rediscovered Krijanić a decade before. In 1859-1860s, he published Krijanić’s essential work entitled “The Russian State in the half of the XVII century: Manuscript from the time of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich” (Krijanić, 1859). Although Bezsonov made some inaccuracies in the depiction and assessment of Krijanić’s personality and activities, the following generation of prominent scientists (Sreznevsky, Buzeskul etc.) repeatedly noted his superiority and endowment (Buzeskul, 2008, p 362). In Soviet historiography, one can also find a similar high assessment, such as: Bezsonov, “having deeply explored Krijanić’s writings, was right about [...]” (Pushkarev, 1984, p. 108).

The 1850-60s were really among the most prolific ones in the scholar’s life. Bezsonov discovered, commented on, or responded to the publication of such valuable ancient sources as *Kniga Pchela*, *Slovo Daniila Zatochnika*, and some others (Bezsonov, 1856c; *Kniga Pchela*, 1857). Since 1860, he began to prepare the songs compiled by Russian collector Kireyevsky for the publication, collected and edited Belarusian songs, and almost simultaneously, in 1861, started to publish the fundamental *Kaliki Perekhozhie* (*Wandering Minstrels*), completing three issues that same year.

*Pesni, sobrannyye P.N. Rybnikovym* is a unique collection that Bezsonov edited and published in two volumes in 1861-1862 (Pesni, 1861; 1862). It was awarded the Demidov Prize, and the first volume was followed by Sreznevsky’s rapturous review (V.I. Dal’ i Obschestvo 2002, p. 94). Bezsonov provided the collection with extensive commentary: only the special “Notes” in the second volume totaled 364 pages, while the lyrics themselves were 354 pages. Some opponents considered the feature a flaw or excess, and sharply criticized the editor. Fortunately, their hostile attitude did not influence on Bezsonov’s enthusiasm, and he continued his work.

In 1863, Bezsonov also turned to the idea of publishing Belarusian songs (Bezsonov 1863), which subsequently appeared with his extensive introduction and afterword concerning the Belarusian language, folklore, and customs (Bezsonov, 1871). The following year, 1864, Bezsonov accomplished the

editing of spiritual poems and songs *Kaliki Perekhozhie* (Kaliki Perekhozhie, 1861; 1864). The collection, which comprises a total of 6 issues, received favourable reviews and was awarded the gold medal of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society and an honorary review of the Academy of Sciences (Yuzhnyy Krai, 1898, p. 8).

Taking into account Bezsonov's enormous experience and deep knowledge, including that of the Polish language, there is no wonder that he was invited to Vilna, where he was appointed chairman of the Vilnius Archaeographic Commission (from January 1865) and director of the Vilnius Classical Gymnasium (from August 1865). Besides, he performed the duties of the head supervisor of the Vilnius Museum of Antiquities and the Public Library, in the organization and arranging of which he took a lively part. As ever, he was actively engaged in collecting activity, studied folklore and archives, including those in Warsaw.

At the end of 1866, Bezsonov returned to Moscow and obtained the position of a librarian at Moscow University, actively participating in many endeavors. In 1867, a Slavic ethnographic exhibition was held in Moscow, and lots of guests from different Slavic regions and countries arrived at its opening. This made it possible to hold a Slavic congress (Vserossiyskaya etnograficheskaya vystavka, 1867). There, in May 1867, and at the meeting of the Society of the appreciators of Russian literature (Obshchestvo lyubiteley rossiyskoy slovesnosti), Bezsonov spoke about the importance of folk growth and cultivation and revival of the Slavs by the means of folk song-making in particular (Bezsonov, 1867). In the same year, he received a silver medal from the Imperial Society of Natural History, Anthropology and Ethnography for the "Wonderful Collection of Russian and Slavic Songs and Drawings", which he had delivered to the ethnographic exhibition.

In 1868, Bezsonov made another genuine contribution when published *Detskiye pesni* (Bezsonov, 1868), which is considered the first collection of Russian children's folklore.

In 1871, he was unanimously elected to the full members of the Imperial Society of Natural Sciences, Anthropology and Ethnography.

On December 15, 1873, the release of the tenth volume of "Kireyevsky's Pesni" was announced, with circulation of 1200 copies, which appeared the following year. The material for the eleventh volume had already been collected. The Society of the appreciators of Russian literature highly praised Bezsonov's fourteen-year work in publishing the songs: the collection that came out constituted "an era in the history of Russian literature – for the motherland, its heroes and historical exploits it represents a lasting monument of fame and glory" (Kleymeniva, 2002, p. 210). For the outstanding achievements, Kazan University awarded him an honorary doctorate in Slavic philology.

#### 3.4 The Kharkiv period

Late in 1870s, because of extremely intense work in previous years, Bezsonov fell ill and suffered from financial difficulties. It so happened that at Kharkiv University, a place remained vacant in the Department of Slavic Philology due to the business trip of Professor Drinov to Bulgaria – consequently, teaching of Slavic languages had not been conducted there for a whole year. Bezsonov applied for the vacancy, and members of the historical and philological faculty of Kharkiv University reacted to his request with "full sympathy". The faculty proceeded from the fact that "the scientific fame of P.A. Bezsonov is very great not only in Russia but also among Slavists abroad" (Protocol zasedaniya, 1881, p. 10). They also referred to the academician Sreznevsky's opinion, expressed in his report on the awarding of the Uvarov Prizes for 1876, who, having noted Bezsonov's most remarkable works, concluded that he was "one of the most hardworking figures in the field of the history of Russian literature." (Ibid.)

It is worth mentioning that at that time Bezsonov owned

*"the largest, the only one in Russia (and in all Slavs lands), in its entirety and rarity, a collection of [...] writings [...] both Russian with dialects, and all Slavic dialects, in manuscripts [...] and printed editions with song-notes, drawings, and folk musical instruments (from Indian to Serbian and Bulgarian) [...]"* (Istoriko-filologicheskii fakul'tet, 1908, p. 130)

Proceeding from this, the University Council at its meeting on November 23, 1878 unanimously elected Bezsonov as an extraordinary professor in the department of Slavic dialects, where he was entrusted with teaching mainly the “practical linguistics” (Ibid., p. 128).

According to the recollections of a student at that time and subsequently an academician Buzeskul, Bezsonov’s introductory lecture in the largest lecture Hall of Kharkiv University “was a resounding success” (Buzeskul, 1927, p. 8). The excited students applauded the professor and carried him out of the auditorium “almost on hands” after the lecture was ended.

Professor Khalansky, the Russian Slavonic philologist, folklorist and corresponding member of the St Petersburg Academy of Sciences, claimed that Bezsonov was invited to Kharkiv

*[...] as a person with an established scientific reputation, namely, as a good practical expert in Slavic languages and as an excellent expert in works of folk poetry and monuments of ancient writing, which he was lucky to find” [and that]*

*“the faculty intended to direct the teaching activity of P.A. Bezsonov to practical classes with students who studied Slavic dialects, since the faculty was aware of the completely successful activity of Bezsonov in this regard in Moscow [...]” (Istoriko-filologicheskii fakul’tet, 1908, p. 130)*

In 1881, professor Drinov, the renowned Bulgarian historiographer, linguist and enlightener, who by that time had achieved a scientific recognition all over Europe, returned to the Department of Slavic Philology of Kharkiv University from a business trip to Bulgaria. In the opinion of their contemporaries, Bezsonov was as accomplished and talented scholar and pedagogue as Drinov (Buzeskul, 1927, p. 8), but for their Kharkiv colleagues the latter was a like-minded person, while Bezsonov eventually became more and more a “stranger”. Nonetheless, Bezsonov remained at the Department on a par with Drinov.

On September 15, 1883, the Council of Kharkiv University voted for the election of Bezsonov for the next five years. By a majority of votes (26 versus 15), the term of his professorship was prolonged, and on October 1, 1884 he was approved as an ordinary professor in the chair he occupied (Kleymenova, 2002, p. 130). Notably that in 1885, on the day of the commemoration of the death of the “first teacher of the Slavs” St. Equal-to-the-Apostles Methodius, the Faculty of History and Philology of Kharkiv University instructed both professors Drinov and Bezsonov to deliver speeches (Istoriko-filologicheskii fakul’tet, 1908, p. 163-165). And at the same time, Bezsonov’s work *Mnimyy “turanism” russkikh* (1885) provoked severe discussions and criticism among colleagues and wider scholar circles.

In the period of 1880-1890s, Bezsonov taught a large number of various courses at Kharkiv University, the list of which testifies to his remarkable knowledge: Slavic antiquities, Slavic biography (ethnography) with a sketch of settlement, primitive history, literature and writing of the Slavs; Slavic dialects (Croatian, Slovenian); Polish language; Serbian language; the ancient literature masterpieces of the Western Slavs; the ancient Greek language, the history of the Slavic primary teachers and the Church Slavonic language; the history of the disciples and successors of Cyril and Methodius up to the XIV-XV centuries, with the history of the editions of the Holy Text, in particular, in the Glagolitic alphabet; Greek mythology, with a brief indication of the relationship to mythological principles in the East and with an explanation of the correspondence to Slavic mythology; mythology as a continuation of the course of “Antiquities”; mythology in connection with the pagan religion and its institutions; Latin-Roman mythology (and partly Romanesque), according to the “comparative” method, matching the Slavs, especially in the ancient regions of Norik-Illyrik, the Danube coast, Scythia, Mysia, Macedonia, Thrace etc. (with practical exercises); the history of literature and writing of the Western Slavs, mainly Czech and Polish; Slavic dialectology, with an explanation of the volume, signs and differences in the most important Slavic dialects, more specifically the southern ones, and especially in comparison with various Russian dialects, as well as with a map in the general ethnographic area (with practical exercises in drawing maps) (Istoriko-filologicheskii fakul’tet, 1908, p. 131).

In 1885, in Kharkiv, according to the Mendeleev program, the second (after St. Petersburg) Technological Institute in the Russian Empire was opened. The organizer and director of the Institute, professor Kirpichev invited Bezsonov to obtain the position of the first head of the library, and in 1886,

Bezsonov de facto became its co-founder and coordinator of its activity for the following decade.

Obviously, Bezsonov's life in Kharkiv was not easy; neither did he make a significant administrative career. Aksakov wrote to him in a letter dated January 4, 1886:

*"I see that your life is full of hardships, in all senses and relationships – in personal, family and public life. [...] Neither you nor I – we are not the masters to organize our affairs [...] I can imagine your situation"* (Pis'ma, 1992, p. 15).

In 1887, Bezsonov had the 60th anniversary of his birth and 30th anniversary of his scientific activity. This is what we learn from a letter written to him by his old friend Bartenev (May 11, 1887):

*"Dear friend Pyotr Alekseyevich [...] In my opinion, it's enough for your moral satisfaction that they wrote and telegraphed to you from all over Russia and from such scientific centres as Paris, London and Prague, and that that has already been announced in press [...]"* (Pis'ma, 2007, p. 294-295)

Despite the personal and family disasters and venerable age, in the mid-1890s, Bezsonov made decisive attempts to put in order the unpublished materials on folk literature that he had left behind and edit them together with previously published ones, most of which had become bibliographic rarities by that time. According to his project, all the works were to be set into three parts, each of which was supposed to present a significantly expanded edition: 1) spiritual verses, in 12 volumes of 10 or more printed pages each; 2) songs in 5 volumes and 3) children's songs in 3 volumes. Several issues had been printed by then (Novoye Izdaniye, 1896, p. 9).

Bezsonov was aware of the value of the collection that he owned. He wrote:

*"[...] for 40 years, I have gathered everything in my library, especially the major print publications (with the exception of some provincial papers or similar local and nowadays rare periodicals), particularly Russian ones, including the so-called "songbooks", even the smallest and modern ones, somewhat suitable and partly reprints; and around them the same from all areas of Slavism, everything the most important of this kind. It took a lot of hard work, tireless zeal, travels and trips, correspondence with lots of booksellers etc., all in all – significant cash expenses that I did not grudge, spending the very last kopek of my earnings on that (I did not have a legacy)." (Bezsonov, 1896, pp. 25-26)*

Possessing such a treasure, the scholar seriously worried about its safety. In such state of affairs, an ordinary professor, who since 1897 had been considered supernumerary, a Valid State Counselor, awarded three medals (Tikhonravov, 1864, p. 64), Bezsonov died of a heart attack on February 22, 1898.

The periodicals immediately responded to the passing of a remarkable scholar (Nekrolog, 1898; Yuzhnyy Krai, 1898). The special attention was paid to the library remained after his decease. The Kharkiv newspaper *Yuzhnyy Krai* reported about it the following:

*"Amongst its copies, you can find not only those that are now considered a bibliographic rarity, but also valuable documents relating to the Jewish question, archeology and other branches of science. In addition, there are lots of letters from various prominent public figures with whom he maintained contact."* (Redkaya biblioteka, 1898)

The Bezsonov's archive and library became the subject of interest of the famous philanthropist, appreciator and connoisseur of antiquity Shchukin. He purchased Bezsonov's papers, which subsequently made up the Bezsonov-Shchukin fund in the Rumyantsev Museum (now the Written Sources Department of the State Historical Museum, Moscow). As for the Bezsonov's library, in 1908 it was bought by the famous Moscow antiquarian Shibanov (Ivask, 1911, p. 67). However, after 1917, Shibanov's store was nationalized, and his collection of books and manuscripts was transferred to the library of the Rumyantsev Museum. Nowadays some books from the Bezsonov's library (primarily in foreign languages) can be found at the Central Scientific Library of V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University.

#### 4. Conclusions and Perspectives of Further Research

In this paper, we did not intend to idealize Bezzonov's life story or exaggerate his cultural contribution. He was far from doing this himself. Yet, precisely owing to his works, the Society of appreciators of Russian Literature managed to "fulfill its main task – that is, to publish a significant part of folklore texts known by the 50-70s of the XIX century at a fairly high level" (Kleymenova, 2002, p. 214). And this is astounding, since the scholar had never hired any assistants or copywriters and accomplished all the titanic work himself.

The above allows us to conclude that it is the time to return to an in-depth and comprehensive exploration of what Bezzonov had done in the fields of Russian, Bulgarian and Slavic folklore, Slavic languages, literatures and customs. The sagacious scholar believed that it would take not a few years to take advantage of his "instructions and move the matter further" (Bezzonov, 1870a). It seems that he was not mistaken. His life and works undoubtedly deserve to become known to the modern thoughtful researcher and enter into scientific circulation.

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