

## IRAQ MUSEUM PROJECT

**Clemens D. Reichel**

The events in Iraq during March and April 2003 (see separate report *Nippur and Iraq at Time of War* by McGuire Gibson), notably the looting of the Iraq Museum between April 9 and 11, drew numerous responses from scholars at the Oriental Institute, which led to the formation of the Oriental Institute's Iraq Museum Project.

The initial grief and anger within the Oriental Institute over the looting of the museum was soon paired with a feeling of being overwhelmed by the worldwide reaction that followed in the days thereafter. We received hundreds of phone calls and thousands of e-mails from people who were shocked and appalled by this atrocious act and who volunteered their help in any capacity to recover the stolen objects. By that time, scholars on the Ancient Near East (ANE) Mailing List were already engaged in an intense debate about a proper response from the scholarly world, and the idea of some kind of a database of stolen artifacts was mentioned repeatedly. McGuire Gibson had started a project providing government and customs agencies with sample photographs and descriptions of key artifact types. As reports of a total loss of the museum's holdings were coming in — which thankfully turned out not to be true — pressure was mounting to build a much more comprehensive computer database with a web interface that scholars, police, and customs officials alike could access worldwide. Following our initial pitch announcing this plan on several e-mail lists, we were encouraged by colleagues around the world to start building the database. Less than a week after the looting, an Iraq Museum Workshop convened at the Oriental Institute, where many of the objectives for the project were developed. Aside from myself, regular participants of these meetings included Gil J. Stein (Director, Oriental Institute), McGuire Gibson (Professor of Mesopotamian Archaeology), Charles E. Jones (Research Archivist and Bibliographer), John Sanders (Head, Computer Lab), and Nicholas Kouchoukos (Professor, Department of Anthropology).

In publishing data on the stolen objects from the Iraq Museum as a web-based computer database, we incorporated lessons learned after the looting of several Iraqi museums following the Gulf War in 1991. Between 1992 and 1996, three booklets entitled *Lost Heritage* were published by American Association for Research in Baghdad, the British School of Archaeology, and the Japanese Archaeological Mission, providing photographs and descriptions of stolen objects. These booklets were intended to help academics, antiquities dealers, and auction houses determine if a suspicious item on the antiquities market was in fact stolen from one of Iraq's museums. Although these booklets were well intended, they were doomed to limited success. These booklets were not circulated widely enough to have a real impact; once they went out of print, they were not reprinted. Some object photographs could only be supplied by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities *after* the booklets were published and were therefore not included. As we were painfully reminded again in the past few months, there are many dynamic factors in a museum looting. Objects that were thought to be stolen turned out to be misplaced or were returned; others were only later identified as truly missing. While paper publications do not provide the flexibility for frequent changes, a computer database does. This point was not missed by some of the contributors to the booklets, but at the time access to the Internet was still relatively uncommon, modem speeds were slow, and most computers were ill equipped to handle graphic files.

Twelve years later, after another Iraq war and museum looting, the technology to build such a database and make it available via web browsers is commonly available. From its outset, time

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was an essential factor in this project. It was only through an exceptional team spirit that it got off the ground so swiftly. By April 18 — only seven days after the museum looting was reported worldwide — John Sanders launched Lost Treasures of Iraq, a new webpage that became the web outlet for most Iraq-related activities at the Oriental Institute (see Computer Laboratory report). At its earliest stage, Lost Treasures already hosted a precursor to the later database consisting of an illustrated index of the most important objects from the Iraq Museum. In the meantime, we had started building a relational database which was made available on the website on May 13. See:

Lost Treasures of Iraq — <http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq.html>

Iraq Museum Database — <http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/Iraqdatabasehome.htm>

The speed at which we were able to proceed was only possible because of the help that we got — unsolicited and unparalleled. In the first few days after the museum looting, our own graduate students lined up at our doors offering help. The shock and disbelief in their faces at what looked like the annihilation of our field of work and their line of study is still a vivid memory. Graduate students have little time and even less money (and our project, less than three days old then, had no budget to pay *anyone*), yet none of this was an issue or even mentioned at that point. Those students, notably Carrie Hritz, Mark Altaweel, Alexandra Witsell, and Leslie Schramer, deserve an extra thank you for being such exceptionally good sports and for working unpaid overtime in scanning and data entry. From late April onward, these jobs were taken over by volunteers. Two names deserve special mention here. Alim Khan patiently entered the data for the Diyala cylinder seals. It was Karen Terras, however, who for the last four months has made the Iraq Museum Project an almost full-time mission. To mention everything that she has accomplished would be almost impossible — it ranges from entering data on thousands of Nimrud ivories to scanning images of ivories, cylinder seals, and other artifacts. Karen has a background in art history, data management, and text editing, so she took it upon herself to edit many of the scholarly descriptions of objects and to simplify them for a non-academic audience — anyone who ever has tried to run a data management project on a shoestring budget will know what kind of a help this is! From day one of the crisis, Charles E. Jones, who is also moderator of the ANE mailing list, has been actively involved in our efforts. Jones has summarized his efforts following the Iraq Museum looting in a separate report (see Research Archives). Soon after the looting he launched IraqCrisis, a moderated discussion list on events relating to Iraq's antiquities [<http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraqcrisis.html>], which by most scholars' accounts has become one of the best news lists on current events regarding Iraq's antiquities. As the Oriental Institute's Research Archivist and Bibliographer, Jones went through endless numbers of books, excerpting Iraq Museum numbers with publication reference. This list, which by now contains over 12,000 entries, is published on the Oriental Institute's website [[http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq\\_bibliography.html](http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq_bibliography.html)] and will soon be linked to the object database. This site also contains data concerning Iraq's destroyed libraries and manuscript collection — not a main research focus of the Oriental Institute, but as it becomes more and more apparent, a cultural tragedy of this war that exceeds the Iraq Museum looting in its horrendousness and long-term impact.

The question has been asked repeatedly — why should such a database be compiled at the Oriental Institute? Numerous reasons could be given here — the Oriental Institute has assembled one of the largest groups of scholars involved in the study of Mesopotamian archaeology. Additionally, web-based publication projects such as the Diyala Project (see separate report) have

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given us a significant edge in computer-based data management. Certainly the most important argument is our own long-standing tradition of archaeological projects in Iraq. Some of the most important excavations in Iraq, such as Nippur, Tell Asmar, Khafaje, Tell Agrab, and Ishchali, have been undertaken by the Oriental Institute. These excavations, which were crucial in establishing the chronological backbone for Mesopotamian archaeology, resulted in the recovery of thousands of objects that were divided between the Iraq Museum and the Oriental Institute. All of



**Figure 1. Looted objects returned to the Iraq Museum in May 2003.**  
*Photograph by McGuire Gibson*

these objects were catalogued during the excavation and most of them photographed and/or drawn in the field. As a result, the Oriental Institute has a visual record of these objects, whether they are housed in Baghdad or Chicago. At present, we can digitally publish this kind of information for 8,500 Iraq Museum objects originating from the Diyala excavations. Together with all the finds from other Oriental Institute excavations in Iraq, especially from Nippur and Khorsabad, this figure may increase to almost 20,000.

Our own excavation material, however, is just one of the resources at our disposal. In the weeks following the looting of the Iraq Museum, scholars and publishers from around the world have offered to contribute material, both published and unpublished, to our database. Some of the finest photographs of objects in the Iraq Museum are published in Eva Strommenger's monograph *Fünf Jahrtausende Mesopotamien* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1962). Hirmer not only generously allowed us to use these images for our database but also sent us a list of unpublished object photographs that had been taken in the Iraq Museum. Several members of the British School of Archaeology supplied us with their own data. Georgina Herrmann (Institute of Archaeology/University of London) provided us with thousands of digitized photographs of Nimrud ivories (many thanks to Stuart Laidlaw for scanning them at the Institute's photolab). Harriet Martin gave us her photographs of all Abu Salabikh cylinder seals in the Iraq Museum found before 1990. Nicholas Postgate (Cambridge University) sent us photographs and drawings of over 1,000 objects missing after the 1991 Gulf War, many of them not included in the *Lost Heritage* booklets. Other contributors or people willing to contribute include (and I simply cannot list everyone) Carol Meyer (Chicago), Karen Radner (Munich), David Stronach (Berkeley), Lynn Dodd Schwartz (University of Southern California), Leigh-Ann Bedal (Penn State, Erie), Marilyn Jenkins-Madina (Metropolitan Museum of Art), Timothy Potts (Kimbell Art Museum), and Elizabeth Stone (State University of New York, Stonybrook). In short, we have been flooded with data; the main challenge now is to sort it quickly and make it available on the web.

Having spent the last eight years of my life on building the Diyala Project database (see separate report), a relational database for archaeological objects that will soon be accessible as a web-based publication, it was probably inevitable that the construction of the Iraq Museum database fell into my hands. But comparing these projects feels like comparing apples and oranges.

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The core of the Diyala Project is a database that contains both published and unpublished data on archaeological objects found during the Diyala excavations. Since this web-based database is intended to be both a final publication as well as an expandable research tool, the data resolution in it has to be very fine, the layout sophisticated, and its database backend very well structured. By contrast, the Iraq Museum database is neither intended as a primary publication nor as a research facility. Its most important function is to help the recovery of objects from the Iraq Museum by providing basic information such as images, materials, and measurements that will allow a visual match should such an object be recovered. What at first looked like doing more of the same — another archaeological database — turned out to be a challenge of a very different kind. This database is intended less for a scholarly audience than for anyone who might encounter a stolen object from the Iraq Museum — anyone from a customs official to the cleaning personnel working for an unscrupulous antiquities dealer. Therefore, any description and categorization has to be simple, descriptive, and easily understandable. Regardless of how hard one tries

to avoid the pitfalls, this is where a scholar runs into trouble. Scholars are likely to identify objects with terms relating to their function, not their appearance. Take the term “cylinder seal,” for example. Part of this term is descriptive since the object itself is of cylindrical shape, but the “seal” component is fully interpretive. A viewer may recognize figurative designs on the object and realize that an impression of it could be made into soft material, yet the identification as a “seal” is based on external, “scholarly” information. Similar pitfalls exist for many other terms that we are accustomed to, such as “cuneiform text,” “bullae,” “votive plaque,” “mace-head,” “boundary stone,” none of which gives a lay person any clear concept of what to expect visually. In short, we had to take off our scholarly glasses and learn to re-type objects based on simple, visual characteristics. Quite often this was easier said than done. What object category, for example, does the famous Warka Vase fall into (fig. 2)? Since it has clearly identifiable relief decoration, some people might classify it as a “relief,” while others would probably call it a “stone vessel.” Different people are likely to look for the same object under different categories, so it is vital that an object be categorized by multiple entries. For example, take the well-known Nimrud ivories: scholars tend to refer to these artifacts, which were found at the

### Art Auction by Chicago Artists to Benefit the Iraq Museum Project

In late April, a group of Chicago artists approached the Oriental Institute with an offer to help raise money to aid the recovery of objects stolen from the Iraq Museum. Soon after establishing contact, the artists decided to support the Iraq Museum Project with an art auction. Eighty-one artists, including many of Chicago’s best-known names, participated in the effort by donating, and in many cases specially creating, artworks for this auction.

A preview of the artwork was held at Gillock Gallery in Evanston on June 7, 2003. The auction took place on June 14, 2003, at Gallery Mornea in Evanston, with a press preview and artists’ reception held on June 13. The auction raised almost \$10,000 in support of the project.

This great success would have been impossible without the unfaltering commitment of time and effort by numerous individuals, most notably Bert Menco (organizer of the auction), Michael Monar (Director, Gallery Mornea), Richard Davis (Manager, Gallery Mornea), Connie Gillock (Director, Gillock Gallery), Mickie Weiss, Fern Bogot, Grant Signs, and Mo Cahill. Thanks to all of them, not only for their support before, during, and after the auction, but also for their continued friendship, which has become a source of inspiration to us in our work. Thanks also to the contributing artists for donating their artwork to support our cause.

A list of the contributing artists can be found at <http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/artistsrespond.html>

Gallery Mornea is located at 624 Davis Street, Evanston; telephone: 847-864-1906.

Gillock Gallery is located at 930 Ridge Avenue, Evanston; telephone: 847-864-3799.

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site of Nimrud in Assyrian palaces dating from the ninth and eighth century B.C., as “ivories,” but while most of them are panels with relieved decoration, others are actually sculpted in the round. While they fall into the same material category, they represent two distinct artifact categories, “relief” and “sculpture.” In a database, a relieved ivory panel therefore has to be found under two different categories, “ivory” and “relief.” But this is only the tip of the iceberg. Presenting all ivories on one webpage would be logistically impossible — imagine how long it would take for a page with several thousand thumbnail photographs to load! And how easy would it be to find an object without a more refined breakdown into

sub-categories? This is where things get very tricky. *Ivories from Nimrud*, the scholarly publication series, presents these objects either sorted by archaeological findspot or by stylistic “schools.” Such categorizations, however essential for scholarly work, offer no aid to a lay person in recognizing and identifying an object. We had no other choice but to come up with our own typology based on visual characteristics. The results can be seen in figure 3. The left side (a) shows an overview of the present layout of our “ivory” page [<http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/ivory.htm>]. Every entry represents an easily recognizable iconographic element (such as “Male Figure, Standing,” “Male Figure, Kneeling,” “Sphinx,” “Griffin,” “Scarab Beetle,” “Sacred Tree,” “Floral Designs,” etc.), each illustrated by an example to its right. Clicking on one of them (here shown for the entry “Griffin” in fig. 3) will show thumbnails of all entries currently available in the database (b). Clicking on a thumbnail opens the individual page for this object (c). For a “scholarly” publication, such a data layout would be unsatisfactory. However, we believe that this visually-orientated presentation makes it possible for non-specialists to locate objects in our database even if they are unaware of names, functions, or cultural significance.

With about 300 entries, the ivories represent our largest group of objects posted so far, yet over 1,000 are still to follow. Some 600 to 700 seals, mostly from the Diyala, Nippur, and Abu Salabikh, are to be posted next. They will join a representative (though by no means exhaustive) display of statues and statuettes, stone vessels, reliefs, gold and bronze items, and terra-cottas that have already been posted.



**Figure 2.** Warka Vase (left) as seen in the Iraq Museum before the war and (right) broken after being returned to the museum on June 12 (left side: E. Strommenger, *Fünf Jahrtausende Mesopotamien*, fig. 19; right side: photograph acquired by McGuire Gibson, used with permission)



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At this point, I finally have to address two crucial and often asked questions: What is the significance (or even necessity) of this site in light of the ever changing numbers of lost items from the Iraq Museum? And what will its eventual scope and purpose be? The initial estimates given by the press in April, which predicted a total loss of the museum's collection (ca. 170,000 objects), were exaggerated. Yet, some press reports that have come out since May are equally misleading. A list of thirty to forty items, first published in late April based on information from Iraq Museum officials, has often been referred to as exhaustive list of missing items. Based on this, certain parties accused scholars and Iraq Museum officials of "hysteria" and "disinformation." But this list reflects *only* objects stolen from the museum galleries. As anyone who works in a museum knows, only a tiny fraction of a museum's holdings are typically on display. Most items remain in storerooms. While not accessible to the public, a museum's storerooms represent its real data pool for scholarly research. And this is where tragedy truly hit the Iraq Museum. The storerooms were broken into and several of them plundered. Since many items were taken off their shelves and are therefore misplaced or broken, it will take a long time to determine what is really missing. Moreover, the museum registry was devastated during the looting. The current loss estimates are approximations by specialists who had worked on certain artifact types in the museum and were familiar with its collection. These numbers are far from being final, but the general tendency is not encouraging. Some objects have been returned in the weeks following the looting (fig. 1). A UNESCO spokesperson reported in late May that 2,000–3,000 objects were still unaccounted for, but the numbers kept rising in June. They took a dramatic step up when in mid-June it was noted that, contrary to earlier reports, virtually all of the Iraq Museum's cylinder seals excavated before 1990 are missing. By late July, the official figure of missing objects had moved up to 12,000 with no indication of any finality. In short, there really is no reason for us to relax. But how do we reconcile these changing figures with our work on the Iraq Museum Database? With few exceptions, we have at present no way of establishing definitively which objects are missing and which objects have been located. By the time a final list is made available, however, many items may well have disappeared into private collections. The time to act is *now*. Our solution to this dilemma is a re-definition of the corpus in our database: all objects in it are known to be property of the Iraq Museum (and in this statement we do also include items that were stolen during looting after the 1991 war). The presence of an object in our database does not necessarily imply that it has been stolen. Should any of the objects be seen outside of Iraq, except in the context of a traveling exhibit, law enforcement should be contacted immediately. We are aware of the potential shortcoming of a list that is by far longer than the actual list of stolen items, but at present we feel that our resources in manpower and equipment are best used in adding more information than in spending time to re-examine the database for objects that may or may not have been recovered. After all, what good would it do to add an object to the database six months from now once its theft is finally confirmed, if authorities could have intervened when it was on the antiquities market? Items that are recovered will be successively annotated, including descriptions of their current status. This is important since not every object returned was actually intact. The famous Warka Vase, for example, the relief scenes of which give one of the earliest accounts of the Mesopotamian picture of the world, was returned in mid-June but was severely damaged with its top register broken off (fig. 3). Although fragments are said to have been returned with the vase, it is possible that some pieces have gone astray and might eventually show up on the art market.

In summary, while we have made great progress over the past few months, plenty of work remains to be done. We hope that our site will soon move to the University of Chicago's Network Servicing and Information Technology Department. An Innovative Technology Grant

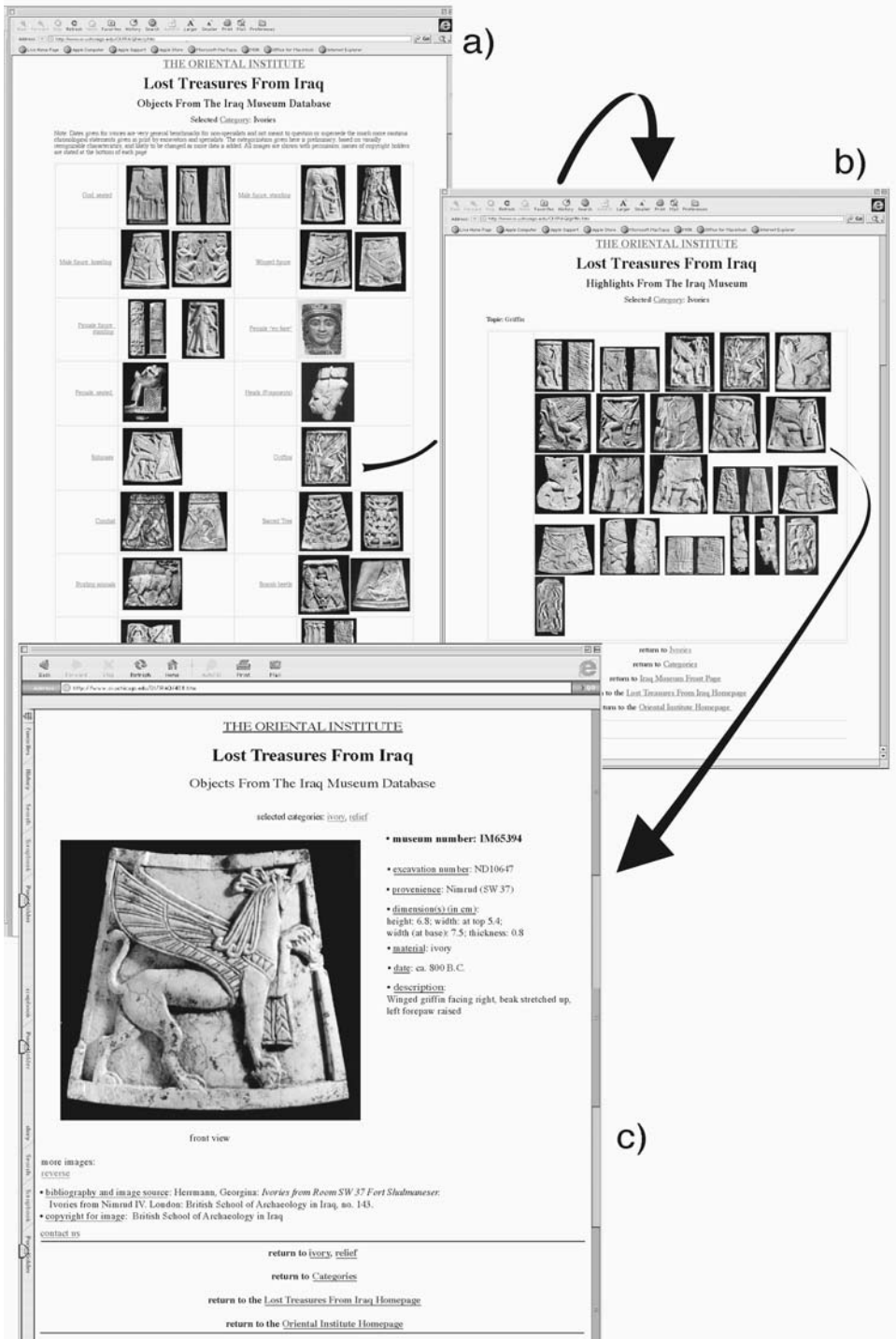


Figure 3. A set of screens from the Iraq Museum Database Project's Webpage, showing possible set of navigational steps from (a) a category page ("Ivories") with a listing of its sub-categories to (b) a sub-category page (iconographic motif of "Griffin"), showing thumbnails of all entered objects belonging to this group, and (c) a description of an individual object

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from the Provost's Office, written by Gil Stein and Nicholas Kouchoukos, will enable us to transfer the database into a different environment. Presently the data is managed in a database program on a local machine; the data then gets scripted to the website. By definition, the data presented on the web is always an "older" backup, no matter how recent the update was done. Soon the database itself will be available online; data that is added or edited will be available immediately. This new layout will also replace our current static pages with dynamic pages, allowing much more individualized and refined object queries. In this effort, we have enjoyed great help from Nicholas Kouchoukos, an archaeologist in the Department of Anthropology, whose interests are closely related to ours. His expertise in building web-accessible databases using open source code has been extremely helpful in the creation of the design for this project.

This account must be somewhat preliminary since events that shape the nature of the project are still unfolding. I would like to close by thanking the people who so generously have helped this project financially, in particular Tony and Lawrie Dean for their very generous contribution. The most memorable and unprecedented contribution, however, came from a group of people who themselves have a very personal bond with artwork — artists. Devastated by the looting of the Iraq Museum and feeling the need to do something to help in the recovery of these priceless artifacts, a group of eighty-one Chicago artists donated countless hours of time, materials, and skills to create artworks that were sold during a special auction at Gallery Mornea in Evanston on June 13 to benefit our project (see inset). This event raised close to \$10,000, a sensational success and a sizable sum that has greatly helped the financing our project. Truly, the money raised at this event played a distant second to the unprecedented nature of the event — as Bert Menco, a Chicago artist and one of the key organizers of the event, expressed it, "... the Artists helped the Art with the work of their own hands." Thanks to him, to the organizers at Gallery Mornea, and to the artists themselves. Their support and devotion will remain an inspiration to us in our ongoing work.

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