

# Ghana Empire

<b>Ghana Empire</b> <i>Wagadou Empire and its power.</i>	
← before c. 830–c. 1235  →	
	
Ghana Empire at its Greatest Extent	
<b>Capital</b>	Koumbi Saleh
<b>Language(s)</b>	Soninke, Mande
<b>Religion</b>	Traditional Religions, Islam
<b>Government</b>	Monarchy
<b>Ghana</b>	
- 790s	Majan Dyabe Cisse
- 1040-1062	Ghana Bassi
- 1203-1235	Soumaba Cisse
<b>History</b>	
- Established	circa 350 A.D before c. 830
- Conquered by the Sosso / Submitted to Mali Empire	c. 1235
<b>Area</b>	
- 1067 est.	1600 km <sup>2</sup> (618 sq mi)

The **Ghana Empire** or **Wagadou Empire**<sup>[1]</sup> (existed before c. 830 until c. 1235) was located in what is now southeastern Mauritania, and Western Mali. Complex societies had existed in the region since about 1500 BCE, and around Ghana's core region since about 300 CE. When Ghana's ruling dynasty began is uncertain, it is first mentioned in documentary sources around 830 CE by Al-Kwarizmi.<sup>[2]</sup> The introduction of the camel, which preceded Muslims and Islam by several centuries, brought about a gradual change in trade, and for the first time, the extensive gold, ivory trade, and salt resources of the region could be sent north and east to population centers in

North Africa, the Middle East and Europe in exchange for manufactured goods.

The Empire grew rich from the trans-Saharan trade in gold and salt. This trade produced an increasing surplus, allowing for larger urban centres. It also encouraged territorial expansion to gain control over the lucrative trade routes.

The first written mention of the kingdom comes from Arabic-language sources some time after the conquest of North Africa by Muslims, when geographers began compiling comprehensive accounts of the world known to Islam around 800. The sources for the earlier periods are very strange as to its society, government or culture, though they do describe its location and note its commercial relations. The Cordoban scholar Abu Ubayd al-Bakri collected stories from a number of travelers to the region, and gave a detailed description of the kingdom in 1067/1068 (460 AH). He claimed that the *Ghana* could "put 200,000 men into the field, more than 40,000 of them archers" and noted they had cavalry forces as well.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Origin

### Written records: foreign state founders

The origins of Ghana have often been marred by contradictions between ethno-historic interpretations as well as ethno historic accounts and archaeology. The earliest discussions of their origins are found in the Sudanese chronicles of Mahmud Kati and Abd al-Rahman as-Sadi. According to Kati's *Tarikh al-Fettash* in a section probably composed by the author around 1580, but citing the authority of the chief judge of Massina, Ida al-Massini who lived somewhat earlier, twenty kings ruled Ghana before the advent of the Prophet, and the empire extended until the century after the prophet (i.e. c. 822 CE).<sup>[4]</sup> In addressing the rulers origin, the *Tarikh al-Fettash*, provides three different opinions, one that they were Wa'kuri (i.e. Soninke), another that they were Wangara (i.e. Mande), and a third that they were Sanhaja, a desert tribe of Amazighy (Berbers), an interpretation which al-Kati favored in view of the fact that their genealogies linked them to this group, and adds "What is certain is that they were not blacks" (*min al-sawadin*).<sup>[5]</sup> While the sixteenth century versions of genealogies might have linked Ghana to the Sanhaja, earlier versions, for example as reported by the eleventh century writer al-Idrisi and the thirteenth century writer ibn Said, noted that rulers of Ghana in those days traced their descent from the clan of the Prophet Muhammad either through his protector abi Talib, or through his son in law Ali.<sup>[6]</sup> Al-Sadi (who wrote in the 1660s), for his part, only notes that they were "white" (*bidan*, which referred to the culture rather than the skin-colour) and



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did not know their exact origin. He says that 22 kings ruled before the Hijra and 22 after.<sup>[7]</sup> While these early views lead to many exotic interpretations of a foreign origin of Wagadu, these views are generally disregarded by scholars. Levtzion and Spaulding for example, argue that al-Idrisi's testimony should be looked at very critically due to demonstrably gross miscalculations in geography and historical chronology, while themselves associating Ghana with the local Soninke.<sup>[8]</sup> In addition, the archaeologist and historian Raymond Mauny argues that al-Kati's and al-Sadi's view of a foreign origin cannot be regarded as reliable. He argues that the interpretations were based on the later presence (after Ghana's demise) of nomadic interlopers in the assumption that they were the historic ruling caste, and that the writers did not address contemporary accounts such as those of al-Yaqubi (872 A.D.) al-Masudi (c. 944 A.D.), Ibn Hawqal (c. 977 A.D.), al-Biruni (c. 1036 A.D.), as well as al-Bakri all describing the population and rulers of Ghana as "negroes".<sup>[9]</sup>

### **Oral traditions: local foundations by semi-historical figures**

In the late nineteenth century, as French forces occupied the region in which ancient Ghana lay, colonial officials began collecting traditional accounts, including some manuscripts written in Arabic somewhat earlier in the century. Several such traditions were recorded and published. While there are variants, these traditions called the most ancient polity they knew of Wagadu, or the "place of the Wago" the term current in the nineteenth century for the local nobility. The traditions described the kingdom as having been founded by a man named Dinga, who came "from the east", after which he migrated to a variety of locations in the Western Sudan, in each place leaving children by different wives. In order to achieve power in his final location he had to kill a goblin, and then marry his daughters, who became the ancestors of the clans that were dominant in the region at the time of the recording of the tradition. Upon Dinga's death, his two sons Khine and Dyabe contested the kingship, and Dyabe was victorious, founding the kingdom.<sup>[10]</sup>

### **Theories concerning the foundation of Ghana**

French colonial officials, notably Maurice Delafosse, concluded that Ghana had been founded by some sort of nomadic group from northern Africa, and linked them to North African and Middle Eastern origins. While Delafosse produced a convoluted theory of an invasion by "Judeo-Syrians", which he linked to the Fulbe, others took the tradition at face value and accepted simply that nomads had ruled first.<sup>[11]</sup> Raymond Mauny, synthesizing early archaeology, various traditions, and the Arabic materials in 1961 concluded that foreign trade was vital to the empire's foundation.<sup>[12]</sup> More recent work, for example by Nehemiah Levtzion, in his classic work published in 1973, sought to harmonize archaeology, descriptive geographical sources written between 830 and 1400, the older traditions of the Tarikhs, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and finally the traditions collected by French administrators. Levtzion concluded that local developments, stimulated by trade from North Africa were crucial in the development of the state, and tended to favor the more recently collected traditions over the other traditions in compiling his work.<sup>[13]</sup> While there has not been much further study of either traditions or documents, archaeologists have added considerable nuance to the ultimate play of forces.

### **Contribution of archaeological research**

Archaeological research was slow to enter the picture. While French archaeologists believed they had located the capital, Koumbi-Saleh in the 1920s, when they located extensive stone ruins in the general area given in most sources for the capital, and others argued that elaborate burials in the Niger Bend area may have been linked to the empire, it was not until 1969, when Patrick Munson excavated at Dhar Tichitt in modern day Mauritania that the probability of an entirely local origin was raised.<sup>[14]</sup> The Dar Tichitt site had clearly become a complex civilization by 1600 BCE and had architectural and material culture elements that seemed to match the site at Koumbi-Saleh. In more recent work in Dar Tichitt, and then in Dhar Nema and Dhar Walata, it has become more and more clear that as the desert advanced, the Dhar Tichitt culture (which had abandoned its earliest site around 300 BCE, possibly

because of pressure from desert nomads, but also because of increasing aridity) and moved southward into the still well watered areas of northern Mali.<sup>[15]</sup> This now seems the likely history of the complex society that can be documented at Koumbi-Saleh.

### Koumbi Saleh

The empire's capital is believed to have been at Koumbi Saleh on the rim of the Sahara desert.<sup>[16]</sup> According to the description of the town left by al-Bakri in 1067/1068, the capital was actually two cities six miles apart but "between these two towns are continuous habitations", so that they might be said to have merged into one.<sup>[17]</sup>

### El Ghaba Section

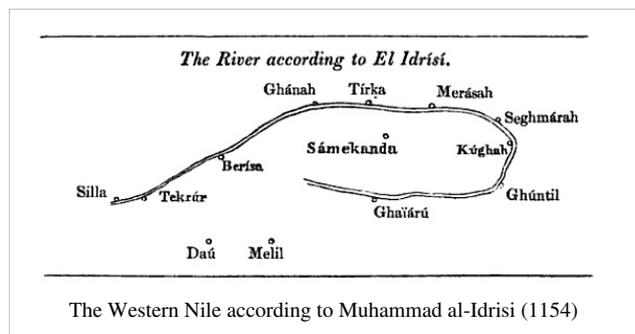
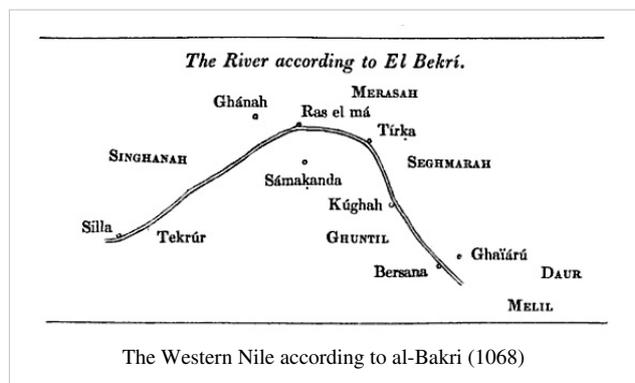
According to al-Bakri, the major part of the city was called El-Ghaba and was the residence of the king. It was protected by a stone wall and functioned as the royal and spiritual capital of the Empire. It contained a sacred grove of trees used for Soninke religious rites in which priests lived. It also contained the king's palace, the grandest structure in the city, surrounded by other "domed buildings". There was also one mosque for visiting Muslim officials.<sup>[17]</sup> (El-Ghaba, coincidentally or not, means "The Forest" in Arabic.)

### Muslim Section

The name of the other section of the city is not recorded. It was surrounded by wells with fresh water, where vegetables were grown. It was inhabited almost entirely by Arab and Amazighy Muslims along with twelve mosques, one of which was designated for Friday prayers, and had a full group of scholars, scribes and Islamic jurists. Because the majority of these Muslims were merchants, this part of the city was probably its primary business district.<sup>[18]</sup>

### Archaeology

A 17th century chronicle written in Timbuktu, the *Tarikh al-fattash*, gives the name of the capital as "Koumbi".<sup>[19]</sup> Beginning in the 1920s, French archaeologists began excavating the site of Koumbi-Saleh, although there have always been controversies about the location of Ghana's capital and whether Koumbi-Saleh is the same town as the one described by al-Bakri. The site was excavated in 1949-50 by Thomassey and Mauny<sup>[20]</sup> and by another French team in 1975-1981.<sup>[21]</sup> However, the remains of Koumbi Saleh are impressive, even if the remains of the royal town, with its large palace and burial mounds has not been located. Another problem for archaeology is that al-Idrisi, a twelfth century writer, described Ghana's royal city as lying on a riverbank, a river he called the "Nile" following the geographic custom of his day of confusing the Niger and Senegal, which do not meet, as forming a single river often called the "Nile of the Blacks". Whether al-Idrisi was referring to a new and later capital located elsewhere, or whether



there was confusion or corruption in his text is unclear, however he does state that the royal palace he knew of was built in 510 AH (1116-1117 CE), suggesting that it was a newer town, rebuilt closer to the Niger than Koumbi Saleh.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Economy

Most of our information about the economy of Ghana comes from merchants, and therefore we know more about the commercial aspects of its economy, and less about the way in which the rulers and nobles may have obtained agricultural products through tribute or taxation. The empire became wealthy because of their trading. They had an abundant amount of gold and salt. Al-Bakri noted that merchants had to pay a one gold dinar tax on imports of salt, and two on exports of salt. Other products paid fixed dues, al-Bakri mentioned both copper and "other goods." Imports probably included products such as textiles, ornaments and other materials. Many of the hand-crafted leather goods found in old Morocco may also had their origins in the empire.<sup>[23]</sup> The main centre of trade was Koumbi Saleh. The king claimed as his own all nuggets of gold, and allowed other people to have only gold dust.<sup>[24]</sup> In addition to the exerted influence of the king onto local regions, tribute was also received from various tributary states and chiefdoms to the empire's periphery.<sup>[25]</sup> The introduction of the camel played a key role in Soninke success as well, allowing products and goods to be transported much more efficiently across the Sahara. These contributing factors all helped the empire remain powerful for some time, providing a rich and stable economy that was to last over several centuries.

## Government

Much testimony on ancient Ghana depended on how well disposed the king was to foreign travellers, from which the majority of information on the empire comes. Islamic writers often commented on the social-political stability of the empire based on the seemingly just actions and grandeur of the king. A Moorish nobleman who lived in Spain by the name of Al-Bakri questioned merchants who visited the empire in the 11th century and wrote that the king:

He sits in audience or to hear grievances against officials in a domed pavilion around which stand ten horses covered with gold-embroidered materials. Behind the king stand ten pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold, and on his right are the sons of the kings of his country wearing splendid garments and their hair plaited with gold. The governor of the city sits on the ground before the king and around him are ministers seated likewise. At the door of the pavilion are dogs of excellent pedigree that hardly ever leave the place where the king is, guarding him. Around their necks they wear collars of gold and silver studded with a number of balls of the same metals.<sup>[26]</sup>

Ghana appears to have had a central core region and was surrounded by vassal states. One of the earliest sources to describe Ghana, al-Ya'qubi, writing in 889/90 (276 AH) says that "under his authority are a number of kings" which included Sama and 'Am (?) and so extended at least to the Niger valley.<sup>[27]</sup> These "kings" were presumably the rulers of the territorial units often called *kafu* in Mandinka.

The Arabic sources, the only ones to give us any information are sufficiently vague as to how the country was governed, that we can say very little. Al-Bakri, far and away the most detailed on, does mention that the king had officials (*mazalim*) who surrounded his throne when he gave justice, and these included the sons of the "kings of his country" which we must assume are the same kings that al-Ya'qubi mentioned in his account of nearly two hundred years earlier. Al-Bakri's detailed geography of the region shows that in his day, or 1067/1068, Ghana was surrounded by independent kingdoms, and Sila, one of them located on the Senegal River was "almost a match for the king of Ghana." Sama is the only such entity mentioned as a province, as it was in al-Ya'qubi's day.<sup>[28]</sup>

In al-Bakri's time, the rulers of Ghana had begun to incorporate more Muslims into government, including the treasurer, his interpreter and "the majority of his officials."<sup>[29]</sup>

## Decline

Given the scattered nature of the Arabic sources and the ambiguity of the existing archaeological record, it is difficult to determine when and how Ghana declined and fell. The earliest descriptions of the Empire are vague as to its maximum extent, though according to al-Bakri, Ghana had forced Awdaghast in the desert to accept its rule sometime between 970 and 1054.<sup>[30]</sup> By al-Bakri's own time, however, it was surrounded by powerful kingdoms, such as Sila.

A tradition in historiography maintains that Ghana fell when it was sacked by the Almoravid movement in 1076,<sup>[31]</sup> but this interpretation has been questioned, notably by Humphrey Fisher.<sup>[32]</sup> Fisher's account has more recently been challenged by Dierk Lange, who believes that the Almoravids had an important role in Ghana's fall, but notes that it was due to their instigation of internal political instability, rather than military actions or conquest.<sup>[33]</sup>

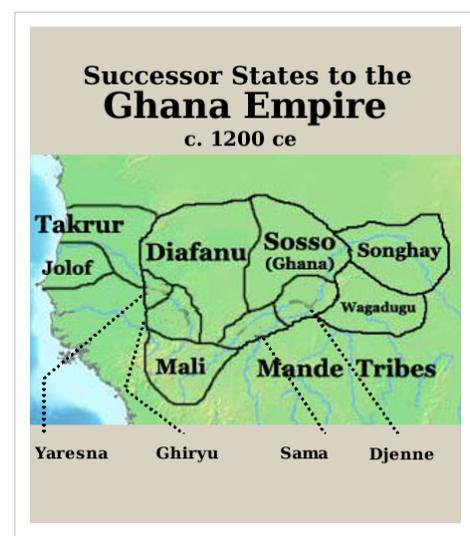
While there is no clear cut account of a sack of Ghana in the contemporary sources, the country certainly did convert to Islam, for al-Idrisi, whose account was written in 1154, has the country fully Muslim by that date. Ibn Khaldun, a fourteenth century North African historian who read and cited both al-Bakri and al-Idrisi, does report an ambiguous account of the country's history as related to him by 'Uthman, a faqih of Ghana who took a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1394, that the power of Ghana waned as that of the "veiled people" grew, through the Almoravid movement. The "extended their domination over the Sudan" pillaged, charged poll tax and other dues, and "converted many of them to Islam."<sup>[34]</sup> Al-Idrisi's report does not give any reason in particular to cause us to believe that the Empire was any smaller or weaker than it had been in the days of al-Bakri, seventy five years earlier, and in fact he describes its capital as "the greatest of all towns of the Sudan with respect to area, the most populous, and with the most extensive trade."<sup>[35]</sup> It is clear, however, that Ghana was incorporated into the Empire of Mali, according to a detailed account of al-'Umari, written around 1340, but based on testimony given to him by the "truthful and trustworthy shaykh Abu Uthman Sa'id al-Dukkali, a long term resident. In al'Umari/al-Dukkali's version, Ghana still retained its functions as a sort of kingdom within the empire, its ruler being the only one allowed to bear the title *malik* and "who is like a deputy unto him."<sup>[36]</sup>

## Aftermath and Sosso Occupation

According to Ibn Khaldun, following Ghana's conversion, "the authority of the rulers of Ghana dwindled away and they were overcome by the Susu...who subjugated and subdued them."<sup>[34]</sup> Some modern traditions identify the Susu as the Sosso, inhabitants of [Kaniaga]]. According to much later traditions, from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Diara Kante took control of Koumbi Saleh and established the Diarisso Dynasty. His son, Soumaoro Kante, succeeded him and forced the people to pay him tribute. The Sosso also managed to annex the neighboring Mandinka state of Kangaba to the south, where the important goldfield of Bure were located.

## Malinke Rule

In his brief overview of Sudanese history, ibn Khaldun, related that "the people of Mali outnumber the peoples of the Sudan in their neighborhood and dominated the whole region." He went on to relate that they "vanquished the Susu and acquired all their possessions, both their ancient kingdom and that of Ghana."<sup>[37]</sup> According to a modern tradition, this resurgence of Mali was led by Sundiata Keita, the founder of Mali and ruler of its core area of Kangaba. Delafosse assigned an arbitrary but widely accepted date of 1230 to the



event.<sup>[38]</sup> This tradition states that *Ghana* Soumaba Cisse, at the time a vassal of the Sosso, rebelled with Kangaba and became part of a loose federation of Mande speaking states. After Soumaoro's defeat at the Battle of Kirina in 1235 (a date again assigned arbitrarily by Delafosse), the new rulers of Koumbi Saleh became permanent allies of the Mali Empire. As Mali became more powerful, Koumbi Saleh's role as an ally declined to that of a submissive state, and it became the client described in al'Umari/al-Dukkali's account of 1340.

## Influence

The modern country of Ghana is named after the ancient empire, though there is no territory shared between the two states. Traditional stories show linkages between the two, with the northern Mande groups of Ghana: namely the Soninke, Dyula, Ligby and Bissa, known collectively by neighboring Gur and Akan groups as *Wangara* sharing histories of migration to the area around the time of the empire's descent.

## Rulers of Awkar

- King Kaja Maja : circa 350 AD
- 21 Kings, names unknown: circa 350 AD- 622 AD
- 21 Kings, names unknown: circa 622 AD- 790 AD
- King Reidja Akba : 1400-1415

## Soninke Rulers "Ghanas" of the Cisse dynasty

- Majan Dyabe Cisse: circa 790s
- Bassi: 1040- 1062

## Rulers during Kaniaga Occupation

- Soumaba Cisse as vassal of Soumaoro: 1203-1235

## Ghanas of Wagadou Tributary

- Soumaba Cisse as ally of Sundjata Keita: 1235-1240

## Notes

[1] Lange 2004, pp. 509-516.

[2] al-Kuwarizmi in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, p. 7.

[3] al-Bakri in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, p. 81.

[4] Houdas & Delafosse 1913, p. 76 (<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5439466q/f103.image>).

[5] Houdas & Delafosse 1913, p. 78 (<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5439466q/f105.image>), translation from Levtzion 1973, p. 19

[6] al-Idrisi in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, p. 109 and ibn Sa'id, p. 186.

[7] Hunwick 2003, p. 13 and note 5.

[8] Levtzion and Spaulding, "Medieval West Africa: Views From Arab Scholars and Merchant" (2003). P27

[9] Mauny 1954, p. 204.

[10] Levtzion 1973, pp. 16-17.

[11] Delafosse, *Haut-Senegal Niger*, 1: 215-226

[12] Mauny 1961, pp. 72-74, 508-511.

[13] Levtzion 1973, pp. 8-17.

[14] Munson 1980.

[15] Kevin McDonald, Robert Vernet, Dorian Fuller and James Woodhouse, "New Light on the Tichitt Tradition" A Preliminary Report on Survey and Excavation at Dhar Nema," pp. 78-80.

[16] Levtzion 1973, pp. 22-26.

[17] al-Bakri, 1067 in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, p. 80.

[18] al-Bakri, 1067 in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, pp. 79-80.

[19] Houdas & Delafosse 1913, p. 76.

- [20] Thomassey & Mauny 1951.
- [21] Berthier, *Recherches archéologiques sur la capitale de l'empire de Ghana*
- [22] al-Idrisi in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, pp. 109-110
- [23] Chu, Daniel and Skinner, Elliot. *A Glorious Age in Africa*, 1st ed. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965
- [24] al-Bakri in Levtzion and Hopkins, eds. and tras. *Corpus*, p. 81.
- [25] Ancient Ghana (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/4chapter1.shtml>)
- [26] al-Bakri in Levtzion and Hopkins, eds. and trans. *Corpus*, p. 80.
- [27] al-Ya'qubi in Levtzion and Hopkins, eds. and trans. *Corpus*, p. 21.
- [28] al-Bakri in Levtzion and Hopkins, eds. and trans., *Corpus*, pp. 77-83.
- [29] al-Bakri in Levtzion and Hopkins, ed. and trans. *Corpus*, p. 80.
- [30] al-Bakri in Levtzion and Hopkins, eds. and trans. *Corpus*, p. 73.
- [31] For example, Levtzion, *Ghana and Mali*, pp. 44-48.
- [32] Masonen & Fisher 1996.
- [33] Lange 1966.
- [34] ibn Khaldun in Levtzion and Hopkins, eds. and trans. *Corpus*, p. 333.
- [35] al-Idrisi in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, pp. 109-110.
- [36] al-Umari in Levtzion and Hopkins, eds. and trans. *Corpus*, p. 262.
- [37] ibn Khaldun in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, p. 333.
- [38] Delafosse, *Haut Senegal-Niger*, 1:

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## External links

- African Kingdoms | Ghana (<http://www.africankingdoms.com>)
- Empires of west Sudan ([http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ghan/hd\\_ghan.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ghan/hd_ghan.htm))
- Empire of Ghana, Wagadou, Soninke (<http://www.soninkara.org/histoire-soninke/empire-de-wagadou/recherches/>)
- Kingdom of Ghana, Primary Source Documents ([http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/materials/handouts/k\\_o\\_ghana.html](http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/materials/handouts/k_o_ghana.html))
- Ancient Ghana (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/4chapter1.shtml>) — BBC World Service

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