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The church examination registers and the development of literacy in early modern Sweden

The historiography of the alphabetisation of the Swedish population is closely linked to the systematic use of the Swedish church examination registers. This is the reason why this article has a double focus. After presenting the history, structure, and information of the examination registers, I will account for the alphabetisation campaign run by the established Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden. In both parts, my perspective is mainly historiographical.

1 An available and useful source for research

The abundance of information in the Swedish parish registers have made them an interesting source for scholars of various disciplines, including cultural geography, demography, economic history, sociology, education, history, ethnology, onomastics, church history, practical theology, religious education, sociology of religion, etc. For a long time, academic scholars overlooked the potential of parish registers, and mostly genealogists made use of them. In the period 1948–1963, the registers were filmed by American Mormons, which increased their availability. The use of the filmed registers took off when the films in the 1980s were converted into microfiche by the Swedish National Archives and eventually made accessible on the internet.¹ In the last few years, the registers have been filmed anew by the company ArkivDigital and are now available in higher quality than before.² For academic research, however, the digitising of registers from a sample of parishes and the creation of the Demographic Database in the 1970s were instrumental for increasing the possibility to process register data with quantitative methods.³

As will be demonstrated in this article, professor Egil Johansson at Umeå University played a decisive role in the promotion of the parish registers, especially the examination registers. Having the privilege of working with Johansson for several years in the 1980s and 1990s, I utilised the examination registers in my own research. In the 1990s, I mapped the use of Martin Luther's Table of Duties in popular

1 National Archives, Digital.

2 ArkivDigital, Swedish.

3 More information about the Demographic Database can be found below.

education,⁴ and I analysed the rise of writing ability in the countryside.⁵ In these approaches, I collected data by making excerpts from several of the filmed registers. When investigating the shift from the 1689 catechism to the 1810 version in Skellefteå Parish, I based my study on a data set from the Demographic Database.⁶

2 The medieval roots of the Swedish church examination registers

The origin of the Swedish parish registration system has been discussed in previous research. Especially the fact that the system served the needs of both the state and church – as well as individual ministers – has called for explanation. Historians have tended to emphasise the military state's need for control of all individuals as the driving force behind the intertwining of religious and secular spheres in the information collected and recorded by the Lutheran clergy. While Sven A. Nilsson identifies the Church Law of 1686 as the most important exponent of this intertwining,⁷ Sven Lundkvist points at state statutes from the late 16th and early 17th centuries that ordered the ministers to serve the state with information for conscription and fiscal purposes.⁸ Regardless of the exact dating of the origin of the Lutheran clergymen's double role as ministers of the church and servants of the state, it is correct to say that the system of serving two masters was established well before the end of the 17th century.

However, the more religiously motivated notations in the Swedish parish registers represent a tradition from the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. Sven Lundkvist places the Swedish registers in a European context, where lists of born, married and buried parishioners are known at least from the 14th century.⁹ Not many similar registers are extant from pre-Reformation Sweden, but Lundkvist discusses an intercession list covering the period 1470–1535, which he assumes is based upon a register of deceased parishioners. Historian Carl Göran Andræ has presented various medieval registers of the parishioners of Funbo.¹⁰ Among the church accounts, there are tithe records and a list of the entire adult population for the so-called *vårfrupenningen*, a special tax for the Vadstena Abbey. Even though there has not been any systematic study of medieval registers, the examples provided in previous research demonstrate that priests kept records of their parishioners for both ministerial and fiscal purposes.

⁴ Lindmark, Uppfostran; Lindmark, New.

⁵ Lindmark, Pennan.

⁶ Lindmark, Reading.

⁷ Nilsson, Krig.

⁸ Lundkvist, Den äldre.

⁹ Lundkvist, Den äldre.

¹⁰ Andræ, Studier.

Egil Johansson spent his entire academic career researching the Swedish parish registration system. After serving as a clergyman in the Lutheran Church of Sweden, he became a professor of Education at Umeå University. In his doctoral dissertation of 1972, he studied the transition from the old household education program run by the church to the new elementary school system of 1842 in the parish of Bygdeå in Northern Sweden.¹¹ In his dissertation he digitised demographic and educational data from the parish registers and analysed them with quantitative methods. His study demonstrated that the registers were reliable sources apt for quantitative studies, and laid the foundation of the Demographic Database, which today includes a comprehensive sample of parishes and regions from various parts of Sweden.¹²

After his dissertation, Johansson received funding for a project on the oldest extant church examination registers in Sweden. In this project he developed eminent knowledge of the sources, and at the same time he was able to pinpoint the development of literacy on local, regional, and national levels. Informed by his theological studies, his view of the examination registers emphasised the pastoral aspects and medieval background of the sources. Especially in two respects this view led to results worth mentioning here. First, Johansson identified the ABC book as the concrete link between the common medieval tradition of oral church education and the print- and literacy-based education initiated in the 17th century. He discovered that the ABC book contained some of the basic texts of the medieval educational tradition presented in the same order: The Lord's Prayer, the Apostolic Creed, and the Ten Commandments.¹³ Second, in the examination registers the parishioners were often organised village after village along the route that the pastor took when examining his parishioners in their homes (Sw. *husförhör*, 'household examination'). In Johansson's view this custom reflected the medieval tradition of examination and annotation of parishioners for their Easter communion.¹⁴

To Egil Johansson, the church examination registers represented the efforts made by the church to make sure that all parishioners were well founded in the Christian faith, simply a way of realising Christ's missionary command. This theological view was challenged, among others by historians Birgitta Odén and Bengt Sandin.¹⁵ They held the view that church education represented an attempt at exercising ideological control, motivated by the need to mobilise the population in times of war. Johansson did not engage in any discussion of the broader societal context of the church education and the registers it created. From my point of view, it is obvious that church education could fill more than one function in 17th- and

¹¹ Johansson, En studie.

¹² The parish registers still constitute the basic sources at the Centre for Demographic and Ageing Research (CEDAR), into which the Demographic Database is integrated. CEDAR, Parish.

¹³ Johansson, Alphabet; Johansson, To Know.

¹⁴ Johansson, Läser.

¹⁵ Odén, Läskunnighet; Sandin, Hemmet.

18th-century Sweden. The intensified education campaign that was launched in the latter half of the 17th century and included mass literacy, can be regarded from the perspective of confessionalisation. The focus on Martin Luther's Small Catechism and Archbishop Olaus Svebilius' Orthodox Lutheran Exposition of 1689 is evidence enough that the Church of Sweden wanted to make true Lutherans of the Swedish population.¹⁶

3 The parish registration system

The church examination register served as a hub in a system of several interrelated registers. There were four different types of ministerial registers documenting a) birth and baptism; b) marriage; c) death and burial; and d) in- and outmigration. The first three types of ministerial registers were introduced in the very beginning of the 17th century, most likely under German influence, while the migration registers were regulated by the Church Law of 1686.¹⁷ In the examination register most of the information was brought together, and references to the special ministerial registers were inserted. The unique information that was recorded in the examination register only was related to education and morality. In addition to these fundamental registers, the ministers in many cases also kept confirmation and first communion registers, especially after 1811 when public examination and confirmation became mandatory church acts. In many parishes, a separate register for the annual communions was held, but in course of time it was integrated into the examination register. This organisation of the registers became the dominant pattern in the 19th century. Then a typical examination register covered several years, each year representing a column on the right-hand side of the double-page spread. For each year there was room for notations on presence at household examinations and dates of participation in communion.

For a long time, each pastor developed his own model of organising the information in the registers. The individual design is most evident in the examination registers, basically because of the abundant information to organise. Starting in the 17th century and taking off in the next century, the design of the examination register was made subject to standardisation. This meant that each diocese established its own system. Bishop Johannes Rudbeckius (1581–1646) of Västerås Diocese was a pioneer in promulgating directions for both ministerial and examination registers.¹⁸

¹⁶ The confessionalisation perspective jibes with results from the Continent, where the Counter-Reformation can be linked to similar efforts to strengthen religious learning. See the contribution by Veronika Albrecht-Birkner on the state of research in the present volume.

¹⁷ Lext, Studier, 57.

¹⁸ Lext, Studier, 59–60 and 69–70.

In Härnösand Diocese, Pehr Högström, vicar of Skellefteå Parish 1749–1784, developed a form that came to be used in 66 out of 84 parishes (Fig. 1). In the beginning of the 19th century, a form designed by Erik Johan Dillner, vicar of Tuna Parish 1788–1817, became the new standard promoted by the Härnösand Chapter (Fig. 2).¹⁹ Only in 1860, a national standard was set for the examination register; at the same time the ministerial registers were made subject to national regulation.²⁰

Fig. 1: Double-page spread of examination register from Bygdeå Parish displaying Dean Pehr Högström's model²¹.

¹⁹ This shift from Högström's to Dillner's model represented the transition from a text-oriented to a more skill-focused organisation of the examination register. The Dillner model also integrated the communion register into the examination register.

²⁰ Lext, Studier, 99.

²¹ HLA, BKA, A1:5a: 1784–1797 – Husförhörlängd (Church Examination Register, Bygdeå Parish). On the left hand side, crofters of Norum village are registered, and on the right hand side, residents at homestead No. 1 of Brednoret village are found. The columns from left to right: Born (year); Married (year); Dead (year); Moved from the parish (year); Moved into the parish (year); First Communion (year); Masters the ABC book; Reads the Catechism by heart; Main parts (1. Ten Commandments; 2. Articles of Faith; 3. Lord's Prayer; 4. Baptism; [no number] Confession; 5. Lord's Supper; Table of Duties; Athanasian Creed, Condition (in terms of knowledge; in way of life).

Fig. 2: Double-page spread of examination register from Klingsta Village, Tuna Parish displaying Dean Erik Johan Dillner's model²².

The long process of gradual standardisation also meant that there were different types of grading systems. Reading ability was usually graded, and so was the comprehension of the catechism (Sw. *begrepp*). Some of the grading systems consisted of characterising terms, while others made use of letters or symbols. In Härnösand Diocese, the Dillner system employed a complex set of symbols for grading the parishioners' reading skills and catechetical understanding, often referred to as the "bridge" (Sw. *byggn*).

²² HLA, TKA, A1:7: 1804–1813 – Husförhörlängd (Church Examination Register, Tuna Parish). At the top of the spread, the farmer and his family are found, and beneath the servants are registered. The columns from left to right: Standing and name; Year of birth; Year of Marriage; Reads and understands; Talents and diligence; Manners; Year 1808 (Examination; Communion), etc.; Notation. The first dot above the "bridge" represents Luther's Small Catechism, and the next five dots represent the main parts of the exposition. The bridge itself is used for grading reading ability, and the central leg signifies various degrees of comprehension. The grading system is explained in detail at the beginning of each volume.

Catechetical knowledge was recorded when a parishioner mastered a specific part of the pensum by heart: Luther's Small Catechism and the five main parts of the exposition. Either you had memorised a part of the catechism or not, so there was usually no detailed grading of memorisation. This also goes for additional texts that occasionally were learnt by heart. In the course of the 18th century, memorisation spread to other texts included in the catechism volume: Luther's Table of Duties, the Athanasian Creed, and David's Penitential Psalms. The focus that was placed on memorisation of certain texts conveying the Christian message is reflected in the organisation of the examination registers. In the 18th century each text, from the main parts of the Catechism to the Penitential Psalms, usually held a specific column in the examination register.

In certain places the examination registers included information on book ownership and writing skills. Information on book ownership is most likely to find in the oldest extant registers, and writing skills are most frequently recorded in early 19th-century registers from parishes in Lund Diocese in southern Sweden. During a period around the year 1800, general talent or intelligence (Sw. *naturgåvor*) was identified, graded, and recorded in some of the examination registers.

4 Reading, memorisation, and comprehension

In early modern Sweden, popular education run by the church was intended to promote three different skills: reading (Sw. *innanläsning*), memorising (Sw. *utanläsning*), and comprehension (Sw. *begrepp*). Often the skills were epitomised to "reading and understanding", the term "reading" covering both reading from a book and reciting from memory. The three skills were linked to different books: the ABC book (reading), Luther's Small Catechism (memorising), and the catechetical exposition (comprehension). This division of skills and books into three categories was ordered by the Church Law of 1686, and the organisation of many examination registers reflected this regulation.²³

The most common type of ABC books consisted of *catechismus canonicus* – the Lord's Prayer, the Apostolic Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Words of Institution of the Baptism and the Eucharist – i. e., the texts that were explained in Luther's Small Catechism.²⁴ Consequently, reading instruction was tightly intertwined with catechetical knowledge, and in practice memorisation started already with the ABC book. The questions of the exposition were intended to develop the understanding of Luther's Small Catechism, but as mentioned above, memorisation soon became the cardinal skill that also included the exposition – and further texts.

²³ Lext, Studier, 193.

²⁴ Willke, Abc-Bücher; Lindmark, Catechism.

The predominance of memorisation was soon identified as a problem, especially from the middle of the 18th century, and many debaters feared that memorisation often was no more than a mechanical skill with a weak connection to comprehension. Consequently, towards the end of the century, the skills rather than the texts were stressed in popular education. This development was reflected in the examination registers, in which the various texts gradually were abandoned as the organising principle. And in pedagogical instructions, such as the preface to the official catechetical exposition of 1810, the instructors were advised not to move on to memorisation until the reading skill was consolidated.²⁵ However, in general memorisation prevailed, and only in the 20th century, when the catechism no longer was used in primary education, the memorising tradition was broken.

5 Literacy in early modern Sweden – Egil Johansson's research results

The Swedish church examination registers have proven to be an excellent source for mapping the development of literacy. In this research field, Egil Johansson was the pioneering scholar, and his findings are still unchallenged.

Johansson used a sample of church examination registers from all the Swedish dioceses to analyse the start and further development of the alphabetisation campaign.²⁶ To some degree his results reflect the archival situation. In dioceses where examination registers are extant from the 17th century, especially Västerås Diocese, the first rise in reading rates could be identified. In other dioceses, where the oldest extant registers date from the early 18th century, it was more difficult to identify the starting point. However, by dividing the parishioners into age cohorts, Johansson was able to use even later registers to map the gradual development of reading skills.

When creating his general picture of the alphabetisation process, Johansson was not interested in the various gradings of the reading skill. He simply noted the first signs of reading ability, however basic it was.

Figure 3 displays Egil Johansson's general picture of the Swedish alphabetisation process.²⁷ Starting in the 17th century, reading rates took off after the turn of the century, and in the beginning of the next century a large majority of the Swedish population could read. Residual illiteracy was found in the oldest age cohorts only. This pattern reflects the fact that the alphabetisation campaign focused on the

²⁵ Lindblom, *Doct. Mårt.* (preface).

²⁶ Johansson, *The History*, 165–182; Johansson, *Literacy*, 151–158.

²⁷ Johansson, *The Postliteracy*, 200.

children. But once an individual had learnt to read, their reading ability was recurrently examined and recorded in the examination registers throughout their life.

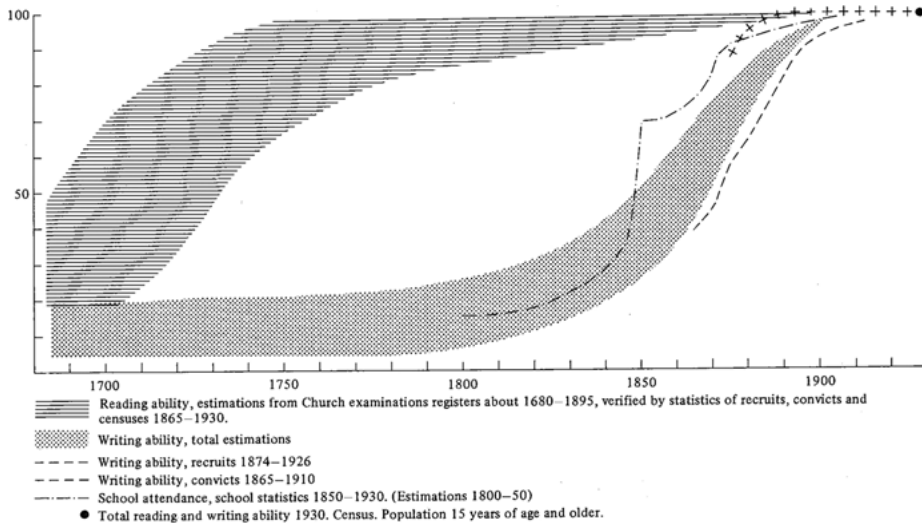


Fig. 3: A model of reading and writing abilities in Sweden about 1680–1930 by Egil Johansson. Population about 10–15 years of age and older. School-children about 6–15 years of age. Percentage figure.

In a sparsely populated country with a restricted number of schools, the alphabetisation campaign relied heavily on the educational activities of the households. Masters of households were made responsible for the teaching of the members of their respective household, servants included. In most cases, the mothers or ageing relatives living in the household engaged in the instruction of the children. The Church promoted household devotions that also served educational purposes. The ABC book usually contained a scheme for morning and evening prayers as well as table blessings, which included reading of basic texts of the ABC book. Consequently, reading ability was promoted by texts that were in use at devotions in church as well as households.

Figure 3 also illustrates the division between reading and writing skills. Organised by the Church, the alphabetisation campaign managed to achieve universal reading ability, regardless of age, sex, trade, social standing, level of education and place of living. Of course, before the skill became universal, the distribution was uneven. At the early stages of alphabetisation, reading rates were higher among men than women, but in the course of the 18th century the women managed to catch up.²⁸ Similar patterns apply for the urban-rural divide and the difference between social strata in society.

²⁸ Johansson, *Women*, 81–82 and 89–90.

Egil Johansson used the term *push factor* to characterise the compelling force of the church-driven alphabetisation campaign. Writing skills were not included in church education. This fact created a more uneven distribution of writing ability, basically driven by demand. In Johansson's terminology inspired by migration research, the spread of writing skills represented a *pull* pattern. Besides higher social strata, writing ability was usually found among the male population in urban settings where the skill was useful to merchants and craftsmen. Most towns had a school in which the boys could learn to write. In the countryside, however, only a few men were able to write before the 19th century. Then the founding of parish schools and eventually the institution of the elementary school system of 1842 boosted writing rates, starting among the male population and with a few decades' time lag embracing the entire nation.

6 Further literacy research and discussion

After Egil Johansson's groundbreaking research, further research has only marginally modified the picture.²⁹ In the early 1990s, new research on writing skills was initiated. A research group at Lund University made use of notations in Scanian church examination registers to map the spread of writing skills in the early 19th century. Their results indicated lower writing rates than Johansson's estimations, but they found the expected social pattern. Freeholding farmers and craftsmen displayed four times higher writing skills than economically weaker social groups. They also found that itinerant teachers played a role for conveying writing skills in addition to permanent parish schools.³⁰ Advised by Johansson, in 1994 I published a study on writing instruction and writing ability in the countryside in the beginning of the 19th century. In addition to Scanian church examination register, I made use of school data. However, I reached similar conclusions as the research group at Lund University: Sons of freeholding farmers producing for a market learnt to write in the parish schools. Usually, the schools were open to both boys and girls, but while the schools offered reading instruction and catechetical teaching free of charge, writing instruction came with a fee.³¹

More recently, Åsa Karlsson Sjögren has studied various types of urban schools for poor people in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and found that a substantial number of girls were taught to write.³² Nils Erik Villstrand has applied a modifying

²⁹ Overviews of research on the history of literacy in the Nordic countries can be found in Gutormsson, *The Development*, and Lindmark, *Magisk*. For Egil Johansson's research group, see Lindmark, *Four*.

³⁰ Nilsson / Svård, *Skrivkunnighet*.

³¹ Lindmark, Pennan, 105–126.

³² Karlsson Sjögren, *Poor*; Karlsson Sjögren et al., *Agents*, 306.

perspective to the weak representation of writing ability in the countryside in early modern Sweden by introducing a distinction between *possessive* and *accessive* writing ability.³³ While only few people possessed the individual skill, most people had access to a person in their neighbourhood who could help them write when needed.

When it comes to reading ability in early modern Sweden, Egil Johansson's results caused discussion. The reading ability rates based on notations in the examination registers were not questioned *per se*, but rather the character and quality of the reading skill promoted and recorded by the church. The discussion took place against dominating theories of modernisation, according to which alphabetisation was a modernising factor along with such processes as urbanisation, industrialisation, and democratisation.³⁴ In early modern Sweden, no signs of modernisation could be detected, even though there was a successful alphabetisation campaign. This anomaly made scholars take different paths. Some scholars simply abandoned the putative connection between literacy and modernisation,³⁵ while others made a distinction between two types of literacy: restricted literacy and advanced literacy.³⁶ According to the latter view, the reading ability promoted by the church-driven alphabetisation campaign in early modern Sweden was restricted to familiar texts, basically a passive skill supporting memorisation. Only with the advent of the mandatory elementary school system of the 19th century, the more advanced literacy type spread among the population. The school-driven active literacy included both reading and writing, reading now meaning a more universal skill that could be applied to any text. Consequently, by making the distinction between restricted and advanced reading skills, the scholars questioning the quality of the reading promoted by church education managed to save the link between literacy and modernisation.

The campaign perspective that was applied to early modern alphabetisation by Egil Johansson emphasised the compelling force of the church. Even the popular religious movements of the 18th century were regarded from the same *push* perspective. These movements were characterised by so intensive reading activities that the members were called "readers". Johansson's placing of the religious "readers" in the *push* category reflected his view of the alphabetisation campaign as a realisation of Christ's missionary command. Both the devout "readers" as well as general readers were found in the same religious universe. However, the *push* perspective tends to conceal the possibility of popular demand for reading skills. Not only the religious reading movement but also popular reading in general deserves to be

33 Villstrand, Bokstäver; Villstrand, Memorialets.

34 Lerner, *The Passing*; Inkeles / Smith, *Becoming*.

35 See for instance Graff, *The Literacy*; Graff, *The Legacies*. Kenneth Lockridge stated: "It is through the Swedish sources that we will look most deeply into the nature of literacy in the past." (Lockridge, *Literacy*, 109–119).

36 See for example Odén, *Läskunnighet*.

discussed as driven by demand, at least to some extent. Already in the 1970s, Thomas Lacqueur identified a strong demand for reading ability and reading materials in pre-industrial England.³⁷ More recently, Britt Liljewall has come to similar conclusions concerning the Swedish situation.³⁸ By analysing autobiographies written by common people, she managed to find out how literacy skills were acquired in the 18th century. In addition to the widespread basic reading skill, she identified a more advanced reading ability, often linked to writing ability. According to Liljewall, the latter type of literacy appears to have been driven by individuals' needs and interests. Consequently, Liljewall's results lends support to the distinction made in the early literacy discussion between restricted and advanced reading skills, including the link between advanced reading and writing skills.

Egil Johansson's overall results concerning the national development of literacy in early modern Sweden have also been supplemented with more detailed research on the alphabetisation of the Sami people. In 1992, Sölve Anderzén defended his doctoral thesis on Jukkasjärvi Parish in the northernmost part of Sweden. Utilising church examination registers, he could establish the existence of a fast alphabetisation process in the latter half of the 18th century.³⁹ Most likely these results are valid for the wider Sami area, where many factors contributed to the growth of reading ability and catechetical knowledge. By the middle of the century, a standard for written Sami was agreed on, and books of higher linguistic quality were issued. Furthermore, a system of residential Sami schools had been instituted, and itinerant catechists taught Sami children in their homes. Writing was seldom included in the Sami school curriculum, but prospective catechists were occasionally taught to write, as well as pupils apt for other offices in local society, such as bailiff, churchwarden, and sexton.⁴⁰

7 Concluding remarks

The church examination registers have proven to be excellent sources for mapping the development of literacy in early modern Sweden. In this chapter, I have presented both the parish registers and the alphabetisation campaign, mainly from a historiographical

³⁷ Lacqueur, *Religion*.

³⁸ Liljewall, *Självskrivna*.

³⁹ Anderzén, *Begrepp*, 184–187.

⁴⁰ Evidence of this can be found in minutes from the annual examination of the Sami schools, but so far, no study on writing skills among the Sami has been published. In an ongoing project, I have studied the annual examination minutes from Lycksele Sami School in the 1790s and found quite a few instances of male pupils being taught to write. This was not the case in Jukkasjärvi Sami School, where only a couple of prospective catechists were taught to write. Anderzén, *Begrepp*, 170–171.

perspective. I have underlined the instrumental role played by Egil Johansson for investigating the history of literacy in Sweden as well as promoting the use of church examination registers in various types of historical research. The focus on Johansson's pioneering contributions has been motivated by the fact that his results are still standing. As demonstrated in the chapter, only in details his overall picture of the alphabetisation process has been modified in subsequent research.

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