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Special Issue

Digital Humanities in Ancient Jewish, Christian and Arabic Traditions

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Caroline T. Schroeder and Joseph Verheyden

About the Editors:

Claire Clivaz (author of this Introduction) is Head of Digital Enhanced Learning at the SIB. She leads her researches in an interdisciplinary way at the crossroads of New Testament Studies and Digital Humanities, analyzing digital transformations of knowledge. She leads the development of etalks, a multimedia publication tool (etalk.vital-it.ch), and a Swiss National Fund on the Arabic manuscripts of the Pauline letters (wp.unil.ch/nt-arabe/ and tarsian.vital-it.ch), and she participates with six other European partners in an ERASMUS+ strategic partnership in Digital Humanities (dariah.eu/teach). She is a member of several scientific committees (ADHO steering

committee, EADH steering committee, IGNTF, *Humanistica*, etc.) and editorial boards (NTS, *Digital Religion de Gruyter*, etc.). She is co-leading a series with David Hamidović by Brill (“Digital Biblical Studies”), and also co-leads research groups in DH (SBL, EABS).

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Caroline T. Schroeder is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of the Pacific, where she was also Director of the Humanities Center from 2012 to 2014. Her research concerns asceticism and monasticism in early Christianity, with a particular focus on Egypt. Her full biography is included in her contribution to this issue.

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Digital Humanities in Ancient Jewish, Christian and Arabic Traditions: Introduction to the Special Issue

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This special JRMDC number brings together articles based on eight papers presented at the Digital Humanities (DH) consultation of the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), titled *Digital Humanities in Biblical Studies, Early Jewish and Christian Studies 2013-2015*. Our editorial board has been the steering committee of these consultations, which have now been confirmed as a section for the 2016-2021 annual meetings¹. These eight articles focus on Digital Humanities (DH) in Ancient Jewish, Christian and Arabic traditions. The first part of this introduction focuses on general considerations concerning the encounter between digital culture and biblical and religious studies, and introduces the first article by Caroline Schroeder. The second part of this introduction maps a number of key issues across the Digital Humanities which appear in the seven specific case studies presented in the other articles in this issue.

1. DH in Biblical and Religious Studies: What Is at Stake?

The first article in this issue has been written by a member of our editorial board, Caroline T. Schroeder, a leading figure of the digital turn in religious studies, as evidenced by the project *Coptic Scriptorium* that she is co-leading together with Amir Zeldes (<http://copticcriptorium.org/>). Schroeder's article, titled "The Digital Humanities as Cultural Capital: Implications for Biblical and Religious Studies", represents a *tour-de-force* overview of the digital turn in our fields. Defining and characterizing the DH is a recurrent and open-ended task, so such an overview aims at what is essentially a moving target.

Scholarly discourse reflecting on and evaluating the digital turn in biblical and religious studies has only just begun to develop, as attested to by the creation of two new book series in 2016. The first of these series is published by de Gruyter, titled *Introduction to Digital Humanities: Religion (IDH)*². The second series is published by Brill, titled *Digital Biblical Studies (DBS)*. These two book series reflect some of the major trends in DH and religious studies at this moment, so they merit careful consideration here.

*IDH Religion*³ will be a series of about twelve introductions addressing specific areas of study at the intersection of digital humanities and the study of religions, suitable for students as well as scholars of religion who may not be familiar with the digital humanities. The scope of the series is wide in terms of methodological approaches (sociology, philology, literary studies, cultural studies, etc.), and the editorial board includes scholars from religious studies and theology.

The DBS series by Brill (www.brill.com/dbs) is born from our own research groups at SBL and EABS (European Association of Biblical Studies). The associated editorial and scientific boards again include scholars from religious studies and theology, even though the title of the series clearly refers to the Bible. The series aims to publish the latest research focusing on the junction of Digital Humanities, Biblical Studies, Ancient Judaism, and Early Christianity. The primary areas of focus are the digital editions of ancient manuscripts, and the evolution of research on big data and close reading. Several ancient languages are included in the scope of the series, including ancient Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Arabic, Coptic, and Syriac. The focus here is

clearly on texts and textuality, which have been the center of Jewish and Christian studies for centuries, while archeology and art history were considered side disciplines. Data visualization and the resulting digital storm will surely contribute to progressively transforming this aspect of the series.

The encounter between textual studies and cultural or visual studies will also be a challenge for de Gruyter's IDH series, whose editorial board includes Sally Promey, director of the inspirational Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion (<http://mavcor.yale.edu/>). How will the series accommodate such approaches alongside the traditional philological and codicological study of religious texts? This relatively new question will probably remain an issue for several decades in religious studies. As has been argued since 2011 (Clivaz 2012a; Clivaz 2014), digital culture leads us into an increasingly multimodal culture with plural literacies on a daily basis:

Humanities, often assimilated to the scholarly traditions focused on Letters and cultural heritages (historical fields and textual studies), are facing today important upheavals notably related to the growing use of information and communication technologies. [...] Culture – that was absolutely bound to the writing, the book and its institutions (universities, libraries, archives, Churches, associations) – is reshaped out of the book (new forms of oral, visual and written cultures), and out of the institutions that were relatively controlling it (Clivaz and Vinck 2014, 9).

In digital culture, one can speak of 'unbound Humanities', or in French, '*les humanités délivrées*', a wordplay that can be translated as 'liberated Humanities' or as 'out of the book Humanities'. To go 'out of the book' is particularly challenging for biblical and religious studies, which have been so eager to promote the idea of "religions of the book" since the middle of the 19th century. The concept was however, born quite late, coming from printed culture (Clivaz 2012b, 4). In this special issue of JRMDC, we present an approach focused on textual studies, since all the authors belong to this sphere. However, in a pre-digital world, this volume could easily have been considered interdisciplinary, from the point of view of the philological fields represented by our authors. Ancient religious textuality is the

common denominator of all the articles, but the parallel births of the IDH and DBS series demonstrate that in the next few years biblical and religious studies will have to deal with methodologically mixed issues far beyond textual worlds.

From this viewpoint, the overview article by Schroeder that begins this issue has to be understood as “The Digital Humanities as Cultural Capital: Implications for [Textual] Biblical and Religious Studies”, demonstrating the expansion of textual studies to include “multimodal layered worlds, worlds of empowerment, engagement, and interactivity” (Schroeder this issue). In this article, Schroeder focuses on two major questions:

What does it mean for Biblical Studies to be marginal to the Digital Humanities when DH is a field positioning itself as transformative for the humanities and is increasingly regarded as influential in academia? How can our expertise in Biblical Studies influence and shape Digital Humanities for the better?

Paradoxically, the particular skills and needs of a marginal field within a marginal field can be a strong motor in the Digital Humanities. Schroeder uses the *Text Encoding Initiative* (TEI) in her research on Coptic Studies, but “the marginal status of Coptic Studies and other subfields within Biblical and Religious Studies is expressed within the *Text Encoding Initiative* (TEI) guidelines themselves” (Schroeder this issue; see also Clivaz and Hamidović 2014). As Schroeder points out:

We in religious and biblical studies know that the push for uniformity, even if well-intentioned, has political consequences. It effectively marginalizes those who do not conform. The TEI community is self-aware regarding this issue, though I would argue more work could still be done to interrogate how standards function in Digital Humanities—work that Biblical and Religious Studies scholars know much about doing.

And so we hope together with her that “marginalia can change canon”, in the Digital Humanities as well as in biblical and religious studies.

This first general background section cannot be concluded without proposing a general definition of Digital Humanities. Despite so much having been said on this particular point, it is useful to recall a simple definition presented on the UCL website:

Digital Humanities is an important multidisciplinary field, undertaking research at the intersection of digital technologies and humanities. It aims to produce applications and models that make possible new kinds of research, both in the humanities disciplines and in computer science and its allied technologies. It also studies the impact of these techniques on cultural heritage, memory institutions, libraries, archives and digital culture (UCL n.d.).

To this definition, one can add that every year DH is increasingly becoming a qualification of “Humanities” rather than a separated field. We are decisively heading towards the “digitized Humanities”, as proposed in the title of a 2012 Harvard Magazine article, which suggests that:

Scholars traditionally begin projects by figuring out what the good research questions are in a given field, and connecting with others interested in the same topics; they then gather and organize data; then analyze it; and finally, disseminate their findings through teaching or publication. Scholarship in a digital environment raises questions about every aspect of this process. For example, in gathering and organizing data. (Shaw 2012, 42)

When we look at the seven other articles of this special JRMDC issue, we find clear illustrations of this phenomenon. There are three general DH issues that one can identify in these articles: the reshaping of knowledge by digital listing and cataloging; the tension between the quest for coherence and resisting asymmetry; and the work of markup as an epistemological challenge.

2. From Seven Case Studies to General DH Problematics

2.1 *Reshuffling the world by digital lists*

David Allen Michelson's article, "Mixed Up by Time and Chance? Using Digital Media to 'Re-Orient' the Syriac Religious Literature of Late Antiquity", masterfully illustrates a generic epistemological challenge in DH: when data are digitally listed and mixed-up, categorizations used in the printed culture are overcome and new forms of knowledge appear.

This general idea was presented in 2012 (Clivaz 2012a, 43-45; Clivaz forthcoming), based on Umberto Eco's book *The Infinity of the List* (2009). Eco begins by remembering the poetic function of the list since Homer as a privileged way to express something that exceeds "our capacities of control" (Eco 2009, 117). Eco traces this "list effect" in Joyce's and Borges' poetics, as well as in the Foucauldian *heterotopia*: Eco claims that "the list becomes a way of reshuffling the world, [an] invitation to accumulate properties in order to bring out new relationships between distant things, and in any case to cast doubt on those accepted by common sense" (Eco 2009, 327). In a unique but powerful paragraph on the Internet, he draws attention to the digital list:

Finally, we come to the Mother of all Lists, infinite by definition because it is in constant evolution, the World Wide Web, which is both web and labyrinth, not an ordered tree, and which of all vertigos promises us the most mystical, almost totally virtual one, and really offers us a catalogue of information that makes us feel wealthy and omnipotent, the only snag being that we don't know which of its elements refers to data from the real world and which does not, no longer with any distinction between truth and error. (Eco 2009, 327)

Umberto Eco was surely not inclined to jump into the digital era, and remained a philosopher rooted in print culture, where the publication of expertise in books gives one the impression of a clear line between printed truths and floating errors. Yet everything he describes as the "list effect" in *The Infinity of the List* can be verified as such by the example of the "Mother of all Lists", the Web.

Michelson clearly demonstrates and analyzes this concept in his article. Working on the British Library's collection of approximately 1000 Syriac manuscripts, Michelson explains how two important 19th century scholars, Wright and Cureton, have shaped their cataloging work with narratives of civilizational and theological superiority. From a cultural studies perspective, Michelson underlines that "in British possession, the manuscripts became a treasure and trophy to the triumph of nation, Church and Crown [...] Neither Cureton nor Wright was inclined to find rationality in the existing organization or binding of the manuscripts by the monks" (Michelson this issue). Lucidly facing this scholarly heritage, the digital collaboration *Syriaca.org: The Syriac Reference Portal* (<http://syriaca.org/>) will differ from earlier scholarship by creating "Linked Open Data in a graph database, the use of non-hierarchical visualization tools, attention to database design so as to enable fluid or even conflicting perspectives, and engagement with the diverse audience needs which arise from traditional cultural materials" (Michelson this issue). Hierarchy between authors and genre effects will be avoided or at least significantly diminished.

Other examples of "reshuffling the world" (Eco 2009, 327) by digital lists are shown in this special issue in the articles by Jan Krans and Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent. Mellon Saint-Laurent presents *The Gateway to the Syriac Saints*, a database project developed by the portal Syriaca.org, and argues that the digital project illuminates how much "hagiographers created relationships among saints to promote their communities [...]. It is precisely this interconnected nature of Syriac hagiography that makes it so amenable to TEI encoding and linked data" (Mellon Saint-Laurent this issue)

Krans, for his part, proposes a new inquiry into Jakob Wettstein's work, which has never been considered beyond the usual limits of literary genres. Wettstein is well-known for his 18th century New Testament edition, but all the implications of his work will only be revealed when the digital world finally allows for the consideration of all his written production, including letters, documents and so forth. Krans shows that "Wettstein's life and work, notably his great New Testament edition, form an ideal candidate for a DH project, with both state-of-the art and pilot aspects" (Krans this issue). One can only hope that this proposal can someday be tested.

2.2 Between aspiration to coherence and resisting asymmetry

When new methodologies or tools are developed, scholarly enthusiasm is always needed. It is obvious that if the authors of these eight articles were not digitally enthusiastic, they would not have written their texts. However, Caroline T. Schroeder prudently concludes her article with a note of caution:

Please do not misconstrue my argument as claiming that the Digital Humanities can ‘save’ an imperiled Biblical Studies or Religious Studies [...]. Rather, I argue that Digital Humanities needs our critical engagement. (Schroeder this issue)

This critical engagement appears absolutely crucial when facing a computing world that may otherwise emerge as a case of “smoke and mirrors”. Such an attitude does not mean, of course, that scholars should express no enthusiasm at all, but rather that such feeling should be critically checked.

James Libby gives us an example of critical enthusiasm in his article “Proposing Some New Ecliptics in New Testament Studies Enabled by Digital Humanities-Based Methods”, in which he considers “Digital Humanities as a voice speaking into the fractures of contemporary NT studies” (Libby this issue). Libby advocates for a “serendipitous, coherentist designs”, beyond what he sees as a “fragmentation in NT studies” (Libby this issue). Such a declaration reminds one of Mark Allan Powell’s reaction to the 1990s emergence of narrative criticism in biblical studies, which was often promoted as overcoming of the ‘spiritual drought’ of historical approaches: “Narrative criticism stands in a close relationship to the believing community [...]. The presence of mythological and supernatural elements, which has troubled modern interpreters for decades, ceases to be a problem” (Powell 1990, 88).

Such desires for a more coherent and less disruptive reading of the NT can, of course, be mapped within specific Christian theological contexts, but there is no doubt that emic and etic approaches will be increasingly mixed in the digital future of religious and biblical studies. However, more generally speaking, such aspirations

echo the fact that the digital trend can raise expectations of a simpler, well organized and fully searchable universe. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a famous post-colonial literary scholar, is afraid that cultural specificities and Derridean asymmetry could be forgotten amongst the globalized approaches of “cultural heritage” projects (Caruth 2010, 1022-1023; Clivaz 2012a, 51; Dilley forthcoming). Even the use of encoding has to be critically engaged with, as Schroeder reminds us:

Yet, the orthodox hermeneutics of encoding are more Gadamerian than Derridean, maintaining a faith in a text object with its own semantic integrity, where meaning is produced in dialogue and in relationship with the encoding itself as well as the encoding community. (Schroeder this issue)

Textual objectivity, even if it is a very sensitive topic in religious and biblical studies, is a parameter that remains inscribed in and continues to influence the entire history of literary studies. We all have to revise our expectations and standards inherited from printed culture in order to determine what we should consider as a text and how we study it.

The method of stylometry⁴ surely has the potential to raise the biggest expectations, but it also has limits depending on what we try to get from it. One of the major DH figures in stylometry, Jan K. Rybicki, offered a powerful talk at the second EADH day in March 2016, the summary of which is available online: “*Advocatus Diaboli* : Lost in Distant Reading?” (Rybicki 2016). In a humorous tone, noticing that “all began so well”, he points to the great achievements in stylometry : “we can show you pretty and colorful tree diagrams or networks, and they seem to be growing bigger every year. Don’t get me wrong: I am still very proud of how th[e] cluster analysis tree[s].” He courageously faces the hottest open question on the topic:

distant reading threatens to lose any possibility of being reunited and combined with close reading when the corpora we analyze become Big Data, or at least a literary/humanist version of Big Data [...]. Unless we find new ways of marrying distant with close, of reading our Big (or Biggish) Data, it might find itself in a stalemate.

DH is now being provoked into answering Rybicki and his insistent questions. As for our immediate fields of enquiry, it is perhaps worth creating a space for enthusiasm about stylometry, as David Wrisley does.

Wrisley's article "Modelling the Transmission of al-Mubashir Ibn Fatik's *Mukhtar al-Hikam* in Medieval Europe" represents a fine stylometric study in his field. Wrisley includes texts in Castilian, Latin and French to check the reception of this medieval Arabic text from a trans-linguistic and supra-national approach. He summarizes his article as putting "medium-scale stylometry into practice in the field of comparative literature and translation studies for the exploration of large text collections, and [suggesting] how quantitative methods could be deployed in translingual corpus-level literary research" (Wrisley this issue). He remains nevertheless conscious of the limitations of the approach, acknowledging that stylometry could in some cases lead to "unchanging results", and this seems indeed to be the case:

A computational modeling approach to examining the place of a translation of a work from Arabic in the discursive community of the French court has confirmed what was suggested by literary historians, namely that Tignonville sits within a network of early French humanism (Wrisley this issue).

Rybicki is leading DH research towards new epistemological questions for stylometry, but it is crucial to let religious studies scholars like Wrisley test such analysis enthusiastically, even if the initial results do not seem at first glance to change the face of the world. Testing belongs absolutely to the digitization of Humanities, where each document remains a specific human production.

Welcoming enthusiasm could even lead to welcome surprises. James Libby, coming from a computing and biblical background, leads a fine algorithmic analysis of a famous Qumran fragment, 7Q5, which has been sometimes claimed to be a New Testament fragment, an opinion not shared by Libby. He concludes that:

Regardless of the final identification of 7Q5, at least two broader findings are clear. First, the worked exercise has uncovered serious inadequacies in the de facto method of identifying fragmentary texts. Second, the new databases, algorithms and software tools enabled by the digital humanities have yielded new identifications that are superior stichometrically and orthographically compared to the de facto approach currently being used (Libby this issue).

Unexpected new developments seem to be on Libby's agenda, as he points out at the end of his article. Indeed, by contacting the Israel Antiquities Authority to get a copyright for the present JRMDC article, we have learned that about 28 new photos of the fragment are available, with substantial new information to boot. Libby has been invited to travel to Israel to study and discuss the new photos there, with plans to write another article.

Between the unescapable aspiration to coherence and the valorization of the resisting asymmetry, the scholarly community has to move forward by practicing a communal discernment of the digitally moving frontiers between reality and unreality. On such matters, this Peircean statement remains inspiring:

The very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a community, without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge. And so those two series of cognitions – the real and the unreal – consist of those which, at a time sufficiently future, the community will always continue to reaffirm; and of those which, under the same conditions, will ever after be denied (Houser 1992, 52).

Such an approach is a good way to answer Umberto Eco's fears: to see the "Mother of all Lists" promising us "of all vertigos the most mystical, almost totally virtual one", but "with any distinction between truth and error" (2009, 327). In digital times, it is not the cover of the book that will draw the frontier between truth and error anymore; the digital community is now in charge of maintaining the distinction between real and unreal.

2.3 Markup as epistemological challenge

Our final topic, the work of mark-up, designates digital editions as a crucial point for all scholars involved in textual studies, whether they are in religious and biblical fields or not. Several articles in our volume evoke mark-up – mainly TEI – but two are particularly focused on this aspect and represent linguistic fields less present in TEI projects: Hebrew and Arabic. The three authors of “Some Initial Reflections on XML Markup for an Image-Based Electronic Edition of the Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri”, Chip Dobbs-Allsopp, Christopher Hooker and Gregory Murray, present:

A collaborative project of the Brooklyn Museum, Princeton Theological Seminary, and West Semitic Research, the Digital Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri (DBMAP) [that] is to be both an image-based electronic scholarly edition of the important collection of Aramaic papyri from Elephantine housed at the Brooklyn Museum and an archival resource to support ongoing research on these papyri and the public dissemination of knowledge about them (Dobbs-Allsopp, Hooker and Murray this issue).

They test and attempt to apply all TEI possibilities to their specific language and document, and note in conclusion that:

What we have just reviewed in terms of XML markup seems to us revolutionary, either technically or theoretically. The surprise remains the general absence of a scholarly discussion of such issues in the field. In part we suspect this is because most of the digital-based text projects in the field to date have been dominantly entrepreneurial in motivation and orientation and not conceived as research or scholarship (Dobbs-Allsopp, Hooker and Murray this issue).

The question is absolutely urgent and important: as long as encoding is considered an ‘infrastructure task’ – whether or not it is related to the entrepreneurial world – and

stays disassociated from research thinking and needs, we will be hardly able to speak about digitized Humanities. In textual studies we claim to be language specialists, and yet we usually continue to consider neither code as real writing, nor encoding as a language. Much has to be done here, and Critical Code Studies has tried to make scholars sensitive to this aspect. In 1999, the computist Neal Stephenson wrote an essay that should now belong to all DH students' curricula: *In the Beginning... Was the Command Line*. The OS UNIX is clearly presented as a language, including an oral tradition:

Windows 95 and MacOS are products, contrived by engineers in the service of specific companies. Unix, by contrast, is not so much a 'product' as it is a painstakingly compiled oral history of the hacker subculture. It is our *Gilgamesh* epic [...] Unix is known, loved, and understood by so many hackers that it can be re-created from scratch whenever someone needs it [...] Unix has slowly accreted around a simple kernel and acquired a kind of complexity and asymmetry that is organic, like the roots of a tree, or the branchings of a coronary artery (Stephenson 1999, l. 937-947).

So the floor is ours, open to us, the Humanist scholars: why are we studying so many cultures and languages, but not this one? The “infrastructure-research based” continent is our next *terra incognita* to be explored. Thus I hope to see more research projects in DH daring to cross these boundaries.

Last but not least, Giuliano Lancioni and N. Peter Joesse lead us in the discovery of a fascinating Arabic project, “The Arabic Diatessaron Project: digitalizing, encoding, lemmatization”. This is an international research project in Digital Humanities that aims to collect, digitalize and encode all known manuscripts of the Arabic Diatessaron (see diatessaron.org). The authors note that previous critical editions (1888 and 1935) have contributed to hiding the transmission history, rather than giving access to it. Instead, the authors

took advantage of the possibility offered by digital encoding to make all variants on the same basis available to users [...] From the point of view of user

experience, the lack of a ‘preferred reading’ makes switching from one reading to another extremely simple: the user just selects a different reading or a set of different readings to compare, and the system performs a quick query that provides relevant information to the user (which normally the editors would have provided) (Lancioni and Joosse this issue).

Even if such remarks sound rather like pragmatic choices born from the history of a specific case, they show quite clearly how a digital encoded edition can totally transform the notion and the tasks of the critical edition. The Homer multi-text project valorized the history of reading rather than a lost *Urtext*, and furthermore considers the text first and mainly as a document, and has opened ways to go further in such a direction (Clivaz 2012b, 2). Let’s see how future editorial projects in biblical and religious studies will continue to shape digital editing tasks (Touati 2013).

Notes

¹ For 2016-2018, the composition of the steering committee is Claire Clivaz (chair), David Hamidović (co-chair), Paul Dilley, James McGrath, Jeanne-Nicole Saint-Laurent Mellon and Joseph Verheyden. Many thanks to Paul Dilley and Tim Hutchings for their English proof-reading of this introduction.

² General series on DH of course exist already; a new one has just published its first title, *Routledge Research in Digital Humanities*, but the definition of the series is not published on the website at the moment of writing this introduction (<https://www.routledge.com/products/9781138184893#series>).

³ There is still no website open for IDH, in preparation under the lead of Alissa Jones-Nelson; editorial contracts have been signed and the editorial board includes Claire Clivaz, Charles M. Ess, Gregory P. Grieve, Kristian Petersen and Sally M. Promey.

⁴ The Wikipedia definition for stylometry is a useful starting point: “Stylometry is the application of the study of linguistic style, usually to written language, but it has successfully been applied to music and to fine-art paintings as well. Stylometry is often used to attribute authorship to anonymous or disputed documents. It has legal as

well as academic and literary applications, ranging from the question of the authorship of Shakespeare's works to forensic linguistics"

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stylometry>).

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