

## Article

# The Lost History: Anthropological Analysis of 93 Post-WWII Skeletal Remains from Eboli Refugee Camp (Campania, Italy) Rediscovered After 75 Years in Bari's Monumental Cemetery (Apulia, Italy)

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**Abstract:** The following work is based on the historical–anthropological analysis of 93 skeletal remains belonging to post-war casualties who died in 1946 and remained missing for years. In 2019, 93 metal boxes containing skeletal remains of Slavic origin, belonging to civilians and soldiers who perished in the immediate postwar period following World War II, were found inside the ossuary of the Monumental Cemetery in Bari (Italy). At the beginning of the search, these people were thought to have died in prison camps in Apulia, such as Torre Tresca and Grumo Appula, in the province of Bari. Later, thanks to the discovery of war badges and years of extensive historical research, it was discovered that these remains had been missing for 75 years and belonged to soldiers of the Royal Yugoslav Army and civilians, probably their relatives, who died in 1946 in the refugee camp of Eboli, in the province of Salerno, Campania (Italy). To unveil this truth that remained hidden for over 75 years, a multidisciplinary study divided into two phases was applied. The first phase, grounded in historical research study, aimed to determine the historical and temporal context in which they lived and confirm the life they actually lived in the Eboli refugee camp. The second phase, grounded in anthropological research, aimed to reconstruct the biological profile of each individual, identify the presence of antemortem, perimortem, and postmortem lesions, assess potential pathological conditions, and determine, where possible, the cause of death. Finally, a correlation of the collected data was conducted to ascertain and corroborate, with reasonable certainty, the living conditions to which they were subjected in the refugee camp where they resided. Italy after 1943 became the scene of intense fighting and a dramatic situation for prisoners of war, including many Yugoslav soldiers. This work brought to light a history that had been lost for as many as 75 years, highlighted the importance, specifically, of the role of the Eboli refugee camp, a context little known and forgotten by many, and above all made it possible to remember and restore dignity to the victims of the Great War.

**Keywords:** forensic anthropology; forensic archaeology; skeletal remains; World War II; Yugoslavian refugee camp Eboli (Italy)



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## 1. Introduction

Anthropology plays a fundamental role in determining a person's identity, and identity is considered an essential marker of respect for the deceased and their relatives, who must be able to mourn their loved ones and have a place of remembrance. Identity encompasses

everything we are—what makes us unique and recognizable throughout our lives—and allows us to be identified and remembered even after death. Therefore, the process of identifying victims from diverse contexts, particularly in war-related scenarios, constitutes a moral obligation and represents the primary objective of forensic anthropologists, both for legal as well as social and religious reasons (Belcher et al., 2021; Adams, 2009; White et al., 2011; Pickering & Bachman, 2009).

This study highlights the importance of forensic anthropologists in a multidisciplinary framework aimed at identification and the reconstruction of significant historical events linked to World War II (Schilling, 2002; Verna et al., 2021; Meucci et al., 2022). Skeletal remains serve as invaluable archives, faithfully documenting an individual's health status, environmental interactions, and personal history (Pickering & Bachman, 2009). During the Great War, Italy became the stage for the deportation of countless soldiers, women, and children of Yugoslav origin to Prisoner-of-War (POW) Camps and Refugee Camps, established specifically to detain and exploit migrants as a labor force in various contexts (Chamberlain, 2022; Walston, 1997; Capussotti & Ellena, 2003). In Apulia (Italy), numerous POW and refugee camps were operational during the war, holding large numbers of foreigners, most of whom came from the Balkans (Salvatici, 2014; Martocchia, 2011).

Bari (Apulia, Italy), like other Italian cities during World War II, was one of the key bases for the Yugoslav partisan resistance against Nazi–Fascist forces. Historical archives in the Apulian region extensively document their presence, both in prison camps and hospitals<sup>1</sup>.

According to some testimonies, it is presumed that Četnik soldiers of the Royal Yugoslav Army and communist brigades of the Yugoslav People's Liberation Army (EPLJ) were interned in the Grumo Appula and Torre Tresca (Bari) prison camps. Driven by the anti-fascist struggle, they later formed their own military units (Colantuono, 2012; Scotti, 2009; Terzulli, 2018; Leuzzi & Esposito, 2003, 2008).

These camps functioned as self-contained communities, and after their closure, they became enduring testimonies to the brutal conditions in which many Yugoslav military personnel, women, and children—as well as individuals of other nationalities—lost their lives. This study analyzes the skeletal remains of 93 individuals, presumably belonging to soldiers, women, and children of Yugoslav origin, recovered from the ossuary of the Monumental Cemetery of Bari (Apulia, Italy). The research was conducted in two phases: one focused on the anthropological analysis of osteological material, and the other on the temporal reconstruction of historical events to determine their origins. The findings will shed light on a lost and forgotten history spanning over 75 years.

## 2. Materials and Methods

In the summer of 2019, during rearrangement and maintenance work, 93 unidentified skeletal remains were found inside metal boxes at the ossuary of the monumental cemetery in Bari (Puglia, Italy). On each box were names written in Cyrillic, a typical alphabet used to write various Slavic languages. Not knowing the nature of the osteological material, the Director of the Cemetery approved the transport of the remains to the Department of Forensic Medicine of the University of Bari Aldo Moro, for subsequent historical and anthropological analysis. After being transported to the Department, the 93 crates were photographically documented, numerically catalogued and transferred to the forensic anthropology laboratory to proceed with the implementation of a research protocol divided into two phases: the first, of a historical nature, to assess the provenance and the historical military context to which they belonged; the second, of an anthropological nature, to analyze the osteological material and determine the biological profile of the remains, for each individual (Leuzzi & Esposito, 2000; Cresta, 1985).

### 2.1. Historical Context Analysis

Historical analysis was conducted through targeted research on all objects found within the small boxes. It should be noted that each box bore a plaque inscribed with the individual's first and last name, while inside, an additional plaque contained further inscriptions, including name, surname, date of birth, date of death, and, in many cases, military rank—all written in Cyrillic script (Cresta, 1985). Furthermore, inside the metal boxes, alongside skeletal remains and identification tags, personal belongings were also discovered (Figure 1), such as shoe brushes, portable razors, a completely oxidized pen, and other items typical of military kits. In many boxes, infant remains were found, accompanied by various objects, including a metal pacifier and a small baby rattle, likely used to soothe or entertain the infants<sup>2</sup>. All recovered material was subjected to further analysis to determine its historical context (Jayakrishnan et al., 2021; Bogdanović et al., 2024; Buckley, 2016).



**Figure 1.** Personal items found in the boxes containing the remains; (A) comb, pen and cutlery; (B) comb and boot brush; (C) infant pacifier; (D) infant rattle.

In addition to personal items, two military badges were found inside two boxes, which are very important for determining the historical context and military background. The two badges were named separately (Figure 2), badge n. 1, found in box n. 71 together with a plaque with biographical data of “Sergeant Dusan K. Ilic” (1921–1946) and badge n. 2, found inside box n. 72, with a plaque with biographical data of “Sergeant Branko B. Todorovic” (1889–1946).

In order to determine the historical origin of the badges and their military context, a historiographical study of military relics was applied, viewing available texts and archives (Castilho & Rocha, 2009). For badge n. 1, an in-depth and targeted study was applied, through the analysis of specific sources and archives, as it was declared a ‘rare badge’ by many collectors (Sindbæk, 2009; Pušnik, 2017; Zanella, 2006; Pirjevec, 1993, 1995). For badge n. 2, on the other hand, historical texts of the Second World War and Italian museum archives were examined (Pirjevec, 1995; Krulic, 1997; Thomas & Babac, 2022; Hockenos, 2018; Pavlowitch, 1981, 1984; Karađorđević, 1955; Tomasevich, 1975; Perizonius, 1982; Tomić, 2010).



**Figure 2.** Badges found inside the boxes containing the remains: (A) badge n. 1; (B) badge n. 2.

### 2.2. Anthropological Analysis of Human Remains

Prior to the anthropological analysis of the osteological material, a mechanical removal of the soil sediment embedded within the bone segments was carried out in order to obtain a correct descriptive interpretation of the individual elements. Subsequently, the partially fractured bone segments were assembled, where possible, in order to determine the entirety of the individual bone elements, for the purposes of cataloguing. This was carried out at the same time by means of support cards, in which it was possible to transcribe and file, for each individual, all the information relative to the skeletal remains under examination which were found inside the metal boxes.

The investigations were divided into several phases in order to determine accurate and reliable results. In the first phase, to assess the state of preservation of the skeletal remains, a taphonomic analysis was carried out through the calculation of three known indices: the BRI—Bone Representation Index, the BPI—Bone Preservation Index and the BQI—Bone Quality Index (Bello, 1999–2000; Lyman, 1996; Dodson & Wexlar, 1979; Dutour, 1989). The second phase, divided into five sequential steps, comprised the anthropological reconstruction of the biological profile from skeletal remains through two principal analytical approaches: morphological and anthropometric examination for estimating sex, ancestry, and age at death. For sex estimation (first step), both morphological analysis based on sexual dimorphism of cranial and pelvic bones (Buikstra & Ubelaker, 1994) and anthropometric evaluation through measurements of specific skeletal elements—particularly the femoral and humeral heads (Seidemann et al., 1998)—coupled with regression formulae application were conducted (Dodson & Wexlar, 1979; Buikstra & Ubelaker, 1994).

Ancestry assessment (second step) incorporated dual methodologies: a morphological approach examining cranial features alongside a metric technique involving standardized cranial measurements and regression analysis (Moore-Jansen et al., 1994). Age-at-death estimation (third step) employed multiple classical methods to enhance precision, particularly valuable given the availability of biographical data recorded on metal case tags accompanying the remains for subsequent verification. These methods included evaluation of cranial suture synostosis, degree of humeral and femoral head obliteration, morphological transformations in the pubic symphysis and auricular surface of the ilium, supplemented by dental wear analysis (Seidemann et al., 1998; Meindl & Lovejoy, 1985; Lovejoy, 1985; Denk et al., 1990; Brooks & Suchey, 1990; Brothwell, 1981). Next, stature reconstruction

(fourth step) utilized two established techniques: the Trotter and Gleser (Trotter & Gleser, 1952) method and Sjøvold's (Sjøvold, 1990) approach, both deriving from anthropometric measurements of long bones. Regarding the Trotter and Gleser criterion, specific formulas for "European" ancestry were used. In addition to the standard measures used to establish the stature of individuals, specific measures of certain landmarks of the femur and tibia were used to calculate some anthropometric indices; this is useful for assessing aspects directly related to the biomechanical activity of individuals throughout their lives (Ministry of Culture, 2022; Martin & Saller, 1957–1962; Canci & Minozzi, 2005). In the fourth step, a differential analysis was conducted on the pathologies and anomalies identified in the osteological material to obtain a general pathological profile of the examined skeletal remains and to assess traumatic lesions unrelated to pre-existing conditions (Moore-Jansen et al., 1994).

Finally, in the fifth step, all collected data were digitally archived in individual files for each analyzed individual, creating a digital repository suitable for future identification correlations and valuable for anthropological studies and research purposes.

### 3. Results

The findings of this research initially pointed in a specific direction, enabling the identification of a convincing historical context, as previously outlined in other published works (Leggio & Introna, 2021; Leggio et al., 2022; Sablone et al., 2021; Mele et al., 2022; Leonardelli et al., 2021). Over the following years, however, through an in-depth historiographical investigation involving hard-to-find evidence and direct testimonies related to the recovered badges, a targeted analysis of the results completely overturned the historical framework, uncovering a narrative lost for over 75 years. This chronological attribution was further corroborated by anthropological and paleopathological findings observed in the analyzed osteological material.

#### 3.1. Results of the Anthropological Analysis

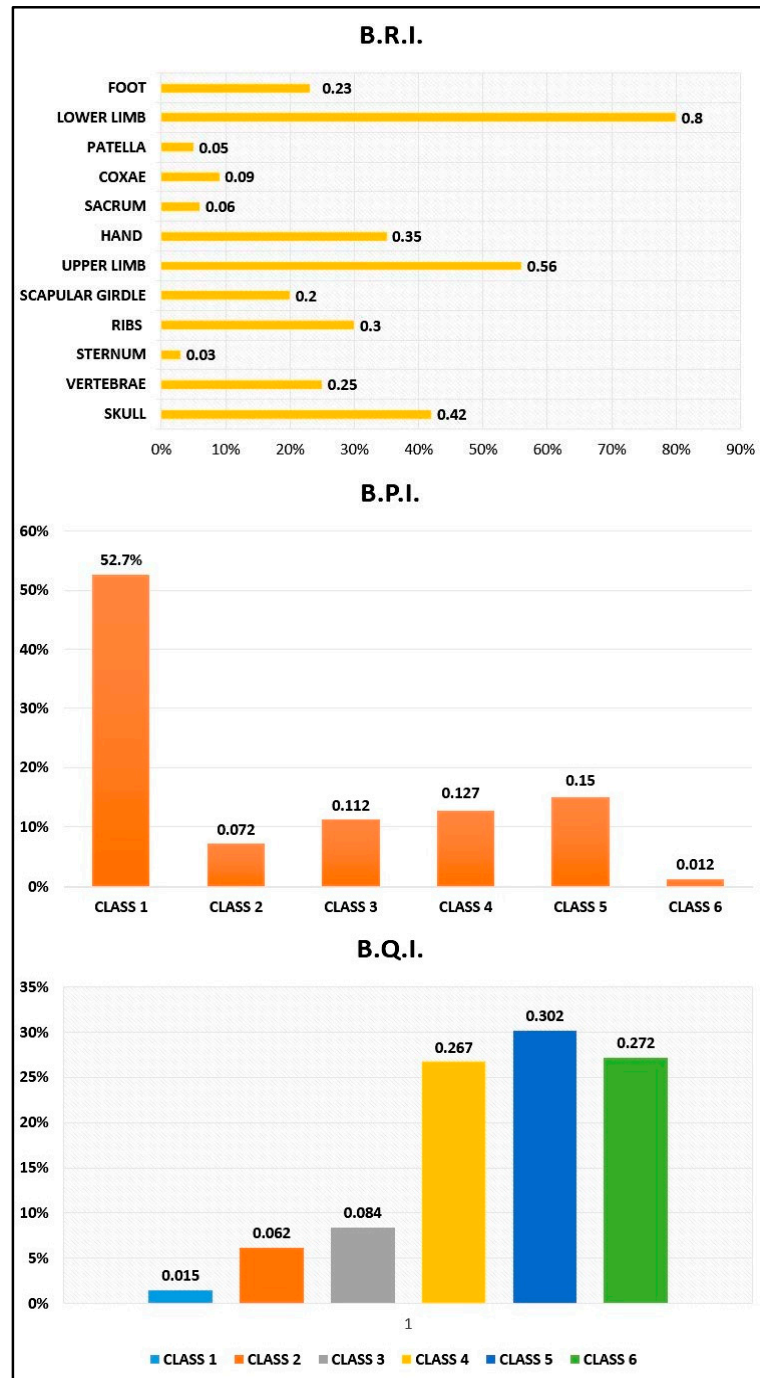
It should be noted that prior to conducting the anthropological analysis, a preliminary inspection confirmed the presence of embedded and adhered soil on each individual bone segment. Consequently, it was decided to proceed with a mechanical removal of the soil to facilitate the analysis and assess the preservation state of the osteological material. After mechanically removing the soil adhering to the cortical bone of the segments, a taphonomic analysis and an assessment of the skeletal remains' degree of preservation were conducted during the first survey, calculating three specific indices.

All three indices comprise a six-grade evaluation scale for the relevant parameter, based on the quantitative and qualitative preservation characteristics. These are expressed through six classes, to which the individual skeletal elements present in the analyzed osteological material were assigned (Figure 3).

The first index, the B.R.I. (Bone Representativeness Index), revealed that the appendicular skeleton (upper and lower limbs) is the most represented anatomical district in the collection (B.R.I. between 56% and 80%), while the skull and hand exhibit only average representativeness values (close to 45%). Low values were recorded for the shoulder girdle, foot, vertebrae, and ribs (B.R.I. between 20% and 30%). The second index, the B.P.I. (Bone Preservation Index), confirmed that overall, 52.7% of the bone segments were absent due to cortical bone erosion. The third index, the B.Q.I. (Bone Quality Index), provided significant results regarding the preservation state of the cortical bone, indicating that 50% of the analyzed specimens' cortical bone had successfully been preserved over time (Figure 4).

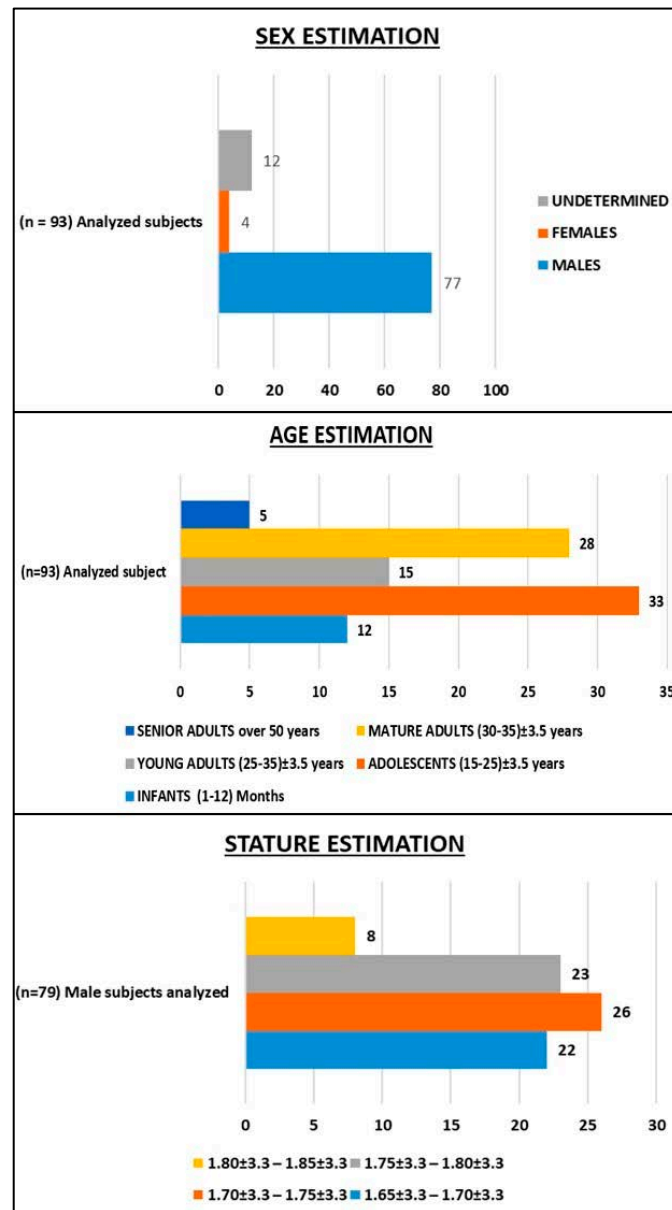
<b>B.R.I.</b>		
<b>CLASS</b>	<b>% RANGE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
Class 1	0%	Bone element never present
Class 2	1–24%	Bone element frequency below one-quarter of the theoretical total
Class 3	25–49%	Bone element frequency between one-quarter and half of the theoretical total
Class 4	50–74%	Bone element frequency between half and three-quarters of the theoretical total
Class 5	75–99%	Bone element frequency exceeding three-quarters of the theoretical total
Class 6	100%	Bone element always present
<b>B.P.I.</b>		
<b>CLASS</b>	<b>% RANGE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
Class 1	0%	Bone element not preserved
Class 2	1–24%	Less than one-quarter of the bone element preserved
Class 3	25–49%	Between one-quarter and half of the bone element preserved
Class 4	50–74%	Between half and three-quarters of the bone element preserved
Class 5	75–99%	Between three-quarters and full preservation of the bone element
Class 6	100%	Bone element fully intact
<b>B.Q.I.</b>		
<b>CLASS</b>	<b>% RANGE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
Class 1	0%	Cortical surface entirely absent
Class 2	1–24%	Healthy cortical surface covering less than one-quarter of the bone
Class 3	25–49%	Healthy cortical surface covering between one-quarter and half of the bone
Class 4	50–74%	Healthy cortical surface covering between half and three-quarters of the bone
Class 5	75–99%	Healthy cortical surface covering more than three-quarters of the bone
Class 6	100%	Cortical surface fully preserved

Figure 3. Description of the index classes used for assessing the state of preservation.



**Figure 4.** Graphical representation of the results of the taphonomic analysis of osteological material. From top to bottom, the three indices are represented: BRI—Bone Representation Index; BPI—Bone Preservation Index; BQI—Bone Quality Index.

The second phase of analysis, conducted through morphological and anthropometric assessments, enabled the determination of the biological profile of individuals associated with the examined remains (Figure 5). In anthropological studies, sex estimation constitutes one of the primary and fundamental analytical steps. This parameter, beyond characterizing the subject under investigation, represents an essential element for reconstructing the bio-demographic structure of the reference population.



**Figure 5.** The graphs display the results of the analyses conducted on the osteological material, from top to bottom: Sex Estimation, Age Estimation, and Stature Estimation.

A total of 93 human skeletal remains were analyzed. After excluding infant individuals, for whom reliable sex estimation based on sexual dimorphism was not feasible, sex estimation was possible for 81 individuals. The results revealed a pronounced male predominance, with 77 individuals identified as male compared to only 4 females, all of European ancestry. For age-at-death estimation, the skeletal remains were categorized into age groups, with each group expressed as a percentage of the total sample. Infants (1–12 months) accounted for 12% ( $n = 12$ ), adolescents (15–25 years) for 38% ( $n = 33$ ), young adults (25–35 years) for 16% ( $n = 15$ ), mature adults (35–50 years) for 29% ( $n = 28$ ), and senior adults (over 50 years) for 5% ( $n = 5$ ). Subsequently, these findings were cross-referenced with the identification data recorded on the tags found within each individual metal box containing the skeletal remains. The comparison confirmed a high degree of reliability, with an error margin of  $\pm 3.5$  years.

To estimate stature and biomechanical indices, an anthropometric analysis was conducted in the third step, involving the collection of standard measurements for stature

estimation as well as specific measurements taken at targeted points of the tibia and femur to calculate anthropometric indices.

To ensure reliable results in stature estimation, only intact femora were selected, leading to stature estimation based on 79 left male femora. The results were categorized into stature classes within a defined range, with a standard deviation of  $\pm 3.3$  cm: ( $n = 22$ )  $1.65 \pm 3.3$ – $1.70 \pm 3.3$ ; ( $n = 26$ )  $1.70 \pm 3.3$ – $1.75 \pm 3.3$ ; ( $n = 23$ )  $1.75 \pm 3.3$ – $1.80 \pm 3.3$ ; and ( $n = 8$ )  $1.80 \pm 3.3$ – $1.85 \pm 3.3$ . The findings revealed a mean stature of 1.75 cm  $\pm 3.3$  cm for the male individuals to whom the 79 analyzed femora belonged. For the evaluation of anthropometric indices and to ensure reliable results, 79 left male femora and 79 right male tibiae were used. The Femoral Robusticity Index was found to be 66%, indicating lower leg strength in the individuals to whom the remains belonged. The Pilastric Index, with a value of 55%, confirmed signs of weak thigh muscle engagement. The Platymetric Index showed a low value of 4%, supporting evidence of intensive trochanter use and thus joint stress. Finally, the Cnemic Index of the tibia, with a high value of 78%, suggested an elongated and slender tibial structure.

### 3.2. Differential Analysis of Pathologies and Lesion Assessment

This analysis examines the distinctive features of the identified pathological conditions, highlighting their etiological factors, pathophysiology, and clinical/paleopathological manifestations (Table 1). The following specific pathologies were identified (Figure 6): ankylosing spondylitis, myositis ossificans, osteochondroma, various types of granulomatous abscesses in the maxilla and mandible, Klippel–Feil Syndrome, alterations in cranial suture ontogeny, spina bifida, Torkildsen surgical procedure, advanced periostitis, generalized osteomyelitis, syphilitic-type lesions, and anatomical variants (Aufderheide & Rodriguez-Martin, 1998; Gran & Husby, 2003; Kransdorf et al., 1991; Murphy & McKenzie, 2010; Agarwal et al., 2012; Leggio et al., 2022; Jayaprakash & Srinivasan, 2013; Singh, 2013; Pietrobelli et al., 2020; Christensen et al., 2014).

**Table 1.** Differential analysis of pathologies and anomalies identified in the complete analyzed osteological sample.

Condition/Pathology	Etiology	Key Osteological Features	Anatomical Distribution	Differential Diagnosis
Ankylosing Spondylitis	Autoimmune (HLA-B27 associated)	Vertebral fusion (syndesmophytes), sacroiliitis, ligament ossification	Spine, sacroiliac joints	Inflammatory arthritis, osteoarthritis, DISH
Myositis Ossificans	Post-traumatic/idiopathic	Heterotopic ossification in soft tissues, lamellar structure	Thigh, arm muscles	Osteosarcoma, osteochondroma
Osteochondroma	Benign neoplasm (exostosis)	Bony protrusion with cartilaginous cap	Femur/humerus metaphysis	Osteosarcoma, myositis ossificans
Granulomatous Abscesses (maxilla/mandible)	Chronic infections (TB, actinomycosis)	Irregular cavities with sclerotic margins, fistulae	Maxilla/mandible	Odontogenic cysts, osteomyelitis
Klippel–Feil Syndrome	Congenital (GDF6/GDF3 mutations)	Cervical vertebral fusion, short neck	Cervical spine	Ankylosing spondylitis, trauma

Table 1. Cont.

Condition/Pathology	Etiology	Key Osteological Features	Anatomical Distribution	Differential Diagnosis
Cranial Suture Ontogenetic Defects	Developmental (craniosynostosis)	Premature suture fusion, cranial asymmetry	Skull	Hydrocephalus, trauma
Spina Bifida	Neural tube defect	Posterior vertebral arch defect	Lumbar/sacral spine	Trauma, surgical interventions
Torkildsen's Procedure	Historical neurosurgery (hydrocephalus)	Trepanation holes, surgical tool marks	Occipital bone	Trauma, other surgical procedures
Advanced Periostitis	Infectious/traumatic	Irregular hyperostosis, layered bone deposition	Tibia, femur, long bones	Osteomyelitis, syphilis
Generalized Osteomyelitis	Bacterial infection (pyogens)	Bone porosity, sequestra, fistulae	Long bones, mandible	Neoplasms, periostitis
Syphilitic Lesions	Treponema pallidum infection	Gummatous osteitis, "hair-on-end" periostitis, nasal deformities	Skull, tibia, long bones	Tuberculosis, leprosy
Anatomical Variants	Congenital/non-pathological	Cervical ribs, supernumerary vertebrae, accessory sutures	Spine, skull	Acquired pathologies, trauma

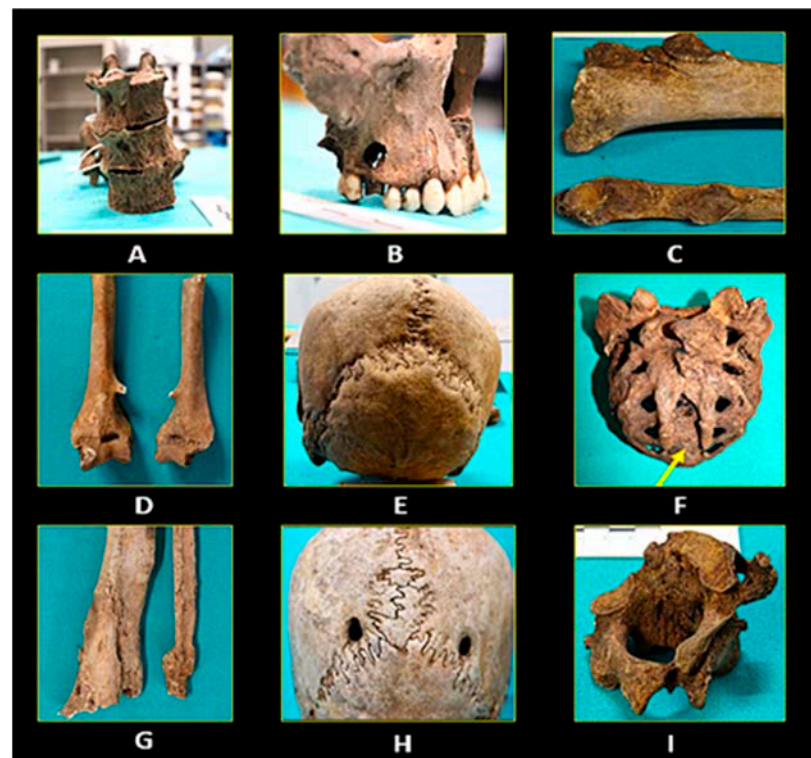
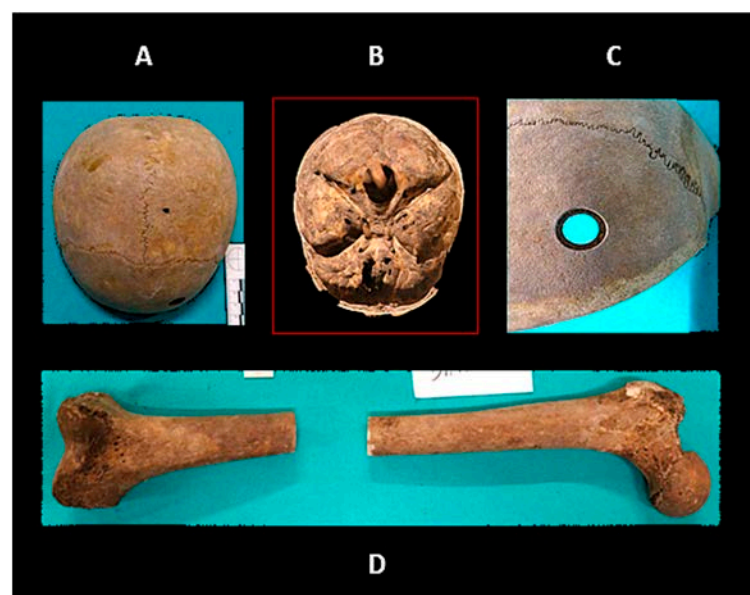


Figure 6. Pathologies identified: (A) ankylosing spondylitis; (B) granulomatous abscess; (C) osteochondroma; (D) ossifying myositis; (E) cranial suture synostosis; (F) spina bifida occulta level III; (G) periostitis with syphilitic-type lesions; (H) Torkildsen's surgery; (I) Klippel–Feil syndrome.

The paleopathological examination of skeletal remains from soldiers and civilians deceased in prisoner or refugee camps during World War II provides critical insights into living conditions, physical stressors, and epidemic diseases characteristic of this historical period. Pathologies associated with physical stress and trauma include ankylosing spondylitis, likely resulting from excessive mechanical loading during forced marches and heavy labor in camp settings, suggesting prolonged exertion under inhumane conditions. Myositis ossificans demonstrates post-traumatic ossification patterns from untreated injuries, potentially reflecting combat trauma or systematic violence within camp environments. Among infectious diseases, advanced periostitis and osteomyelitis indicate untreated bone infections, attributable to antibiotic scarcity and poor sanitary conditions, while syphilitic lesions reveal the consequences of compromised social hygiene and sexual transmission in overcrowded conditions. Granulomatous abscesses observed in maxillary and mandibular regions frequently correlate with tuberculosis or actinomycosis infections, exacerbated by malnutrition and starvation. Generalized osteomyelitis further demonstrates systemic infections from sepsis or gangrene, likely originating from infected wounds compounded by immunosuppression. Congenital and developmental anomalies such as spina bifida and Klippel–Feil syndrome would have significantly limited military fitness, potentially indicating non-standard conscription practices. Alterations in cranial suture morphology suggest chronic malnutrition beginning in early childhood. The presence of a Torikildsen procedure mark indicates emergency neurosurgical intervention for post-traumatic hydrocephalus, performed under extreme conditions. Postmortem analysis reveals autopsy-related lesions and intentional bone sampling, possibly for experimental purposes (Figure 7) (Dittmar & Mitchell, 2015; Kemp, 2016).

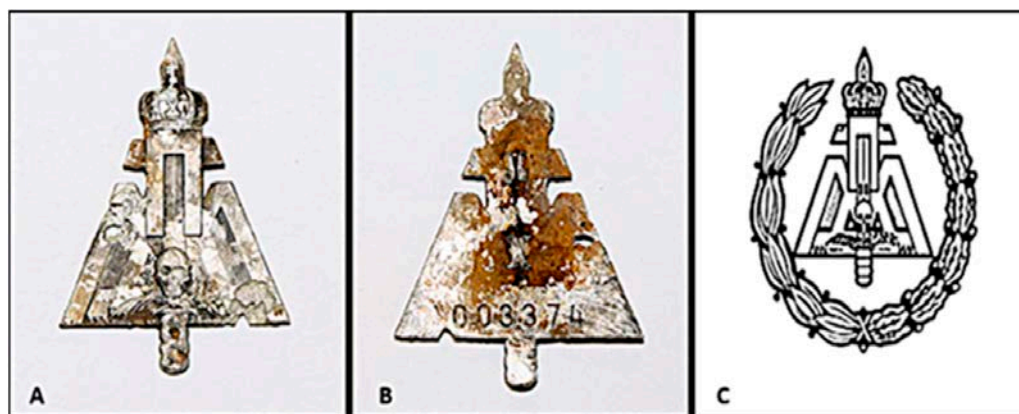


**Figure 7.** Autopsy signs and postmortem injuries. (A,B) autopsy craniometry section; (C) cranial frontal postmortem sampling; (D) femoral diaphysis postmortem sampling.

The paleopathological analysis enabled the evaluation of a systematic pathological profile that has provided compelling evidence of extreme physical exploitation, including forced labor; inadequate medical intervention and poor hygiene, as demonstrated by untreated infections identified on bone segments; and chronic malnutrition, confirmed by metabolic bone diseases detected in the analyzed material. Additionally, evidence of physical trauma was documented.

### 3.3. Results of Historical Analysis

Beginning with a historical analysis of the personal items recovered from the boxes, a chronological framework for their use was established, spanning from the 1930s to the 1960s. Most military kits used during the war contained a small comb, a boot-cleaning brush, and stationery and cutlery sets (Figure 1A). The pen discovered in the boxes (Figure 1A) closely matches models commonly used by military personnel between 1940 and 1945, including well-known brands such as Parker, Sheaffer, and Waterman. Additionally, the pacifier model (Figure 1C) found in the box containing infant remains represents one of the earliest designs produced by the 'Binky' brand, which was in use from 1935 until the 1960s. Similarly, the rattle model corresponds to the same period, dating between the 1930s and 1950s (Figure 1D). Consequently, all personal items recovered from the boxes align with a historical context associated with the Second World War. Beyond these personal artifacts, the historical framework was further corroborated by the discovery of two military badges. Badge n. 1 (Figure 8), regarded as rare by historians and collectors, depicts the resistance efforts of the Ravna Gora movement under the leadership of General Dragoljub Draža Mihailović. General Draža was the founder and commander of the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland, also known as the Četnik formations. This Serbian nationalist movement, rooted in monarchist-conservative and anti-communist ideology, remained loyal to King Peter II, who was exiled in London following the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia. The movement also faced opposition from the communist regime led by Josip Broz, known as Tito, a political leader and military commander of the Yugoslav Communist forces.



**Figure 8.** (A) Front projection of the badge found inside the boxes; (B) rear projection of the same badge; (C) the military badge of Ravnogorski represents the struggle of the Ravna Gora movement under the leadership of General Dragoljub “Draža” Mihailović-Cica-for our faith, king and homeland 1944. (C) Image taken from: <https://royalyugoslavarmy.wordpress.com/> (accessed on 27 February 2025).

Badge n. 2 (Figure 9) represents the coat of arms of the Royal Yugoslav Army, which soldiers and officers customarily affixed to their pointed sheepskin headgear. It constituted the land forces of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, previously known as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which existed from 1 December 1918 until its surrender to the Axis powers on 17 April 1941. The army was officially dissolved on 7 March 1945, following the collapse of King Peter II’s government-in-exile.



**Figure 9.** (A) Badge found inside the boxes containing the skeletal remains. (B) Frieze for a Yugoslav military cap bearing the monogram of Peter II Karadorđević, last king of Yugoslavia between 1934 and 1945, Dante Foschi Museum Forlì (FC). (B) image taken from the website: [https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id\\_card=225196](https://bbcc.regione.emilia-romagna.it/pater/loadcard.do?id_card=225196) (accessed on 14 March 2025).

Through an examination of historical documents from Apulian territory, the initial hypothesis was confirmed that the remains belonged to soldiers of the Yugoslav Četnik Army—part of the Ravna Gora national movement in exile since 1941 under the command of Serbian General Dragoljub “Draža” Mihailović—as well as to soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army of Yugoslavia, led by communist leader Josip Broz Tito. Indeed, within this historical context, Italy in 1945—following the 8 September 1943 armistice—became a battleground for intense fighting between Allied forces and remaining fascist troops, while also facing a dire humanitarian crisis involving prisoners of war, including numerous Yugoslav soldiers. By the conflict’s end, Italy lay in ruins, and multiple prison camps were established across the country to manage foreign prisoners of war (Absalom, 1995). After analyzing the documentation, we came to the conclusion that presumably, during the Second World War, these soldiers, women and children probably lived in the two prison camps in the Bari area and thus in the Torre Tresca Concentration Camp or the Grumo Appula Concentration Camp. According to historical documentation, both armies, although adversaries in their own territory, fought alongside the Italian partisans and with the Allies against the Nazi-Fascist forces in Apulia (Italy) (Pavlowitch, 2010). Research therefore initially confirmed, following the Apulian historical archives, that the skeletal remains were probably part of the 463 Yugoslav partisans still missing in Apulian territory during the Great War (Salvatici, 2014; Martocchia, 2011). At a later stage, an in-depth study of badge n. 1 was re-evaluated, through the historiographic analysis of Colonel Petar Pavašović’s memoirs, which describes the Royal Yugoslav<sup>3</sup> Army in the Eboli Camp (Campania-Italy)<sup>4</sup>. During the study of the published memoirs, the previously reported image of badge n.1 was found (Figure 8C) and it was discovered that this badge had only been assigned to the Četnik Army of Camp Eboli.

The findings revealed discrepancies with the initial data, necessitating consultation with a group of military memorabilia experts to verify the authenticity and provenance of badge n. 1. Subsequent analyses confirmed that badge n. 1, known as the Ravnogorski Znak (Ravna Gora Badge), had been manufactured in Eboli, Italy, and was distributed exclusively to members of the Yugoslav Army of the Homeland (Jugoslovenska vojska u otadžbini, JVuO) between late 1945 and late 1946. The badge was issued solely to JVuO soldiers stationed in Allied camps in Italy—specifically in Eboli (Salerno province, Campania region)—and in Germany, namely in Münster. Following this discovery, targeted research was conducted on the history of the Eboli camp during the postwar period, with particular focus on its potential connection to Bari and the remains of Četnik forces. The

investigation revealed that the Eboli Refugee Camp housed between 14,000 and 27,000 individuals, predominantly of Serbian origin, including female military personnel and children. Subsequently, the sole available reference on this subject—Eboli Camp 1945–1947: A Photographic History—was examined. This work compiles photographic documentation and testimonies from camp survivors, providing substantial evidence concerning the deaths of Yugoslav refugees. Many perished in the camp and were buried in the cemetery of nearby Battipaglia (Salerno, Campania). Notably, the text documented that following cemetery maintenance work, the remains of 93 Serbian individuals were exhumed and subsequently disappeared without trace. Additionally, it contained a nominal register listing soldiers, women, and children who had died in the Eboli camp under investigation (Lukich & Radoičić, 2011). The findings necessitated further verification and validation through supplementary evidence, as the most recently collected data fundamentally contradicted the initial historical framework. To ascertain the accuracy of these new discoveries, the aforementioned text author was contacted to obtain a copy of the list contained within the book. Additionally, a final phase of historiographical research was conducted. A publicly accessible blog dedicated to the history of the Yugoslav refugee camp in Eboli was identified, containing archival newspaper articles documenting how, following maintenance work at the Battipaglia Cemetery (Campania, Italy), the human remains of 93 individuals—soldiers, women, and children—had disappeared for over 75 years. These remains were reportedly transferred to an unspecified cemetery in the city of Bari (Eboli Camp Documents, 2023; Van Otadzbine, 1957; Spomenica PSC, 1998; Serbian Volunteers by Stevan Piroćanac, 2010).

Attached to these documents was an additional list of names.

A comparative analysis was subsequently performed between the list from the book, the one found in the blog, and the biographical data identified on the tags found inside the metal containers housing the analyzed remains. The names matched precisely, leading to a definitive conclusion: the ninety-three skeletal remains indeed belonged to members of the Royal Yugoslav Army in the Homeland (JVuO)—soldiers, women, and children—who had died in the Eboli camp and were originally interred at the Battipaglia Cemetery (Salerno, Campania). Their remains subsequently disappeared for more than 75 years following maintenance work at the cemetery.

#### 4. Discussion

This study has confirmed the importance of adopting a multidisciplinary approach to delineate and examine specific contexts related to the identification of victims who perished in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, a subject that continues to generate substantial scholarly interest across numerous countries. The war-torn region was primarily governed by the Nazi regime, while the remainder of the country was divided into smaller territories controlled partly by the King's army, the Četniks (the Royal Yugoslav Army, which held conservative monarchist tendencies) and partly by the Partisan movement, formed by the Communist Party and composed of soldiers from the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia, led by Josip Broz Tito. The internal conflict between these two factions split Serbia between the King's army and the Communist Partisans, who later became the governing body of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. As the Second World War progressed and the Communist movement gained popularity and power, the King's army and its generals were forced into exile.

This led to the deportation of tens of thousands of the King's soldiers and their families to refugee or internment camps in free Europe. One such camp was located in Eboli, near Naples (Campania, Italy). By 1945, the war appeared to be over—yet for the exiled King's army and their families, it was not, as the rise of the new communist government in their homeland offered no guarantee of freedom or survival. Thus, between 1945 and

1947, Yugoslav soldiers and their families established communities within the Eboli camp, which became one of the largest Yugoslav refugee settlements in Italy. When the camp was eventually disbanded, many Serbian families relocated across Europe, particularly to England and the United States, while some refugee families resettled in Australia (Lukich & Radoičić, 2011; Kozul, 2021). Through historical research—including the analysis of two military insignia found inside the metal boxes containing the examined human remains—it was possible to chronologically reconstruct the era in which these individuals lived and the military–historical context to which they belonged. Many of the deceased from the Eboli camp were often buried in different cemeteries located in nearby towns, including the Battipaglia cemetery (Campania, Naples). Historiographical analysis has revealed that, following maintenance work at this cemetery, the remains of 93 individuals—soldiers, women, and children—disappeared for over 75 years (Eboli Camp Documents, 2023). Furthermore, historical research uncovered newspaper articles, originally published in Cyrillic and later translated into Italian, indicating that the remains had somehow been transferred to one of the many cemeteries in the city of Bari (Puglia, Italy), (Van Otadzbine, 1957; Spomenica PŠČ, 1998; Serbian Volunteers by Stevan Piroćanac, 2010). This evidence, along with the existence of the book *Eboli Camp 1945–1947: A Photographic History* by Nikola Lukić (published in 2011), further supported the research findings and plausibly confirmed a correlation between the 93 human remains analyzed during the study and those that had vanished for over seven decades. The book contained a list of 93 individuals who had died in the Eboli camp, which was later cross-referenced with biographical data from the identification tags found inside each metal box containing the analyzed remains at the anthropology laboratory of the Department of Forensic Medicine in Bari. The historiographical research results not only corroborated the historical context but also provided a plausible identification of the 93 human remains. During the anthropological analysis of the 93 skeletal remains—limited by a 50% preservation rate, as confirmed by the indices (B.R.I., B.P.I., and B.Q.I.)—it was possible, where feasible, to partially reconstruct the biological profile in some cases. Excluding juvenile individuals (12 in total), sex estimation was performed for 81 individuals, revealing 77 males and 4 females. Age at-death estimation was also conducted on the same 81 individuals, with results (estimated with an error range of  $\pm 3.5$  years) categorized into the following classes: infants (0–14 years) accounted for 12% ( $n = 12$ ), adolescents (15–25 years) for 38% ( $n = 33$ ), young adults (25–35 years) for 16% ( $n = 15$ ), mature adults (35–50 years) for 29% ( $n = 28$ ), and senior adults (over 50 years) for 5% ( $n = 5$ ). Stature was estimated by selecting only intact femora—specifically, 79 male femora—yielding an average height of 175.0 cm ( $\pm 3.3$  cm). Furthermore, anthropometric indices were calculated on the same 79 femora to evaluate the biomechanical stress levels experienced by the individuals to whom the remains belonged. The Femoral Robusticity Index was 63%, below the 65% threshold reported in the literature, suggesting compatibility with malnutrition, limited physical labor, or debilitating detention conditions (Larsen, 2015). The Pilastric Index, with a value of 55%, indicates poor muscular development consistent with restricted mobility, protein malnutrition, or non-strenuous labor (Niinimäki & Baiges Sotos, 2013). The Platymetric Index, at 4%, supports the hypothesis of extreme articular stress, potentially due to load-bearing activities or harsh living conditions (Stock & Pfeiffer, 2004). Finally, the Cnemic Index value of 78% suggests osseous gracility compatible with physical inactivity, chronic malnutrition, or metabolic disorders (e.g., osteoporosis from vitamin deficiencies) (Mays, 2010).

Finally, a paleopathological analysis was conducted, including a specific differential diagnosis and a traumatic injury assessment to identify lesions potentially compatible with a hypothetical cause of death. The paleopathological analysis enabled the evaluation of a systematic pathological profile, providing plausible evidence of extreme physical exploita-

tion, such as forced labor, limited medical intervention, and poor hygiene, as indicated by untreated infections observed on bone segments. Additionally, chronic malnutrition was confirmed by the presence of metabolic bone diseases in the analyzed material, along with traces of physical trauma. The results show a strong correlation with historical accounts of camp conditions during the Second World War, offering bioarchaeological confirmation of documented suffering (Kola et al., 2000; Colls, 2015; Blau & Ubelaker, 2016). Further isotopic and genetic analyses could provide additional insights into dietary patterns and disease epidemiology among these populations. The traumatic injury assessment, however, did not reveal any perimortem lesions that could plausibly indicate the cause of death. Instead, it identified postmortem injuries, suggesting autopsy procedures and bone sample extraction, as indicated by cortical bone characteristics. These were likely performed for experimental or research purposes postmortem. The findings from the historical and anthropological analysis, within the overall framework, revealed a strong correlation among the results, with key elements that plausibly demonstrate the temporal chronology of their placement, the military historical context, and a pathological profile consistent with detention and living conditions similar to those endured by prisoners of war. For this reason, the 93 skeletal remains analyzed may very likely belong to the 93 human remains of soldiers, women, and children who died in the Eboli camp and disappeared more than 75 years ago

## 5. Conclusions

This research has once again demonstrated the effectiveness of a multidisciplinary approach in the analysis of human remains linked to the tragic context of the Second World War. The findings of this study have most likely enabled the identification of 93 skeletal remains belonging to soldiers, women, and children who died in the Eboli Prison Camp, thereby restoring dignity to the victims of this major historical conflict. In the future, further genetic and isotopic analyses will undoubtedly be conducted both to advance scientific research and to complete the identification process, which will allow for the repatriation of the remains to their relatives. Thanks to the support of the Ministries of Defense, these soldiers, women, and children will finally return home after 75 years of oblivion. Moreover, these results have brought to light a significant yet previously overlooked historical reality of the Second World War: the Eboli Refugee Camp.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> State Archives of Bari. Available online: <https://archiviodistatodibari.cultura.gov.it/home> (accessed on 30 March 2025).
- <sup>2</sup> Lux Military Antiques. German Field Spoon/Fork Combo Cutlery Set. Available online: <https://www.lux-military-antiques.com/en/p/german-field-spoonfork-combo-cutlery-set-17.htm> (accessed on 25 February 2025). Tales from the Supply Depot. Identifying British Army Brushes. Available online: <https://talesfromthesupplydepot.blog/2023/06/24/identifying-british-army-brushes/> (accessed on 25 February 2025);
- <sup>3</sup> Royal Yugoslav Army. Available online: <https://royalyugoslavarmy.wordpress.com/> (accessed on 27 February 2025).

- <sup>4</sup> Imperial War Museum Collections. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1030002710> (accessed on 27 February 2025); World Militaria Forum. Available online: <https://www.worldmilitariaforum.com/forums/> (accessed on 27 February 2025).

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