

RESULTS FROM A TEST EXCAVATION AT GROOT KOMMANDOKLOOF SHELTER IN THE BAVIAANSKLOOF/KOUGA REGION, EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE*

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ABSTRACT

Groot Kommandokloof Shelter was excavated during the 1980s as part of a long term archaeological project in the Kouga/Baviaanskloof mountains. The bottom unit was dated to 6430 BP. Well-preserved botanical remains were recovered from the surface unit. Small underground plant species were ignored in favour of *Watsonia* sp. which was the main plant food collected. This, together with a large number of small ostrich eggshell chippings and other cultural material recovered from the surface unit, suggest that the site was used for special activities during the past ca 2000 years. Two human skeletons were also found.

INTRODUCTION

Groot Kommandokloof Shelter is one of several small shelters and caves test excavated during the 1980s in the Baviaanskloof/Kouga mountain region in the south-eastern Cape (Fig. 1). The project proposal, results from two other sites in this region and the present day environment have been discussed elsewhere (see Binneman 1997, 1998).

This small shelter (33.40 S; 24.07 E) is located in the heart of the Kouga Mountains some 900 m above sea level and 12 km in from the Baviaanskloof valley (Fig. 2). The shelter faces north-east and measures 18 m wide by 8 m deep and the roof is some 8 m high at the dripline (Fig. 3 & 4). The immediate environment consists of Table Mountain Sandstone and Mountain Fynbos. There is no standing water nearby and a small stream near the shelter only flows during heavy rains.

Due to its position, the shelter is exposed to direct sunlight for most of the early morning and protected from the westerly winds and winter rainfall. These favourable climatic conditions played an important role in preserving botanical remains in the surface unit.

Most of the rock art is badly faded, but there are still a few clear paintings visible along the back wall. Among the paintings are a white buck, finger prints, and several figures, of which at least one is painted in a trance posture.

During the first visit to the site a partly exposed skull

of a burial was discovered eroding from the shelter's surface. According to local people they visited the shelter occasionally to remove honey from a bee-hive in the roof of the shelter. During the visit an active hive and a long homemade ladder were encountered in the shelter, which led to the decision to excavate the skeleton before it could be disturbed or even removed by visitors.

The well-preserved botanical remains from the surface unit provided the chance to contrast the subsistence patterns between sites in the high mountains and the well-watered Baviaanskloof valley floor during the past ca 2000 years.

EXCAVATION AND DATING

The deposit was 0,50 m deep and the 9 units identified are described from bedrock to the surface. (Fig. 5).

Overlying bedrock was a thick layer of black carbonized organic material and ash (BCL), radiocarbon dated to 6430 ± 70 BP. A juvenile burial, resting on the rock floor and covered by a stone cairn, was found buried in a shallow hollow in this unit. BCL was rich in cultural material.

A thin layer of soft yellow loam and ash (YA) covered the stone cairn and BCL. Underlying YA, was thick layer of compacted red-brown loams and patches of grey and mottled white ash (RB/MA), also rich in cultural material. The hard orange ash was followed by a thin layer of soft yellow soil (SYS) fairly rich in cultural material.

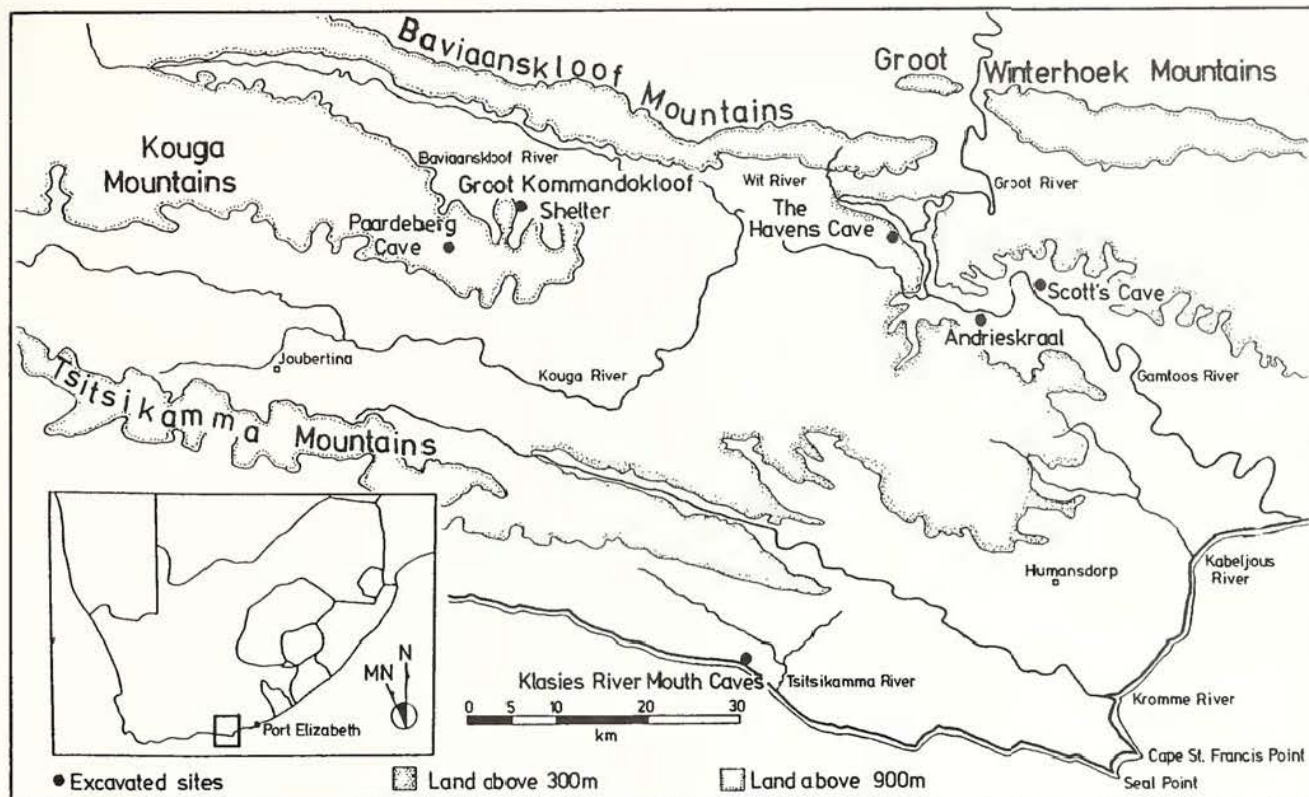


Fig. 1. Map of the south-eastern Cape and the location of Groot Kommandokloof shelter.

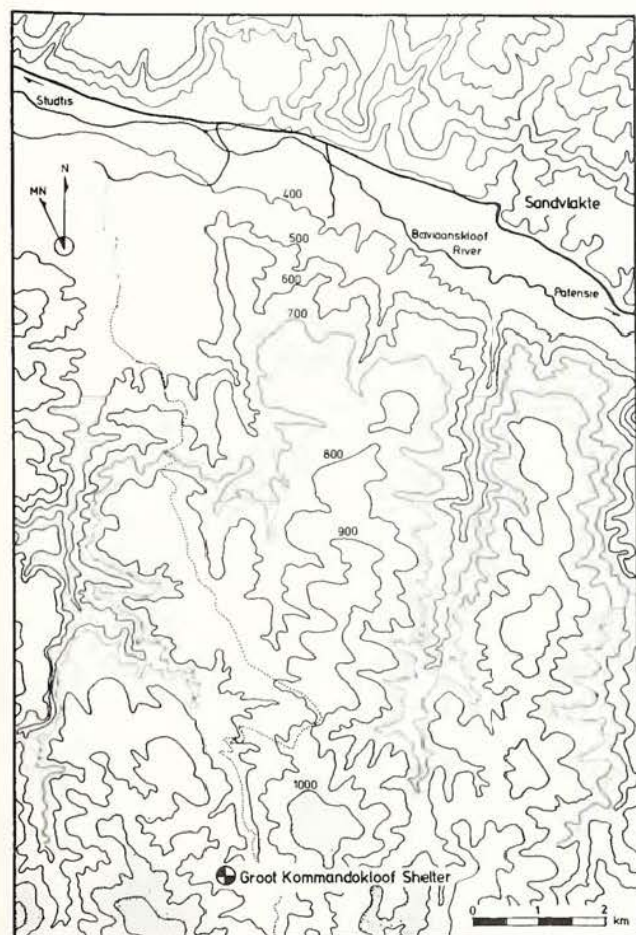


Fig. 2. Location of Groot Kommandokloof Shelter.

Overlying SYS was a hard, compacted orange ash (OA) with patches of white ash and a small circular ash feature with carbonized plant material (OA/AF). This was followed by thick layers of grey ash (GA) and hard compacted pink ash (PA). PA consisted of a thin lense in the front part of the square and was replaced by a shallow depression filled with soft grey loose soil (SGS) towards the rear of the cave.

The surface unit (Bedding), comprised thin layers of burnt and compacted unburnt plant material, mainly grasses, between 10 cm and 20 cm thick. Mixed with the grass were a wide range of edible and medicinal plant remains and botanical artefacts (Tables 1 & 2).

SUBSISTENCE AND DIET

Plant remains

Unlike the other sites investigated in the Kouga/Baviaanskloof mountains, *Cyperus usitatus* was totally absent from the bedding unit at Groot Kommandokloof Shelter. *Watsonia* sp. represented the bulk of the under ground plant food remains. *Freezia* sp. were also present in small quantities (Table 1). The only other plant food collected of any noticeable value was *Dioscorea elephantipes*. Seed remains were poorly represented at the site and even *Pappea capensis* and *Schotia* sp. remains were found only occasionally.

An interesting find was the abundant remains of *Protea nitida* Mill. ('waboom'). This tree grows in large numbers in the vicinity of the shelter. Although the remains probably entered the shelter as fire wood, the tree



Fig. 3. View of Groot kommandokloof Shelter.

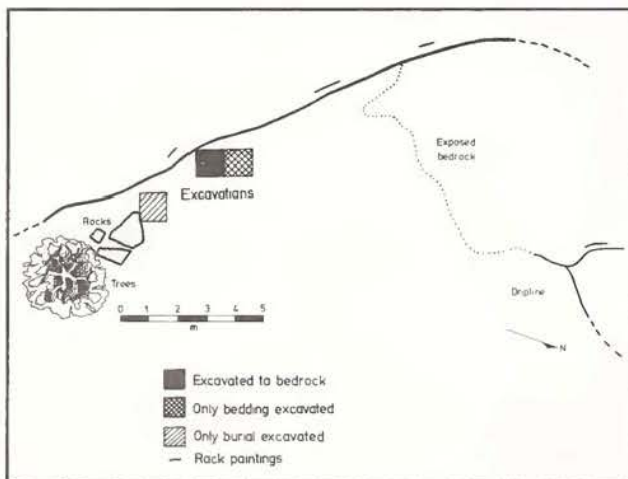


Fig. 4. Plan and excavations at Groot Kommandokloof Shelter.

has a wide variety of uses. Early settlers used the wood to manufacture felloes for wagon wheels. The leaves when crushed and mixed with water make a durable writing ink (one may speculate that it could have been used as paint or ingredient for paint). The bark can also be used to tan hides and for an infusion for treating diarrhoea (Coates Palgrave 1977:131).

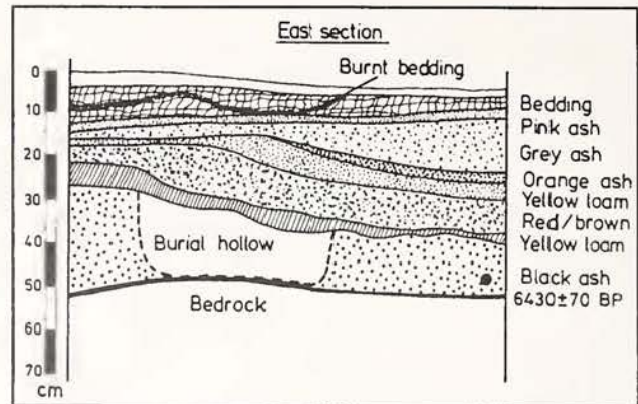


Fig. 5. Section drawing of the excavation.

Another medicinal plant not encountered at any of the other sites, was *Passerina cf. filiformis* L. The 'hottentots' drank a decoction of this plant for the relief of shooting pains (Watt & Breyer-Brandwijk 1962:1025). *Hypodiscus aristatus* remains were also common in the bedding unit and were collected for the seeds which were made into beads.

Faunal remains

The mammal remains are represented by mainly small animals such as *Procavia capensis*, *Lepus* sp, *Oreotragus oreotragus* and *Raphicerus* sp. with the occasional larger animals such as *Equus cf. zebra* (Table 3).

Marine shell fragments were found in all the units except for BCL. The shell remains were presumably collected and transported to the shelter for decorative purposes after visits to the coast or traded from people who did visit the coast.

CULTURAL REMAINS

Lithic remains

The lithic industry is similar to that described at THC (Table 4) (Binneman 1997). As expected, quartzite comprised between 51% and 78% of the raw material used at the site with quartz a distal second with between 17% and 44%. Other raw materials such as silcrete, hornfels and chalcedony were present in small quantities.

Formal tools however, were mainly manufactured from quartz crystals which were found throughout the sequence.

Non-lithic artefacts

Apart from the bedding unit, few non-lithic cultural items were recovered from the test excavation and remains were virtually absent from the bottom three units. There is a slight increase in non-lithic items upwards in the sequence, mainly due to the presence of ostrich eggshell (Table 5). Beads and fragments were relatively abundant in the bedding unit. A large number of small chips were found which suggest active bead manufacturing. Pottery was found only in the bedding unit and included two decorated fragments. A wide variety of botanical artefacts

Table 1. Analysis of bulk samples of plant remains from Groot Kommandokloof Shelter.

	Bedding
WEIGHT	
Unsieved	3997,5
1mm mesh	1179,2
3mm mesh	821,1
NON BOTANICAL	
Waste stone	218,8
Stone tools	158,0
Pottery	4,5
OES	3,3
Freshwater shell	0,4
Bone	26,1
Insects	0,2
Earth lumps	16,5
PROCESSED PLANT MATERIAL	
REEDS	
Fragments	0,4
cut	0,2
CYPERUS TEXTILIS	
cordage	0,1
matting	0,2
WOODEN ARTEFACTS	
pegs	1,2
shavings	12,0
GRASSES	
stems and bases	43,1
INFLORESCENCES	
<i>Themeda triandra</i>	0,1
<i>Hypodiscus aristatus</i>	2,4
<i>Protea nitida</i>	6,0
SEEDS AND FRUITS	
<i>Schotia</i> sp.pods	0,3
<i>Pappea capensis</i>	0,2
<i>Olea Capensis</i>	0,1
<i>Euclea</i> sp.	0,3
<i>Hypodiscus aristatus</i>	0,7
EDIBLE AND MEDICINAL	
<i>Watsonia</i> sp.	
corm tunics	5,6
corm bases	4,0
<i>Freezia/Tritonia</i> sp.	
corm tunics	0,1
corm bases	0,4
<i>Dioscorea elephantipes</i>	2,0
<i>Passerina filiformis</i>	0,4
<i>Grassula/Cotyledon</i> sp.	6,1
LEAVES	29,8
OTHER INCLUSIONS	
Charcoal	26,1
Twigs and bark	67,8
Thorns	0,1
<i>H. aristatus</i> stems	1,7
Misc. unidentified	14,5
BOTANICAL ARTEFACTS	
Seed beads	0,1
Grass bangle	0,2

Table 2. Frequencies of pottery and bothanical artefacts from Groot Kommandokloof Shelter.

POTTERY	
Fragments	36
R/decoration	1
B/decoration	1
Total	38
WOOD	
Pegs	5
Fire drills	
female	1
Cut pieces	2
Shavings	*
Total	8
REED	
Cut/notched	1
Ochre stained	1
Total	2
CYPERUS	
Cordage	3
Matting	15
Netting	2
Total	20
SEED BEADS	
<i>H. aristatus</i>	12
OTHER ARTEFACTS	
Plant bangles	1
Total	1
OTHER INCLUSIONS	
Mastic	1
Total	1
* Present in relatively large numbers	

were recovered from the excavation which included fragments of cordage, matting, netting, wooden pegs, wood shavings and seed beads.

BURIALS

KK1/1

The burial was situated one metre from the back wall of the shelter. The skull was partly exposed when discovered and displayed a peculiar oval shaped hole on

Table 3. Faunal Remains from Groot Kommandokloof Shelter.

	BED	PA	SGA	GA	OA	SYS	RB	YA	BCL	TOTAL
MAMMALS										
Small carnivore						1				1
<i>Procapra capensis</i>	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	10
<i>Equus cf zebra</i>	1									1
<i>Raphicerus</i> sp.		1	1		1	1	1	1		6
<i>Oreotragus oreotragus</i>	1						1		1	3
<i>Lepus</i> sp.							1	1	1	3
Bovidae - general										
small				1						1
small medium	1			1	1	1			1	5
large medium									1	1
TOTAL	4	2	2	3	4	4	4	3	5	31
REPTILES (tortoise)	*	*								
MARINE SHELL										
<i>Perna perna</i>	1	2	2	1	1	1	1			9
<i>Patella</i> sp.		1				1				2
<i>Donax serra</i>	1		1	1		1	1	1		6
<i>Marginella</i> sp.					1					1
<i>Turbo sarmaticus</i>						1	1	1		3
<i>Haliotis</i> sp.						1				1
<i>Conus</i> sp.	2									2
Barnacle				1						1
Unidentified						1				1
TOTAL	4	3	3	3	2	6	3	2		26
FRESHWATER SHELL										
<i>Unio caffer</i>	1									1
TOTAL	1									1
LANDSNAIL										
<i>Acatina zebra</i>			1	1	1	1				
Total			1	1	1	1				4
* Present										

the right parietal bone (Fig. 6). The burial was that of a woman approximately thirty years of age (P. Rightmire pers. comm.). No bone growth is visible in the damaged area and it is not known whether the hole caused the individual's death.

It is clear from Figure 7 that the bones of the skeleton were disturbed, possibly by rodents or even re-burial. The entire shallow grave hollow consisted of a rodent burrow. Some of the bones, such as the atlas, were found nearly 40 cm from the first vertebra. The skull has moved about 20 cm.

Notwithstanding, it would appear that the woman was buried on her right side in a flexed position, presumably

facing in an easterly or north-easterly direction. At least one large flat grindstone covered the remains although there could have been more stones. Three copper beads and a tortoise bone pendant were the only grave goods found with the burial.

KK1/2

Another burial, that of a juvenile, was found on bedrock in the test pit excavated against the back wall. The juvenile was lying on its right side in a stretched out position (Fig. 8a). A large pile of fifteen stones covered the remains (Fig. 8b). The cairn of stones included ochre stained hammerstones, anvils, flaked cobbles, flakes and

Table 4. Frequencies of stone artefacts from Groot Kommandokloof Shelter.

	BED	PA	SGA	GA	OA	SYS	RB	YA	BCL	TOTAL
WASTE										
Chips	342	579	465	502	370	763	1431	219	2082	6753
Chunks	11	19	16	17	13	22	19	5	38	160
Cores	3	-	2	4	-	7	19	-	21	56
CRP	1	14	8	6	6	16	33	3	59	146
Flakes	441	559	565	585	333	783	1267	199	1687	6419
TOTAL WASTE	797	1171	1056	1114	722	1591	2769	426	3887	13533
Waste as % of Grand Total	98,3	97,6	99,0	99,1	98,1	97,7	98,3	97,3	97,7	98,1
UTILISED										
Flakes	4	7	2	1	-	4	2	-	14	34
Hammerstones	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Hammerst/rubbers	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	2
TOTAL UTILIZED	4	7	3	1	-	4	4	-	14	37
Utilized as % of Grand Total	0,5	0,6	0,3	0,1	-	0,5	0,2	-	0,4	0,3
FORMAL TOOLS										
Scrapers	5	11	3	8	11	28	36	12	62	176
Adzes	1	2	2	-	1	1	-	-	2	9
Cobble adze	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Grindstone/adze	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Segments	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	2
Borers	1	1	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	4
Backed blades	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Misc. retouched	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	2
Bored stone	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
TOTAL FORMAL	10	15	5	8	14	29	39	12	65	197
Formal tool as % of Grand Total	1,2	1,8	0,7	0,8	1,9	2,0	1,5	2,7	2,0	1,7
GRAND TOTAL	811	1200	1067	1124	736	1628	2816	438	3980	13 800
OTHER										
Ochre (grams)	30,4	31,4	47,6	24,6	12,6	56,2	46,7	2,4	63,3	
Shale (grams)	-	3,6	8,1	59,6	1,4	38,6	18,6	0,1	408,5	
Crystals	-	11	7	7	6	13	22	-	46	

rock. Among these was a stone with a possible human figure 'painted' in back on it (Binneman & Hall 1993). Underneath the cairn were two large flat grindstones, placed directly on top of the skeleton. One was red ochre stained (Fig. 8c).

DISCUSSION

Although the samples from the test excavation at Groot Kommandokloof Shelter are small, which obviously limit the degree of explanations and interpretations, valuable archaeological information is nevertheless gained. In

general the data supports observations from the Wilton units at other sites in the region, such as The Havens Cave for the past ca 6400 years.

A wide range of botanical species were exploited (bedding unit), but when compared with The Havens Cave and Kleinpoort Shelter (the other two sites previously discussed in the area), differences are visible. Small underground plant foods such as *Cyperus usitatus* were absent from the site. Instead larger species such as *Watsonia* sp. and *Freezia* sp. were preferred. This may suggest that a more specialised or selective collecting strategy of plant foods was practiced at Groot Kommando-

Table 5. Frequencies of shell and bone from Groot Kommandokloof Shelter.

	BED	PA	SGA	GA	OA	SYS	RB	YA	BCL	TOTAL
OSTRICH EGGSHELL										
Fragments	85	19	23	13	21	27	8		1	197
Roughouts	7	1	1	4	1	4				18
Beads	14	13	6	4	3	2	1		1	44
Pendants		1	1							2
Container apertures						1				1
Decorated pieces						1				1
TOTAL	106	34	31	21	25	35	9		2	263
MARINE SHELL BEADS										
<i>Nassarius kraussianus</i>			2						1	3
<i>Burnupena</i> sp.	1									1
TOTAL	1		2						1	4
BONE										
Ochre stained	1									1
Utilised	1									1
TOTAL	2									2



Fig. 6. Burial KK1/1. Note the peculiar hole in the skull.

kloof Shelter. The site was probably occupied for short periods at specific points in time to coincide with the availability of certain underground plant foods such as *Watsonia* sp. It can be speculated that these plant foods could support fairly large groups for short periods of time, *i.e.*, seasonal aggregation. It is interesting that no storage pits were found at KK1 and that *P. capensis* and



Fig. 7. Burial KK1/1. Note the movement of the bones.

other seeds were virtually absent (this may be due to sampling).

There are also other indicators, from the bedding unit in particular, which support the above speculation that Groot Kommandokloof Shelter was occupied for group activities at specific times of the year. Large numbers of wood shavings indicate active manufacturing as well as maintenance of wooden artefacts. A relatively high frequency of small ostrich eggshell chips, fragments, roughouts and beads and *H. aristatus* seeds and completed beads suggest active ornamental manufacturing (social production) at the site. 'Trance figures' among the rock



Fig. 8. Burial KK1/2. a. The skull is visible next to the cairn (top left). The arrow points to the possible 'painted figure'. b. The two large flat grindstones placed on top of the skeleton. c. The skeleton in a stretched position.

paintings depicted on the walls also suggest social ceremonies such as trance and healing dances, activities which usually take place during the aggregation phase.

The use of raw material was similar to that at The Havens Cave. Quartzite was the dominant raw material while quartz crystals were preferred for the manufacture of formal tools and other raw materials comprised less than 5,0%.

Raw materials also supply important clues to the spatial meaning of the Baviaanskloof sites in relation to sites elsewhere. Silcrete which was an important raw material at Paardeberg Cave (between 22% and 46% - unpublished report) across the Kouga mountains some 12 km away, was virtually absent at Groot Kommandokloof Shelter. The raw material evidence support the assumption made earlier that a symbolic boundary of some sort existed between groups in the Baviaanskloof and the Langkloof (Binneman 1996, 1997).

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