

reset and start – The reanalysis and new presentation of an old excavation in Vienna’s historical and topographical core

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Abstract: The Archaeological department of the Federal Department for the Protection of Monuments curates and secures analogue and digital records from archaeological interventions, observations and research projects in the Austrian federal area since 1850. The archaeological sites and monuments record and also a new monuments information system (archaeological and architectural monuments), which is currently being developed, also supply concrete data about historic and modern research institutions, finds and records depots, research history, literature and geodata from past excavations. The increasing need to reanalyse sites, which are “lost” scientifically as well as in terms of conservation, makes this central knowledge base all the more important.

In a period of tightening finances and considering the increasing scarcity of undisturbed deposits in the built-up city centre, research into urban lives has to be rethought. The reassessment of older earthfast or structural archaeological research can lead to new results as many new methodological approaches have emerged in recent decades, thus making it possible to analyse contexts in a fresh way and to arrive at new research questions. An interdisciplinary approach can be particularly helpful in scrutinising familiar material and reinterpreting it, if necessary.

Evaluation and re-evaluation processes of this kind concentrate on controversial questions and/or excavations, not the least for financial reasons. The particular approach to the material, and with it an accessible and transparent praxis, are primarily dependant on the extent and condition of the record and the finds material, of course, but the (in)completeness and character of partially published excavation results can also be relevant. Prepublications, older publications and nearly-published topics often result in the establishment of models, which go on to overshadow new discussion processes and, by persisting, obstruct new approaches and alternative suggestions. Particular care and above all a rigorously self-critical attitude are necessary in order to avoid a prejudiced approach in evaluating the material.

Keywords: beginning of settlement; reinterpretation; new methodological approach

The Mauerbach Archaeology Centre. Research Hub and Knowledge Store

(BLES¹ | HEBERT | PLOYER | POLLAK 2014)

The Federal Department for the Protection of Monuments (BDA) has been installed in the former Carthusian monastery at Mauerbach in the Viennese Forest since 1984. From 2003 onwards, the Department of Archaeology set up restoration workshops and work spaces in the northern wing of the former complex and a depot for archaeological finds from Eastern Austria in the so-called “Lorenz Barn”. The transfer of important parts of the archaeological department from the crowded Hofburg in Vienna to Mauerbach took

place in 2011/2012. The workplaces of colleagues responsible for the core areas archaeological research – inventurisation (archaeological survey) and archive are found there. The new archaeology centre of the Federal Department for the Protection of Monuments at Mauerbach has been open for public use since 2013 (Fig. 1).

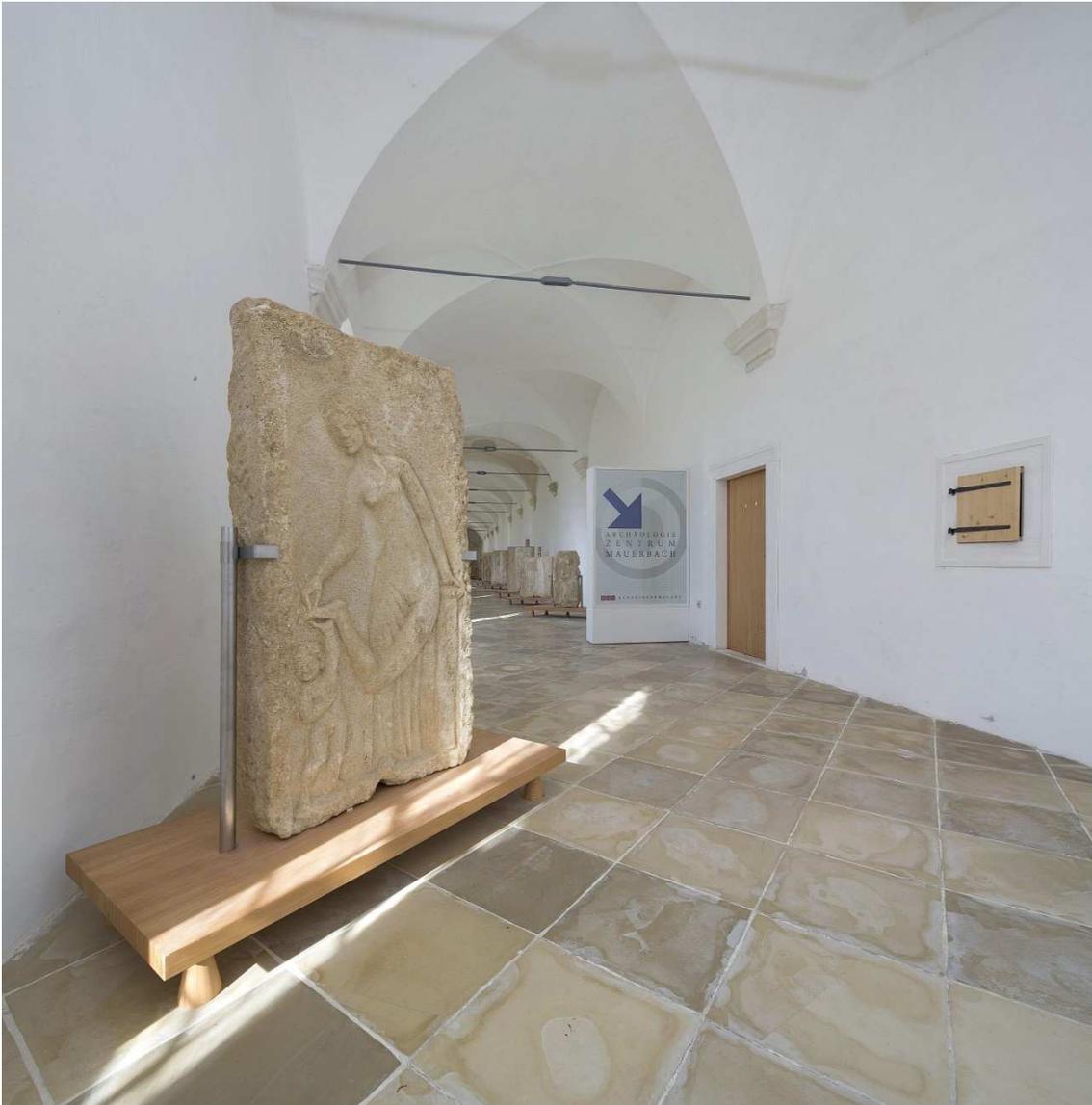


Fig. 1 – The charterhouse in Mauerbach: the Cloister (Foto: Bettina Neubauer-Pregl, BDA)

The analogue and digital archaeological archive of the BDA with reports, drawings and monument records from the beginnings of the state monuments service in 1850 to the present is administered in the Mauerbach Archaeology Centre (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 – Data storage in the archive (Christoph Blesl, BDA)

From 2012 onwards, all site records from authorised archaeological interventions from the entire federal area are housed at Mauerbach, whether in original form or in duplicate. The site records from 500-600 excavations, emergency finds' recovery actions and surveys are integrated into the archive each year. For the first time archaeological data from more than 30,000 years of cultural history are now centrally available to the department and – on the basis of the archive laws and following consultation with the authors – to researchers and interested specialists. The central, federal sites record, which is continuously being updated, can be accessed in Mauerbach as can the newly reorganised specialist departmental library. Post-excavation analysis of finds and site records of importance to the protection of monuments in Austria and to research have been taking place in Mauerbach for ten years now. These include the analysis of large excavations from linear road and rail projects and of single excavations.

Well-equipped workspaces in the northern wing's workshops can be used for the conservation and restoration of archaeological finds. In recent years, restorers of archaeological finds using the Mauerbach Archaeology Centre have been important for individual projects and for the care of the extensive Federal Department for the Protection of Monuments central archaeological finds depot in the Lorenz Barn (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 – Storage of archaeological finds (Christoph Blesl, BDA)

The rooms at Mauerbach are used for specialist seminars and workshops, dealing with particular themes to do with the protection and research of monuments, and are also suitable for small conferences. When discussing the Mauerbach Archaeology Centre as the home of research into archaeological monuments in Austria, it should be pointed out that the term “research into archaeological monuments” is taken from the care of buildings and monuments and is not widely used in archaeological and ancient history circles. It nevertheless describes the integrative character of this core task of archaeology in the conservation service very well. Detailed knowledge, not only of the entire corpus of monuments, but also of the state of research nationally and internationally, including related sciences and relevant natural sciences, not least the restoration sciences, are essential. Research into archaeological monuments always has to be relevant at different levels: To the historical cultural landscape in its entirety, to the individual monuments and to the finds as the smallest units. The emphasis lies on the archaeological survey, which by drawing on all possible sources and prospection methods, aims to record the national corpus of monuments as completely as possible and thus create the basis for further actions by the department (“protection order”, zoning and planning procedures, heritage management and rescue excavations). The sources include not only the actual finds sites themselves, but also previous finds, collections and historical information (inventories, the estates of past researchers and collectors, historical reports and maps).

The archaeological sites and monuments database, together with a new monuments information system (archaeological and buildings protection) currently being developed, can also supply concrete data and links to participating historic and modern research institutions, the location of finds and records, research history, literature and geodata from past excavations. This central knowledge store is particularly important in the light of the increasing need – for scientific and preservation reasons – to re-examine “lost” sites.

Three of these excavations on very important sites now lost were carried out by Hertha Ladenbauer-Orel in the 1960 and the first years of the 1970's. The abatement of the merited scientist was devolved to the department of monuments in 2009 and was stored in Mauerbach.

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How can research into urban lives best be carried out in a period of declining financial resources and with undisturbed areas in the built-up urban centres becoming more and more rare? The re-examination of older archaeological or structural archaeological projects is one way of arriving at new results. In recent years many different methods have developed, which make it possible to examine archaeological features in a new way and thus to arrive at new questions. An interdisciplinary approach can help in checking already known conclusions and re-interpreting them if necessary.

Hertha Ladenbauer-Orel carried out three mentioned excavations or rather building site observation projects in the immediate vicinity of each other in Sterngasse, at Ruprechtsplatz und in Judengasse (LADENBAUER-OREL 1963; LADENBAUER-OREL 1972; LADENBAUER-OREL 1973). Ladenbauer-Orel knew about the archaeological projects, which took place in Germany's city centres during the rebuilding campaign after 1945 (PLANITZ 1954), and wanted to use Vienna's reconstruction in a similar fashion and thus arrive at comparable results about the development of the Vienna settlement.

Unfortunately, the accompanying circumstances in Vienna were disastrous. The political desire for a rapid reconstruction programme prevented organised archaeological excavations (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 – Construction site Ruprechtsplatz: an impression (Helga Ladenbauer-Orel, BDA, archived in the Mauerbach Archaeology centre)

Ladenbauer-Orel recorded – frequently alone alongside three mechanical excavators – a great many features, which she assigned to Roman, early or early high medieval phases. The appalling conditions in which she was forced to work led her to suggest from her earliest publications onwards that large building projects in the historic city centres could only be dealt with by interdisciplinary teams. She called for the simultaneous presence of geologists, art historians, historians and archaeologists on the buildings sites and excavations, in order to record and interpret features as quickly and accurately as possible. A suggestion which was not acted on.

This brief summary of the conditions under which the excavations of Ladenbauer-Orel took place makes one thing clear: The demolition of the houses and their cellars by mechanical excavators led to the almost complete destruction of archaeological layers on those sites. Stratigraphic sequences and accompanying pottery finds could only be recorded in a few corners, which survived because of their position on the edges of the buildings sites. Nevertheless, during the course of the excavation in Sterngasse Ladenbauer-Orel managed to photograph 64 individual walls and record the height at which they were encountered. She allocated them to Roman, early and late medieval, and post-medieval phases and published the results of the excavations immediately after the end of the project – embedded in a wider historical context (LADENBAUER-OREL 1965/1966; LADENBAUER-OREL 1969; LADENBAUER-OREL 1970; LADENBAUER-OREL 1974).

Let us turn to the key question: Why should these three sites, which were analysed and published by Ladenbauer-Orel herself, be re-examined? First of all: As we all know archaeology has changed significantly in the last 30-40 years. New themes have become established, for example “dark earth”, as a widely accepted marker for the transition between Roman and medieval layers (GABERZ 2014). New dating methods have appeared: In eastern Austria, for example, the analysis of masonry structure has been used for dating purposes since the late 1980s (SEEBACH o. J.; KÜHTREIBER 2005; MITCHELL/SCHÖN 2002). This is a way of arriving at an approximate date without adjacent earthen layers or finds.

New excavations or projects accompanying contractors’ trenches, most of them supervised by Martin Mosser from the Urban Archaeology service, have brought new results, which must now be correlated with Ladenbauer-Orel’s findings (MOSSER 2012; MOSSER 2013a and 2013b; MOSSER 2014).

New investigations of standing buildings, in our case of St. Rupert’s Church, one of the pivots of Ladenbauer-Orel’s thoughts about the origins of Vienna, have been carried out and have led to new dates (ZEHETNER 2003).

Scientifically speaking, a re-analysis of site records, which are of great importance for research into Vienna’s city centre, is very definitely desirable.

But is it ethically acceptable to rewrite the life’s work of another scientist? The answer to this question is very definitely YES, whereby this should not be interpreted as an attempt to destroy an exceptional researcher. Instead, a term from the historical sciences is appropriate here: Archaeological excavations are historical sources, which have to be subjected to critical assessment. This procedure is an everyday part of the historical sciences, but continues to lead to problematic remarks among archaeologists. Source criticism is not, however, a personal attack on an excavator or an earlier researcher, but serves to explain the objective possibilities of a re-analysis of previous excavations on the basis of a new level of knowledge.

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In processing and especially reprocessing the results of old excavations even the attempt of claiming objectivity demands and presupposes first of all a certain and very special state of impartiality towards the various and sometimes quite prominent theories old excavation data have a tendency to spawn. In most cases these theories have been involuntary absorbed even by the most critical archaeologist's mind over years and then - even more subconsciously incorporated/fitted into a back ground pattern of information used to position and stabilise the own theories. In this case, the human craving for a rudimental grid, the strong refusal to start all over accepting the proverbial "white room" as a place to begin, may be experienced as an unwholesome obstacle, quite hard to remove, blocking out objectivity.

In most cases the more or less conscious inability to let go of these theoretical constructs leads to two different ways of dealing with theories. After scrutinizing the matter carefully, the first main approach is to accept – at least to accept with reservations - the second is to oppose. But even if the decision is made to oppose, there is still dependency and concentration on the old theory itself.

The internalization and anchoring of old theories, ideas and "visualisations" engarlanding the mostly meagre excavation results of days of old is something that can't be avoided especially in the beginning of a scientific career/life step and it is as difficult to remove even with growing scientific routine. The old theory itself remains some kind of cardinal point, a prevailing zero-level-surface.

This is definitely a crucial topic in reprocessing old excavation data, all the more, if these data, or at least what was known of them, have been discussed, interpreted and used to build up settlement models for decades. For good or for bad: they have been internalized, especially by archaeologists, who have been working on the very topic a long or at least longer time. Those continued studies make the researcher more experienced on one hand, but on the other hand probably more insensitive/insensate to his own state of mind that can hardly be described as unbiased. The only way "out" is stepping "through" and behind this surface and have a more unbiased look at the original excavation-data themselves. The one and only strategic theorem in this case is to rely on no earlier attempt of interpretation, no matter how logical and/or trustworthy it seems.

Destruction in late roman times – Ladenbauers-Orel's idea of the "burnt layer dating 400 a.d."

One of the main theoretical pillars of Ladenbauer-Orel's historical concept of settlement development (LADENBAUER-OREL 1974, 18) is the idea of almost complete destruction of roman structures and only scarcely surviving traces of roman life and "spirit". These mere fragments of roman culture and population led – at least in her opinion - last but not least to a meagre but continuous use of the area of the roman fortress. This idea of late roman warfare and final defeat seemed to be echoed in a specific archaeological feature and she was confident to identify the traces of destruction in the shape of a significant "burnt layer" she observed while being occupied with the excavations Ruprechtsplatz (Fig. 7), Sterngasse and finally Judengasse.

A closer examination of the archaeological finds involved proofed all too soon, that the layer in dispute was no product of late roman activities of any kind, but that it belonged to the early high medieval period. A new and very convincing solution of this problem was needed and so a second attempt to decode this

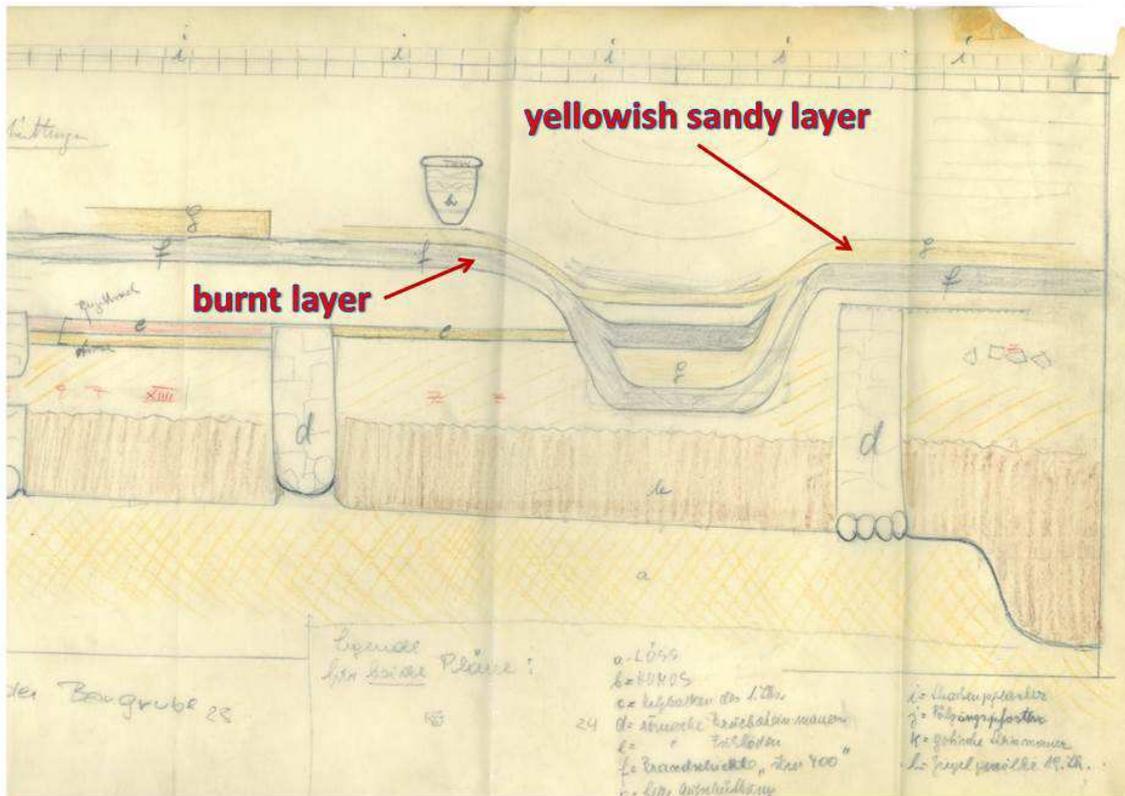


Fig. 7 – Interpretation instead of documentation (Helga Ladenbauer-Orel, BDA, archived in the Mauerbach Archaeology centre)

stratigraphy entitled this sequence of a small dark layer, followed by a light brown, yellowish, sandy feature the result of a “slash and burn” initiative, to make preparations for a new settlement area (FELGENHAUER-SCHMIEDT 1992, 63). So the idea of destruction died a quick death, the “slash and burn”-theory thrived because of its logical structure and is used up to now and – to be honest – internalized by most young and old archaeologist

As a matter of fact this features stated compound qualifying it as “burnt layer” in the first place was never put into question. This is precisely, where a complete reanalysis of this stratigraphic situation has to start.

Observing the situation from a new and more unbiased point of view, a very thin dark layer is evident, while no compound is discernible. Quite striking on the other hand is a sequence of roman mortar floors situated beneath. To sum up all these facts: In roman and probably even late roman times floors consisting of clay and mortar were constructed and repeatedly renewed. This succession of floors is covered by a humous darkish layer with a probably intentionally flattened surface, a layer that probably can be identified as the “dark earth”, an archaeological feature quite common as a “borderline”/ “barrier” between late roman and medieval remains. This “dark earth” is superposed by the thin dark layer, which is sealed by a fill-up layer consisting of light, yellowish sandy material (Fig. 8)

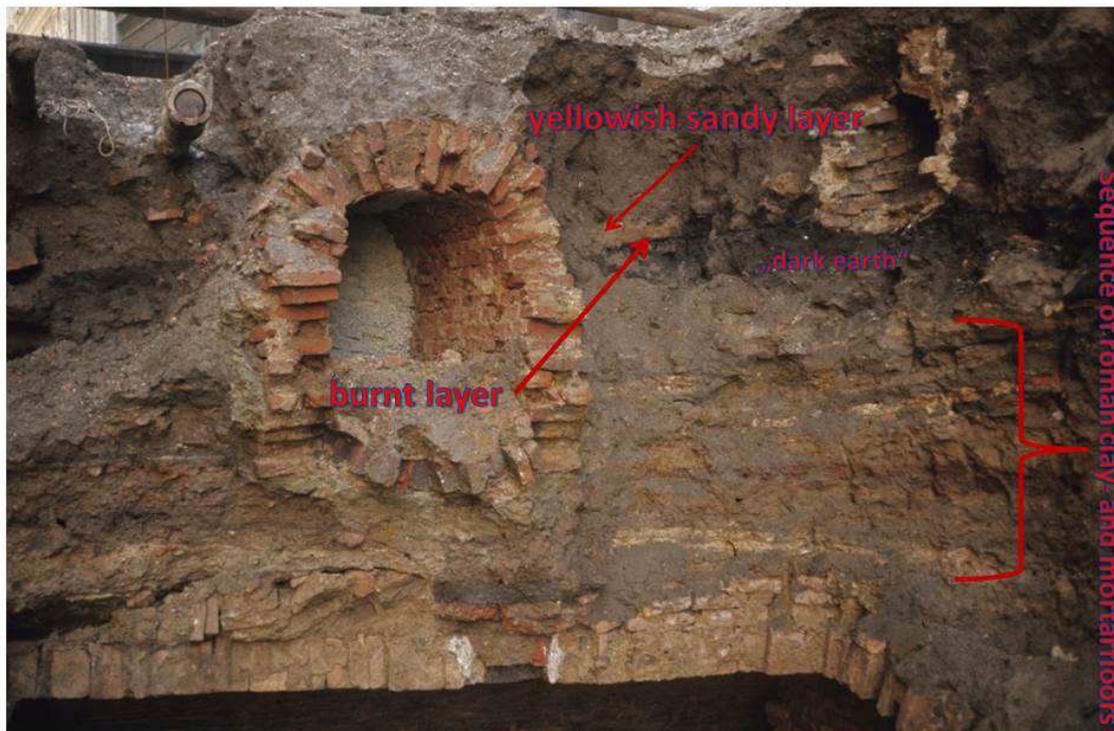


Fig. 8 – The so called “burnt layer” and its stratigraphic embedding (Helga Ladenbauer-Orel, BDA, archived in the Mauerbach Archaeology centre)

Ladenbauer-Orel may have hypothesised fire as a catalyst for the thin dark layer, but it is not unlikely, that it was water. The plane and densified surface of the “dark earth” all together with the sequence of mortar floors obviously had the potential to influence the water permeability in this area significantly. The result could well have been a moist and muddy surface that was quickly covered by sand – out of obvious reasons. This muddy situation might well have been preserved in the stratigraphic sequence as a thin dark layer. One way or the other new soil samples are desperately needed and the only way to answer this question sufficiently.

Returning to the initial idea and title the question remains: Are we able to reset and start anew, to be objective, erase each and every influencing precondition, and delete every misleading sketch and concept? Especially among those archaeologists, who find themselves often entangled in the web of old excavation data and much more dangerous – the powerful theories und enthralling models based on them - the unbiased archaeological mind is clearly a rarity.

Facing one’s own boundaries and systemic weaknesses it is inevitable to admit once more, that complete and utter objectivity is and probably will be an illusion but it also remains a value worth attempting approximation.

I. G.

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