I

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Boxing in the Ancient World

In the National Museum of Rome sits the bronze masterpiece *The Boxer at Rest*, a statue of an ancient Greek boxer considered to be the most famous sculpture of a fighter ever made and a national treasure. The boxer is seated with his gloved hands resting on his thighs, and his head is turned to his right as if responding to something that has caught his attention, perhaps the adulation of the crowd. He is clearly a veteran of the ring and a middle-aged fighter, whose face bears testimony to the cuts, scars, and abrasions of a long, violent boxing career. Although his open mouth with lips drawn inward displays his weariness, the boxer's muscles are tense, ready to spring and engage his next opponent. Like the contours of a map, the boxer's features bring to relief the origins of his sport, from its murky beginnings and its inevitable connection to the rise of ancient civilization itself.

Early Evidence

There is little doubt that boxing traces its origins to the earliest civilizations of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean. Terracotta reliefs dating from 2400 BC to 2000 BC found in ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) depict unarmed combatants using their fists. Details are sparse as to whether the participants employed any covering on their hands or fought bare-knuckled. An Egyptian tomb relief from Thebes dating to the mid-fourteenth century BC features boxers fighting in front of spectators and perhaps the Pharaoh himself. Hieroglyphic captions on the relief have been translated as "Hit" and "You have no opponent," indicating a set of organized rules to the fight.²

It is during the late Bronze Age that we encounter the first definitive evidence of glove use by early pugilists. The "Boxer Vase" from Hagia Triada (1600–1500 BC) on the island of Crete clearly shows boxers using a wrist strap securing some material that protects the hand. We do not know if the material consisted of softer padding or a harder substance like leather or

even metal, but due to the fact that the fighters are wearing military-style helmets with eye and cheek protection, we may infer that the headgear was intended to provide protection from gloves made of material capable of substantial damage. The most well-known evidence for boxing in the Bronze Age Aegean, however, is the charming fresco of the "Boxing Boys," found on the island of Thera (modern Santorini) at Akrotiri. Although heavily reconstructed from fragments, the painting clearly shows two youths wearing belted loincloths standing toe to toe, engaged in fisticuffs. Each appears to wear a soft glove or covering on his right hand. Because the fresco was found at a shrine, the boys' fighting seemingly is connected to a religious ritual.³

Homeric Greece

With the emergence of Greece and the epic poems of Homer during the eighth century BC, we begin to see a more detailed picture of boxing in early Greek society. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* provide us with two depictions of boxing among the upper and lower classes. In Book 23 (23.679-728) of the *Iliad*, aristocratic Greek heroes hold a boxing contest as part of the funeral games for their comrade, Patroclus, killed in battle by the Trojan hero Hector. Achilles, the mightiest of the Greek heroes, sponsors the events and furnishes the prizes: a valuable mule for the victor and a two-handed goblet for the runner-up. The match is a showdown between Epeius, the best boxer among the Greeks (and the first boxer known for boasting "I am the greatest!"), and a fellow hero named Euryalus. Both men wear oxhide leather straps or thongs (himantes) around their wrists and girdled loincloths around their waists. The bout ends with Epeius piercing Eurvalus' defense with a knockout blow that sends his opponent reeling. In a show of good sportsmanship, Epeius catches Euryalus and holds him upright, preventing his opponent from ignominiously hitting the ground. In this example, these elite boxers demonstrate the Greek ideal of excellence (arête) as they honor the fallen Patroclus. The status-conscious heroes of Homer would have been eager to compete with honor and win prizes to enhance their reputation (kleos).

Homer's *Odyssey* provides a less glorious, but nonetheless instructive, demonstration of ancient Greek boxing. In this section of the *Odyssey* (18.31-107), the hero Odysseus has returned to Ithaca disguised as an old beggar and finds himself in a street fight against a vagrant named Irus. The suitors of Odysseus' wife, Penelope, set the two beggars against each other in a bare-fisted brawl as a low form of sport, with a stuffed goat's stomach as the contestant's reward. Irus, a brawny but cowardly lout, lashes out

wildly, hoping his strength might end the bout quickly. But Odysseus, the thinking man's boxer, measures his foe and connects with a perfectly timed counterpunch to the neck. With Irus summarily dispatched, Odysseus enjoys a hot meal and a small measure of self-respect. In this brutal contest there is no heroic *kleos* to be earned or *arête* to be demonstrated. The stakes were more basic: food in one's belly and some street cred in Ithaca.

Also revealed in Odysseus' contest with Irus is a theme that becomes prominent in the portrayal of boxing in classical mythology: the triumph of technique over brute force. In wily Odysseus we have a skilled fighter who calculates whether to strike Irus with a killing blow or simply go for a knockout, whereas Irus relies on his apparent advantage in strength and size and punches with wild and thoughtless abandon.

Boxing in Greek Mythology

Greek mythology reflects ancient Greek values, beliefs, and cultural idioms. The contrast between boxing styles, i.e. boxer versus brawler, is reflected in the stories of the Greek gods that are associated with the sport. On the one hand, we have Apollo, the cool, rational sun god, who was worshipped in some regions of Greece as Apollo *Pyktes* (the boxer). This form of Apollo, as legend has it, defeated the war god Ares (a god of irrational violence) in a boxing match at Olympia (Paus. 5.7.10). He also wrested control of the road leading to Delphi from the bully Phorbas by pummeling him into submission (Philostratus, *Imagines* 2. 19). Hercules, on the other hand, while better known for his wrestling and almost limitless strength, is reported by some traditions to have defeated the Sicilian King Eryx, a renowned boxer, in a contest over Geryon's cattle (Seneca, *Hercules Furens* 480). One imagines no matter how skilled Eryx might have been, his jaw would have not endured a chin check from Hercules.

Finally, the boxing match between King Amycus and Polydeuces (Pollux) from the story of Jason and the Argonauts (the *Argonautica*) brings together some of the major themes associated with boxing found in Greek mythology (Theocritus, *Idylls* 22.27–135). Each fighter embodies characteristics of the brawler and boxer, respectively. King Amycus is a physically imposing bully, complete with cauliflower ears, who disregards the common laws of hospitality. Like Phorbas, he is little more than a street corner thug who challenges visitors to his territory to fight. Polydeuces, on the other hand, is a rational hero who attempts diplomacy to avoid a confrontation with the belligerent king. Only when given no alternative does Polydeuces agree to fight.

The contest between Amycus and Polydeuces echoes Odysseus' fight with Irus. Polydeuces uses superior ring generalship to his advantage by

maneuvering to get the sun to his back. He easily slips Amycus' punches and lands vicious counterpunches and jabs, cutting his opponent's face with the sharp edges of his dried ox-hide wrappings. Amycus is a pressure fighter but eventually tires from the sheer volume of punches he throws. Attempting to end the fight with one blow, Amycus makes a crucial error. He tries to pin Polydeuces' left hand while going for a crushing downward blow but is outmaneuvered and caught on the temple with an overhand right counter, which ends the fight, leaving Amycus dazed and defenseless. Amycus' brawling style is no match for Polydeuces' craft and skillful defense.⁴

Boxing and the Panhellenic Games

With the rise of the Greek *polis* (city-state) during the seventh century BC, boxing undergoes a change from an event linked to aristocratic funerals and individual duels between gods and heroes to competitions that celebrated the honor and glory of the community of the *polis* itself. Greek boxing proper, the *pxy*, emerged as one of the events in the four sacred Panhellenic games: the Olympic, Delphic, Nemean, and Pythian. The Olympic Festival dedicated to Zeus in Olympia was the most prestigious. Boxing (along with wrestling and the *pankration*, a form of no-holds-barred wrestling) was considered a heavy event (*alegeinos*) in contrast to the light events, which included track and field. According to the writer Philostratus (*On Gymnastics* 9–10), the Spartans originated boxing (Polydeuces was a noted pugilist and Spartan by birth) but soon abandoned it because bouts were often decided by submission, which would give critics ample opportunity to accuse the Spartans of a lack of spirit.

The earliest recorded Olympic victor was Onomastus of Smyrna, who in 688 BC also instituted the first set of formal rules of ancient Olympic boxing. Unlike modern boxing, ancient Greek boxing had no weight classes (an advantage for larger and stronger competitors) or time limit. The boxing match ended with a knockout or a submission, indicated by raising one's finger to the referee. Greek vase paintings, which provide most of the evidence for ancient boxing, show referees with long canes used to break clinching and punish infractions (i.e. biting and scratching) during the match. There was no roped off ring per se, but some vase paintings depict designated areas for boxers separate from spectators, and the use of a long pole to restrict the size of the ring itself.⁵

In the Panhellenic games, the boxers fought in the nude, abandoning the earlier custom of the girdled loincloth mentioned in Homer. Early "gloves" consisted of ten- to twelve-foot-long leather thongs (*himantes*) wrapped around the hands and the forearms giving support for the wrist (Philostratus, *On*

Gymnastics 10; Eustathius 1324.18). In the fourth century BC, harder and heavier thongs (oxeis) were employed and often reinforced with a hard leather insert, which improved the use of one's hands for defense while increasing the potential for damage as well. These evolved into a one-piece glove, which left the fingertips free but covered the entire upper arm. Leather straps enclosed the glove, which held a knuckleduster insert of hard leather. Soft gloves (spairai or episphairai) (Plato, Laws 8.830B) along with ear guards (amphotides) (Plutarch, Moralia 38B) soon followed, perhaps because the use of regular boxing equipment inflicted too many injuries during practice and sparing sessions.

Despite such precautions, boxing remained a brutal sport. The historical record provides evidence that the faces of some boxers were unrecognizable from injuries they had suffered (Lucillus, *Greek Anthology* 11.75). Moving physical evidence of this is provided by the fourth-century BC Greek *Boxer at Rest* bronze statue mentioned earlier in this chapter. His scarred brow, broken nose, lacerated cheeks, and cauliflower ears are a grim testament to a lifetime of fighting. The ideal boxer remained stoic in the ring. Plutarch writes that the crowd, not the boxer, should respond with emotion inspired by the fight. Murmurs and gasps from the spectators should punctuate a well-delivered blow, while the boxer remains silent, focused on his task at hand.⁶

The rewards of victory, though "gained in blood" as one inscription attests, were great.⁷ The Panhellenic games bestowed crowns of olive (Olympian), pine (Isthmian), wild celery (Neamean), and laurel (Pythian/Delphi), whereas at other festivals winners could expect a crown of palm leaves or a palm branch to be held in the right hand (Lucian, *Anacharisis* 9; Paus. 8.48.2–3). In addition to these trophies, valuable commodities such as olive oil were often awarded as prizes. At Athens' Pan-Athenaic festival during the first half of the fourth century BC, the winner of the boxing event received sixty amphoras of olive oil, worth around \$40,000.8 Roughly a single amphora held thirty-nine liters. So we're looking at 2,340 liters of olive oil total as the prize. The monetary value is not the point, but rather the utility of the oil itself in the ancient Greek world and the prestige. Winners of Panhellenic crowns could also earn tidy sums of money from their home *polis* (Plutarch, *Solon* 23.3) or a lifetime of free room and board supplied at public expense.⁹

Beyond such material rewards, however, the most gratifying of prizes was the recognition and fame won by the victorious boxer. The Athenian sage Solon once said that the tokens of victory were less important than the reputation of the victor. This, according to Solon, was of far greater value than any prize, and the winners (at the moment of victory) were thought to be equal to the gods (Lucian, *Anarcharis* 9–14). The most famous and successful of boxers won a kind of immortality. With their victories preserved in verse

and their bodies immortalized in marble and bronze, these fighters attained the status of athlete-heroes, whose legendary fame continued beyond their deaths. Let us look at two noteworthy examples: Theagenes of Thasos and the family of Diagoras of Rhodes.

Theagenes of Thasos

The ancient writer Pausanias (6.11.2–9) noted that among the hundreds of statues of Olympic victors decorating the city of Olympia, few were as famous as that of the boxer Theagenes from the island of Thasos. A two-time Olympic champion (his first victory came in 480 BC), he is reported to have won over 1,300 events in both boxing and *pankration*. During the fifth century BC, Theagenes dominated his opponents at the Panhellenic games, winning thrice at Delphi, nine times at Nemea, and also nine times at the Isthmian games, including a double victory in both boxing and *pankration*. Given such great strength and stamina, which he had allegedly displayed even as a child, Theagenes' father was rumored to have been Hercules himself.

Theagenes' arrogance and gluttony were also Herculean in scope. To commemorate his double-victory at Olympia, he named his son Diolympios ("twice at Olympia"). He consumed an entire bull on a bet and was reported to have challenged guests to wrestling matches and feats of strength at the dinner table. Growing weary of his victories in his two chosen sports, Theagenes trained for and won the long-distance running event in Thessaly, the home of the swift-footed Achilles. Doubtless his successes in the ring and immense ego outside of it made Theagenes many enemies, one of whom attempted to take his revenge not while the boxing champion was living but after his death. Pausanias wrote that after the champion had died, a man had attacked and flogged Theagenes' commemorative statue at Olympia as if it were the boxer himself. To the man's surprise, the statue fell, crushing him to death. Taking advantage of Athenian law, his sons prosecuted the statue for murder, won their case, and threw the fighter's effigy into the sea. The citizens of Thasos recovered Theagenes' statue in their fishing nets and brought it back to Olympia, consecrating the image as a divine hero imbued with healing powers (Paus. 6.11.2-9). On the island of Thasos today there are remains of a shrine to the heroic, if loutish, boxer with a hollow marble block made into an offering box.10

The Family of Diagoras

In 464 BC, the poet Pindar immortalized Diagoras of Rhodes in his seventh Olympian Ode. An accomplished boxer, Diagoras was a periodonikes, or

circuit winner, at the Panhellenic games. He won once at Olympia, twice at Delphi, four times at the Isthmian games, and earned several victories at Nemea. He was credited with numerous wins at lesser events throughout Greece including events at Athens, Arcadia, Thebes, Arcadia, Argos, Pellana, Megara, and Aegina. A man of great size and impeccable fighting form, Diagoras (unlike Theagenes) did not engender ill will and was beloved by both the Rhodians and others outside his home community.

But while Diagoras was a champion boxer worthy of Pindar's verses, it was the athletic accomplishments of his children that solidified his legacy. His three sons continued the family tradition of athletic excellence earning statues of their own beside their father as Olympic champions. Diagoras' two elder sons, Akousilaus and Damagetus, won at Olympia in boxing and *pankration*, respectively. But Dorieus, the youngest son, proved to be the star of the Diagorean athletic dynasty with three Olympic, four Delphic, eight Isthmian, and seven Nemean crowns in boxing and *pankration*. Diagoras' daughters Kallipatira and Pherenike each bore him grandsons who became Olympic boxing champions.¹¹

Under the Shadow of Rome

During the second century BC, the Greeks fell under Roman rule and as the Roman poet Horace wrote, "Captive Greece ensnared her wild conqueror" (Horace, *Letters* 2.1.156). Greek boxing was transformed under Roman rule. The sacred Greek games, which featured boxing events that celebrated the glory of the individual Greek *polis*, would now serve new Roman masters and become intertwined with Roman traditions. Roman boxing (*pugilatus*) had long been part of the athletic events in the *ludi* (statefunded games) and *munera* (privately funded spectacles) since the sixth century BC, perhaps deriving from early Etruscan examples.¹²

Though the evidence is sparse, Roman boxing was similar to Greek save for the type of boxing glove used. The Romans originally adopted the heavier gloves of the Greeks but soon replaced it with the *caestus*, a glove with a semi-cylindrical bronze reinforcement capable of causing horrific wounds.¹³ The Romans considered their *pugilatus* to be more violent and deadly than Greek boxing and certainly more dangerous than wrestling and the *pankration*. These two forms of boxing, however, began to merge with the Romans holding Greek style games in Italy for the first time in 186 BC.¹⁴

During the imperial period in the first century AD, Roman boxing stood alongside the gladiator matches and arena beast hunts that emphasized Rome's power and dominance over man and nature. Rome's first emperor, Augustus, was an avid follower of boxing and enjoyed contests between

Roman and Greek pugilists. In AD 14 Tiberius, Augustus' successor, introduced in his honor the first set of regularly held celebratory games, in Naples, called the *Ludi Augustales*. In Greece, boxing was still firmly entrenched in the sacred Panhellenic games, but their function had turned from the celebration of the *polis* itself to the aggrandizement of Roman rulers. Ironically, venues for games increased under Roman emperors who introduced Greek-style events into the city of Rome itself, including the Neronian games and the Emperor Domitian's Capitoline games.

Yet the Romans held a deep ambivalence toward Greek culture, including athletics, which were considered to be both exciting and decadent. Romans as spectators admired Greek boxers and athletes. Wealthier Romans even enjoyed training in gymnasiums or within the privacy of villas decorated with statues and murals of Greek athletes and sporting events. But to engage in athletic performance in public was shameful and unacceptable for a Roman citizen. Likewise, Greek games in Italy and abroad were safe and nonthreatening to Roman identity only when they honored the emperor. For the Greeks, the traditional Panhellenic games maintained an important link to the past (and its glories) and provided a way to attain prestige in the new political order. Imperial generosity supported Greek culture so long as it was controlled and proved beneficial to the empire. As one insightful study puts it, "Yet in the majority of cases it probably suited all parties to sign up to an image of Greek cultural prestige preserved and enabled by Roman power." 16

Despite the enormous popularity of the games, some Roman intellectuals argued that the voyeuristic nature of athletic events had a corrupting influence. Tacitus bemoaned that due to boxing's popularity, Roman youths might strip down and take up boxing gloves instead of pursuing more practical martial arts (*Annales* 14.20.4), whereas Cicero thought nudity in the games was a shameful distraction (*Tusc. Disp.* 4.70). Other writers complained that the inflamed emotions caused by sporting events clouded reasoning and prevented spectators from striving for higher and nobler pursuits.¹⁷ Seneca stated that any physical exertion as practiced in athletics dulled the mind (*Letters* 15.3). However, some Roman writers portrayed the rigors of athletics, boxing in particular, as a metaphor for the attainment of virtue through training and competitive struggle.¹⁸

Melankomas of Caria

Dio Chrysostom, a sophist in the Roman Empire during the second century AD, wrote of a famous boxer, Melankomas of Caria, whose unblemished record was a result of his unsurpassed defense (*Orations* 28 & 29). Melankomas earned his victories, which included numerous crowns, by

never permitting his opponents to land a single blow while never himself landing a punch. Through his superior stamina, Melankomas outlasted his foes, forcing their capitulation once their inability to connect with their own punches had exhausted them. Due to his rigorous training and dedication to his craft, Melankomas was reportedly able to hold up his hands in defense for two consecutive days.

For Dio, Melankomas was the ultimate example of a man who attained virtue through physical contest. He had overcome the temptations of lust, sloth, and gluttony through his almost ascetic training and preparation. While in the ring, Melankomas demonstrated supreme courage, self-discipline, and temperance, never succumbing to the promise of an easy win by striking his opponent. And because his foes gave up in defeat, Melankomas earned the purest form of victory by breaking his opponents' will without causing them physical harm. Though his description of Melankomas rings with hyperbole, Dio found philosophic virtue within the brutal and violent world of boxing.

End Game: Late Antiquity

Boxing, along with the *ludi* of the Romans and the Greek games in the East, would fade during the fifth century AD. The emerging Christian ethos of the Roman world would weaken the popularity of the more violent athletic events, which had strong pagan religious connections. Though growing imperial restriction played a factor in the demise of combat sports, a more important cause was the economic decline of the Roman city, in the face of Germanic incursions, that prevented local elites from funding public games. Boxing and its associated sporting events were never revenue-makers in the conventional sense. Rather, they played an important role in the generation of political capital for its sponsors and were used as a form of social control linked to urban life in the classical city. The end of combat sports such as boxing as popular spectacles, in a way, mirrored the end of the ancient city and thus marked an important transition from the world of classical antiquity to the Middle Ages.

NOTES

This bronze sculpture is also known as *The Terme Boxer* or *The Boxer of the Quirinal*. See R.R.R. Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 54–55, for background and context. Recently, this statue was the centerpiece of a major exhibit celebrating Italian art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art during the summer of 2013. For details, see Seán Hemingway, "The Boxer: An Ancient Masterpiece Comes to the Met," *Metropolitan Museum of*

- *Art*, June 17, 2013, www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/now-at-the-met/features/2013/the-boxer.
- ² For the Near Eastern evidence, see the Terracotta plaque of wrestlers and boxers, Iraq Museum, Bagdad, nos. 32 and 10039. Concerning Egypt, see M. Poliakoff, Combat Sports in the Ancient World (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 68 and fig. 64.
- 3 For the Hagia Triada vase see, Peter Warren, *Minoan Stone Vessels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), no. 469; On the Santorini fresco see, A.J. Papalas, "The Development of Greek Boxing," *Ancient World* 9.3–4 (1984): 67–69, and N. Crowther, *Sport in Ancient Times* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 38–39.
- 4 The boxer versus brawler theme can be found in I. Weiler, *Der Agon im Mythos* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), 173–174, and Plutarch, *Moralia* 724C. The fight between Polydeuces and Amycus is retold in Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 2.30–97 and later by Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* 4.141–293.
- 5 For Onomastus, see Philostratus, On Gymnastics, 12 and the Olympic Victors List (22nd Olympiad) cf. Paul Christensen and Zara Martirosova-Torlone, "The Olympic Victor List of Eusebius: Background, Text and Translation," Traditio 61 (2006): 31–93, and P. Christensen, Olympic Victor Lists and Ancient Greek History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); for kicking in boxing, see N. Crowther, "The Evidence for Kicking in Greek Boxing," American Journal of Philology 111 (1990): 176–181; use of a pole or ladder to restrict the movements of boxers is argued by M. Poliakoff, "Melankomas, ek klimakos, and Greek Boxing," American Journal of Philology 108 (1987): 511–518.
- 6 Moralia 79E.
- 7 G. Kaibel, *Epigrammata Graeca* (Berlin: Berolini Apud G. Reimer, 1878), no. 942.
- 8 *IG* II² 2311; The monetary value of the amphorae of olive oil is calculated by S.G. Miller, *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources*, 2nd edn, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991) no. 84, 81, adjusted for twenty-first-century inflation.
- 9 IG I² 77.11–17. For payment of Greek athletes see, David C. Young, *The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1984), 131.
- 10 BCH 64-65 (1940-41); 175.
- 11 Pausanias 6.7.1-5.
- 12 J.-P. Thuillier, Les Jeux athlétiques dans la civilization étrusque (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1985), 181–286.
- 13 M. Junkelmann, "Greek Athletics in Rome," in *Gladiators and Caesars*, eds. E. Köhne and C. Ewigleben (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 75–78, and for a contrary view of the *caestus* being constructed of only leather, see H. Lee, "The Later Greek Boxing Glove and the 'Roman' *Caestus*: A Centennial Reevaluation of Jünther's Über Antike Turngeräthe," *Nikephoros* 10.9 (1997): 168–178.
- Livy 39.22.1–2; I. R. Arnold, "Agonistic Festivals in Italy and Sicily," *American Journal of Archaeology* 64 (1960): 245–251; N. Crowther, "Greek Games in Republican Rome," *L'Antiquité classique* 52 (1983): 268–273.

- 15 Suetonius, Augustus, 45.2. Cf. R. M. Greer, "The Greek Games at Naples," Transactions of the American Philological Association 66 (1935): 208–221.
- I6 Zahra Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 280.
- 17 Tacitus, Dialogus de oratibus 29.2.
- 18 For the spiritual and philosophic benefits of the rigors of combat sports, see Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, 134–147. A pertinent example would include the well-known boxing match between Entellus and Dares in Virgil, *Aeneid* 5.362–484. See M. Poliakoff, "Entellus and Amycus: Virgil, *Aen.* 5. 362–484," *Illinois Classical Studies* 10 (1985): 227–231.

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