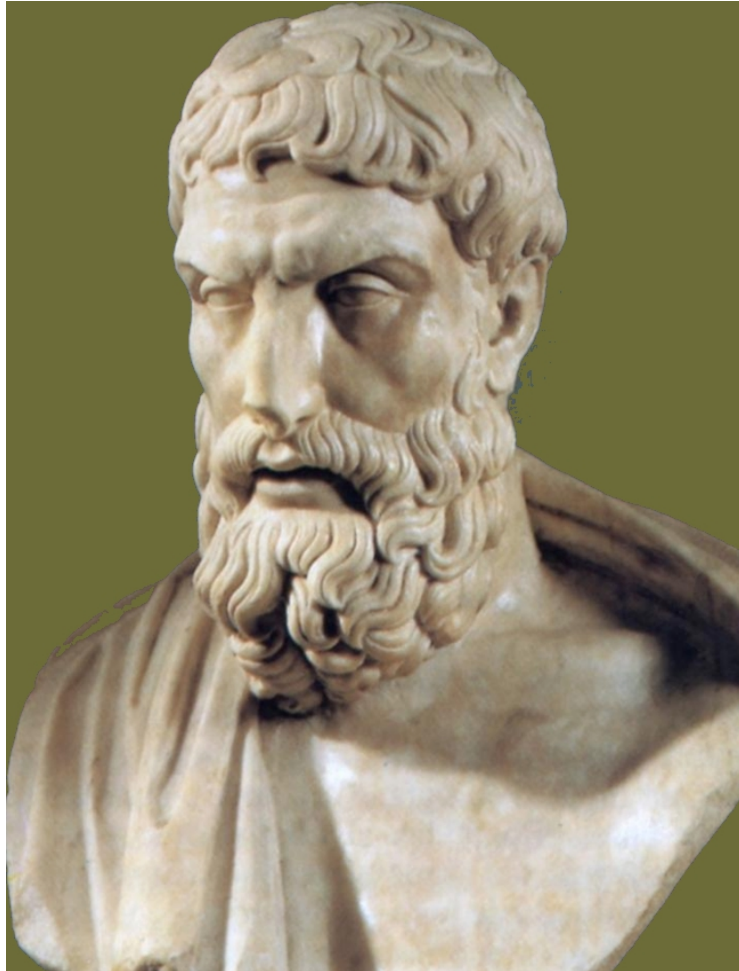


# How the portrait of the Athenian philosopher Epicurus became known to us

Takis Panagiotopoulos<sup>1</sup>



*The Athenian philosopher Epicurus  
Bust from pentelic marble - Museum Capitoline Rome*

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<sup>1</sup> First published in “Anthology of Epicurean Philosophy” in the Greek language. Many thanks to Dimitri Lostromo and to Rachel Forides for helping with the translation.

The Athenian philosopher Epicurus, lived from 341 to 270 BC. His Philosophy quickly spread to many places, even throughout his times. Diogenes Laertius<sup>2</sup> says of Epicurus: *"his own country honored him with bronze statues, his friends who were so numerous that they could not be counted in whole cities"*.

In the following centuries Epicurean philosophy continued expanding throughout the civilized world. The portrait of Epicurus was always a point of reference and was particularly prevalent. Cicero in his work «De finibus» states that the Roman Epicurean Atticus<sup>3</sup> said: *"Even if we wanted to we cannot forget how Epicurus looks, and this is because the Epicureans have his image not only in paintings but also in cups and rings"*.<sup>4</sup>

In the years that followed, the decline of the Roman Empire and the prevalence of Christianity marked the beginning of an era that led to the collapse of Greek civilisation and its replacement by the Middle Ages. Epicurean philosophy was swept by the whirlwind of these dark times and almost disappeared. The writings of Epicurus and other Epicureans Philosophers was destroyed, the same fate awaited the plethora of their portraits. Busts and statues were shattered, buried or incorporated as building materials into temporary housing structures.

Until the 12th century we cannot find any substantial written work by Epicurus, except an abusive reference in the lexicon «Suda»<sup>5</sup>. From the 12th till the 14th century there are only a few references to Epicurean philosophy, based on sources from Cicero, Seneca and Augustine. The authentic Epicurean sources known nowadays to us were not accessible to thinkers of that era. Leonidas A. Alexandridis states (2014 p.133): *"Only a millennium after the destruction of Epicurean written works and monuments, did it become possible to reconstruct the thoughts of the philosopher, in particular the finding in 1417 of the amazing poem by Lucretius «De Rerum Natura», dated the first century BC and the collating -the 3rd AD century- Diogenes Laertius made of the major philosophical schools of antiquity."* After the destruction, the portraits and the authentic writings of Epicurus were unknown for many centuries.

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<sup>2</sup> Diogenes Laertius, Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, Book 10

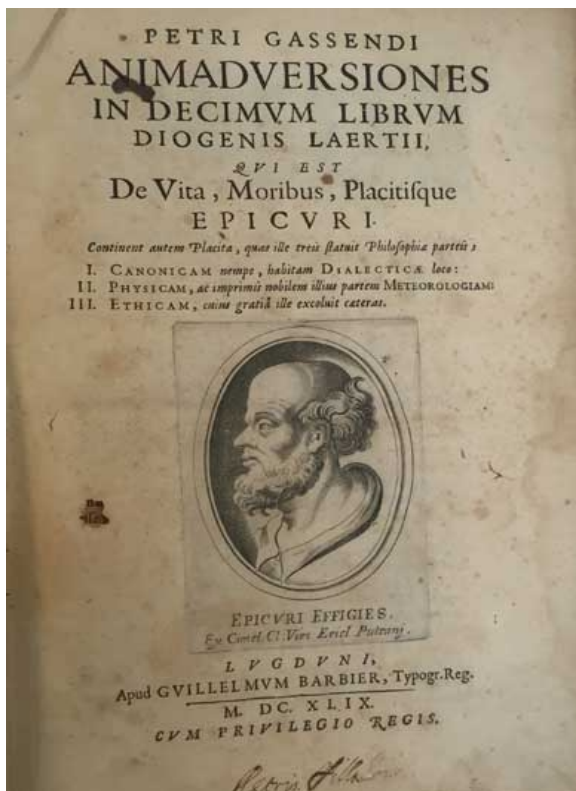
<sup>3</sup> Titus Pomponius Atticus, Rome 110-32 BC

<sup>4</sup> *"...nec tamen Epicuri licet oblivisci, si cupiam, cuius imaginem non modo in tabulis nostri familiares, sed etiam in poculis et in anulis habent"*. - Cicero, De finibus 5.3.

<sup>5</sup> Suda lexikon 10<sup>o</sup> c. AC.

### **Attempts to recover the portrait of Epicurus**

In the process of recovering the Epicurean writings that were rescued in the above mentioned works, scholars of the Renaissance were impressed by Epicurus. They wanted to restore, not only his writings but also the essence of his philosophy, and to find his portrait. Initially, their research was unsuccessful. Early archaeology had brought to light many portraits of philosophers, but unfortunately they were anonymous. They could only speculate as to the portrait of the philosopher Epicurus.



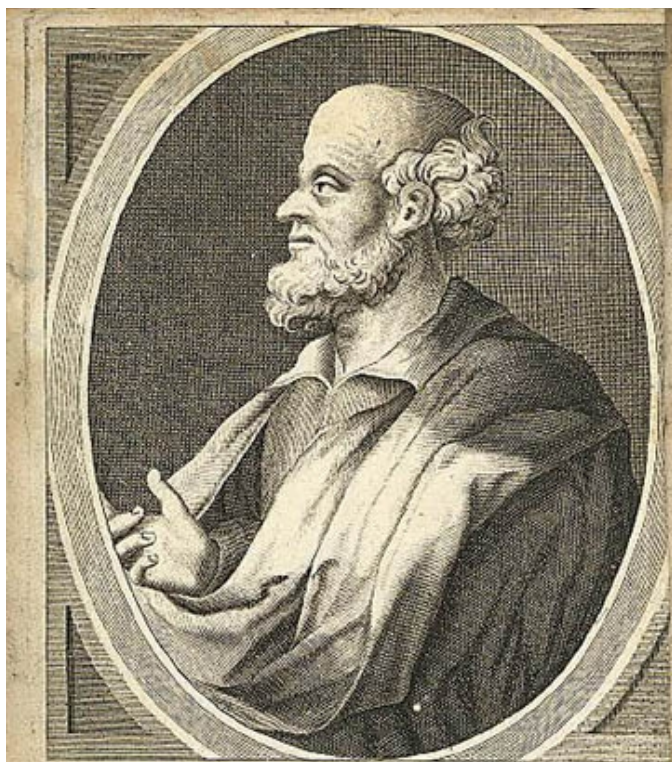
*Epicurus Gassendi, a sketch by Puteanus*

Bernard Fischer<sup>6</sup>, (1981, p.130), states that Gassendi in his famous work «Animadversiones in librum X Diogenis Laertii» in 1647, had included a picture of Epicurus, as it was conceptualised by Puteanus who had first published a letter to Maximilianus Plovverius several years before, in 1612. In the second edition of his work, in 1656, Gassendi preferred to use the sketch of Hernicus Howenius.

<sup>6</sup> Professor Bernard Frischer is a leading virtual archaeologist and the author of seven printed books, three e-books, and dozens of articles on virtual heritage, Classics, and the survival of the Classical world. <http://frischer.org/>

Jean-Marie Guyau<sup>7</sup>, states in his work «Le morale d 'Épicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines», in 1878, a translation by Leonidas A. Alexandridis "He had (Gassendi) in his hands two copies of Epicurus: one was sent by his friend Naude, the other, made according to a sculpture, given by Henri Dupuy, a philologist from Louvain. Gassendi mentions himself the eulogistic inscription in which Henri Dupuy had accompanied the portrait with these words:

*“Admire, my friend, the soul of a great man who still breathes through his characteristics. It is Epicurus, with his gaze and his visage. Admire this picture, as it justifiably draws all eyes”.*<sup>8</sup>



*Epicurus Howenius*



*Epicurus Ludovisi*

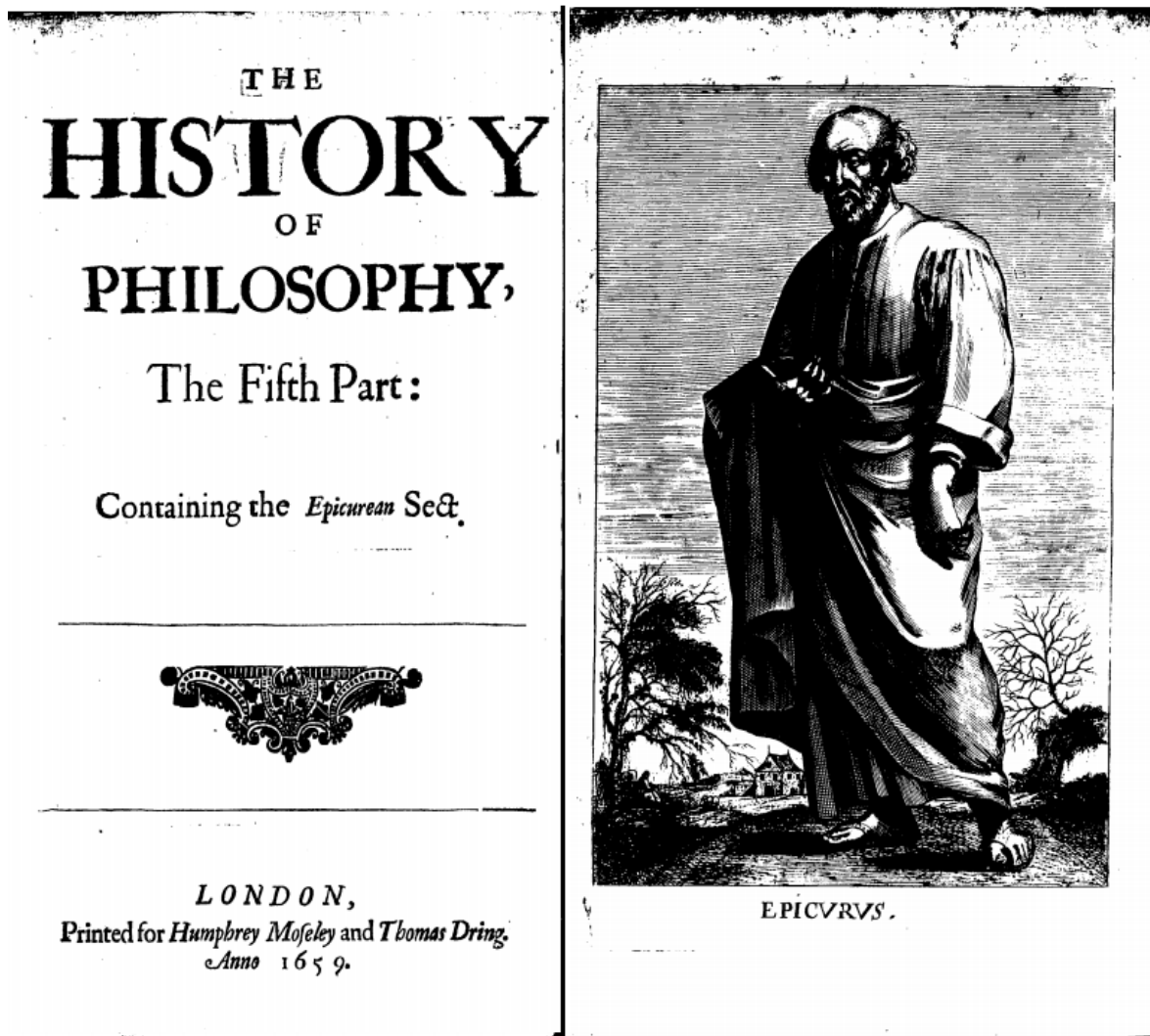
In 1667 Gabriel Naude published his «Epistolae». In his letter to Gassendi he mentions the sketching of Epicurus had been produced from a statue found at Villa Ludovisi in Rome with the help of the painter Henricus Howenius.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Marie Guyau (1854-1888) French philosopher

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Marie Guyau, 1878, «*Le morale d 'Épicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines*», Greek translation by Leonidas A. Alexandridi.

<sup>9</sup> Epicurus Gassendi as picture had publish in 3d and 4th Panhellenic Symposium Epicurean Philosophy by C.Yapijakis (2013, p.179) and by Leonidas Alexandridi (2014, p.134)

In 1660 «The history of philosophy» written and released by Thomas Stanley contained a presentation of the Epicurean philosophy from Gassendi's work, an English translation from the Latin prototype. Another attempt was made to portray the philosopher Epicurus, speculatively indeed.



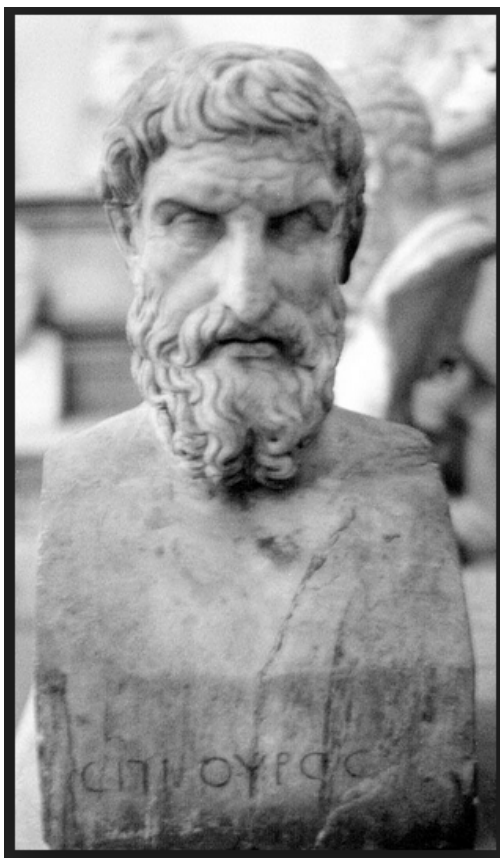
*Speculative image of Epicurus by Thomas Stanley, 1659*

The efforts to identify the portrait of Epicurus continued for many years thereafter. Archaeology at that time discovered more sculptures and portraits of philosophers, without any of these being inscribed as the philosopher Epicurus. Noting the same occurred with other philosophers, as with Diogenes. So identifying the portrait of Epicurus became impossible. However, we read in Bernard Frischer's book, «The Sculpted

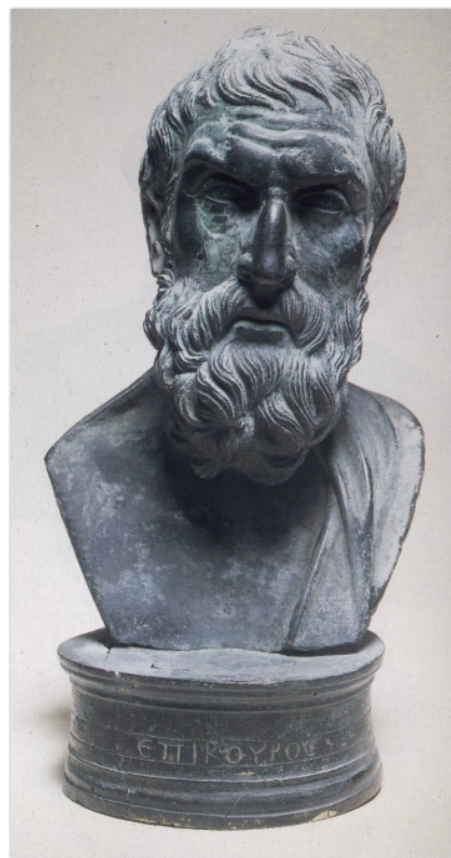
Word: Epicureanism and Philosophical Recruitment in Ancient Greece», there were many who embarked on bearing Epicurus as the philosopher of the anonymous statues and portraits. All attempts proved unsuccessful. This was confirmed by benevolent fate when the first portrait of Epicurus was discovered which did bear his name.

### **The inscribed busts of Epicurus**

The discovery happened only just in 1742 in Rome. During works on the construction of a portico in the church St Maria Maggiore, they accidentally discovered the first double bust of Epicurus and Mitrodorus, where their names were inscribed (Frischer, 1982, p. 151).



*The marble bust from St Maria Maggiore<sup>10</sup> Rome, with the name of Epicurus.  
Museums Capitolini, Rome*



*The bronze bust from Vila dei Papiri with the name of Epicurus<sup>11</sup>.  
Museum of Napoli.*

<sup>10</sup> Nearby, in Villa Casali, founded at 1775 a same double bust. The British Museum «*The Townley Gallery*», 1836, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> At the same place they found the bust of Hermarhus the first scholar of the Garden after Epicurus.

The double bust was immediately placed in the collection of Pope Benedict 14<sup>th</sup> (The British Museum, 1836, p.14). This discovery was grand because finally the portrait of Epicurus and Mitrodorus became known. As an aftermath, it helped identify the remaining anonymous busts.

In 1753 a second discovery happened, a small bronze inscribed bust of Epicurus was found in the Villa of Papyrus at Herculaneum, Italy, amongst the ashes of Vesuvius. In this way, we have conclusive confirmation of Epicurus portrait. In total to this day, thirty busts of Epicurus have been discovered, all copies from the Roman period of Hellenistic prototypes, as Bernard Frischer states (1982, p. 175), "*After so many centuries, we met again the gentle character of this great philosopher*".

### **Statues of Epicurus**

Today we know of seven statues that depict Epicurus, unfortunately without their heads. They all have the same theme, the philosopher seated, wearing a tunic and holding a rolled papyrus. Just in 1912 it became known that these types of statues depicted Epicurus, (Bernard Frischer, 1982 pg. 155).



*Statue of Epicurus without the head.*

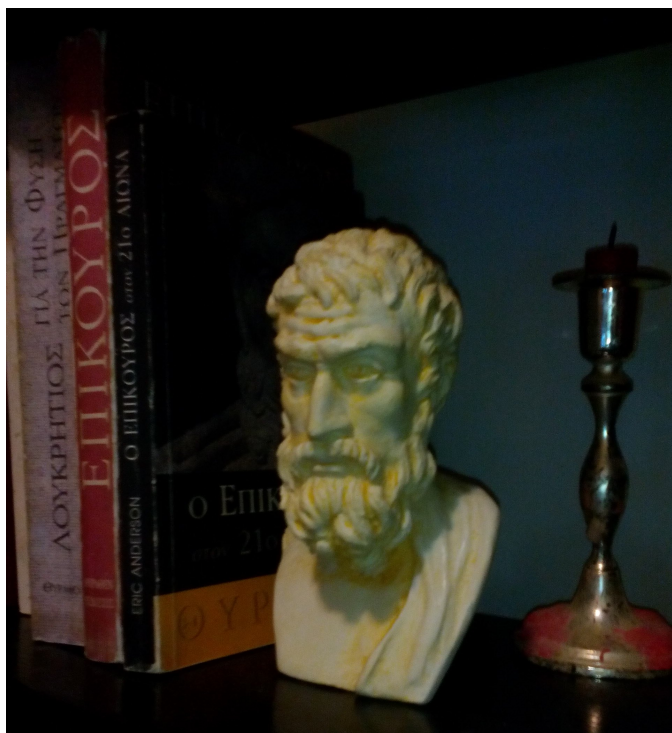
*Discovered by archaeologist Georgios Dontas in Athens, late 60s.*

The last two statues were found by the Greek archaeologist George Dontas, in the area between Kerameikos and Metaxourgeio in the 1960's, as reported by the same (Dontas, Archeological Paper, 1971).

In this area five statues were found in total, of normal size, fitted in a rough building "an age of desolation" as Dontas characteristically states. Two statues belong to Epicurus and are copies of a famous statue of the philosopher made between 270 and 280 BC. They are made of pentelic marble. The remaining statues belong to others Epicurean philosophers. Unfortunately they are all without heads. According to these findings, Dontas speculates that this area must have housed the philosophical school of Epicurus, the Garden. The location of the Garden and the article by Donta have already been discussed by the friends of Epicurean philosophy. (Yapijakis, 2010).

### **The portrait of Epicurus in our epoch**

Nowadays the portrait of Epicurus has the same sentiment as it did in antiquity for friends of Epicurean philosophy and beyond. The bust of Epicurus apart from existing in museums, also exists in picture form in plethora of books and websites. He has inspired artists to create his form in our modern times in paintings.



*Epicurus bust  
by Exikias Trivoulides*

In foreign museums modern copies of his busts are available. Recently, three-dimensional printing technology was used to produce busts out of various materials.



In Greece the painter Evi Sarantea<sup>12</sup> made "The Portrait of Epicurus" (2012) and the sculptor Exikias Trivoulides made a copy of "Epicurus bust" (2015), for the first time in modern Greece.



*"In my painting, I have shown the face of Epicurus as long and narrow, with a small mouth, and sparse hair coming down on to the forehead - as he is shown in the bronze copy of the head of the original of the first half of the third century BC which is exhibited in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, also taking other evidence into account. The typical deep wrinkling of the brow suggests intense and constant intellectual activity, while the rest of the face exudes the calm and imposing qualities which the philosopher has made his own".<sup>13</sup> Evi Sarantea*

*Epicurus portrait  
by Evi Sarantea*

## **Epilogue**

By benevolent luck and from research of enlightened people, but also from the admiration of all Epicureans of all times towards the great philosopher, that even today "we cannot forget the portrait of Epicurus even if we wanted to, because, the Epicureans have his image not only in paintings but also in bowls and rings ..." as said from ancient times by Atticus.

Athens 2017

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<sup>12</sup> Evi Sarantea works - [www.akg-images.de](http://www.akg-images.de)

<sup>13</sup> From the book INSIDE THE STATUE, REPRESENTATIONS OF ANCIENT GREEK BASED SCULPTURES p.149-150 (Greek edition) ΤΟ ΕΝΤΟΣ ΑΓΑΛΜΑ, ΑΝΑΠΑΡΑΣΤΑΣΕΙΣ ΑΡΧΑΙΩΝ ΕΛΛΗΝΩΝ ΒΑΣΙΖΟΜΕΝΕΣ ΣΕ ΓΛΥΠΤΑ, Εκδόσεις ΠΕΡΙΠΛΟΥΣ

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