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Source: *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, May, 1996, Vol. 49, No. 8 (May, 1996), pp. 29-43

Published by: American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3824699

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Stated Meeting Report

The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome

Glen W. Bowersock

When the first volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon was delivered to the public on February 17, 1776, it proved to be a huge and instant success. Its author observed in his *Memoirs*, "My book was on every table, and almost on every toilette." Two days after its publication the work was hailed as a classic by Horace Walpole, who found its style "as smooth as a Flemish picture." David Hume read the history in the short time that remained to him before his death in the same year, and he wrote to Gibbon, "Whether I consider the dignity of your style, the depth of your matter, or the extensiveness of your learning, I must regard the work as equally the object of esteem." Adam Ferguson compared Gibbon to Thucydides and declared the *Decline and Fall* "what Thucydides proposed leaving with his own countrymen, *a possession in perpetuity.*"

It is not so often that the judgment of contemporaries is confirmed by the judgment of posterity, but Gibbon's work is no less admired today than it was two centuries ago. His masterly exposition was matched by an irresistible theme. The end of the Roman Empire had preoccupied certain European thinkers of the eighteenth century because then, as now, the spectacle of a great civilization collapsing into oblivion seemed in some way to offer instruction for those who feared the loss of their own civilization. Gibbon's

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work—and, perhaps even more important, the idea distilled in its title—have exerted a massive influence upon our thinking about the past. Gibbon had read Montesquieu's *Considérations* on the greatness of the Romans and their decline (his word was *décadence*), but it is Gibbon, not Montesquieu, who dominates discussion of the subject today. Yet any reader who makes his way to the end of the many volumes of the *Decline and Fall* is bound to feel uneasy as the grand dénouement of 1453 approaches. An empire requiring more than one thousand years in which to decline and fall must have been remarkably robust.

In fact, in 1776 Gibbon was by no means certain that he would ever bring his narrative down to the taking of Constantinople by the Turks. In the preface to his first volume, he recognized that it would be desirable to recount what he called "the memorable series of revolutions, which, in the course of about thirteen centuries, gradually undermined, and at length destroyed, the solid fabric of Roman greatness." But Gibbon was willing to promise the public only a continuation down to the change of dynasty in the Western empire in the late fifth century A.D. As for the rest, he wrote, "Though I may entertain some hopes, I dare not presume to give any assurances." Nonetheless, were he to possess the necessary health, leisure, and perseverance to reach the year 1453, his work would do no less than, in his words, "connect the ancient and modern history of the world." This was, of course, what he ultimately achieved. The very idea of connecting the ancient and modern history of the world under the heading of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire is something that should give us pause.

Gibbon's perspective, embracing the whole of the Byzantine Empire, the rise of Islam, and much of the Western Middle Ages, was conspicuously at variance with his celebrated opinion, expressed at an early stage in his work, that the decline and fall of Rome should be ascribed to the triumph of barbar-

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ism and religion (by which he meant Christianity). The constant transformation of cultures and polities within the geographical frame of the Roman Empire, as well as the successful assimilation of diverse languages and peoples, seemed rather to illustrate the fecundity and richness of what that empire had created.

Traditionally, the Roman Empire was thought to have come to an end in 476 with that pathetic Western ruler, Romulus Augustulus, whose very name symbolized the closure of a world that had begun with Romulus and been turned into a monarchy by Augustus. A literary conceit took precedence over historical judgment in giving Romulus Augustulus the improbable role of Rome's last emperor. In a well-known article of 1973, Arnaldo Momigliano addressed this problem under the title *La Caduta senza rumore di un impero nel 476 d.C.* (the fall of an empire in 476 without anything being said). The point is that the Roman Empire did not fall in that year. Yet, as Momigliano observed in his article, from the eighteenth century onward we have been obsessed with the fall: it has been valued as an archetype for every perceived decline and, hence, as a symbol of our own fears.

If the emperor after Augustulus and the new imperial house had turned out to be German, that might indeed have distressed rival claimants in Italy, but rulers from the margins of the Roman world were hardly anything new. Hadrian had come from Spain, Severus from Africa, Elagabalus from Syria, and Maximinus from the Balkans. The Ostrogoths who succeeded Romulus Augustulus thought themselves just as much in the line of the great Augustus as their predecessors, and they cherished and fostered the Roman culture of Italy, as any attentive reader of Cassiodorus can easily discern. Gibbon passed quickly over the removal of the man he called "the helpless Augustulus." He knew perfectly well that Rome in the West was hardly a corpse.

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Rome in the East—Constantinople, or the New Rome—was going from strength to strength. Its imperial domination of the eastern Mediterranean proved a powerful bulwark against the Persians in Iran, who had humbled Rome's emperors and invaded her provinces only two centuries earlier. Gibbon's long history is an eloquent acknowledgment that Rome did not fall in the fifth or sixth centuries. It changed and multiplied itself. Its centers of power and administration moved. It may have been a chameleon, but it was certainly no phoenix, because there were no ashes. A clear and decisive end, such as that which the Turks inflicted on the Byzantine Empire, or the Bolsheviks on the Empire of the Czars, or the Allies on the Third Reich, never came to the Empire of Rome. Gibbon understood this, and that is why a work entitled *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* comes to an end in 1453, with the capture of Constantinople.

That is also why Gibbon felt obliged to expatiate upon the Byzantine Empire as well as the Western kingdoms. He has received little credit over the years for what was in fact an extraordinarily audacious historical enterprise. Ostrogorsky, in his standard *History of the Byzantine State,* had written, "Gibbon's forceful presentation of his theme had a strongly deterrent effect on scholars and dampened enthusiasm for Byzantine research for nearly a century." With that psittacism for which scholars are notorious, Sir Steven Runciman subsequently declared, "The splendour of his style and the wit of his satire killed Byzantine studies for nearly a century"; another eminent Byzantinist asserted most unjustly, "The *Decline and Fall* long placed the kiss of death upon Byzantine studies."

Gibbon's view of the Byzantines was none too charitable, it must be admitted, but he knew that they were important and that they represented a continuing tradition of Hellenized Roman culture. Modern Byzantine studies would have been seriously impover-

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ished if Gibbon had shared Horace Walpole's weary sentiment, expressed from the Gothic opulence of Strawberry Hill: "I could not recollect all those fainéant emperors of Constantinople, who come again and again. . . . How he [Gibbon] could traverse such acres of ill-written histories, even to collect such a great work, astonishes me." What Gibbon did was pioneering work, to be taken up, sometimes inevitably in reaction, by a succession of great nineteenth-century historians, beginning with Barthold Georg Niebuhr, who edited Agathias, and on by way of Parisot and George Finlay to Krumbacher, who wrote the standard history of Byzantine literature and founded the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift.*

The growth of Byzantine studies led to increased scrutiny of what was known in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the later Roman Empire, or Bas-Empire. The term was already familiar in French from the estimable but immensely tiresome *Histoire du Bas-Empire* in thirty volumes, by Charles Le Beau, the perpetual secretary of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in the eighteenth century and a person whom Gibbon had met in Paris and liked (though clearly not respected). The standard account of the later Roman Empire—roughly, the age from Constantine to Muhammad—was written sympathetically at the end of the next century by J. B. Bury, who was, not surprisingly, also the meticulous editor of a new edition of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall.* This period of transformation and change in both East and West continued, however, generally to be viewed as the last gasp of a glorious classical past. The adjective *later* was not altogether complimentary, nor was the simple form *late* in the expression "late antiquity," used on occasion to designate the same epoch. Many writers absorbed some of Gibbon's more instinctive prejudices and saw classical culture as squeezed dry by the demands of Christian asceticism, although a few could see that the Christianity of this age was actually full of visceral excitement borrowed from the

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polytheists. The modern Greek poet Cavafy spotted this in a famous poem comparing the good life of the Christians at Antioch with the dreary proprieties imposed by that zealous pagan, the emperor Julian.

Late antiquity, in the hands of a Cavafy—or of the remarkable nineteenth-century Greek historian whose works he knew well, Constantine Paparrigopoulos—was a vibrant time of renewal and refreshment, not of decline. But this view of the period attracted few adherents among historians before the 1960s, when it was startlingly taken up with uncommon eloquence and learning by Peter Brown. His modest survey of 1971, entitled *The World of Late Antiquity,* encapsulated a new vision of the post-Constantinian age as the beginning of something grand and distinctive rather than as the end of the classical world everyone knew and admired. A subsequent volume of lectures, delivered at Harvard in 1976, traced the origins of this late antique culture to the high Roman Empire of the second and third centuries, seen as a kind of seedbed for wonderful and exotic plants that were to come into bloom several centuries later. Those lectures and the book that followed bore the title *The Making of Late Antiquity.* This was a deliberate provocation, answering Sir Richard Southern's *The Making of the Middle Ages* with a strong affirmation that the pivotal time was really late antiquity, not the Middle Ages.

This debate and subsequent work have gone on still further to annihilate those secure boundaries with which we all once felt comfortable in contemplating the ancient past. In recent years the great divide seen in the Hijra (Hegira) of the prophet Muhammad and the rise of Islam has also begun to disappear, along with the fall of Rome itself. Conquests and a new religion naturally made a substantial difference, but, as we now can see, much that was fundamentally Byzantine endured. The Arabs in Baghdad became the finest translators from the Greek that have ever existed anywhere, and Christians contin-

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ued to worship for centuries in churches under Arab rule. They conducted their offices amid mosaics, such as those from the eighth century recently uncovered in Jordan, that easily rival the best work of Byzantine masters. Late antiquity, in the late twentieth century, has turned out to be the centerpiece of historical studies of the common era down to the ninth century or so. It has become a growth area for students and scholars. Its implications for Gibbon's theme are portentous, as are its implications for us.

The obsession with the fall of Rome that Momigliano identified as starting in the eighteenth century and still with us when he wrote in 1973 has now been dramatically altered. The obsession is not with describing the causes of Rome's fall, or locating it, but with denying it altogether. This approach to the subject was, as we have seen, implicit in Gibbon's treatment two hundred years ago—but only implicit. Otherwise he would have changed his title, or at least confided to his notebooks that he wished he had chosen another one (just as he confided that he had made a dreadful mistake in opening his work with the Antonine Age). For well over two hundred years the fall of Rome has stood as a warning to modern peoples in the relentless march of their civilization. And now, in the last third of this century, those who think about these things seem ready to announce that Rome's fall was an illusion. We may well wonder what is going on.

In fact, one might perhaps be inclined to question altogether the eighteenth-century origins of the modern fascination with the fall of Rome if one were casually to pick up a volume of nearly seven hundred pages published in Munich in 1984 under the title *Der Fall Roms . . . im Urteil der Nachwelt.* The author, Alexander Demandt, starts from late antiquity itself and moves solemnly through the Middle Ages and Renaissance before finally settling on the Enlightenment after well over a hundred pages. The upshot of so much learned prolegomena is that polythe-

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ists periodically complained about invasions, Christians exulted over the enfeeblement of the traditional gods, and the collapse of buildings instructed people of every persuasion that nothing in the world lasts forever. But of the fall of Rome as a cautionary lesson there is virtually nothing.

In a lengthy chapter on the end of the Roman Empire in the consciousness of the Middle Ages, Demandt is obliged to concede that the fall of Rome was neither perceived as an event nor felt as a problem. A great Renaissance figure such as Poggio Bracciolini had been moved by the ruins of Rome, and readers of Gibbon will recall that at the end of his history he evoked the memory of his famous predecessor. But for Poggio, as for the medieval thinkers, what was so disturbing was the contemplation of the transitoriness of all earthly things, not the collapse of a great civilization that might have survived if it had been managed differently. It is, therefore, proof of the point that the fall of Rome emerged as a problem only later that most of Professor Demandt's book is dedicated to the last three centuries of our era. He demonstrates the complexity and almost irrational desperation of the interpreters of the perceived event by an astonishing catalogue that stands on the final page of his book. There we find, listed alphabetically, 210 causes proposed for the downfall of the Roman Empire. The list begins with *Aberglaube* and ends with *Zweifrontenkrieg*, and along the way we encounter such interesting items as *Charakterlosigkeit, Egoismus, Frauenemanzipation, moralischer Idealismus, Sinnlichkeit,* and *Überkultur.* Sadly, Professor Demandt in 1984 knew nothing of the revisionism that has flowered in recent decades, or even anything of contrary opinions before that. Peter Brown appears in his pages only twice in passing, and in the guise of an American specialist on Augustine, and Paparrigopoulos does not appear at all.

It might be helpful to recall that our modern obsession with the fall of Rome not only began in the eighteenth century but also, as

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most of us have known it, bore the Gibbonian stamp. This means that the reflections of a Montesquieu or even a Vico (whom Gibbon certainly never read) do not represent what we have in mind when we speak of the fall. For Montesquieu, decadence and decline were deduced from a study of ancient literary texts, as were the shifting *corsi* and *ricorsi* of Giambattista Vico. For Gibbon, the primary inspiration was his own personal experience of ancient ruins in Italy, and especially in Rome. It was a very different experience from Poggio's. The Italian humanist had concluded resignedly, "The wheel of fortune has accomplished her revolution," as Gibbon translated Poggio's words at the opening of his final chapter. The last sentence of that chapter (and of the entire work) proclaims—as do Gibbon's *Memoirs,* with different phrases—"It was among the ruins of the Capitol that I first conceived the idea of a work which has amused and exercised near twenty years of my life." Never mind that there were no ruins on the Capitol when Gibbon was there. From the Capitol he could certainly see plenty, and we know that he did. Ruins, to an Enlightenment eye, conjured up an image of a fall, and Europeans on the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century confronted with emotion sights that Italians had lived with in perfect equanimity for centuries. It was a sobering experience.

Added to the ruins above ground in the Roman forum and elsewhere were the ruins now being brought to light from below ground in the early days of archaeology. The excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum delivered an even more cautionary message on the swift and violent end of those who lived licentiously and well. Monuments and whole cities were seen in their fallen state. They seemed to symbolize the end of a great civilization, and if we are to believe Braudel, it was not until the eighteenth century that Europe acquired the concept of "civilization" and hence had something it might be concerned to lose. This problem was not, how-

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ever, something that the Italians worried about. They had easily absorbed all those ruins into their own history. Writing in Spoleto in the 1970s, Momigliano could observe with perfect accuracy that the town reflected an unbroken continuum of civilized life from the Roman Empire down to the present. "At Spoleto," he wrote, "the arch of Drusus now stands in the middle of a medieval street, and one of the medieval gates has the reputation, supported by a Renaissance inscription, of having witnessed the successful forays of the Roman colonists against Hannibal. In its turn the medieval cathedral is decorated by one of the masterpieces of Filippo Lippi." This was a place, as Momigliano rightly says, "in which a late Roman aristocrat could turn up without feeling the shock of a conflict between the old and the new."

But to many in the Western world after Gibbon, the sight of ancient ruins was a compelling visual lesson. Now, thanks to archaeology, we have more ancient ruins than ever—and, thanks to modern modes of transportation, they are familiar to an ever larger number of people. Since the *Enola Gay* did its terrifying work, we have seen images of ruin far more horrible and far more instructive than any that the Romans have bequeathed to us. Those ruins from antiquity have begun to lose their magic. Even in the 1930s, Cole Porter could bring on the stage a chorus of world-weary travelers to sing

> . . . they always show us
> Ruins, ruins, ruins.
> Ev'rywhere we go they show us ruins,
> We saw a pile in Carthage,
> In Rome, another lot,
> While here, apart from bugs and fleas,
> The only thing they've got
> is ruins, ruins, ruins.
> They constitute our daily doin's.

The move away from the fall of Rome to a creative and vibrant late antiquity must also be seen in the perspective of the *fin de siècle* in which we are now living. At least since the

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Ayatollah Khomeini proved that religion was still a powerful political force in the world, we have come to accept fundamentalism and cults as an integral part of the social fabric. The Neoplatonism of late antiquity and the Christian asceticism of the desert have found, for the first time in several centuries, a resonance in contemporary society. Of course others, like Cavafy, had responded to their message earlier, but they had still been seen generally as outsiders and misfits. Now a tide of relativism has made us receptive—arguably, too receptive—to forms of culture and behavior that once seemed inconsistent with traditional patterns (or should we say values?). The seductive powers of rhetoric have been reaffirmed by Hayden White and others to assist in the annihilation of historical certainties. No one has captured this phenomenon so concisely as Clifford Geertz with the title of his new autobiographical book, *After the Fact.* The relativist approach, combined with a new awareness of the force of religion and its highly rhetorical theology, opened up the possibility of turning one's back on the majesty of the Roman Empire in order to salute Byzantium, Ravenna, and Mecca.

An interesting and sensitive witness to the vanishing paradigm of the fall of Rome has turned up very recently through the discovery of an article written by the poet W. H. Auden on commission for *Life Magazine* in 1966. The magazine rejected the article, and it is being published this year for the first time. It is entitled "The Fall of Rome." We can have little doubt that the editors intended to have a piece that would bring their opulently illustrated series on the Romans to a suitably edifying conclusion. But Auden was writing at exactly the time that the paradigm of the fall was beginning to fade. The editors of *Life* presumably knew that he had long been interested in the topic, ever since a review he published in 1944 of Charles Norris Cochrane's book *Christianity and Classical Culture.* Three years after that review, Auden had written a poem called "The Fall of Rome,"

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showing unmistakable connections between Caesar's world and his own:

> Cerebrotonic Catos may
> Extol the Ancient Disciplines,
> But the muscle-bound Marines
> Mutiny for food and pay.
>
> Caesar's double-bed is warm
> As an unimportant clerk
> Writes I DO NOT LIKE MY WORK
> On a pink official form.

In these lines from 1947, Auden accepted the fall in the traditional way. The poem opens with a scene of desolation (an abandoned train, outlaws in caves), and it ends with another (herds of reindeer moving "silently and very fast").

But two conspicuous representatives of a different way of thinking about this subject caused Auden to modify his position. First, he became acquainted with the poetry of Cavafy and admired it. In an introduction to a new translation from the Greek in 1961, he took note of the vivacity of late antique Christianity, even though, as he observed later, he considered the adoption of Christianity as the official state religion to be a bad thing—by which he meant, as he said, "an un-Christian thing." Auden's second intimation of a major reassessment of the fall of Rome was a slim but highly influential volume of lectures delivered by the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, E. R. Dodds, and published in 1965 as *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety.* Doubtless mindful of the tribute to Auden in this title but also perhaps aware that the subject had long interested him, the editors of the newly founded *New York Review of Books* invited the poet to review Dodds' book. He did so only a few months before he wrote the rejected piece for *Life.* Dodds showed Auden a post-classical world that held far more promise than he had noticed before. "One may like or dislike Christianity," Auden wrote in his review, "but no one can deny that it was Christianity and the Bible which raised western literature from the dead."

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From observations like this it was only a short step to some remarkable lines we find in the *Life* article—lines that could easily have come from the pen of Cavafy or Peter Brown (or, for that matter, many of us who have written on late antiquity in the last ten years). Writing about the ascetics of the desert, who now stand under the label of "holy men" as central figures in the new view of post-Constantinian antiquity, Auden wrote, "At its best the movement produced characters of impressive integrity and wisdom, with great psychological understanding, charity and good-humour. We owe the Desert Fathers more than we generally realise. The classical world knew many pleasures, but of one which means a great deal to us, it was totally ignorant until the hermits discovered it, the pleasure of being by oneself." Only five years after Auden wrote these words, Peter Brown published an immensely important paper on "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," a paper that Ihor Ševčenko has recently characterized as "the Big Bang of 1971." Three years after that, the original English text of an extraordinary note that Cavafy had put into his copy of Gibbon was made accessible in a Western publication. Writing about Simeon the Stylite in response to Gibbon's less than respectful remarks about the "aerial penance" of the celebrated ascetic, Cavafy protested, "This great, this wonderful saint is surely an object to be singled out in ecclesiastical history for admiration and study. He has been, perhaps, the only man who has dared to be really alone." These words had actually been published first in 1963 in Athens, in a Greek collection of the poet's prose. It is unlikely that Auden saw them there, although conceivably someone showed them to him. But the coincidence that brought out their parallel observations only a few years apart mirrors perfectly the new vision of late antiquity in which the fall of Rome was increasingly hard to find.

In 1966 Lynn White published a volume of papers from a symposium on what he called

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"Gibbon's problem after two centuries." His title, *The Transformation of the Roman World*, already betokened an awareness of new paradigms of decline, but it was still too early to see what was happening to the fall. Decline came in there for ample, possibly excessive attention. But even so, no one was yet aware that a new generation of historians of antiquity would rewrite the decline of the classical world as the rise of late antiquity. When, however, under the auspices of this Academy and its journal, the two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first volume of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* was commemorated with magnificent solemnity in Rome, the new era had clearly dawned. An astonishingly bold assessment of Gibbon's treatment of the fifth and sixth centuries came from Peter Brown himself, while Bernard Lewis paid tribute to Gibbon's audacious and highly original inclusion of Islam in the reconfiguration of the ancient world. Old tradition was there too, in the form of Steven Runciman's bilious attack on Gibbon's view of Byzantium—but Runciman, born in 1903, was (and still is) the most distinguished of the Byzantinists for whom late antiquity was the age when Rome collapsed, making way for Byzantium as its new and wondrous successor. Those of us who assembled in Rome in 1976 could now see, better than Auden and Lynn White's symposiasts had a decade earlier, a conflict between two widely divergent perspectives on the past.

Now, in 1995, it is probably fair to say that no responsible historian of the ancient or medieval world would want to address or acknowledge the fall of Rome as either fact or paradigm. It has ended up as a construction that has its own place in modern history, across the two hundred years that followed the first volume of Gibbon's work in 1776. It represented, as Momigliano divined, the fears of European and American thinkers as they confronted the instability of the civilization to which they belonged. The fall of Rome, symbolized by the imposing ruins that

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travelers and archaeologists could readily see, counseled caution—and, to the extent that its apparent lessons were heeded (or thought to be heeded), often encouraged an unseemly arrogance and self-satisfaction.

But we live today in a shrunken world in which the Gibbonian categories of religion and alien cultures (which are, after all, what Gibbon described, more prejudicially, as barbarism) have become positive components of late twentieth-century civilization. It is a world that finds hope and inspiration in the religious intensity and mixed cultures of late antiquity. The fall of Rome is no longer needed, and like the writing on a faded papyrus, it no longer speaks to us. When Gibbon laid down his pen in Lausanne in June of 1787, it probably did not speak to him either. He had learned too much. But, as he himself confided to his notebooks at the end of his life, when he pondered the content of his opening chapters, "Of what avail is this tardy knowledge? Where error is irretrievable, repentance is useless."

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