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SAN GORGONIO PASS: Forgotten Route of the Californios?

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URING THE SPANISH-AMERICAN OCCUPATION of California, San Gorgonio Pass saw more settlement and use by travelers than has hitherto been believed. George W. Beattie's study of travel between California and Sonora provides examples for the commonly accepted idea that the Pass was little or never used by the Californios. Thus for the period prior to 1825 he says: "The land route from Sonora to California by way of the Yuma territory — a route which Anza had opened in 1774 — had been abandoned since 1781.... Spanish governmental authorities had long realized the great desirability of reopening the land route to California...." Following the same line of thought, another work states, "Strange to say there had been no intercourse between Sonora and California up to 1831...."

For the period after 1825, Beattie describes in some detail the expedition of Captain José Romero, of the Mexican Army. This officer traveled through San Gorgonio Pass in 1824-25. Beattie then states: "Lieutenant Romualdo Pacheco, the engineer who had accompanied him on this trip, returned to San Diego by way of Yuma, and reported in favor of that route. It was made the official mail road shortly after." 3

The San Gorgonio Pass is the natural gateway from the deserts of Sonora, Arizona, and hinterland of California to the fertile coastlands. For purposes of this paper, the pass will be considered to include: San Timoteo Canyon, beginning at the San Bernadino asistencia reconstruction in Redlands: San Gorgonio Pass proper including Beaumont, Banning, Cabazon, and Whitewater; and that stretch of desert to and through Palm Springs. Some evidence from areas adjacent to but beyond this territory will also be included.

Just when the first Spaniards entered the pass, still remains unknown, as do the names of those early adventurers. However, Herbert E. Bolton has presented a report which suggests that Pedro Fages, later governor, but then military commander of California, may have used the pass in 1772. Fages had been visiting San Diego when he heard

that several deserters had escaped into the desert that lies eastward from that town in an effort to reach Sonora. He started after them with a well-equipped expedition. But after reaching certain dry desert mountains, perhaps the Superstitions, he gave up the pursuit and turned northwesterly, exploring the sierra (no doubt the Santa Rosas). His diary indicates that, on passing through these mountains he visited San Bernardino Valley before reaching San Gabriel Mission. "Last year [1772] coming from San Diego in pursuit of deserters I went and struck the plain fifty leagues towards the east. Lack of water forced us into the sierra. When we were parallel with the Mission San Gabriel we went about fifteen leagues to strike the plains again."4 However, Bolton goes on to mention horse signs found by Juan Bautista de Anza on his first journey into the Borrego area. He also notes that Fray Francisco Garcés records in his diary for March 10, 1774, on the same expedition, that other soldiers had passed through that region. From this evidence Bolton feels strongly that Fages followed the Anza trail through Coyote Canyon in the Santa Rosas. Despite this the Fages' diary does show that he crossed San Bernardino Valley and departed by way of Cajon Pass. Thus he at least crossed the entrance to San Gorgonio Pass in 1772.

Spanish exploration continued into the San Bernardino Valley through 1810, finally resulting in its being named on May 20 after the saint whose day that is.⁵

Having established penetration and activity into San Bernardino Valley by 1810 we may move directly into what effect this had on San Gorgonio Pass.

Two sources place Spanish Catholic priests in the pass at almost the same time as they appeared in the more westerly valley. The same sources give differing accounts of the naming of the pass.

The late Doctor Murray [Welwood Murray, Scottish born developer of San Gorgonio Pass in the 1880s] told me himself that a priest from San Juan Capistrano traveled up the Santa Ana Canyon and the San Timoteo to perform the duties of priest among the Indians. It also appears that this priest was Father Gorgonio, in whose honor the name was changed.

Dr. Murray is supposed to have reported that this priest was killed at San Juan Capistrano in 1812.6 The "change" in name he refers to may be from San Bernardino Pass to San Gorgonio Pass as both names were used in early days.

The other tradition relative to the naming of the Pass is as follows:

They called it San Gorgonio rancho, probably in honor of Saint Gorgonius, a Latin martyr under the Emperor Diocletian. (As a further detail in this matter of the naming of the Pass: It was customary for traveling friars, in saying mass at a new place, to name it after the saint whose day it happened to be. When we reflect that there were many Franciscan saints more appealing to the friars than the non-Fran-

ciscan Gorgonius, we may consider the naming of the spot after him as pretty plain evidence that this first visit of a padre to the pass occurred on Saint Gorgonius day in the church calendar, or March 9th. The exact year is uncertain).⁷

Doubtless there are apocryphal elements contained in the above traditions, particularly in the story reputed to have come from Dr. Murray. But the central fact in both is the presence of Spanish priests in the pass most probably in the second decade of the nineteenth century. That the pass was almost certainly named after the saint is established by the known penchant of the fathers for naming places discovered on the particular saint's day. Noted above is the specific naming of the San Bernardino Valley in that manner.

There is yet more evidence for the use of the pass shortly after 1810, this time by secular rather than religious authorities. As priests generally preceded Spanish explorers, or at least went with them, early church influence in the pass again seems indicated.

There appear to have been no salt refineries in early California. The finished product was brought from Mexico and hence was very precious. But Indians at San Gabriel Mission informed the fathers that there was raw salt to be had in the desert. They in turned notified the officials in Los Angeles and arrangements were made to recover salt from that source. The first expedition, a train of carretas with an escort of caballeros, set out in 1815 from San Gabriel Mission with Indian guides. They passed through San Gorgonio Pass and down to Salton Sink — now Salton Sea. From that year, and for fifteen more, each spring a similar caravan made the trek taking about one month for the round trip. This practice ceased when salt works were finally set up at Redondo Beach. The above report from an early historian⁸ is corroborated by information from a modern informant. "Lewis Rawson was just here. . . . Significant were these words: 'I remember old timers, when I was a boy, telling how the first salt came from the desert. Later there was a salt works set up at Redondo Beach.' "9

Further evidence of Spanish-Mexican activity in the pass during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century is supplied by the record of baptisms at San Gabriel Mission. On February 10, 1822, an eight-month old boy in danger of death was baptized by Pedro Alvarez at the mission. The boy was the son of Quirarquinat and Coyo Yichivo of the "Maronga" ranchería. The important fact here is the name of the ranchería from where the Indians came. As spelled by the Mexican scribe it is a rendering of Maringa, a general name applied to both the area and people of today's Morongo Valley just northeast of San Gorgonio Pass in San Bernardino County. These Maringa, or Maringayam, were a large sub-tribe, or probably a separate tribe, of the people generally called Serrano.

Pedro Alvarez is identified by Beattie as a landowner in Los Angeles in 1799 but also as the man who directed the development of the irrigation system for San Bernardino Rancho in 1820, established for the use of San Gabriel Mission. Beattie further says, "... in May of that year an invitation was sent to the Indians of distant San Gorgonio... and other... rancherías to come and see the Guachama Indians do their planting." 13

February 11, 1822, saw the baptism by Father Zalvidea of Guivainat, an eighteen-year-old son of Sogon, Captain of Gonopeopa. Again the place name shows exactly where and to whom the mission influence had reached. This is a variation of the name Bonopiape (or Wanapiapa) Indian place name for the area of modern Whitewater at the east end of the pass. This was the home of the Wanakik Cahuilla sub-tribe, a group which shortly spread its lineages throughout the pass. Again Beattie shows that the baptiser, Father José María Zalvidea, played an active and important part in the development of San Bernardino Rancho.

But without question the most authenticated use of the pass by the *Californios* is found in the Romero Expedition accounts.¹⁸ The basic outline of the expedition from those accounts is as follows. The newly established Mexican government wished to have land travel reëstablished between Sonora, Mexico, and Alta California. It had been essentially brought to a standstill by the closing of Yuma Crossing in 1782 after a year and one-half of war between the Spanish and Quechans. The Spanish failed to break the Indian power and were forced to withdraw from the fighting and in consequence ceased to travel over the Anza Trail into California.

Colonization activities in Sonora, Baja California, and Alta California from 1818 to 1823 made this situation intolerable. Accordingly, a preliminary step was taken to reopen a route when Antonio Comaduras, military commandant at Tucson, arranged with José, an important Cocomaricopa Indian, to carry mail by Indian runner over an Indian trade trail into California north of the hostile Quechans. This route was a regular commerce trail through Halchidoma and Cahuilla territory, these tribes being friendly with each other and the Maricopas but hostile to the Ouechans. Two trails have been identified archaelogically either of which could be the route or parts of the route. These are RIV 53T and RIV 80T (site reference numbers according to University of California Archaelogical Survey). RIV 53T runs essentially north of the Chuckawalla-Orocopia mountain chain, RIV 80T essentially south of it, both in Riverside County. Express service began over the route using Indian runners in February, 1821. It passed through San Gorgonio Pass, down San Timoteo Canyon, across San Bernardino Rancho to Mission San Gabriel.19

However, the Mexicans naturally wished to open a regular thor-

oughfare for caravans, military movement, and generally safe and frequent travel. Accordingly when Fray Félix Caballero traveled from Mission Santa Catalina in Baja California, across the Colorado, to Arispe, Sonora, he was escorted back to Santa Catalina by Captain José María Romero and a detachment of troops. The Quechans were hostile and stripped the party of horses and equipment at Yuma Crossing though their lives were spared. The Tucson commandant and the California Governor, Luis Antonio Argüello, arranged for Romero, under escort of Lieutenant José María Estudillo with thirty men from the garrison at San Diego, to return to Tucson by way of the Halchidoma-Cahuilla trail, thus hopefully opening a permanent and safe land route to Mexico.

It is to Lieutenant Estudillo's diary that we are indebted for a detailed description of *Californio* activity in San Gorgonio Pass.²⁰ They left San Bernardino Rancho December 25, 1823 (no mention made of Christmas) at 9:15 o'clock, a. m. In five leagues (twelve and one-half miles) they reached Yucaipa rancho—identified by Beattie²¹ as a rancho of Mission San Gabriel. By five o'clock that afternoon, traveling roughly the same distance again they reached San Gorgonio Rancho.

Estudillo's diary has at long last established the exact location of that headquarters:

... we arrived at the last rancho, called San Gorgonio, and in the vernacular, Piatopa. The terrain covered today is full of obstructions, and rocky. The mountains are bare of large trees, and all is without pasture. At the entrance to the canyon of the northern mountains where the corrals of the cattle are, and where there is a small Indian house, there is a dry arroyo. It has a little water in small pools....²²

First of all, of course, the leagues traveled for the day, ten, put the rancho in the area of the City of Banning, and not Beaumont as was hitherto thought.²³ The Indian name as rendered is Piatopa. The northern boundary of the City of Banning touches Banning Water Canyon where it enters Morongo Reservation. There are two Indian names for this spot. One is Cahuilla and refers to a Wanakik village and lineage — Pisata.²⁴ The other is Maringa and relates to a Tamakuyayam lineage village — Pihatupiat.²⁵ Finally the terrain description is typical of that along the top of San Gorgonio Pass near the northern hills. The only opening along here that would stand out above all others as, "... the entrance to the canyon of the northern mountains ..." is Banning Water Canyon. The next day Estudillo and Romero continued ten more leagues to Bonopiape which has been established above to be Whitewater Canyon.

The entry for December 27 mentions Agua Caliente as the next destination. On the twenty-eighth, "We continued our march, and at 3:00 in the afternoon we arrived at Agua Caliente." The distance was eight leagues and again it is a clear as to where the Mexicans were — Palm Springs.²⁶

The diary continues to follow the expedition by one place name after another, one league after another to a place, probably north of Palen Dry Lake, above Rice, where on January 7, 1824, because of,

...the condition of the horses who had not had water for three days nor eaten except for dry branches which they found, it was judged impossible to continue. We resolved to return to where we had come from.

They had not been able to follow the trail to the river. Exactly why is unclear except that they suspected their guides, who were from San Juan Capistrano and not local tribesmen of "... malice and contact with the gentiles." ²⁷

However, though unsuccessful in its mission, this expedition established certain facts about Spanish-Mexican use of the pass. First, as seen above, there was general knowledge and use of places as far as Agua Caliente. On their return Romero demonstrated such faith in the route that on January 16, while camping at Toro — Los Veranitos in the diary — he "... spoke with the gentile named Juan José with the idea that he could carry letters and bring an answer from José-Cocomaricopa..." Some of these letters have actually been located and translated. They show that Romero was writing to the comandante of Sonora, Don Antonio Narvona, reporting essentially his orders and how he had accomplished them to that date.

On the morning of the seventeenth the party rose and left about eight o'clock. They first gave the letters to Juan José then arranged with a village *net* or leader to care for three horses and two pack mules which he was to bring to San Bernardino after they were able to travel. Again this shows there was no problem of a trail between San Bernardino and Toro.

On the eighteenth they reached Agua Caliente and found Indians there from San Bernardino Rancho. In the afternoon of the following day they met cowboys from Rancho San Gorgonio driving cattle from Agua Caliente to the former place. Reaching San Gorgonio at one in the afternoon, January 20, they laid over resting and sheltering from heavy rains (heavy snow in the mountains) until Saturday, January 24. On that date the man in charge of Rancho San Gorgonio is first mentioned — Juan Bermúdez. A former Soldier of Spain, born in Sonora and employed by Mission San Gabriel after his discharge from the army about 1820, he is the first clearly identifiable Mexican resident of San Gorgonio Pass.³⁰

Despite this initial failure Romero retained faith in the Halchidhoma-Cahuilla trail. Almost a year later, December 19, 1824, he reached the Colorado after an eleven-day journey from San Bernardino Rancho over the trail. However, despite this success, no permanent route was opened. Rebellion was on in the southland and while Romero's engineer, Lieutenant Romualdo Pacheco, recommended against the Halchidhoma

Trail and for the route through Yuma, in fact no land route to Sonora was opened until 1827 when a trail was developed which utilized Yuma Crossing and San Felipe on the way to San Diego and San Luis Rey Mission.³¹

What Romero's journeys through the pass do prove conclusively is that the whole area from Yucaipa to Palm Springs (Agua Caliente) was in extensive use by the Spanish and Mexicans as early as 1823. It supports the "salt trek" in that the party obviously knew where they were until Coachella Valley was reached. It was only after they crossed that locality and tried to rely on guides unfamiliar with the trail that they got lost. That even then they had complete faith in the passage as an effective mail route is evident.

The next date that can be specifically assigned to the pass in 1834. In 1889 suit was brought regarding the Indian right to settlement on what is now known as Morongo Reservation (then called Potrero).³² The question turned around how long they had lived at this spot. One of the witnesses gave testimony which again shows early Mexican familiarity with the pass.

Joachim Chevallo, the next witness, was a tall brawny Spaniard.... He was 77 years, 8 months and 12 days old. Used to be a vaquero on San Bernardino ranch.... Went up on the San Gorgonio plains first in 1834. Went with a party of 80 after some Indians who had captured a priest from the old San Bernardino mission. We went up as far as Whitewater. We had a fight with the Indians there. There was a place beyond San Gorgonio called Mono Piapa...³³

Meanwhile, other activities were taking place which probably sent eddies of inquiry out into the pass. Jurupa Rancho (site of present Riverside city) was granted to Don Juan Bandini in 1838, and he established an adobe there. From 1839 to 1842, the Yucaipa and San Bernardino Valleys were developed and colonized by the Lugo brothers, José del Carmen, José María, and Vicente, under government permit. Diego Sepúlveda, a relative of the Lugos, built his adobe at Yucaipa about 1842. Ygnacio Palomares, also seeking Yucaipa, settled his stock in San Timoteo Canyon.³⁴

In these years the official Sonora Road became rather firmly laid out. After reaching San Bernardino from Los Angeles, it proceeded up San Timoteo Canyon to what is now called Lamb's Canyon, where it swung south without entering the pass proper and went on through San Jacinto, Hemet and along State Highway 79 by way of St. John's grade, Sage, Aguanga, Oak Grove and on southeast to Yuma Crossing.³⁵

Additional light is thrown on the Sonora Road, its location and its name, by J. M. Guinn.³⁶ He states it was early known as *El Camino Real de San Gabriel y San Bernardino*. He also refers to old maps showing it proceeding to and *through* San Gorgonio Pass. This, of course, is in direct conflict with Beattie's analysis.

Besides Guinn's comments there are other sources which again suggest a greater use of the pass through these years than previously thought. First of all, Hughes reports "Spaniards" [sic] in the pass in 1839. "In the year 1839 we see one Hosea Morea Adila, a Spaniard wandering into the pass...he seems to have visited the Indians who had 20 or 30 houses at the Potrero." Hughes then adds "It may have been this same year that Francisco Alvarado came into the region, looking for Indians to work at the mission rancho in San Bernardino valley."³⁷

It is interesting to note that Antonio María Lugo, father of the previously mentioned Lugo brothers, in petitioning for San Bernardino Rancho in 1841, mentioned outlaws fleeing to the Department of New Mexico through San Bernardino. "...a regular village will be formed (in San Bernardino Valley), and its police will check those who through that route — which is one the robbers usually take — drive out mules and horses which they steal with some frequency." Although he believed they used Cajon Pass and the Mojave branch of the Santa Fe Trail, he uses the word "usually." Could not some have slipped out by way of San Gorgonio? Certainly rustlers and smugglers did but a few years later. 39

The 1840's also saw San Gorgonio Pass being used as a through route in a fashion strictly inimicable to California interest. May 12, 1840, was a day forever after to be known as the day of "The Grand Raid." Peg-Leg Pete Smith of sinister and legendary fame in many guises in the southwest led a large force of Utes down from Cajon and San Gorgonio Passes (they had come from Utah through Nevada and Arizona, across the Mohave over the Old Spanish Trail), across San Bernardino Valley and into the Los Angeles basin. Thence north they swept to San Luis Obispo Mission which they captured and pillaged. After three days of hard riding and precision rustling, they headed back with up to 5,000 head of horses. "Pegleg appears to have gone through San Gorgonio, turning north at its eastern end for the area now called Lucerne Valley, with one division of his forces."

In 1845, Don Benito Wilson was commissioned by Governor Pío Pico to pursue raiding Indians. After one punitive action on the Mohave Desert, he followed another party through San Gorgonio Pass into Cahuilla territory. His apparent acquaintance with the trial into the pass and with the Indians, such as Cabezon, the Cahuilla leader living at Palm Springs, or Agua Caliente as it was then called by the *Californios*, suggests a certain familiarity with the area. However, Wilson did not go beyond Agua Caliente.⁴¹

That General José María Flores, last commander of the Mexican Army in California, retreated to Sonora through San Gorgonio Pass is established by several reports. On January 17, 1850, J. J. Warner (of ranch and Hot Springs fame) told this to Judge Benjamin Hays,

"... Warner says there is another road across the desert, going up close to the mountains on the eastern side — the same by which the Mexican General, José María Flores, retreated out of California in ... 1847...." José Lugo reports Flores on January 11, 1847, "... in Cucamonga... heading for Chino.... Flores [was] on his way to Sonora."

The Mexican force, under Flores, failing to make any impression upon, or stay, the American advance, retreated to San Pasqual, some five or six miles northeast of Los Angeles. On the evening of the 11th (January, 1847) General Flores with forty or fifty men left the place for Sonora, going by way of San Gorgonio Pass and the Colorado River.

The "internal" evidence which suggests a familiarity with, and use of the route by the *Californios* may now be considered. Primarily this consists of place names.

San Timoteo Canyon: Gudde presents evidence that it was used as an alternate designation for the Yucaipa grant as early as December 3, 1830.45

Potrero Genio Creek: Bancroft so lists what is now Hathaway Canyon in Banning on his 1862 map. 46

Antonio Creek: Bancroft also notes the large creek and wash that crosses Morongo Indian Reservation.

Agua Blanca: This was the early name for Whitewater according to O'Neal. She also has it Agua Blanco and Río Blanco.⁴⁷ In addition another source carries it as Arroyo Blanca.⁴⁸ These sources are all of the 1860's.

El Toro: This canyon, and its adjacent spring in the east face of the Santa Rosa, northwest of Salton Sea, were so identified in the early 1860's.49

Palma Seca: Soda Spring or Lone Palm were anglicized versions of the name of this small, brackish spring, located about where Date Palm Beach is today on east shore of the Salton Sea.⁵⁰

Dos Palmas: The spring and two palm formations from which the present ranch and oasis derive their identification were so designated in William D. Bradshaw's first letter pertaining to his journey which opened up the route to La Paz, Arizona.⁵¹

The above data indicate that each of these names was used specifically by early Anglo-American travelers along this route. This suggests that the places had already been given names which were more or less accepted as official. It would appear questionable to assume that the North Americans had given them these names. Had they been doing the naming, surely they would have used English. As a matter of fact this is just what they did, as indicated by Bancroft's map.⁵² An unnamed canyon east of Banning, which was probably today's Millard Canyon, became "Grant's Creek." The presently named One Horse

Spring, southwest of Whitewater became, "Indian Run." (Why these two names were changed to their present wording is not quite clear). Palm Desert, east of Palm Springs, was "Sand Hole." And there were others. Had the early travelers used the Indian names for these places, such a contraction as occurred at Chuckawalla would be apparent. Patencio says that the Indian name for this place meant, "tall slender cactus." Bradshaw renders it more exactly, no doubt through his contact with Cabezon and the Maricopas, as "Chu-cu-wallah." ⁵⁴

Thus it would appear that a sufficient number of *Californios* moved over the San Gorgonio Pass route prior to 1847 to begin giving semi-official place names to the more outstanding natural features.

Two more interesting clues to *Californio* usage are items of equipment actually found along the route. Recently an article appeared in a Banning newspaper and reported that a person walking in Banning Water Canyon had come across the rotting remains of Spanish-type horseware. As described in the article, it would appear to have been of great age. The second find is reported by Paul Wilhelm of One Thousand Palms Oasis, northeast of Palm Springs: "The few things [found] that were Spanish were a metal part of a stirrup from a saddle, identified by Lewis Rawson... with a miner's old fashioned pick... harness with buckles or some type of snaps... many buttons that were Spanish, many things like spoons, and a Spanish Rosary..." 56

Besides this material, at least two reports have been made of Spanish-Mexican mining activity along the route. The closest to the pass was in Rattlesnake Canyon, northwest of Morongo Valley.⁵⁷ This is quite a distance from the pass, but the pass route would have provided excellent access to mining and prospecting ventures in that area, as it did under Anglo occupation.⁵⁸ A more remote, but equally important, find, because it lies along the Bradshaw extension of the pass route, was near Chuckawalla Springs. Here very old placer tracings have been reported.⁵⁹

The informants in each of these cases referred to local legends and traditions which they had heard and discussed with old prospectors and settlers near the locations. Responsibility for the mining activities was fixed on the *Californios* by all such traditional material.

Lastly these are specific local references to Spanish-Mexican built adobes in the pass area. Elder says, "When Weaver went onto his place there was an old adobe there. It was probably the little chapel which had been erected as an outpost of San Gabriel Mission." 60

Jessica Bird refers to ruins of adobes at what is now Highland Springs resort north of Beaumont.⁶¹

Mrs. Susan B. Coombs, a person who first came into the pass before 1900 and was a foremost educator in its early school system, told the

author she believed the San Bernardino asistencia — sub-mission to San Gabriel — had raised adobe structures at Highland Springs.

Finally, Garfield Quimbly, a local historian associated with the San Bernardino County Museum and Malki Museum on Morongo Reservation, has located old adobes in Laborde Canyon southwest of San Gorgonio pass just west of Beaumont. Mrs. Vern Roberts (née Laborde, and part Indian) of Hemet told him in 1964 that her mother was born in one of the adobes in 1850.

In conclusion, it would appear from the above evidence that the Spanish-Mexican occupation of California and Arizona saw a greater use of the natural route through San Gorgonio Pass than has hitherto been accepted. However, it was not a primary, official route of exit and entry, and it did not enjoy the prestige and service of the regular Sonora Road. Probably it was more of an adventurer's trail for treasure seekers, prospectors, and miners. But that it was used by many Californios over a period of time, and was known to them as a definite route into Arizona and Sonora, seems clear. In short, it was a land route to Sonora and used on occasion as such.

NOTES

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24. Bean and Mason, Diaries, p. 101; Bean, "The Wanakik Cahuilla," The Masterkey, Vol.

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26. Bean and Mason, Diaries, pp. 37 and 101.

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30. Bean and Mason, Diaries, pp. 50 and 105.

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