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### Original Research Article

## A Study of the Reasons for Representation of the Visual Elements of Sasanian Art and the Avoidance of the Impression of Royal Art in the Sogadian Mural

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### Abstract

**Problem statement:** The Sogadian civilization was on the Silk Road route and was one of the most significant areas of the Silk Road. This geographical location resulted in significant cultural intertwining in the art and culture of the area. The influence of Indian, East Asian and Iranian culture on art are visible. But in the meantime, the influence of Sassanian from Iran may be stronger as the Sogadians received the most influence from the Sassanian in their art. But in this impression, they merely confined themselves to the representation of the Visual Elements of Sasanian art and did not reflect the spirit of royal art in their works. This is especially evident in the Sogadian murals.

**Research question:** What are the reasons for the unique representation of the Visual Elements of Sasanian art and not to reflect the spirit of royal in Sogadian art murals?

**Research objective:** Identifying the reasons for Sogdian selective influence on some specific aspects of Sassanid art, is the main objective of the present study.

**Research method:** This research is a qualitative one and it is conducted in historical methods as well as the descriptive-analytical study and the required data was collected through a library method.

**Conclusion:** Sogadian society provided the opportunity for growth for all individuals within the context of the social and political structure of developed urbanization. Due to having such a structure, the money made by being located on the Silk Road route provided considerable prosperity to the people of the area and besides the king, other rich people were formed in the hearts of the population. The same story flourished with epic, mythical, everyday themes, and in Sogadian murals depicting stories that all Sogadian people could be heroes, rather than the central persona and the king's display of absolute power.

**Keywords:** *Sogadian art, Sogadian murals, Sassani art, Iranian art.*

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## Introduction

Soghd is a vast area between the rivers Amu River (Jayhoun) in the south, to Sirdarya (Sayhoun) in the north of Central Asia. Archaeological findings confirm that the stream of the Soghd River (Zarafshan) is the most important factor in contributing to transforming this area into a permanent Sogadian settlement. Thus, from the very beginning, Sogadian has set the stage for the emergence of urban life. Not only did the Sogadian River's geographical situation play an important role in this integration, but it is also being by the Silk Road sustained the social and economic structure of the city. So, it can be assumed that the Sogadians are one of the pioneers of the growth and development of urbanization in Iranian civilization. Therefore, the importance of this essay is that it can provide a step towards a better understanding of the art of Central Asia, which is also closely linked to Iranian art and civilization. The present study lacks a hypothesis regarding the nature of the method, is based on this basic question that, what are the reasons for the visual and evasive features of the display of royal aspects of Sasanian art in Sogadian murals?

The purpose of this study is to identify the reasons that influenced Sogadian's scrupulous selection of aspects of Sasanian art and to achieve the purpose of the research, the influence of Sogadians on Sasanians in the context of social, political geography and economic situation of Sogadian society has been studied and analyzed.

## Literature review

According to the reviews, there are several studies related to the subject of this article. One of the most important of these studies is the book "Sogadian Painting" (Naghasiye Soghdi) by Azarpey in 2018, which its importance has been in the study of Sogadian murals and examination of Sogadian paintings both in terms of forms and contents. This book does not mention the reasons for Sogadian's scrupulous selection of Sasanian art.

Another source of great relevance to the subject of this study is an article entitled "Investigating the Effects of Sasanian Painting on the Sogadian Mural" by Dadvar, Moeinadini & Assar Kashani, in 2012 which is written to recognize the effects of Sasanian paintings on Sogadian murals. Finally, he has concluded that the Sogadians have influenced not only by the Sasanians, but also by other cultures in other lands, such as Khwarazm, India, and Greece. By the way, they have always sought to preserve their own values and their cultural and artistic backgrounds.

In his essay, very closely related to the present article, Dadvar has concluded that the Sogadians were only content with the Visual Elements of Sasanian art and did not represent the royal Sasanian elements in their works, but he has not mentioned or addressed the reasons for this impact. There is also another article entitled "Comparison of Foundations and Subjects of Transoxianan Art and Sasanian Iran" by Hasan Shojaei Mehr, who has evaluated the historical works of Transoxiana and Sasanian Iran. The evaluation is in terms of comparing artistic foundations and themes. The findings of this study show that the art of Transoxiana coincided with the concepts and symbols of Iranian public culture and, within its themes, had a broad visual representation of the local peasants 'and merchants' culture, while Sasanian art lacked Enjoying the concepts and symbols of Iranian society's culture in its foundations and themes, the focus is largely on visual representation of Sasanian imperial power.

There is also another article, entitled "Sogadian Textile Design: Political Symbols of an Epoch" by Elmira Gyul, which deals with the Sogadian political signs used on Sogadian cloths. She has considered the use of these symbols under the influence of Sasanian art. The political symbols in this article are not symbols of the royal power and glory, but of the common symbols of the day in which the clothes were worn and seem to have some political implications. However, the visual

examples presented in this essay are very few, and the few examples cited in this article cannot prove that the Sasanian inspired motifs that have become popular in Sogadian culture and art have been political. Since there are many examples that confirms that Sogadian has used the visual elements of Sasanian art.

None above articles have addressed the Sogadian influence of the visual elements of Sasanian art and the rejection of royal symbols.

### **Sogadian Social and Political Geography Compared to Sasanian**

The oldest, historical documents available to refer to the Sogadians are from the six to the fifth century BC, when a group of Sogadians is displayed on the eastern staircase of Baram hall, Apadana, among delegates (Azarpey, 2018, 20). Also according to the writings of Herodotus and Darius inscriptions in Bisootun, Takht-e Jamshid, and especially in Naqsh-e Rostam, Soghd (Samarkand and Bukhara) was from the Iranian lands (Pirnia, 1996, 692). After the Achaemenes period, Sogadian became “part of the Sasanian Empire” (Sims, Marshak & Grube, 2002, 15).

Although Sogadian was a part of the Sasanian Empire during the Sasanian era, it differed greatly from the Sasanian government in terms of political structure. Sasanian rule was based on the king’s power, and under his control, the body of society was deprived of many privileges. Aside from the king’s power during the Sasanian era, from the beginning they integrated with the Zoroastrian clergy, and the relationship between religion and government continued until the end of their rule (Christensen, 1999, 206). The Sasanians, therefore, harassed and persecuted the followers of other religions with their official religious policies. So, the class of the Zoroastrian clergy also gained too much power.

The clergy’s position and economical function in Sasanian political-social system were in such a way that they were at the forefront of other social classes and constituted as the most powerful class in Iran

(Sobhani Tabrizi, 2006, 81). In such circumstances, the class of ordinary citizens and the lower and middle layers of society continued to weaken, and this trend manifested itself in the kind of themes used in Sasanian art. But in the Transcend, and especially in Soghd, the culture of urbanization was fortified, the class of citizens and merchants strengthened, adherence to native traditions was increased, and multicultural society was grown (Shojaee Mehr, 2016, 144).

“There are pieces of evidence that two of the Samarkand’s kings were elected by the people, and in one case it is clearly stated that the monarch was came to power by people. So not only the elders but also the humans of the city played a major role in Sogadian history” (Azarpey, 2018, 39). While the Sogadians became familiar with the Sasanian political and governmental structure as well as their artwork through the trade of merchants across the Silk Road, they did not directly benefit from it, and especially in art, they were subordinate to the social and political arrangements of their society.

### **Soghd’s Economical Situation**

The lands of Transoxiana and especially Sogadiana during the Sassanian era, achieved significant economic prosperity due to locating in the silk road route and the type of social and political structure. The Sogadian citizens were not a warlike people, and they only watched over the stability and security of the Silk Road, and their efforts to bring peace and firmness to their social, political and economic situation were well demonstrated.

To the extent that this city was introduced as: Soghd, an ancient and rich city, - the followers of all the sects is are free to learn, and the way to a prosperous life is open. knowledge is available, and hearts are open to it. The people are traditional and social, they are well-known for goodness, forgiveness, and perseverance (Sayyed Moradi, 2010, 196). One of the cities that played a key role in Sogadiana’s economic growth and experienced the most economic growth was undoubtedly Samarkand.

According to the evidence, the Sogadian cultural, social and political center is undoubtedly Samarkand, and the Sogadians not only managed to secure the monopoly of the silk trade on the eastern path but also made Samarkand one of the important centers of paper industry and commerce (Habibi, 2001, 492).

The city of Samarkand had four gates at that time; the Chinese gate in the east, the Bukhara gate in the north, the Nowbahar gate in the west and the Kash gate in the south, and because of the growth of indigenous traders as well as foreign merchants, there was a large market called Ras-al-Tag (Azhand, 1984, 219). Jahezz<sup>1</sup> marks the craft in Samarkand as a distinctive feature of this city and its people (Moghadasi, 1983, 47). The merchants, therefore, were always traveling this route, exporting Chinese and Indian merchandise to the Western, Persian, and Eastern Roman countries, and as a result of this economic boom, most Sogadians enjoyed individual independence. There is some evidence which confirms Sogadian trading activities, including the inscription of Aliya valley in Send River. Also, historical documents do not overlook the rich Sog'diana's meadow of the gold (Markwart, 2004, 49-51). As Yaqubi (2010, 57) in al-Baladan besides talking about Samarkand, explains: "There are gold bars in this river and there is no gold in Khorasan, except what I have learned is in this stream." Also, a historical document highlights the important role and reputation of the region in the field of the most expensive types of minerals; Whereas in the memorial tablet of the Shush Apadana monument, Darius refers to the azure and agate brought from the Sogadian land or an Indian carrying gold soil from the Sogadian valley and his Figure on the Persepolis Apadana stairs or the Sogadian delegation That carry golden tools (Koch, 2000, 133).

Another reason for the economic boom in Sogd was the presence of a river, which said the ship could also travel in the blessed the river, all the

lands of Soghd, were green; In a way, they knew the Bukhara fruit was better than the fruit of all over the Transoxiana (Moein-o-foghara, 1991, 13). Thus, based on historical documents and evidence, it can be said that Sogadian merchants have achieved a thriving commercial economy due to their native potential and success in the East-West trade and, as a result, the Sogadian independent financial situation has provided support and their art flourished in the sixth century. But the Soghdian people, even with favorable economic conditions, refused to pay taxes (Mohammadi-Mallayeri, 2000, 12). They were tyrannical people until King Tarkhoun was imprisoned by the people of Soghd after accepting the Arab tribute, and remained in prison for the rest of his life (Narshakhi, n.d, 226-227).

### **Reflection of Sogadian Social, Political, and Economic Relations in Sogadian Murals**

In the cities of Soghd, politics and religious freedom were observed and this explains why the Buddhist, Christian, Manichaeian, and Zoroastrian religions lived together freely. The Sogadian effort to blend Central Asian people with Iranian, Greek, Indian, and Chinese cultures is exemplary. This political-religious freedom and the acceptance of disparate cultures also resulted in wealth, cultural and economical - development. Indeed, it was in the 7th century that Chinese trade and Sogadian flourished, and the eastern gate of Samarkand was renamed the Gate of China, after which Samarkand became one of the most prosperous and wealthy cities in Transoxiana, with a reputation for prosperity and cultural and artistic prosperity. This situation lasted until the early Islamic era. The reflection of Sogadian's social and economic relations is correctly reflected in its murals, making Sogadian one of the most original and creative art centers that has influenced other artwork points (Fig. 1).

Perhaps one of the most striking implications



Fig. 1. Part of the Sogdian Wall Painting, Samarkand, first half of the seventh century Choghani envoys to the Samarkand kingdom. Source: Azarpey, 2018, 240.

of the dynamic economy and relatively free Sogdian social and political structure can be found in a variety of graffiti themes. “The Sogdian painting has a great variety. Predominantly, it can be divided into religious, epic, historical, regular and folk groups depending on the subject” (Pakbaz, 2017, 39). In addition to the variety of mural themes, the types of themes that are most commonly used in this global and everyday world can also be a reflection of the structure of Sogdian economics and society.

In fact, “Murals of worldly charm constitute the main body of the paintings discovered in Sogdian; this diversity and pervasiveness of secular paintings suggest these paintings were the main medium of artistic expression among the Sogdians” (Azarpey, 2018, 201).

After all, during this period, the painting in Soghd became so enormously popular that it covered not only the palaces and temples but also one to five rooms of the wealthy homes and in general one-third of the houses of the citizens of Soghd. That, in itself, could be another sign of the impact of the economic boom on the people of Soghd (Dadvar, et al., 2012, 24)

### The Thematic Differences of the Sogdian Murals with Sassanian Works

During the Achaemenid period, Soghd was considered one of the largest provinces of Iran. (Moemen, 2014, 43). On one hand, the Sasanian

also considered themselves to be the Achaemenid legacy, insofar as this bequest greatly influenced their art and the royal motifs as the main theme of Sasanian artwork and its integral part were widely used (Ravandi, 1975, 575). On the other hand, in comparison with Sogdian art, epic themes have been of the utmost importance in Sogdian murals. The heroic and epic stories are often portrayed in continuous beams, and the heroic scenes are aligned so that the viewer can follow the visual narrative horizontally on the wall (Pakbaz, 2017, 41). Sogdian art, unlike Sassani royal and official art, did not merely represent the wishes of the kings, and the Sogdian kings played no more than the other Sogdian citizens in decorating their homes, even in the murals of their residences. On the other hand, mighty Sassani kings had them portrayed as Gods in their prominent murals in order to signify endorsement or portrayed as an epic hero in scenes of battle (Fig.2).

As Ammianus Marcellinus<sup>2</sup> writes about a mural in a palace near Seleucia: “The king was slaying wild animals in all kinds of hunting, because in their country there was nothing but painting or sculpting of blood in different forms and scenes of war. (ibid., 28). But as it is illustrated in Fig. 3, the Sogdians attempted to display a pattern of heroism in their art, thus seeking patterns among literary heroes rather than kings. Sogdian paintings highlights the bravery and not the feudal spirit of the soldier (Azarpey, 2018, 85).

The Sogdians learned many of the Sassanian art techniques but never imitated them, but gave it a new sprite.

For instance: the king’s facade was used to represent the God on the throne and transform the royal prey into the scene of an ordinary or mythical battle of a God and a monster. Although the Sogdian artists were familiar with the Sassani patterns, they did not once depict the king’s facade on their potteries, so in Soghd, the royal entity was not an indication of official glory but it was a reflection of the noble and prosperous peoples’



Fig. 2. Sasanian commander depicted as an epic hero.  
Source: <http://www.britishmuseum.org>.



Fig. 5. How the Sassanid King was depicted among other people.  
Source: <https://nl.pinterest.com>.



Fig. 3. Part of the Sogdian murals (Rostam's Seven Labors), Panjakent  
Source: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org>.



Fig. 4. Part of a Sogdian mural depicting a royal ceremony.  
Source: Azarpey, 2018, 139.


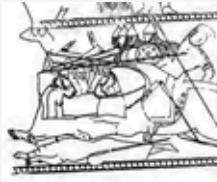






lives (Azarpey, 2018, 46). In general, in the Sogdian mural, the king is of equal size to the others at the grand ceremony, as shown in Fig. 4. In Sasanian murals not only the king overcame other emperors but also he is larger than the others (Fig. 5).

In addition to the differences in the size of the Sassani monarch with those around him, other points about the difference in the way the Sasanian king is portrayed by the Sogdian and their own heroes, include the number of figures and the type of their position in the epic and heroic scenes (Table1).

According to Table 1, the Sasanian king is often portrayed as having overcome difficulties alone or is larger than anyone else, and has been at the focal point of the picture, making him the main reason for success. In the Sogdian mural, there is always a group of soldiers who have achieved a collective victory under the command of commanders. In Sogdian works, unlike Sasanian works, it is the collective unity that is regarded as the inspiring and guaranteeing element of victory; This is emphasized even by the identical size of the figures and the type of positioning on the

Table 1. Differences in the Sassanian King's Figure Displays with Sogadian Commanders and Soldiers. Source: authors.

- A. The Sasanian king overcomes his enemy. Source: <http://svarogi.wordpress.com>.
- B. Sogadian hero in a battle. Source: Azerpey, 2018, 113.
- C. The Sassani king overcomes his enemy. Source: Grishman, 2011, 152.
- D. Sogadian soldiers on the way to war.. Source: <http://www.flickr.com>.
- E. Sasani king is hunting a lion. Source: Harper,1981,16.
- F. Sogadians in a battle.. Source: <http://www.hermitagemuseum.org>.
- G. The Sasanian king overcomes his enemy. Source: <http://dariocaballeros.blogspot.com>.
- H. Battle scene of Sogadian soldiers. Source: Azerpey, 2018, 16.

Row	The way a Sassani King is depicted	The way the Sogadian heroes are depicted	Details
1	 A	 B	The Sassani king fights alone with his enemy, while in the Sogadian mural, the battle is depicted as a group.
2	 C	 D	In this battle, only the Sassani king is pictured, while in the Sogadian instance, a group of soldiers with a commander is depicted
3	 E	 F	The Sassani king is facing danger alone, while in the Sogadian mural the warriors are all together.
4	 G	 H	The Sasani King is portrayed ahead of his troops and to a larger extent than them, while the Sogadian soldiers are no different in size, their position in the picture is more realistic

stage, which is not significantly different in visual value. Therefore, the royal side has a significant place in Sassani art, while in Sogadian works the king is rarely focused on the motifs.

Epic and religious themes, along with folk and

daily themes such as parties, entertainment and the like, are develop the subject of Sogadian murals. And it should be noted that this mural shows the artist's keen attention to composition and his mastery of curved lines. In Sogadian art, as is well

illustrated in Fig. 6, the formation of the human body is highly logical. Slim waist, wide shank, mighty shoulders and muscles, strong and sturdy neck, lightweight fuselage head and delicate hands and fingers, all of which are properly designed (Azarpey, 2018, 93). Whereas the Sassani artist, like his predecessors, has preferred abstraction and symbolism over realistic representations of Sogadian artists everywhere.

Finally, it is distinct that despite the acceptance of foreign influence and the presence of various civilizations, the Sogadians were able to maintain their cultural identity and keep their social traditions away from the influence of outsiders and they had their own artistic traditions.

### Sassanian Influences on the Sogadian Mural

In studying the arts and culture of many lands related to Iran, one can see the interplay of many cultural and artistic traditions which is the most important visual heritage that remains in the geographical range of Soghd in Central Asia. Thus, as can be seen in Table 2, examining the effects of Sasanian paintings on Sogadians, plays an important role in recognizing Sogadian visual culture and among them, the murals depicted on brick architecture in the cities of Transoxiana, are the most important artistic expression of Sogadian culture (Shojaee Mehr, 2016, 145).



Fig. 6. A section of the mural depicting a scene from a banquet, Panjakent<sup>3</sup>. Source: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org>.

As shown in Table 2, the influence of the Sasanian on Sogadians art is summarized only in the representation of visual elements. This means the Sogadians were limited to the representation of Sassani themes which did not show the royal spirit. They have adopted most of the elements like flowers, leaves, harp, animal, etc. from Sassanian art, and - symbols such as the pearl ring that were somehow related to the concept of regal power in the Sassani era, were just utilized as a decorative element and not as a symbol of royal power.

In Panjakent paintings, crowns, masks, and colors are adapted from Sassanian, and the clothes of many of the characters who painted on their walls are similar to the Sassani clothing (Fig. 7). In other words, the textiles used in Sogadian paintings as figurines, have traditional Sasanian designs. While narrating epic and heroic tales, the Sogadian artist has illustrated the details of clothing, weapons, and all elements of the scene, whether martial or magical. Even the manner in which people sit in and the presence of wavy tapes in the scenes of Panjakent is also a tradition of Sassani Iran (Dadvar, et al., 2012, 29).

Women in these murals are not portrayed as witches of primitive societies or wise spouses and mothers, but appear as ideal women in a society that espouses athlete values; In accordance with the same values that are really prevalent in Sogadian society (Fig. 8). Sogadian paintings represent the achievement of skilled artists who respond to the needs and aspirations of the creative community, while Sassani Iranian arts pursue purely religious or governmental interests (ibid., 31).









### Research Method

This research is a qualitative one and it is conducted in historical methods as well as the descriptive-analytical study and the required data was collected through a library method. The statistical population of this study includes Sassanid artworks and Sogadian murals and the sampling method is non-random sampling.



Table 2. The formal effects of Sasanian art on Sogadian art. Source: authors.

- A. curved and flower design used in a plate. Source: <https://nl.pinterest.com/>
- B. curved and flower design used in a horse saddle. Source: <http://photo.qip.ru/>
- C. Repetition of circle design as a pearl ring. Source: <https://nl.pinterest.com/>
- D. Repetition of circle design as a pearl ring. Source: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org>
- E. Sassanian King Attended Others (Bigger and Above). Source: <https://nl.pinterest.com/>
- F. Emperor of Soghd was present among other people (like other people). Part of a Sogadian mural, banquet, Panjakent. Source: Azerpey, 2018, 139.
- G. Sassanian metal container and depicting music playing. Source: <https://nl.pinterest.com/>
- H. Part of the Sogadian mural depicting harpsichord, Panjakent. Source: Azerpey, 2018, 244.

Row	Sasanian Example	Sogadian Mural Example
1	 A	 B
2	 C	 D
3	 E	 F
4	 G	 H

### Discussion

Generally, most scholars agree that the Sogadians have been selectively influenced by Sasanian

artwork in their works; That is, the Sogadians were only content with representing the formal features of Sasanian art and rejecting the royal aspects. The



Fig.7. Sogdian Cloth Inspired by Sasanian textile, Panjakent. Source: <http://photo.qip.ru>.



Fig. 8. Sogdian Ladies' Showtimes, Panjakent. Source: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org>.

Sogdians were part of the Achaemenid realm and had encountered Iranian art many years before the Sassanids; Persepolis carvings shows Sogdian they were not only familiar with Iranian art at the time, but also familiar with the social and cultural structure of the Iranian people and had a close relationship with the Iranians.

On one hand, Achaemenid art is in common with the Sasanian art in the form of royal themes, which means that the royal themes were not unfamiliar to the Sogdians when confronted with Sasanian art. This indicates that the Sogdians were familiar and fully aware of the role of themes, symbols, compositions, and all the elements that had royal themes in Sasanian art; Thus, the Sogdian denial of the Sasanian royal symbols cannot be attributed to their lack of awareness of the meaning of such symbols. On the other hand, it cannot be assumed on the other hand, it cannot be assumed that being located on the Silk Road route would have led directly to this result alone; And the Sogdians have avoided the influence of the royal elements of Sassanid art due to its position on the road and the economic progress resulting from it and its confrontation with other cultures.

Because Iran itself, like Soghdad, was on the Silk Road, and if the Silk Road uniquely could have had such an effect on Soghd, Iran, or at least parts of Iran, would have had its effects. Of course, This does not mean, that the motifs used in Sogdian art and particular Sogdian murals were meaningless. The religious factor also can not have been attributed to this kind of Sogdian selective influence; Although most of the Sogdian people were following a common religion, the vaster Sogdian community was a multi-religious community in which religions such as Christian, Buddhist, Manichaean, Zoroastrianism, etc. lived freely, and in such a circumstance a religion as such Zoroastrians and Zoroastrian priests were not in power to exert such widespread influence. Over and above, all of these arguments head us to a more fundamental conclusion.

## Conclusion

Based on all the present evidence, it seems that the main reason for the Sogadian tendency to represent Sasanian formal symbols and the deficiency of the royal representations should be considered as the Sogadian social and political structure.

That is to say, unlike Sassani Iranian society, the Sogadian people provided the opportunity for economic and cultural growth for all individuals in the context of the social and political structure of developed urbanization. In such an arrangement, everyone in the community had the opportunity to achieve the desired success and to contribute to their society. In fact, It was due to such a structure that the money made of locating in the Silk Road route provided substantial prosperity for the people of the area and aside the king, other rich people also formed from the hearts of the population. This sparked a boom of stories with epic themes, mythical, daily, themes and featured in Sogadian murals; Instead of the central persona and the king's display as the absolute power, there were stories that all Sogadian people could be heroes.

## Endnote

1. Abu Ottoman Amro ibn al-Bahr, known as Jahezz, is famous for being a king of literary prose for his skill in literary techniques (Moghadasi, 1983,47).
2. Ammianus Marcellinus is a Roman historian. His writings are considered valuable documents on Iranian history.
3. The city and areas of Soghd, where the majority of the population is Tajik and its original name (Panj kand) means five cities (Seyed Sajadi, 2004, 319).

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