

## Use of the HSS/LMS Hash-Based Signature Algorithm with CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE)

### Abstract

This document specifies the conventions for using the Hierarchical Signature System (HSS) / Leighton-Micali Signature (LMS) hash-based signature algorithm with the CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE) syntax. The HSS/LMS algorithm is one form of hash-based digital signature; it is described in RFC 8554.

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## 1. Introduction

This document specifies the conventions for using the Hierarchical Signature System (HSS) / Leighton-Micali Signature (LMS) hash-based signature algorithm with the CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE) [RFC8152] syntax. The LMS system provides a one-time digital signature that is a variant of Merkle Tree Signatures (MTS). The HSS is built on top of the LMS system to efficiently scale for a larger number of signatures. The HSS/LMS algorithm is one form of a hash-based digital signature, and it is described in [HASHSIG]. The HSS/LMS signature algorithm can only be used for a fixed number of signing operations. The number of signing operations depends upon the size of the tree. The HSS/LMS signature algorithm uses small public keys, and it has low computational cost; however, the signatures are quite large. The HSS/LMS private key can be very small when the signer is willing to perform additional computation at signing time; alternatively, the private key can consume additional memory and provide a faster signing time. The HSS/LMS signatures [HASHSIG] are currently defined to use exclusively SHA-256 [SHS].

### 1.1. Motivation

Recent advances in cryptanalysis [BH2013] and progress in the development of quantum computers [NAS2019] pose a threat to widely deployed digital signature algorithms. As a result, there is a need to prepare for a day that cryptosystems, such as RSA and DSA, that depend on discrete logarithm and factoring cannot be depended upon.

If large-scale quantum computers are ever built, these computers will have more than a trivial number of quantum bits (qubits), and they will be able to break many of the public-key cryptosystems currently in use. A post-quantum cryptosystem [PQC] is a system that is secure against such large-scale quantum computers. When it will be feasible to build such computers is open to conjecture; however, RSA [RFC8017], DSA [DSS], Elliptic Curve Digital Signature Algorithm (ECDSA) [DSS], and Edwards-curve Digital Signature Algorithm (EdDSA) [RFC8032] are all vulnerable if large-scale quantum computers come to pass.

Since the HSS/LMS signature algorithm does not depend on the difficulty of discrete logarithm or factoring, the HSS/LMS signature

algorithm is considered to be post-quantum secure. The use of HSS/LMS hash-based signatures to protect software update distribution will allow the deployment of future software that implements new cryptosystems. By deploying HSS/LMS today, authentication and integrity protection of the future software can be provided, even if advances break current digital-signature mechanisms.

## 1.2. Terminology

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "NOT RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in BCP 14 [RFC2119] [RFC8174] when, and only when, they appear in all capitals, as shown here.

## 2. LMS Digital Signature Algorithm Overview

This specification makes use of the hash-based signature algorithm specified in [HASHSIG], which is the Leighton and Micali adaptation [LM] of the original Lamport-Diffie-Winternitz-Merkle one-time signature system [M1979][M1987][M1989a][M1989b].

The hash-based signature algorithm has three major components:

- \* Hierarchical Signature System (HSS) -- see Section 2.1
- \* Leighton-Micali Signature (LMS) -- see Section 2.2
- \* Leighton-Micali One-time Signature (LM-OTS) Algorithm-- see Section 2.3

As implied by the name, the hash-based signature algorithm depends on a collision-resistant hash function. The hash-based signature algorithm specified in [HASHSIG] currently makes use of the SHA-256 one-way hash function [SHS], but it also establishes an IANA registry to permit the registration of additional one-way hash functions in the future.

### 2.1. Hierarchical Signature System (HSS)

The hash-based signature algorithm specified in [HASHSIG] uses a hierarchy of trees. The N-time Hierarchical Signature System (HSS) allows subordinate trees to be generated when needed by the signer. Otherwise, generation of the entire tree might take weeks or longer.

An HSS signature, as specified in [HASHSIG], carries the number of signed public keys (Nspk), followed by that number of signed public keys, followed by the LMS signature, as described in Section 2.2. The public key for the topmost LMS tree is the public key of the HSS system. The LMS private key in the parent tree signs the LMS public key in the child tree, and the LMS private key in the bottom-most tree signs the actual message. The signature over the public key and the signature over the actual message are LMS signatures, as described in Section 2.2.

The elements of the HSS signature value for a stand-alone tree (a top

tree with no children) can be summarized as:

```
u32str(0) ||  
lms_signature /* signature of message */
```

where the notation comes from [HASHSIG].

The elements of the HSS signature value for a tree with Nspk signed public keys can be summarized as:

```
u32str(Nspk) ||  
signed_public_key[0] ||  
signed_public_key[1] ||  
  
...  
signed_public_key[Nspk-2] ||  
signed_public_key[Nspk-1] ||  
lms_signature /* signature of message */
```

As defined in Section 3.3 of [HASHSIG], a signed\_public\_key is the lms\_signature over the public key followed by the public key itself. Note that Nspk is the number of levels in the hierarchy of trees minus 1.

## 2.2. Leighton-Micali Signature (LMS)

Subordinate LMS trees are placed in the HSS structure, as discussed in Section 2.1. Each tree in the hash-based signature algorithm specified in [HASHSIG] uses the Leighton-Micali Signature (LMS) system. LMS systems have two parameters. The first parameter is the height of the tree,  $h$ , which is the number of levels in the tree minus one. The [HASHSIG] includes support for five values of this parameter:  $h=5$ ,  $h=10$ ,  $h=15$ ,  $h=20$ , and  $h=25$ . Note that there are  $2^h$  leaves in the tree. The second parameter is the number of bytes output by the hash function,  $m$ , which is the amount of data associated with each node in the tree. The [HASHSIG] specification supports only SHA-256 with  $m=32$ . An IANA registry is defined so that other hash functions could be used in the future.

The [HASHSIG] specification supports five tree sizes:

- \* LMS\_SHA256\_M32\_H5
- \* LMS\_SHA256\_M32\_H10
- \* LMS\_SHA256\_M32\_H15
- \* LMS\_SHA256\_M32\_H20
- \* LMS\_SHA256\_M32\_H25

The [HASHSIG] specification establishes an IANA registry to permit the registration of additional hash functions and additional tree sizes in the future.

The [HASHSIG] specification defines the value  $I$  as the private key identifier, and the same  $I$  value is used for all computations with

the same LMS tree. The value  $I$  is also available in the public key. In addition, the [HASHSIG] specification defines the value  $T[r]$  as the  $m$ -byte string associated with the  $i$ th node in the LMS tree, and the nodes are indexed from 1 to  $2^{(h+1)}-1$ . Thus,  $T[1]$  is the  $m$ -byte string associated with the root of the LMS tree.

The LMS public key can be summarized as:

```
u32str(lms_algorithm_type) || u32str(otstype) || I || T[1]
```

As specified in [HASHSIG], the LMS signature consists of four elements:

- \* the number of the leaf associated with the LM-OTS signature,
- \* an LM-OTS signature, as described in Section 2.3,
- \* a type code indicating the particular LMS algorithm, and
- \* an array of values that is associated with the path through the tree from the leaf associated with the LM-OTS signature to the root.

The array of values contains the siblings of the nodes on the path from the leaf to the root but does not contain the nodes on the path itself. The array for a tree with height  $h$  will have  $h$  values. The first value is the sibling of the leaf, the next value is the sibling of the parent of the leaf, and so on up the path to the root.

The four elements of the LMS signature value can be summarized as:

```
u32str(q) ||  
ots_signature ||  
u32str(type) ||  
path[0] || path[1] || ... || path[h-1]
```

### 2.3. Leighton-Micali One-Time Signature (LM-OTS) Algorithm

The hash-based signature algorithm depends on a one-time signature method. This specification makes use of the Leighton-Micali One-time Signature (LM-OTS) Algorithm [HASHSIG]. An LM-OTS has five parameters:

- n:** The number of bytes output by the hash function. For SHA-256 [SHS],  $n=32$ .
- H:** A preimage-resistant hash function that accepts byte strings of any length and returns an  $n$ -byte string.
- w:** The width in bits of the Winternitz coefficients. [HASHSIG] supports four values for this parameter:  $w=1$ ,  $w=2$ ,  $w=4$ , and  $w=8$ .
- p:** The number of  $n$ -byte string elements that make up the LM-OTS signature.

**ls:** The number of left-shift bits used in the checksum function, which is defined in Section 4.4 of [HASHSIG].

The values of **p** and **ls** are dependent on the choices of the parameters **n** and **w**, as described in Appendix B of [HASHSIG].

The [HASHSIG] specification supports four LM-OTS variants:

- \* LMOTS\_SHA256\_N32\_W1
- \* LMOTS\_SHA256\_N32\_W2
- \* LMOTS\_SHA256\_N32\_W4
- \* LMOTS\_SHA256\_N32\_W8

The [HASHSIG] specification establishes an IANA registry to permit the registration of additional hash functions and additional parameter sets in the future.

Signing involves the generation of **C**, which is an **n**-byte random value.

The LM-OTS signature value can be summarized as the identifier of the LM-OTS variant, the random value, and a sequence of hash values (**y[0]** through **y[p-1]**), as described in Section 4.5 of [HASHSIG]:

**u32str(otstype) || C || y[0] || ... || y[p-1]**

### 3. Hash-Based Signature Algorithm Identifiers

The CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE) [RFC8152] supports two signature algorithm schemes. This specification makes use of the signature with appendix scheme for hash-based signatures.

The signature value is a large byte string, as described in Section 2. The byte string is designed for easy parsing. The HSS, LMS, and LM-OTS components of the signature value format include counters and type codes that indirectly provide all of the information that is needed to parse the byte string during signature validation.

When using a COSE key for this algorithm, the following checks are made:

- \* The 'kty' field MUST be 'HSS-LMS'.
- \* If the 'alg' field is present, it MUST be 'HSS-LMS'.
- \* If the 'key\_ops' field is present, it MUST include 'sign' when creating a hash-based signature.
- \* If the 'key\_ops' field is present, it MUST include 'verify' when verifying a hash-based signature.
- \* If the 'kid' field is present, it MAY be used to identify the top

of the HSS tree. In [HASHSIG], this identifier is called 'I', and it is the 16-byte identifier of the LMS public key for the tree.

#### 4. Security Considerations

The security considerations from [RFC8152] and [HASHSIG] are relevant to implementations of this specification.

There are a number of security considerations that need to be taken into account by implementers of this specification.

Implementations MUST protect the private keys. Compromise of the private keys may result in the ability to forge signatures. Along with the private key, the implementation MUST keep track of which leaf nodes in the tree have been used. Loss of integrity of this tracking data can cause a one-time key to be used more than once. As a result, when a private key and the tracking data are stored on nonvolatile media or in a virtual machine environment, failed writes, virtual machine snapshotting or cloning, and other operational concerns must be considered to ensure confidentiality and integrity.

When generating an LMS key pair, an implementation MUST generate each key pair independently of all other key pairs in the HSS tree.

An implementation MUST ensure that an LM-OTS private key is used to generate a signature only one time and ensure that it cannot be used for any other purpose.

The generation of private keys relies on random numbers. The use of inadequate pseudorandom number generators (PRNGs) to generate these values can result in little or no security. An attacker may find it much easier to reproduce the PRNG environment that produced the keys, searching the resulting small set of possibilities rather than brute-force searching the whole key space. The generation of quality random numbers is difficult, and [RFC4086] offers important guidance in this area.

The generation of hash-based signatures also depends on random numbers. While the consequences of an inadequate PRNG to generate these values is much less severe than in the generation of private keys, the guidance in [RFC4086] remains important.

#### 5. Operational Considerations

The public key for the hash-based signature is the key at the root of Hierarchical Signature System (HSS). In the absence of a public key infrastructure [RFC5280], this public key is a trust anchor, and the number of signatures that can be generated is bounded by the size of the overall HSS set of trees. When all of the LM-OTS signatures have been used to produce a signature, then the establishment of a new trust anchor is required.

To ensure that none of the tree nodes are used to generate more than one signature, the signer maintains state across different invocations of the signing algorithm. Section 9.2 of [HASHSIG] offers some practical implementation approaches around this

statefulness. In some of these approaches, nodes are sacrificed to ensure that none are used more than once. As a result, the total number of signatures that can be generated might be less than the overall HSS set of trees.

A COSE Key Type Parameter for encoding the HSS/LMS private key and the state about which tree nodes have been used is deliberately not defined. It was not defined to avoid creating the ability to save the private key and state, generate one or more signatures, and then restore the private key and state. Such a restoration operation provides disastrous opportunities for tree node reuse.

## 6. IANA Considerations

IANA has added entries for the HSS/LMS hash-based signature algorithm in the "COSE Algorithms" registry and added HSS/LMS hash-based signature public keys in the "COSE Key Types" registry and the "COSE Key Type Parameters" registry.

### 6.1. COSE Algorithms Registry Entry

The new entry in the "COSE Algorithms" registry [IANA] appears as follows:

Name: HSS-LMS  
Value: -46  
Description: HSS/LMS hash-based digital signature  
Reference: RFC 8778  
Recommended: Yes

### 6.2. COSE Key Types Registry Entry

The new entry in the "COSE Key Types" registry [IANA] appears as follows:

Name: HSS-LMS  
Value: 5  
Description: Public key for HSS/LMS hash-based digital signature  
Reference: RFC 8778

### 6.3. COSE Key Type Parameters Registry Entry

The new entry in the "COSE Key Type Parameters" registry [IANA] appears as follows:

Key Type: 5  
Name: pub  
Label: -1  
CBOR Type: bstr  
Description: Public key for HSS/LMS hash-based digital signature  
Reference: RFC 8778

## 7. References

### 7.1. Normative References



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## Appendix A. Examples

This appendix provides a non-normative example of a COSE full message signature and an example of a COSE\_Sign1 message. This section is formatted according to the extended CBOR diagnostic format defined by [RFC8610].

The programs that were used to generate the examples can be found at <<https://github.com/cose-wg/Examples>>.

### A.1. Example COSE Full Message Signature

This section provides an example of a COSE full message signature.

The size of binary file is 2560 bytes.

```
98(
[
  / protected / h'a10300' / {
    \ content type \ 3:0
  } / ,
  / unprotected / {},
  / payload / 'This is the content.',
  / signatures / [
    [
      / protected / h'a101382d' / {
        \ alg \ 1:-46 \ HSS-LMS \
      } / ,
      / unprotected / {
        / kid / 4:'ItsBig'
      },
      / signature / h'000000000000000010000000391291de76ce6e24d1e2a
9b60266519bc8ce889f814deb0fc00edd3129de3ab9b6bfa3bf47d007d844af7db74
9ea97215e82f456cbdd473812c6a042ae39539898752c89b60a276ec8a9feab900e2
5bdf0ab8e773aa1c36ae214d67c65bb68630450a5db2c7c6403b77f6a9bf4d30a02
19db5cced884d7514f3cbd19220020bf3045b0e5c6955b32864f16f97da02f0cbfea
70458b07032e30b0342d75b8f3dc6871442e6384b10f559f5dc594a214924c48ccc3
37078665653fc740340428138b0fb5154f2f2cb291ad05ace7acae60031b2d09b2f4
17712d1c01e34b165af2e070f5a521a85a5fb3dd2a6288947bcbdd5e2265d3670bd61
92eb2bf643964e2783d84aec343f8e3571e4fcf09cbeea94e80470aa7252d1c733a5
535907e66c7b9f0b88b159dc2a7370ee47f13e7e134d3d05e5f53fac640b784a9b0f
183fe14217325626f487cc8d8cb9eaf0abb174ee0b7076cf39c45037cefdcf3f1e61b
5174581214c09870b72c39737ec4c46a96199b66cad2990bcbe5bb1abfde99107c7f
7289395bf2a433598ede0b1969f23db949afb5b4d33831dae6c641a6355f8f9bf16c
dfffc4bf86891b93a557c2152ac8a1de51c995344cc10cc4bc9ecfbb4e418bed0f334
af165339e6725dc4fc1e995521e1be8a566d59b57cd130903b42d07087d63646ef8f
c1e9e9071bb67a123fdec3f37638cdf0f4bf3084074069171c17885b9431ad908d3
6a6f8a826256d2aa34f8aa0731a357c060db8e80fef61b1c323890e640633b98d17
5d4d6ebff800a71cfc864ec02837de9d0e079f0f400acafd56805cb273e631ba395d
23e86acf6eae63181a5afe1f0a361cbbd5fefeb7db0c95591ec3128e80dfbea9ca0f
89fc035d761c05d41e7a010892c42e8e2af62aa604f4e214c0bb08075481f9cc307a
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c894d5e43993c834c4746309c886d6131f2f92155ca1160bac9660802a947b5aba94
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af68aa90261b3f5ad273adacf2d0cb5b0c5402bfa62da67a52dcddfa463e72d2c005
f1ac0ea3cb62364ee3419333612e07bf685006137a592e2fcd58398265c4ff9e11e7
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1882455ece23e50324c5feea217920b0f3109dcbdc81762e41b7ca271efac8e39cc2
6ebe085abdbf6b314a38929799fb7feebee2e20b97056ed17ef3881e6e89330314dd
```

```
7e9c629c46dfdb925c7c5f5d243f159d964691745cd46579fd0696479e1c49cbd2af
879a2bce8576619cca7b6e516e6c94c1087441a81f11b9a83535b24ddc725a81a9d1
ff62da2804c8d84c6e382065574282ea1f23eaf648cfa9767afb098fd81654d76133
f5f39bcc762c9bc31f7f4665cc0efa929b5c05dedd76143c63dc7018ab130c108ea9
01be32b9d911b66da13a1528c32a9694c899a772f8e1fe00c17eceb343e737d72cba
06cf5ddac9a4d3df7ef391cf6595a6d8c14b0d80f93023b1b3d4371239da98b67a1b
6a379422616282a16e8d1f97a130baf21e572bcca91abb760eac6957f9b1b05e49e2
d181874ac6dd160d1c717b73bd28ef55f08d47466d5aef754814c7e206fa9e2ec533
85d14d52f7769d95ea50524fffb20dc7275b04d71d1967e3bbc6ed481f1fc5a15e78a
1fd967d96045625645dbd173cccdd97661e995ce47d6b3ead96ee6d006a5ce6f4c97
77fe2e3f91bebe877cac8c6486dfce0315dc71bbb93879759b8981c5fff2e11deb809
abf4280ee93d1711e73645b410acb518538ce3d4bda1e355c988f068165668e99d6a
8de356b4b13298036ad05d526c4a5e2591612a477b7e86550adde128cd71ee651d44
99699000a02979e42bbccf32c83b1eb0ff99aa4d352e20e0b3382422df2c2ed4ce90
c94cf1a359e92ef971dc6db06047a333c2ebe827eb6d5f2811fdb0bf0f12bf2094e
0dcd8e418f3f691a60ceb0cefb6f45f47883d6b9f320950e91266740c6dbfad6b3cf
e56de0aa6658b0dc893bb6e49e6294537a7878e86cfc8e6c150675db1a89d188ea6e
fe7d88ff57b39b8610e392811ee097ca61c4841e0fbd346ed3ff6a5e412acb0d9f13
022df2e7fdaa8e0face7366c8ffe6f446995b564fc3d59c70fecdb60a25e28650417
157f43f3e72c3afc601509641cfd099a78130e1f7ba8333502ad4f036f46411a43d0
35e2ca0ed0c346d9aac5df05196c95c38e6e52763ed896b6d02464a910dda6cca340
24e3b9c3723d26e2886ad724dd56ea285e8e4b60beec924d55dd700c38877b74552f
ea1f8741579b02061416131db390f628522885236b51f7aef23167d3a5fe5eadcd88
b0e99b2b6bc56b0dea4fb22146294766c28e5e7c834dbdcb6bfdd7bd8455252522ff
2e974f6fd3fda176749b7cdced5b9aba092b2982c89cb7d2b36348928c8f01170618
ecff14d9e0eed9d88d97e38bcf7a837f674be5243fc624c8afd3d105f462bfa939b8
143a3a98f78fbb8c915e00bdbbf707b12c45784f4d1cb1426b583a0d5fbec1f5ea6d
0067c090168cb788e532aca770c7be366ec07e7808f1892b00000006ed1ce8c6e437
918d43fba7bd9385694c41182703f6b7f704deedd9384ba6f8bc362c948646b3c984
8803e6d9ba1f7d3967f709cddd35dc77d60356f0c36808900b491cb4ecbbabec128e
7c81a46e62a67b57640a0a78be1cbf7dd9d419a10cd8686d16621a80816bfdb5bdc5
6211d72ca70b81f1117d129529a7570cf79cf52a7028a48538ecdd3b38d3d5d62d26
246595c4fb73a525a5ed2c30524ebb1d8cc82e0c19bc4977c6898ff95fd3d310b0ba
e71696cef93c6a552456bf96e9d075e383bb7543c675842bafbfc7cdb88483b3276c
29d4f0a341c2d406e40d4653b7e4d045851acf6a0a0ea9c710b805cced4635ee8c10
7362f0fc8d80c14d0ac49c516703d26d14752f34c1c0d2c4247581c18c2cf4de48e9
ce949be7c888e9caebe4a415e291fd107d21dc1f084b1158208249f28f4f7c7e931b
a7b3bd0d824a4570'
```

```
]
]
]
)
```

## A.2. Example COSE\_Sign1 Message

This section provides an example of a COSE\_Sign1 message.

The size of binary file is 2552 bytes.

```
18(
[
  / protected / h'a101382d' / {
    \ alg \ 1:-46 \ HSS-LMS \
  } / ,
  / unprotected / {
    / kid / 4:'ItsBig'
```

[illegible]

cc160c6b410e2d8989488ac8ef9a9febbf65ad4fdffa532a8122ef82dc1a4ffc361c  
bf9f752b36aa9821683d5f3f5842f90134eb423d5cbc76858b4c0a7ba798ec94a089  
fdb24b5b25f42d7b6bb8192f07b98eb2de1fe7bc8b6c740fa5cde6fb4890d2f17916  
64a96c25a0a71a541025b5ec825eed91f393505473e21d0620177993982e6c1b6bf9  
1b777b5ab5739b84946c518c7e6aa0e689e9ad1d34e6ef6ca0e709c4aefecd6f2594  
b017940742aceb72c5a52d7d47a3a74f9d09eb84cf82b349de32278a771cebc31ebc  
580c09b11799b1f0e6d11d75b17e389d259c531f957a1e699250711df2e36f64f21c  
92eff698a392d92df0b2f91991408a076b83149e025a9ffba1ff1caed916a2fc1ac5  
d3081c30b5c64b7d677c314b6e76ac20ed8bb4a4c0eb465ae5c0c265969264b27e6d  
54c266f79e58e2fa6a381069090bec00189562abcf831adc86a05a2fc7ffaa70dbd3  
fa60e09d447cd76b2ff2b851c38e72650ade093ba8bd000000067b95de445abf8916  
1dff4b91a4a9e3bf156a39a4660f98f06bf3f017686d9dfc362c948646b3c9848803  
e6d9ba1f7d3967f709cddd35dc77d60356f0c36808900b491cb4ecbbabec128e7c81  
a46e62a67b57640a0a78be1cbf7dd9d419a10cd8686d16621a80816bfdb5bdc56211  
d72ca70b81f1117d129529a7570cf79cf52a7028a48538ecdd3b38d3d5d62d262465  
95c4fb73a525a5ed2c30524ebb1d8cc82e0c19bc4977c6898ff95fd3d310b0bae716  
96cef93c6a552456bf96e9d075e383bb7543c675842bafbf7c7cdb88483b3276c29d4  
f0a341c2d406e40d4653b7e4d045851acf6a0a0ea9c710b805cced4635ee8c107362  
f0fc8d80c14d0ac49c516703d26d14752f34c1c0d2c4247581c18c2cf4de48e9ce94  
9be7c888e9caebe4a415e291fd107d21dc1f084b1158208249f28f4f7c7e931ba7b3  
bd0d824a4570'

]  
)

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