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REPRESENTATION OF MEDUSA ON A MOSAIC FLOOR IN MEDIANA*

Abstract:

A number of representative rooms decorated by mosaic floors from the period around the 4th century were examined during the archaeological research of the villa with peristyle in the middle of the late antiquity settlement in Mediana near Naissus. In 1969, a part of the damaged mosaic floor with geometrical motifs and a central round emblem including a representation of Medusa-Gorgon with wings was discovered in the central room of the villa, that is, in a large triclinium-aula. Medusa is represented in the manner of late antiquity, as a woman with a pensive expression who has lost many of the attributes characteristic of such representations in Greek and Hellenistic art. The aim of this paper is not only to provide analyses of the visual artistic aspect of the presentation, but also to attempt a reconstruction of the mosaic carpet in the room on the basis of various site data, which are now available to researchers.

Key words:

Medusa, Gorgon, mosaic floor, triclinium-aula, villa with peristyle, Mediana, late antiquity, 4th century.

It has been more than eight decades since the first spades removed the turf of the fertile humus of the Nišava valley from the remains of buildings of the late antiquity settlement in Mediana (Brzi Brod) (Fig. 1). The settlement, with an organized urban scheme and surfaces divided into lots, built along the *via publica*, was situated at about three Roman miles to the southeast of Naissus, on the road to Serdica (today Sofia)^[1]. The research also allowed determining a basic chronology of the development of the settlement, including a time range from the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th century to the Hunnic invasions in 441^[2].

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[1] According to the estimations of researchers, the late antiquity settlement occupied a surface of about 80 hectares, with over 20 partly explored buildings and the same number of structures detected by geomagnetic surveys (Comp. Milošević et al. 2011, 277, fig. 2).

[2] The stratigraphy of Mediana has not yet been precisely determined. M. Vasić dated the first phase of construction in the period after Constantine's conquest of Illyricum in 317 – probably in 319, until 330 (Vasić 2005, 168). Around the year 330 most of the buildings of Mediana were probably destroyed or levelled and the horreum, military barracks and villa with peristyle may have been built at that time. That phase ends with the destruction of building during Gothic attacks in 378. A smaller settlement with a necropolis and two churches also existed between the Gothic and Hunnic devastations (378/380–441) (Vasić 2005, 168–169; 2007, 97–98). The author gives a slightly different interpretation in a study from 2013, when he relies on previous researchers (Петровић 1994, 22), who dated the beginning of construction works in Mediana to the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th century (Vasić 2013, 99).



Figure 1 – Mediana, Aerial photograph.
Central part of the settlement, view from the south (after: Милошевић 2013, сл. 51)

The research recorded that six buildings, five of which have a residential character and one which is an early Christian church, had floors decorated by mosaics (Јерemiћ 2006, 145-157; 2010, 98-99). The largest surface under the mosaics was found in the villa with peristyle (Милошевић 2013, 121-124), where mosaics decorated corridors around the peristyle court, two smaller tricliniums-stibadiums with indented ground plans, a large room in the north part of the complex (*triclinium/ aula*) and a corridor which connected the villa with the *thermae* (Fig. 2). Figural mosaics were found exclusively in the *aula* and part of the porch in front of its entrance. A rectangular panel with a representation of a river god (*fluvius*) stood in front of the entrance – probably a personification of the river Eurotas, who – in the scene reconstructed on the basis of rare parameters – is watching a love scene between the Spartan queen Leda and Zeus transformed into swan (Trovabene 2005, 123; Јерemiћ 2010, 203-204).

The central room (Fig. 2, 2), placed lengthwise in a north-south axis, with a rectangular ground plan (19,6 x 12 m) and semi-circular apse on the north end (depth 5,2 m), had a floor that supported hypocaust pillars and supporting walls. The room was used as a large *triclinium* (Vasić 2006, 69) that is to say, a multi-use room, which was also used for ceremonial receptions (*aula*) (Динчев 2002, 206; 2006, 9; Милошевић 2013). The site was studied from 1969-1971, after which the remains of mosaic

floors were conserved and left *in situ*^[3]. Mosaics covered the entire surface of the room, however, they have only been partially preserved (Fig. 3). The best-preserved parts are in the southern part of the room where the figural representation, the subject of this paper, was discovered (Zotović, Petrović 1969, 185). There were three mosaic carpets in this part of the room, two rectangular and one square, with a figural representation inside a medallion (Fig. 4). The square carpet was placed symmetrically in relation to the entrance of the room. The composition of the two rectangular, lateral carpets (the widths of the carpets including the borders is 2.4 m), consisted of hexagons touching each other, with lozenges covering the interspace (*Répertoire graphique I*, 1973, no. 417). Each of the hexagons bore a circle with a cross-shaped flower (*Répertoire graphique I*, 1973, no. 107). The mosaics were made of blue, white, dark red and red tesserae.

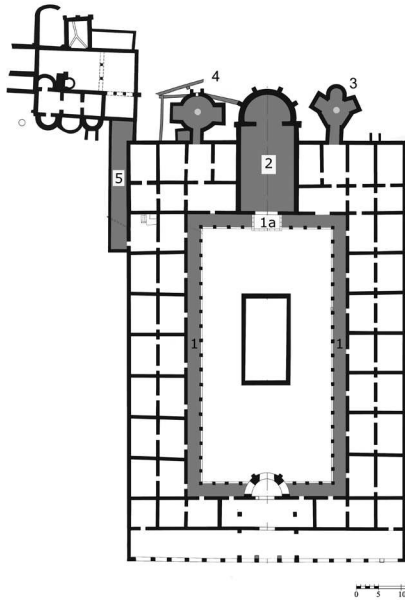


Figure 2 – Mediana, villa with peristyle, surface under the mosaic 1. corridors; 1a. podium; 2. aula; 3. eastern *triclinium*; 4. western *triclinium*; 5. corridor which connected the villa with the *thermae* (after: Милошевић 2013, сл. 53)

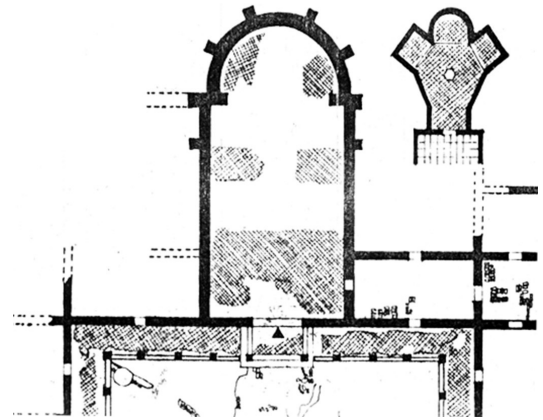


Figure 3 – Villa with peristyle, aula, mosaic floors (drawing: G. Jeremić)



Figure 4 – Southern part of the aula, detail, view from the south (photo: G. Milošević, Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

[3] Conservation of the mosaics was conducted by Milorad Medić of the National Museum of Belgrade

The entrance axel was covered by a square carpet (5,5 x 5,5 m), surrounded by meanders in perspective. In the middle of the carpet there was an octagon, 2.8 m in diameter. The octagon was surrounded by squares, triangles and lozenges, filled in with various motifs, among which lozenges distinguished themselves by their representations: in each of the southwest and northeast lozenges there is a stylized bird, probably a pigeon (*Répertoire graphique* I, 1973, no. 62)^[4], while the southeast and northwest lozenges contain a fish laid on an oval plate.

The motif of an octagon with a star made of squares and lozenges, represented in this room of the villa, was one of the favourite motifs during the 4th and 5th century, both in secular and sacral buildings. Such compositions can be seen in the early 4th century in the palace I (hall A) in Gamzigrad (*Romuliana*) and in the palace of Galerius in Thessaloniki, but they are also represented in a number of buildings in Antioch, dating from the time of the Severan dynasty to the late 5th century (Јеремих 2010, 106-108).

Inside the octagon there was a round medallion, 0.8 m in diameter, surrounded by four lozenges with inscribed circles. Inside the round medallion–emblem, there was a representation of the head of Medusa with wings (Fig. 5, 6). The representation stood in the axel of the entrance and faced spectators entering the room. At the moment of discovery, it was partly damaged in the area of the left cheek and eye. The face is slightly turned towards the left from the point of view of the spectator. Medusa is presented with a round face, ample cheeks and very slightly indicated chin. The mouth is small and round, the nose regular, the eyes dark brown and large, with an emphasized region below the eyes. The forehead is wide, with a pronounced horizontal wrinkle, which gives a pensive and preoccupied expression to the face. The hair is dark and curly and contains two curls in the form of snakes which frame the face and fall down to her shoulders. There is a pair of outspread wings made of grey tesserae. The face was made of whitish, light rose, light yellow and light grey tesserae. The face, hair and wings are framed on the outside by tesserae of dark yellow stone. The rest of the round medallion is filled in with tesserae made of white marble placed to form a circle, while the edge of the medallion is made of dark yellow tesserae, the same as those used for the face, but larger.



Figure 5 – Aula, detail of medallion with a representation of Medusa (Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)



Figure 6 – Medusa, detail (Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

[4] The motif was created with stylization, that is to say, by adding the elements of the beak, eye and queue, to the well-known ornament of node with three windings and a middle eye where the middle node represents the body of a bird (Cf. Јеремих 2010, 104).

So far, the representation of Medusa-Gorgon on the mosaic from Mediana is the only finding in mosaic art presenting this mythological figure in the Central Balkan region. Medusa (Μέδουσα), one of the three Gorgons (Γοργώ, Γοργών, Γοργάς, Γοργόνη, Γοργόνες, from γοργός meaning dreadful, the one who frightens), is a demonical woman of terrifying appearance, who is mortal unlike her two sisters, Stheno (Σθενώ, Σθένουσα) and Euryale (Ευρύαλη) (Dahlinger 1988, 285). According to the myth, Medusa, whose look would turn to stone anyone who gazed at her, was killed by Perseus who beheaded her and made Chrysaor and Pegasus spring from her body, since she was pregnant by Poseidon. Perseus, after having turned his adversaries to stone, offered the head of Medusa – Gorgoneion – to his protector Athena, who placed the Gorgoneion on her shield. In the myth, Medusa was associated with Asclepius who knew about the healing powers of her blood (Dahlinger 1988, 286), as well as with Libya which was considered to be the home of snakes (Dahlinger 1988, 286). Lucanus (*Lucanus* IX, lines 625-653), in the myth of Perseus and his decapitation of Gorgon, notes that the snakes of Libya were created from her blood which fell on the earth.

It has not yet been precisely determined when snakes and wings appear in artistic representations of Medusa, but they were certainly widespread by the 3rd century BC, which was recorded on coins of Seleucus I (Krauskopf 1988, 328). At the beginning, Medusa's head was represented in three-quarter profile, often looking upwards. In Hellenistic times she had a decorative role in profane architecture, while on tombstones and sacral monuments she represented the "the one who is watching" (Krauskopf 1988, 329) which is perhaps best illustrated by the inscription on the Serapeon's treasury on Delos (the end of the 3rd – beginning of the 2nd century BC): "Visitor, do not be afraid to see me, when standing in front of me, Gorgon. Night and day, I am sleeplessly watching the sacrificial room, belonging to the God. Throw it joyfully, as much as you wish, through my mouth, into my spacious belly" (Dahlinger 1988, 287).

The symbolic meaning and origin of Gorgon and Gorgoneion have been discussed by scholars for many years. The reasons for her appearance used to be connected with overcoming the fear of animals (especially lions) or natural disasters (storms, volcanos, caprices of the deserts, stormy clouds) (Howe 1954, 209-210). A general conclusion is that the meaning of Gorgoneion is universal in many cultures and that it primarily concerns humans' subconscious fear. The mask containing a mixture of human and animal features is found in many primitive cultures (Howe 1954, 209). Masks are worn and represented in order to express fear, but also a wish to overcome that fear. According to these theories, Gorgoneion would represent the sign of any outside aggression to which men react subconsciously and the first step in overcoming the fear when facing such aggression (Howe 1954, 212, 214).

In the myth of Perseus and Gorgon, it has been noted that the hero used the severed head to fight against malicious persons who had hurt his beloved mother Danae (Polydectes) and Andromeda (Phineus), as well as against the lustful companions of Dionysus – satyrs. In a symbolic sense, the aim of the Gorgon's petrifying look is to kill lustful, animal instincts, which is supported by the fact that the look of Gorgon did not have any effect on women (Howe 1954, 220-221)^[5]. In urban societies, the original fear of animals was transformed into a much more intimate fear, materialized in the appearance of Gorgon, who made men as cold as stone and, therefore, restrained their male instincts.

[5] Medusa's petrifying look also found its place in satirical Roman prose with Athenaeus, who uses this symbolism to describe a visit to the fish market: "... in Rome, fishmongers ... sell skinny fish at high prices... I thought that Gorgons were only a fantasy, but every time I go to the market, I start to believe in them more and more; one quick view of the fishmonger is enough to turn me to stone ... I can talk to him only if my face is turned on the side because, when I see him selling miniature fish at high prices, I freeze with fear." (Athen., *Deip.* 6. 224, according to: Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, 19, n. 8).

Logically, Gorgon was finally transformed into a beautiful and tragic Medusa with a sad look. The second part of the myth of Perseus and Gorgon – punishment of the companions of Dionysus, shows the importance of the evolution of morality in human society and the repression of greedy and lustful nature, which the hero Perseus can only moderate by means of the Gorgon's head (Howe 1954, 221).

Gorgoneions belong to the group of the most frequently represented pictures of demons in classical art and it is almost impossible to present their entire corpus. These representations can be divided into two basic groups: individual Gorgon's masks, heads or busts and scenes where Medusa's head is presented with Perseus, Athena/Minerva, Andromeda (Paoletti 1988, 345-346). Masks, heads and busts of Medusa belong to the largest group of presentations and they are found on a number of objects and monuments (Paoletti 1988, 345-346). More than 120 representations of Medusa have been discovered in Roman mosaics so far, and they are presented in so many different manners that we cannot find two identical or almost identical representations. However, it can be noted that Roman mosaic craftsmen and their patrons preferred the beautiful type of Medusa. That is a type of representation which started to develop in Greek classical art and reached its height in the time of Hellenism (Frothingham 1894, 571). This type of representation of Medusa appears in five basic types with variants, depending on the position and shape of her head: a. a three-quarter type with an elongated (oval) face, b. a type presenting three-quarters of a round face, c. a joint three-quarter and frontal position, d. a frontal presentation of an oval face, and e. a frontal presentation of a round face (Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, vol. I, 33).



Figure 7 - Medusa, Antioch, detail (after: Levi 1947, pl. 14a)



Figure 8 – Medusa, Hadrumetum, detail (after: Paoletti, *LIMC* IV-2, 1988, fig. 20).

The most frequent type is Gorgoneion with a three-quarter pose and oval face (the first type, *a*), to which the author also attributed Medusa from Mediana (Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, vol. I, 54 et n. 8; vol. II, 267-268, cat. 46). However, this Gorgoneion should be classified into the type with a three-quarter presentation and round face (type *b*)^[6]. Gorgoneion from Mediana does not have direct parallels in the mosaic corpus of Roman and Late Roman Gorgoneions. In general, we can accept that Medusa from Mediana, regarding its iconography, relied on Hellenistic models, but that it was created according to the genius of late ancient artistic expression. A somewhat similar presentation is found in the Gorgoneion in the house with red floor at Daphne near Antioch (Fig. 7), where Medusa was presented with a pensive look and a certain rigidity, which announced the tendencies becoming dominant in the period of late antiquity. D. Levi dated the mosaic to the period of Hadrian and Antonines (Levi 1947, 88, 625), while Hessenbruch McKeon is of the opinion that the mosaic was probably created in the 3rd century (Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, vol. II, 271-272, cat. no. 49). The head of Medusa from Hadrumetum (Soussé) (Fig. 8) from the period of the 2nd century belongs to the type with round face, whose traits resemble, to a certain extent, the presentation from Mediana (Paoletti 1988, 347, cat. 20). The difference lies in the presentation

[6] The author has done the attribution to the type *a* according to the available photography, which was taken at a certain angle making the Medusa's face look elongated.

of hair, which is more exuberant in the example from Hadrumetum and additionally enriched with eight snakes, sinuously twisted outwards. The representation of Medusa's head from Sparta was also realized in this manner and is similar to the example from Mediana due to a certain rigidity in her face, plenitude and emphasised eyes with a sad look. The mosaic is dated to the second half of the 3rd century (Panagiotopoulou 1994, 372, fig. 12).

Gorgoneion from Mediana represented part of a larger mosaic carpet, which, judging by a technical drawing made during excavations in 1935, was already partly discovered at that time (Fig. 9)^[7]. The drawing shows a part of the mosaic carpet with a grid of octagons along the west edge of the room and part of the space containing a motif – most probably a star made of lozenges and squares. That part of the mosaic is undoubtedly reminiscent of the part of the carpet around the medallion of Medusa. According to this drawing, that is, to the positions of supporting walls and the appearance of the northern part of the building, one can assume, with a high degree of certainty, that the middle part of the room with apse was discovered during the excavations in 1935 and that some parts of the mosaic floor were recorded on that occasion, but, unfortunately, they were not found during the excavations carried out from 1969-1971 (Fig. 10). According to this hypothesis, the carpet with a grid of octagons once spread along the whole west wall of the room and, consequently, along the east wall, although this was not confirmed by the research conducted in the 1970s, except for the parts of substructure in the north third of the rectangular space.



Figure 9 – Drawing by the engineer V. Hodanović, 1935 – remains of mosaic from aula, villa with peristyle (after: Петровић 1994, сл. 7)

[7] Drawing by the engineer V. Hodanović, who participated in preparation of technical documentation during excavations in Mediana 1935 (Cf. Братанић 1938, 199-204; Петровић 1994, fig. 7).



Figure 10 – Aula, excavations carried out from 1969-1971, view from the north (Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

If our reconstruction is correct, the middle part of the room, along the north-south axis, contained a number of square spaces with a grid of rhombuses and squares. The Gorgoneion was discovered in the southernmost space. The 19.6 m length of the room allows us to suppose that this space could have contained three of those carpets placed one after another. Such considerations leave to the researchers a vast space for speculation regarding the appearance and iconography of those square carpets. According to comparative material, one could consider the possibility of completing this mosaic composition. One of the hypotheses would be that the medallions contained representations of the three Gorgon sisters, which has never been confirmed in mosaic practice. However, such representations are not unknown in toreutics (Paoletti 1988, cat. 197). Another possibility could be a design based on the subjects related to the myth of Perseus. Medallions with Medusa's heads are found together with representations of Perseus, and one of them was discovered in Morton in Brittany, within a villa from the 4th century, where Gorgoneion was placed in the central part surrounded with personifications of the four winds and panels with different figural scenes of Dionysian groups (Lancha 1997, 286-287, cat. no. 121), for which J. Lancha says that, in the context of the 4th century, they should be considered rather as evidence of the “mythological curiosity of the owner of the villa, than his literary culture” (Lancha 1997, 288).

Gorgoneions appear in mosaic art in all parts of the Empire and one can generally identify favourite types in certain regions or times. The most frequent type in Italy is the semi-profile with oval face (type *a*, according to Hessenbruch, McKeon), a characteristic representation of east Mediterranean regions is the semi-profile with round face (type *b*) (Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, vol.

I, 45), which could indicate an east Mediterranean origin of the medallion from Mediana. This type is rarely represented on mosaics in North Africa, Spain and western provinces of the Empire. This type has not been recorded in Britain, since those regions are well-known for frontal representations with an oval face (type *d*) (Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, vol. I, 46).

The presentation of Medusa with a semi-profile and round face was developed in the period between the 1st century BC and the late 4th -5th century AD, while the greatest number of presentations dates from the 2nd-3rd century (Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, vol. I, 45). Representations of the semi-profile originate from the Hellenistic tradition, and it is therefore understandable that this tradition was preserved in the eastern regions of the Empire, as well as in Italy and North Africa (Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, vol. I, 47). A chubby, round face was equally popular in these regions.

Gorgoneions on Roman mosaics most often appear in domuses (about fifty examples), private buildings and villas (about thirty), while they are rarely found in public buildings (only five mosaics) (Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, vol. I, 87). As far as their position inside the buildings is concerned, most of them decorated tricliniums of private buildings where the head of Medusa was usually turned towards the participants of the feast (Witts 2000, 299). Given the position of Gorgoneions in Mediana, we suppose that the primary use of this room was nevertheless representative – for receptions, while meals were probably organized in two lateral tricliniums, to the east and west of this room.

Defining the importance of Gorgoneions in Roman mosaics is a complex task raising several issues, among which the most important are those related to various interpretations of Medusa in classical antiquity sources and art tradition (Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, vol. I, 106-107). In the Roman art of mosaics, the representation of Medusa's head with a beautiful pensive face gained, besides prophylactic, also an ornamental character. Mosaic master craftsmen did not create the horrifying type of Gorgon for decorative purposes, but a beautiful face in order to create a pleasant impression (Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, vol. I, 111).

The head of Medusa from Mediana probably had an apotropaic character^[8]. If we observe the representations surrounding her medallion – pigeons and fish in the context of the symbolism of early Christianity, we see a certain syncretism in this composition, which was not unknown to artists of late antiquity. However, such a combination of elements in Roman mosaics with Gorgoneions has not yet been found in the published material. According to the building phases and numismatic findings, the Gorgoneion from Mediana was created between the 40s and 50s of the 4th century, when Christianity was already a recognized religion of the Roman Empire, but also during a period when pagan elements continued their lives in various branches of art^[9]. The composition scheme of this square mosaic space, skilfully designed and placed in the axel of the room's entrance, contained popular motifs of late antiquity.

The choice to represent Medusa's heads in tricliniums and aulais is not a rare phenomenon in mosaic art throughout the period of classical antiquity. During the period of late antiquity one can note a return to the representations of Hellenistic times, revived in a new manner. The Hellenistic picture of Medusa included a woman with exuberant hair, with a rich wreath of snakes, ribbons and tresses, an

[8] In Roman times, it was considered that evil forces circulate the world, especially the forces of malice, enviousness and jealousy (*invidia*), and that one can only defend oneself with amulets, pictures or symbols. These forces could attack at any moment and cause accidents, that is to say, bring bad luck to a household (Cf. Hessenbruch McKeon 1985, vol. I, 102).

[9] The hypothesis that mosaics appeared during the time of the short reign of Julian the Apostate (361-363) was made due to the existence of panels with pagan elements (river gods, Medusa). However, archeological findings, as well as the analysis of other mosaics in the villa, indicate the time as being directly prior to the rule of Julian (Constantius II) (Cf. Јеремић 2010, 138).

expressive face and portrait traits. During the late antiquity period, she became a static picture, losing her three-dimensionality and lively facial gestures and hair. Her face looks worried, tired, pensive and weak, which are characteristics she did not originally possess according to mythology. Medusa from Mediana, of a mediocre artistic quality, was probably created in one of the eastern Mediterranean, possibly Balkan, workshops and shows all the tendencies of the mosaic works of late antiquity. Due to the lack of reliable data, the real reason why Medusa was placed in the central room of the villa in Mediana will remain in the domain of speculation until there are new discoveries.

The mosaic with Medusa, as well as other mosaics from private and public buildings in Mediana, was created around the middle of the 4th century, during the times when the bustling economy of Naissus, which began in the first decades of the 4th century, was at its height (Bacvić 2013, 93). Mosaics were expensive artistic and professional products and only accessible to a small number of privileged patrons. Especially appreciated mosaics were those with figural scenes, and two of these examples have been discovered during the research conducted so far in Mediana (Medusa and the scene with the river god). However, only one of these originates from the closer surroundings of the late antiquity fortifications of Naissus, from a suburban villa dating approximately from the same period and discovered on the slopes of Vinik (representation of architecture in perspective)^[10].

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[10] Reports by I. Nikolajević and M. Medić from July 7th 1972, No. 936/1 and 937/1, documentation of the Institute for Protection of Cultural Monuments of Niš.

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