

CHARLES E. HILL

From the
Lost Teaching of
Polycarp

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament*

186

Mohr Siebeck

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Charles E. Hill

From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp

Identifying Irenaeus' Apostolic Presbyter
and the Author of *Ad Diognetum*

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

This book proposes to restore to his credit a substantial portion of the teaching of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, c.a. A.D. 69–156. It began as several separate studies, each of which has had earlier incarnations. In a paper entitled “Diognetus and Polycarp,” presented in 1998 at the North American Patristics Society’s annual meeting at Loyola University in Chicago, I detailed coincidences between the writing known as the *ad Diognetum* and the teaching of Polycarp, as exhibited in his letter to the Philippians, in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and in the testimony of Irenaeus, and suggested that Polycarp in fact may have authored the *ad Diognetum*. My interest in the *ad Diognetum* continued to develop, with studies on the question of its unity and authorship, but the paper, with its admittedly unconventional thesis, lay on the back burner for several years while other projects took precedence. While researching for an article on Cerinthus, I was struck by the agreement between Irenaeus’ catalogue of heresies in book 1 of *Against Heresies* and his account of the words of the “apostolic presbyter” in *AH* 4.32.1. The article, published in 2000,¹ presented a short argument for identifying this presbyter as a main source for Irenaeus’ heresy list in book one, and for identifying both with Irenaeus’ teacher, Polycarp. At the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies in Oxford in August, 2003, the argument about Polycarp and the presbyter was expanded in a paper entitled, “Polycarp *contra* Marcion. Irenaeus’ Presbyterial Source in *AH* 4.27-32.” This paper, to appear in *Studia Patristica* (eds., M. F. Wiles and E. J. Yarnold), is an earlier version of Part One of this book.

After this paper was read at the Oxford conference, I was approached by Pier Franco Beatrice, of the University of Padua, who told me of his keen interest in the subject. In his humility, Professor Beatrice did not mention that he had written on the subject. It was not until I was near the final editing stages of this book that I saw a reference to an article he had written, the title of which alone informed me that my “discovery” of this

¹ C. E. Hill, “Cerinthus, Gnostic or Chiliast? A New Solution to an Old Problem,” *J ECS* 8 (2000), 135–72.

lost teaching of Polycarp had been already made as early as 1990!² I regard it as a confirmation of the major conclusions of this book that they were arrived at by Beatrice and myself entirely independently, and I am happy to acknowledge that several individual points treated here were observed previously by Beatrice in his provocative article.

I would like to thank Dr. Henning Ziebritzki and Professor Jörg Frey for their encouragement to publish this material in the WUNT series. I also wish to thank Michael Farrell and Keely Leim for their excellent library help and my students Todd Hickerson, Brian Salter, and Jason Foster for the various forms of assistance which they so ably supplied.

Orlando, March 2005

Charles E. Hill

² Pier Franco Beatrice, "Der Presbyter des Irenäus, Polykarp von Smyrna und der Brief an Diognet," in Eugenio Romero-Pose, ed., *Pléroma Salus Carnis. Homenaje a Antonio Orbe, S.J.* (Santiago de Compostella, 1990), 179–202.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|------|--|
| ACW | Ancient Christian Writers |
| ANF | <i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> , edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, 10 vols., rev. A. C. Coxe (repr. Grand Rapids, Mich., 1950–) |
| ANRW | <i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> , edited by H. Temporini and W. Haase (Berlin, 1972–) |
| BDAG | <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3 rd edn. Edited by Frederick William Danker (Chicago and London, 2000) |
| DACL | <i>Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie</i> , 15 vols., edited by Ferdinand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq (Paris, 1907–53) |
| DCB | <i>A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines</i> , 4 vols., edited by W. Smith and H. Wace (London, 1877–87) |
| LCL | Loeb Classical Library |
| LHH | <i>The Apostolic Fathers. Greek Texts and English Translations</i> , updated edn. of <i>The Apostolic Fathers. Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings</i> , 2 nd edn., edited and translated by J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, edited and revised by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1999) |
| L&S | <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , compiled by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones, Roderick McKenzie, et al., 9 th edn. (Oxford, 1996) |
| NPNF | <i>A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> , 2 nd series, 14 vols., edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York, 1890–1900) |
| NTA | <i>New Testament Apocrypha</i> , revised edn., 2 vols., edited by Wilhelm Schneemelcher, English translation edited by Robert McL. Wilson (Cambridge and Louisville, 1991) |
| PGL | <i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon, with Addenda et Corrigenda</i> , edited by G. W. H. Lampe (Oxford, 1961–68) |
| SC | Sources chrétiennes (Paris, 1943–) |

Introduction

The importance of Polycarp of Smyrna to second-century Christianity is, from any point of view, considerable. Helmut Koester rightly regards him as “doubtlessly the most significant ecclesiastical leader of the first half of II CE.”¹ Polycarp pastored his flock in one of Asia’s chief cities through times of opposition and growth.² Near the beginning of his unusually long tenure of leadership at Smyrna he was praised, and prodded, in a famous letter written by Ignatius, bishop of the ancient and prominent Christian community of Antioch. Many who never met Polycarp surely knew him from this letter, which circulated widely in a collection of Ignatius’ letters. Certainly by the 140s and continuing until his death in the mid-150s Polycarp was an elder statesman – if not *the* elder statesman – for Asian Christianity. At the time of Polycarp’s death, the author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* stated that the bishop of Smyrna was famous throughout Asia among Christians and pagans alike (19.1), and related how even the hostile crowd acknowledged him as “the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our Gods” (12.2).

The sources for our knowledge of the life and teaching of Polycarp are several. We have only one of what Irenaeus attests were many letters

¹ H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*, (New York/Berlin: De Gruyter, 1982), 308. Despite a general recognition of Polycarp’s importance, many have been less than admiring of his natural abilities, e.g., Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Primitive Church: Studied with Special Reference to the Origins of the Christian Ministry: The Hewett Lectures, 1928* (London, 1929), 98–99, “Polycarp, to judge from his surviving epistle, was a person of small ability.” For collections of negative assessments, see Paul Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament*, WUNT 2. Reihe 134 (Tübingen, 2002), 65–67; Kenneth Berding, *Polycarp and Paul. An Analysis of their Literary and Theological Relationship in Light of Polycarp’s Use of Biblical and Extra-Biblical Literature*, Suppl. NovT 62 (Leiden/Boston/Cologne, 2002), 4–6. Recently, more positive evaluations have been made by scholars such as Boudewijn Dehandschutter, “Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians: An Early Example of ‘Reception,’” in Jean-Marie Sevrin, ed., *The New Testament in Early Christianity: La réception des écrits néotestamentaires dans le christianisme primitif* (Leuven, 1989), 275; A. Lindemann, “Paul in the Writings of the Apostolic Fathers,” in William S. Babcock, ed., *Paul and the Legacies of Paul* (Dallas, 1990); Hartog; and Berding.

² Lightfoot in fact wrote that “The lifetime of Polycarp was the most tumultuous period in the religious history of the world; and a chief arena of the struggle between divers creeds and cults was Asia Minor” (J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, 1981 repr. of 1889–1890 edn.), 5 vols, Part 2, vol. 1, 464–65).

written by Polycarp to brethren and churches (Eusebius, *HE* 5.20.8), his early epistle to the Philippian church. This relatively short epistle is our most substantial sample of his teaching, though it was written about forty years before his death. We can also ascertain a few things about him and about the Smyrnaean church at the time he wrote to the Philippians from Ignatius' letters to him and to his church. Then we have the extremely valuable account of Polycarp's martyrdom, with its contemporary narrative of Polycarp's last days and some of his last words. This document was probably constructed with the aid of the official Roman account of the trial. While debate continues about many details of its redaction, the *Martyrdom* as a whole is widely regarded today as highly trustworthy. Irenaeus too gives us some historical reminiscences and anecdotes about Polycarp's life in Smyrna, and about his visit to Rome at the beginning of Anicetus' episcopacy in about 154–155.³ To be placed alongside the praise of this former student, are the few words of Polycrates, bishop of neighboring Ephesus, from the early 190s which laud Polycarp as a venerable Asian martyr, witness to the quartodeciman tradition, and a vital link with Jesus' disciple John (Eusebius, *HE* 5.24.4). The controverted *Life of Polycarp* by Ps. Pionius from the third or fourth century gives a much later and tendential account, and any historical information derived from this source has to be treated with great caution.⁴ Likewise, the historical worth of the information preserved in the recently published Harris Coptic Fragments is debatable, though they tell us important information about Polycarp's legacy in the church.⁵

In one tantalizing remark, Irenaeus insisted that there was a good deal of Polycarp's oral teaching which he himself could remember accurately,

³ Irenaeus knows about Polycarp's keeping and defending the quartodeciman Easter while in Rome. He reports a caustic, personal encounter with the heretic Marcion (probably though not certainly at Rome), and Polycarp's successful efforts at winning back some who had strayed after Marcion and his fellow heretic, Valentinus. This makes it most probable, in my opinion, that Irenaeus was actually in Rome at the time. According to the Moscow manuscript of the *MPolyc.* 22.2, 5, he was in Rome when Polycarp suffered martyrdom not long afterwards. It is possible then that he accompanied Polycarp from Smyrna to Rome, where he then stayed, or perhaps he had already emigrated to Rome some time previous, and met Polycarp again when he arrived.

⁴ Lightfoot, *AF* 2.3, 431, judged it historically worthless and attributed to it a fourth-century date. P. Corssen, "Die Vita polycarpi," *ZNW* 5 (1904), 266–304, argued that the author was the Smyrnaean martyr Pionius, killed in the Decian persecution and the subject of the *Martyrdom of Pionius*. Most have sided with Lightfoot in regarding the author of the *Life* as writing under the guise of this Pionius. See Boudewijn Dehandschutter, "The Martyrium Polycarpi: A Century of Research," *ANRW* 2.27.1: 485–522.

⁵ Frederick W. Weidmann, *Polycarp and John. The Harris Fragments and Their Challenge to the Literary Traditions*, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity Series 12 (Notre Dame, 1999).

having noted it down in his heart when he heard it, and having ruminated upon it for decades (*Letter to Florinus*, Eusebius, *HE* 5.20.7). It seems a great pity that Irenaeus never reports to us, in what is extant of his writings, any of that oral teaching – at least if he does so he does not identify it as such. It is the purpose of Part One of this book, however, to show that some of this oral teaching of Polycarp still exists, imbedded in Irenaeus' book *Against Heresies*, and is still recoverable. If this proves to be the case, it will add substantially to our knowledge of Polycarp and his teaching. In Part Two I present another case for identifying some of Polycarp's teaching, in the anonymous work known as the *Epistle to Diognetus*. This too, if proven to be the case, would add a great deal to our understanding of Polycarp and his teaching.

At the outset I will state that the two cases rest on quite different sets of evidence; each case is presented and should be evaluated separately. The first will render results which, I will suggest, may be treated as a certainty. The results of the second rest, I believe, high in the realms of probability, though perhaps not quite at the same level as the first. Nevertheless, both cases are presented here for the further evaluation of scholars in the hopes of enhancing our understanding the life and teaching of this important and interesting figure.

Part One

Polycarp *Contra Marcionem*

Irenaeus' Presbyterial Source in *AH* 4.27–32

Chapter 1

The Identity of the Presbyter

Introduction

Van Unnik observed of “the presbyters” in the writings of Irenaeus that, “Shadowy though they are, they seem to be key figures in certain areas of the church in that age of transition, which is the 2nd century.”¹ In Irenaeus’ view the presbyters, indeed, are the essential links between the apostles and the apostolic teaching, on the one hand, and the faithful churches of Irenaeus’ day on the other. Even the notion of apostolic succession as held by Irenaeus has to do first of all with the presbyters, and not simply with those presbyters who are also bishops, for it is the presbyters who are the guardians of apostolic teaching (*AH* 3.2.2; 4.26.2; 32.1; 5.20.2; *Proof* 3).² And for Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, there is no one in the body of the church’s presbyters³ since the apostles as prominent as his former teacher, Polycarp of Smyrna.⁴ According to Irenaeus, this man knew and was ordained by apostles, and “when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the

¹ W. C. van Unnik, “The Authority of the Presbyters in Irenaeus’ Works,” in J. Jervell and W. A. Meeks, eds., *God’s Christ and His People. Studies in Honour of Nils Alstrup Dahl* (Oslo-Bergen-Tromsø; 1977), 248–260.

² Jeffrey G. Sobosan, “The Role of the Presbyter: An Investigation into the *Adversus Haereses* of Saint Irenaeus,” *SJT* 27 (1974), 129–46, labors to make a distinction between a community’s “Council of Elders” and what Irenaeus calls the *presbyterii ordine*, the latter conceived of as the “priests” of a community, under the authority of the bishop. Irenaeus’ *presbyterii ordine* instead appears to be nothing more or less than the order of elders, which along with the bishop, teaches and governs the Christian community. For more nuanced treatments see Frank D. Gilliard, “The Apostolicity of Gallic Churches,” *HTR* 68 (1975), 17–33; D. Powell, “Ordo Presbyterii,” *JTS* n.s. 26 (1975), 290–328. Gilliard observes that though Irenaeus himself functioned as a monarchical bishop in Lyons, this entailed no formal authority over other churches in Gaul, and that he lived at a time when the “titled bishop” was by no means a universal phenomenon.

³ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1981 repr. of 1889–1890 edn.), 5 vols, Part 2, vol. 1, 475, said of Polycarp, “It is not therefore as the martyr nor as the ruler nor as the writer, but as ‘the elder,’ that he claims the attention of the Church.”

⁴ Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (London/New York, 1997), 36, notes that “Irenaeus regarded Polycarp as the most important living link between Christ and himself.”

Church has handed down and which alone are true” (*AH* 3.3.4; cf. Eusebius, *HE* 5.20.6–7; 24.16).⁵

Some years ago in an article on Cerinthus, I presented a short argument for identifying Polycarp as a source for Irenaeus in at least two places in *Against Heresies* where his name is not mentioned.⁶ Here I wish to present a much fuller case involving significantly more data. Following a presentation of the evidence for this, we shall in chapter 2 examine more closely the sayings attributed to the elder (Polycarp) by Irenaeus in *AH* 4.27–32. In chapter 3 we shall then explore the implications of this restoration for our knowledge of Irenaeus, Polycarp, and for the church’s early reaction to Marcion.

A. The Presbyter of *Against Heresies* 4.27–32

1. Text-critical Issues

Throughout the section *AH* 4.27.1–32.1 Irenaeus cites the oral teaching of an ancient presbyter who taught publicly on anti-Marcionite themes.⁷ The recognition of the unity of this teaching, and of the teacher, has been retarded by two text-critical problems. First, the Greek of 4.27.1–32.1 has not survived anywhere, but according to the present Latin text of 4.27.1 the presbyter is said to have heard tradition from those who had seen the apostles (*ab his qui Apostolos viderant*), and from their disciples, while the presbyter in 4.32.1 is said to have been himself a disciple of apostles (*senior Apostolorum discipulus*). Despite the inconsistency, nearly all scholars have concluded that a single presbyter is meant.⁸ And this must

⁵ Translations from *Against Heresies* will, unless otherwise noted, be from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* edition. Translations of other works of Irenaeus from the Greek of Eusebius, however, will be my own.

⁶ C. E. Hill, “Cerinthus, Gnostic or Chiliast? A New Solution to an Old Problem,” *J ECS* 8 (2000), 135–172.

⁷ A. Harnack, “Der Presbyter-Prediger des Irenäus, IV, 27,1–32,1: Bruchstücke und Nachklänge der ältesten exegetisch-polemischen Homilien,” *Philotesia zu P. Kleinert* (Berlin, 1907), believed the words of the presbyter were given in a sermon, but the terminology used by Irenaeus, and the character of the extracts, point rather to lectures given to students. The extracts are not from a published work but from oral deliverances, though Lightfoot, *Essays on the Work Entitled Supernatural Religion. Reprinted from The Contemporary Review* (London/New York, 1893), 196, n. 1, suggested “the possibility that we have a report of lectures taken down at the time... The discourses ... are so long and elaborate, that the hypothesis of lecture notes seems almost to be required to account for them.”

⁸ Van Unnik, “Authority,” is an exception. P. Bacq, *De l’ancienne à la nouvelle Alliance selon S. Irénée. Unité du Livre IV de l’Adversus haereses* (Paris, 1978), 346, notes the significant studies of Harnack, Bousset, Loofs, Widmann, and Benoit, which were in agreement

surely be the case, as the material attributed to each person is not merely similar, but indeed integrated⁹ and interdependent.¹⁰ Both Lightfoot and Harnack simply accepted the reading of 4.27.1 as stating the facts “more precisely”¹¹ and understood “disciple of apostles” in 4.32.1 in a “looser” sense.¹² In other words, this presbyter would not have heard apostles personally, but instead heard those who had seen them, despite the fact that Irenaeus calls him “a disciple of apostles.” On this basis, Lightfoot suggested that the presbyter might have been Melito of Sardis or Pothinus.¹³

In 1904, however, came the discovery of a generally very literal,¹⁴ sixth-century Armenian translation of books 4 and 5 of *Against Heresies* along with Irenaeus’ *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*. Though published in 1907, its incorporation into a critical edition of *AH* 4 did not take place until the Sources chrétiennes edition in 1965.¹⁵ The Armenian version seems to have resolved this particular text-critical issue. At 4.32.1 it agrees with the Latin in calling the presbyter a disciple of apostles, but back at 4.27.1, instead of saying that this elder “heard tradition from those who had seen the apostles (*ab his qui Apostolos viderant*) and from their disciples,” it says the presbyter “heard it from the apostles whom he had seen, and from their disciples.” On the basis of its agreement with both the Latin and the Armenian of 4.32.1, Rousseau concluded that the Armenian of 4.27.1 preserves the original.¹⁶ He thus conjectured that the original Greek read: Καθὼς ἤκουσα παρά τινος πρεσβυτέρου τοῦ

on “l’influence exercée par un ‘traité du presbytre’ sur les chapitres 27–32, à l’exception de IV, 28, 2.”

⁹ This is a problem with van Unnik’s solution (“Authority,” 251), who saw two distinct presbyters in 4.27.1 and 4.32.1. Nor did van Unnik take account of the reading of the Armenian, which will be explained below. The *quoque* in 4.32.1 (*Hujusmodi quoque de duobus Testamentis senior Apostolorum discipulus disputabat*) distinguishes Irenaeus and the presbyter, not two presbyters, as van Unnik, 251, apparently would have it (the Armenian, by the way, does not reflect the *quoque*).

¹⁰ In 4.31.1 the teaching of the elder is remembered with respect to the blameworthy actions of patriarchs and prophets. The typological exegesis which follows is then in 4.32.1 linked directly to “the presbyter, the disciple of apostles,” who is explicitly said to have reasoned “after this fashion (*hujusmodi*)” with respect to the two testaments. See the treatment below.

¹¹ J. B. Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays* (London/New York, 1893), 59.

¹² Harnack, “Der Presbyter-Prediger,” 21.

¹³ Lightfoot, *Supernatural Religion*, 196, n. 1.

¹⁴ A. Rousseau in A. Rousseau, B. Hemmerdinger, C. Mercier, and L. Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon: Contre les Hérésies Livre IV*, 2 vols., Sources chrétiennes 100 (Paris, 1965), 1: 129, “Ce qui frappe avant tout, dans la version arménienne, c’est sa très grande littéralité.”

¹⁵ See previous note.

¹⁶ SC 100, 1: 263, note 729, n. 1.

ἀκηκόοτος παρὰ τῶν ἀποστόλων αὐτοῦς τε ἑωράκτος καὶ παρὰ τῶν μαθητευθέντων.¹⁷ This reading has been accepted by Irenaean scholars, such as Bacq and Donovan.¹⁸ Bacq then sees the two references to the elder's apostolic connection in 4.27.1 and 4.32.1 as forming an *inclusio*, adding, "Cetter inclusion est claire: pour Irénée, les chapitres 27–32 forment un tout unifié, qui reflète, d'une manière ou d'une autre, l'enseignement du presbytre qui'il a personnellement connu."¹⁹

The second textual problem occurs at 4.28.1. Here the Latin uses the plural *presbyteri*, with the corresponding plural verb. If original, the plural would still include the presbyter whose teaching is the foundation for this section, but would introduce a plurality of elders whose presence is signified nowhere else in the section. Once again, the coherence of the material seems to require the singular. Thus, Erasmus, Gelasius, and Feuardent all proposed that the plural was a transcriptional error, a solution accepted by Harnack and Loofs.²⁰ The discovery of the Armenian version has confirmed this conjecture, as it has the singular noun and verb, as now printed in Rousseau's edition.

The discovery of the Armenian version has thus helped immensely in clarifying the original text at these two points. The import is that throughout AH 4.27.1–32.1 Irenaeus is claiming to reproduce from memory the oral teaching of a single presbyter, a disciple of apostles who heard and saw apostles and their disciples.²¹

Who then was this elder, a hearer and a disciple of apostles, who also provided Irenaeus with exegetical and hermeneutical foundations for refuting heretics like Marcion? Most recent scholars have appeared reluctant to make any suggestion. In 1975 Frank Gilliard was willing to

¹⁷ The equivalent of *ab apostolis qui eos etiam viderat*. Rousseau's French translation is "C'est ainsi que j'ai entendu dire par un presbytre, qui le tenait des apôtres, qu'il avait vus, et de leurs disciples."

¹⁸ M. A. Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegeville, Minn., 1997), 128, n. 27, who calls attention to the reading. Bacq, *Alliance*, 205, etc., accepts it without comment. The matter was also treated by Pier Franco Beatrice, "Der Presbyter des Irenäus, Polycarp von Smyrna und der Brief an Diognet," in Eugenio Romero-Pose, ed., *Pléroma Salus Carnis. Homenaje a Antonio Orbe, S.J.* (Santiago de Compostella, 1990), 179–202.

¹⁹ Bacq, *Alliance*, 360.

²⁰ A. Benoit, *Saint Irénée. Introduction à l'étude de sa théologie* (Paris, 1960), 20.

²¹ The statement in 4.27.1 that he was a disciple of the apostles and of their disciples is potentially confusing. Rousseau points out that "disciple of apostles" has two meanings in Irenaeus, one referring to men like Polycarp and the elders quoted by Papias, who were part of the post-apostolic generation but who had some contact with some of the longer-living apostles, the other referring to men like Luke (1.23.1; 3.10.1) and Mark (3.1.1), who were more the contemporaries and long-term disciples of the apostles, "collaborateurs des apôtres dans la fondation de l'église" (SC 100 1: 263–64). It is the latter who are meant in 4.27.1, as in 1.10.1; 3.12.13; 3.15.3.

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