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UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB

CROATIAN STUDIES

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**STUART'S CAVALRY RAID DURING
THE GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN**

B. A. THESIS

Zagreb, September 2019

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1. Introduction

If you would ask any history student or a person at least vaguely interested in history if they could name one battle of the American Civil War, most of them would probably say Gettysburg. Aided by the 1993 epic war movie of the same name, and the great documentary Civil War series by Ken Burns that premiered in 1990, the memory of Gettysburg as the bloodiest battle of the war (which is unquestionable) and its turning point (which is greatly debated among historians) enabled it to become something of a myth in both academic and civilian circles. A great number of questions appeared and are perpetuated in relation to this great battle, and many of them will never get answered.

What would happen if general Jackson was still alive and commanded troops now under general Ewell? Did great charge of Pickett's division have any chance of success or was it just a great blunder on Lee's part? Was Longstreet right in his objections toward Lee that the Army of Northern Virginia should fight a defensive battle, instead of attacking Northern positions on the high ground?

To these questions' answers would never be discovered, as they are of theoretical nature, and it is unwise if not outright foolish, as a historian, to seriously discuss or research into topics of such 'what if?' nature. One question, however, that I'm sure a lot of people that watched the abovementioned movie, or read about the battle, the campaign, or the war, asked themselves was: Where was Stuart? Why was he so important to General Lee? Was not being at Gettysburg his own fault, or was it just an unfortunate twist of events? Was Stuart 'joyriding' or was he following Lee's orders? Would battle of Gettysburg play out differently if Stuart was with Lee's army? Was Stuart the reason why Confederates lost the battle?

In this thesis we will try to answer those and similar questions with the help of over 150 years of hindsight and many thousands of pages written on the subject by both historians who studied this subject for years and decades, and generals, soldiers and officers who played prominent roles in the events that transpired.

2. Strategic Situation and the Goal of the Raid

In the Summer of 1863 war between the Confederacy and the Union was in its third year. General Robert E. Lee's victory at Chancellorsville enabled him to invade the North, in order to remove the enemy threat from vicinity of Richmond, take the armies out of war-ravaged Virginia, and feed his troops in the enemy's country. It would also encourage anti-war elements, lower the morale of the civilians in the North, reopen the question of foreign recognition, and perhaps even conquer peace and recognition from the Union government itself.¹

The goal of the Stuart's incursion with his cavalry into Maryland east of the Army of the Potomac (thus putting the Union army between himself and main Confederate force, but also putting himself between the Union army and Washington) was to divert attention from Lee's army that was moving north into Pennsylvania, destroy communications between Federals and their capital, to drive a wedge between the Northern army and Richmond, and to collect supplies from a different area of the North than that through which the main army was travelling.²

¹ McPherson 1988: 910.

² Nesbitt 1994: 58.

3. The Orders

Orders that Stuart received from Lee regarding the raid at its outset were and still are sources of great debate between historians, so we will try to briefly replicate them and also answer the controversies surrounding them. They would also help understanding what Stuart had in mind when he set out into Maryland and Pennsylvania. This is Lee's dispatch to Stuart received on the 22nd of June:

“General: I have just received your note of 7:45 this morning to General Longstreet. I judge the efforts of the enemy yesterday were to arrest our progress and ascertain our whereabouts. Perhaps he is satisfied. Do you know where he is and what he is doing? I fear he will steal a march on us, and get across the Potomac before we are aware. If you find that he is moving northward, and that two brigades can guard the Blue Ridge and take care of your rear, you can move with the other three into Maryland, and take position on General Ewell's right, place yourself in communication with him, guard his flank, keep him informed of the enemy's movements, and collect all the supplies you can for the use of the army. (...)”³

Lee's orders to Stuart were sent through Longstreet, his principal subordinate and commander of the 1st Corps, who obviously read them since he mentioned them in his next correspondence to Stuart. In the evening of June 22nd Longstreet sent letter with Lee's orders:

“General: General Lee has enclosed to me this letter for you⁴, to be forwarded to you, provided you can be spared from my front, and provided I think that you can move across the Potomac Gap, and passing by the rear of the enemy. If you can get through by that route, I think that you will be less likely to indicate what our plans are than if you should cross by passing

³ Nesbitt 1994: 57-58.

⁴ This is the order cited previously on this same page.

to our rear. I forward the letter of instructions with these suggestions. Please advise me of the condition of affairs before you leave, and order General Hampton – whom I suppose you will leave here in command – to report to me at Milwood, either by letter or in person, as may be most agreeable to him...

N.B. – I think that your passage of the Potomac by our rear at the present moment will, in measure, disclose our plans. You had better not leave us, therefore, unless you can take the proposed route in rear of the enemy."⁵

With the benefit of hindsight bestowed by the passage of time, Longstreet, in his postwar memoirs, claimed Stuart disregarded Lee's orders by going off on his ride east of the Blue Ridge and around the enemy army. „The raid and the absence of the cavalry at the critical moment were severely criticized through the army and the country,” wrote Longstreet „If General Stuart could have claimed authority of my orders for his action, he could not have failed to do so in his official account. He offered no such excuse but claimed to act under the orders of his chief, and reported that General Lee gave consent to his application for leave to make the march. So our plans, adopted after deep study, were suddenly given over to gratify the youthful cavalryman's wish for a nomadic ride,”⁶ As is visible in the above Longstreet's dispatch, however, he wholeheartedly endorsed the idea in June 1863, which makes his postwar memoirs disingenuous and in conflict with his contemporaneous writings.⁷

It is also interesting to note how Longstreet might have been one of the reasons Stuart was late for the battle: Colonel John S. Mosby, one of the Stuart's subordinates and the staunch defender of his conduct in the afterwar years asserts that by moving toward the Potomac river on the 24th (the day before Stuart started), James Longstreet and A. P. Hill set the Union army in motion, and it in turn prevented Stuart to cross on the 25th, delaying his crossing for what amounted to two full days.⁸ „If Longstreet and Hill had stayed quiet a day longer, Stuart would

⁵ Nesbitt 1994: 60.

⁶ Longstreet 1992: 343.

⁷ Wittenberg 2006: 255.

⁸ Wittenberg 2006: 284.

have crossed the Potomac in advance of Hooker's army in the morning of the 25th, and the fate of Confederate cause might have been different.“⁹

On the night of 23rd, at Stuart's headquarters, a courier arrived from Lee's headquarters. He handed a dispatch marked 'confidential' to H. B. McClellan, his assistant adjutant general¹⁰. The letter was subsequently lost, but in his 1885 book *I Rode with Jeb Stuart*, McClellan said:

„The letter discussed at considerable length of the plan of passing around the enemy's rear. It informed General Stuart that General Early would move upon York, Pa., and that he was desired to place his cavalry as speedily as possible with that, the advance division of Lee's right wing. The letter suggested that, as the roads leading northward from Shepherdstown and Williamsport were already encumbered by the infantry, the artillery and the transportation of the army, the delay which would necessary occur in passing by these would, perhaps, be greater than would ensue if General Stuart passed around the enemy's rear. The letter further informed him that, if he chose the latter route, General Early would receive instruction to look out for him and endeavor to communicate with him, and York, Pa., was designated as the point in the vicinity of which he was to expect to hear from Early, and as the possible (if not probable) point of concentration of the army. The whole tenor of the letter gave evidence that the commanding general approved the proposed movement, and thought that it might be productive of the best results, while the responsibility of the decision was placed upon General Stuart himself.“¹¹

This correspondence recalled by McClellan is vital because it gave Stuart several pieces of information. It sent him from the Emmitsburg route farther east toward York and added

⁹ Mosby 2012: 192.

¹⁰ Nesbitt 1994: 66.

¹¹ McClellan 1994: 317-318.

more distance to the ninety-mile trek originally conceived by Lee and passed on to Stuart. It also mentioned that the roads west of the mountains were clogging up rapidly and bolstered Stuart's impression that Lee wanted him to ride around the Union army because of that.

It also placed some duty of reconnecting with the rest of the army upon Early and placed a tentative destination of the army (or at least the advanced elements of it) much further east than before mentioned (York is 40 miles east of Emmitsburg).¹²

On June 24th, knowing that he would be out of touch with the army for several days, Stuart sent remarkably specific orders to Brigadier General Beverly H. Robertson, whose brigade was working with Jones' brigade. Robertson was to be in command and Stuart virtually repeated Lee's orders to him:

„General: Your own and General Jones' brigades will cover the front of Ashby's and Snicker's Gaps, yourself, as senior officery being in command. Your object will be to watch the enemy; deceive him as to our designs, and harass his rear if you find he is retiring. Be always alert: let nothing escape your observation, and miss no oportunity which offers to damage the enemy.

After the enemy has moved beyond your reach, leave sufficient pickets in the mountains, withdraw to the west side of the Shenandoah, place a strong and reliable picket to watch enemy at Harper's Ferry, cross the Potomac, follow the army, keeping on its right and rear.

As long as the enemy remain in your front in force, unless otherwise ordered by General R.E. Lee, Liutenant-General Longstreet, or myself, hold the Gaps with a line of pickets

¹² Nesbitt 1994: 67-68.

reaching across the Shenandoah by Charlestown to the
Potomac. (...)“¹³

¹³ Nesbit 1994: 68-9.

4. The Ride

At 1 after midnight on June 25th Stuart moved out his column consisting of three brigades but was slowed due to the movement of Union troops marching north (he was planning to move through the gaps between camped soldiers. It was impossible pass through the enemy while enemy troops were on the move). On June 26th, he again had to halt to graze the horses and gather information on the enemy.¹⁴

Stuart managed to ford the Potomac during the night of 27th, but with further delays, as the river was two feet higher than normal and the guns and ammunition had to be unloaded, troopers carrying gun shells and powder on their horses in order for the whole column to make it across.¹⁵

On the morning of June 28th, once north of the Potomac, Stuart cut the Cheasapeake and Ohio Canal and captured boats loaded with supplies for the Union army. Moving north, the force entered Rockville after noon, and found themselves directly across the main line of communication and supply between Washington and the Army of the Potomac. Miles of telegraph were torn down.¹⁶

Shorty after Confederates occupied Rockville, a huge wagon train approached from the southeast, apparently unaware of the Confederate presence. Finally, realizing the trap, the officers tried desperately to turn the eight-mile train around, but Stuart's men captured all but the overturned wagons, which they burned. They got 125 new wagons, loaded with oats, corn, hams, hardtack, bacon and whiskey, with fresh mules and harness.¹⁷ Stuart mentioned in his report that at that time he considered an advance on Washington, but abstained solely because of time required for such a move (Washington is about 18 miles south of Rockville, opposite to the Stuart's planned direction of march). He decided to cut the enemy's second line of supply however, that of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. From Rockville, the distance to the railroad was about 25 miles, and in the direction of Stuart's advance toward Hanover.¹⁸

¹⁴ Nesbitt 1994: 71.

¹⁵ Nesbitt 1994: 73.

¹⁶ Nesbitt 1994: 75.

¹⁷ Nesbitt 1994: 76.

¹⁸ Freeman 1944, vol 3: 67.

After riding through the night of June 28-29 and burning the B&O railroad just after dawn, the whole force arrived at Westminster. The Federal cavalry gave a brief fight but held up the advance only briefly. There, for the first time, Stuart's men found adequate forage but had to stay most of the night of the 29th gathering it.¹⁹ Due to these delays, Stuart was prevented from crossing into Pennsylvania one day earlier, thus enabling division of federal cavalry under Brig. Gen. Judson Kilpatrick to fight him on June 30th – a fight that would consume an entire precious day.

By the time Stuart managed to shake himself loose from Killpatrick and continued to York, Pennsylvania, Lt. Gen. Richard Ewell's Second Corps was already gone, having been recalled to the Cashtown-Gettysburg concentration area by General Lee. Had he not lost time in these two battles; he might have caught up with Ewell's infantry near York. Had that occurred, the entire battle of Gettysburg might have evolved differently.²⁰

After disengaging from Killpatrick and after a whole night march, in the morning of July 1st, Stuart discovered that General Early had left York and gone to the West. Stuart's best guess today was that the army was concentrating to the north of Chambersburg, at Shippensburg. Stuart pushed the column toward Carlisle.²¹ But when his commissary officers reached Carlisle in late afternoon, they found Ewell's men had long since departed; the enemy occupied the town. The truth was that Stuart, after eight days on the move, had only now learned where Lee was: "The whereabouts of our army," he wrote, "was still a mystery, but during the night I received a dispatch from General Lee that the army was at Gettysburg and had been engaged this day."

The news was brought back with orders to hurry the column to Gettysburg. They also had glowing reports of victory over Meade's infantry during the day. Stuart left Carlisle at one after midnight, with about thirty miles to go by the nearest route. He only arrived there on afternoon of 2nd of July, too late to influence the battle.²²

¹⁹ Nesbitt 1994: 82.

²⁰ Wittenberg 2006: 99.

²¹ Davis 1998: par. 2.2255-56.

²² Davis 1998: par. 2.2259-62.

5. The Controversies

Recrimination over the way Jeb Stuart's ride was conducted began almost immediately. Indeed, the controversy began within days of the end of the fighting at Gettysburg. Someone had to take the blame for the loss there, and Stuart, along with Lt. Gen. James Longstreet, was the most logical candidate.²³ Lee was untouchable, considering his revered reputation among the Confederates, and his actions were not being under scrutiny for a long time after the war ended²⁴.

After we dealt with the controversy surrounding Stuart's following of orders in the earlier section, we could sum up some other accusations that were being voiced against him since the battle of Gettysburg in the next few distinct statements:

- Stuart's absence brought on the Battle of Gettysburg.
- Stuart left Lee with no cavalry to do the main army's reconnaissance.²⁵
- The 125 wagon train captured on the 28th seriously impeded the ride and critically delayed Stuart's arrival at Gettysburg.²⁶
- Stuart should have taken an alternative route in his ride north.²⁷

We will briefly deal with these criticisms one by one.

5.1. Stuart's absence brought on the Battle of Gettysburg

Most of Stuart's detractors claim his failure to provide the Army of Northern Virginia with adequate intelligence of Federal movements cause Lee to blunder into battle he did not desire, upon ground he did not choose. Sufficient evidence exists to demonstrate this criticism may not be justified. An important dispatch that was not reproduced in the Official Records of the Civil War and only got published years later by John B. Jones in his diary kept during years working for the Confederate War Department kept a report that Stuart sent to Lee and is

²³ Wittenberg 2006: 226.

²⁴ Nesbitt 1994: 125.

²⁵ Nesbitt 1994: XVII. (Introduction)

²⁶ Freeman 1944: 66.

²⁷ Wittenberg 2006: 333.

reporting the that the Army of the Potomac is marching north, after Lee's army. The dispatch is dated June 27th, and it is obvious that Lee hadn't received it, but it is hard to blame Stuart for not reporting that the Army of the Potomac was marching northward when evidence exists that he attempted to do just that.²⁸

In addition, Colonel John S. Mosby, one of the Stuart's subordinates and the staunch defender of his conduct in the afterwar years, is pointing out that Lee had to know, even without the information from cavalry, that Army of the Potomac is already moving north by that time, as if that wasn't the case there would have been nothing to prevent Gen. Lee from marching directly to Baltimore or Washington. And if he thought that was the case, he would march east, not north as he did.²⁹

He also makes a compelling case regarding to who's fault it was that the battle came into being the way it did, with the army not concentrated and without the intent of Gen. Lee to get into a fight before concentration is achieved. He ordered a concentration of the army at Cashtown on the morning of 29th of June, a village about 7 miles west from Gettysburg. Hill's Corps first reached Cashtown on the 30th. That night Hill and Heth (one of his division commanders) heard that there was a force of the enemy at Gettysburg; early next morning Hill, without orders, with Heth's and Pender's divisions, started down the Gettysburg pike and ran into Buford's cavalry, thus starting the battle.³⁰ As Heth's reason for going to Gettysburg in the first place was to make a forced reconnaissance, he was to retire after he got the information he needed without triggering general engagement, which was Lee's order. He didn't do that, but pressed on and was soon heavily engaged with Federal newly arrived I Corps. Lee thus got lured into a trap from which he could not easily extricate himself. Jeb Stuart, explained Mosby, did nothing to either create or spring the July 1st trap.³¹

Coddington, a historian who wrote one of the most important books about the subject called 'The Gettysburg campaign: A Study in Command' says:

²⁸ Wittenberg 2006: 322.

²⁹ Wittenberg 2006: 276.

³⁰ Wittenberg 2006: 278.

³¹ Wittenberg 2006: 280.

„One thing is sure. On the eve of 1st of July Lee had his forces in splendid shape to carry out his strategy of defeating the Army of the Potomac "in detail", that is, one part at a time. If, as Stuart's accusers insisted, the absence of cavalry permitted Lee to be surprised into an unfortunate encounter of major proportions at Gettysburg, they overlooked two important elements in the situation. Meade was just as surprised, and the initial advantage lay with Lee.“³²

5.2. Stuart left Lee without Cavalry

The entire argument that Stuart's ride left Lee and the army of Northern Virginia blind ignores one critical fact: Stuart only took three of the seven available brigades with him on his ride. That means he left 4 brigades to screen the army's advance.³³ As Gen. Stuart says in his report, "*Robertson's and Jones's brigades, under command of the former, were left in observation of the enemy, on the usual front (about Middleburg), with full instructions as to following of the enemy, in case of withdrawal, and joining our main army.*" Those two brigades contained about 3000 troops, which was more than sufficient for every purpose.³⁴

Stuart also left clear and precise orders for the commander of this force, Robertson, as can be read in the earlier section of this article. Robertson was never asked and so never answered the important question of why he failed to inform Lee that the Union army had crossed the Potomac by June 27th or why he waited until June 29th to begin his move northward. Robinsons claim that he was in regular communication with Lee regarding the disposition of the enemy is difficult to accept at face value. There is no evidence in Official Records, correspondence files, or writing or statements of any of the participants that Robertson made any attempt to inform Lee of Union army movements. He offered no proof to support his

³² Coddington 1984: 207.

³³ Wittenberg 2006: 341.

³⁴ Mosby 1898: Par. 6.18.

claim, and none has been found. The upshot is that the blame for General Lee's lack of accurate intelligence cannot be deposited at Stuart's feet.³⁵

In addition, Stuart believed that Jenkins brigade, which was leading Ewell's advance into Pennsylvania and was under his command, contained 3800 troopers³⁶. As well, watching the left flank of the army was Imboden with 2000 troopers³⁷. Stuart left with Lee what he believed were close to 9000 troopers, most of whom were within a day or two's ride of Lee himself.³⁸

Why that force wasn't used for reconnaissance by Gen. Lee is a question that we won't get into due to the scope of this article, but the mounted troops, and plenty of them, were readily available and in communication with Gen. Lee. He however, left Robertson and Jones in Virginia, sent Imboden as far as possible from the enemy, only retaining Jenkins, who at the critical moment found himself in the rear of the infantry³⁹. It seems that it was not the lack of cavalry that Gen. Lee was bereft of, for he had enough of it had it been properly used. It was the absence of Stuart himself that he felt so keenly, for on him he had learned to rely to such an extent that it seemed as if his cavalry were concentrated in his person, and from him alone he would be able to get the information he needed.⁴⁰

5.3. The Wagon Train

Although most observers point to the 125-wagon train captured on the 28th of June as the critical factor that delayed Stuart's arrival at Gettysburg, not everyone saw it that way. "Here was godsend for our poor horses," recalled Capt. William Blackford, Stuart's engineering officer, "for every wagon was loaded with oats intended for Meade's army and it did one's heart good to see the way the poor brutes got on the outside of those oats."^{41,42}

³⁵ Wittenberg 2006: 351-2.

³⁶ Different estimates were given by McClellan (1500-1600) and Thomason (1800) for Jenkins' brigade.

³⁷ Thomason 1994: 426.

³⁸ Nesbitt 1994: 70.

³⁹ Wittenberg 2006: 263.

⁴⁰ Wittenberg 2006: 270.

⁴¹ Blackford 1999: 225.

⁴² Wittenberg 2006: 331.

Mosby states that: "Possibly if Stuart had burned the trains he captured on the march he might have arrived earlier and joined Early on the 30th, but none of Stuart's critics can show any bad results from his carrying the trains along with him. If he had arrived on the 30th, at York, he could not have communicated with General Lee. Lee was fifty-five miles away west of the South Mountain at Chambersburg." At that time, Mosby pointed out, „General Lee knew perfectly well ... the direction in which Meade was heading his army, and that his cavalry occupied Gettysburg. Stuart could have told him no more. The instructions did not require him to report to General Lee but to Ewell."⁴³

Stuart had served as the regimental quartermaster of the 1st U.S. Cavalry in the years prior to the Civil War, and he keenly understood the importance of making sure cavalrymen had adequate supplies to feed and maintain both men and horses. Stuart understood the importance of the cargo carried in those wagons, and without those tons of fodder it is difficult to conclude how his starving horses could have carried on much longer—or ever reached Gettysburg in a condition to fight a major engagement the day after their arrival. The wagons also carried fodder and provisions that were used by other elements of Lee's army. These supplies helped the Confederates carry on with the fighting around Gettysburg and assisted the Southerners during their long retreat into Virginia.⁴⁴

5.4. Stuart should have taken an alternative Route in his Ride North

As can be read in the earlier part of this article, Stuart received a dispatch from General Lee that the main alternate route is filled by the marching infantry, artillery, and ammunition wagons. It would be hard to understand, unless guided with hindsight we now possess, why would Stuart change his earlier agreed plan to ride around the rear of Union army, that had full support from Lee as the supreme commander, especially after receiving information that made the route he planned to take more favorable in the light of these new developments. The reason why this question was asked so after was probably because McClellan's recollection of the letter Stuart received from Lee on the night of 23rd only got presented in writing in his

⁴³ Wittenberg 2006: 283.

⁴⁴ Thomas 2019: 40.

memoirs, years after the war ended, as it got destroyed and was not publicly available in any other form until that time.

6. Conclusion

Stuart has not survived the war, dying in the Battle of the Yellow Tavern in May of 1864; less than a year after the Gettysburg campaign took place⁴⁵. Thus, he was unable to defend himself or his actions after the war when Gettysburg was starting to be seen as the pivotal battle after which South was doomed to lose the war. As such he was a perfect scapegoat for his critics and everyone who, for whatever reason, wanted to shift the blame from other important actors of that battle – most notable being Lee, Longstreet, Ewell, A.P. Hill and Heth. It looks like for this reason, and because Robinson, who was left in command when Stuart crossed into Maryland did not inform Lee on the movements of the Union army, which he was ordered to do, is why controversies around Stuart's conduct are still alive to this day. That, and the fact that the Battle of Gettysburg was a defeat and was destined to be the last invasion of the North by the Army of Northern Virginia.

The myth and fiction⁴⁶ surrounding this Stuart's famous absence got intermixed with fact and helped muddy the waters in relation to what really happened, and why. I hope that this brief overview helped to show that most of the controversies surrounding Stuart were in fact either grossly exaggerated or factually wrong.

It also must be noted that Federal cavalry surely played a large role in slowing down Stuart, for he lost at least a day and a half in skirmishes during the raid and the battle of Hanover. When looking back with hindsight historians often fall prey to the thought that if only one person did one thing differently, the result would drastically change, as if that one event or decision was done in a vacuum and the other forces involved wouldn't change accordingly.

When George Pickett, the Confederate division commander that lead the famous Pickett's Charge, failure of which sealed the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg, was asked why the charge failed and, by extent, why the battle was lost, Pickett frequently replied "I've always thought the Yankees had something to do with it."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Nesbitt 1994: 125.

⁴⁶ The movie mentioned in the Introduction, Gettysburg, was adapted from the historical novel *The Killer Angels*, and as such helped fictionalised conversations and scenes to get accepted as fact in the mainstream.

⁴⁷ Boritt 1992: 19.

After all, when contemplating who is to blame for the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg it is hard not to agree Wittenberg's assesment that no single person or could or should be blamed for that crippling loss. Rather, a combination of circumstances led to the Confederate disaster. The Army of Northern Virginia would have lost the battle of Gettysburg whether Jeb Stuart and his cavalry were present earlier or not. Their absence simply provides more fodder for the endless debates that are still being perpetuated over a century and a half after this great battle took place.⁴⁸ As for the defeat itself, it would aslo be prudent to add that in all honesty, Yankees probably had something to do with it.

⁴⁸ Wittenberg 2006: 360.

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