



ŠĀPUR II

ŠĀPUR II (r. 309-79 CE), the longest reigning monarch of the Sasanian dynasty (224-651 CE). Legend has it that the courtiers and the clergy placed the crown on the womb of his mother when she was pregnant (Ḥamza Ešfahāni, p. 50; *Mojmal*, p. 34), thus rendering him king literally from birth. Ṭabari states that the same courtiers, priests and officials that were in charge during his father's reign continued to run Šāpur's empire (Ṭabari, p. 51), which implies that the empire was secure enough and stable enough to survive without a strong monarch. It was fortunate for the Persians that during the childhood of Šāpur II the Roman Empire had been involved in its own domestic affairs, as Constantine and other Caesars were battling each other for power. This was not the case with the Arab Bedouins, who crossed the Persian Gulf from Bahrain and the neighboring region, and pillaged the province of Fārs, specifically the district of Ardaxšir-xwarrah (see [FIRUZĀBĀD](#)) and the coastland of the Persian Gulf (*ibid.*, p. 51). These Arabs came from Bahrain, Ḥajar, and the Kāžemiya region (Ṭa'ālebi, p. 33), and these locations would later pay dearly for their incursion.

The Arab wars. Sasanian-based sources state that, when Šāpur II had reached the age of sixteen (325 CE), he began a campaign to pacify the Arab tribes and secure the borders of the empire (Ṭabari, p. 54; Meskawayh, p. 134). Šāpur II first attacked the Ayad, who were in Iraq (the historians' Sawād, the Sasanian province of [Āsōristān](#)). He then crossed the Persian Gulf, reaching al-Ḳaṭṭ, which is the coastal region of Bahrain and Qaṭar. He attacked Hajar, which was inhabited by the tribes of Tamim, Bakr b. Wa'il, and 'Abd al-Qays (Ṭabari,



p. 54). While killing much of the tribal population, he is also said to have destroyed the wells to cut off the water supply as a further punishment to the Arabs. This was followed by a campaign in eastern Arabia and Syria against the Arabs and the cities of Yamāma, Bakr, and Taḡlib (Ṭa'ālebi, pp. 332-33; Meskawayh, pp. 134-35). Šāpur II, having dealt harshly with the Arabs, consequently came to be known as (Ar.) *Ḍu'l-Aktāf* “he who pierces shoulders” rendering (Pers.) *Huya sonbā*, (Ḥamza Eṣfahānī, p. 50; *Mojmal*, p. 34) which renders Middle Persian **Šānag āhanj* (Daryae, 2002, pp. 146-47). As a result of these conquests, some of the Arabs were pushed into the heartland of Arabia (Bosworth, apud Ṭabari, p. 55), and the Persian Gulf region remained in the hands of the Sasanian Empire. This was part of the overall strategy of the Sasanians to secure the Persian Gulf.

Some Arab tribes were forcibly displaced and relocated into the Sasanian Empire. The Taḡlib tribe was settled in Darayn (a port in Bahrain) and al-Ḳaṭṭ; the 'Abd al-Qays and Tamim were settled in Hajar, and the tribe of Bakr b. Wa'il was settled in Kerman and the Ḥanaẓila in Ramila (vicinity of Ahvāz; Meskawayh, p. 135). To keep the Arabs from mounting further attacks, Šāpur II constructed a defensive system which was called *war i tāzīgān* “wall of the Arabs” (Daryae, 2002, p. 43). This wall appears to have been close to the city of *Hira* which came to be known as *Ḳandaq i Šāpur* (Frye, 1977, pp. 8-11; Mahamedi, pp. 156-58). The campaign of Šāpur II is also mentioned in the Zoroastrian encyclopedic text, the *Bundahišn* (33.15): “During the rulership of Šāpur, the son of Hormizd, the Arabs came; they took Xorig [Ulē] Rūdbār; for many years with contempt (they) rushed until Šāpur came to rulership; he destroyed the Arabs and took the land and destroyed many Arab rulers and pulled out many number of shoulders” (*andar xwadāyīh ī šābuhr ī ohrmazdān tāzīgān mad hēnd u-šān xōrīg [ulē] rudbār grift was sāl pad xwār [āwār] tāzišn dāšt tā šābuhr ō xwadāyīh mad oyšān tāzīgān spōxt ud šahr aziš stad ud was šāh tāzīgān ābaxšēnēd [ābesīhēnīd] ud was maragīhā šānag [*nih]axt*; Anklesaria, 33.16; Bahār, 18.215; Pakzad, 33.21).

The Roman and Hunnic wars. Until the death of Constantine in 337, there was relative peace with the Romans, but the conversion of Armenia to Christianity and the Roman rulers' backing of Armenia caused Šāpur II to begin a campaign against them. When Constantius came to the throne (337-38), war began; Šāpur II laid siege to Nisibis three times, and there was constant warfare, which did not go in favor of either side. The Roman defensive system of fortresses and *limes* hindered Šāpur's campaign in the region (Frye, 1983, p.

137), but some forts, such as the town of Bezabde near Nisibis, fell to him (Amm. Marc., 20.7.9-15). The encroachment of the nomadic tribes in Central Asia forced Šāpur II to turn his attention to the East (*Chronicle of Arbela*, p. 85), and the war with Rome ended in stalemate by 350. Around this time we first hear of the Hunnic tribes, who were probably the *Kidarites* (Chinese *Jiduolo*; see also *HUNS*), who were encroaching onto the Sasanian Empire and also menacing the Gupta empire (320-500 CE) in India. Šāpur II, who had just returned from the Syrian front, was able to contain his eastern foes by making an alliance with their king, Grumbates (see *CHIONITES*), against the Romans (Compareti, 2002, p. 375; Amm. Marc., 17.5.1).

It is quite possible that Šāpur II defeated his eastern foes and established Sasanian domination over the Kūšāns (Azarnoush, 1994, p. 14). This theory can be substantiated from the two Middle Persian inscriptions that mention that the eastern boundary of the Sasanian Empire under Šāpur II included Sind, Sistān, and Turān (Frye, 1966, pp. 84-85, 85-87; Back, 1978, pp. 490-97). Also Ammianus Marcellinus (23.6.14) lists the provinces of the Sasanian Empire in that period as Assyria, Susiana, Media, Persis, Parthia, Greater Carmania, Hyrcania, Margiana, the Bactriani, the Sogdiani, the Sacae, and Scythia at the foot of Imaus (Himalayas), and beyond the same mountain, Serica, Aria, the Paropanisadae, Drangiana, Arachosia, and Gedrosia. Ṭabari additionally mentions that Šāpur II, among his city building projects, established cities in Sind and Sijistān (p. 65), which confirms his rule over that region. Finally, most of the gold coins minted by Šāpur II are from eastern mints, such as Marv, where the Kušāns also minted gold coins. Also, a large quantity of copper coins from the mints of Sakastān and Kabul exist (Schindel, 2004, p. 26). This may mean that Šāpur II was able to extract a large amount of gold and other precious metals from his defeated eastern enemies.

In 359, Šāpur II, with the backing of King Grumbates, attacked Syria, laid siege to *Amida*, entered it after seventy-three days (Amm. Marc., 19.9), and deported its population to *Ḳuzestān* (see *DEPORTATIONS ii. IN THE PARTHIAN AND SASANIAN PERIODS*). The city of *Amida* was pillaged and its population deported, because the son of King Grumbates was killed. In 361, the new Roman emperor, *Julian*, counter-attacked and won victories against Šāpur II in 363, and even laid siege to *Ctesiphon*. The capital, however, was not taken, because of disorder and pillaging among the Roman forces (Libanius, 28.254-55). In anticipation of Julian's victory against the Persians, an inscription was placed in the upper Jordan valley, with the premature title of



BARBARORVM EXTINCTORI, probably because of his initial success in Antioch in March 363 (Bowersock, 1978, pp. 123-24). We are told that among the Roman generals there was a Persian renegade by the name of Hormisd who commanded the cavalry. Julian had destroyed his own naval ships, so that his forces would not retreat (Libanius, 18.263) and Šāpur II responded by adopting a scorched-earth policy in Mesopotamia which resulted in hunger among the Roman forces. In June 363 Persian forces equipped with elephants defeated the Romans, and Julian was badly wounded in battle, probably by one of the *kontophoroi* “cavalry spearmen,” and died in his tent (Amm. Marc., 25.3.6; Libanius, 18.269-70). Eutropius, who was an eyewitness to this campaign, affirms that Julian was killed at the hand of the enemy (*Breviarium* 10.16).

Jovian was elected emperor and had to make peace with Šāpur II with what the Romans called an *ignobili decreto* “shameful treaty” (Amm. Marc., 25.7.13), ceding eastern Mesopotamia, Armenia, and the adjoining regions, including fifteen fortresses as well as Nisibis (Amm. Marc., 25.7.9). Persian terms and conditions were conveyed by Surenas (Suren), who agreed to have the mainly Christian population of Nisibis moved to Roman territory while the Persian standard was raised over the city (*Chronicon Paschale* 554). Jovian left Mesopotamia, and the Romans would not engage the Sasanians further, as Emperor Valens had to deal with Germanic tribes in the Balkans.

The Armenian and Georgian wars. It was during the early years of Šāpur II’s life that Armenia under King Trdat (Tiridates) IV (r. 298-330) adopted Christianity (in 314). Consequently some of the Armenian feudal clans (*naxarars*) converted as well and supported Trdat IV against those *naxarars* who were loyal to the Sasanians, and more specifically, those who honored the ancient Zoroastrian tradition of Armenia, still worshiping Ormizd, Anāhit, and Vahagn (Agathangelos, pp. 51-53). The precarious internal struggle and the wavering loyalties of the *naxarars*, the king, and the clergy ushered in a turbulent period in Armenian history, and the sources for this period are confused. Šāpur II early on had fortified the region bordering Armenia, as is apparent from the Middle Persian inscription at Meškinšahr (Frye and Skjærvø, 1996, p. 54), to check the power of the *naxarars*.

King Tiran (r. 340-50) attempted to keep Armenia independent by playing both the Romans and the Persians, but lost his life to Šāpur II. He was replaced by his son, Aršak II (r. 350-67), who initially also tried to appease both the Romans and the Persians, but who finally joined Julian’s expedition against the

Sasanians (Amm. Marc., 23.3.5, 24.7.8). As part of the peace treaty between Šāpur II and Jovian, Armenia and Georgia were to come under Sasanian control and the Romans were not to get involved in Armenian affairs (Amm. Marc., 25.7.12). The Armenian king was captured by the Persians and imprisoned in the Castle of Oblivion (in Armenian sources known as Fortress of Andmāš or Castle of Anyuš in Kuzestān), where he is said to have committed suicide while being visited by his eunuch Drastamat (*Epic Histories* 5.7). The cities of Artāšat, Vałaršapat, Eruandašat, Zarehawan, Zarišat, Van, and Naḳčwan were taken and their populations deported, among whom there were many Jewish families (ibid., 4.55). The pro-Persian *naxarars*, Vahan Mamikonean and Meružan Arcruni, accompanied Šāpur II and were rewarded for their help; and two Persians, Zik and Karen, with a large army were placed over Armenian affairs (ibid., 4.58). Georgia was also placed under Persian control, where Šāpur II installed Aspacures in eastern Georgia, but eventually the Roman emperor Valens succeeded in installing Sauromaces in western Georgia (Amm. Marc., 27.12.15).

Pap (r. 367-374), who was the son of the Armenian ruler Aršak who had fled to the Romans, was placed on the throne in 367 with Roman backing. The Armenians were able to withstand Šāpur II's attack near Bagawan in 371 (Garsoian, 1997, pp. 90-91). Pap, however, was not popular with many of the *naxarars* or the Armenian church because of his pro-Arian policy, which caused him to be slandered by the Armenian sources as devoted to the *dews* "demons" due to the religious beliefs of his mother, Queen P'aranjem of Siwnik' (*Epic Histories* 4.44). Pap became a victim of internal divisions and fighting among *naxarars* and the general (*sparapet*) Mušeł Mamikonean and was eventually killed at the instigation of Emperor Valens (Garsoian, 1997, p. 91).

Religious policies. In 337, during the reign of Šāpur II, there was a rise in the persecution of Christians, partly due to the Christianization of the Roman Empire and the identification of Christians as collaborators with the enemy (Barnes, 1985, pp. 131-32). The campaign of Šāpur II into Syria against the Romans had consequences for the Christianization of the Sasanian Empire, since some Christians were deported there (Chaumont, 1988, pp. 57-60). The problem with Christian loyalty toward the king of kings is also clear in that Šāpur II had asked a double tax from the Christians during his war campaign against the Romans. According to the *Acts of Simeon*, once the Christian leader had refused to abide by this request, Šāpur II said: "Simeon wants to make his



followers and his people rebel against my kingdom and convert them into servants Caesar, their coreligionist” (Brock, 1982, p. 8). From the time of Šāpur II, Christian martyrologies become numerous, even though persecution is usually blamed on the Zoroastrian priests. Even Armenian sources record the persecution of the Christians within the Sasanian empire during the rule of Šāpur II (Elishe, pp. 110-11). The names of famous martyrs include Šāpur II’s master craftsman Posi (Pusai), who had been settled in Karkā dā-Lādān, also his daughter Martha, Ba’utha from [Karkā Bēt Selok](#), Thekla, and Danaq, all of whom were martyred under the direction of Mobed Ādurgušnasp. Other martyrs, many women, include Țaṭon, Mama, Mezakhya, and Anna from Karkā Bēt Selok; and Abyat, Ḥathay, and Mezakhya from [Bēt Garmē](#) (Brock and Harvey, 1998, pp. 68-77). Not all Zoroastrian priests promoted the persecution of Christians; and, according to Syriac sources, in one case a *mowbed* named Pagrasp refused to order persecution—or else the king canceled orders of persecution (*Chronicle of Arbela*, pp. 73-74). We also hear of persecution of the Jews in 486 at the city of Gay (Spāhān; see [ISFAHAN](#)), to which the Armenian Jews had been deported. This was in reprisal for the killing of Zoroastrian priests and the attack on fire temples in the city by the Jewish population (Widengren, 1961, pp. 134-38; Panaino, 2004, p. 214).

With regard to Zoroastrianism, the towering figure of the fourth century CE was [Ādurbād i Mahrspandān](#), who was credited with the codification of the Avesta and the weeding out of heresy. According to *Denkard IV*, once the Zoroastrian priest had proven the truthful doctrine: Šāpur, the king of kings, son of Hormizd, induced all countrymen to orient themselves to god by disputation, and put forth all oral traditions for consideration and examination. After the triumph of Ādurbād, through his declaration put to trial by ordeal (in disputation) with all those sectaries and heretics who recognized (studied) the Nasks, he made the following statement: ‘Now that we have gained an insight into the Religion in the worldly existence, we shall not tolerate anyone of false religion, and we shall be more zealous.’

Šābuhr šāhān šāh ī hormizdān hamāg kišwarīgān pad paykārišn yazdān āhang kard ud hamāg gōwišn ō uskār ud wizōyišn āwurd pas az bōxtan ī ādūrbād pad gōwišn ī passāxt abāg hamāg ōyšān jud-sardagān ud nask-ōšmurdān-iz ī jud-ristagān ēn-iz guft kū nūn ka-mān dēn pad stī dēn dīd kas-iz ag-dēnīh bē nē hilēm wēš abar tuxšāg tuxšēm ud ham gōnag kard (Shaki, 1981, pp. 117-19).

Thus, it appears that there was a great synod or council, in which all people (*kišwarīgān*), probably meaning Zoroastrian theologians, discussed the

Zoroastrian material available. It is clear that there were differences of opinion still, because we are supplied with a host of terms for “different [Zoroastrian] sects” (*jud-ristagān*), such as those of “different groups” (*jud-sardagān*), and those who “study the Nask” (*nask-ōšmurdān*) of the *Avesta*. In the apocalyptic literature Šāpur II is fondly remembered as the one who regulated the world (*dād ārāyēd*) and made salvation current among the creatures (*boxtagīh pad dāmān*) of the world, and Ādurbād is remembered as the restorer of the religion (*dēn-rāst-wirāstār*) against the heretics (*jud-ristagān*; *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* 3.25; Cereti, 1995, pp. 86, 152). Šāpur II, with the aid of Ādurbād, attempted to bring about order and doctrinal unity in the Zoroastrian religion. No doubt the threat of Christianity induced the king to not only persecute the Christians, but also create a strong Zoroastrian church for his co-religionists. In this context all other Zoroastrian sects were called false religion (*ag-dēnīh*). Foreign sources usually portray the Persian kings, and specifically Šāpur II, as worshipping the sun and the moon, and state that Šāpur II claimed to be “brother of the Sun and the Moon” (*frater Solis et Lunae*; Amm. Marc., 17.5.3), a title which does not appear in the Sasanian sources. It is, however, confirmed by Armenian sources, in which Šāpur II is said to have sworn by the sun (Elishe, p. 96) referring to Mithra the Persian god of oath and contract (Schmidt, 1978, pp. 345-93).

Imperial ideology and numismatics. According to Classical sources (Amm. Marc., 17.5.5), Šāpur II went on a campaign in the West against the Romans to re-conquer what had belonged to his ancestor. It is not clear who Šāpur II believed his ancestor to be, but the source may be referring to the Achaemenids or the Kayanids (Shahbazi, 2001, p. 61; Daryaeae, 2001-02, pp. 1-14). During the reign of Šāpur II, the title of *mazdysn bgy MLK'n MLK'yl'n MNW ctry MN yzd'n* “the divine Mazda-worshipping, king of kings of the Iranians, whose image/seed is from the gods [*yazdān*]” begins to disappear from Sasanian coinage (Daryaeae, 2002, p. 41). From this period forward there was a reorientation toward the Kayanids that paralleled the rise of Zoroastrianism as the state religion, and so the past was grafted with the Avestan dynasties (Shahbazi, 2001, p. 62). It is also at this juncture in Sasanian history that the Zoroastrian priesthood gained even more power, and so Šāpur II was the last ruler to claim to be in the image of the Gods.

Šāpur II minted copper, silver, and gold coins, including an unusual amount of copper coinage struck on Roman flan (Schindel, 2004, p. 17), which may suggest Persian extraction of booty. The gold coins also changed in weight



from 7.20 g to 4.20 g, closer to the Roman *solidus* of 4.5, but N. Schindel believes that the new weight may be based on a Syrian *siliqua* (ibid., p. 25). The obverse of Šāpur II's silver coinage shows the bust of the king in motion, as is apparent from the diadem ribbons as well as the secondary ribbons shown floating upwards, which suggests an outdoor portrait rather than an interior one (ibid., p. 18). Šāpur's crown does not contain the astral symbols that appear under the succeeding kings until [Bahrām IV](#) (r. 388-99). On the reverse the usual fire altar is present, but it is shown to be cylindrical and smaller than on previous issues, with ribbons tied on the shaft. From the time of Šāpur II a new series of designs appears for the fire flames (ibid., p. 22). Also of importance is that the two attendants before the fire are portrayed differently (type 1a1): on the right the person who is probably the king is shown with the *korymbos* (globe element of the crown) present; the person on the left, without it, may be Ohrmazd. In the next series of his coinage (1a2), the attendants become identical, suggesting that both are the image of the king. Sometimes the king's bust is also shown in the fire (type 2; ibid., p. 23).

City building and artistic remains. Šāpur II created several cities and paid special attention to *Ḳuzestān*, where Roman prisoners of war were settled in the royal city called *Erānšahr-šābuhr*, Ar. *Erānšahr-sābur*. He is also credited with the building of *New-šābuhr*, Pers. and Ar. *Nayšāpur/Naysābur* (Ṭabari, p. 65). When *Nisibis* was taken by the Persians in 363 as war reparation, Šāpur II populated the city with people from the cities of *Staxr* and *Sepāhān* (Ṭabari, p. 62). Other cities attributed to him are Ar. *Buzurj-šāpur*, close to *Baghdad* on the west side of *Tigris* river; Ar. *Ḳorah-šāpur*, Mid. Pers. *Ērān-xwarrah-šābuhr*, i.e., *Susā* (*Karḳa*), and a fire-temple called *Sroš-āzarān*, Mid. Pers. *Sroš-ādurān* (Ḥamza Ešfahāni, pp. 50-51). Other cities associated with him are *Pērōz-šāpur* (*Anbār*); *Šādrawān-šūstar* in *Ḳuzestān*; *Bawān*, a fire-temple at *Jorwān* in *Spahān*; and *Frašāpur* or *Farršāpur* in *Sind* (Ebn al-Balkī, pp. 72-73).

Exactly at this point in history, Sasanian monuments disappear from *Persis* and appear in the northwest. It is possible that with the new titles and image for the monarch a new royal place was reserved, a place closer to *Ctesiphon* and *Ḳuzestān* (Herrmann, 2000, p. 37), where Šāpur II is said (Ṭabari, p. 57) to have spent most of his time. The artistic style is essentially different from those in *Persis*. *Mithra*'s image becomes prominent, along with that of *Ohrmazd*. Some scholars have suggested that the rock relief at *Tāq-e Bustān* really portrays Šāpur II, commemorating his victory over *Julian*, flanked by *Mithra* and *Ohrmazd*, while the second relief on the left certainly portrays

Šāpur II and Šāpur III, as is evident from the inscriptions (see [SASANIAN ROCK RELIEFS](#)).

It has been surmised that it was in Šāpur's time that silver bowls became mobile royal propaganda pieces, replacing the rock reliefs. A 7th-century Georgian source states that Šāpur II gave as presents silver bowls and cups (ref. in Harper, 1978, p. 24). Under Šāpur II, Sasanian imperial art also became codified and controlled (ibid., p. 16). Stucco found in Palace II at Kish shows the bust of a king which some have identified with Šāpur II (ibid., p. 108), and the spectacular finds at Hajjiābād by Azarnoush provide a number of busts of Šāpur II (Azarnoush, 1994, pp. 103-9). Thus, besides the silver objects, stucco too may have become the replacement for monumental rock reliefs from the fourth century on (Herrmann, p. 43).

Šāpur II's Image in Persian and Arabic Tradition. Beside the legendary story of the crown placed on his mother's womb, there are other stories that have been included in Šāpur II's vitae in the Perso-Arabic sources. It is reported that he displayed intelligence in his youth, which gave comfort to the grandees and the priests. He woke up one night in Ctesiphon hearing the clamor of people; asking the reason for it, he was told that there are too many people on the bridge crossing over the Tigris river, and so he ordered that another be built, so that one would be used for going from east to west and the second for west to east (Tabari, p. 52; Dināvari, pp. 74-75; Ṭā'ālebi, p. 331; Ferdowsi, *Šāh-nāma* VII, pp. 219-20). The *Šāh-nāma's* account of Šāpur II is in part confused with the career of Šāpur I and for the most part deals with his campaigns against the Arabs and love story with Māleka, as well as his journey to the Roman Empire. The Arab attack on the Sasanian Empire is associated with Ṭā'ir, who has the epithet of *šir-del* "lion-heart" (ibid., VII, p. 220), who was the leader of the Ghassanid Arabs of Syria. Šāpur II ultimately chases him to a fortress in Yemen and punishes him and many other Arabs by piercing their shoulders. Šāpur II is able to enter the fortress because of Ṭā'ir's daughter Māleka, whose mother was Šāpur's aunt, Nušah. The beautiful Māleka, who has fallen in love with the king, sends a message to Šāpur, reminding him of their blood tie and saying that she will allow him to take the fortress if he asks her in marriage. Šāpur II agrees and enters the fortress but ends up killing the maiden for her treachery (ibid., VII, p. 223; Dināvari, p. 75).

Another legendary story has to do with Šāpur's journey in disguise to the Roman empire to gauge the power of the enemy. He is recognized and then imprisoned in the skin of an ass in a dungeon, and the key is kept by Caesar's



wife (*Šāh-nāma* VII, pp. 228-29). The queen's maid, who is of Persian descent, softens the skin with milk and escapes with the king to Persia. While Caesar is laying siege to Ctesiphon, Šāpur and 6,000 men attack the drunken Roman ruler and his troops at night (*ibid.*, VII, pp. 238-40). Caesar is imprisoned, his ear and nose are cut off, and he dies in prison (*ibid.*, VII, pp. 244-45). The two stories have similarities: (1) Šāpur is handsome, and beautiful maidens residing with the enemy facilitate his escape; (2) the maidens are of Persian origin, hence their loyalty lies with their homeland; (3) In the jaws of defeat the king is able to turn things around and defeat his enemies with intelligence and bravery.

Ḥamza Eṣfahāni saw a book that existed among the Zoroastrian priests about the history and kings of ancient Persia. He reports that Šāpur II was drawn wearing a red shirt and pants, holding a club, sitting on a throne, with a blue crown with golden edges and a golden crescent in the middle on his head (Ḥamza Eṣfahāni, p. 50).

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