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The Influence of Roman Politics on the Imperial Cult AD 69-193

From the period of the Flavians to the Antonines, the imperial cult expanded massively throughout the Roman empire towards the frontier. The practices of the imperial cult remained consistent throughout the empire, though there were regional differences in beliefs and motivation. In this time period, the imperial cult’s political influence throughout the regions differed based upon provincial motivations, imperial interference and activity, and the impact of urbanization. The provincial cult served to reflect Rome’s political and social climate in these times, as various changes to the imperial cult were influenced by the changes in dynastic policy, to a lesser extent, imperial personalities.

Pre-Flavian: political influences in formative years

As the Roman empire continued its expansion, it became increasingly difficult to maintain control over the various regional provinces. The imperial cult, established within the provinces, would serve as a unifying factor throughout the empire, thereby focusing provincial loyalty and therefore increasing centralization. This would in turn allow for an easier control over the empire as a whole. The practice of either appointing local elites to minor government positions, or relocating elites to provinces to serve in these positions was continued within the cult, which further served to increase imperial control over the state. The imperial cult was founded within the provinces, though it was developed specifically for religious purposes. While its establishment may have been motivated by the desire for political unification, and therefore the increase in provincial loyalty to the emperor, the cult was first and foremostly for religion.
However, the imperial cult was used by emperors to establish political legitimacy, and was a medium through which imperial strength could be demonstrated, such as through the regulation of worship. Emperors would regulate provincial worship through guidelines, which primarily influenced titles and inscriptions — the regularity of these guidelines for worship naturally would allow for an increasing amount of imperial control in other aspects as well. These guidelines would be used to control specific aspects of worship, and thereby could be used to control provincial perception of the emperor. This practice of establishing guidelines extends back towards Octavian, where he regulated the provincial cult through a series of guidelines. He decreed that resident Roman citizens were to solely worship Roma and Divus Iulus.¹ In contrast, non-Roman provincials were allowed to pay cult to the emperor himself, as long as they included Dea Roma within their worship.² Octavian sought to control public perception of himself, through the establishment of these seemingly mundane, but specific, guidelines. By ordering the resident Roman citizens to worship only Roma and Divus Iulius, he avoids any potential implication of kingship — which the Senate feared. However, he allows non-Roman provincials to worship himself, provided Dea Roma would also be worshipped. While Octavian must be wary about monarchical implications within Rome and the Senate, he must also establish a strong imperial persona outside of Rome in order to secure long-term loyalty from the provincials. While these provinces may pay Rome, speak Latin, and emulate Roman culture as part of their establishment into the empire, the element of imperial worship would further ensure loyalty and prevent rebellion.

This divide between the provinces and resident Romans in terms of worship were just an example of the power over worship that the emperor extended — this divide would decrease

¹ Tacitus *Annals* IV. 37
² Fishwick III.1 3
over time as provinces gained full Roman citizenship, but the influence exerted over these provinces would increase. Further evidence of the the usage of the imperial cult’s establishment as a form of propaganda is seen through the realisation that there was an absence of belief in the divinity of the ruler within the provinces prior to the Romans. The *concilia* were created in the imperial period and regime — their origins can be connected directly to a provincial cult’s installation.¹ There is little evidence, therefore, to suggest that the imperial cult would have developed at the local and provincial level outside of deliberate imperial action. In light of Octavian’s initial guidelines for the provincial imperial cult, which established that emperor worship was acceptable provided that worship towards Dea Roma was also present, the idea that the Latin provinces have no traces of the cult of Roma provides an interesting insight. It establishes that Octavian’s guidelines were mostly given to soothe senatorial concerns of the rising of Roman king. While the guidelines establish that worship of the living emperor would be in conjunction with the cult of Roma, it is clear that it is unenforced, and thereby not an important characteristic of provincial worship. These guidelines, therefore, served as propaganda to establish imperial divinity (and legitimacy) as well as secured the emperor’s political status (and lack of) in the eyes of the Senate. This is further seen even on the pre-Flavian level, where the altar at Lugdunum was established primarily to prevent a Gallic uprising. According to Fishwick, both Livy and Dio note that these events had occurred over discontent over Roman subjugation and upheaval over the census, and both historians agree that the outcome of this turmoil resulted in the establishment of the altar at Lugdunum. Dio further confirms that the initiative came from the Roman side, and there is very little evidence that the Gauls had voluntarily proposed the establishment of federal cult.⁴

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¹ Fishwick III.1 4
² Fishwick III.1 11-12
Pre-Flavian: religion & government

The initial formation of the provincial cult is ultimately not due to any religious motivation, but was established in the early provinces as yet another machination of the emperor to gain further political dominance and control through propaganda. It would also serve, as in the case at Lugdunum, to help mediate or prevent conflicts against the capital. As the number of provinces that gained citizenship increased, their distance away from the capital would increase, making it difficult for rebellions to be crushed before it spread in power. The establishment of provincial cults would resolve that, with its priests serving a dual role as vigilant watchmen to ensure the loyalty of the provinces to the state. Much like the *augustales* of the earliest form of the imperial cult, the post of *flamen* (or priest) was reserved largely, though not exclusively, to wealthy freedmen and patricians, who would thereby be integrated with the local elites. However, it is important to note that while the initial establishment of the imperial cult in the province of Lugdunum, and others like it, was intended for the establishment of propaganda, its practitioners were devout worshippers. With the exception of Hither Spain, who had spontaneously requested the institution of the cult, this pattern of politicizing worship would follow throughout the reign of both the Flavians and the Antonines.

Flavian: political and religious expansion & change

The Flavian era, from AD 69 to 96, was a period of increased expansion and reformulation of the imperial cult. Under Vespasian, official worship had become established and integrated with the older, well-established provinces such as Narbonensis, Proconsularis, and Baetica⁵, and had been modified in the provinces of Hispания Citerior, Lusitania, and the Three Gauls. Furthermore, the *lex de flamonio provinciae Narbonensis*, the “central document of the

⁵ Fishwick III.1 95
provincial priesthood in the Latin west”\textsuperscript{6} concerns itself with “regulating the office of the official \textit{flamen} and provincial assembly of Narbonese Gaul.”\textsuperscript{7} With the \textit{Lex Narbonensis}, and the beginnings of the Flavian regulation of imperial worship, there seems to be indications of a general trend towards standardization, in part due to the aforementioned inscriptions and practices. This change in imperial worship from the former Augustan practices is in part due to the nature of the Flavian dynasty itself. This change in worship due to imperial personality and character of the regime — the dynasty itself was constantly fighting to establish legitimacy and authority because of its beginnings. Therefore, the provincial cult’s emphasis on the reigning emperor and the consolidation (or inclusion) of the \textit{divi} is particularly notable within the provincial cults throughout this time period. With a dynasty that had no real Republican ties and connections, and was considered to be one of uncertain legitimacy, Flavian’s establishment of strict regulations and the push towards establishing the legitimacy of the \textit{gens Flavia} was vital in providing the establishment a sense of power and authority. Quite unlike its predecessor, the Flavian dynasty (Vespasian particularly) relied on a widespread campaign to consolidate power from the very beginning. A slight movement away from the pre-Flavian guideline of the presence of Dea Roma alongside the emperor in imperial worship can be seen, and is identifiable of a growing imperial power and a weakening Senate. While Vespasian and Titus still try to maintain the facade of aristocratic collegiality, the \textit{lex de imperio Vespasiano} gave the emperor ultimate power, undercutting the facade of the constitutional monarchy.

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\textsuperscript{6} Fishwick III.2
\textsuperscript{7} Williamson  17
Flavian: religion & government

The dynasty’s emphasis on improving and standardizing the imperial structure, particularly in regards to Vespasian’s interest in reformation, further serves to support this viewpoint of Flavian policy. By streamlining imperial actions, such as the conferring of grants of citizenship and other municipal legal matters, the Flavians were able to demonstrate their power and influence. The increase in grants of citizenship effectively increased the range of the provincial cult, and this connection between territorial expansion and the growth of the provincial cult was immensely beneficial to the emperor — as the cult moved with the travels of merchants, legions, and other citizens, they brought with them their religious practices. The *Lex Narbonensis*, the Narbonese charter, is a primary example of how this reformation and expansion of regulations would be directly influential towards the development of the provincial cults. In this way, the provincial cult had shifted from “spontaneous local initiatives, as observable in the Julio-Claudian period, to… planned direction.”8 The imperial cult established in Narbonensis under Flavian rule also saw itself and its regulations mimicked within the other provinces in the Latin west. These regulations not only dictated the length of tenure of the priests, but the honorific dedications given to them, and epigraphical inscriptions. This practice not only provided a way to assert imperial power, but also served as a constant reminder of the emperor’s presence despite the provinces being far from Rome. His control over even the minute details of provincial worship allowed for a greater manner of influence within the provinces. It also allowed the emperor to easily identify possible scapegoats and figureheads of rebellion, through the local presence of a loyal priesthood. Although later dedications and inscriptions do not follow the exact formulaic prescriptions as identified in the *Lex Narbonensis*, the similarity of these serve to suggest that the established regulations at Narbonensis was not a unique event —

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8 Fishwick III.1 98
the existing imperial cult underwent a severe change under the Flavian dynasty. Furthermore, it is under the Flavians in which the imperial cult truly begins to combined both worship of the Divus Augustus and the genius of the deified emperors, as well as the worship of the living emperors, hence the emphasis by the Flavian dynasty on the establishment of the gens Flavia.

The Lex Narbonensis, as the institutional framework for Flavian-era federal worship, served the important role of establishing a standardized and streamlined set of regulations for the imperial cult within the provinces. This served to distinguish the dynasty and give it authority, but also served to unify the provinces together in their worship through the formulae of inscriptions and worship itself. Durham, Gargola, and Talbert note that the cult’s flamen and flaminica were responsible for administering to their communities an annual oath of allegiance to the emperor and his family. They were also responsible for overseeing community-wide celebrations, city festivals for military victories, special events in the imperial family, and other tasks dedicated to praise the emperor. Despite this vast range of responsibility found in the role of flamen and flaminica, “...the unifying thread was public awe and acknowledgement of imperial power.”\(^9\) This unifying thread of public awe and acknowledgement of imperial power\(^10\) was exactly what the Flavian dynasty had hoped to achieve through the overhaul of the imperial cult and the introduction of regulations. Although practices differed and no single province was exactly identical to that illustrated in the Lex Narbonensis, a pattern had been established. Inscriptions found at the province of Corduba conformed to the same standard pattern that inscriptions found in province of Africa Proconsularis (whose provincial centre was in Carthage) did. Fundamentally, this standardization allowed for the imperial cult to become “one of the

\(^9\) Boatwright 391-392
\(^10\) Dio LXVII.7
strongest unifying forces for the diverse Roman empire.”\textsuperscript{11} This, along with the cult’s predilection towards community celebration and parades, served to increase a province’s satisfaction with the capital and promote unification. The imperial cult under the Flavians allowed for provinces to prove their dedication and compliance to the capital, thereby doing its part in preventing rebellion, and served to unify the empire together through common practices and worship.

**Flavian: military & religious expansion**

There is a connection between the provincial cult and Roman military affairs as well. As Durham, Gargola, and Talbert have mentioned, cult \textit{flamen} were also responsible for organizing festivals that celebrate military successes. However, certain altars, such as the Arae Flaviae in Germany were located in close proximity to the headquarters of military operations, providing “...the nodal point for worship of the imperial house in the newly won Agri Decumates of south-west Germany.” This centre, though lacking traces of a \textit{flamen}, seems to be closely developed with that of the Augustan period. The centre was also linked with the headquarters of military operations, which would give its name to a permanent settlement.\textsuperscript{12} This, coupled with the fact that at this point, the presence of a temple in a provincial cult indicated that the worship’s focal point would be addressed to the deified dead, and that the presence of an altar would indicate the focus upon worship of the living emperor, indicates the presence of altars near military settlements were intentional, and therefore significant. Worship of the emperor would unify the legions, despite their varying backgrounds, as well as provide a reminder of whom they owe their allegiance to. The imperial cult not only served as a political unifier throughout the

\textsuperscript{11} Fishwick III.1  350
\textsuperscript{12} Fishwick III.1  146-147
provinces, but retained the military’s loyalty directly to the living emperor and Rome itself. Because the imperial cult and the military were so intertwined, it was also easily spread through their movements — where the legions moved, so did the imperial cult. The official military religious calendar found in Dura Europos on the Eastern Syrian steppe demonstrates the centrality of the imperial cult. The Dura Papyrus\textsuperscript{13}, though officially placed in the 3rd century, offers an insight into how deeply ingrained the worship of the imperial house as the religion of the Empire. While holidays such as Saturnalia and Neptunalia have their place within the calendar, it is dominated with mentions of imperial birthdays, accessions, and sacrifices to the deified emperors and their family.

Because the imperial cult also benefitted from state patronage, the promotion of loyalty to the state and dynasty was encouraged not only through the military but also through those around military settlements. The introduction of imperial regulations on imperial worship, comparable to the ones found in the \textit{Lex Narbonensis}, shows that the Flavian dynasty had significant influence in the development of the provincial cult in Hither Spain. Information about the content of worship within the provincial cults resides solely in the titles of the priests; a practice that starts with the Vespasian’s accession. The variation between the provinces, therefore, is titular — it is the priestly formula that shows the most change from province to province, and not the contents of worship. Major provincial centres of worship for the imperial cult were established in the Flavian period. Current chronological identification for these centres is primarily due to the formulaic inscriptions that were developed and prescribed in the \textit{Lex Narbonensis}, a direct result of Flavian interference in provincial matters. Furthermore, Vespasian’s strong efforts to gain the respect and allegiance of the legions (rather than solely focusing on the Praetorian Guard, as his aristocratic Roman predecessors had done) coupled with

\textsuperscript{13} Dura Papyrus No. 54
multiple measures to bolster public position and gain the loyalty of the provincial elite also resulted in the increasing prominence of the imperial cult. Flavian foreign policy and military strategy led to a widespread Roman legionary presence throughout the empire, and therefore also the spread to imperial worship within the provincial cults.

**Antonine: religion & government (expansion and change)**

While the Flavian dynasty proved to have the most influence in terms of reviving and changing the status of the imperial cult throughout the provinces, the Antonine period (AD 96-193) continued to maintain this trend of expansion, spreading the official ruler cult to the Danubian provinces. As the empire changed regimes, from the Flavian absolutist monarchy, underlined in the *lex de imperio Vespasiano*, to the Antonine’s constitutional monarchy and practice of meritocracy, so did the practices and beliefs of the provincial cult. Where Flavian rule and motivation was coloured by a desire to establish imperial legitimacy, due to the emperor Vespasian’s non-aristocratic background and weak claim to the throne, the rule of the Antonines was more firmly well-established, due to Trajan’s adoption of Hadrian (despite Hadrian’s similar background to Vespasian — born to an equestrian father outside of Rome). The dynasty of the Antonines continued the expansion that the Flavians had started, maintained the tendency to liberally reward civic status and citizenship to the provinces. This was in an attempt, much like the Flavians had done, to integrate provinces (primarily in the West) more into the empire. Marcus Aurelius, who had spent many long years fighting wars on the Danubian frontier, was able to reorganize the frontier areas and encouraged urbanism and granted civic rights to a number of cities. Furthermore, Marcus Aurelius continued the Hadrianic trend of upgrading the impromptu settlements around legionary bases (*canabae*) to municipia. This continuation of provincial expansion from the Flavian area encouraged the imperial cult to spread further out.
However, despite this, the imperial cult had begun to shift and change, mostly in minor ways. The most notable developments, however, are attested in the epigraphic records of various provinces in the Latin West. The provincial cult of the Three Gauls, for example, underwent significant modifications due to the introduction and “inclusion of deified personages and the associated construction of a provincial temple”\(^\text{14}\) — both of which would be attributed to Hadrian. These innovations by Hadrian served as an illustration of the continuing patronage of the empire towards these public works for the cult, despite a downward trend in the economy. Further mention shows that the provincial cult in Hispania citerior remained unchanged, “but there are already signs enthusiasm for holding provincial office was beginning to wane” which contrasted with Africa Proconsularis, which had taken an unprecedented step in replacing *flamen* with *sacerdos* as the title of the provincial priest. Despite the sudden change in title, the imperial cult in Africa Proconsularis remained the same. It therefore seemed to be a change in title, rather a change in the content of provincial worship. What occurs in the federal cult in the reign of the Antonines, therefore, is very much and nothing at all. At this time, the older, Julio-Claudian, established provincial cults had adopted Flavian regulations and practices, undoubtedly due to imperial influence by Hadrian. More recently-established provincial cults such as Hispania citerior and Africa Proconsularis, however, continued much of the same growth they had during the Flavians, save for a few minor changes such as the change in priestly titles. More notably, Fishwick’s note that there was waning influence in enthusiasm for holding provincial office in Hispania citerior, was most likely in part due to an increasing “financial burden imposed by the priesthood of the province.”\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{14}\) Fishwick III.1 171-172
\(^{15}\) Fishwick III.1 186
Antonine: economic & political factors

Despite Hadrian’s financial support, some of it supposedly at his own expense, such as the _aedes Augusti_ at Tarraco\(^{16}\), the cost of holding provincial office under the Antonines continuously increased. Public entertainment and repairs would have placed more financial burdens upon the local elite, members of the council, and the high priest. The financial burden of provincial priesthood, combined with what Fishwick calls apathy, was the cause of a sudden lack of statues dedicated to priests, as well as the shift in the ethnic and geoeconomic background of these priests.\(^{17}\) Furthermore, provincial ruler worship under the Antonines had become to move away from the _dominatio_ of Domitian\(^ {18}\) towards what Fishwick calls a “more moderate, conservative outlook, articulated under Trajan… in contrast to the ‘republicanism’ paraded by the literary sources....”. This trend continues under Hadrian, who shifted the focus of the imperial cult from the worship of just the deified dead to the _divi_ and _divae_, and transformed the cult of Roma. Despite Hadrian’s adoption by Trajan, he still sought to establish a respectable pedigree. His promotion of Roma as Roma Aeterna, who personified the city of Rome (rather than her original iteration as a Greek goddess), served to emphasize Hadrian’s efforts to spark a nationalistic fervor as well as illustrating his inward-looking policy for the empire. Hadrian, much like Vespasian, used the imperial cult in order to establish imperial (and personal) legitimacy as well as unite the continuously growing empire. The imperial cults became increasingly focused more on the living emperor and the imperial family. The reign of the Antonines, characterized with its preoccupation with moving away from the despotism of the late Flavians and general return to treating the Senate with respect, is reflected in the shift of the imperial cults to a more conservative, moderate form. More importantly, the revival of imperial

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\(^{16}\) Fishwick III.1 \ 186  
\(^{17}\) Fishwick III.1 \ 189  
\(^{18}\) Fishwick III.1 \ 172
support of cult of Dea Roma, now renamed Roma Aeterna indicates a political move in which Hadrian actively sought to induce political unification and loyalty to Rome. Though not a part of the imperial ruler cult, the promotion of Roma Aeterna is indicative of the imperial cult’s status as a tool of the emperor to maintain political unity. These changes towards the imperial cult are indicative of their respective dynastic policies, but also vary due to imperial personalities as well, such as in the case of Hadrian. However, despite this revival and change in administration, much of the Flavian-era regulations remained much the same. The overall picture that emerges, as Fishwick notes, is one of a similar pattern of worship that was practiced throughout the older, original provinces. They worshipped the deified dead alongside the living emperor, and in cases such as the Three Gauls and Hither Spain, they also worshipped Roma. In direct contrast to these older provinces and their practices, the newer provincial cults, such as the ones newly instituted in the Danube region, focus solely on the reigning Augustus. This divide in practice indicates a return to a Julio-Claudian practice of a primary focus on the worship of the living reigning Augustus in the newly established cults such as Dacia, Upper and Lower Pannonia, and Upper and Lower Moesia. Unlike the older provinces, these Danubian provinces also lack the presence of Roma in worship. Worship centered on an altar, rather than temples as before. Dacia, as well as other provinces in the Latin west annexed by Trajan, also share the possibility of the institution of provincial councils alongside the provincial cult itself. These councils would play a role in provincial life, though limited in scale and role. In the Three Gauls, provincial worship also expanded and included deified personages besides Roma and the living Augustus — this change can be associated, even attributed, to the construction of a temple during the Antonine period. These changes rendered the practices at the Three Gauls to follow those with most of the provinces outside of the Danubian region, despite the unusual inclusion of Roma (who,

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19 Fishwick III.1 172
according to Fishwick, was limited to Three Gauls and Hispania citerior).\textsuperscript{20} The provincial cults established during the Flavian period remained much the same during the Antonine. While the shift from the priestly title of \textit{flamen} to \textit{sacerdos} served to indicate a change, regardless of size and scope, from the Flavian regulation to Antonine practices, the provinces of Narbonensis, Mauretania Caesariensis, Baetica (amongst others) show no such change, indicating that the content of worship in the imperial cult in these provinces remained the same during the Antonines from the Flavians. Due to the lack of developments in these “established cults of older provinces”\textsuperscript{21}, identified by to their continual worship of the living emperor alongside the deified dead (and in the cases of Three Gauls and Hispania citerior, Roma). This practice, though commonplace in the provinces during the 2nd century, is unique only to the provinces established prior to the Antonines. The newly established Danubian provinces “diverge sharply from this overall trend in attesting only the cult of the living emperor to the exclusion of both Roma and the \textit{divi/divae}”.\textsuperscript{22}

Despite these changes in worship and practice from the newly established Danubian cults in comparison to the previously established provinces by the Flavians, much remained the same. \textit{Flamen} (or now, \textit{sacerdos}) were still typically of an equestrian class, as they were in the later Flavian period. This is to be expected, as Hadrian’s reign followed Flavian tradition of extending the role of the equestrian class. Rank and title conveyed \textit{dignitas}, and was an essential part of Roman society. In Dacia, “proportionately about as many provincial priests belong to the \textit{ordo equester} as any other province in the Latin west”. The prestige the title of sacerdotium held within the Three Daciae, therefore, indicates a certain level of popularity and desirability for the position — quite unlike Hispania citerior. Furthermore, because these provincial priests were

\textsuperscript{20} Fishwick III.1 186  
\textsuperscript{21} Fishwick III.1 195  
\textsuperscript{22} Fishwick III.1 195
quite likely to be from the *ordo equester*, it can be easily assumed that the priests in Dacia held great amounts of municipal administrative experience.  

Unlike Hispania citerior, where the office was losing its appeal due to a combination of apathy and financial inability to support the costly role, the *flamen* at Dacia had no such struggle. This may be due to the added prestige of *flamen* would add to the equestrian families, or due to the fact that the administrative experience held by the municipal equestrians assisted them in their role as the priest. Despite the various minute differences between provincial flamen, and the appeal of the title, it must be noted that the role of the *flamen/sacerdos* continued fairly similarly throughout the two dynasties. Henry Fairfield Burton, in *The Worship of the Roman Emperors* notes that, “...public worship was elaborate and costly, including not only offerings and sacrifices but public games of every sort ….often lasting for several days.” The expenses for these public games, he notes, “were defrayed partly by the imperial government, partly by a tax levied by the local authorities in the provinces or cities, and partly by contributions on the part of individuals….” As such, the financial burden upon priests was great, despite some imperial assistance. While the later Flavian dynasty was characterized by great expansion and urbanism, the economy during the second century had begun to slow down, particularly in the Mediterranean core. Finances could have played a role in the sudden change in worship habits within the Danubian provinces, though it is far more likely that the practice of sole worship to the living Augustus (which characteristic of the cult during the Julio-Claudians) is more likely to have been influenced by the return to a more traditionally republican, constitutional monarchy that characterized the era of the Antonines.

23 Fishwick III.2 261  
24 Burton XL.2 85-86
Conclusion:

The imperial cult continued to expand throughout the Roman empire towards the frontier, serving as a method to unify the provinces to each other and the emperor himself. From the period of the Flavian dynasty to the Antonine dynasty, general practices of the imperial cult remained much the same, though variances through provinces and over time occurred due to the status of the cult reflecting upon the changes occurring within the empire or the imperial personality. In essence, the imperial cult served as a reflection of the Roman empire’s political environment, and its provincial differences illustrate the change in influence and values that occur in this time.
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