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# The History, Provenance, and Importance of BYU's Didymus Papyri

Dave Nielsen

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## Introduction

In 1984 BYU acquired its most prized manuscript holding, the 'Didymus Papyri.' This original acquisition consisted of a full quire or gathering of 10 papyrus bifolia (20 pages) from a cache of manuscripts re-discovered in an ancient stone quarry in 1941 outside of Cairo, Egypt. Regretfully, in the almost 25 years since BYU's acquiring these amazing texts, little to nothing has been done with them. They have not been published and so the world at large has not been able to benefit from the knowledge contained in them, not about their source, Didymus of Alexandria, nor Egyptian Christianity of the fourth century. Indeed, the scholarly world at large does not even know we have them.<sup>1</sup> In addition, hardly anything is known of how and why these texts were preserved, yet forgotten to history. This paper attempts to fill the latter lacuna, and will explain the reason why these texts came to rest where they have, thus allowing us to complete part of the puzzle of BYU's most little-known gem, the Didymus Papyri.

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<sup>1</sup> The Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB- <http://www.trismegistos.org/ldab/>) is the world's largest, most complete database of papyri and manuscripts from all over the world. Of the over 13,000 ancient Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Demotic literary texts, there is no mention there to BYU's owning the 22 total pages of the 2000 originally discovered in 1941.

## The History of the Didymus Papyri

The find of the Didymus papyri, as well as BYU's involvement with them, is truly amazing. In 1941 British and American soldiers were looking for a munitions bunker, and they found a perfect one in the ancient quarries at Tura, just south of Cairo. The Egyptian government and antiquities service having given permission, upon exploring the caves the soldiers found under centuries of dust and rubble stacks of codices bound at the spine. Those there made no effort to archaeologically document the find, and stole them in order to sell for a price on the lucrative antiquities market. Although the Egyptian government made a concerted effort to reclaim them, much of the find was smuggled out of the country.<sup>2</sup> As mentioned in the text, the cache of papyri found was voluminous, causing the first papyrologist to study them to explain it was the 'shock of my papyrological life' to work with them.<sup>3</sup> The 2,000 folia, of which only 1/3 have been recovered on the antiquities market, include scriptural commentaries on select books of the Bible (Genesis, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Psalms) by both Origen and Didymus. These papyri are fascinatingly unique because they are not from the pen of the scholar himself, but are in fact stenographic notes taken during some of the lectures of Didymus the Blind. Ergo, they provide us with an unprecedented glimpse into the world of Alexandrian scholasticism of the fourth century.

BYU's procurement of these valuable manuscripts is no less incredible. One of the

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<sup>2</sup> For details on the original find see Henri Munier, "Chronique." *Bulletin de la Societe d' Archeologique Copte* 7 (1941): 73-94; Octavius Gueraud, "Note preliminaire sur les papyrus d'Origene decouverts a Toura." *Revue de l'histoire des Religions* 131 (1946) : 85-108 ; Henri-Charles Puech, "Les nouveaux ecrits d'Origene et de Didyme decouverts a Toura." *Revue d'histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* (1951) : 293-329 ; Ludwig Koenen and W. Müller-Wiener, "Zu den Papyri aus dem Arsenios Kloster bei Tura." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 2 (1968) : 41-63.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Layton, *Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 2.

American engineers present, obtained the full quire (20 pages) and shipped them home to his brother-in-law, Frances B. Parnegian. In 1959 the texts were given to Mr. Parnegian, who put them in the back of a book and stored them in his attic. His widow later joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and found them cleaning the attic and didn't know what to do with them. Her helpful home teacher contacted BYU, whose Thomas Mackey, a professor of Classics, immediately recognized their importance and orchestrated their purchase from Mrs. Parnegian.<sup>4</sup> He also had BYU buy another 2 page folio, bringing the total acquisition to 22 pages.<sup>5</sup> The texts in special collections comprise the unpublished commentary on Psalms 27-30. Today, 50 pages reside in Cairo, 50 in Geneva, 14 in London, and 200 in Cologne. The fact that they “survived the tag of heresy, Islamic invasion, World War II, and 30 years in an attic” makes them that much more amazing!<sup>6</sup>

Any artifact studied without knowledge to its provenance loses the information inherently imbued in it. In order to understand the texts we need to understand the milieu from whence they came.

The man we know from these texts was one of the most famous figures who dominated fourth century Egyptian Christianity. Born c.313 A.D. (d. 398 A. D.), he was blinded as a result of illness around the age of four or five. He had a voracious appetite for learning and mastered all subjects available to him, including the scriptures, by having texts read to him. One of his students biographically wrote that though he could not see, he longed for “knowledge of the true

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<sup>4</sup> Brent Harker, “Didymus the Blind Sees the Light of Day,” *BYU Today*, vol. 39 no. 3 (June 1985): 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> This single page was obtained in Egypt by Major B. Austen. It was sold at Sotheby's in New York to H.P. Kraus in 1983, and later bought from Mr. Kraus by BYU. (See HBLL card catalogue entry for the Didymus Papyri, call no. 091 D56e.)

<sup>6</sup> Harker, “Didymus the Blind Sees the Light of Day,” 20.

light” and prayed “to receive illumination of heart.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed he was as one scholar described him a “walking, talking computer” whose mind made him the most sought after theologian of his day.<sup>8</sup> He was appointed head of the catechetical school in Alexandria by Athanasius, a post he held for 50+ years in one of the most important cities in the world.

As with all teachers, his legacy is further realized in the caliber and success of his students. Unequivocally Didymus was revered as the foremost scholar of his era in Alexandria; students from far and wide came to study with him.<sup>9</sup> Because of Didymus’ physical condition, he was unable to travel in search of work as most other philosophers and teachers did. This enabled him to hermetically study in the most learned city of the empire subjects ranging from Aristotelian philosophy to Biblical exegesis from the likes of Philo and Origen’s original texts. He portrayed himself and his students accepted his stature as an ascetic master before it came into style, as it were. His student Palladius writes that Didymus lived and studied in a secluded cell.<sup>10</sup> This seemingly unimportant detail subtly sheds light on the famous students, that they not only accepted this way of life but most likely participated in a similar form while studying under Didymus.<sup>11</sup> He taught that “life understood in its proper and true sense is this: to live according to philosophy and virtue.”<sup>12</sup> And like his teacher Origen, Didymus’ students ascribed to him a

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<sup>7</sup> Rufinus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Book 11.

<sup>8</sup> Harker, “Didymus the Blind Sees the Light of Day,” 19.

<sup>9</sup> Jerome, *Commentariorum in Osee prophetam*, prolegomena.

<sup>10</sup> Palladius, *Historia Lausica*, IV:3.

<sup>11</sup> P. Nautin in Angelo Di Berardino ed., *Dizionario Patristico e di Antichita Cristiane* (trans. A. Walford: Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co., 1992), 235.

<sup>12</sup> Layton, *Didymus*, 13.

divine spirit while they spoke of holy things, a type of transcendence only bestowed to the most divine of men.<sup>13</sup>

He taught the most influential fathers of the Church after him, including but not limited to Jerome, Palladius, and Rufinus. The latter records that a visiting saint told him “...not [to] be troubled by the deprivation of your physical eyes; rejoice that you have the eyes which angels have, by which God is seen, and through which a great light of knowledge is being lit in you.”<sup>14</sup> Didymus was also, as BYU’s Wilfred Griggs notes, “an avowed Origenist,”<sup>15</sup> and eventually this association with his former teacher Origen caused the Council of Constantinople in 553 to condemn his writings, but not his person.

A brief excursus on Origenism is warranted here for the reader. Herein the term is used to refer to his beliefs and teachings rejected by the consensus of the Church *after* his life. Such teachings include the pre-existence of souls, the three-tiered allegorical structure of holy writ, universal reconciliation, and the living nature of heavenly bodies and powers.<sup>16</sup> It should again be emphasized that there was no governing Church hierarchy during his life, and that only later did the ecumenical councils forbid his work and anathemize his name. Didymus was right in the middle of the fight between independent minds and the burgeoning bureaucracy of orthodoxy in the fourth century.

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<sup>13</sup> Rufinus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Book 11.

<sup>14</sup> Rufinus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Book 11.

<sup>15</sup> Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 C.E.* (New York: Brill, 1990), 153.

<sup>16</sup> See David Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1998), 486-491.

## The Provenance of the Didymus Papyri

The above historical introduction has served as background information so that the central questions of this paper can be answered. Namely, who were these monks who preserved the texts, and why did they preserve them? Both the monastery itself and the history of the early ascetic movement are the two primary foci that we will discuss as to why these texts came to rest where they did.

Tura, where the monastery was and where the manuscripts were found, has a rich and illustrious history. It was the stone quarry par excellence for ancient Egypt, producing the most white and pure stone. This monumental stone was used mostly for facing the tombs of the wealthy, regal, and noble from the Old Kingdom to the New.

Egypt officially became a Christian country in 391.<sup>17</sup> Its leaders, people like Origen, Athanasius, and Didymus, were heavily involved in the Christological controversies and debates of the fourth-century. Unable to reconcile with either the eastern or western Roman Catholic churches, and with the fiercely independent spirit of their ancestors, the Christians in Egypt broke away and quickly developed in many close but divergent ways, giving birth both to the Coptic and monastic movements.

The incredible intellect of Didymus, coupled with his progressive philosophy and near mythical status were the perfect building blocks for an ascetic image being built around him, and the monks in the desert, on recommendation of one Arsenius (discussed below), surely would not have had a problem accepting his work.

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<sup>17</sup> Christian Cannuyer, *Coptic Egypt: The Christians of the Nile* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000), 29.

Perched atop the mountain whose caverns yielded the limestone is the ancient monastery of Dair al-Qusair. Both the location and the history of the monastery are described in the medieval travel account of Abu Salih.<sup>18</sup> It is described as being incredibly beautiful and imposing, owning the most commanding view of the Nile valley below. It was also quite big and had upwards of 8 churches, dozens of living quarters (including many rock-hewn caves), and other buildings used for the daily activities of the residents. Salih reports that the complex's resources were enough to support upwards of 6,000 monks at its peak. Around the year 1010 the monastery was destroyed during the caliphate of al-Hakim, who later repented of the act and rebuilt the ancient complex.

The monastery was originally dedicated to the memory of St. Arsenius, a mogul of early Egyptian monasticism. Also known as Arsenius of Tura, he originally hailed from Rome and traveled the empire as a well-respected and sought after teacher. Dissatisfied with the pursuit of worldly goods, he came to join the monks in Egypt, first at Scetes, then at Tura after wandering for more than 15 years. His unique combination of high learning and ascetic devotion set the example for all monks after him to follow at Dair al-Qusair in Tura. We know that he was an admirer of Didymus, who himself was an early proponent of the ascetic life. Such a perspective, discussed above, is central to understanding both the monastic movement as well as the Arsenoite community that produced the papyri.

Because of its resources and prime location, the monastery was patronized by the Alexandrian bishopric as well as the Muslim Caliphate after the invasion of 641. Such

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<sup>18</sup> Abu Salih The Armenian, *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighboring Countries* (trans. B.T.A. Evetts; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895), 145-153. Salih says that the Roman emperor who Arsenius taught dedicated the site over the grave of his old sage. This can hardly be true since we know the latter outlived his pupil by at least 30 years. Multiple stories do corroborate the fact that Arsenius was certainly involved there.



benefaction from the outset brought a flow of funds as well as prestige that allowed the monastery the means to have a top-notch library. This evidence has led scholar Richard Layton to say that “the Arsenius cloister seems to be the only community in the area adjacent to the quarries with the resources necessary to produce, correct, [and] study... this vast corpus of texts.”<sup>19</sup>

To reiterate, both the philosophical/ theological tendencies as well as the location and resources of the monastery were essential ingredients that attracted the works of the Didymus the Blind to Tura. One of the most interesting things about all of the papyri, including those housed at BYU, is that they *all* contain palimpsest texts.<sup>20</sup> This means that at one time or another, there was a different text written on the papyrus sheets. Anciently, because of the cost and scarcity of papyrus, people would regularly recycle texts by scrubbing off the existing letters (made possible by the resilient nature of the papyrus plant) and writing something else. The magnitude of such a feat is brought into proportion when we consider that all 2000 folia were recycled. This fact in and of itself is revealing about the nature of this community. They not only revered the content and its source so much to copy the texts, but went to great lengths to make more papyri available, surely choosing between other texts that were not so fortunate, thus being lost to history. This is further underscored by the fact that many of the surviving pages are worn so thin that the copyists had to write around the holes in the plant fiber.<sup>21</sup> It is true, however, as Koenen points

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<sup>19</sup> Layton, *Didymus*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Gueraud, “Note preliminaire,” 89-90; Gerhard Binder et al., eds., *Ekklesiasteskommentar* (6 vols ; Bonn : Habelt, 1969-83) ; Koenen and Müller-Wiener, “Zu den Papyri,” 46-48.

<sup>21</sup> That all of the Didymus papyri, including BYU’s, are palimpsests is truly one of the most exciting frontiers that has yet be to explored with these texts. BYU has for over a decade been a pioneer in the study of ancient texts with the Multispectral-Imaging (MSI) technology developed here. Using MSI scholars are able to see through damage, such as carbon, plaster, etc. that cover the text, by imaging the text with wavelengths that the human eye

out, that there are signs of mutilation in the texts, evidencing their proposed fate before being hidden in the quarries by the monks.<sup>22</sup>

We can postulate several different theories as to why the texts were deposited in the quarry as they were, but of this we cannot be sure. Perhaps they were taken there to be hidden from the most resourceful reader. This is probably unlikely since the best way to destroy the texts would have been to burn them on site. The most plausible explanation is that one/some of the monks did not agree with the decision of the Church council and could not bear to see these beloved texts destroyed. Luckily for all of us, these monks had the foresight in the seventh century to save these writings, hidden from the world for 14 centuries.

### The Importance of the Didymus Papyri

This brings us to discuss the second illustrative point as to why the Didymus papyri resided where they did. When one thinks of cloistered monks living together, a heterogenous atmosphere of learning and free-thinking is hardly the impression that comes to mind. However, recently scholars have rewritten the early history of Egyptian monasticism, showing, at least at the outset, the monastic movement indeed was diverse in thought and practice, and only joined

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cannot see. The ink has different reflective characteristics than that of the material it is written on, and using digital technology, BYU scholars can separate the ancient text from its marred background, thus being able to read things lost to the accidents of history.

Concerning the use of MSI on the Didymus papyri, the Ancient Textual Imaging Group (ATIG) did the preliminary work of imaging the text in the summer of 2008. Currently (Oct. 2008) post-processing is being done that will enable ATIG scholars to read the palimpsest texts which lie under the commentary of Didymus that will shed more light on the monastic community that preserved the text.

<sup>22</sup> Koenen and Müller-Wiener, "Zu den Papyri," 45.

the orthodox *regula fidei* until sometime later.<sup>23</sup> Didymus, a man whose works were highly respected for ages, was a unique Christian in many ways. Bart Ehrman notes that Didymus “believed that the canon of the New Testament extended beyond the bounds advocated by the bishop.”<sup>24</sup> The bishop mentioned, Athanasius, wrote his famous 39<sup>th</sup> festal letter to once and for all close the discussion on what was and what was not scripture in 367. That Didymus, the man appointed by him to lead the catechetical school, and the two most famous Biblical codices ever produced, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus, disagree with the bishop, further attest to the fluidity and diversity of doctrine at the end of the fourth century in Egypt.<sup>25</sup>

Previously, the picture of early monasticism was painted by the laudatory biographies of the students of influential monks, sometimes decades and even centuries after their death. James Goehring has been most influential in challenging the received story against new evidence from literary and documentary papyri of the era.<sup>26</sup> He states that the new “wealth of evidence suggest[s] a diversity and complexity within the ascetic development hitherto unimagined.”<sup>27</sup> This therefore highlights the urban aspect of the movement and “indicates the diversity of ascetic

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<sup>23</sup> James Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (SAC 7; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Bart Ehrman, “The New Testament Canon of Didymus the Blind.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 37 (1983): 1-21.

<sup>25</sup> Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity*, 175. Both of these codices were produced in Alexandria during the fourth century, quite likely during the lifetime of Didymus. That such ‘non-canonical’ works were included in them is remarkable and telling of the state of belief more than 200 years after the time of Christ and the Apostles. There was no orthodoxy as we know it, though it would soon be imposed the empire over.

<sup>26</sup> James Goehring, “Monastic Diversity and Ideological Boundaries in Fourth-Century Christian Egypt.” *J ECS* 5.1 (1997): 61-84.

<sup>27</sup> Goehring, “Monastic Diversity,” 63.

paths available in early Christian Egypt and suggests that interaction across such paths was more common than previously thought.”<sup>28</sup>

It is well known that during the formative stages of the desert movement, monks with ‘heretical’ beliefs were able to remain hidden within monasteries professing orthodox belief. As many have pointed out, the Christian tie that bound the monks was not the orthodoxy known to us today but the learning and devotion that was the very nature of their ascetic lives. These men (and women) sought autonomy and freedom to commune with God; they did not, at least in the earliest years, conform always to the mandates of the bishops and councils. This is seen in the criticism of the literary sources that anachronistically impose the decrees of later centuries on the earlier history of the movement. Of the many that could be cited, only one will suffice to illustrate this point and its implications for our understanding of the era and group of monks that owned the used the Didymus papyri.

One thing that must be clear to the reader is that the theological climate after the end of the fourth century was avowedly anti-Origenist. In the later lives and teachings of the desert saints, the clear doctrinal statements are a blatant effort to stamp out bastions of Origenist belief. Indeed, as Rubenson controversially notes, these biographies were political as well as spiritual texts. In the case of the *Vita Antony*, its purpose was “neither to humanize a charismatic leader nor to ‘elevate’ a simple monk, but to use the influence of Antony to depict the victory of orthodoxy over pagans and heretics, the victory of the cross over demons, of gnosis by faith over gnosis by education, of the ‘man taught by God’ over the philosophers.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Goehring, “Monastic Diversity,” 63-64

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Rubenson, *Letters of Saint Antony* (SAC 5 ; Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 1990), 187.

The central conclusion that we need to take from this is that the monastic movement was not a streamline one at all. Though these later propagandistic biographies brought conformity and numbers to the monasteries, they do not reflect the true nature of the genesis of monastic thought and life. The defining character of these early years was diversity rather than conformity. Indeed, the history of Christianity in the third through fifth centuries is hardly to be seen as unified! Only through later councils and imperial decrees was the orthodoxy defined, as referenced in these later texts.

What we see through both the literary and historical analysis of both the Didymus and documentary papyri is that orthopraxy evolved into what it became. In fact, the monks relied on the ‘Origenist’ beliefs preserved by Didymus and others because they in fact inspired them to lead the lives they did. They were a primary factor and resource for the composition of the mosaic that was their theology. “As such, it embraced the use of ascetic texts of diverse theological persuasion precisely because of their ascetic orientation.”<sup>30</sup> This interpretation is perfectly at home with the monastery at Tura. They were a large community with resources and prestige, a microcosm of the diverse atmosphere of Alexandria and other cities from which its inhabitants came. Their approach was one of completeness, searching for truth and respectfully preserving it wherever it was found. They highly revered Didymus as both an ascetic forerunner as well as a learned theologian whose neo-platonic, allegorical interpretation of scripture was treasured. Thus they went to great lengths to preserve the papyri, even after the formal condemnation of the Council of Constantinople. Indeed, “there seems to be no reason, given the nature of the received tradition, to reject the gathering and use of such texts by elements within an ascetic community not yet defined in terms of the rigorous orthodoxy of the Alexandrian

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<sup>30</sup> Goehring, “Monastic Diversity,” 80.

episcopacy.”<sup>31</sup> These points show why the texts of Didymus were there in the first place, as well as why they survived for so long, for over half a century, after the council that condemned them.<sup>32</sup>

We too must be careful not to impose our ideas on them as the way things were. Surely not all monks would have accepted such texts, but the evidence strongly suggests that “the boundaries between ecclesiastically or doctrinally distinct individuals, groups, or literatures appear remarkably fluid.”<sup>33</sup> The Didymus papyri are therefore remarkably important to aid in the true reconstruction of the history of the era.<sup>34</sup> The monasteries in the desert like that at Tura were places where ideas and human interaction with them flourished. The BYU papyri are indicative of a larger Christian movement trying to define itself, both doctrinally and socially, as well as an ascetic movement that developed “on a case-by-case basis over time both historically and literarily.”<sup>35</sup>

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this find. Because of the councils of the Church, those works of Didymus that did survive were scrubbed clean of any Origenist content, reducing his literary output, which, because of the Tura papyri we know was voluminous, to

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Robert M. Grant, review of Louis Doutreleau, “*Origène: Homélie sur la Genèse*”; Pierre Nautrin, “*Origène : Homélie sur Jérémie*”; Pierre Husson, “*Didyme l'Aveugle : Sur la Genèse.*” *Church History* 46.3 (1977) : 392-393.

<sup>33</sup> Goehring, “Monastic Diversity,” 81.

<sup>34</sup> Layton writes that “Origen’s exegesis was, of course, the cornerstone upon which the school’s intellectual edifice was constructed. Origen’s importance to Didymus’ biblical scholarship should be seen in providing the lens that focused a diverse literary and oral tradition stretching back to Philo. Origen made the biblical narratives intelligible for Didymus...[for him] the rising controversy over Origen placed at stake not a specific theological system, but the intelligibility of the Bible. In the Alexandria of the era of Didymus, the Origenist controversy turned not on the aims and techniques of ascetic practice, but on defining the foundations of the Christian community as a whole.” (Layton, *Didymus*, 160-161.)

<sup>35</sup> Goehring, “Monastic Diversity,” 82.

mere scraps and quotations in contemporary writers. Were it not for the Tura papyri, our understanding of a crucial era of the development of early Christianity would be severely lacking.

The works of this blind Alexandrian have already been lost once to history in an underground cavern. May we not let them languish in special collections as they once did in the ancient quarries of Egypt! Hopefully the time will soon come that BYU's contribution to the reconstruction of this history will come via the publication of its vastly important yet little-known treasure, the Didymus papyri.

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