

SHORTER NOTES

A ROMAN SILK DAMASK FROM KENT

OUR knowledge of the trade between the provinces of the western Roman Empire rests mainly on the chance survival of actual goods, or, in the case of foodstuffs, of their containers. Documentary evidence is comparatively meagre. A comprehensive survey of the trading connections may tend to lay undue emphasis on the less easily destructible items in stone and metal and underrate the importance of perishable goods such as clothing and textiles. The purpose of this note is to draw attention to an unpublished fragment of damask cloth from Kent and to add another item to the list of luxury goods imported into Roman Britain.

Excavation of a Roman barrow at Holborough, Snodland, Kent, in 1954 revealed that an elaborately ornamented lead sarcophagus containing the body of a very young child had been inserted as a secondary burial into the already upstanding mound.¹ Apart from the skeleton, all that was found in the coffin was the remains of the lining of a purse in plain weave linen and three minute fragments of another woven fabric adhering to a tuft of human hair.² The pottery in the primary burial gives a *terminus post quem* of the first quarter of the third century A.D. The excavator was of the opinion that the secondary burial was inserted not long afterwards, and in any case before c. A.D. 250.³ The style of the lead coffin supports this conclusion.

The analysis of the damask

Three small fragments of stuff, each of three layers of fabric—in all c. 7.5 sq. cm.—are all that survive. They are now dark brown in colour and may have been preserved by the lead salts from the coffin. The fibre is probably silk.²

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, lxxviii, 1954, 18-22; for coffin, see J. M. C. Toynbee, *Art in Britain under the Romans*, 1964, 350f.

² *Arch. Cant.*, lxxviii, 1954, 19. The Manchester Chamber of Commerce Testing House has examined the textile for me and inclines to the view that it is of animal origin, possibly animal hair: the textile is now in too poor a condition to admit of certain identification. The parallels (see note (4)) suggest strongly that it is silk. I am grateful to Mr. D. B. Kelly of the Maidstone Museum for giving me the opportunity to study the cloth.

³ Mr. Ronald Jessup kindly confirms the accuracy of the published dating.

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System (1) warp? 50-60 threads per cm., Z-spun, light brown in colour.
System (2) weft? 50-60 threads per cm., practically unspun, slightly darker brown than yarn (1).

The weave is a simple geometric damask in 3 over 1 twill; there is full displacement in the warp direction, partial in the weft. Weaving required eight sheds, and the thread-up was based on eight warp threads. The pattern reverses after six, eight or twenty shots of weft (Fig. 1).

The warp and weft appear to have been of different colours; the cloth would have been a tartan with a minute check pattern. The entire repeat pattern cannot be reconstructed (Fig. 2). The squares and rectangles of the pattern are alternately warp-faced and weft-faced, and would have cast light in different directions.

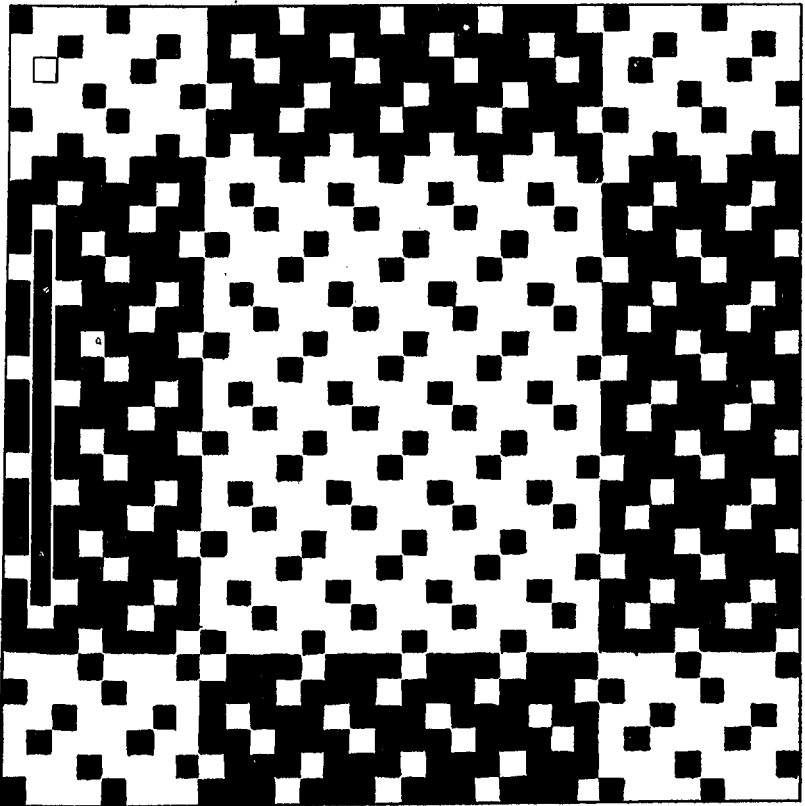


FIG. 1. Detail of the Holborough Damask. Black squares are warp threads uppermost.

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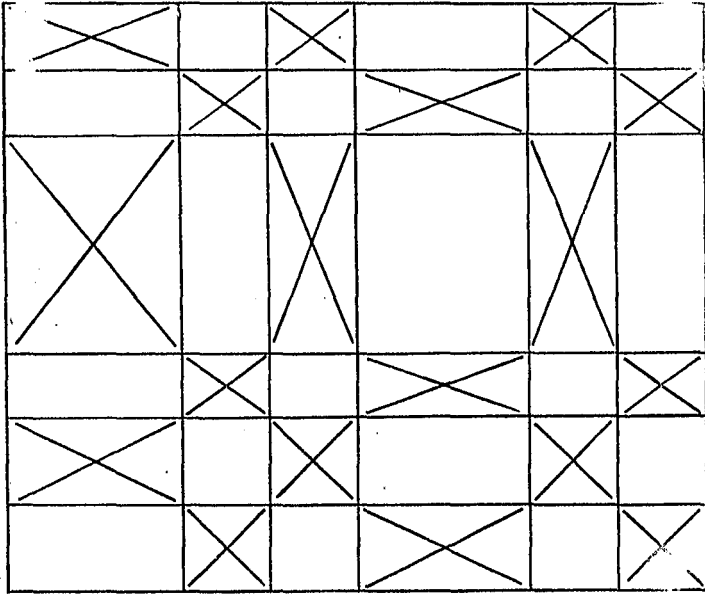


FIG. 2. General repeat pattern of the Holborough Damask. Warp-faced areas bear crosses.

At least two faults in the weave are visible. The first is where a thread of the warp-system (system (1)) floats over fifteen weft threads; normal shedding would have required it to pass under three weft threads at points along its length. A heddle (leash) may have broken, or the warp may have become tangled. The second mistake is where a weft thread floats over five warp threads on the same side of the cloth, one of which it should have passed under. The latter is the same warp thread as is concerned in the first fault, so the two mistakes may be mechanically connected.

Discussion

The only close parallel to the Holborough fabric is a silk textile in 3 over 1 twill weave from the tomb of Iamblichus near the city of Palmyra in Syria.⁴ Its date is uncertain, but it is unlikely to have been woven in the first half of the third century A.D. Its check pattern is formed of squares and rectangles revealing alternately the blue-dyed warp and the golden-brown weft. In shedding, count and spin its resemblance to the Kent fragments is so striking that it may be reason-

⁴ R. Pfister, *Textiles de Palmyre*, 1934, 42, S. 6, 59; *idem*, *Nouveaux Textiles de Palmyre*, 1937, 36, fig. 17; cf. *The Art Bulletin*, xxv, 1943, 358 ff. The *terminus ante quem* is A.D. 276.

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ably attributed to the same group of weavers. To combine Z-spun warp with unspun weft is characteristic of late Roman and Byzantine silks; Pfister was able to show by reference to the weave and the spin of the yarn that this Palmyrene silk was probably a local Syrian product, not an import from China as was the bulk of the silk material found here. A similar but much simpler fabric from Palmyra⁵ had a purple-dyed woollen selvedge, which could only have been produced in the Mediterranean.

The late antique damask silks (*scutulata* in Latin⁶) are the result of an extensive series of experiments carried out in the East with new and complicated looms using as many as sixteen heddle-rods, combinations of rods, and possibly a simple draw-loom device. It is likely, although it has not yet been proved, that the Syrians had developed a raised horizontal loom like the modern hand-loom, perhaps as early as the third century A.D. for the manufacture of simple damasks.⁷

Two silks with a check pattern in 2 over 2 diamond twill weave (damasks) have been found in late fourth century contexts in the western provinces at Trier and at Conthey in Switzerland; the example from Trier bears a Latin factory mark, and was probably woven in the West.⁸ These complicated *scutulata* with twelve or more sheds relied for their pattern effect on the slope of the twill and the sheen of the cloth.

Another line of development based on 3 over 1 twill led to the Holborough damask, which from a technical point of view is only superficially similar to the silks in 2 over 2 diamond twill, since it is alternately warp- and weft-faced. Further experiments with this weave gave rise to simple linear repeat patterns (compound cloths) formed by the weft alone, in which the colours of the design are reversed on opposite sides of the cloth. The earliest piece in this technique is from Dura-Europos on the Euphrates and is contemporary with our Holborough *scutulatum*.⁹ A still more advanced stage is represented by a late fourth century compound twill from Trier¹⁰ with a free curvilinear pattern, which may have required a draw-loom device.

⁵ Pfister (1937), 35, fig. 16.

⁶ J. P. Wild, 'The textile term *scutulatus*', *Classical Quarterly*, NS xiv, 1964, 263 ff.

⁷ A full discussion of these developments will appear in my forthcoming book on the Roman textile industry.

⁸ From Trier: *Zeitschrift f. christ. Kunst*, xxiii, 1910, 279f., 347; *Bonner Jahrbücher*, 78, 1884, 170 ff., Taf. vii. (I am grateful to Dr. Kempf of the Bischöfliches Museum, Trier, for allowing me to examine these stuffs.) From Conthey: *Germania*, 18, 1934, 202 ff.

⁹ R. Pfister, L. Bellingier, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report iv, Pt. II*, 1945, 53, No. 263, pl. I, xxvi, F.

¹⁰ *Zeitschrift f. christ. Kunst.*, xxiii, 1910, 279 f. It is more complicated than the Coptic woollen twills published by Mrs. G. Crowfoot. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, xxv, 1939, 40-47.

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Silk was a luxury article in the Roman Empire, since almost all the raw material had to be imported from India or China. However, as early as the late Hallstatt period, the chieftains in Württemberg knew the fibre as a thread for embroidery.¹¹ Although the Holborough fragments may be the earliest silk yet recognized in Britain, there is no reason to suppose that they were unique in their time.

J. P. WILD

THE LAY SUBSIDY ROLL FOR SOMERDEN HUNDRED, 1327-8

In Volume XVIII of *Kent Records*, published recently, there is a sad note that the 55 names of Somerden Hundred tenants in the Lay Subsidy roll for 1334-5 are missing.¹² It seems likely that the steward of the hundred court failed to complete the fair copy from his rough notes. The names of people assessed from this hundred in other years are none the less noted, and it will help to fill the gap in the recently-published book if the Somerden entry for 1327-8 is printed at once.

Kent is very rich in Lay Subsidy records, which are to be found in Class E 179 at the Public Record Office and listed in typescript there in Volume 31 of Stack 10 in the Round Room. At the same time, it is worth calling attention here to the activities of the late Mr. B. F. Davis of Bromley who, over thirty years ago, spent a great deal of time copying from these lists for the long period 1301-1380. These valuable notes he handed over to the late Dr. Gordon Ward who, in turn, passed them for safe custody to the Sevenoaks Public Library.

There can be little doubt that, from the point of view of an historian taking a broad view of Kent, the published Lay Subsidies of 1334-5 are most valuable. They cover the *whole county* for one year. On the other hand, the Davis extracts cover much of the county for *three generations*, and give a fairly clear indication of the dates of decease (a very important point) of many of the persons mentioned in Volume XVIII of *Kent Records*, so that the preparation of these for publication would be of value. It is to be hoped that one day another volume of *Kent Records* will be published dealing with Lay Subsidies only. Material is now easily available to fill at least one substantial book for the fourteenth century alone.

As for the extract printed below, it should be remembered that the assessment was for a Twentieth, nor for a Fifteenth and Tenth as in 1334-5. The roll of 1327-8 also bears marginal annotations, indicating within each hundred the villages by which assessment and collection was

¹¹ G. Riek *et al.*, *Der Hohmichele, Röm.-Germ. Forschungen*, 25, 1962, 204 ff. I am grateful to Professor H.-J. Hundt for verbal confirmation of the published interpretation.

¹² *Kent Records*, xviii (1964), 142.

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made. Thus, the hundred of Blackheath is divided according to the marginal headings: Woolwich, Combe, Eltham, Lee, Greenwich, East Greenwich and *Wiche*. Occasionally, the marginals appear to refer to a district or borgh now lost, as in the present extract, or to a prominent man amongst the tenants, as in the case of Codsheath hundred, with its Chandos, Cons, Brutone, Somer, Broke, and so on.

HUNDRED OF SOMERDENNE [SOMERDEN]¹³

Chalk'	Stephen de Cobham	4s.	0d.	
	Thos. de Heure	4s.	0d.	
	Jn. Yonu	4s.	0d.	
	Pet. Hamon	1s.	0d.	
	Robt. le Chalouner	2s.	0d.	
	Rog. Wykyng	3s.	0d.	
	Osbert le Rukke	5s.	0d.	
	Thos. de Wygindene	3s.	4d.	
	Jas. de Cobham	5s.	0d.	
	Michael Minot	4s.	0d.	
	Wm. de Mordenne	4s.	0d.	
	Edmund de Polle	3s.	0d.	
	Pet. Broker	1s.	6d.	
	Thos. Waterman	1s.	6d.	
	Thos. Artour	1s.	6d.	
	Wm. de Dorkynhole	3s.	0d.	
	Nich. Dobbel	2s.	0d.	
	Wm. de Havedene	1s.	0d.	
	Wm. atte Lese		6d.	
	Jn. Saleman	1s.	0d.	
Robt. de Slegtre	2s.	0d.		
Thos. Wykyng		6d.		
Robt. Morecok	1s.	0d.		
Wm. Morecok		6d.		
Thos. Brounman		6d.		
Richd. de Bogherst	2s.	0d.		
Wm. Ficheler		6d.		
	Total	61s.	4d.	<i>prob'</i> [proved]
Halk'	Wm. Reyner	1s.	0d.	
	Thos. atte Melle		6d.	
	Wm. Salman	1s.	6d.	

¹³ Public Records Office E 179, 123/10, m.34v. The principles of edition are the same here as those adopted in *Kent Records*, xviii. The transcript of the late Mr. B. F. Davis has been checked at the P.R.O. by Professor F. R. H. Du Boulay.

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	Jn. Capellanus		6d.	
	Richd. atte Hame		1s. 0d.	
	Hamo le Carpenter		1s. 0d.	
	Pet. Reyner		10d.	
	Steph. le Mellere		1s. 0d.	
	Thos. de Chippelstede		10d.	
	Wm. Felaghe		1s. 0d.	
	Robt. Dobbel		1s. 0d.	
	Jn. Chalouner		6d.	
	Ralph Canon		1s. 0d.	
	Wm. atte Hale		1s. 0d.	
	Jn. atte Hale		2s. 0d.	
	Jn. Belamy		1s. 0d.	
	Gilbert de Tegherst		2s. 0d.	
	Jn. Chanu		1s. 6d.	
	Jn. de Medherst		2s. 0d.	
	Simon atte Beche		1s. 0d.	
	Wm. Cristemesse		1s. 0d.	
	Geoff. de Medherst		1s. 0d.	
<i>Taxat'</i>	{	Jn. Derkynhole	5s. 0d.	
		Jn. Chidingstone	5s. 0d.	
		Wm. Cosyn	5s. 0d.	
	Total		39s. 2d.	<i>prob'</i>
	Total of the hundred	£5	0s. 6d.	<i>prob'</i>
	[52 names]			

C. S. DURTNELL

A WITCH-BOTTLE FROM GRAVESEND

In June, 1962, during excavations for foundations for a new building on the north side of West-street, Gravesend, the workmen uncovered an interesting relic of one of the superstitious practices of the seventeenth century. This was in the shape of a good example of the common type of 'grey-beard' jug of imported Rhenish stoneware, which is popularly known as a 'Bellarmine'. The contents, however, were of more interest than the jug as they consisted of over a pound of assorted metal objects, of which three-quarters were iron nails and pins.(1)

The vessel was found embedded in undisturbed river mud, at a depth of about 5 ft. The site backs on to the Thames river-bank which, at this point, has been made up throughout the centuries, but is still only about 30 yards from high-watermark, while West-street itself, which fronts the site, has been in existence for at least six hundred years. It was not possible to ascertain whether the jug had been

deliberately buried in the bank of the river or merely thrown into the water and subsequently buried by the deposit of mud.

The jug, which is 9 in. high, is badly misshapen. The rim is distorted, the handle mis-aligned, and there is a dent in the belly where it has been in contact with another vessel during firing. It is of late form with a very degenerate mask of Holmes' Type IX (2) and a medallion consisting of two 'C's back-to-back with four rosettes top, bottom and sides, the whole surrounded by a circle of raised pearls. The base shows clearly the whorled marks left by the wire used to cut the jug from the wheel, a feature which is thought to distinguish the imported Rhenish jugs from those of the same period from Fulham. From the style of the mask and the shape of the vessel a late date, possibly the last quarter of the seventeenth century, is suggested for the jug although this does not necessarily give us a date for its use as a 'witch-bottle'.

The jug, when found, was stoppered with a solid lead plug, the top of which was about a $\frac{1}{2}$ in. below the top of the rim and about an inch thick. The finder was puzzled as to how it had been inserted and thought, from its appearance, that it had been run in in a molten state. This plug, unfortunately, was drilled out and the vessel emptied before coming into the hands of the writer. Luckily the contents were not discarded but were recovered intact when their presence was made known.

The jug and its contents were submitted firstly to Mr. R. Merrifield, B.A., F.S.A., F.M.A., of the Guildhall Museum, and then to Mr. S. Scholes of the British Iron and Steel Research Association, and this short paper is the outcome of their reports.

The contents of the bottle weigh 600 grams, of which 420 grams, that is to say nearly three-quarters, consists of iron nails. A further 30 grams are also iron in the form of wire and unidentified fragments. Some hundreds of brass pins weighing 32.5 grams are present, and 35 grams of lead fragments in the form of window-leading. Most of the remainder consists of stones, pieces of bone, coal, coke, wood, grass and dirt. The most interesting objects, however, are a lock of hair, a glass bead and a small diamond-shaped gilt ornament, probably from a belt.

The iron nails range in size up to about 3 in.; they are obviously not modern, both in shape and in having had a surface scale on them formed during manufacture. Some amongst them are, however, quite 'modern' in shape, being very much like present-day clout nails, but the scale demonstrated their antiquity. Most of the nails were bent, as were the pins, at quite sharp angles; this was obviously deliberate, and may have had a magical significance. In the case of nails this had the effect of cracking the surface scale at the bend and allowing corrosion to proceed most rapidly at this point. This, in itself, suggests a liquid

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environment, and the character of the corrosive attack, a 'pustulated' appearance near the bend, indicates most definitely that corrosion took place in a liquid of medium to high electrical conductivity. This is consistent with the presence of urine as a constituent, and iron firmate has been detected in the rust, which confirms this. The absence of liquid in the bottle when opened is not entirely surprising. In spite of the very long probable period of submergence, the lead stopper would make the bottle liquid-tight, and corrosion of the iron, resulting in hydrated iron oxides, would account adequately for the disappearance of an appreciable quantity of liquid that was in the vessel before its disposal.

Very little information can be extracted from the window-leading or the pins, which had spherical heads like modern dressmaking pins. The presence of the stones and dirt is rather puzzling. It is possible that the nails, wire, and odd pieces of iron and lead represent the contents of an 'odds and ends' box such as is often found today in many garden sheds. The earth is both sandy and chalky, a combination which is only to be found along the Thames near Gravesend, so that the bottle was almost certainly used for its present purpose by someone from that locality and not washed down from higher up the river, or thrown from a boat.

Examination of the hair is not complete, but it is tentatively suggested that it belonged to a woman from three considerations—the length and fineness, neither conclusive, and the fact that, although it is difficult to be certain, it looks as if it had at some time been dyed with henna. Faded human hair, however, always looks red as this is its natural colour without pigment. The bead and gilt ornament are probably two personal items added to reinforce the effectiveness of the hair and urine. The ornament has two bent prongs at the back which suggests that it had been a belt decoration, and there is some design, possibly a monogram, which so far defies deciphering.

Excellent papers have been written on the use of these 'witch-bottles' by Mr. Ralph Merrifield (3) and it is therefore only necessary in this report to summarize briefly their purpose.

They are, of course, relics of the days when illness and death were thought to be caused by the evil powers of demons and witches. This power could only be overcome by a much stronger magic, hence the 'witch-bottles', prepared as a counter-measure on behalf of the bewitched victim. An essential ingredient was the urine of the victim and this was often accompanied by hair, nail-clippings or other things closely associated with the person. In addition, sharp pointed objects such as nails, pins, wooden splinters or even thorns were usually included. These were all objects 'to carry a shew of Torture', as a late seventeenth-century writer puts it.(4) The general idea was to throw back the evil magic on the witch that had cast the spell, and it was

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believed that the bottle and contents, if buried under the house, would cause the witch a painful strangury and eventually kill her, or if boiled up on a fire until the bottle burst, would kill her at once. Chemical analysis of the contents of the Gravesend vessel has proved the presence of urine, but no nail-clippings were found.

Joseph Blagrave writing about 1671 explains why, through the agency of the urine of the victim, the witch can be tormented.(5) 'The reason . . . is because there is part of the vital spirit of the Witch in it, for such is the subtlety of the Devil, that he will not suffer the Witch to infuse any poysonous matter into the body of man or beast, without some of the Witches blood mingled with it.' He means, in other words, that the best way of fighting back is via the link of sympathetic magic which has been set up between the witch and her victim.

The hideous human face on the necks of these bottles seems possibly to have been regarded as sufficient to frighten the witches, as the grotesque images and gargoyles on old churches were thought to have the power to scare off demons. On the other hand it is quite likely that the bottle was considered to be a satisfactory substitute for the image of the witch. 'Image magic' is the basis of most sorcery, and Blagrave's explanation suggests that the witch was magically identified with the bottle. It may be significant that the late Bellarmine used for this purpose have distinctly malevolent faces. It must not be imagined, however, that these vessels were made specifically for this purpose; they were simply wine-containers, quite common and ideally suited for this type of use.

An interesting point is the way that these bottles were disposed of, and this varies in different parts of the country. In London the usual method was to throw it away into a stream or river, or to dump it in the marshes. In East Anglia, on the other hand, the bottle was usually buried beneath the threshold or hearth of a house, and they have been found in the sea-walls of Canvey and Foulness Islands.

Mr. Eric Maple, in his excellent book on witch-craft, *The Dark World of Witches*, states that even until mid-Victorian times bottles containing the essential personal human items of the victim were buried under hearths and doorsteps in Kent. 'For this county, in spite of its history of relative freedom from witchcraft, took care to ensure that the local witches were kept well in hand.'(6)

Mr. Merrifield informs me that quite recently a late eighteenth or early nineteenth century stoneware bottle containing nails and pieces of wood was found under the hearth of Clapper Farm, Staplehurst. He remarks that it is a point of some interest that this is the East Anglian method of disposing of a witch-bottle, whereas Gravesend follows the London method, and he poses the question, 'Is this yet another cultural distinction between Men of Kent and Kentish Men?'

I am grateful to Messrs. Scholes, Merrifield and Maple for their

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valuable help with this report, and in particular I am indebted to Mr. J. Payne of Rosherville who found the bottle and so generously presented it to the Gravesend Museum.

ERNEST W. TILLEY

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