



# Interacting with the Humanities

Ruth Kirkham – Project Manager  
'Building a Virtual Research Environment for the Humanities' (BVREH)



# Interacting with the Humanities – Our Experiences

- What is a VRE and what have we been doing?
- Who are our humanities users?
- What did we do to address their needs?
  - ‘A day in the life’ (field methods)
  - Scenarios
  - Demonstrators
  - Pilots/iterative development
- How were these methods useful in motivating and involving users?
- What lessons have we learnt?



## What is a Virtual Research Environment?

### Definition of a VRE:

“The purpose of a VRE is to help researchers in all disciplines manage the increasingly complex range of tasks involved in carrying out research. A VRE will provide a framework of resources to support the underlying processes of research on both small and large scales, particularly for those disciplines which are not well catered for by the current infrastructure.” (JISC)

“A set of online tools, systems and processes interoperating to facilitate or enhance the research process within and without institutional boundaries.” (Mike Fraser – OUCS)



## Building a VRE for the Humanities



- Initially a 15 month project (started summer 2005)
- Capturing user requirements from researchers across the division
- How do the Humanities differ from large scale Science?
- No predefined technology (ground up approach)
- Build 3 to 4 prototypes/demonstrators



## **A VRE for the Study of Documents and Manuscripts**

- A pilot 'Virtual Research Environment for the Study of Documents and Manuscripts'
  - Another really long project title!
- Addressing needs highlighted in previous survey
  - Communication/collaboration
  - Image viewing
  - Annotation tools
- Small group of test users initially, with functionality broaden to wider humanities researchers

## What did we do?



Or... what didn't we do!

## User Requirements Survey

- ‘Field methods’ stage prior to prototyping (Wixon et al 2002)
- Interviewed a broad range of humanities researchers, research projects, libraries and a number of IT support staff to determine:
  - What is ‘a day in the life’ of a humanities researcher like?
  - What is the ‘workbench’ of a humanities researcher?



## User Requirements Survey

- Must consider developers/computer scientists and ways to motivate them
- Getting them involved at the user requirements stage has been crucial
- In the very beginning no development work during the BVREH survey



## User Requirements Survey

- Supported by enthusiastic user champions from within the humanities division
- Approach was important in providing users with a sense of 'ownership'
- Led us to create a number of scenarios...

## User scenarios



**Simon Brown:**  
Researcher -18<sup>th</sup>  
Century German



**Dr Mary  
White:**  
Researcher at  
a university  
library



**Bob Black:**  
Researcher -  
Classics



**Gwendolyn  
Green:** Lecturer  
and artist in the  
Fine Art  
department

### **Disclaimer:**

Names have been changed to protect the innocent.

No animals/researchers were harmed during the production of this presentation

## Simon Brown: Researcher - 18<sup>th</sup> Century German



### ***Representing those who believe themselves to be non-technical***

Simon Brown is a member of the Modern Languages faculty and specialises in 18th Century German

He mainly uses primary sources and spends a great deal of time in the library. Simon admits to using his computer as a 'glorified typewriter'

In recent years, Simon has used the internet to find out about more ephemeral material including articles by journalists and lesser known authors, which in the past he may have missed.

Simon finds signing up to email lists an annoyance due to the sheer amount of unwanted, non-related information that results. However he does find one list of particular interest.

Simon is particularly keen to hear about grants and potential sources of funding

## Dr Mary White: Researcher at a university library



### **Representing those who work internationally and collaboratively and is just discovering the benefits of technology**

Mary White works on a research project in a university library, cataloguing Medieval Manuscripts using local xml tools.

Mary uses bibliographic tools and word processing packages extensively and is keen to be able to share her work easily and quickly.

Mary works collaboratively with many researchers across the world. Typically she uses email and the telephone to communicate with them. Mary has recently experienced an IRC Chat meeting which she found particularly useful

Mary is interested in the idea of the Access Grid however, she is concerned that her colleagues may not have access to the technology.

## Bob Black: Researcher - Classics



***Representing those who are technically minded and have significant involvement in digital projects***

Bob Black is a researcher within the Classics faculty specialising in ancient Greek inscriptions.

Bob has been involved with many digitization projects, enabling resources to be made available for study. IT use already reflects the way his group is working.

Bob often collaborates with other experts across the world and appreciates the benefits of technology in assisting with this. Like Mary, Bob is concerned that his colleagues don't have the same familiarity with ICT and although he actively seeks the latest tools, he finds relatively little of use at this time.

## Gwendolyn Green: Lecturer and artist in the Fine Art department



### ***Representing those actively seeking collaborations across subject and institutional boundaries***

Gwendolyn Green is a lecturer and artist in the Fine Art department. Her work is heavily influenced by science and electronics.

Gwen uses the internet and various software and graphic design tools extensively in her work.

Keen to work with others across subject and institutional boundaries, Gwen wants to know what researchers are doing elsewhere and how she might work with them.

Gwen is keen on the notion of an 'ideas pool' where artists and interested parties can advertise their ideas and interests to one another.

## 'Supporting the Mechanism of Research'



**Simon Brown:**  
Researcher -18<sup>th</sup>  
Century German

- Centralised information regarding grants and funding
- Searchable lists of conferences lectures and seminars



**Dr Mary White:**  
Researcher at a  
university library

- Chat Facilities
- Working collaboratively on documents
- Assistance in publishing online
- Access Grid technology



**Bob Black:**  
Researcher -  
Classics

- Information about researchers and research interests
- Communication tools e.g. Video conferencing/ Access Grid technology and chat facilities



**Gwendolyn Green –**  
Lecturer and artist in  
the Fine Art department

- Information about researchers and research interests
- Centralised information regarding grants and funding



# Scenarios



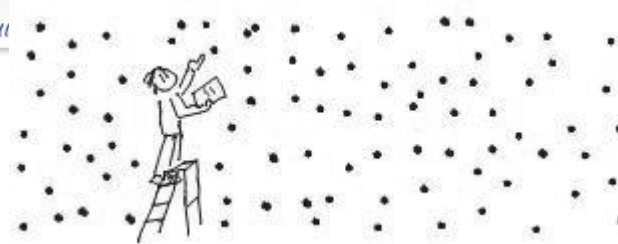


## Eighteenth Century Workspace

- To support a study of Jane Austen's work
- Investigated the options for integrating four online resources:
  - Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language (1755)
  - Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO)
  - Chadwyck-Healy Literature Online
  - British Fiction 1800-1829: A database of production, circulation and reception

## Physical Tools

- Physical tools such as communication and novel user interface devices such as digital pen and paper (Anoto) and Personal Interface to the Access Grid (PIG)

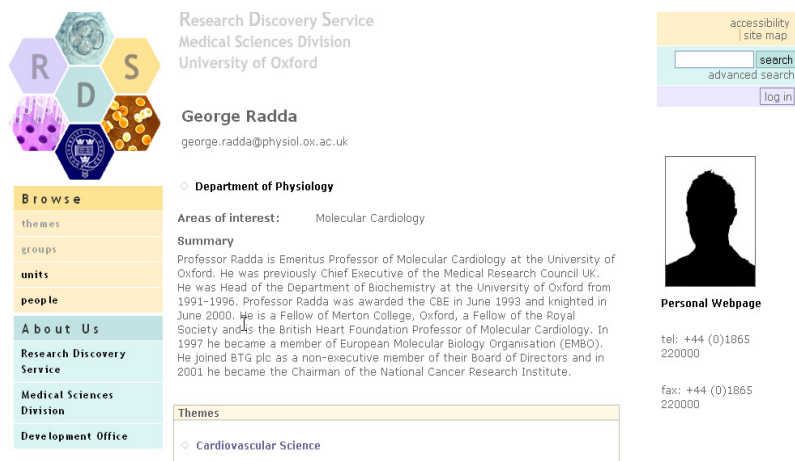


It's all about keeping track of 669 845 157 115 773 458 169 very small dots.



## Research Discovery Service

- Medical Sciences and ACDT project
- Database of researchers and research interests across the division
- BVREH working with Medical Sciences to use the service for the Humanities

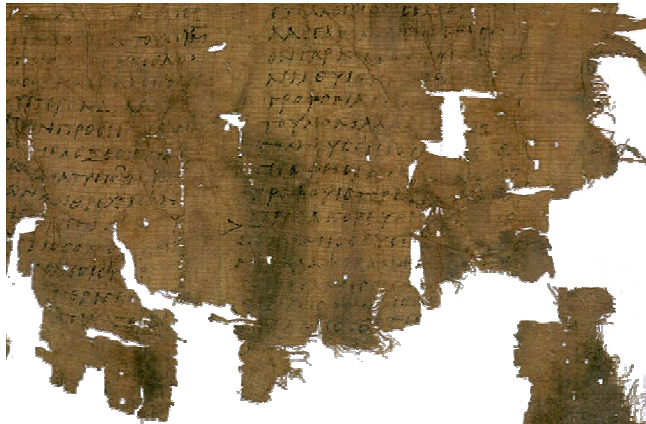


The screenshot shows a user profile page for George Radda. At the top left is a hexagonal logo with 'R', 'D', and 'S' and a central circular emblem. The header identifies the 'Research Discovery Service' within the 'Medical Sciences Division' at the 'University of Oxford'. The profile for 'George Radda' includes his email 'george.radda@physiol.ox.ac.uk' and a 'Department of Physiology'. Under 'Areas of interest', 'Molecular Cardiology' is listed. A 'Summary' section provides a detailed biography of Professor Radda, mentioning his roles at the University of Oxford, the Medical Research Council UK, and the National Cancer Research Institute. A 'Personal Webpage' section contains contact information: 'tel: +44 (0)1865 220000' and 'fax: +44 (0)1865 220000'. A search bar with 'search', 'advanced search', and 'log in' buttons is located at the top right. A sidebar on the left offers navigation options: 'Browse' (themes, groups, units, people), 'About Us', 'Research Discovery Service', 'Medical Sciences Division', and 'Development Office'. A 'Themes' section at the bottom lists 'Cardiovascular Science'.



## Virtual Workspace for the Study of Ancient Documents

- An interface allowing browsing and searching of multiple image collections, including tools to compare and annotate the researcher's personal collection





## Demonstrators

- Great for taking to humanities researchers to ask ‘is this the type of thing you asked for?’
  - Are we on the right track?
  - Gaining further requirements
  - Lots of interest for fairly little effort
- Excellent ‘marketing’ tools to stakeholders



## Pilot/Iterative Development



- Pilot VRE for the Study of Docs and Manuscripts
- Iterative development was sensible way forward (also recommended by JISC in VRE2 call)
- Essential to maintain motivation
- Must manage expectations along the way
  - Demo that exceeds expectations, gold dust
  - Curse of the demo, can be really demotivating for everyone



## Pilot/Iterative Development

- Iterations really useful in gaining further requirements
- Users are a part of the process
  - No nasty surprises at the end
- Separate stable version good for marketing to wider stakeholders
  - On website
  - Conferences etc

## A Virtual Research Environment for the Study of Documents and Manuscripts



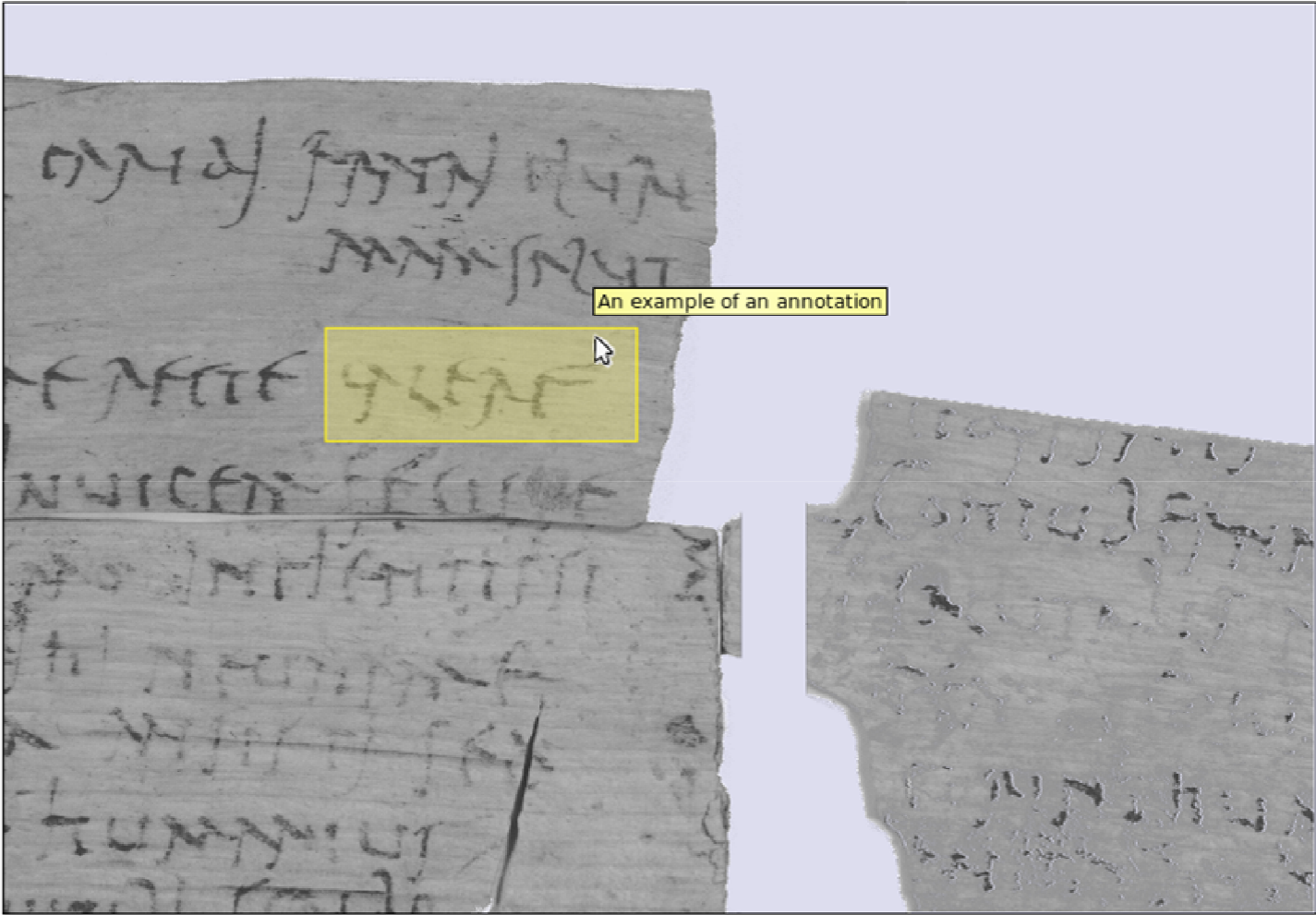


Mozilla Firefox

File Edit View History Bookmarks Tools Help

http://pybus.oerc.ox.ac.uk/gsv/trans-b.html

http://pybus..../trans-b.html



An example of an annotation

Selected Images:

- 311\_1-front
- 311\_2-front

Done

Search

Vindolanda Tablets

Go!

**John**

online

Unfiled (0/2)

- ruth
- System

**ruth** History

<John> Are ready to work on the first image?

<ruth> Yes I've got my cup of tea ready and can see the image in the workspace

OK

Send

# A Virtual Research Environment for the Study of Documents and Manuscripts

What to do by any of the way  
home? where to be laid in bed  
to be active? It was altogether as  
confusions of images & Doubts - a  
perplexity, an <sup>agitating</sup> ~~embarrassment~~ <sup>subtle</sup>  
she could not see the end of it

+  
-  
 Show annotations  
New Annotation

Notes

[\*\*From Triplestore\*\*] [Character encoding = UTF-8]  
Is this image a part of the Jane Austen manuscript that became the novel 'Persuasion'?

Update Notes

object description  
This is a test of the Object Description category to add metadata from 'Image Upload'

C8315-04 Persuasion

C817-06 Persuasion

C8315-04 Persuasion-te:

## A Virtual Research Environment for the Study of Documents and Manuscripts



**Show annotations**

Key - annotations are coloured by project:

Project Foo

public

New Annotation

Annotation text: My test annotation

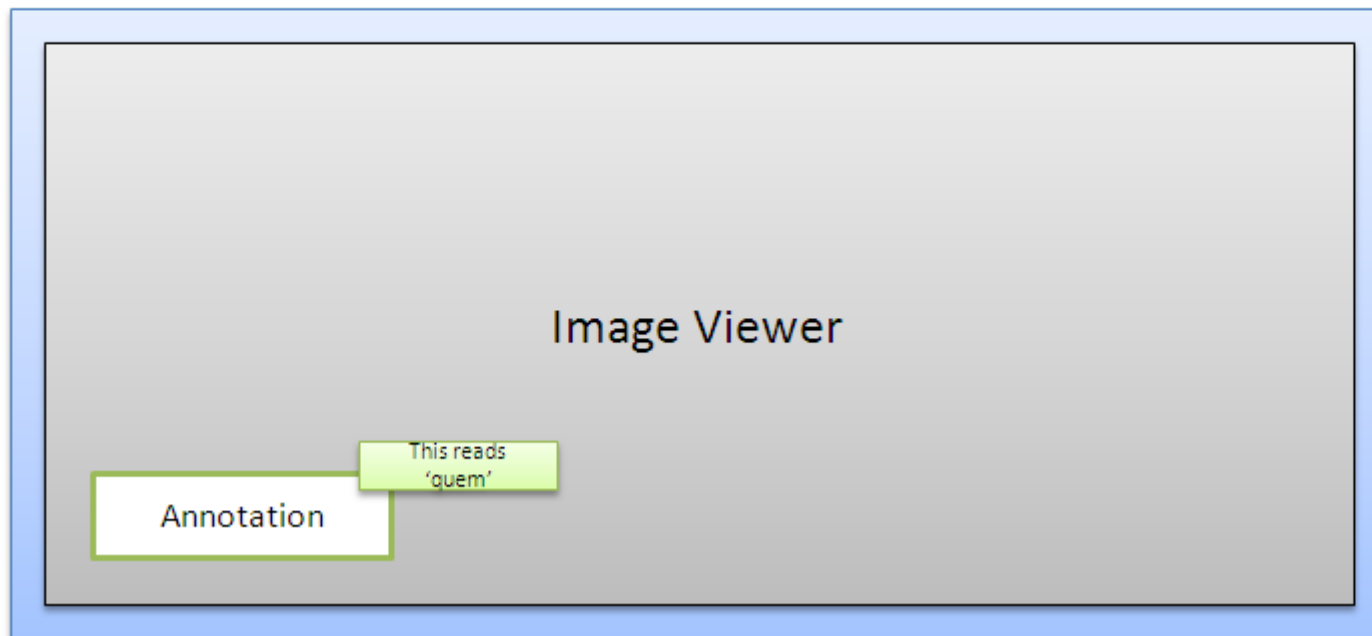
Annotation project: Project Foo

Cancel

Acc

Project Foo  
none (public)

# Annotations



New Annotation

Show annotations

- private  
11.28 (Alan) This looks like 'quem'
- private  
11.35 (Roger) Agreed, this changes everything!
- Public  
12.20 (Charles) This reads 'quem'
- 14.50 (Alan) The first line looks wrong
- 15.02 (Roger) I can see quadratus on the third line

Image Lis

Transcription

# A Virtual Research Environment for the Study of Documents and Manuscripts

Image View | Image Upload | Image Compare | PTM Viewer | Entertainment | Admin Tools | Projects

Image View edit

Image List

Display in image  
There were 476 images na

0-9 10-19 20-29 30-39 40-49  
100-109 110-119 120-129  
170-179 180-189 190-199  
240-249 250-259 260-269  
310-319 320-329 330-339  
380-389 390-399 400-409  
450-459

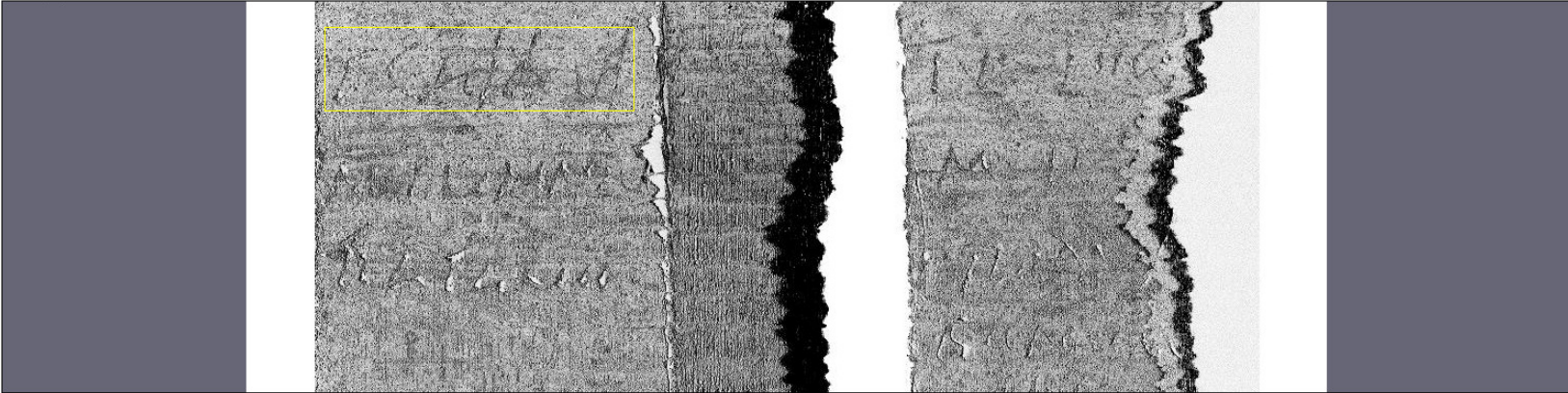
Seg\_M1C\_IC\_Frisia-00506

Seg\_M2C\_IC\_Frisia-00506

Seg\_rawlm\_highlightDiff

Image View

NB: no project selected.



Show annotations  
New Annotation

Create or join discussion session:  
Username:   
Discussion id:  Create or Join

CommentsPortlet

Discussions:

[I read T CASSIUS, but they had T\(ITUS\) CESDIUS... 'A'](#)  
I read T CASSIUS, but they had T(ITUS) CESDIUS  
[created=project= uri= http://bvreh.humanities.ox.ac.uk/annotation/0ae75dd-829-41c9-b4d8-d81323fe8395 parent=]  
Reply

**admin replied:** The entire line reads T CASSIUS on the left and TR LEG V on the right  
[created=Thu Mar 19 16:54:46 GMT 2009 project= uri= http://bvreh.humanities.ox.ac.uk/annotation/5a98b331-0716-4c86-92ed-a89a4b5e6645 parent=http://bvreh.humanities.ox.ac.uk/annotation/0ae75dd-829-41c9-b4d8-d81323fe8395]  
Reply



## BVREH Lessons Learned

There have been many, but here are some of the highlights...



## Lessons Learned

- The strongest aspect of the BVREH has been its user-led approach
  - Researchers were asked what they do
  - How they do it
  - What would be useful to them
- This had strong motivational benefits and created ‘ownership’
- Users learn as we do - As such feature creep becomes a real issue
- Prioritisation is essential



## Lessons Learned

- Getting Computer Scientists involved early on, during requirements gathering was really useful
  - Helped developers to understand user needs
  - Helped forge good relationships
  - Creates trust





## Lessons Learned

- Using demonstrators and pilots allowed us to use iterative development and prototyping
  - Allows us to keep researchers involved and to learn further from their experience and research processes
  - Great for demonstrating progress to wider stakeholders
  - But you may never feel as though you're finished...



## Lessons Learned

- You're only as good as your last iteration!
  - Motivations can dwindle when a demo doesn't deliver as expected or is delayed
  - Managing expectations at all times has been essential and not always easy



## Lessons Learned

- You can't include everyone
  - Humanities researchers are a huge group
  - Address immediate needs and market the outcomes effectively



## Lessons Learned

Finally...

- It has been essential to budget time and resource for requirements gathering



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