

# The Planning and Date of the Roman Legionary Fortress at Chester

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## Introduction.

That the fortress at Chester was appreciably larger than the other legionary fortresses in Britain is well known; it had an area of 24.33 ha (59.8 acres), compared with the 21.5 ha (53 acres) of Inchtuthil, the 20.5 ha (50.5 acres) of Caerleon and the 20.6 ha and 20.24 ha (c. 50 acres) of Colchester and York respectively. Lincoln and Gloucester had areas of 15.6 ha (41.5 acres) and 17.8 ha (43.25 acres) (1). Mr D. F. Petch suggested that the former did not hold a full legion; on the analogy of size, the same should also apply to the latter (2). In 1969 Mr Petch confessed himself unable to explain the cause of the unusually large size of the fortress, although a little later, in his introduction to the reprint of W. Thompson Watkin's *Roman Cheshire* (Watkin, 1886, repr., vii), he did point to the larger size of the internal buildings at Chester—a significant point to which we shall return, while Dr M. G. Jarrett suggested that explanation might be unnecessary in view of the wide variety of fortress shapes and sizes throughout the empire (Nash - Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969, 36 and 150 respectively).

Although a superficial examination of fortress plans appears to support Jarrett's view, the fact nevertheless remains that the British fortresses, at least, do show some consistency in size and layout. It has been regarded as valid to look for consistency in the sizes of auxiliary forts originally intended to accommodate the same type of unit, although difficulty has been found in deciding which of the several types of auxiliary unit a fort was intended to hold. It has at the same time been recognised that forts built for the same type of unit might have different sizes in different areas and possibly in different periods. Thus, the Welsh forts, type for type, seem to have been more spacious than those on Hadrian's Wall (Wall forts: Dobson and Breeze, 1969; Breeze and Dobson, 1974; Welsh forts and comparison: Jarrett in Nash - Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969, 152). There is certainly a great variety in the legionary fortresses throughout the empire, but we must remember that there were few of them, so that any intended norms will inevitably be less apparent, that they were founded over a fairly broad period and that because of the sheer size of the enclosed area, local geographical conditions are more likely to have distorted standardised plans. However, in Britain, all the fortresses under consideration were founded in the fifty years following the invasion of A.D. 43 and while large scale plans would perhaps show irregularities in the layout of most, if not all, of them, none were so drastically affected by the local geography as Vindonissa (Windisch)

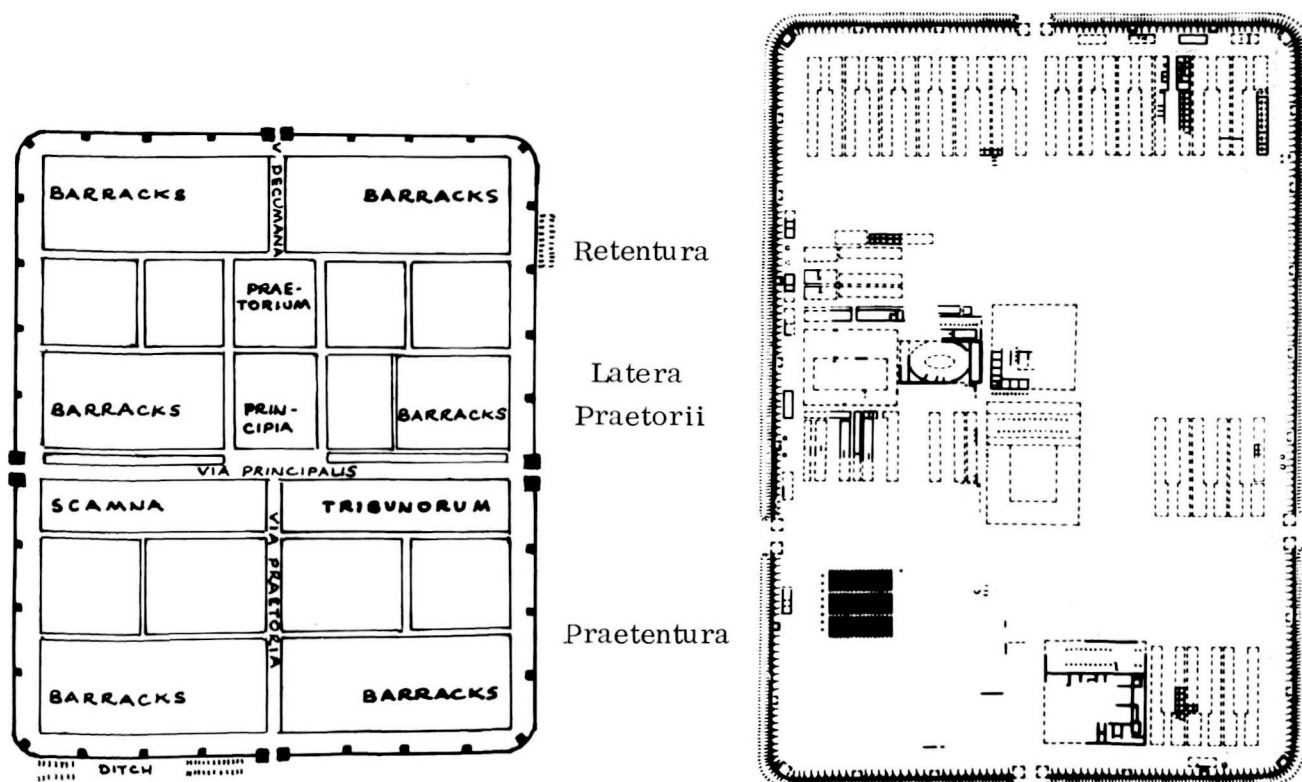


Fig. 20 Plans of a standard 50 acre first century fortress in Britain, and Chester. Scale 1: 6000

in Germania Superior or Carnuntum (Petronell, near Deutsch-Altenburg) in Pannonia Superior. Inevitably, the plans of Chester and Caerleon on which much of the following discussion is based show the stone-phase layout of fortresses many of whose buildings were originally in timber. Excavation has shown small differences between the phases but not basic differences in layout. Moreover, it is now clear both at Chester and Caerleon that some buildings were erected in stone from the start, while others, presumably included in the original plans, were not erected at all until after the beginning of the 'stone phase' (see especially Boon, 1972, 24-32, 33-35, 37-45). To maintain the old rigid distinction between timber and stone phases is not, therefore, appropriate.

## PLANNING

The Chester fortress is marginally narrower over the ramparts than Caerleon, while York and Colchester are virtually the same as the latter. Caerleon and Colchester are the same length; York is slightly shorter than either of them, while Chester is considerably longer. The three fortresses apart from Chester are divided roughly in half by the *via principalis*, while at Chester this road divides the fortress roughly in the proportions one third—two thirds. Inchtuthil does not follow the pattern of any of the other British legionary fortresses, being shorter and wider than any of them. The *via principalis* is further forward than at Colchester, York, or Caerleon, but not so far forward, proportionally as at Chester. In fact, the lengths of the *praetentura* at Chester and Inchtuthil are virtually identical. In all the other fortresses in Britain and in most of those throughout the empire, the *retentura* is only one *insula* deep; at Chester, and at Novaesium (Neuss) in Germania Inferior, it is two deep. At Chester and Inchtuthil the *praetentura* is two *insulae* deep as against three in the other British legionary fortresses. Both arrangements are found abroad (3).

If the rear *insulae* of the *retentura* at the Chester fortress are omitted, then the length of the fortress becomes virtually the same as that of the other British fortresses apart from Inchtuthil. We have already observed that the width is virtually the same. Further, the forward *insulae* of the *retentura* are an odd length, providing space for seven barracks *per scamna*, the veranda of the southernmost one facing buildings of the *latera praetorii* across the *via quintana* instead of a neighbour of the same cohort across an alley. At Novaesium, where the corresponding *insulae* again accommodate barracks *per scamna* we find only four, not a complete cohort but at least a more logical number than seven. However, perhaps a more significant observation is that the depth of the forward *insulae* of the *retentura* at Chester is the same as that of the rearward *insulae* together with the *via sagularis* and the rampart. This immediately suggests the idea that Chester may originally have been intended to have the same dimensions as the other, earlier British fortresses, but that, at some stage during its planning or construction, it was decided that extra space was needed and what was virtually another *retentura* was added. The forward *insulae* of the *retentura* were not reduced to a logical depth, for example that sufficient for six barracks (one cohort), but were left with the land originally taken in for the defences. We shall argue below that it was probably after plots had been allocated to specific buildings that it became clear that the fortress would have to be enlarged. This extra land was therefore included in the forward part of the *retentura*, not because insufficient detailed surveying had been done to allow it to be defined and excluded, but in all probability simply to save trouble.

Why was the extra space needed? It is agreed that the fortress did not accommodate an extra unit, either naval or a legionary vexillation (Nash-Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969, 36, 150). The question cannot be answered in terms of numbers of buildings, although it is worth noting that despite the different division between *praetentura* and *retentura*, the total number of *insulae* at Chester and Caerleon is the same; our knowledge of the total range of buildings in British legionary fortresses, even those at Caerleon and Inchtuthil, the most extensively excavated, is simply not complete enough to allow us to be precise and to invoke for example, the presence of the Elliptical Building. In fact, if we allow one *insula* for granaries, there are still three vacant *insulae* at Caerleon, while there should be two at Chester, excluding the *insulae* containing the *scamnum tribunorum*, if we allow two *insulae* for more barracks and one each for the *basilica exercitatoria* and *valetudinarium* and allow one for the granaries, which distort the picture by occupying part of the *insulae* containing the *scamnum tribunorum* at Chester, whereas they must be in one of the larger *insulae* at Caerleon. Of course, in both fortresses, it may be that we should allow for six granaries, as at Inchtuthil, or even eight, as suggested by Boon (1972, 122 note 14), which could have been the full number at Inchtuthil and at two per *insula* would have accounted for all the empty *insulae* at Caerleon (4). The character of the building on the sinistral side of the *principia* at Chester and Caerleon is uncertain. That in the corresponding position at Inchtuthil was never erected. We must therefore look at the size of the *insulae*. Both the barrack *insulae* and that containing the Elliptical Building are deeper than those in earlier fortresses (the size of the latter may simply equal what was left over when the others had been laid out). To incorporate these within the limits of the proto-fortress involved the omission of the separate *scamnum tribunorum*. (The tribunes' houses presumably occupied at least

part of the second rank of *insulae* in the *praetentura*).

At Inchtuthil, where the barrack *insulae* are even longer than at Chester, the separate narrow *scammum tribunorum* is again omitted. Thus the number of *insulae* is less than normal, as it would have been at Chester had the extra rank not been added to the *retentura*. Perhaps as a result, the *basilica exercitatoria* was compressed and the internal baths, if planned, (none were in fact built) could have been small ones among the tribunes' houses, as at Carnuntum, while extra width allowed granaries to be placed at the sides of the *viae decumana* and *praetoria*. At Chester, on the other hand, the fortress was near the width of the earlier ones, while the above mentioned buildings apparently retained their full size, while another, the Elliptical Building, was added. Consequently, the number of *insulae* had to be restored to that found in earlier British fortresses.

## DATE

Given the correspondence of some features in the planning of the Chester fortress with Caerleon and earlier fortresses and of others with Inchtuthil, it is natural to suggest that the latter features should be attributed to Agricola, although they were almost certainly not among the personal innovations in military planning with which he is credited (on which see Frere, 1967, 115-6). This suggestion raises again the disputed question of the date of the foundation of the Chester fortress. In 1951 Richmond and Webster suggested 78/9 (i.e. overlapping the end of the governorship of Sex. Julius Frontinus (74-78) and the beginning of that of Gn. Julius Agricola (78-84)), a date based on the lead water pipes found in the city (Wright and Richmond, 1955, no. 199 (5); c.f. the inscription giving the same date (AD 79) on a length of lead water pipe found in the Elliptical Building: *Britannia* 2, 1971, 292-93, no. 17). Working on the same date, Ogilvie and Richmond have made Chester a wholly Agri-<sup>1</sup>colan foundation, emphasising its role as a base for that governor's push to the north (6). However, Mr Petch has recently taken up F. H. Thompson's idea that the fortress was founded earlier in the governorship of Frontinus (7). His grounds are that the intra-mural bath-house, which he dates to 79 on the basis of the restoration of the Purbeck marble inscription from the Feather's Inn (Wright and Richmond, 1955, no. 14; *RIB* no. 463), would have been among the last buildings to be erected; the extra-mural bath-house at Inchtuthil was incomplete when the fortress was abandoned and the intra-mural baths, supposing any to have been planned, had not even been started. He suggests that the lead pigs from the Deceanglian mines dated to 74 (Wright and Richmond, 1955, nos. 196-7) may be associated with the beginning of work on the fortress. This is certainly an attractive and economical hypothesis, but it does raise certain objections.

The campaign(s) for which Frontinus was remembered were those which secured the final subjugation of the Silures (8). Noting Tacitus' brief comment on the difficulties of the operation—certainly made for its propaganda value but doubtless none the less true—we may assume at least one season's hard fighting, probably in 75. Another would have been spent consolidating the conquest by encirclement of the area with roads secured by forts located at nodal points. Only then, surely, would attention have been turned to Mid- and North Wales. It is most unlikely that a war would have been opened on two fronts, or provocation offered to the enemy by the construction of a new legionary fortress, as troops committed in the north (Legion II Adiutrix, for the sake of argument) could have easily been caught between the hostile Ordovices to their south-west and the recently conquered Brigantes to their north-east, at a time when Legion II Augusta could easily have become bogged down in guerilla warfare in the south. Legion XX Valeria Victrix, then at Wroxeter, could have been called upon to give help in two directions (9). Concerted resistance between the North Welsh tribes and the Brigantes, such as seems to have been threatened when P. Ostorius Scapula campaigned against the Deceangli (Tacitus, *Annals* XII, 32; on the link between North Wales, especially Anglesey, and the Brigantes see Jarrett, 1964a, 25; Dudley, 1974, 30), might have necessitated the intervention of the Ninth Legion, then at York. Such overstretching of available forces would have been reminiscent of the unhappy governorship of Suetonius Paulinus. Dudley's suggestion that Frontinus went so far as to appease the druids of Anglesey, while unproven, could have fitted the strategic and diplomatic necessities of his governorship. On the other hand, although Tacitus makes no mention of activity in Mid- or North Wales by Frontinus, he does record that Agricola's first action in taking over the governorship was the 'exterminate almost the whole tribe' of Ordovices, who had destroyed an auxiliary unit operating in their territory (*Agricola* 18), going on to attack Anglesey (10) (suggesting that despite Paulinus' attack the druids still constituted a political force). Thus, by the end of Frontinus' governorship, the Romans were apparently in control of Mid-Wales and were operating on the borders of Snowdonia, although the enemy had not been brought to a decisive battle (Jarrett, 1964a, 34-35). The activity leading up to this we can probably date to not earlier than 77, or at earliest beginning in late 76. The construction of a fortress at Chester was an essential feature in the policy of encirclement of North Wales and in the separation of tribes there from their possible Brigantian allies (Richmond, 1963a, 39; Thompson, 1965, 9). On the other



hand, it was not necessary that the conquest should be launched from there (Richmond, 1963a, 40, suggested penetration via the Dee valley to Cerrig y Drudion and Betws y Coed), and indeed, it may have fallen into a quiet sector, since the nearest Welsh tribe, the Deceangli, may well have been controlled by the Romans since the time of Suetonius Paulinus or even Ostorius Scapula (Jarrett, 1964, 209; 1964a, 25-26; Jarrett in Nash-Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969, 8). These factors are consistent with the beginning of work on the fortress before the final conquest by a relatively inexperienced legion, II Adiutrix, in the last months of Frontinus' governorship. Much the same conclusion was reached by Jarrett (1964a, 35). This date would suit the modification of plan at an early stage.

The site for the fortress at Inchtuthil was probably chosen in 83 (Frere 1967, 110-1, 117) and work probably began in 84. It was abandoned, still incomplete probably in 87, after at most 3 full seasons' work, possibly less. Added to the normal, or, in the second case, vital works were a stone facing to the rampart and a bath-house (left unfinished). At Chester the 'extras' were less: the Elliptical Building, also left unfinished (Newstead and Droop, 1939; *J. Roman Stud.* 58, 1968, 183), and the internal baths, both in stone. At Inchtuthil the *praetorium* had not been started at abandonment, while at Chester its construction appears to have been delayed, possibly until the reign of Trajan (Petch, 1968, 4). In both cases the baths had a higher priority than the *praetorium*. Again, the Chester garrison is likely to have had fewer diversions than that at Inchtuthil. It seems reasonable, therefore, that the building at Chester should have taken no longer than at Inchtuthil. With the modifications suggested, probably little more than the defences and internal levelling would have been completed at Chester in 78. Most of the barracks would have followed in 79-(?) 80. Going by modern practice, the pipes dated to the first half of 79 would have been laid as soon as plots had been prepared for building, not, as has been suggested, at the completion of the fortress (eg Thompson, 1965, 9-10; Petch in Nash-Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969, 35). In this year the Elliptical Building would have been started. The baths must have received high priority to be completed in 79 (if indeed the inscription refers to that building), but it can be argued that, in fact, no regular order can be detected in building; the baths at Caerleon, founded in ?75, did not follow until c. 85 (Boon, 1972, 30, 42, 78), while those at Inchtuthil followed much sooner.

#### THE EARLIEST ROMAN PRESENCE AT CHESTER.

The presence of cremation-burials in the *retentura* was used many years ago by Watkin as an argument for the walled area of Chester once having been smaller (1886, repr., 87). More recently they have been taken as evidence of a pre-Flavian fort, probably to be linked with the Anglesey campaign of Suetonius Paulinus (11). Despite careful examination of early layers in the fortress, no structures have been found which cannot belong to the known legionary fortress and no typically pre-Flavian objects which could not have continued in use after 69. If we consider other places where there is a succession of Roman military installations, it is remarkable how rarely their sites coincide exactly. For instance, the fortress at Gloucester probably succeeded one a little to the north at Kingsholm; an earlier fort is now suggested at Lincoln south of the Witham, and the Agricola supply-base at Corbridge has been found not to underlie the later forts (of which the earliest is now dated to c. 90) but to be situated near the Red House Burn baths to the west (12).

However, none of the areas that have been investigated outside the Chester fortress has consistently produced objects which would be out of place in the Flavian fortress. In the lack of archaeological evidence, strategic arguments by themselves are not strong enough to demand an early base at Chester and it is to be hoped that recent aerial surveys may produce evidence and stimulate ideas on the directions of early campaigns in this area (13). I should therefore prefer to see these cremations as having been deposited in the early months of the construction of the fortress, before the *retentura* was extended. The only surviving vessel which contained one of these cremations, the so-called 'Steven's Urn' has been supposed to be typologically pre-Flavian, but fragments of similar vessels have been recovered from early contexts in the legionary fortress during recent excavations in Goss St. (1973) and Crook St. (1973-4). The lead pigs from the Deceanglian mines remain evidence of 'pre-legionary' control of the area, while occupation of Chester itself remains obstinately Flavian.

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1. For Chester and Caerleon see the articles in Nash-Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969; for York, *Eboracum* 4-5 and fig. 3; for Inchtuthil, Collingwood and Richmond, 1969, 16-17 and fig. 3; for Colchester, *Britannia* 5, 1974, 439-42 and *Current Archaeol.* vol. IV, no. 43, 1974, 239. For Lincoln, see Petch, 1962, 48, also Whitwell, 1970, 24-25 and Colyer, 1975, 8; for Gloucester, Hurst, 1974, 19, fig. 4. Plans of fortresses throughout the empire, conveniently reproduced to

- the same scale are to be found in Nash-Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969, 147 ff., figs. 80-82. As the only plans available to me in the composition of this paper have been the small-scale ones in the publications cited above, it would not have been worthwhile calculating exact dimensions to support the arguments that follow. It may be worth doing this at a later date in the light of more accurate information.
2. Petch, 1962, 48; Frere, 1967, 71 repeats this. As an alternative, Mr Petch suggested that there may have been a less generous allowance of space in the early fortresses than in the Flavian ones, pointing out that the sizes of the roughly contemporary fortresses at Gloucester (the first one, assumed to be at Kingsholm) and Colchester were unknown; if so, Lincoln could have held a full legion. The extent of the presumably Claudian fortress at Colchester has since been determined to be the standard 50 acres of the Flavian fortresses. Hurst, 1975, 294, tantalisingly reports on "Kingsholm's use first as a pre-Flavian military site (or sites) of more than one phase covering *c. 50 acres*" (my italics). Kingsholm has long been conjectured to be the site of P. Ostorius Scapula's legionary fortress founded against the Silures of South Wales, mentioned in Tacitus, *Annals* XII, 32 (Webster, 1970, 187-88 and 196). The fortress on the colonia site at Gloucester was probably not founded until the late 60's (Hassall and Rhodes, 1975, 31).
  3. See the plans in Nash-Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969, 148-49, figs. 81-82.
  4. Part of what appeared to be a granary was found during the Princess St 1939 excavations, but no further traces have been recovered in subsequent excavations in the area.
  5. Richmond and Webster, 1951, 18; cf. Richmond, 1963, 256, Richmond, 1963a, 39, Collingwood and Richmond, 1969, 21; anticipated by Stevens, 1942, 50.
  6. Introduction to Tacitus, *Agricola*, 54-55.
  7. Thompson, 1965, 9 (AD 76-77); Petch, Nash-Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969, 35 and an introduction to Watkin, 1886, repr., vi. A pre-Agricolan foundation had been argued by Watkin himself (Watkin, 1886, repr., 7), but he did not suggest an exact date or distinguish clearly between the known fortress occupied by Legions II Adiutrix and XX V.V. and the forts of Scapula and Paulinus which he supposed to have preceded it.
  8. Tacitus, *Agricola*, 17. They had previously been attacked by Scapula, Didius Gallus, Quintus Veranius and probably Suetonius Paulinus; see Nash-Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969, 5 and Dudley, 1974. Jarrett, 1964a, 34-36 allows time for a minor campaign in 74. For a discussion of the areas occupied by the tribes of Wales see Jarrett, 1964, 207-9 and Jarrett in Nash-Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969, 3-4. M. G. Jarrett and J. C. Mann. 'The Tribes of Wales', *Welsh Hist. rev.* 4, 1968-69, 161-71 has not been available to me.
  9. It is likely that Legion II Augusta would have taken part in Frontinus' conquest of the Silures. It is again likely that it would have been supported by auxiliaries and possibly vexillations from other legions, the latter making it unlikely that a large force could be mustered for a campaign in North Wales. Jarrett, 1964a, 35, ascribes the 61 acre marching-camp at Blaen Cwm Bach, above the Neath valley, to Frontinus. This could have held three legions plus auxiliaries. The mustering of such a force in South Wales would have made peace on all other fronts absolutely imperative.
  10. Boon, 1972, 123 note 26 suggests that the Plas Uchaf (Abergele) hoard of Roman bronze vessels may be related to the disaster of 78.
  11. Stevens, 1942, 50 and 52; Richmond and Webster, 1951, 18-19; Richmond, 1963a, 39; Thompson, 1965, 7; Frere, 1967, 88; Collingwood and Richmond, 1969, 21-23; Jones and Webster, 1969, 212-3; Petch in Nash-Williams rev. Jarrett, 1969, 35; Jarrett, *ibid.* 6-7 and fig. 3; Webster, 1970, 192; Grealy, 1974, 2; Petch, introduction to Watkin, 1886, repr., vii. Watkin himself, *op. cit.* 4-5, argued on strategic grounds that both Scapula and Paulinus must have at least passed through the site of Chester, as did John Horsley (Horsley, 1732, repr., 33), but neither of them adduced archaeological evidence for their presence. Both were misled by the later road-pattern, which, as Prof. Jones has remarked (Grealy, 1974, 2) appears to differ from the routes used in the early campaigns. In some areas they correspond closely.
  12. Gloucester: see references cited in note 1 above; Lincoln: Whitwell, 1970, 12, Colyer, 1975, 8. For possible predecessors to the known fortress at Lincoln in the form of vexillation forts, of which a conjectural fort at Lincoln might have been one, see Frere, 1967, 70-1, and Frere and St Joseph, 1974, 37-39. Corbridge: *Britannia*, 5, 1974, 409; 6, 1975, 230; *Current Archaeol.* vol. IV, no. 46, 1974, 325-29.



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