

**Remnants of the past Buddhist Civilization at Hazara along with the Karakoram
and the CPEC Highways: A Potential Source for Promoting Religious Tourism in
Pakistan**

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Received: 01-10-2024	Revised: 28-10-2024	Accepted: 10-11-2024	Published: 01-12-2024
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Abstract

The region encompassing Taxila to Gilgit is called ancient Urasa, modern Hazara that is rich in history, culture, and contemporary developments. Since 2007 archaeological surveys of the entire Hazara region have been conducted from time to time by the Department of Archaeology Hazara University Mansehra under various funding agencies and finally completed in 2023. The results of the surveys revealed many archaeological remnants belonging to different periods of human history. This paper provides a concise overview of the historical and contemporary significance of the Buddhist remnants found along the Karakoram Highway (KKH) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) route, spanning from Taxila to Gilgit. The region traversed by these highways, including the Hazara Division, serves as a bridge between ancient Buddhist heritage and modern infrastructure development.

Keywords: *Buddhist's Remnants, KKH, CPEC, Hazāra*

1. INTRODUCTION

The journey begins in Taxila, an archaeological treasure trove and a prominent Buddhist learning and culture center. The remnants of stupas, monasteries, and relics in Taxila offer a glimpse into the region's deep-rooted Buddhist history. As travelers move northward on the KKH, they encounter historical towns such as Pir Manakrai at Haripur, Rajuya at Havalian, Damtaur and Mangal at Abbottabad, Thakot, and Shinkiari, at Mansehra, Allai at Batagram, Safe Dheri at Torghar, Kharat at Kolai Palas, Sholgara at Kohistan Lower and Shatial rock carving at Upper Kohistan, each reveals artifacts, and structures from the Buddhist era. The KKH, a historic engineering marvel, weaves through the rugged terrains of Pakistan's northern areas. It takes travelers through the Hazara Division, where they witness the juxtaposition of ancient Buddhist sites with breathtaking mountain vistas. Chilas, along the KKH, boasts rock carvings and inscriptions that further illuminate the region's historical significance.

The CPEC, a modern development initiative connecting Gwadar Port to China's Xinjiang region, includes the expansion and enhancement of the KKH. This project has not only improved road infrastructure but has also brought economic opportunities to the region. The region that connects Taxila with Gilgit is known as ancient Urasa (present Hazara Division), with its rich Buddhist heritage, stands as an integral part of this burgeoning economic corridor.

2. LOCATION OF HAZĀRA

East of the Indus River lies the Hazara region in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. In the north, it lies between latitudes 88° 45' and 85° 2', and in the east, between 72° 86' and 74° 9'. It is mostly made up of a tiny patch of land that is sandwiched between the Jhelum and the Indus. The division is 120 miles long at its longest point, 40 miles wide in the middle, and 56 miles wide at its southernmost point. Its southern boundary is delineated by the Murree, Rawalpindi, and Attock rivers. It is divided by the River Indus from District Swabi, District Amb, and the recently established Districts of Tor Ghar and Buner in the northern part. Azad Kashmir lies to the east, while the Kaghan mountain divides it from Swat, Kohistan, and Chilas to the north. The districts that currently make up the Hazara Division are as follows (figure 1):

Haripur District

1. Abbottabad District
2. Mansehra District
3. Batāgrām District
4. Torghar District
5. Lower Kohistan District
6. Upper Kohistan District
7. Kolai-Palas District

The Hazāra Division is strategically located along the KKH, which has historical significance and is now being further developed as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The Hazara Division is an important region in Pakistan's northern areas, and it plays a significant role in the development and connectivity facilitated by these infrastructure projects. This not only contributes to regional connectivity but also holds the potential for economic growth and development in the Hazara Division and the broader northern areas of Pakistan (figure-2).

3. BUDDHIST REMNANTS OF HAZĀRA LINKING TAXILA TO GILGIT

The Hazara region in Pakistan, which lies between Taxila and Gilgit, has significant Buddhist historical and archaeological sites that connect these two areas. The region consists of modern eight districts: Haripur, Abbottabad, Mansehra, Torghar, Batagram, Kohistan Lower, Kohistan Upper, and Kolai Palas. The notable Buddhist remnants in all these districts of Hazara were recently documented by the team of archaeologists from Hazara University Mansehra. The details of each district of Buddhists remains is given upcoming sections

i. Buddhist Remnants at Haripur

The Hazara region, which includes Haripur and the northeastern part of the former Northwest Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), is the only area east of the Indus. The district is situated between north latitudes 33° 44' and 34° 22' and east longitudes 72° 35' and 73° 15', at an elevation of around 610 meters above sea level. This district has the highest Human Development Index of any district in the province. Due to its crucial geographical location, Haripur has long been a hub of cultural activity. It has served as a crossroads for two major commercial routes (the Silk Road and the Grand Trunk Road), which link the Indian subcontinent with China and Central Asian nations. It is possible to date the start of cultural activities in the area to the 9th or 10th millennia BC. The evidence for this was discovered in the Khanpur cave, which was dug up by Farid Khan (University of Peshawar) and Eden Johnson in 1964. The mesolithic period can be dated by the numerous microliths that have been found during these digs (Ali et al., 2009). The monuments of the Gandhara Grave Culture are frequently associated with the Indo-Aryans who entered the region through the northwest passes in the latter part of the second millennium BC. The Achaemenid Persians dominated the Hazara region from 558 to 327 BC, when Alexander the Great overthrew them. The most accurate and first-hand evidence of Mauryan dominance in this region of the subcontinent may be found in the Ashokan rock edicts at Mansehra, on either side of the Silk Road. Pottery from Pir Manakrai (Khan, 2002), Panian in district Haripur (Qamar, 1998), and

a silver Menander coin from Bedadi (Mansehra) (Ali et al., 2009) testifies to the Indo-Greeks, Indo-Scythians, and Indo-Parthians' political ascent. These ceramics are strikingly comparable to pottery from Bhir Mound, Sirkap, and other ancient Gandhara sites. The Parthians were succeeded by the Kushans, the Kushans, and lastly the Kushano Sasanians until the invasion of the White Huns in the fifth century CE. The Buddhist monuments (stupas and monasteries) built by the Kushans are still visible across the Hazara region. The current districts of Haripur, Abbottabad, Mansehra, Batagram, Kohistan lower, Kohistan upper, and Kolai Palas are all along the old Silk Route. Buddhism arrived in China and Central Asia via this crucial historical and cultural thoroughfare (Dani, 1999). The Mughal emperor Shah Jahan used to rest here while travelling to Kashmir (Jahangir, 2001). Numerous sites dating from the Prehistoric era to the British era were uncovered during the most recent archaeological investigations conducted by the Department of Archaeology at Hazara University (Mansehra), demonstrating the persistence of cultural activities in the area.

The Directorate of Archaeology and Museums Khyber Pakhtunkhwa conducted the first thorough archaeological investigations in the Haripur area in 2003. But this time, too, the group failed to document every archaeological site in the district. Despite having very little financing, the Hazara University Department of Archaeology merits recognition for discovering hidden archaeological gems in the other two Hazara districts in addition to the Haripur area. A total of 186 Buddhist sites (figure-5) were documented because of both explorations (Ali et al., 2009; Shakir et al., 2021).

ii. *Buddhist Remnants at Abbottabad*

Situated in the current Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan, District Abbottabad spans 1,967 square kilometres. The districts of Azad Jammu and Kashmir to the east, Mansehra, Muzaffarabad, Rawalpindi, and Haripur to the north, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir to the south encircle Abbottabad. Swynnerton said in 1980 to have discovered the firsthand axes in Thandiani, east of Abbottabad District, demonstrating the commencement of cultural activity in the entire Hazara people and tracing the district's history to the individual and regional stone ages. The finding of a grave culture site in the area provided more evidence of an Indo-Aryan invasion of the Hazara (Ali et al., 2009). A substantial Buddhist civilization founded by the Mauryan ruler Asoka in the area was substantiated by the documentation of over 166 sites during archaeological explorations dating to the Buddhist era (figure-5).

iii. *Buddhist Remnants at Mansehra*

Mansehra is frequently known as Takht-i Hazara (or the Throne of Hazara) because of its breathtaking natural surroundings and rich cultural heritage. The district, which spans a total area of 4579 square kilometres, is bordered to the north by the districts of Kohistan, Batagram, and Diamir; to the east by the district of Muzaffarabad in Azad Jammu & Kashmir; to the south by Abbottabad and Haripur; to the southwest by Shangla and Buner; and to the west by the district of Swat. Due to its exceptional geographical location, Mansehra has long been a meeting point for diverse cultures and civilizations. It is located at the intersection of four major thoroughfares: the Karakorum Highway, which runs from Taxila to the upper Indus; the second and third roads, which both head east and lead to Gilgit and Kashmir, respectively. In the middle of the third century CE, Emperor Ashoka chose this location for the famous fourteen edicts to be inscribed for this reason (Dani, 1995).

The Department of Archaeology and Museums worked together with the Tokyo National Museum's Archaeological Mission to Pakistan to perform excavation at Zar Dheri. Between 1995 and 1999, the crew excavated the site over the course of seven different seasons. These excavations were quite successful and turned up many artefacts, including pottery, iron tools, shards of bone, and sculptures made of schist stone with Kharoshthi aksharas. Panels depicting the Buddha in various seated positions, the Buddha standing, and the Buddha with devotees are among the sculptures that have been recorded at the site (Azeem, 2002). Abdul Samad has written a lengthy description of the Lingam Temple, which is located on the Karakoram Highway 10 kilometres north of Mansehra. He underlined how Hindus built Hindu temples by adapting elements of Islamic architecture (Samad, 2008).

When Bado Dheri Gandhian Mansehra was recently excavated, it revealed a very unusual stupa in terms of material and construction technique (Shakir & Hameed, 2019), and when Zar Dheri was also excavated by the same department (Shakir et al., 2021), the Department of Archaeology Hazara University Mansehra conducted excavations there. The origins of the raw materials used to create the stone sculpture at Zar Dheri was validated by the mineralogical study of the schist stone that was reported from there (Shakir et al., 2022). In light of the aforementioned, it is evident that Mansehra attracted national and international scholars to contribute to the growth of archaeology in the region due to its vast archaeological potential. Even at that time, most of the archaeological riches remained uncovered until the Department of Archaeology Hazara University was established in 2006 to carry on the exploration effort. It had the effect of recording and documenting 157 Buddhist-era sites (figure-5).

iv. *Buddhist Remnants at Batāgrām*

The District Baagrm is bounded by the districts of Shangla on the west, Kohistan on the north, Mansehra on the east, and the tribal region of Kala Dhaka (now known as the District Torghar). It is located at latitude 34.40 and longitude 73.1. Its headquarters are at Batagram Town, which is located on the Silk Highway around 75 km from Mansehra. Baagrm and Allai are the two tehsils that make up the district. Interest in the Batagram sites and relics has increased because of recent archaeological discoveries in the area. Ancient graves at these sites have reportedly been demolished in quest of artifacts and gold. The 18 Buddhist period sites that the author, who was a member of the investigation team, recently documented from this region. Many of the locations were interconnected and close to the Indus River (figure-5) (Shakir et al., 2023).

v. *Buddhist Remnants at Torghar*

Torghar is located between 72o48 and 72o58 E and 34o32 and 34o50 N. On the east, it is bordered by Agror; on the south, Tanawal; on the west, Buner; and on the northeast, Batagram. The Torghar range is between 25 and 30 kilometres long and rises to a height of 8,000 feet above sea level. Due to the nearby Chagharzai areas of Buner District, this area has also been referred to as Chagharzai. Located across the Indus River from Kala Dhaka (now officially known as District Torghar), Shangla District is primarily the territory of Tehsil Martung. The result of an Archaeological survey in the region revealed 20 Buddhist sites (figure-5) mostly interconnected with the river Indus (Shakir et al., 2023).

vi. *Buddhist Remnants at Kohistan Lower*

In Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province's Hazara Division, the Lower Kohistan District is situated. Pattan serves as Lower Kohistan's district capital. The Kohistan District was divided into the Upper Kohistan and Lower Kohistan Districts by the provincial administration in 2014. Plas and Pattan were the only two tehsils that made up Lower Kohistan at that time. Ranovali Pinkhad, which had previously been a part of Pattan tehsil, was converted into a distinct tehsil on May 31, 2018, while the tehsil of Plas was made into a separate district in 2017 and given the name Kolai-Plas. Kohistan Lower is blessed with an abundance of natural wealth. Some of the world's highest peaks in the Hindu Kush in the north and the lovely banks of the River Indus have abundant attractions for every type of tourist. It also has chromite and aqiq mines. Lower Kohistan Culture is thousands of years old, unique, and extremely rich. Moreover, the people are exceedingly hospitable; they are warm and courteous and take much delight in entertaining guests. The present survey was carried out first in the district lower Kohistan after approval of the district administration. The district is comprised of two tehsils, Tehsil Bankhat and Tehsil Pattan which are further divided into different union councils. Only 2 Buddhist period sites were reported from the district (figure-5) (Shakir et al., 2023).

vii. *Buddhist Remnants at Kohistan Upper*

The district is situated amidst agriculturally hilly terrain and mountains. Extreme weather, including extremely hot summers and bitterly cold winters, can be found in the lower parts. From the east it relates to the Azad Jammu and Kashmir and from the north its boundary is attached to the Yasin and Tangir valleys of Gilgit Baltistan (see figure-3). As a result of the

archaeological expedition 6 sites were documented belonging to the Buddhist period (figure-4) (Shakir et al., 2023).

viii. *Buddhist Remnants at Kolai Palas*

Koli Plas is a district in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province's Hazara Division. Up to it was established as a distinct district in 2017, it was a part of the Kohistan district of the Hazara division. Kolai-Pallas by modernizing the previous Pallas Sub-Division, Lower Kohistan was divided into the District Kohistan. With the creation of Battered Kolai on May 31, 2018, Kolai-Pallas now has two tehsils in total. The district had a population of 274,923 at the time of the 2017 census, with 149,104 men and 125,814 women. There were only rural residents. There were seven members of religious minorities in the area. Dardic people who speak Kohistani languages dominate the area. Before being converted to Islam over the ages, these peoples followed an animistic religion akin to the old Vedic faith. 91.26% of the population is made up of these individuals. With 7.09% of the population, Pashto speakers are the second-largest group. The only indication of Buddhism in this neighborhood is the Buddhist monastery (figure 4).

CONCLUSION

The Hazara region in Pakistan stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Buddhist civilization. Spanning from Taxila to Gilgit, this area is a treasure trove of historical remnants that provide profound insights into the ancient culture, religious practices, and architectural achievements of the Buddhist era. The remnants of the Buddhist civilization in the Hazara region are not merely historical artifacts but living connections to a rich cultural and spiritual heritage. Taxila, the region's southern gateway, remains one of the most prominent centers of Buddhism in ancient India. Its monasteries, stupas, and sculptures are enduring symbols of the profound intellectual and spiritual pursuits that flourished here over two millennia ago. These archaeological treasures have earned Taxila a place on the UNESCO World Heritage list, underscoring their global importance.

As we move northward along the Karakoram Highway (KKH), we encounter a landscape that is both awe-inspiring and humbling. The KKH, itself a testament to human ingenuity and determination, traverses through the Hazara Division, connecting ancient relics with modernity. The historical towns of Pir Manakrai, Mangal, Damtaur, Thakot, Shinkiari, and Mansehra serve as living witnesses to the coexistence of past and present. The Buddhist artifacts unearthed in these areas offer glimpses into the lives of those who once practiced this ancient faith.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Hazara region's Buddhist remnants is their ability to bridge the gap between eras. The rock carvings and inscriptions in Chilas, etched into the very mountains that surround it, provide a tangible link to a time when Buddhism thrived in the region. These carvings, some dating back over a thousand years, tell stories of devotion, artistry, and the passage of time. They serve as a reminder that the Hazara Division has been a crossroads of cultures and faiths for centuries.

In the present day, the Hazara region has taken on a new role as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The expansion and improvement of the Karakoram Highway, as a component of CPEC, has brought modernization and connectivity to these ancient lands. While some may view this as a dichotomy, it is a testament to the region's ability to evolve while preserving its historical roots. The Buddhist remnants in Hazara serve as a reminder that cultural heritage is a tapestry woven from threads of the past and the present. They inspire scholars, archaeologists, and travelers alike to explore the mysteries of our shared history. These remnants invite us to contemplate the impermanence of civilizations and the enduring impact of ideas.

In conclusion, the Buddhist remnants in the Hazara region are not relics of a bygone era but living testaments to the resilience of culture and the timeless pursuit of knowledge and spirituality. They connect us to a world that predates our own by centuries, providing a window into the hearts and minds of those who walked this land long ago. As we explore these remnants, we find ourselves not only enriched with historical knowledge but also with a

deeper appreciation for the cultural tapestry that weaves together the past, present, and future. The Hazara region stands as a beacon of heritage, inviting all who visit to tread lightly on its sacred ground and carry its stories forward.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was part of the NRP-funded project of HEC for the exploration of the Hazara Division under the supervision of the Department of Archaeology, Hazara University Mansehra, under the license of the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Peshawar. We gratefully acknowledge their support and encouragement.

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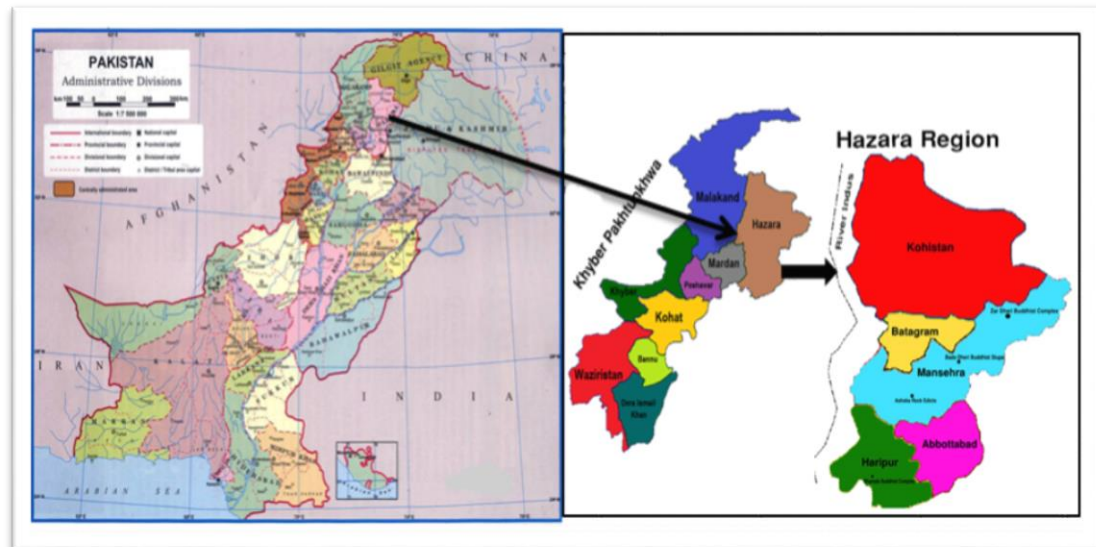


Figure 1: Geographical location of Hazara region

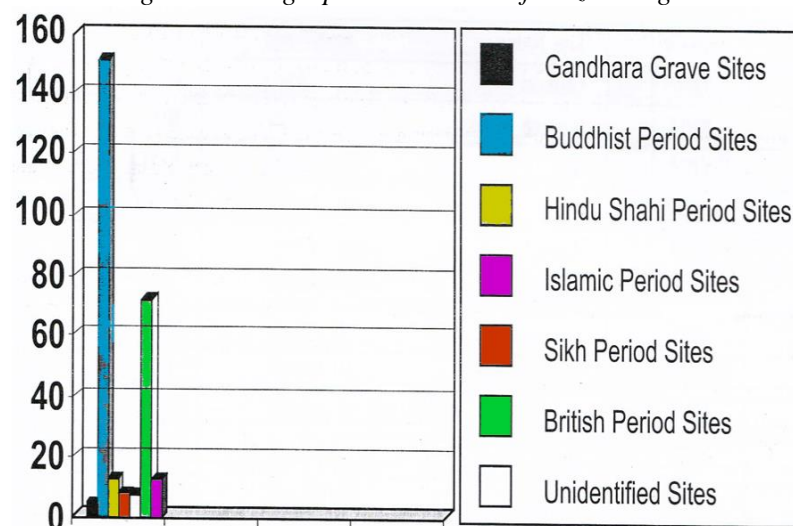


Figure 2 Multi-religious sites exposed during Archaeological Survey of District Abbottabad 2006-07

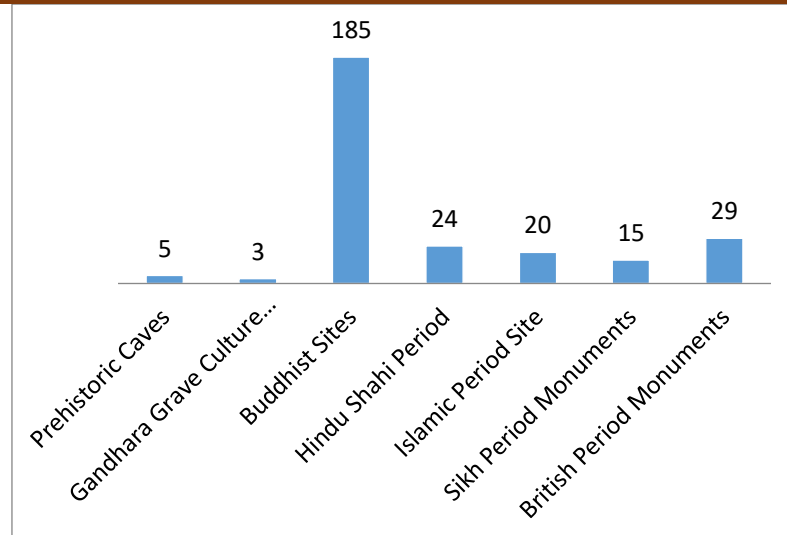


Figure 3 multi-religious sites reported during Archaeological Survey of Haripur 2007-08

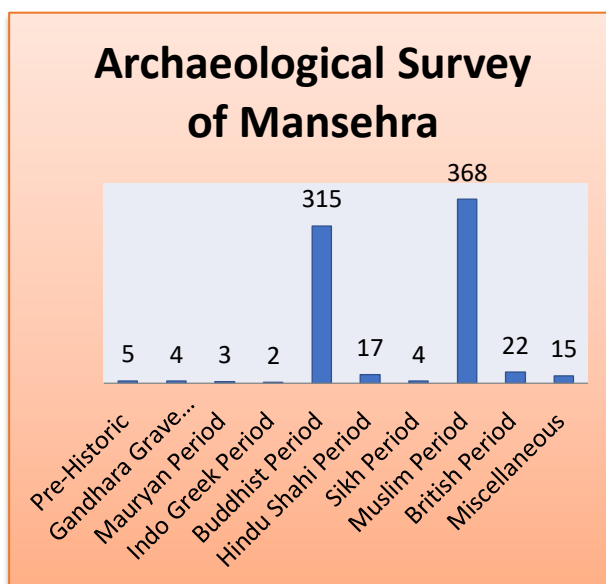


Figure 5 Discovery of Multi-religious sites from district Mansehra 2007-08, 2016-17



Figure 4 Chansoor Dheri-I: Urn burial



Figure 6 a) Arial View of Buddhist Complex Bhamala, b) Cross-Plan Stupa, c) Stucco Buddha image, d) largest Parinirvāṇa statue at Bhamala Haripur Hazara



Figure 7 a) Overview of Badalpur Monastery, b) row of chapels c) Main stupa d) Buddha in meditation pose



Figure 8 Buddhist complex at Jinan Wali Dheri



Figure 9 Buddhist Monastery at Jullian



Figure 10 Monastery at Piplan



Figure 11 Ashokan Rock Edicts at Mansehra



Figure 12 Buddhist Establishment at Zar Dheri

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