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URKESH: FOR A SEMIOTICS OF THE HURRIAN SACRED

ABSTRACT. – The particularity of the morphological organization of the sacred urban space can be understood in the light of an understanding of the forms as signs of an equally coherent religious vision, one that contrasts deeply with that of the Mesopotamian south, in spite of the partial similarity of forms. The glyptics of the royal court displays a naturalistic style that, by setting itself off from the religious sphere, enhances the latter's distinctiveness. The Temple Terrace is a mountain in ways that match the concept embodied in the southern ziggurat and yet differs sharply from it: it is the urban echo of a landscape that remains alive in the conscience of the people, in ways that contrast with the highly stylized southern realizations. The *abi* reflects a conception of the divine that is based on the close interaction of a one to one relationship: it is the sign of a conduit to the absolute that the southerners explicitly eschewed, in favor of a conception based on the recurrence of patterns. The coherence of the outward forms, and their longevity, are thus rooted in their association with values of which these forms are the outward signs. The sometimes nebulous concept of ethnic identity emerges here with clear and explicit formal traits.

Keywords: Hurrians, Urkesh, religion, semiotics, temples, ziggurat, glyptics, *abi*

There are many distinctive traits in the culture that is emerging from the excavations of ancient Urkesh. Taken together, they constitute a cluster that is all the more significant because of the high date that can be assigned to them, the period known as the Akkadian horizon in Mesopotamia. Here, I will focus on the religious dimension, in an effort to see if and how we may attribute meaning to the data. It is in this sense that I speak of semiotics, as an attempt to identify patterns of distribution and correlation that may justify the assumption of an original intent. It is on this basis that I look at semiotics not as a fashionable catchword, but as a working method, one that builds on a clearly formal analysis to identify the underlying triggers that caused the clustering in the first place, and that we can thus arguably propose as the fountainhead of meaning.

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I will look at three aspects of the culture of 3rd millennium Urkesh: the political imaginarium and its relationship to the religious sphere; the way in which the cultic imaginarium defines the moment of human interaction with the divine world; and the mythical imaginarium as the representation of the divine world seen in and of itself. At the end, I will seek to show the common traits that link these three moments together, and on which a semiotic argument may be based.

1. THE ROYAL COURT

The Urkesh glyptic inventory is well known for its unique iconography: its main feature during the Akkadian period is the realism of the subject matter and the naturalism of the style, which set Urkesh apart from southern Mesopotamia. One particular point is relevant for us here, namely the fact that practically all the seals connected through the cuneiform legend with Tupkish and his court have a purely secular subject: tribute is brought to the king (Fig. 1), the crown prince stands in front of his father (Fig. 2), the queen sits with her children (Figs 3-4), servants are shown working for the queen bearing the burden of the legend with the queen's name (Fig. 5), the queen's nurse attends to the royal children (Fig. 6) and the banquet mistress of the queen displays a butcher and a woman churning butter (Fig. 7)⁽¹⁾. Only one seal of this group, inscribed with the name of the king, shows a divine figure, but it is too fragmentary to indicate where this figure would fit within the overall compositional frame (Fig. 8).

Of particular interest for our argument is another seal (Fig. 9) that belongs to the group in which is also found the seal impression of Tar'am-Agade, the daughter of Naram-Sin, most likely a generation later than Tupkish (Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 2002). The cuneiform legend gives the personal name Ishar-beli, without any title. For reasons given in the article just cited (p. 24 f.), it seems plausible that this individual may be a functionary of the court, possibly even belonging to the southern entourage of Tar'am-Agade. Here the subject matter *is* religious, with a deity sitting on the right, and two approaching from the left. Notice how the static posture of the deities is in contrast with the dynamic posture of the animals: the equid in the center jumping upwards, the buffalo on the left locking eyes

⁽¹⁾ The seals were originally published in Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 1996a; 1996b; 1998. In an interpretive study along similar lines as the argument I am developing here, M. Kelly-Buccellati (forthcoming) studies the construction of identity as embodied in the seals; see also Kelly-Buccellati 2009.

with the small quadruped being carried by the second deity. It is particularly the equid in the center that holds our attention – not only because of the superb rendering of the figure in movement, but especially because here the divine world is brought into the fray, as it were. The equid is shown as alive, interacting with the deities. The stark contrast between staticity (divine figures) and dynamism (the animals) highlights the interaction. The divine figures appear almost as statues, and may indeed be conceived as such, impassible in a frozen gesture that only softens when in contact with the animals – the seated deity presenting an item to the equid, the small quadruped almost jumping out of the arms of the deity holding it. The direct interaction is striking. It is not only the nature of the subjects involved in the action, but the action as such and the way in which it is represented, stylistically. It is from these factors that we can interpret the scene semiotically or “iconologically”. What is being conveyed, the “signified”, is a live interaction of the animal with the divine world. The latter remains distant, in its staticity, but is brought down to the level of real life by the dynamic interaction⁽²⁾.

There is no reason to assume that the court of Tupkish was more secular in orientation than its southern counterparts. One may well argue that the opposite is true. Avoiding the mixing of themes, religious and political, may be taken to indicate a greater appreciation of the distinctiveness of the religious sphere. In this regard, the semiotic argument may take its starting point from the realism and naturalism of the style, and run as follows. What is depicted, the “sign”, has a precise correlation to the “signified”, all the more precise as the realistic and naturalistic style focuses the attention on the action. The context is political in the specific sense of an actual, interpersonal relation: the gesture acknowledging the crown prince, the position of the queen as the primary wife, the official status of members of the court, the emphasized submissive posture of the lower servants. All of this is claimed without recourse to divine intervention, and is declared visually, also without recourse to divine imagery.

In other words, naturalism entails a coherence in the representational sphere. Since the divine world is beyond the perceptual dimension, they are not represented on the same figurative level as the human world. The two worlds are kept separate, and when they are conjoined, as in the seal of Ishar-beli, the stylistic contrast between staticity and dynamism seems to emphasize the chasm between the two worlds.

⁽²⁾ An additional, more speculative interpretation is that the seal celebrates the equids of the High Country, the *mātum elītum* where Urkesh lies, and that the locking of the eyes of the small quadruped, if it, too, can be interpreted as an equid, with the buffalo emblematic of the house of Akkad, may stand to indicate the ideological joining of the two regions.

2. THE CULT

The seals explicitly linked by their legends to the royal court evince a delight in the representation of concrete moments in the life of the individuals concerned, from the king on down to the courtiers. It is the same with the seal that represents a sacrifice (Fig. 10; Kelly-Buccellati 2005, 36-40). The religious dimension is not expressed by heraldic figures, but by an activity that unfolds as if on a stage. The event as such emerges with a factuality that expresses the full religious dimension of the act, without the need of any iconic or heraldic embellishment.

We find the same aesthetic canon in other items that may be linked to the cult because of the location where they have been found. A stone plaque from the EDIII layers next to the Temple conveys a striking dynamic sense where it shows a farmer thrusting the plow in the furrow (Fig. 11a) and a herd in a circular movement (Fig. 11b; Kelly-Buccellati 1990, 127-129)⁽³⁾.

The two bronze lions of Tish-atal reflect two contrasting gestural renderings, a single axiality view in the one of the Louvre (Fig. 12a), and a double axiality view in the one from the Metropolitan (Fig. 12b), which we can thus see from two distinct vantage points. We have argued (Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 2009, 58-63) that these two lions may come from a foundation deposit of Temple BA at Urkesh, and from the inscription that accompanies them (Wilhelm 1998; Zettler in Muscarella 1988, 94) we may hypothesize that the lion figure refers to a deity. Conjecturally, then, the two lions may be linked with the temple cult.

The *abi* is one of the structures that can be most narrowly defined in terms of a specific cultic action, that of summoning the spirits of the Netherworld (Kelly-Buccellati 2002). One of the finds within the *abi* is a theriomorphic vessel (Fig. 13), with the spout in the shape of a pig snout. This puts a realistic face on a vessel presumably used during the ceremonies, and this realism is further evidenced by a seal of Queen Uqnitum (Fig. 14) where a pig (or possibly a boar), is shown as a filler motif: we may suspect that the seal may have included, in the missing part, the medium who was most likely a woman.

⁽³⁾ A similar herd in a rotational movement is found on a seal impression (A7.321) that was, however, found in the palace, and thus cannot be linked to a cultic purpose.

3. THE MYTH

I have proposed elsewhere a functional and a stylistic interpretation (Buccellati 2009; 2010a; 2012a) for a particular feature of the revetment wall of the Urkesh Temple Terrace: a triangular pattern in the organization of the stone wall (Figs 15a-b) may be understood *functionally* as a survival of a technique used to construct large animal enclosures in the highlands to the north of Urkesh; and it may be understood *ideologically* as an architectural “logogram”, i.e., a motif that corresponds to a distinctive symbol used in glyptics and in cuneiform writing to represent the mountains.

Since there are reasons to believe that the Temple Terrace was dedicated to Kumarbi (Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 2009, 62 f.), we may see the mountain motif used in the revetment wall of the Temple Terrace as a representation of the landscape on which, the Hurrian myth of Silver tells us, Kumarbi was thought to be walking when away from his seat of Urkesh. This is of course conjectural, but a particular application of perceptual analysis contributes to make it at least plausible. The Temple Terrace is not a freestanding structure like a ziggurat, and the revetment wall encases the Terrace only on its southern flank: this means that it was meant to be seen against the backdrop of the mountains not far to the north (the Tur-Abdin). It appears, in other words, very much like a staging that reproduces in a proximate spatial dimension what the myth describes for the more distant landscape: Kumarbi’s temple atop the mountain-like terrace echoes the mountains in the background, atop which the same deity is projected as walking in the distance.

This ideological aspect may also be represented figuratively in a seal impression (Fig. 16) that we have interpreted as referring to the myth of Kumarbi (Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 1997, 93). The iconography is clear: a deity is striding across a series of mountain peaks, followed by a quadruped. The mountains are rendered as triangular shapes that are not strictly geometrical, but rather modulated.

To see in this figure a representation of Kumarbi is as conjectural as the proposed interpretation of the Temple Terrace as a proscenium for the distant mountain landscape. But it seems fair to say that this suggestion, linking the myth of Silver with the seal, is, again, at least plausible, since the notion of a deity walking on the mountains is a very specific *topos* that is not otherwise so described in other myths.

4. SEMIOTICS

4.1 *Naturalism vs. iconicity*

Even though some of the suggestions made here are conjectural, and have clearly been identified as such, I believe that an overall pattern emerges that allows us to assign a distinct specificity to the notion of the sacred as we begin to see it in the Urkesh imaginarium of the late 3rd millennium. The trend is to eschew iconicity and to opt instead for a directness that finds its main realization in the naturalistic style of the various art forms⁽⁴⁾.

The same directness is displayed in architecture. In its simplest meaning, semiotics entails the correlation between two dimensions. In the case of the *abi*, the depth of the monumental shaft evokes the descent to the Netherworld, and the spirits that emerge from it are confronted individually and explicitly, not metaphorically. The contrast could not be greater between this approach to the divine world and that of Mesopotamian divination.

In the case of the revetment wall of the Temple Terrace, the triangular pattern (which is an observable dimension of a concrete item) is a sign that points in the direction of, (i.e., that “signifies”), the mountains. The wall is the sign, the mountains are the signified. Next, the mountains can be linked to the myth, so that the signified emerges not as just the actual mountains to the north, but as the mountains *on which* Kumarbi is shown walking. This is a configuration of elements that cannot really be imagined in the south of Mesopotamia: a temple terrace in the imitation of a mountain and a narrative (verbal and visual) that adheres to a realistic representation of events. The deity is shown in an anthropomorphic manner in terms not only of the rendering of the figure on the seal, but also of the action involved.

Admittedly, this degree of specificity remains conjectural. The semiotic argument does not, in and of itself, serve as a proof. It serves as just an “argument”, a concatenation of suggestions that have merit only in terms of the plausibility of the various steps taken. In this sense, semiotics helps us frame the argument in terms that are explicit and, precisely, arguable. Where this argument gains in value, is in the clustering of parallel correlations between signs and “signifieds”. It is such a clustering that I have sought to highlight here.

⁽⁴⁾ Not related to the religious sphere per se, but nevertheless significant for the similarity of the stylistic effect, is the rendering of Gilgamesh in the plaque published by Kelly-Buccellati 2006. The rendering is much more realistic than any of the other figures from southern Mesopotamia that have been traditionally so identified (and even more conjecturally so than in the case of the Urkesh Gilgamesh).

What seems particularly striking is the fact that it is not only the iconography that indicates distinctiveness (e.g., the god walking in the mountains), but, as well, a set of correlations that link the iconography *with style*. In the Kumarbi seal, the deity, we have just seen, is not really an icon. The two lions of Tish-atal, taken together, stress two different and complementary modalities of representation. In the seal of Ishar-beli, the seated deity appears indeed as an icon, but here it is the rampant quadruped that breaks the iconicity of the ensemble and introduces a very realistic dynamic element, in the same manner as with the standing deity and the small quadruped shown as seeking to leap away from the hold and locking eyes with the buffalo.

4.2. *Semiotics and referentiality*

Another way to look at semiotics is in terms of referentiality. The sign is to the signified what the referential is to referent. In the first case, the emphasis is on the subject: the sign points to the signified – e.g., a flag to a country. In the second, the emphasis is on the target: the referent qualifies the referential – e.g., a country presupposes a flag. The referent is like the vanishing point in perspective: it is not a given, because we do not see the point that, precisely, vanishes within the figurative context; and yet *it is* a given, because all the lines found in the context presuppose it, and only *it*. In this sense, we can call the divine the referent, and the sacred the referential.

Two classic examples from the literature may help elucidate this point. Jack Miles (1995) describes the God portrayed in the Old Testament as a unitary character and protagonist across the profound variations in the literary record. The title is suggestive of the coherence of a central referent to which the various authors give different voices and faces. The second is Robert Armstrong (1971), an anthropologist, who finds a unifying thread in the concept of, as the title says, the “affecting presence” of a given intangible reality perceived across various representations of African religious art.⁽⁵⁾

The pertinence to our current topic is that the notion of a coherent referent serves as the conceptual bridge across the diverse cultural manifestations, and provides thereby a useful interpretive key. The signified is the divine referent perceived as the affecting presence. The referential, or the sign, is the sacred in the form of the different cultural manifestations that point, concurrently, to the deity, the “vanishing point”. The higher the incidence of this concurrence, i.e., the more the number of referentials (the sacred) that can best be explained by virtue of the same referent, the safer the inference about the coherence of this referent – the divine dimension.

⁽⁵⁾ I have developed these themes in some detail in my recent book (Buccellati 2012).

4.3 The “Hurrian” sacred

The Urkesh “cultural manifestations”⁽⁶⁾ are not only coherent in their overall import, they are also distinctive vis-à-vis the broader Mesopotamian context. Taken together, they form a cohesive and mature whole, which presupposes an equally distinctive referent.

The semiotic dimension proposes a deeper level of understanding, and it does so in an arguable fashion. We may juxtapose it to a “semantic” dimension, i.e., one that, as is normally the case⁽⁷⁾, focuses on the typology of gods and goddesses and on the lexical aspect of myths and cults.

That the cluster of cultural manifestations from Urkesh, distinct from the southern Mesopotamian tradition, may be further qualified as “Hurrian”, depends on a line of reasoning analogous to that developed for the definition of the sacred. The case for ethnic (“Hurrian”) affiliation can be made for a *cluster* of traits relating to a Hurrian ethnic identity that can plausibly be applied to Urkesh (Buccellati 2010b; 2013). As of now, Urkesh is the only 3rd millennium city for which this case can be made – and the evidence intimates that the case may possibly be made for the 4th as well (Kelly-Buccellati 2010). The current intense archaeological activity in Iraqi Kurdistan may well add one or more urban centers belonging to the same sphere, such as Kumme. And when events in Syria allow us to return to Tell Mozan, we trust that the picture we are beginning to see of a rich and diverse Hurrian sacred will become even more sharply defined.

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⁽⁶⁾ Described here and in the paper by M. Kelly-Buccellati in this volume.

⁽⁷⁾ See recently the excellent overview by Marie-Claude Trémouille in Biga – Capomacchia 2008, 279-314; this text is essentially confined to the 2nd millennium, and does not integrate yet the data from 3rd millennium Urkesh.

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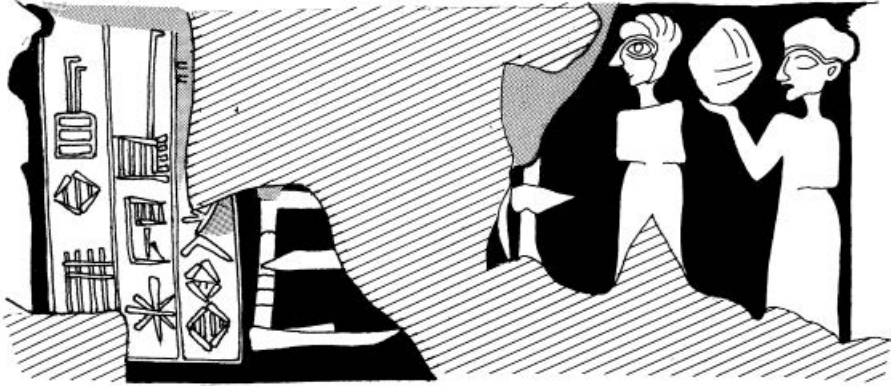


Fig. 1 – Composite of seal impression AKk1, with a cuneiform legend referring to *Tupkiš endan Urkeš*. The figure that would have appeared as seated on the stool but is now obliterated would have been that of the king, to whom a tribute is being presented, possibly a skein of wool? Akkadian Period, ca 2250 BC.



Fig. 2 – Composite of seal impression AKk2, showing king Tupkish seated and the crown prince touching his knee. Akkadian Period; 2250 BC.



Fig. 3 – Composite of seal impression AKq2, with the legend of queen Uqnitum, showing the crown prince touching the knee of his father. Akkadian Period, ca 2250 BC.



Fig. 4 – Composite of seal impression AKq4, showing queen Uqnitum with a daughter touching her knee. Akkadian Period, ca 2250 BC.



Fig. 5 – Composite of seal impression AKq5, with the legend of queen Uqnitum placed in a horizontal position over the back of two servants. Akkadian Period, ca 2250 BC.



Fig. 6 – Composite of seal impression AKh2, showing the nurse of the queen, Zamena, holding the hand of the prince seated on the lap of the mother. Akkadian Period, ca 2250 BC.



Fig. 7 – Composite of seal impression AKh3, with the legend of the cook (Tuli), showing a butcher and woman churning butter. Akkadian Period, ca 2250 BC.



Fig. 8 – Composite of seal impression AKk4, with the legend of king Tupkish, showing a divine figure. Akkadian Period, ca 2250 BC.

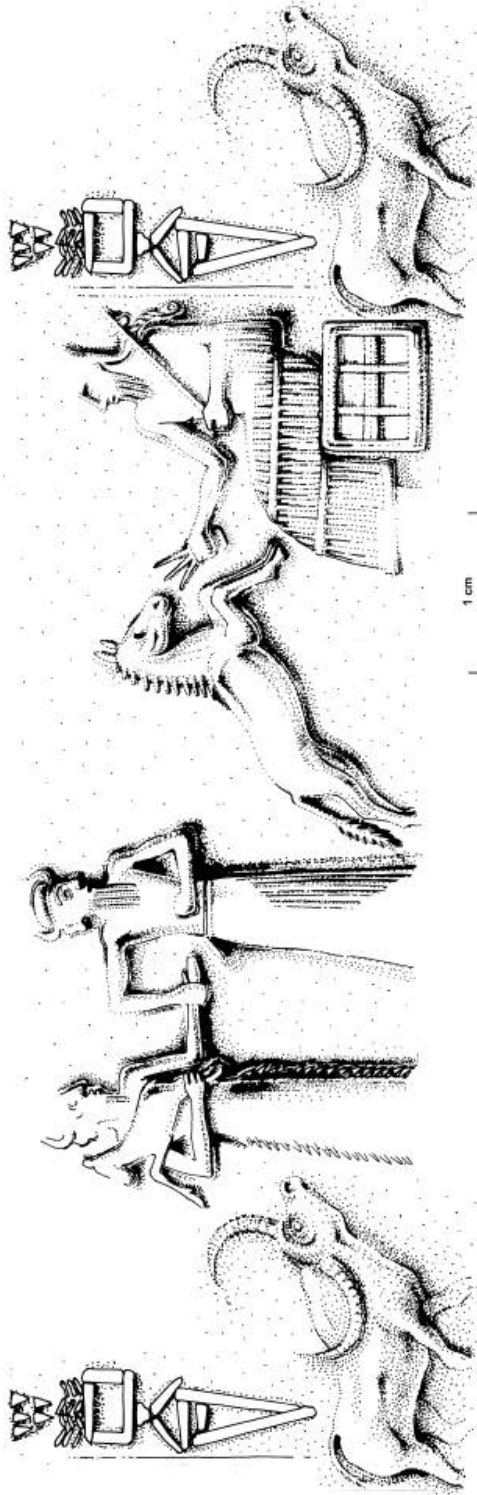


Fig. 9 – Composite of seal impression ARc3, with legend of Ishar-beli, showing quadrupeds and divine figures. EBIII, ca 2200 BC.



Fig. 10 – Rolling of seal A15.270, showing the sacrifice of a small bull. Akkadian Period, ca 2250-2150 BC.



Fig. 11a. Stela B1.19, side showing a plowing scene. ED III, ca 2300 BC.



Fig. 11b. Stela B1.19, side showing a herd of animals in movement. ED III, ca 2300 BC.



Fig. 12a. Lion and tablet of Tish-atal, AO 18837 and 19938. Akkadian (?), ca 2250 BC (?).

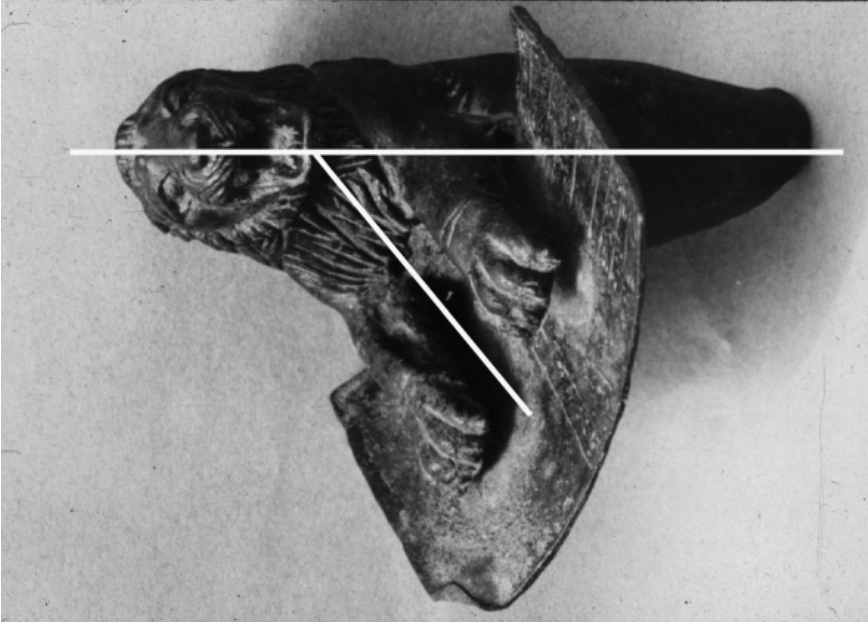


Fig. 12b. Lion of Tish-atal, MMA 48.180. Akkadian Period (?), ca 2250 BC (?).



Fig. 13 – Spout of zoomorphic vase, with head of a pig, A12.149. Akkadian Period (?), ca 2250-2150 BC (?).



Fig. 14 – Composite of seal impression AKq3, showing queen Uqnitum, and a pig or boar under the cuneiform legend. Akkadian Period, ca 2250 BC.



Fig. 15a – Western end of revetment wall of Temple Terrace (J1^w1), with a triangular pattern. ED III, ca 2300 BC.



Fig. 15b – Western end of revetment wall of Temple Terrace (J2^w1), with a triangular pattern. ED III, ca 2300 BC.



Fig. 16 – Seal impression AKc21, showing a deity walking in a mountain landscape.
Akkadian Period, ca 2250 BC.

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