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TWO NEW MOSAIC INSCRIPTIONS
FROM THE MARTYRION OF THEODOROS AT HIPPOS ABOVE THE SEA OF GALILEE
AND A SUMMARY OF ALL SEVEN INSCRIPTIONS

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 230 (2024) 127–135

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TWO NEW MOSAIC INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE MARTYRION OF THEODOROS AT HIPPOS ABOVE THE SEA OF GALILEE AND A SUMMARY OF ALL SEVEN INSCRIPTIONS

This article publishes the last two inscriptions excavated in 2022 on the mosaic floor of the Martyrion of Theodoros (also known as the “Southwest Church” or the “Burnt Church”) at Hippos of the Decapolis,¹ a polis situated on a hill rising east of the Sea of Galilee.² These two Greek inscriptions join the five previously published,³ which are summarized with updated readings in the second part of the article, since the excavation of the church was completed in 2023 and no other inscriptions are to be found.

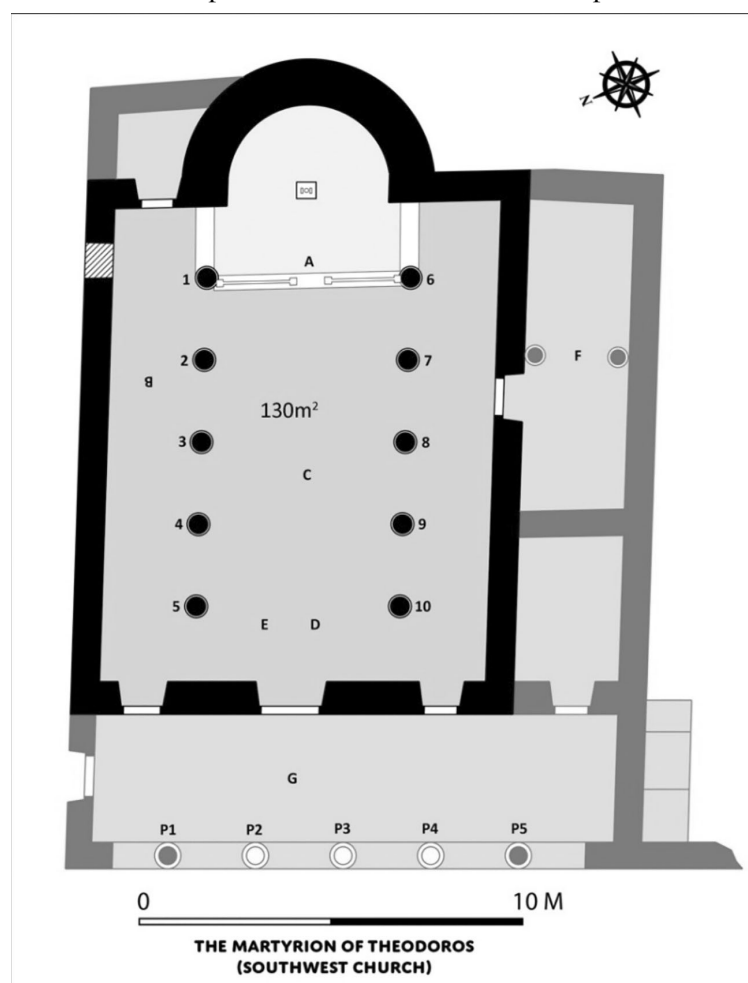


Fig. 1. A schematic plan of the Martyrion of Theodoros with the inscriptions (A–G) marked according to their spatial orientation (drawn by I. Nakas and M. Eisenberg)

¹ Excavations at Hippos are directed by Michael Eisenberg and Arleta Kowalewska on behalf of the Zinman Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa, Israel. The 2023 excavations, the last season at the church, were conducted under the Israel Antiquities Authority license G-10/2023 and Israel Nature and Parks Authority permit number A006–23 (Hippos [Sussita] is a national park). Conservation work was directed by Yana Qedem. After the season’s works, the mosaic floors were covered up to protect them.

² See the related media reports of Schuster 2022, Hahn 2022, Kaiser 2023.

³ Staab–Eisenberg 2020 nos. 1–3, now reedited as CIIP 6719–6721, and Staab–Kowalewska–Eisenberg 2022 nos. 4–5.

Inscription F – Offering of Urania and Theodoros

The inscribed medallion, flanked by two columns and facing east, is located in the middle of the mosaic floor of the eastern diakonikon room, annexed to the south of the basilica (Figs. 1–2). It is comprised of two concentric circles in black and grey tesserae, adorned around its inner circle by grey-brown and red crow-steps. The text is in red tesserae, while the lines above the letters marking the nomen sacrum K(YPI)E in l. 5 and the numbers in ll. 6–7 are in black and dark grey. For unknown reasons the omega and the OY-ligature in Θεοδώρου are also in black and seem to have been added after the inscription was finalized, lacking spaces between them and the other letters.⁴



Fig. 2. Inscription F (photo: M. Eisenberg)

- Z. 1 Προσφορ(ά)
 2 ὑπὲρ σωτηρί(ας)
 3 κ(αὶ) ἀντιλήψεως
 4 Οὐρανίας (καὶ) Θεοδώρου·
 5 Κ(ύρι)ε, πρόσδεξε, ἀμήν.
 6 χρ(όνων) ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) δ' ἔτ(ους)
 7 θιχ'

l. 5 read πρόσδεξαι

“Offering for the salvation and succour of Urania and Theodoros. Lord God, receive, Amen! In the times of indiction 4 and year 619.”

l. 1–5: It cannot be ruled out that the commissioners thought of a coherent syntactical structure, to formulate the prayer request Προσφορ(άν) ..., Κ(ύρι)ε, πρόσδεξαι (“Accept, o Lord, ... the offering!”). However, it seems more likely that the invocation Κ(ύρι)ε, πρόσδεξε, ἀμήν is added loosely after the mention of the

⁴ Whether this goes back to a correction of an initially misspelled ΘΕΟΔΩΡΟ can only be speculated.

nominative προσφορά. See for Hippos CIIP 6713 πρωσφορά ... ἅγιε Κωσμά Ι (καὶ) Δαμηνέ, πρ(όσ)δεξε, ἀμήν, Κύριε.

2/3: The collocation ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας καὶ ἀντιλήψεως is common in this context; see e.g. CIIP 2432 (Tell Shekef, 6th cent. AD), 2854 (Choziba), 3291 (Kh. el-Makhrum), 6007 (Kh. Karkara), 7598 (Beth Shean). The expression derives from the appellation to God as “saviour and helper” (καὶ γὰρ αὐτὸς θεός μου καὶ σωτήρ μου ἀντιλήπτωρ μου) in the Psalms (Ps 61, 3.7; Ps 88, 27; cf. PsSal 16, 4 ὁ σωτήρ καὶ ἀντιλήπτωρ μου).

4: Οὐρανίας (καὶ) Θεοδόρου: for the abbreviation mark S = καὶ see e.g. Hippos CIIP 6713 (baptistry); Hammat Gader, no. 10 (Di Segni 1997, 197f. = CIIP 7421). It also appears in non-literary papyri (Kenyon 1899, 153; Bilabel 1923, 2302) and on Byzantine seals.

The woman is mentioned first, and we may suspect that she is Theodoros’ wife. The exquisite name Urania is also encountered in the neighborhood of Hippos in the context of a high-ranking family: At Hammat Gader, one of the many inscriptions of the bathhouse (CIIP 7383) records the visit of a Praefectianus (ἐπαρχικός) named Boethos with his wife Synkletia, his son Iobios (written Ἰώβιο(ς)), and his granddaughter Urania. For Iobios cf. the following inscription G, l. 6 with note.

6f.: χρ(όνων) ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) δ’ ἔ(τους) θιγ’: The 4th indiction starting on 1 September 555 AD overlaps with the year 619 of the Pompeian Era autumn of 64 BC (autumn 555 AD – autumn 556 AD). That the time calculation at Hippos is based on the Pompeian Era has so far been indirectly attested by an inscription from Khisfin/Haspin (Meimaris 1992, 75; Gregg–Urman 1996, 83f. no. 83 = SEG 26, 1676; cf. 46, 1951; Stein 1990, 28–30) located within the territory of Hippos (Pažout–Eisenberg 2021).⁵ The inscriptions from Hippos itself dated by year and indiction are fragmentary in this respect,⁶ and a coin type adduced by Seyrig as a proof of the Pompeian Era commencing in autumn 64 BC actually shows a year number different from that which he asserted.⁷

Thus, for the first time, an inscription from Hippos itself proves that the city used the Pompeian Era, starting in the autumn of 64 BC. The 4th indiction (in any case starting on September 1) correlates with year 619 of the Pompeian Era that starts in autumn 64 BC, which means that the inscription can be dated to October 555 – August 556 AD.

Inscription G – Offering of the Bishop Megas for his brothers

The inscribed medallion in the eastern portico before the entrance to the church,⁸ in front of the main portal to the basilica, is set inside a double-framed square filled with a composite guilloche in red, black and white color tesserae. The medallion includes two double concentric circles, the space between which is filled with a simple continuous meander in red tesserae (Figs. 1, 3).

⁵ The mosaic inscription in the photisterion of the nearby monastery at Kursi within the territory of Hippos (Pažout–Eisenberg 2021) is dated by imperial consulship to December 585 AD (Meimaris 1992, 348 n. 28, cf. 343; Blomme 1980, 403; Ovadiah 2007, 470–471). At Kerak (Beth Yerah) on the southwestern shores of the Sea of Galilee, most probably part of the Hippos territory, a donor’s mosaic inscription in the church (CIIP 6915) can be dated according to the Pompeian Era to a narrow timespan between 1 September 528 AD (start of indiction 7, as indicated in the inscription) and the end of the Pompeian year 591 a few weeks later in the autumn of the year 528 AD.

⁶ Cf. CIIP IV 1, no. 6711 (baptistry/photisterion of the Hippos Cathedral) with year 654, missing the indiction number, dated 591 AD; CIIP IV 1, no. 6712 (ibid.), where the indiction Θ given in the editions is not verifiable as it is broken and fully missing from the inscription; cf. Epstein–Tzaferis 1991, 92 and Eck 2019, 153 n. 14.

⁷ Seyrig 1959 read the number 285 (ΕΙΙΣ) on a single worn coin (pl. XIII no. 21) issued by Elagabalus. His coins cannot have been emitted later than spring 222 AD, since Elagabalus was killed on 11 or 12 March of this year and then punished with *damnatio memoriae*. With regard to a dating to the year 285 of the Pompeian Era, the beginning of that era in Hippos would then inevitably have to be set in 64 BC (cf. Meimaris 1992, 75). However, this conclusion is based on an incorrect reading of the number, which is in fact ΒΙΙΣ (= 282), as other specimens of the same coin type show; cf. Spijkerman 1978, 178f. no. 35, plate 38; RPC online <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/6/9224> [temporary].

⁸ We use the term “portico” instead of “narthex” because the space was not closed. Nevertheless, this space was most probably used as a narthex, at least from the last renovation phase (555–556 AD). The excavations showed no other remains of porticos on the northern or southern edge of the courtyard before the church.



Fig. 3. Inscription G (photo: M. Eisenberg)

- 1 Προσφορά
- 2 Μεγάλου
- 3 ἁγιωτά(του) ἐπισκόπ(ου)
- 4 ὑπὲρ ἀναπ[αύ-]
- 5 [σεω]ς Εὐσεβίου
- 6 καὶ Ἰοβίου ἀδελ-
- 7 φ[ῶν] ἑ[τέρου]ς καὶ
- 8 [ἰνδικτιῶνος] δ'

“Offering of Megas, the most holy bishop, for the peaceful repose of Eusebios and Iobios, (his) brothers, in the year 620, indiction 4.”

l. 1–5: Προσφορά ... ὑπὲρ ἀναπαύσεως: The formula is widely used; for Hippos see CIIP 6716 (North-west Church), προσφορά ἢ ὑπὲρ ἀναπαύσεως Ἀλντων(ί)ας διακονίσης.

2f.: This is probably the same Megas mentioned in the medallion mosaic in the center of the basilica nave (Inscription C, below). In any case, the bishop had no reservations about personally presenting his two brothers in a prominent position in the vestibule by making a donation. Obviously, it was not considered inappropriate for an official to show such favor to his own family in a public church space.

This is in some way analogous to the city’s Cathedral, where the main priest Procopius (CIIP 6709) donated a mosaic in the photisterion for the benefit of his family members (CIIP 6712; for 6711 see Eck 2019, 153).

5f.: In the fragmentary inscription E (below), speculatively supplemented, perhaps two individuals named Eusebios and Megas also appear. They may be the beneficiaries of a mosaic foundation whose donor is not clear. It would, of course, be pure speculation to see in these uncertain persons the bishop and one of his brothers, all the more so as the name Eusebios is very common.

6: Another Ἰώβιος appears with a Δουσάριος as sponsor or executor in two inscriptions from Bostra (IGLS XII 1, 9129 and 9133; cf. C. Roueché, ZPE 105, 1995, 45f.).

In the above-mentioned (to inscription F, l. 4) commemorial inscription from Hammat Gader (CIIP 7383), the name, written Ἰώβιος(ς), occurs among Greek names (Boethos, Synkletia, Urania) of members of a high-standing family of a Praefectianus.

7f.: Given that indiction 4 covers the time span from September 555 – August 556 AD and that the year 620 according to the Pompeian Era in Hippos encompasses 556–557 AD, as proven by inscription F above (see to l. 6f.), this dating could be correct only if the beginning of the Pompeian Year fell in a month before 1 September 556 AD, which is the first day of indiction 5.

Theoretically, there are two possible ways to solve this discrepancy: Either the mosaicist committed an error, or we must assume against the evidence and the communis opinio that the Pompeian Year at Hippos started before September. Although we find the Roman months at Hippos (CIIP 6711, 6712), this does not necessarily imply that the year began with January, which is a much later development. And in the above-mentioned inscription from Khisfin dating, most probably following the Hippos chronology, to the year 667 (= 603/604 AD) in the indiction 7 (September 603 – August 604) and to July, we see that the later year 667 must at least still match with July 604 and thus cannot have begun before this month (in 603 AD). This would leave only August for the beginning of the year, but there is no reasonable argument for assuming such an exception, since the parallels show that the Pompeian Eras usually go with the Macedonian Calendar starting in autumn or October (Meimaris 1992, 394 table IV).

Thus, we suggest that the mosaicist or his commissioners made a mistake by setting the Δ (= 4) instead of the correct Ε (= 5), a fault which could easily happen shortly after the change of indiction, that is, in September/October 556 AD. A similar error appears on a stele from Shivta in the Negev (Negev 1981, 53–54, no. 54), where in 608 AD the eleventh indiction instead of the twelfth was inscribed at the beginning of the new indiction period (23 Gorpaios = 10 September).⁹

We may assume that the entire mosaic furnishing of the church was executed in a limited period of time, the end of which can now be defined by the dating of the portico inscription, which was probably the last to be completed.

In total, for the last renovation phase of the church, which included the laying down of all the mosaic carpets, the portico mosaic now gives a terminus ante quem, according to which its end can be dated to October 556 AD.

An updated reading of the five previously published inscriptions (Figs. 1, 4)

Inscription A (Fig. 4) – Offering of the priest Simonios (Staab–Eisenberg 2020, 204f. = CIIP 6721)

The inscription was inserted after the bema mosaic was already completed, in front of the main entrance from the nave to the bema (chancel).

Προσφορὰ Ἰ Σιμωνίου πλεσβίτερος

“Offering of the priest Simonios.”

Inscription B (Fig. 4) – Foundation inscription of Theodoros and Petros (Staab–Eisenberg 2020, 2005–208 = CIIP 6720)

An inscription within a tabula ansata in the eastern part of the northern aisle, the only one facing west instead of east.

⁹ Cfr. Meimaris 1992, no. 458, who comments: “The mistake ... is probably due to the engraver’s failure to observe that a new indiction began just nine days before the date of the inscription.” Meimaris compares the analogous examples no. 450 (Nessana, 18 September 605 AD: indiction 8 instead of 9) and no. 489 (Nessana, 7 October 630 AD, indiction 3 instead of 4). – Meimaris 1992, no. 238 from Shivta could be a parallel in this respect, perhaps the 13th indiction (ⲘⲓⲦ, wrongly inscribed or recorded) instead of the 14th (Ⲙⲁ), on 30 September 505 AD.



A.



B.



C.



E.

D.



F.



G.

Fig. 4. The mosaic inscriptions in the church: A. the bema; B. the northern aisle; C. center of the nave; D. western part of the nave; E. western part of the nave; F. eastern diakonikon; G. portico (photo: M. Eisenberg)

Ἀβ(β)ᾶς Θεόδωρος καὶ Ὀβ(β)ᾶς Πέτρος, ὅτι α(ὐ)τὸ ἐκτείσαν τὰ δύο | μετρίδια τοῦ
μπαρτύριον τοῦτο.

“Father Theodoros and father Petros (sc. are remembered here), because they themselves founded the two μετρίδια (?) of this sanctuary.”

1. 5 μετρίδια: In a response to the first edition, Catherine Saliou (2020) understands the term μετρίδιον as “travée de charpente”, referring to the inscriptional evidence from Syria where the word μήτρα/μέτρα is used twice in an architectural context: A building inscription from Palmyra dating to 328 AD commemorates a portico “of eight μήτραι” (IGLS XVII, 1, 101 τὴν πᾶσαν στέγην μήτρων ἡ’ | τῆσδε τῆς στοᾶς), which in her view have to be interpreted as the interspaces between the columns or more precisely the wooden frameworks of the roof covering those spaces. In another inscription from Antiocheia Pieria “64 μέτραι” (IGLS III, 2, 1142, l. 7–8: καὶ ἠλλάγησαν [stone E, “were exchanged”] μέτραι | ξδ’) would pertain to the wooden building parts, which cover the spaces between the piers of a bridge over one of the tributaries of the Orontes.¹⁰ According to Saliou, the μετρίδια of the church in Hippos are simply a diminutive form of μήτρα/μέτρα in Syria without any difference in sense. Against that background they would signify either the framework covering two single intercolumnia or much more likely, in a wider interpretation favored by Saliou, the roof trusses of the two basilica aisles. Such a suggestion would be problematic as the aisles do not carry a separate truss or roof but rather a wooden entablature (architraves). The truss would cover the entire space including the nave.¹¹

With regard to the diminutive form, however, even this interpretation of the two μετρίδια can only be given with reservations. It cannot be ruled out that they refer to some other small wooden work in the eastern part of the church.

In any case, the architectural term μητρ-/μετρ- (perhaps both misspelled from μίτρ-) seems to be based on the idea of a building element connecting two parts or covering a space, either resulting from the word ἡ μίτρα (“bond”; cf. LSJ s.v., Lampe s.v. 4) or from ἡ μήτρα (“bolts for locks”; LSJ s.v. IV).¹²

Inscription C (Fig. 4) – The main inscription within a medallion in the center of the nave (Staab–Eisenberg 2020, 208–213 = CIIP 6719)

Ἐπὶ τοῦ | [ὁ]γ(ίου) κ(αὶ) μακαριστ(άτου) | ἡμῶν πατρ(ός) κ[αὶ] | ἐπισκ(όπου) Μεγά[λ]ο[υ] |
ἐγένετο τὸ πᾶ[ν] | ἔργον τῆς ψηφώσεως τοῦ ἁγ(ίου) | μαρτυρ(ίου) Θεοδώρου.

“Under our holy and truly blessed father and bishop Megas, the entire work of the mosaic in the holy martyrion of Theodoros was executed.”

Inscription D (Fig. 4) – Offering of the priest Simeonios (Staab–Kowalewska–Eisenberg 2022, 133–135; correction Staab 2022)

The southern of two inscriptions in the western part of the nave within a tabula ansata, 1.7 m from the main portal.

¹⁰ Cf. Seyrig 1939, 309–312, who already understood the word as “yoke” (“travée”).

¹¹ The Martyrion of Theodoros was a basilical church, typical of the architecture of Byzantine Palestine, i.e. a double-truss timber gabled roof covered by terracotta roof tiles, supported by the walls and two rows of columns. The basilica was ca. 9.3 m tall if the roof’s ridge was at a 25° pitch, while the columns were ca. 4 m tall. The double-truss is based on a tie-beam and a king-post which are more than sufficient for the short 5.3 m span between the basilica colonnades. Hundreds of roof tiles and iron nails, as well as some windowpanes, were found in the debris of the church.

¹² Cf. Staab–Eisenberg 2020, 207f.; it cannot be excluded that what is registered under IV in the LSJ is simply a spelling variant of the former ἡ μίτρα.

Προσφορὰ τοῦ πρεσβυτέρου Σιμεονίου χρυσοῦχοῦ ΚΟΣΤΟΥΤΟΣ φυλλάξ(ε)ι αὐτῶν κ(αὶ) ἰ
 vv τὰ τέκνα αὐτοῦ ἰ καὶ τὴν ἐλευθέρα(ν) τῆς.

l. 6 Mosaic ΣΟΥ, του = αὐτοῦ

“Offering of the priest Symeonios, goldsmith, custodian (?). He (sc. the Lord God) will protect him and his children and his wife.”

Inscription E (Fig. 4) – Fragmentary, remembrance of the priest Elias, Megas and Eusebios (Staab–Kowalewska–Eisenberg 2022, 135–137)

The northern of two inscriptions in the western part of the nave within a tabula ansata, 1.7 m from the main portal.

Υ[ca. 6 l.]ΙΙΣΚΑΙΑΝ΄
 [ca. 6 l.]ΣΒΑΙΛΙΟΥ ἰ
 ΑΔΔΜ[.]ΙΜΕΓΑΚΑ ἰ
 ΙΕ[. . .]ΒΙΟΥ

Speculative edition

- 1 Ύ[πὲρ μνήμ]ης καὶ ἀν΄-
- 2 [απ(αύσεως) πρε]σβ(υτέρου) Αἰλίου
- 3 ὁδ(ελφοῦ) μ(ου) [κα]ὶ Μεγά(λου) κα-
- 4 ἰ Ε[ὐσε]βίου

“For the [remembrance (or peace, [εἰρήν]ης)] and repose of the priest Elias, [my brother, and] of Megas and of Eusebios.”

For a similar formula with family relationships after the personal names, compare the inscription from Khisfin (Haspin) quoted above (to inscription F l. 6f.) with respect to the era dating system of Hippos (l. 1–3): Κ(αὶ) ὑπὲρ μνήμης καὶ ἀναπα[ύσε]ως ἰ Οὐάρου πατρ(ὸς) κ(αὶ) Βασι[λί]ο[υ] κ(αὶ) Εὐγενίου ἀδελφῶν καὶ ἰ [Οὐ]άρου υἱοῦ.

Summary

The Martyrion of Theodoros is to date the smallest and the simplest among the five fully or partly exposed churches at Hippos. It was part of the southwestern neighborhood at Hippos, located some 190 m west of the city’s forum. Its conflagration and subsequent destruction, with the debris undisturbed until modern times, has preserved its mosaics better than in any other of the Hippos churches.

Based on the archaeological data from the completed church excavations, five phases can be distinguished:

Phase I – Construction ca. mid-5th century AD

Phase II – Renovation and lifting of floors in the late 5th/early 6th century AD

Phase III (a–b) – Last major renovation which included lifting of floors and paving of the above-mentioned mosaic floors in 556 AD

Phase IV – The last phase of use of the church and its destruction in the early 7th century AD.

All the archaeological and historical data point towards a destruction during the Sassanid (Persian) invasion of 614 AD. It is the only church in Hippos whose use does not extend until the Early Islamic period.

The large number of inscriptions in Greek in this small church – seven in total – is something special. They were all executed in the last rebuilding phase and allow for a close chronological sequence between the execution of the mosaics in the southern side areas (F) and in the entrance hall (G) of the basilica, as well as to date the end of the last phase of renovation in autumn 556 AD. With regard to the lunate forms of e.g. sigma and epsilon, the mosaics C, F and G belong together, while inscriptions A, B, E, and D have angular forms (Fig. 4). From the last group, the less elaborate inscriptions, A was obviously inserted lat-

er into the already existing floor, while for E and D the same cannot be completely ruled out, since they also do not fit harmoniously into the original picture-pattern-concept of the mosaic in the nave and differ strongly from the central medallion; the insertion could have happened even after autumn 556 AD, when the entire floor covering was presumably completed.

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