Pirates once swashbuckled across the ancient Mediterranean

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Thousands of years before Blackbeard, these buccaneers raided ships, stole booty—and even kidnapped a young Julius Caesar.

Merchant ships, such as that on the left of this sixth-century B.C. Greek bowl, were targets of pirates in antiquity. Naval warships, such as the one on the right, were periodically deployed to quash piracy. British Museum, London

BRITISH MUSEUM/RMN-GRAND PALAIS
Every child knows what a pirate looks like: a swashbuckler with an eye patch and a parrot perching on his sholder. This perception of pirates and piracy, which still deeply influences modern culture, was shaped by authors writing in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

These highly fanciful notions were inspired by the privateers and buccaneers of the "golden age" of piracy, which lasted roughly between 1650 and 1730. But pirates and piracy are much older than this era, and maritime banditry has been around for nearly as long as seafaring itself.

The origins of the modern term "piracy" can be traced back to the ancient Greek word *peiráomai,* meaning attempt (i.e., "attempt to steal"). Gradually this term morphed into a similar sounding term in Greek meaning "brigand," and from that to the Latin term *pirata.*

A second-century A.D. Roman relief of a sea battle was produced when Rome's naval supremacy had reduced piracy. National Archaeological Museum, Venice
DEA/SCALA, FLORENCE

Ancient pirates left no archaeological records. The historical evidence for what they did, why they did it, and the attempts that were made to quell them is obtained entirely from written sources. These help build a picture of the threat that pirates presented and reveal that the practice was prevalent throughout antiquity.

Land and sea

Piracy in the ancient world can be linked, in part, to geography. The ruggedness of the Mediterranean region often favored maritime rather than agricultural livelihoods. During the Bronze and Early Iron Ages, occupants of coastal settlements such as Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre in Lebanon, and Athens, Aegina, and Corinth in Greece, relied on marine resources such as fish, mollusks, seaweed, and salt for their survival. Most people living in such places would have owned a boat and possessed both seafaring skills and an unsurpassed knowledge of local navigation and sailing conditions. If times were particularly hard, these skills could be easily used in piracy. (This virtually-intact Roman shipwreck was raised after 2,000 years.)

Models and images of sailing vessels found in Greece, Egypt, and the Levant reveal that by 3000 B.C., a wide assortment of craft were regularly sailing the Mediterranean. During the early millennia of seafaring, when maritime navigation was in its infancy, ships were unable to cross long distances over open water and so kept close to the coast. Shipping was therefore restricted to a few navigable routes, such as the one that connected Egypt with the island of Crete.

Merchant vessels laden with goods moved along these shoreline thoroughfares. The rugged coastlines of the Mediterranean were another advantage to pirates. Numerous hidden inlets allowed their ships to remain hidden from view until it was too late to escape. Merchant ships lacked speed and dexterity, and pirates were quicker and nimbler.

The wreck of Kyrenia
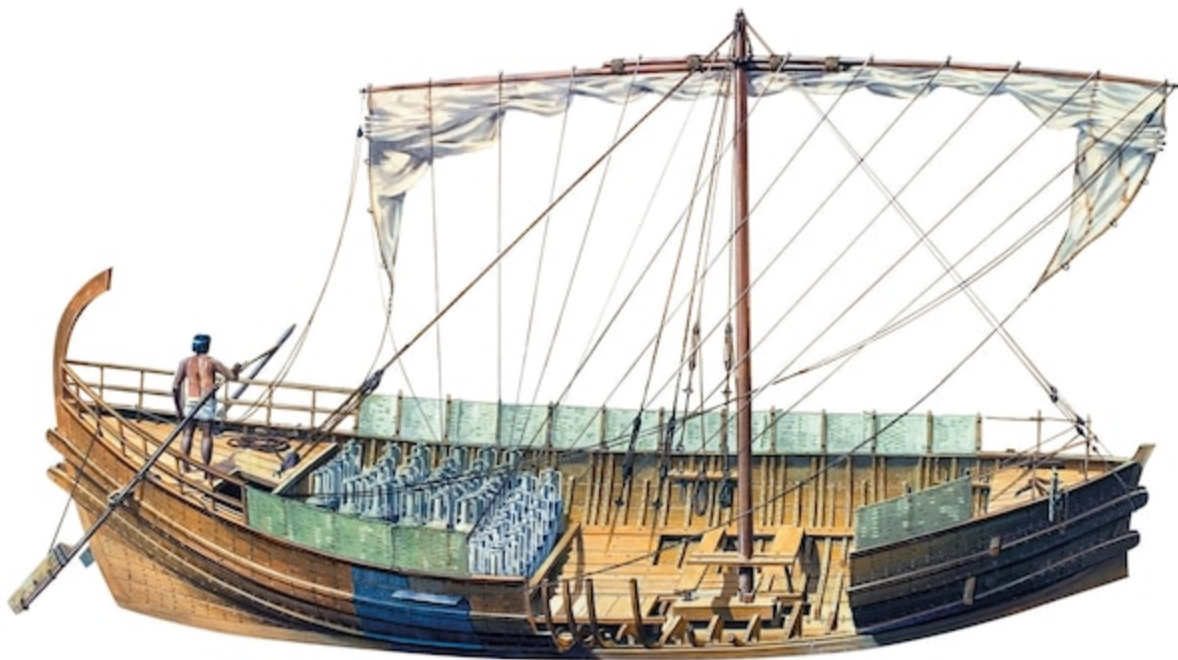
Based on archaeological data, the ship is thought to have had a single mast, with a square sail and two lateral rudders. The wooden hull was covered with a protective lead coating.

Richard Schlecht/NGS

In 1965 the wreckage of an ancient, small, single-masted merchant boat was discovered on the bottom of the sea off the coast of Cyprus. Archaeologists Michael and Susan Womer Katzev dubbed the wreck *Kyrenia,* after a nearby Cypriot port. Radiocarbon dating reveals the boat was constructed between 325 and 315 B.C.—around the time of the death of Alexander the Great—and sank between 295 and 285 B.C. When it sank, the ship was carrying a shipment of amphorae of wine from Rhodes, millstones, and almonds. The 46-foot-long, lead-plated hull bore signs of violence. Evidence that some of the cargo is missing has led archaeologists to suspect that the *Kyrenia* was captured, plundered, and then sunk by pirates.

Pirates in Egypt

Some of the earliest written accounts of piracy come from Egypt. One of the first is an inscription from the reign of Pharaoh Amenhotep III (1390-1353 B.C.) that describes having to establish defenses in the Nile Delta against maritime raiders. These raiders were perhaps the first true pirates, as they attacked anyone of any nationality and owed their allegiance to no one. (The most valuable pirate treasure? Maps.)

More ancient accounts come from the Amarna Letters, a series of diplomatic correspondences between the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten and allied and vassal states. Written on clay tablets between 1360 and 1332 B.C., they touch on many concerns, including piracy. The tablets record that two groups of pirates, the Lukka and Sherden, were causing substantial disruption to regional commerce and security. Correspondence between the king of Alashiya (modern Cyprus) and the Egyptian pharaoh reveals just how much of a threat the Lukka (based in modern-day Turkey) posed. Having vigorously denied that the people of Alashiya had allied themselves with the pirates, the king then claims to have introduced countermeasures, and states he would punish any of his subjects involved in piracy.

In the 14th century B.C., Egypt and its allies detailed frustrations with two confederacies of pirates in the Amarna Letters...
DEA/ALBUM

The Sea Peoples

Another important Egyptian text sheds light on a feared and mysterious group of marine marauders: the Sea Peoples. In *The Tale of Wenamun,* a work of fiction written around 1000 B.C., the Tjeker (a subset of the Sea Peoples) controlled the coastline between southern Israel and Byblos (central Lebanon) and attacked merchant shipping with impunity. The titular Wenamun turns to piracy in a desperate effort to replace the money that had been stolen by one of his crew. Despite the Tjeker not being directly involved in the crime, Wenamun blames their leader for failing to apprehend the criminal and so seizes a Tjeker ship and takes a quantity of silver.

Standing tall, a vengeful Ramses III smites Sea People captives in a 12th-century B.C. relief at Medinet Habu, Egypt. The Sea Peoples, a confederation of tribes whose origins remain undetermined, rampaged across the eastern Mediterranean in the 13th and 12th centuries B.C.
AKG/ALBUM/FRANÇOIS GUÉNET

The marine power known as the Sea Peoples came to overshadow all others during the final two centuries of Egypt's New Kingdom. Many archaeologists believe they were a loose confederacy who thrived in the Mediterranean around the 13th and 12th centuries B.C. Vivid accounts of Egypt's battles against them are found in the mortuary temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu. Inscriptions on the walls dramatize how the pharaoh lured them into a carefully laid trap: "The countries which came from the isles in the midst of the sea, they advanced to Egypt . . . The net was made ready for them. Entering stealthily into the harbor-mouth, they fell into it. Caught in their places, they were dispatched, and their bodies stripped."

The identity and nationality of the Sea Peoples remains one the biggest questions in the history of the ancient Mediterranean. The term "Sea Peoples" does not appear in ancient texts (a 19th-century Egyptologist coined the name). Most of the sources describing their actions come from ancient Egypt, and none gives a specific geographic point of origin for them. While the Sea Peoples' actions may appear like pure piracy, their exact nature and intentions are still debated. At different times they may have been immigrants or entrepreneurs, instead of strictly pirates. Historians continue to explore this mysterious maritime power to understand their true place in the history of the Mediterranean.

Epic pirates of Greece

Attitudes to piracy in ancient Greece are reflected in the Homeric epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, composed around 750 B.C. Although pirates are often spoken of with disapproval in these works, on a few occasions their actions and activities are not only condoned but praised.

The historian Thucydides later wrote of the different motives for coastal dwellers to practice piracy, "some to serve their own cupidity and some to support the needy." Like Homer, Thucydides suggests that marauders could be held in esteem: "They would fall upon a town unprotected by walls and would plunder it; indeed, this came to be the main source of their livelihood, no disgrace being yet attached to such an achievement, but even some glory."

By the end of the sixth century B.C., Greek trade spanned the length and breadth of the Mediterranean. The marked increase in the volume and value of goods being traded meant that, for the first time, large coastal cities such as Athens, Corinth, and Aegina were almost wholly dependent on maritime trade. With piracy now posing a significant threat to their commercial interests, these cities introduced a number of measures to fight it. (Barbarossa would later become the most feared pirate in the Mediterranean.)
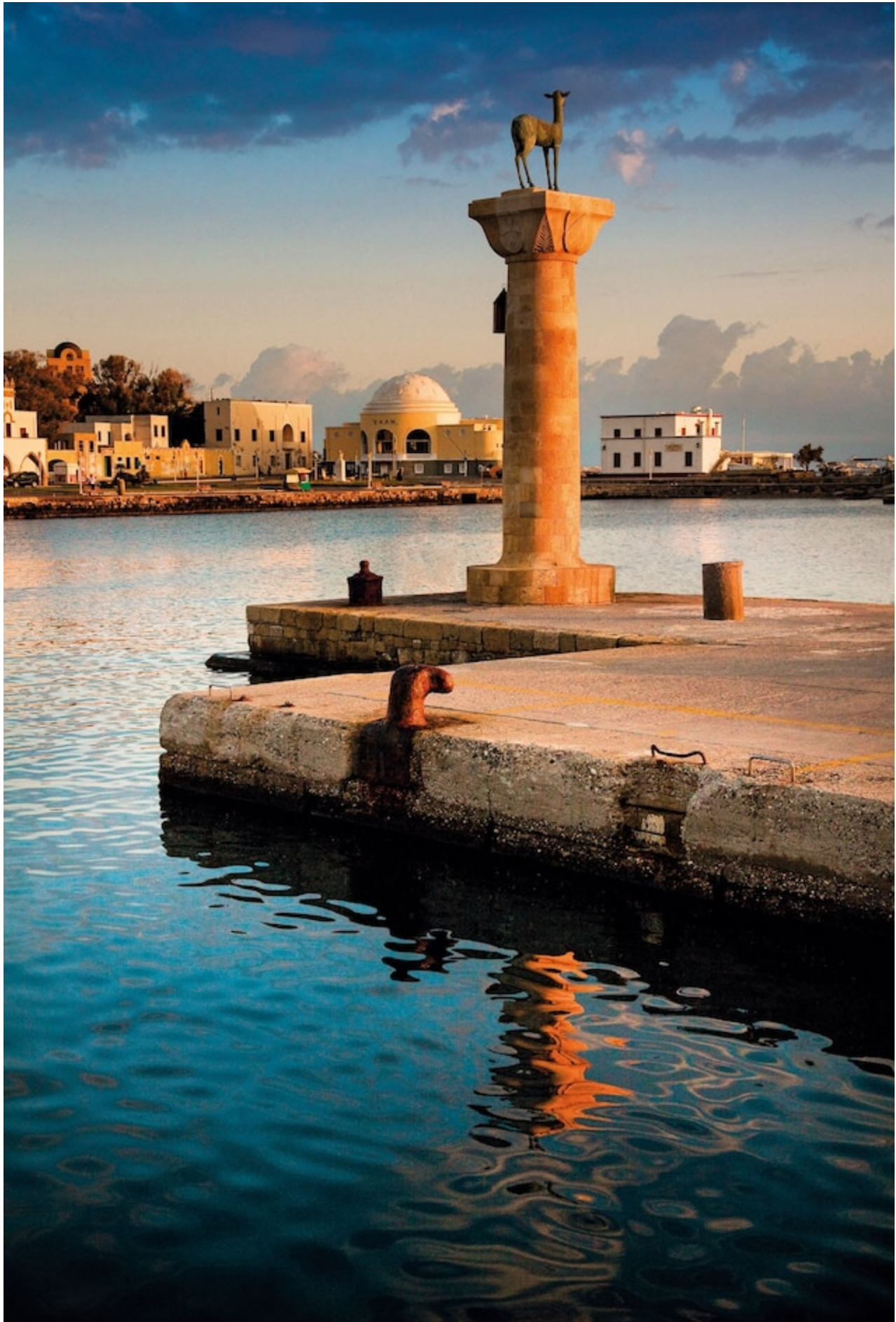
In antiquity, Rhodes grew wealthy from the trade that traveled through its harbor. The Rhodian navy protected the island's booming maritime economy from pirates until its decline in the second century B.C.
ANNA SERRANO/FOTOTECA 9X12

According to Thucydides, the Corinthians were the first to use their navy to suppress piracy. The huge expense and impracticality of large-scale naval campaigns, however, would have precluded many other states from these kinds of efforts. Consequently, throughout the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., the Greek states tried to curtail piracy using less expensive measures, including sporadic campaigns designed to "clear the seas of pirates"; the creation of alliances and pacts with specific language outlawing maritime banditry; the construction of naval outposts in regions popular with pirates; and the use of naval escorts to protect merchant shipping.

These measures proved fruitless in stopping the pirates. In the fourth century B.C., Alexander the Great believed attacks on his merchant shipping would threaten his planned invasion of Persia. He created the first truly international coalition against piracy to which his allies were expected to contribute. But following his death in 323 B.C., no power was strong or affluent enough to suppress piracy. In fact, Alexander's successors found that pirates could be turned to their advantage, either to directly menace their enemies, or by being incorporated into their own navies as auxiliary units.

Demetrius I of Macedon regularly employed pirates among his naval forces. The first-century B.C. historian Diodoros Siculus records that the spectacular array of vessels Demetrius deployed when blockading Rhodes included a number of pirates, the sight of which "brought great fear and panic to those who were watching." (Some pirates practiced democracy... when they weren't busy looting.)

Crime and divine punishment

A Roman mosaic from the house of Dionysus and Ulysses at Thugga (modern-day Dougga, Tunisia). Third century A.D. Bardo National Museum, Tunisia

Artists embraced piracyin their works, as in this third- century A.D. Roman mosaic. Uncovered in the House of Dionysus and Ulysses at Thugga (in modern Tunisia), it depicts, Dionysus, god of wine, aboard a pirate ship. Adapted from a tale that appears in the *Homeric Hymns* (a series of poems from the seventh and sixth centuries b.c.) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (A.D. 8), the god is kidnapped by pirates who believed him to be a mortal prince. When they try to tie Dionysus up, the ropes fall away. The helmsman warns that he must be a god, but the pirates take no notice. Suddenly, a vine springs from the top of the mast, and Dionysus turns into a lion. The terrified pirates jump into the sea and are turned into dolphins. In the mosaic, the figure of Dionysus is on the left (the head has been lost), and extends an arm toward his portly mentor, Silenus, who has his hand on the tiller.

Pirates of Rome

During the fourth and third-centuries B.C., Etruscan pirates posed a major threat to the merchants of Greece. They presented a particular menace to the island of Rhodes whose thriving economy was heavily dependent on the Adriatic shipping routes between Greece and

Italy. Rhodes therefore deployed its large, well-equipped navy to protect trading ships.

With the collapse of Rhodian naval power in 167 B.C., however, a strong check on piracy was removed. By the latter half of the second century B.C., it had once again become a considerable threat to Mediterranean shipping with the rise of the notorious Cilician pirates from the coastal region of modern-day Turkey. Cilicia's fearsome marauders targeted grain ships. Crews were captured and enslaved. Important or rich passengers were held hostage for ransom.

As Rome's agricultural and mining industries depended on a plentiful supply of cheap slaves, the Romans were initially willing to tolerate the Cilicians, but their tolerance came to an end in 75 B.C. when a group of Cilician pirates kidnapped a young Julius Caesar, and held him on the island of Farmakonisi. The first- and second-century historian Plutarch describes Caesar's blasé reaction to his 38-day captivity: He joined in their games, read aloud his speeches to them, and laughingly threatened to kill them all.

"The pirates were delighted at this," Plutarch wrote, "and attributed his boldness of speech to a certain simplicity and boyish mirth." As it turned out, they had fatally underestimated their captive. Once ransomed, he hunted down and imprisoned them. A little later, "he took the pirates out of prison and crucified the lot of them, just as he had often told them he would do when he was on the island and they imagined that he was joking."

Hermes, one of the divinities worshipped by Cilician pirates. Detail from a fifth-century B.C. Kilix. Louvre Museum, Paris
BRIDGEMAN/ACI

The sack of Rome's port town, Ostia, at the hands of pirates in 67 B.C. finally persuaded the Romans to undertake a more concerted and systematic effort to tackle piracy. A new law granted the Roman general Pompey the Great unprecedented authority and finances for combating this scourge of trade. (Here's how Pompey set the bar for Caesar's triumphs.)

In his *Life of Pompey,* the historian Plutarch paints a vivid picture of the scale of the challenge facing the general:

Their flutes and stringed instruments and drinking bouts along every coast, their seizures of persons in high command, and their ransoming of captured cities, were a disgrace to the Roman supremacy. For, you see, the ships of the pirates numbered more than a thousand, and the cities captured by them four hundred.

Accordingly, Pompey undertook a series of raids against the main pirate strongholds in the Mediterranean. Although thousands died at the hands of Pompey's troops, those that surrendered were issued pardons and given property and land in regions located far from the sea. These rewards enabled the recipient to make an honest living and diminished the attractions of piracy. Pompey's policy to blend pressure with persuasion was to be the most successful method of fighting piracy for much of the Roman period.

Roman general Pompey (in a first-century B.C. bust) launched a campaign against piracy in 67 B.C., which made the...
PRISMA/ALBUM

Pax Romana

By the death of <u>Augustus</u> in A.D. 14, virtually the whole Mediterranean coastline was under direct Roman control. This Pax Romana, the peace resulting from Rome's dominance, curtailed the activities of pirates. As traditional occupations such as farming and trading became more profitable, the risks and hardships of a life at sea became distinctly less attractive. The political and economic unity of the Roman Empire also encouraged greater cooperation when it came to eradicating piracy.

Nevertheless, like those before them, the Romans were never able to completely eradicate the practice. The occasional outbreak of piracy was typically suppressed by large-scale naval operations. These campaigns were aimed at locating and destroying the pirates' anchorages and fleets. One such operation occurred during the reign of Tiberius in the first century A.D. An honorific inscription commissioned by the citizens of Ilion (in modern-day Turkey) offers thanks to the Roman general Titus Valerius Proculus for "destroying the pirate groups in the Hellespont and for guarding the city in all ways without burdening it."

Although the Roman Empire had all but eradicated piracy at the height of its power, as its political and economic influence waned during late antiquity, the practice once again began to flourish in the Mediterranean. Even the powerful fleet of Byzantium did little to prevent piracy from becoming a great scourge to the region, and marauders once again terrorized the shipping lanes until the emergence of the formidable Arab and European navies in the early Medieval period.

On the bottom of the Mediterranean, maritime archaeologists have found remnants of third-century B.C. b...
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