

## The Magi in the Derveni Papyrus

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Derveni is a pass about 12 km NW of Salonica, northern Greece. In January 1962, archaeologists excavated several tombs there which contained opulent grave-offerings, though there is no major ancient city known to have existed in the vicinity. One of the tombs contained weapons, and it has been suggested for this reason that its occupant might have been a soldier. Outside his tomb, in the ashes of the funereal pyre, was found a charred papyrus roll that was, evidently, to have been burnt with him.<sup>1</sup> It is the first papyrus found in Greece, and one of the oldest Greek papyri known. The text was probably composed around 500 B.C., in Ionian Greek - thus, perhaps, in one of the Greek cities of Asia Minor under Persian rule - and the papyrus, probably from the later years of the fourth century, shows signs of a copyist who was a speaker of the Attic dialect. From the large proportion of the text that survives, it is plain that P. Derveni is an allegorical interpretation of an Orphic poem, combining a discussion of cosmology and the physical nature of this world with mythology about the next world, life after death. Cult and initiation in connection with knowledge of the fate of the soul are a unifying theme; and there is a doctrine of metempsychosis of the Pythagorean type (that is, involving both human and animal bodies).

Men have supernatural beings (daimones) allotted to them, who are the servants of the gods: these daimons live beneath the earth and watch us. But, the author laments, men are too mired in sin and devoted to pleasure to pay due attention to dreams and other signs of the perils of life after death, and they even disbelieve in

the horrors of Hades. Initiates ought to make libations (khoai) and sacrifices (especially, as it seems, of poultry) to the Erinyes or Eumenides, who, the author insists, are souls. The author's point of view bears the particularly strong imprint of the teachings of the Presocratic philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus; but much of Plato, notably the *Phaedo*, reflects the same range of seemingly disparate concerns, united by interest in the immortal soul and its progress. (As we shall see presently, the same connected interests animate Persian Zoroastrians of the same period.)<sup>2</sup> All these subjects are central to Orphic teachings: in the later Orphic *Argonautica*, Orpheus congratulates Apollo: "And you have learned the ways of divination by beasts and birds, and what the order of entrails, and what is presaged in their dream-roaming paths by souls of mortals overcome in sleep; answers to signs and portents, the stars' courses, the purification rite, great blessing to men, placations of gods, and gifts poured out for the dead."<sup>3</sup>

It is no longer a matter of dispute that Greek beliefs about the underworld and priest-sages who went there and returned owe much to Thracian and Scythian (i.e., North Iranian) shamanism.<sup>4</sup> Empedocles, for example, told his disciple, "You will be able to fetch (axeis) from Hades the life-force (menos) of a man who has died." He promises him healing powers, too, and control of wind and rain. All this is plainly shamanistic, with its closest parallel in the *Menippus*, where the shaman able to conduct one to Hades and back is a Zoroastrian magos of the Parthian period named Mithrobarzanes. Xanthos of Lydia, a contemporary of Empedocles, is the first to refer to him in surviving Greek literature; and he is mentioned in the context of a discussion of the Persian magoi.<sup>5</sup> The shaman in the course of his initiation undergoes ritual dismemberment; and virtually every scholar of Orphism concurs in one way or another with Linforth's view that the myth of the dismemberment of Orpheus by the Titans is "peculiarly Orphic ... the very core of Orphic religion."<sup>6</sup>

Orphism is not out of place in fourth-century Macedonia: Plutarch (*Alex.* 2) mentions that Olympias, the mother of Alexander ("the Great" to Greeks and *gizistag*, "the Accursed", to Zoroastrians, b. 356 B.C.), participated in the Macedonian Bacchanalia, which he calls Orphic. Such beliefs existed far beyond the Bosphorus, too - at Borysthenes (Olbia), on the estuary of the river Bug, on the northern coast of the Black Sea. There, Herodotus reports (*Hist.* 4.79), the Scythian king Skyles had been initiated into the cult of Dionysos Bakkhios; and three bone plates of the 5th cent. B.C. found at Olbia have Orphic inscriptions in Greek.<sup>7</sup> Ionia, Northern Greece and the cities around the Black Sea were ruled,

invaded, and visited by Persians throughout the fifth century B.C.; so the Orphic religion in these regions flourished alongside Zoroastrianism and its priests, the magoi, and what did the Magi of Achaemenian Iran actually teach?

Zoroastrians believed, then as now, in an afterworld of heaven and hell, of rewards and punishments. The physical world is a place of mixture and combat of forces of good and evil. Knowing this is important, since physics is morality: by leading a righteous life, in which one seeks the purification of all creation, one enters heaven, not hell, after death. Zarathuštra, and the Magi after him, travel to that world in dreams and ecstasies, and bring back accounts of it that strengthen the faith of the perplexed in times of trouble - Vištāspa's war against the Hyaona demon-worshippers, or, later, the times of trouble after Alexander's conquest of Iran, and Kartīr's struggle against the heresiarch Mānī. As is well known, the Zoroastrians also believe that man has an immortal aspect: a protective spirit, called the *fravaši*. These spirits of the dead receive offerings; and the last day of the year, *hamaspathmaēdaya of fravardigān* (Armenian *hrot-ic'*), is dedicated to them. Spirits of the dead are feared, as well as revered - as is the case in most human communities - so after dark, for instance, the *fravašis* are abroad, and one ought not to draw water, which they like especially to inhabit, till midnight, when the protective Sun begins its return. As in other cultures, the cock-crow that heralds dawn is believed to banish nocturnal evils; but Zoroastrians also believe the cock to be bird of Sraoša, the *yazata* who hears prayer and acts as a psychopompus.

None of these Zoroastrian beliefs and customs would have seemed very strange to followers of Orphism; and it is indeed likely that the Iranian faith would have been one important source of their own beliefs. This is not to say that Iran was the splendidly isolated Aryan Kulturträger, bringing metaphysical enlightenment to lesser breeds without the law. As seems to have been the case with Irano-Jewish interaction, the Persian religious system acted as a catalyst for the elaboration of ideas that already existed. Also, as Burkert has shown, itinerant priests in Greece practicing rites of purification and exorcism in the century after Homer show the closest affinities, not to Iran, but to Semitic Assyria - and the cultural transfer from the Semitic world, in religion, literature, and philosophy as well as the alphabet and other aspects of material culture, was massive.<sup>8</sup> Column six of the Derveni papyrus reads as follows:

eukhai kai thysiai meilissousi tas psykhas, / epōidē de magōn dynatai daimonas  
empodōn/ ginomenous methistanai: daimones empodōn eisi/ psykhais ekhthroi. tēn  
thysian toutou heneken poiouein/ hoi magoi, hōsperei poinēn apodidontes, tois

de/ hierois epispoudousin hydōr kai gala, ex hōnper kai tas/ khoas poiouisi. anarithma kai polyomphala ta popana/ thyousin, hoti kai hai psykhai anarithmoi eisi. mystai/ Eumenisi prothyousi kata ta auta magois; Eumenides gar/ psykhai eisin. hōn heneken ton mellonta theois thyein/ ornitheion proteron...

#### Tsantsanoglou's translation:

... prayers and offerings appease the souls, whereas the incantation of the Magoi is powerful enough to change (drive away?) the daimones who hinder (the souls). The daimones hinder because they are hostile to the souls. That is why the Magoi perform the sacrifice, as if paying compensation. And over the sacrifices they pour water and milk, from which they make also their khoai. They make offerings of innumerable and many-veled cakes, because the souls are also innumerable. Initiates make preliminary sacrifices to the Eumenides in the same manner as the Magoi. Because the Eumenides are souls. On whose (the souls') account, whoever intends to sacrifice to the gods must first make an offering of poultry to ...<sup>9</sup>

For poinē(n), "penalty" is another valid rendering; and polyomphala can be understood as "many-knobbed" also (the omphalus can be a bump or an indentation). "Poultry" may be too specific for ornitheion; better, unless one is certain from context that a cock or chicken must be meant, "a kind of bird". There are Greek parallels for some usages here: Persephone accepts from some people poinan palaiou pentheos; Clement (Protrep. 22.4, p. 17.4 Stählin) mentions popana polyomphala amongst the paraphernalia of the Greek Mysteries, and inscriptions in temples of Asklepios mention cakes (popana) with nine and twelve omphala.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean the penalty paid to those below, or the indented cakes, were Greek in origin, only that idea and thing enjoyed popularity widely. But does the term magos in the Derveni papyrus mean a Zoroastrian priest, and is this a description of an identifiable Iranian ritual practice - or are we dealing here with a magician generally, even a sorcerer?

The term magos in fifth- and fourth-century Greece meant, at first, a Persian priest, with either a positive or negative sense (able to do amazing things - or else alien and dangerous); but it seems quickly to have acquired the alternate or additional, decidedly negative connotation of a magician, a wizard or sorcerer. Heraclitus (DK 12 B 14) is supposed to have addressed his prophecies against "\*wanderers/ men of the night (nyktipolois), magoi, bacchantes, maenads, initiates". Zoroastrian priests perform the appropriate watches (gāh) and the office of the *Vīdēvdāt* at night; but this would scarcely qualify them as nyktipoloi, midnight rambles after a fashion, since their principal rite, the yasna, must be

solemnized in the morning. (Plutarch, in his work on *Isis and Osiris* and the other Oriental mystery cults, including Mithraism, describes a kind of Persian black mass in which everything normal is reversed - so the rite is performed at night, rather than by day.) In the *Orestes* of Euripides, 1.1493 ff., a Phrygian slave insists Helen disappeared suddenly, "either from the effects of drugs or from the tricks of a magos or carried off by the gods". It all sounds like a shamanic trip; and who can tell whether the magos is just a wizard, or meant specifically as a Persian priest, added for orientalizing effect to the bit part of a "barbaric" Anatolian?

There is less ambiguity in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where the Theban king castigates Teiresias as a "magos hatcher of plots, crafty beggar". In the First Alcibiades, the mageia of Zoroaster is praised as "worship of the gods"; and in the Hellenistic, pseudo-Aristotelian *Magika*, the author protests "the magoi do not know or practice sorcery" - which means enough people thought that they did. The Romans, similarly, were to use magus and magia first to mean official Persian priests; and later the meaning degenerated. Catullus (*Carmina* 90) knew enough about Iranian mores to ridicule the Magi for their incest (*Av. xvaētvadātha*). Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* 30.1) tries to reconcile the two meanings - Zoroastrianism and sorcery - and suggests that the *magicae vanitates* began in Persia, and combine three arts: medicine, religion, and astrology.<sup>11</sup> In the fourth century, the use of the term in Greek was sufficiently flexible that magos could have meant either an Iranian priest, or a sorcerer. West, indeed, argued that the magoi of the Derveni text might have been neither Iranians nor Greeks, but Babylonian religious practitioners who had acquired the appellation magos because Persia ruled Mesopotamia.<sup>12</sup>

But Professor West's suggestion seems mistaken. Xerxes had burnt the temple of Marduk at Babylon and severely persecuted worshippers of the demons and destroyed their temples (*daiivadāna*). (It is worthwhile to note that in the inscription he left at Persepolis describing this policy, Xerxes asserts that if a man worships Ahura Mazda according to Truth and with ritual, then he will be happy when alive and accounted righteous (*artavān*) after death - that is, his soul will go to Heaven: he displays the same concern, *mutatis mutandis*, for earthly arrangements and their otherworldly consequences, as does the author of the Derveni text). In the heart of Persis, the Elamite priests who performed their rites at Persepolis did not have Iranian ecclesiastical titles; nor does it seem likely that any non-Zoroastrian would have been called a member of the hereditary caste of the priesthood of a religion that was the creed of the Achaemenian kings, and that condemned adherents of other faiths as followers of the anti-cosmic Lie. In Iranian

lands, magos or its equivalent was not a term to be bandied about with cosmopolitan flexibility, particularly, one would think, in the Babylonian religion that Xerxes had persecuted; nor is there any reason to suppose an itinerant Babylonian would not have used his native title with pride. It is more simple and likely, and requires no special pleading, just a shave with Occam's razor, to suppose the Magi of the Derveni papyrus were Persian Magi.

The Magian rites described are funerary; and the details of Zoroastrian funerary rituals have always impressed foreigners, from Herodotus in the west to the Chinese and Japanese in the far east.<sup>13</sup> Probably this is in part because of the beliefs surrounding them - of the immortal soul, its judgement and the journey to heaven or hell, the efficacy of prayer and the belief in resurrection. Certain aspects of the Zoroastrian rituals performed in reverence for the *fravašis* of the departed (*ardafravaš*) are of particular interest here. Zoroastrian priests solemnize a meal in honor of the dead, Satūm, which is accompanied by a prayer called in P. Guj. *satūm no kardo*, i.e., "the chapter of staomi" (Av. "I praise"-Yasna 26) - hence its name. In the Pāzand *dibāče*, or exordium, the worshipper says, "May my good thoughts, words, and deeds go to delight the *fravašis* of the holy." This is striking, because this mantra of the three virtues seems to have been employed by Kartīr to ensure his shamanistic Himmelsreise der Seele; the three virtues ensure salvation, according to the prayer *Vispa Humata*; and here they - or their mantra - are linked explicitly to a food offering for the souls of the dead as bringing them benefit. The Satūm is solemnized on the *čahārom*, on the anniversary (P. Guj. roj) of death, and in Fravardigān on the eve of the New Year; Fravardigān or Hamaspathmaēdaya is now called by the Parsis Muktād, from Indic *muktātman*, "liberated soul" (i.e., deceased). In the morning watch (*hāvan gāh*), Parsis offer milk or tea, fruit, flowers, and a sweet dish such as *bākrā* (a hard cookie made of wheat flour, sugar, and grated almonds or raisins). In mid-morning, around 11:30 A.M., the second Satūm features a dish of rice with curry or dal (boiled lentils). If the Satūm falls on New Year's day, then this meal would consist of the Parsi delicacy *dhandar patyo*, with water, salad, a side dish, and a chapati. For the late-afternoon (*uzyeirin gāh*) Satūm, a vegetable or meat dish without rice, water, and a chapati are offered. Priests recite the Satūm no kardo, mentioning all members of the family, and then consume the meal. Assistants to the priests, or ladies called in P. Guj. *goranīs*, cook the Satūm food. None of it corresponds to the polyomphalous cakes offered by the Magi of the Derveni papyrus, unless the *bākrā* of the *Hāvan gāh* be a replacement for a cake like the *drōn*. *Goranīs*, too, prepare this: it is a round cake

of unleavened wheat flour and water, with nine cuts (*ennea omphala?*) used in the Bāj, Afrīnagān, and other high rituals. No bāj can be solemnized without the drōn, including that of Muktād; and sometimes, the drōn is used in the Satūm, as well.<sup>14</sup>

The Derveni papyrus mentions that innumerable cakes are offered, since the souls are likewise innumerable. This somewhat odd observation may derive from observation of a Fravardigān Satūm. In the summer of 1985 I spent a few days with a Parsi Zoroastrian family in Navsari, Gujarat, India, where there is a great Ātašbahrām fire. My hosts showed me a silver vase used to contain flowers for the Muktād Satūm, engraved with the name of a deceased (*marhūm*) relative: during that commemoration of all the souls, they told me, the huge prayer-hall of the great fire temple is entirely filled with trays of such offerings, with labelled vases - so many, perhaps, as to seem innumerable, or at least to impress upon the philosophically-minded observer the infinity of the souls.<sup>15</sup>

Other details of the section on the Magi in the Derveni papyrus also may be explained with reference to Zoroastrianism. The rooster is the bird of Srōš, who guides the soul on its journey (cf. the Parsi Zor. Srōš nu patru service after death); hence, perhaps, the ornitheion offering, though of course Zoroastrians will never kill or eat a cock. The offerings of the Magi repay a "penalty" or "debt" (*poinē*): Zoroastrians make monetary or ritual restitution for sins deemed *tanu-pərəta-* (Av., "subject to forfeiture of the body"), of which there are a vast number, described in the *Vidēvdāt* and other texts. The second part of the Avestan compound enters Armenian as a loan with extreme religious prominence: Christians ask our Father in Heaven, in the great prayer Christ Himself composed, to forgive our debts (*z-parti-s*, acc. pl.-Gk. *opheilēmata*) as we forgive our debtors (*partapan-ac'*, dat. pl.). In Armenian, a sinless or righteous man - one who is saved - is an-part, "without debt". The first Armenian to print a book styled himself, humbly, Yakob mela-part, Jacob the Sinner (lit. "sin-indebted"). And so on.

The Paternoster has in mind salvation in the next world, as in this - and did not the Parthian prince, St. Gregory the Illuminator, explain to Tiridates the Great, that the Redeemer is *šahapet gerezmanac'*, i.e., xšathrapati of *Garō.dāmāna!* Elišē vardapet, in his *History of the War of Vardan Mamikonean*, mentions that a fifth-century Sasanian Magus was called *hamakdēn*, "(knower) of all the Religion", because he was versed in the *ampart' aš*, *bozpayit*, *pahlawik*, and *parskadēn* schools (*k'ešt'k'*): E. Benveniste explained the first as "a treatise on penalties", from OIr. \**hamparta-kaiša*.<sup>16</sup> If this is correct, then precise knowledge of debts and the manner of their restitution, in this world and the next, will have been a

category of expertise of the ancient Iranian Magus on a par with mastery of Persian and Parthian regional zands. To conclude, the simplest explanation of the section on the Magi in the Derveni papyrus is that it is a fairly detailed and accurate description - strongly flavored with Orphism, not surprisingly - by a learned observer in Achaemenian Ionia of the Zoroastrian Satūm service. If so, it is the oldest physical documentation of any rite of the Good Religion, in any language.

## Notes

1. Probably the fire would have conveyed the contents of the scroll - its ethereal body, as it were - with its owner into the world to come, where, like the Tibetan or Egyptian books of the dead, it would be an essential guide and source of knowledge. A painting on a Greek amphora of ca. 325 B.C. shows an old man seated in a building - his tomb - holding a book roll. Orpheus stands before him, playing a kithara. A scholium on Virgil cites an Orphic book called *The Lyre*, which says souls need the kithara to ascend (West 1983, pp. 25 with pl. 2, p. 30): it may be that the painting shows how the soul after death needs its Orphic book of the dead to ascend with Orpheus.
2. See on the find of the scroll and the general contents and affiliations of the text West 1983, pp. 75-81; Obbink, *SDP*, p. 39; and Funghi, *SDP*, pp. 34-35.
3. Cited by West 1983, p. 38.
4. For a concise explanation and defense of the term in a Greek context, see West 1983, pp. 5-6. I argued in "Kartīr and Mānī, a Shamanistic Model of their Conflict," *Festschrift Ehsan Yarshater*, that the paradigm of the shaman's *Himmelsreise* is the best way to understand the ritual virtuosity the third-century Sasanian high priest used to discredit the founder of Manichaeism. This shamanic component goes back to the beginnings of Zoroastrianism, and is rooted, also, in the Iranian epic; as I have shown in "A Parthian *Bhagavad Gītā* and its Echoes," in the *Festschrift* for Nina G. Garsoian most recently. Resistance to the idea that there was an Iranian - and Zoroastrian - form of shamanism persists, however, on the wholly indefensible grounds that shamans are "Turkic" or "primitive", or even practitioners of "witchcraft". The ultimate sub-text of all this is the ideology of Aryan sophistication, philosophical sobriety, and, ultimately, supremacy, though present-day opponents of the use of the term in an Iranian context may no longer be aware themselves of the pedigree of their stance.
5. See Kingsley 1994 and 1995, p. 40.
6. Kahn, *SDP*, p. 57, citing also Rohde, Guthrie and Nilsson.
7. West 1983, p. 17. The culture of the Greek cities on the northern coast of the Black Sea reflects often a fusion of Hellenic and north Iranian elements - to be expected, when one considers that the Royal Scythians of Herodotus (*Paralatai*: cf. Avestan *paradāta*-, NPers. *pišdad!*) lived directly to the north. Little terracottas of the tauroctony indicate



that Mithraism seems to have come here from Pontus several centuries before it reached the Roman Empire in full force. The later *Borysthénitica* of Dio Chrysostom resembles somewhat a Platonic work: the philosopher goes for a walk in the country, meets a handsome boy, gets lauded upon a discourse - but the boy looks like Mithras, on horseback, in trousers, with a Scythian cape; and the dialogue introduces images from Iranian religion.

8. See Burkert 1983; and now West 1997. Gone are the days when Astour's masterpiece, *Hellenosemitica*, was a voice crying in the wilderness. During the intertestamental period, we witness a flood of Zoroastrian themes into the religion of Israel - increased interest in the problem of theodicy and the nature of the devil, the demon *Asmodeus* (i. e., Av. *aēšma-*, "wrath", the demon par excellence; the loan *hešmaki* in Georgian means "demon" generally, and Eznik of Kolb calls Armenian demon-worshippers *\*hešmaka-paši*), and stories such as Esther, Tobit and Daniel which belong to the genre of the Persian romances. It is not as though Jews before then had not thought about divine justice, or the problem of evil, or love stories. Persia gave an impetus to what had already existed: the emphasis remains permanent in Christianity, which was born when Iranian prestige in Israel was at its zenith. In normative, Rabbinic Judaism, with roots in a tradition that had already been old before the Persians came, it all subsides.
9. Tsantsanoglou, *SDP*, pp. 95-96.
10. West, *SDP*, p. 87 and n. 3.
11. For refs., see Graf 1997, p. 20 f.
12. West, *SDP*.
13. A set of Chinese tomb panels of the sixth Century A.D., now in the Shumei Museum in Japan, portrays scenes from the Central Asian silk road, including a Zoroastrian rite which I explained as a depiction of the soul service solemnized on the fourth morning (*čahārom*) after a person's death. A priest in a *padān*, or face-mask, is shown touching an implement - perhaps the offering spoon (Parsi-Gujarati *čāmac*) to a blazing fire-chalice (P. Guj. *afarganyu*). There is a vase, for milk or wine; a tray of pomegranates and other foods; and a third vessel, perhaps containing sandalwood. A dog waits expectantly for its portion of the offerings. See Russell 1997, pp. 17-19, and P1. 1 d. A poem addressed to the seventh-century Japanese emperor Temmu, apparently written by a Zoroastrian woman named *Dārāy-duxt*, has been tentatively interpreted by Prof. Gikyo Ito as follows: "Even a blazing fire, / *\*manthra-dahma-* (*me'ni-siru-da-kumo*) / Snatches and wraps and puts in a bag- / Do they not say so? / May the cloud looking blue ascend higher / That is hanging over the north mountain range, / Passing the stars, passing the moon, / And up to the highest heaven" (Ito 1994). He understood this as a description of the soul's ascent to the Zoroastrian heaven. There was an influx of noble, educated Iranians into East Asia at the time of the Moslem conquest of the Sasanian Empire, and great interest in things Iranian. The poem, if Ito read it rightly, might have

been likened by its appreciative hearers to similar sky-journeys (thoroughly shamanistic) in the classical Chinese of Chi Yuan. He did not discuss the "believer's *mantra*", but Kartir advances into Heaven, constantly repeating *humata, huxta, hvaršta* - "good thoughts, words, and deeds" - the Zoroastrian ethical triad. It has the right rhythm for a mantra meant to bring on and sustain an ecstatic state. The prayer extolling this mantra, *Višpa humata*, proclaims, *višpa humata, višpa huxta, višpa hvaršta, vahištəm anghuīm ašaēta* "All good thoughts, words, and deeds reach the Best Existence" (Phl. has *šawēd*, "goes (to)", NPers., *xw<sup>h</sup>heš-e behešt dārad*, "has the desire for Paradise", for *ašaēta*. see Dhabhar 1963, pp. 43-44).

14. See Modi 1986, pp. 402-404. For the detailed description of the Parsi Satūm, I am indebted to my friend and Gujarati tutor Mrs. Shehnaz Munshi (b. 1947, Bombay, India; interviewed at Cambridge, MA, 15 November 1997).

15. My description and study of the Parsi women's rite of Muškil Āsān Bahrām Yazad, together with an evocation of home and community life in modern Parsi Navsari, including the Muktād, was printed in the *Festschrift* for Professor Jes Asmussen of Copenhagen. The study was also presented at a conference and promptly derided by the reformist Parsi academic and community leader, Prof. K.D. Irani of the City College of New York, a specialist on Plato, as giving disproportionate attention to a vulgarly superstitious custom unrepresentative of sophisticated and pure Zoroastrianism. But the details of Zoroastrian life in Navsari may in fact throw light on this oldest primary document in Greek on the rites of the Magi, which seem to have impressed Plato's predecessors and contemporaries no end.

16. See Russell 1987, p. 137 and n. 104.

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