A designed cyclic analogue of gomesin has potent activity against Staphylococcus aureus biofilms

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Background: Infections caused by bacterial biofilms are very difficult to treat. The use of currently approved antibiotics even at high dosages often fails, making the treatment of these infections very challenging. Novel antimicrobial agents that use distinct mechanisms of action are urgently needed.

Objectives: To explore the use of [G1K,K8R]cGm, a designed cyclic analogue of the antimicrobial peptide gomesin, as an alternative approach to treat biofilm infections.

Methods: We studied the activity of [G1K,K8R]cGm against biofilms of Staphylococcus aureus, a pathogen associated with several biofilm-related infections. A combination of atomic force and real-time confocal laser scanning microscopies was used to study the mechanism of action of the peptide.

Results: The peptide demonstrated potent activity against 24 h-preformed biofilms through a concentration-dependent ability to kill biofilm-embedded cells. Mechanistic studies showed that [G1K,K8R]cGm causes morphological changes on bacterial cells and permeabilizes their membranes across the biofilm with a half-time of 65 min. We also tested an analogue of [G1K,K8R]cGm without disulphide bonds, and a linear unfolded analogue, and found both to be inactive.

Conclusions: The results suggest that the 3D structure of [G1K,K8R]cGm and its stabilization by disulphide bonds are essential for its antibacterial and antibiofilm activities. Moreover, our findings support the potential application of this stable cyclic antimicrobial peptide to fight bacterial biofilms.

Introduction

Biofilms comprise aggregates of bacterial cells encased in a matrix of self-produced extracellular polymeric substances (EPS), e.g. polysaccharides, proteins and extracellular DNA (eDNA).1,2 These biofilms are responsible for many chronic and persistent infections that occur in the human body, such as lung infections in cystic fibrosis patients or chronic wound infections,3–5 and are frequently involved in medical device-associated infections.6,7 The treatment of these infections is often difficult as biofilm-embedded bacteria can escape the host immune system and are more tolerant to conventional antibiotics than bacteria in the planktonic form.7 Tolerance mechanisms include the reduced diffusion or sequestration of antibiotics in the EPS matrix, and the slow growth rate of biofilm-embedded cells that hinders antibiotic activity, as they usually target metabolic active processes. Novel antimicrobial agents that are active against bacterial biofilms are urgently needed and antimicrobial peptides (AMPs) are a promising option.8,9 Although AMPs are a diverse group of molecules, most have short amino acid sequences, a high...
content of cationic and hydrophobic residues, and broad-spectrum activity. Furthermore, their main mechanism of action involves the disruption of bacterial membranes, giving them the ability to kill slow-growing and non-growing bacteria in biofilms. Gomesin (Gm) is a cationic 18-residue AMP originally isolated from the haemocytes of the Brazilian spider Acanthoscurrria gomesiana. Structurally, the peptide consists of a β-hairpin, where two antiparallel β-strands are connected by a loop and stabilized by two disulphide bonds (Cys2-15 and Cys6-11) in a parallel arrangement, which are crucial for its antimicrobial activity and resistance to serum proteases. Gm is also known for its anticancer, antimalarial, and anticytotoxic activity and anti-Leishmania activity. Mechanistic studies suggest that the activity of the peptide is, at least partially, dependent on its ability to interact and permeabilize anionic lipid membranes. Several studies have shown that cyclic peptides have increased antimicrobial activity compared with their linear analogues. For example, the cyclic peptide labaditin, derived from the plant Jatropha multifida, revealed strong activity against planktonic Staphylococcus aureus, in contrast to its linear analogue that was ineffective, indicating that its cyclic structure is essential for antimicrobial activity. In another study, it was shown that cyclization of the peptide cryptdin-4 (Crp4), an α-defensin with a triple-stranded antiparallel β-sheet, resulted in improved antimicrobial activity against several Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria compared with the native peptide, while maintaining a low haemolytic activity and high stability in human serum.

In the case of a cyclic analogue of gomesin, cGm, backbone cyclization increased serum stability and enhanced anticancer and antimarial activities when compared with the native peptide, but no significant improvement in the activity against Escherichia coli was observed. However, the rationally designed cGm analogue, [G1K,K8R]cGm (Figure 1a), exhibits a 10-fold increase in potency against Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria, compared with native Gm or cGm (e.g. MIC against S. aureus is 32 μM for cGm and 2 μM for [G1K,K8R]cGm), while maintaining high stability in serum and low haemolytic activity (HC₅₀ > 64 μM). This peptide was obtained by replacing Gly1 with Lys, and Lys8 with Arg, and has a net charge of +7, whereas cGm has a net charge of +6, at pH 7.4. Mechanistic studies showed that the antimicrobial activity of [G1K,K8R]cGm is dependent on its ability to bind and disrupt the bacterial membrane after penetrating the outer protective layer. Despite the demonstrated potential of Gm and its cyclic analogues against bacteria in the planktonic form, to the best of our knowledge there are no studies on their activity against bacterial biofilms. In the present study, we show that the cGm analogue [G1K,K8R]cGm has potent activity against biofilms of S. aureus, a Gram-positive bacterium frequently associated with biofilm-related infections. Using a combination of atomic force and confocal laser scanning microscopies we found that the mechanism of action of the peptide involves membrane disruption of biofilm-embedded cells. In addition, using a backbone cyclized analogue without disulphide bonds ([G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced, Figure 1b), and a linear and unfolded analogue (lin[G1K,K8R]cGm, Figure 1c), we were able to demonstrate the importance of the [G1K,K8R]cGm folding for its antibacterial and antibiofilm activities.

Methods

Peptide synthesis, folding and purification

Peptides were assembled using Fmoc solid-phase chemistry on 2-chlorotrityl chloride resin. [G1K,K8R]cGm was synthesized, cyclized and folded using methodology reported by Cheneval et al. Disulphide bond formation and correct connectivity was confirmed using 1D 1H NMR spectroscopy (Figure S1, available as Supplementary data at JAC Online) on a Bruker Avance 600 MHz spectrometer (Billerica, USA). The backbone cyclized analogue without disulphide bonds, [G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced, and the linear analogue, lin[G1K,K8R]cGm, have the four Cys (Cys2, 6, 11 and 15) of [G1K,K8R]cGm replaced with the unnatural amino acid l-2-aminoxybutyric acid. Analysis of the 1D NMR spectra of these two analogues showed poor separation of resonance signals (Figure S1), suggesting that both are unstructured. The masses of the peptides were confirmed using electrospray ionisation mass spectrometry (Table S1) and both peptides were ≥95% pure, as confirmed by reversed-phase HPLC (RP-HPLC) (Figure S2). To prepare stock solutions, lyophilized peptides were weighed out on a high-precision analytical microbalance, dissolved in sterile Milli-Q water and peptide concentration was determined by absorbance at 280 nm (Table S1). Aliquots were stored at −20°C.

Bacterial strain and growth conditions

S. aureus strain ATCC 6538 was purchased from ATCC (Manassas, VA, USA). S. aureus planktonic bacteria were grown in Mueller–Hinton Broth (MHB) (BD, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA), for 18 h, at 37°C. S. aureus bacterial biofilms were grown in tryptic soy broth (TSB) (BD) containing 0.25% (w/v) glucose (TSBG), for 24 h, at 37°C, to allow biofilm formation.

Activity against planktonic bacteria

The ability of [G1K,K8R]cGm, [G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced and lin[G1K,K8R] cGm to inhibit bacterial growth was evaluated by determining the MIC using a standard broth microdilution procedure, as previously described. S. aureus suspensions were prepared in MHB to a final concentration of 1x10⁶ cfu/mL and incubated for 18 h at 37°C in a sterile 96-well microtitre round-bottomed polycarbonate plate (Corning, NY, USA), containing 2-fold dilutions of each peptide. Final bacterial concentration was 5x10⁵ cfu/mL, whereas peptide concentration ranged from 0.78 to 100 μM. The MIC was defined as the lowest peptide concentration required to inhibited visible bacterial growth.

Activity against S. aureus biofilms

The antibiofilm activity of [G1K,K8R]cGm against 24 h-preformed S. aureus biofilms was evaluated using three distinct methods, as previously described: a resazurin reduction fluorometric assay and a colony count assay to determine the metabolic activity and viability of biofilm-embedded cells, respectively; and a crystal violet assay to quantify the total biofilm biomass.
Fully reduced resazurin (i.e. resorufin) in MHB, obtained after auto-
claving the sample for 15 min, was used as positive control. The percent-
age of resazurin reduction was determined relatively to the control, after blank (10% v/v alamarBlue® reagent in MHB) correction.

Colonies were counted, and viable bacteria (in cfu/mL) were re-
ported as percentage of the control.

To determine the antibiotic activity of [G1K,K8R]cGm, for either 4 or 24 h, resulted in a signifi-
cant reduction of the metabolic activity of biofilm-embedded
bacteria, as quantified by a resazurin fluorometric assay
(Figure 2a), being even more potent than the antibiotic

Resazurin reduction fluorometric assay
S. aureus suspensions at 1 × 10⁶ cfu/mL were incubated in a sterile
96-well microtitre black flat-bottomed polystyrene plate (Corning) for
24 h at 37°C. After a washing step with MHB to remove non-adherent
bacteria, preformed biofilms were used as a control. After washing the biofilms twice with MHB, crystal violet staining was determined relatively to the control, after blank (0.25% v/v crystal violet in sterile Milli-Q water) correction.

Crystal violet binding assay
Crystal violet is a basic dye that binds to negatively charged molecules,
such as those in biofilm EPS matrix and on bacterial membrane surface, thus staining the biofilm biomass. S. aureus suspensions at 1 × 10⁶ cfu/mL were incubated in a 96-well microtitre clear flat-bottomed polystyrene plate (Corning) for 24 h at 37°C. After a washing step with MHB to remove non-adherent bacteria, preformed biofilms were incubated in the absence or presence of 2-fold serial dilutions of [G1K,K8R]cGm, ranging from 0.78 to 50 μM, for 4 or 24 h at 37°C, or with [G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced and lin[G1K,K8R]cGm, ranging from 0.78 to 50 μM, for 4 h at 37°C. The antibiotic vancomycin (Sigma-Aldrich) was also tested from 2.07 to 69 μM. Untreated biofilms were used as a control. Biofilms were washed twice with MHB and incubated with
0.25% (v/v) ethanol (Carlo Erba Reagents S.A.S., France) by repeated pipetting. Biofilm biomass was quantified by measuring the absorbance at 590 nm of each sample in an Infinite® M200 microplate reader (Tecan, Männedorf, Switzerland). The percentage of crystal violet staining was determined relatively to the control, after blank (0.25% (v/v) crystal violet in sterile Milli-Q water) correction.

Biofilm imaging methods
Atomic force microscopy (AFM) and confocal laser scanning microscopy (CLSM) were used to visualize the effect of [G1K,K8R]cGm and lin[G1K,
K8R]cGm on S. aureus biofilms. Details on these methods are provided as Supplementary data.

Results and discussion
[G1K,K8R]cGm has potent activity against preformed S. aureus biofilms
To determine the antibiotic activity of [G1K,K8R]cGm, 24 h-preformed biofilms of S. aureus ATCC 6538 were used. Treatment of the preformed biofilms with increasing concentra-
tions of [G1K,K8R]cGm, for either 4 or 24 h, resulted in a signifi-
cant reduction of the metabolic activity of biofilm-embedded
cells, as quantified by a resazurin fluorometric assay
(Figure 2a), being even more potent than the antibiotic

Figure 1. Schematic representation of [G1K,K8R]cGm (a), [G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced (b) and lin[G1K,K8R]cGm (c). The sequence diagram of [G1K,K8R]
cGm (A, top panel) shows the two antiparallel β-strands (light blue arrows) and the two parallel disulphide bonds between Cys2-15 and Cys6-11 (yellow
sticks). As shown in the surface representation of [G1K,K8R]cGm (A, bottom panel), positively charged residues (shown in blue) and Tyr residues (shown
in green) are located in the same region of the peptide. The amino acid residues modified in [G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced (b) and lin[G1K,K8R]cGm (c) pep-
tides are highlighted in red. The first amino acid residue (K1) and the positively charged residues (dark blue) are indicated in all the peptides. [G1K,K8R]cGm
and [G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced are backbone cyclized, whereas lin[G1K,K8R]cGm has free N- and C-terminals. To prevent the formation of disulphide
bonds in [G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced and lin[G1K,K8R]cGm, the four Cys (Cys2, 6, 11 and 15) of [G1K,K8R]cGm were replaced with the unnatural amino acid
L-2-aminobutyric acid (presented as Abu). The net charge of these peptides at pH 7.4 is +7. This figure appears in colour in the online version of
JAC and in black and white in the print version of JAC.
Antibiofilm activity of a designed cyclic analogue of gomesin vancomycin (Figure S3). This effect was dependent on the peptide concentration, but not on the incubation time. Moreover, the treatment of biofilms with peptide for 4 h, resulted in a significant reduction of the viability of bacterial cells, as shown with a colony count assay (Figure 2b). Specifically, treatment with 50 μM [G1K,K8R]cGm, the highest concentration tested, reduced the metabolic activity of preformed biofilms by ∼90% and the cell viability by ∼96%, suggesting that the peptide kills biofilm-embedded bacteria. The results also showed that the peptide had a small impact on the biofilm biomass (Figure 2c), evaluated using a crystal violet assay. Since bacterial cells account for less than 10% of the dry mass, the results corroborate the hypothesis that the peptide acts mainly at cell level.

[G1K,K8R]cGm has an amphipathic structure, in which hydrophobic residues form a small hydrophobic patch on the surface of the molecule surrounded by positively charged residues forming...
a charged patch (Figure 1a). This amphipathic organization is likely to be important for its membrane-binding properties and antimicrobial potency, as supported by studies with cGm analogues with mutations in hydrophobic and/or positively charged residues. The amphipathic properties and overall 3D structure of [G1K,K8R]cGm are maintained by a backbone cyclization and two disulphide bonds. To evaluate the importance of the 3D organization of [G1K,K8R]cGm in its antibiofilm activity, a backbone cyclized analogue without disulphide bonds, [G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced, and a linear unfolded analogue (i.e. not backbone cyclized and without disulphide bonds), lin[G1K,K8R]cGm, were studied. In both analogues, the four Cys residues present in [G1K,K8R]cGm, at positions 2, 6, 11 and 15, were replaced with the unnatural amino acid L-2-aminobutyric acid (Figure 1b and c). This amino acid has structural similarities with cysteine, but it has a methyl group instead of a thiol on the side chain, rendering it unable to form disulphide bonds.

The results showed that both [G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced and lin[G1K,K8R]cGm have a limited effect on the metabolic activity of biofilm-embedded cells when compared with the parent peptide (Figure 2a). Similar results were obtained when the peptides were tested against bacteria in the planktonic form, with MIC values of 3.13, >50 and >100 μM for [G1K,K8R]cGm, [G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced and the linear unfolded analogue, respectively. Although we cannot exclude the potential role of cysteine residues for the antimicrobial activity of [G1K,K8R]cGm, as proposed for other peptides, these results suggest that the folding of [G1K,K8R]cGm and its stabilization by the disulphide bonds are required for its antibacterial and antibiofilm activity. Similar observations were obtained with a cyclic antimicrobial peptide with comparable 3D structure: the linear unfolded analogue was inactive. However, for the backbone cyclized analogue without disulphide bonds the results were different, since although a reduced antibacterial activity was observed, it was not completely abrogated as in the case of the [G1K,K8R]cGm-reduced analogue.

**[G1K,K8R]cGm affects the morphology and topography of biofilm-embedded bacterial cells**

AFM was used to directly visualize changes on the morphology and topography of biofilm-embedded cells induced by [G1K,K8R]cGm on S. aureus biofilms. Representative AFM error and height images, and the correspondent 3D projection of untreated biofilms (Figure 3a, top panels), show a dense and uniform layer of cells with a characteristic staphylococcal round shape, as well as a smooth surface. In contrast, the images obtained after treatment of the biofilms with 25 μM [G1K,K8R]cGm for 4 h (Figure 3a, middle panels), clearly show changes on the morphology of the bacterial cells, which became more

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**Figure 4.** Effect of [G1K,K8R]cGm and lin[G1K,K8R]cGm on the membrane integrity of S. aureus biofilm-embedded cells imaged by CLSM. (a) Representative CLSM images of untreated biofilms (top panels) and biofilms treated with 25 μM [G1K,K8R]cGm (middle panels) or lin[G1K,K8R]cGm (bottom panels), for 4 h. Biofilms were stained with the nucleic acid-binding dyes SYTO 9 (green) and TO-PRO-3 iodide (red). The overlay between the green and red channels from the xy and xz orthogonal plane images are presented. The xy plane images were taken at an inner layer of the biofilms (z = 2 μm). (b) Normalized TO-PRO-3 mean fluorescence intensity for untreated, [G1K,K8R]cGm-treated and lin[G1K,K8R]cGm-treated biofilms. Ns, non-significant; ****P value ≤0.0001. This figure appears in colour in the online version of JAC and in black and white in the print version of JAC.
irregular. In line with the antibiofilm activity results, no changes were observed on the bacterial cells of biofilms treated with 25 μM [G1K,K8R]cGm (Figure 3a, bottom panels), confirming the inability of this analogue to act against S. aureus biofilms.

To quantify the changes of the topography of the bacterial cells, the cell surface root mean square roughness ($R_{\text{rms}}$) was determined (Figure 3b). The $R_{\text{rms}}$ value obtained for untreated biofilms was $11.6 \pm 3.1$ nm, increasing to $18.0 \pm 3.7$ nm after...
treatment with 25 μM [G1K,K8R]cGm, quantitatively showing that the surface of biofilm cells becomes perturbed after treatment with the peptide. Treatment with 25 μM lin[G1K,K8R]cGm resulted in an Rrms of 15.3 ± 6.9 nm, a statistically non-significant difference, confirming the lack of changes on the topography noted in the qualitative image analysis.

**[G1K,K8R]cGm kills biofilm-embedded bacterial cells through membrane permeabilization**

To evaluate the ability of [G1K,K8R]cGm to permeate the membrane of biofilm-embedded bacteria, a CLSM-based assay was performed using 24 h-preformed S. aureus biofilms. Biofilms were sequentially stained with the nucleic acid-binding dyes SYTO 9 and TO-PRO-3 iodide. SYTO 9 permeates cells and binds to the intracellular DNA (iDNA) of all bacteria, having intact or damaged membranes, staining bacteria green, whilst TO-PRO-3 iodide only binds to the iDNA of bacteria with damaged membranes, staining bacteria red.\(^{39,50}\) Representative CLSM images obtained at an inner layer of untreated biofilms (z=−2 μm) (Figure 4a, top panels) show the bacterial population stained green, thus having an intact membrane. Treatment of the biofilms with 25 μM [G1K,K8R]cGm for 4 h (Figure 4a, middle panels), resulted in an increase of the density of bacteria stained with TO-PRO-3 iodide and a concurrent decrease of bacteria stained with SYTO9 (left panels, SYTO9 and TO-PRO-3 iodide xy plane images). This suggests that TO-PRO-3 iodide enters into biofilm-embedded cells with peptide-induced compromised membranes. Once inside the cells, TO-PRO-3 iodide displaces, at least partially, the SYTO 9 bound to the iDNA, resulting in bacteria that appear orange in the xy and xz overlay images. In agreement, the quantitative analysis of the mean fluorescence intensity of TO-PRO-3 iodide at an inner layer of the biofilm (z=−2 μm) (Figure 4b), shows a significant increase of the dye signal, demonstrating the ability of the peptide to disrupt the membrane of biofilm-embedded cells. These results agree with prior studies with [G1K,K8R]cGm,\(^{32}\) suggesting that its antimicrobial mode of action towards bacteria in the planktonic form is dependent on the ability to bind and disrupt the bacterial membrane. In contrast, for biofilms treated with lin[G1K,K8R]cGm (Figure 4a, bottom panels; and Figure 4b), no significant changes on TO-PRO-3 iodide fluorescence intensity were observed, showing that the linear analogue does not affect the membrane permeability of biofilm-embedded bacteria, as expected from the results above.

**[G1K,K8R]cGm induces fast membrane permeabilization kinetics of biofilm-embedded bacterial cells**

To investigate the kinetics of membrane permeation of [G1K,K8R]cGm we used a real-time CLSM-based assay of calcine release.\(^{39}\) 24 h-preformed S. aureus biofilms were incubated with the cell-permeant and non-fluorescent dye calcine-AM for 3 h to allow its cellular uptake. Once inside the cytoplasm, calcine-AM is hydrolysed by intracellular esterases releasing calcine,\(^{31,52}\) a highly fluorescent compound that stains bacteria green. Damage of the membrane integrity of bacterial cells induces calcine release and dilution into the extracellular media, with a consequent decrease in its fluorescence emission intensity. Thus, a decrease in the calcine fluorescence emission intensity can be correlated with the permeabilizing effect of [G1K,K8R]cGm.

Representative CLSM images obtained for untreated and peptide-treated biofilms are shown in Figure 5a, while their quantitative analysis are shown in Figures 5b and c. The quantitative analysis was performed by evaluating the relative changes over time in the average fluorescence emission intensity from a rectangular region of interest (ROI) encompassing the calcine-stained biofilms. For both untreated biofilms and biofilms treated with lin[G1K,K8R]cGm, the average fluorescence emission intensity of calcine remained largely unchanged over the 2 h incubation. The slight increase observed was possibly due to a slow background hydrolysis of calcine-AM by the intact biofilm-embedded bacteria. For biofilms treated with 25 μM [G1K,K8R]cGm, a decrease of the average calcine fluorescence emission intensity was observed over the incubation time, as a consequence of the peptide permeabilizing bacterial membranes. In fact, as shown in Figure 5b, the fluorescence intensity decay was fitted with a monoexponential function with a halftime of ∼65 min. Moreover, the asymptotic limit fluorescence intensity at infinite time is zero, suggesting that over time all bacterial cells are permeabilized by the peptide. The slow decrease of the fluorescence intensity observed in Figure 5b might be dictated by slow diffusion caused by the electrostatic interactions between the cationic peptide and the anionic EPS matrix in addition to molecular sieving imposed by the macromolecular meshing in the matrix. Furthermore, an estimate for the diffusion coefficient of the peptide was calculated using the Brownian motion model for mean squared displacement: \( D = 7.2 \times 10^{-4} \, \mu m^2 \, s^{-1} \). A similar result has been reported for the linear viral-derived peptide pepR\(^{39} \) (\( D = 4.5 \times 10^{-3} \, \mu m^2 \, s^{-1} \)), in which such slow diffusion along the biofilm structure was ascribed to medium viscosity and electrostatic interactions with the biofilm matrix.

**Conclusions**

The antimicrobial activity of the spider-derived AMP gomesin, and its cyclic analogues, has been studied previously against bacteria in the planktonic form. Here, we report for the first time the activity of a gomesin-related peptide against bacterial biofilms, and demonstrate the potential of the designed cyclic analogue, [G1K,K8R]cGm, as a drug lead to fight bacterial biofilms. [G1K,K8R]cGm is known for its potent activity against bacteria in the planktonic form, high stability in serum and low toxicity to human
RBCs. In the current study we show that it also displays potent activity against S. aureus biofilms by killing biofilm-embedded bacterial cells. The peptide was found to be more active than other β-hairpin peptides such as tachyplesin I–III and their cyclic analogues. We also found that the 3D structure of [G1K,K8R] cGm is essential for its antibacterial and antiangiobin activities. Mechanistic studies suggest that the peptide can diffuse across the biofilm and kill bacteria by targeting and disrupting their cell membranes (Figure 6). AMPs able to reach bacteria within a complex polymeric matrix and kill them using a mechanism independent of their metabolic activity are an alternative approach to fight biofilm infections. Moreover, as recently shown for a cyclic analogue of the host-defence peptide IDR-108, cyclic and disulphide-rich AMPs have additional advantages as they are likely to have improved resistance to proteolytic degradation and prolonged biological activity in vivo, compared to linear analogues.

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### Transparency declarations

None to declare.

### Supplementary data

Supplementary Methods, Tables S1 and Figures S1 to S3 are available as Supplementary data at JAC Online.

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