

Of Altars and Terraces: Domestic Ceremonialism and Residential Terracing at Chawak But'o'ob, Belize

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Abstract:

Previously reported investigations at the Late Classic Maya site of Chawak But'o'ob, Belize revealed domestic platforms and multi-roomed foundation braces constructed atop stacked, dry slope contour terraces. Further examination during 2006 and 2007 has uncovered an enigmatic paved terrace surface and evidence of ceremonialism in the form of a possible drum-shaped interior house altar and two anthropomorphic ceramics, one of which may be a mask fragment. This paper will discuss archaeological and ethnographic parallels and consider how these findings may enhance our limited understanding of rural domestic ritual among ancient Maya commoners.

Introduction

Since 2003, investigations undertaken at Chawak But'o'ob, a humble ancient Maya escarpment community along the Rio Bravo drainage in northwestern Belize, have focused on residential terracing.¹ During the 2006 and 2007 field seasons, a ceremonial component to these investigations began to emerge. This paper aims to briefly present new evidence on ceremonialism in the context of the previous research on terracing and consider how these findings may enhance our limited understanding of hinterland domestic ritual among the ancient Maya.

¹ Hanna and Walling 2006; Hanna, Davis, Walling 2006; Walling, et al. 2005, 2006

Site Context

Chawak But'o'ob is a small hinterland site in the Programme for Belize Conservation and Management Area of northwest Belize, Central America (Figure 1).² Six of the seven occupational-groups contain residential terracing, of which Group B, in the southeastern part of the site, has received the most intensive investigation (Slide 2). Initially the series of stacked, dry-slope contour terraces in Group B were believed to be relics of ancient intensive agriculture, but extensive clearing and excavation, begun in 2003, has exposed 18 platforms and 10 house foundation braces resting atop them. Ceramic analysis has indicated that sherds recovered from the Group B terraces represent commoner utilitarian vessels and date solidly to the Tepeu II ceramic phase of the Late Classic period.³

Terracing in Mesoamerica

Before we continue, I would quickly like to clarify what I mean by the term, *residential terracing*. There are three traditional categories in which all Mesoamerican terraces have been classified: agricultural, hydrological, and architectural (see Slide 3). The latter consists of the large platforms that support monumental architecture at major sites.⁴ As we use the term here, residential terraces- unlike architectural terraces- are stacked benches that support domestic structures and may not exhibit formal construction nor preclude close proximity to intensive agriculture (Slide 4).

² Chawak But'o'ob has undergone over 15 years of investigation by the Rio Bravo Archaeological Project, headed by Dr. Stanley L. Walling of the Community College of Philadelphia and the University of Texas at Austin. See Davis 2005; Davis and Walling 2004, n.d. and n.d.; and Scarborough, et al. 2003

³ Ceramic analysis conducted by Lauren Sullivan of the University of Massachusetts at Boston; See Sullivan and Sagebiel 2003

⁴ Donkin 1979; Wilken 1971, 1987; Whitmore and Turner 2001

Sites

Residential terraces have only recently begun to attract attention by Mesoamericanists, thus presenting a certain state of ambiguity concerning whether similar arrangements of structures have been identified on terraces elsewhere in the Maya lowlands. Most recently, however, house platforms around the site of Dos Hombres, 3 km to the north of Chawak But'o'ob on the Rio Bravo escarpment, were found resting atop residential terraces (Slide 5). One of these groups contained multiple burials, which strengthen the ceramic, lithic, and architectural evidence that these were indeed domestic living spaces.⁵ Also, residential terraces have been reported by Cynthia Robin and Andrew Wyatt at the site of Chan in the Belize River Valley.⁶ At Chan, like Chawak But'o'ob, many of these structures are associated with hydrological features employed for small-scale irrigation and agriculture.

Beyond these sites in Belize, extensive residential terracing has been documented in Oaxaca by Feinman, Nicholas, and Haines at Monte Alban and surrounding sites,⁷ and Perez-Rodriguez has also recently reported residential terracing in the Mixteca Alta.⁸ Additionally, extensive Late Classic "habitational terracing" has been known at the site of Los Cimientos in the Central Highlands of the Chiapas, as reported by Rivero-Torres.⁹

Paved Terrace

In an effort to better define the internal character of the Group B residential terraces at Chawak But 'o' ob, the edge of one of these features, Terrace 4, was

⁵ Trachman 2007

⁶ Wyatt 2004, 2005

⁷ Feinman, Nicholas, and Haines 2002

⁸ Perez-Rodriguez 2006

⁹ Rivero-Torres 1987:12

excavated this past season (Slide 6). What we discovered was a terrace with earthen fill, topped by two courses of stone, with seemingly the entire surface paved in cobbles. Because the pavement is between two foundation braces, it may have been an open patio for external domestic space. It is also possible that the pavement represents the subfloor of a perishable structure attached to the two adjacent structures, similar to the Foundation Brace A, B, and C complex two terraces above (Slide 7). What is also interesting is that the pavement stops roughly a half-meter west of the terrace wall line. It is unclear what the function of this gap was, though it may have been a drain or irrigation channel (Slides 8 & 9). Future investigations in this area will focus on better defining this unusual terrace design.

What is clear from this excavation and others in Group B is that these terraces were actually engineered as residential space, with all evidence suggesting that they were never used for the large-scale, intensive agriculture usually associated with dry-slope contour terracing.¹⁰ Agricultural terraces typically form deep, fertile deposits for planting and erosion control. While some areas of the Group B residential terraces may have functioned in this manner, it seems clear that they were built principally to level the surface for living space.

Domestic Ceremonialism

A House Altar and Termination Cache

Further up the escarpment on Terrace 5, excavations of Room 3 in Foundation Brace B, conducted during 2006 and 2007, uncovered a large, drum-shaped stone, measuring 64 x 50 cm in diameter (Slides 10 & 11). Several fragmented vessels and a small marine shell (unusual for the site) were also found just east of the stone, possibly

¹⁰ See also Hanna, Davis, Walling 2006

representing a termination deposit.¹¹ While no significant features or artifacts were found in the matrix below the stone, a medium-sized (20 x 15cm) burned cobble of smoky quartz was found a few meters south in the same room, at the same level, amongst abundant fragments of burned limestone and three small concentrations of charcoal. Though it remains unclear, the evidence of burning here suggests that it may have been a hearth. Unfortunately, the presence of the hearth was realized after it had already been removed, preventing further scientific documentation. That this possible hearth is associated with a potential interior altar suggests that it held a ceremonial function rather than one used for cooking,¹² and further corroborates the interpretation of this room as a small house shrine.

Anthropomorphs

Also this past season, two unusual ceramic sherds that may offer indications of ritual activity were found in nearby Foundation Brace A (Slide 12). Half of a small, anthropomorphic vessel exhibiting a squinting eye, wide-nostrilled nose, and the round, puffy cheek of a face was found within the stairway. In a layer just below the vessel fragment, another artifact exhibiting a rounded edge and oval, eye-shaped hole resembles the eroded fragment of a ceramic facemask. In addition to their potential ritual functions, these unique ceramics may have been part of a dedicatory cache placed in the stairway. Future excavation in this area will focus on expanding the unit in order to better define this possible cache.

¹¹ Mock 1998; Stark 1999

¹² Brown 2004; Gonlin 2004

Discussion

House Altar Discussion

Obviously, altars and oratories, masks and dedicatory vessels are all well noted characteristics of Maya culture. However, since these objects were recovered from modest, commoner households rather than monumental public spaces or some other elite context, they add a new dimension to our understanding of commoner life in the Late Classic.

While round, cut-stone altars are common to the ceremonial plazas of major Classic Maya centers, reports of domestic altars from the Late Classic lowlands are rare and often descriptively vague. Postholes for wooden table altars, like those most commonly used by modern Maya, have been reported from Late Classic house investigations, though rarely and usually from elite contexts.¹³ Shrine or oratory structures have been reported more frequently, though their identification is not based on altars, but the presence of hearths, burials, and high concentrations of ceremonial artifacts indicative of ritual activity.¹⁴ Marshall Becker's "Plaza Plan 2" at Tikal, for instance, identified a recurrent arrangement of elite house groups with an eastern shrine, only one of which (5G-2) actually had a small platform altar.¹⁵ Moreover, Becker recognized that these groups, "may be the earliest appearance of an oratory in a residential group."¹⁶

Ethnographically, wooden table altars are distinctly ceremonial and generally a ubiquitous feature of modern Maya houses, where they usually bear several wooden

¹³ Becker 1971, 1999; Hammond, et al. 1987

¹⁴ Becker 1999; Smith 1962

¹⁵ Becker 1971, 1999; Puleston (1983) later reported a steady frequency of the plan beyond the site center

¹⁶ Becker 1971:193

crosses, statues, pictures of saints, and other items considered sacred.¹⁷ Stone altars have also been observed ethnographically, used mostly by shamans, and can range from crude, natural stones to those more formally constructed.¹⁸

It is largely assumed, however, that house altars were a “late trait,” first appearing in full-force during the Postclassic and continuing in various forms to the present.¹⁹ Some scholars have gone so far as to speculate that, “interior house altars may have been European introduced, associated with the spread of Catholicism.”²⁰ This was obviously not the case. The confusion arises from the numerous occurrences of rectangular, platform altars at Postclassic sites. A. Ledyard Smith’s report from Mayapan, for example, documented over 100 rectangular domestic altars in personal shrines and in outside courtyard groups.²¹ Postclassic altars in non-elite or commoner households such as these have also been reported from sites in Cholula²² and elsewhere in the Yucatan and Oaxacan areas.²³

Mask Discussion

Like house altars, masks are another distinctly ceremonial artifact that, to the authors’ knowledge, has never been reported in non-elite contexts. In fact, while depictions of masked rulers and figures are a common element in Classic Maya art, findings of masks are quite rare. The two ceramic masks found in a sealed off room at Aguateca may be among the only Late Classic Maya masks found archaeologically intact

¹⁷ Deal 1988; Diener 1978; McCafferty 2007

¹⁸ Brown 2004; Deal 1987; Siegal 1941

¹⁹ Gonlin 1993:16

²⁰ Bryant 1988:26

²¹ Smith 1962

²² McCafferty 2007

²³ Andrews and Andrews 1975; Deal 1987; Gonlin 1993; Shaw 2002

(Slide 13).²⁴ One depicts the painted image of an old man and the other "a deity or monster with large eyes and fangs,"²⁵ both presumably used as ceremonial headdress elements. Skillful analysis of the texture of these masks by Harriet Beaubien revealed that they were made by soaking cloth in clay and layered on a mold.²⁶ Once fired, the textile burned away, leaving an exceptionally lightweight mask. Because of the density, texture, and unembellished character of the mask fragment from Chawak But'o'ob, it is possible that this was a mold used to produce masks in a similar method.

General Discussion

The evidence of domestic ceremonialism described above, signifies a highly complex set of rituals unusual for Late Classic commoner household contexts. When taken as a whole, this data- an interior house altar, a ritual mask, and even the creation of a rural ballcourt- may indicate a distinctive independence on the part of the practitioners. Are they evidence of an alternate spiritual doctrine, distinct from the elite-controlled, theatre-state theocracy and its divine mandate? It seems plausible that the residents of Chawak But'o'ob may have been engaged in what James Scott has labeled, "a hidden transcript of resistance,"²⁷ a subversive departure from the dominant ideology of Late Classic elite culture.

Undoubtedly, many major centers in the Maya lowlands experienced tumultuous events of active destruction during the period known as the Terminal Classic.²⁸ It is

²⁴ Inomata 2001; Fragments of ceramic masks have been found elsewhere at Aguateca as well as the Los Quetzales cave, Las Pacayas, in Petexbatun (Beaubien 2000) and possibly at the sites of Cahal Pech in Belize (personal observation) and Piedras Negras (Beaubien 2003)

²⁵ Inomata 2001:294

²⁶ Beaubien 2003; Inomata 2001

²⁷ Joyce and Weller 2007:149

²⁸ Demarest and Rice 2005; Inomata 2001; Joyce and Weller 2007; McCafferty 2007; Sharer 1994; Thompson 1954

difficult, however, to delineate between evidence of subtle resistance and acts of violence and insurgency when both are present. Some view the destruction of these Classic Maya centers as simply ritual termination events or devastation by an invading army.²⁹

Recently, however, Joyce and Weller detailed a number of major sites where the construction of limited access temple courtyards likely excluded commoners from state ceremonies during the final phases of the Late Classic.³⁰ As they concluded, “it is possible that the exclusion of commoners from state ceremonies could have been viewed as a violation of the moral responsibilities of the nobility (Jansen 2004). If nobles failed to meet their ritual obligations, commoners might have begun to find alternative means to contact the sacred.”³¹ The ritual practices evident at Postclassic sites, including the usage of house altars as described above, indicates a transition in ceremonial activities sometime between the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods. Could these later practices be a continuity of traditions begun during the Late Classic, when the private worship of ancestors and gods began to gain prominence at hinterland communities such as Chawak But’o’ob?

Conclusion

While the evidence from Chawak But’o’ob does not support violent peasant uprising at the end of the Late Classic, it does indicate commoner ceremonialism mimicking the sacred rituals that occurred at elite sites during this time. Whether these efforts were imitation, domination, or opposition, has yet to be determined, and further research is needed to move these points forward. It is clear that the archaeological data of ritual

²⁹ Rice, Demarest, 2005; Inomata 2001

³⁰ Joyce and Weller 2007

³¹ Joyce and Weller 2007:170

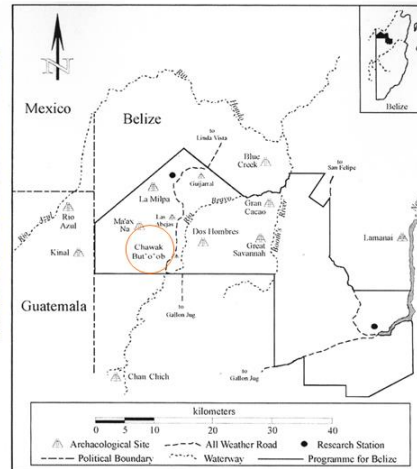
practice from Chawak But'o'ob deepens our understanding of the complexity of Late Classic life in the ancient Maya hinterlands. Future investigations at Chawak But'o'ob will attempt to refine our understanding of the nature of domestic ceremonialism at the site and, by extension, among the ancient lowland Maya.

Selected Slides from the Accompanying PowerPoint

Slide 1 Chawak But'o'ob, Belize



Map of Mesoamerica
Programme for Belize area highlighted

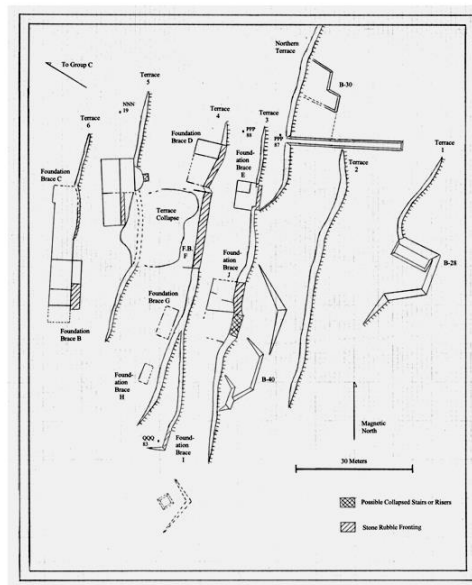


Map of The Programme for Belize
Conservation and Management Area
and Archaeological Sites
(from Scarborough, et al., 2003)

Slide 2



Map of Chawak But'o'ob with
Group B and other groups
highlighted

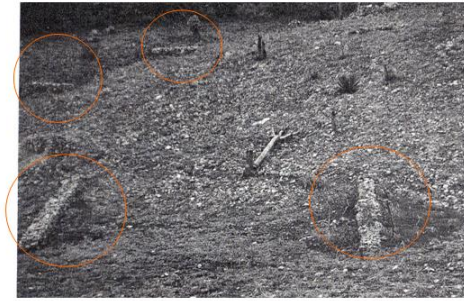


Group B Residential Terraces

Slide 3



Modern Agricultural Terraces:
Tonicicapan, Guatemala



Hydrological Terraces:
Cross-Channel Weirs in Mexico

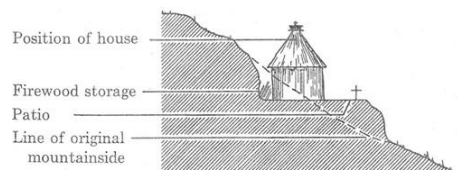


Architectural Terraces:
Central Plaza at Tikal, Guatemala

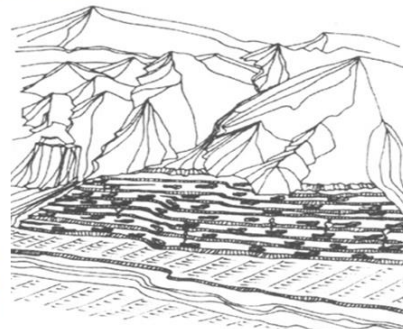
Slide 4



Cleared Terrace in Group B
at Chavak But'o'ob

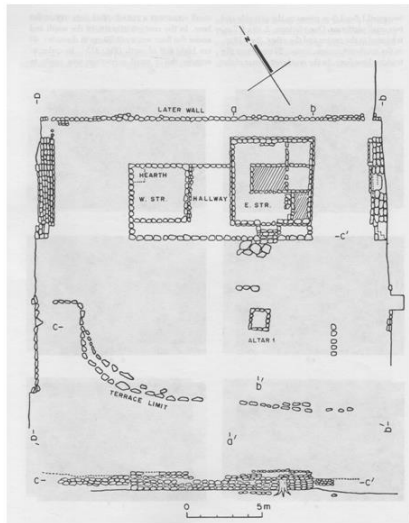


Terraced House Construction at Zinacantan
(from Vogt, 1967)

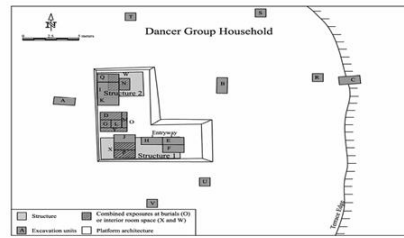


Residential Terraces
and Floodplain Farming
at Chiribaya Baja, Peru
(from Martinson, et al., 2003)

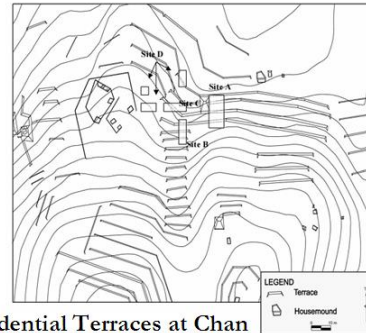
Slide 5



Habitational Terrace at Cimientos
(From Rivero Torres, 1987)



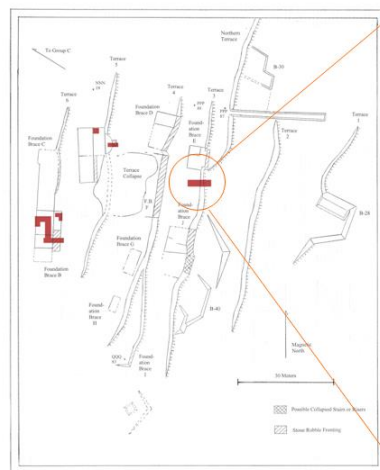
Residential Terrace at Dos Hombres
(From Trackman, 2007)



Residential Terraces at Chan
(From Wyatt, 2005)

Slide 6

Paved Terrace



2007 Group B Excavation Areas

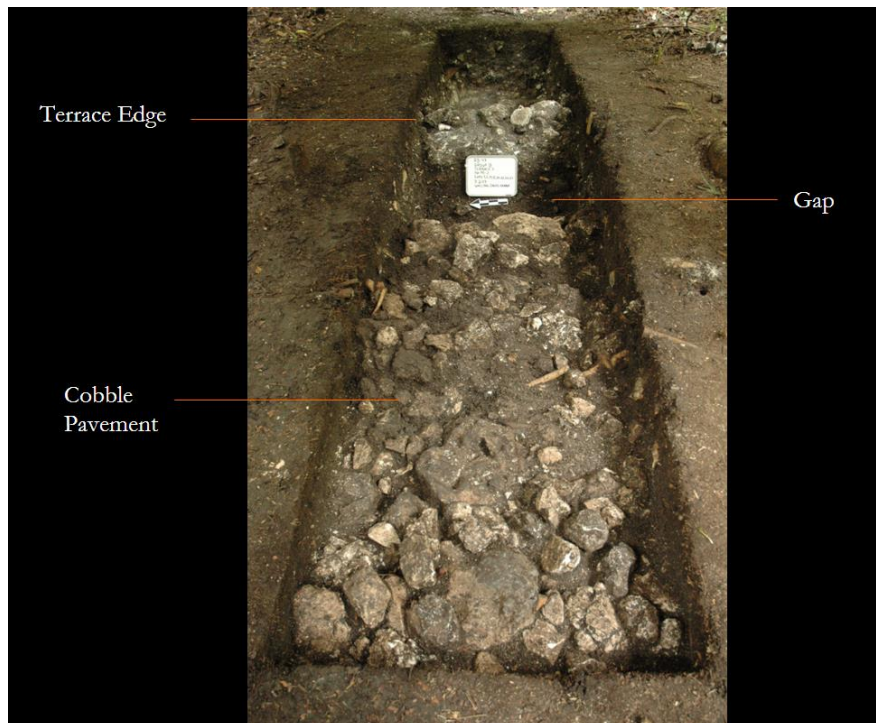


Slide 7

Plan View, Upper Residential Terrace Complex, Group B



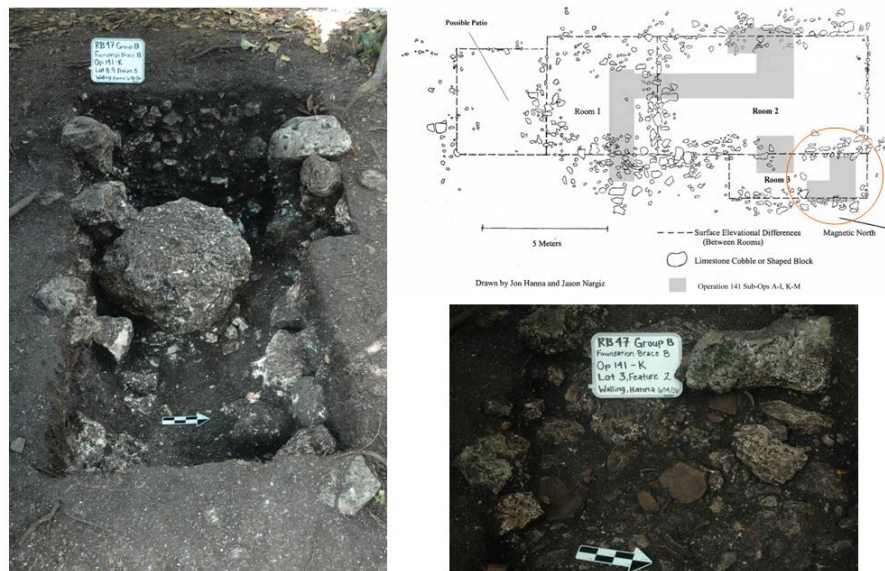
Slide 8



Slide 9



Slide 10
Domestic House Altar



Possible Altar and Termination Deposit from Room 3, F.B. B

Slide 11



Slide 12

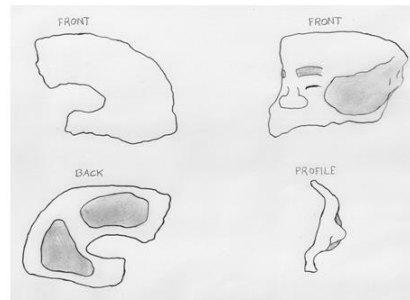
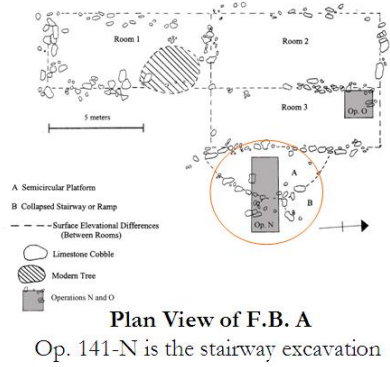


Illustration of 141-N Ceramics



Ceramic Mask Fragment



Ceramic Face Vessel Sherd

Slide 13

“Old Man” Ceramic Mask
from Aguateca
(from Beaubien, 2003)



Profile of Mask Fragment
from Chawak But'o'ob



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(includes citations from Slides)

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