Biochemical events leading to the diversion of carbon into storage lipids in the oleaginous fungi *Mucor circinelloides* and *Mortierella alpina*

James P. Wynn,1 Adil A. Hamid,2 Yonghua Li1 and Colin Ratledge1

Author for correspondence: James P. Wynn. Tel: +44 1482 465507. Fax: +44 1482 465458. e-mail: j.p.wynn@biosci.hull.ac.uk

1 Centre for Advanced Lipid Research, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX, UK
2 Department of Microbiology, Universiti Kebangsaan, Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Salangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

The biochemical events associated with the onset of lipid accumulation in *Mucor circinelloides* and *Mortierella alpina*, under conditions of nitrogen-limited growth, have been elucidated; they differ in key aspects from those described in oleaginous yeasts. The NAD⁺:isocitrate dehydrogenases of *Mc. circinelloides* and *Mort. alpina* were not absolutely dependent on AMP for activity. Furthermore, changes in the cellular adenine nucleotide pools and energy charge were different from those reported for oleaginous yeasts. In *Mc. circinelloides* ATP, ADP and AMP concentrations all decreased by 50% after nitrogen limitation, leading to a constant energy charge at the expense of the size of the total adenylate pool. Pyruvate carboxylase in *Mc. circinelloides* was cytosolic, having implications for the organization of lipid synthesis in filamentous fungi. As a result of the data obtained, a revised and more concerted mechanism for the initiation of storage lipid accumulation is put forward for filamentous fungi.

Keywords: AMP deaminase, NAD⁺:isocitrate dehydrogenase, lipid accumulation

INTRODUCTION

As the nutritional benefits of certain long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids are becoming appreciated so the demand for oils rich in these fatty acids is expanding. In particular, the roles of arachidonic acid [20:4n-6] (ARA) and docosahexaenoic acid [22:6n-3] (DHA) in neonate brain and nervous development have been reported and this has resulted in the inclusion of these fatty acids in baby formulae (Kyle, 1997). As amenable plant and animal sources for these fatty acids do not exist, oils rich in these fatty acids are being produced commercially using oleaginous micro-organisms. Arachidonic acid is being produced using the zygomycete fungus *Mortierella alpina* and DHA is being produced using the marine algae *Cryptothecodinium cohnii* and *Schizochytrium* spp. (Ratledge, 1997; Wynn, 1998).

In attempts to optimize these processes and to realize new ones, a sound understanding of the regulation of cell lipid accumulation in the production organism is required. Although the biochemical basis of microbial oleaginicity has been elucidated this work has been carried out almost exclusively in yeasts (Botham & Ratledge, 1979; Boulton & Ratledge, 1983; Evans & Ratledge, 1983, 1985a, b). A similar system has been tacitly assumed to apply to other groups of eukaryotic micro-organisms.

All the enzymes thought to be crucial for the accumulation of substantial amounts of storage lipid are present in both oleaginous yeasts and filamentous fungi. However, it has become apparent in the course of our more recent work that the regulation of lipogenesis may differ between filamentous fungi and yeasts. In the present study *Mucor circinelloides* was used as the principal model for oleaginous filamentous fungi. However, because of its commercial importance *Mort. alpina* was also included in order to verify the key results. This report indicates a number of significant differences in the biochemistry of lipid accumulation between oleaginous yeasts and oleaginous filamentous fungi. A revised and more concerted mechanism for the initiation of storage lipid synthesis when filamentous fungi experience N-limiting conditions is put forward. These findings have implications not only for the production of single-cell

Abbreviations: dO₂, dissolved oxygen concentration; NAD⁺:ICDH, NAD⁺:isocitrate dehydrogenase; PFK, phosphofructokinase.
oils but also for other commercial fermentations using filamentous fungi (e.g. those producing citric acid and gibberellic acid) in which lipid synthesis represents an undesirable by-product and therefore an unnecessary waste of substrate.

**METHODS**

**Chemicals.** Unless otherwise stated all fine chemicals were purchased from Sigma.

**Cultivation of fungi.** *Mucor circinelloides* CBS 108.16 and *Mortierella alpina* Peyron CBS 696.70 were initially cultivated in 1 litre magnetically stirred bottles containing 800 ml Kendrick medium (N-limiting) (Kendrick & Ratledge, 1992). These cultures were incubated for 16 h at 30 °C then used at 10% (v/v) to inoculate 4 litre (working volume) fermenters containing modified Kendrick medium containing ammonium tartrate at 2 g l⁻¹ for *M. circinelloides* and 30 g l⁻¹ for *Mort. alpina*. Fermenters were incubated at 30 °C, stirred at 500 r.p.m. with aeration at 0.5 vol. vol.⁻¹ min⁻¹ and pH maintained at 5.5 by automatic addition of KOH and HCl.

**Production of cell extracts.** Biomass was harvested by filtration (under reduced pressure) through a Whatman no. 1 filter and washed with cold distilled water. Cell extracts for the determination of enzyme activities were prepared by suspending mycelia in an extraction buffer (Wynn et al., 1998) and disrupted either by passage twice through a French pressure cell at 35 MPA or by a single pass through a ‘One Shot’ cell disrupter (Constant Systems) at 640 MPa. Disrupted cell suspensions were centrifuged at 10000 g for 10 min and the supernatant retained for enzyme analysis. Protein concentrations were determined using the method of Bradford (1976) with BSA as a standard.

**Preparation of spheroplasts and isolation of mitochondria.** *M. circinelloides* was grown in 1 litre stirred bottles, as described above. Harvested biomass was washed twice with spheroplasting buffer (50 mM Tris/HCl, pH 6.5, containing 1.2 M sorbitol) then suspended in the same buffer containing chitinase/chitosanase preparation (Vanheeswijck, 1984) at 2 mg ml⁻¹ and incubated for 3 h at 30 °C. The treated biomass was collected by centrifugation (10000 g for 10 min at 4 °C) and the spheroplasts formed by resuspension in 50 mM Tris/HCl (pH 7-5) and incubated at 20 °C for 1 h. The disrupted cells were fractionated by centrifugation at 5000 g for 10 min and then the supernatant centrifuged at 16000 g for 20 min. The cell preparations were maintained at 4 °C throughout. The supernatant and the pellet formed at 16000 g were retained as the ‘cytosolic’ and ‘mitochondrial’ fractions respectively.

**Estimation of enzyme activities.** NAD⁺:isocitrate dehydrogenase (NAD-IDCH) was assayed using the method of Kornberg (1955). ADP deaminase activity was assayed using a reaction volume containing 100 mM KH₂PO₄/KOH (pH 7.1), 2 mM MgCl₂, 0.5 mg BSA ml⁻¹, 2 mM NaH₂PO₄, 2 mM ATP (pH 7.1), 5 mM AMP. The assay volume was incubated for 10 to 30 min at 30 °C and the NH₄⁺ liberated was quantified using the indophenol method (Chaney & Marbach, 1962). Adenylyl kinase was determined using a method based on that of Sottocasa et al. (1967). The reaction volume contained 67 mM Tris/HCl (pH 7.5), 5 mM ADP, 0.5 units hexokinase/glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase mix (from baker’s yeast), 5 mM MgSO₄, 0.2 mM NAD⁺ and 10 mM glucose. The increase in A₃₄ₙ was measured. Phosphofructokinase (PFK) was assayed as described by Sols & Salas (1966), citrate synthase as described by Parvin (1969), succinate dehydrogenase as described by Schwartzgubel et al. (1981), pyruvate kinase as described by Worthington Enzymes (1979) and pyruvate carboxylase as described by Seubert & Weicker (1969). The assay reactions for citrate synthase, succinate dehydrogenase, pyruvate kinase and pyruvate carboxylase were supplemented with 0.1% (w/v) Triton X-100.

**Determination of nucleotide concentrations.** The concentrations of adenine nucleotides (ATP, ADP and AMP) were determined using the luciferin/luciferase system to quantify ATP (Spelmann et al., 1982). Samples (20 ml) from the fermenter were rapidly quenched (<0.5 s) by collection in sterile Universal tubes containing 4 ml conc. H₂SO₄. Quenched samples were diluted 1:10 with 5 mM glycglycine/KOH buffer (pH 7.8) and, if necessary, the pH adjusted to 7.8. Cell debris was removed by centrifugation at 10000 g for 10 min and then the supernatant was diluted 1:10 with glycglycine buffer. The diluted supernatant was either analysed immediately or stored at −20 °C for a maximum of 2 weeks prior to analysis. ATP was quantified by adding 50 µl of the sample prepared above to 50 µl 100 mM glycglycine buffer (pH 7.8) containing 5 mM MgSO₄, 0.5 mM phospho(enol)pyruvate and 100 µl ATP assay mix (Sigma). ADP was quantified by conversion to ATP in the same reaction mixture as described above but with the addition of 1 unit pyruvate kinase (type 1: crude preparation from rabbit muscle) and incubated at 37 °C for 10 min prior to the addition of the ATP assay mix. ADP was calculated by subtraction of the amount of ATP detected previously. AMP was likewise quantified by its conversion to ATP and then subtraction of the amount of ATP + ADP detected in the sample. AMP was converted to ATP by addition of 1 unit myokinase (from porcine muscle) and 1 unit pyruvate kinase followed by a 10 min incubation at 37 °C prior to the addition of the ATP assay mix.

**Determination of culture dry weight.** A 20 ml sample of the culture was harvested on to a washed, dried and pre-weighed filter (Whatman no. 1). The filtrate was retained and analysed for culture glucose and ammonium concentrations (see below). Harvested biomass was washed with distilled water and then dried at 110 °C to constant weight. The weight of the biomass was determined gravimetrically.

**Analysis of the culture supernatant.** The glucose concentration in the culture medium was determined using a GOD-Perid test kit (Boehringer Mannheim) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. The ammonium concentration in the culture filtrate was determined using the indophenol test (Chaney & Marbach, 1962).

**Analysis of intracellular metabolites.** Samples were collected into tubes containing 4 ml 5.8 M HClO₄. Samples were centrifuged at 10000 g for 10 min and the supernatant adjusted to pH 7.4 with NaOH. The isocitrate and citrate concentrations in the samples were determined as described by Siebert (1974) and Bagley (1974) respectively. Samples of culture medium were also analysed for isocitrate and citrate to allow corrections to be made for extracellular metabolites.

**Determination of culture dO₂ and CO₂ evolution.** The dissolved oxygen concentration [dO₂] of the culture medium in the fermenters was continuously recorded using polarographic O₂ electrodes (Mettler-Toledo, Woburn, MA, USA) as a percentage of the O₂ concentration in the equilibrated culture medium immediately prior to inoculation. The CO₂ evolution by the fungal cultures was determined by measuring the CO₂ in the fermenter exhaust using a CO₂ analyser (Analytical Development Co., Hoddesdon, UK).
RESULTS

The dO₂ in *Mc. circinelloides* cultures decreased during the period of active cell growth in the presence of NH₄⁺ in the culture medium (Fig. 1). After N-exhaustion the dO₂ recovered to an equilibrium point between 70% and 80%. The CO₂ content of the fermenter exhaust gas exhibited similar but opposite trends to the dO₂ data, with CO₂ concentration in the exhaust gas increasing during active growth (i.e. prior to N-exhaustion) then decreasing as the culture experienced N-limitation. Changes in CO₂ evolution were rapid, occurring within minutes of the exhaustion of the N-source.

The NAD:ICDH activities of two olearolinous fungi, *Mc. circinelloides* and *Mort. alpina*, were examined at a range of isocitrate and AMP concentrations *in vitro* (see Fig. 2a, b). The fungal enzymes were not dependent on AMP for activity in the presence of saturating levels of isocitrate. At low isocitrate concentrations AMP increased the affinity of the NAD:ICDH for isocitrate. The Kᵣ of NAD:ICDH for isocitrate in the presence of 1 mM AMP was tenfold lower in *Mc. circinelloides* (from 3·2 mM to 0·3 mM) and twofold lower in *Mort. alpina* (from 4·6 mM to 2·7 mM) than when determined in the absence of AMP. As a result of the increased affinities for isocitrate of the NAD:ICDHs from the fungi in the presence of AMP, activity was detectable and maximal at lower concentrations of isocitrate when AMP was present in the system (see Fig. 2a, b).

Attempts to determine the intracellular concentration of isocitrate in *Mc. circinelloides* failed to detect this metabolite at any stage of growth, the limit of detection being <1·5 nmol (mg dry wt)⁻¹. This corresponded to an intracellular concentration of less than 1 mM (see Discussion). In contrast, intracellular citrate was detectable both before and after N-exhaustion. A fourfold increase in the citrate concentration, from 3·7 ± 6 nmol (mg dry wt)⁻¹ (mean ± SEM; n = 3) to 16·1 ± 4·7 nmol (mg dry wt)⁻¹ (n = 5), occurred after N-exhaustion, corresponding to an intracellular citrate concentration of 1–2 mM prior to N-exhaustion and 4–8 mM after N-exhaustion.

When the activity of AMP deaminase was determined, in triplicate batch cultures of *Mc. circinelloides*, an increase in activity was reproducibly observed at the point when the cultures became N-limited and was coincident with the onset of lipid accumulation (see Fig. 3a). The increase in activity of AMP deaminase was, however, transitory and activity returned to basal levels within 5 h of N-exhaustion (see Fig. 3a). Similar data were obtained with *Mort. alpina* (Fig. 3b).

Throughout the cultivation period, the activity of adenylate kinase was high in comparison to the activity of AMP deaminase and it increased over threefold after the depletion of the culture N-source. The specific activity of adenylate kinase in *Mc. circinelloides* was 518 ± 154 nmol min⁻¹ (mg protein)⁻¹ (n = 5) prior to N-
was the most abundant nucleotide (concentration period immediately after N-exhaustion (see Fig. 4). ADP adenine nucleotides decreased by 50% during the 2–3 h ATP, ADP and AMP. The concentrations of all three almost immediate decrease in the concentrations of kinase activities, at the time of N-exhaustion, led to an stimulation of AMP deaminase and adenylate 

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Both citrate and NH₄⁺ affected PFK activity in Mc. circinelloides, though in an antagonistic fashion (Fig. 5). PFK activity, in vitro, was increased 50% by 5 mM NH₄⁺. However, higher concentrations of NH₄⁺ reversed the stimulation so that at 15 mM NH₄⁺ the activity of PFK was equivalent to the activity in the absence of NH₄⁺. Citrate, in contrast, inhibited the activity of PFK in vitro, causing a 50% decrease in activity at 5 mM and an abolition of activity at 15 mM. The effect of NH₄⁺ in the presence of citrate, on the activity of PFK confirmed the antagonistic affect of these two compounds. In the presence of 1 mM citrate, the stimulation of PFK by 4 mM NH₄⁺ was maximal and only half that observed in the absence of citrate.

When a cell-free extract from Mc. circinelloides was subjected to subcellular fractionation, the activity of pyruvate carboxylase [21 nmol min⁻¹ (mg protein)⁻¹] was recovered in the soluble fraction along with that of pyruvate kinase [5 mg min⁻¹ (mg protein)⁻¹] and did not appear in the cytosolic fraction. Pyruvate carboxylase activity was clearly separated from the activity of the mitochondrial marker enzymes citrate synthase [37 nmol min⁻¹ (mg protein)⁻¹] and succinate dehydro-
and other secondary products are accumulated. Only by a sound understanding of this biochemistry can rational attempts at increasing lipid/secondary product accumulation using molecular techniques be made. Previous attempts to increase the production of secondary products by gene cloning without a sound biochemical background have highlighted the ‘hit and miss’ (mainly miss) nature of this approach (Rangasamy & Ratledge, 2000; Ratledge, 2000; Roehr et al., 1996; Ruijter et al., 2000).

The enzymes thought to be important in the initiation of lipid accumulation (ATP: citrate lyase, AMP deaminase and NAD⁺:isocitrate lyase) in yeasts (Evans & Ratledge, 1985a, b) have all been reported in filamentous fungi (Botham & Ratledge, 1979; Wynn et al., 1998) and their presence in *M. circinelloides* has been confirmed in this and previous studies (Wynn et al., 1997).

**NAD⁺:ICDH in oleaginous fungi**

The characteristics of the NAD⁺:ICDHs of the two fungi examined were similar (though the enzyme from *Mucor alpina* had a higher affinity for isocitrate than that from *Mortierella*) but were clearly distinct from those described for the NAD⁺:ICDH from oleaginous yeasts (Botham & Ratledge, 1979; Evans et al., 1983; Evans & Ratledge, 1985b). Both fungi are oleaginous – with *M. circinelloides* capable of accumulating 25% (w/w dry wt) lipid and *Mort. alpina* capable of accumulating 40% lipid (Wynn et al., 1999) – however, the NAD⁺:ICDH activities in these fungi were not absolutely dependent on AMP and, therefore, more closely resembled the enzyme from non-oleaginous micro-organisms (Evans et al., 1983; Atkinson et al., 1965). It is important to note, however, that NAD⁺:ICDH was only active in the absence of AMP at non-physiological concentrations of isocitrate; i.e. 3 mM and 5 mM for *M. circinelloides* and *Mort. alpina* respectively. Although we could not detect isocitrate in the cells it is likely that the concentration of isocitrate will be approximately 5% of the citrate concentration (Siebert, 1974), which was measured maximally at 15–20 nmol (mg dry wt)⁻¹. This would give a concentration of isocitrate of less than 1 nmol (mg dry wt)⁻¹, i.e. less than 0.5 mM assuming 2–4 µl H₂O (mg dry wt)⁻¹ (Knowles, 1977). At this concentration of isocitrate, NAD⁺:ICDH would be down-regulated by the decrease in AMP concentration observed in the cells as a result of the increase in AMP deaminase activity triggered by N-exhaustion from the culture medium: see below.

**AMP deaminase activity**

Activation of AMP deaminase plays a key role in decreasing the concentration of AMP in oleaginous yeasts entering N-limited growth (Evans & Ratledge, 1985a). A similar situation occurred in the filamentous fungi studied, with a peak of AMP deaminase activity coincident with N-exhaustion causing a decrease in the intracellular AMP concentration (see below). The de-
crease in AMP concentration was coincident with the decrease in CO₂ evolution (see Fig. 1), which was indicative of a major decrease in the activity of the citric acid cycle. That the increase in activity of AMP deaminase was directly responsible for the decline in activity of NAD:ICDH, thereby affecting the overall activity of the citric acid cycle, is entirely consistent with these observations. The situation is more complex than in oleaginous yeasts in that AMP deaminase subsequently returned to its original activity, but this did not lead to any concomitant increase in AMP concentration or in the rate of CO₂ evolution. Therefore, the effect of the increase in AMP deaminase, though transitory, nevertheless may have initiated a cascade of connected biochemical events that rapidly led to the initiation of lipid accumulation.

Changes in adenylate pool size and cellular energy charge

The increased activity of AMP deaminase led to a rapid decrease in the cellular AMP, from 0.8 nmol (mg dry wt)^−1 (0.2–0.4 mM) prior to N-exhaustion to 0.5 nmol (mg dry wt)^−1 (0.13–0.25 mM) after N-exhaustion. AMP remained at this concentration even after AMP deaminase returned to its initial activity (Fig. 4). This approximately 50% decrease in AMP concentration, although not as dramatic as the 90% decrease reported for some yeasts (Boulton & Ratledge, 1983; Mitsushima et al., 1978), would nevertheless still lead to a significant down-regulation of NAD:ICDH activity, and thereby rapidly diminish the carbon flux through the citric acid cycle. Although the AMP concentration measured represented the total intracellular, rather than intra-mitochondrial, concentration this is thought unimportant as the mitochondrial membrane in eukaryotic microorganisms is permeable to AMP (Matsushima et al., 1978; Bartels & Jensen, 1979). Therefore, the intracellular and intra-mitochondrial concentrations of AMP are likely to be equivalent.

Although a decrease in the AMP concentration associated with the depletion of the N-source in \textit{M. circinelloides} resembles the situation reported for oleaginous yeasts (Boulton & Ratledge, 1983; Mitsushima et al., 1978), changes in the adenylate pool and the cellular energy charge differed from those previously reported. Whereas in yeasts the decrease in AMP was accompanied by an increase in the intracellular ATP/AMP ratio (Solodovnikova et al., 1998) and, therefore, energy charge, in \textit{M. circinelloides} this did not happen. During the transition from N-replete to N-limited growth, the cellular concentrations of all three adenine nucleotides decreased by approximately 50% and the energy charge remained constant. This is similar to the situation reported in bacteria and fish, where during metabolic stress the cellular energy charge was maintained within closely defined limits at the expense of the total adenylate pool size, by the combined action of AMP deaminase and adenylate kinase (Atkinson, 1977; Woo & Chiu, 1997).

Regulatory properties of PFK

A preliminary study of the PFK of \textit{Mc. circinelloides} demonstrated regulatory properties similar to those reported for the enzyme from other fungi (Roehr et al., 1996). Activity was stimulated by the presence of NH₄⁺ and inhibited by citrate, with these effectors acting antagonistically. Therefore under N-limiting conditions a decrease in the intracellular NH₄⁺ and an increase in citrate concentration would down-regulate the carbon flux through the glycolytic pathway, via inhibition of PFK activity. It is possible that the build-up of citrate due to the down-regulation of the citric acid cycle (see above) plays a role in regulating the rate of glycolysis (due to the inhibition of PFK) and therefore its own synthesis.

Subcellular localization of pyruvate carboxylase

A cytosolic pyruvate carboxylase activity in \textit{Mc. circinelloides} is in accord with the observations in other fungi (Osmani & Scrutton, 1985; Klitsch et al., 1991). In this regard filamentous fungi are distinct from yeasts, in which both mitochondrial and cytosolic pyruvate carboxylases have been reported (Evans et al., 1983; Rohde et al., 1991; Van Urk et al., 1989), and animals, where pyruvate carboxylase is mitochondrial (Böttger et al., 1969; Taylor et al., 1978). A cytosolic pyruvate carboxylase would allow the cytosolic generation of NADPH for lipid biosynthesis via the co-operation of pyruvate carboxylase, malate dehydrogenase and malic enzyme to produce a ‘transhydrogenase cycle’ generating NADPH at the expense of NADH and ATP.

Conclusions

The biochemical mechanism responsible for the initiation of lipid accumulation in oleaginous fungi differs in several fundamental ways from that observed in oleaginous yeasts. As a result, the hypothesis explaining the onset of lipid accumulation in oleaginous yeasts requires modification before it can be applied to filamentous fungi. Although many of the enzymes involved in both systems are the same, the mechanism that operates in filamentous fungi is a somewhat more complicated and concerted process than that reported for yeasts.

The following hypothesis is put forward to explain the switching from active growth to the stationary phase in filamentous fungi.

1. As the N-source in the medium reaches a concentration below the \(K_m\) value of the uptake mechanisms the intracellular NH₄⁺ concentration decreases. Because NH₄⁺ is an activator of PFK the decrease in its concentration will lead to a decrease in the carbon flux through the glycolytic pathway (Fig. 6).

2. A reduced flux of carbon through the glycolytic pathway (and therefore ultimately the citric acid cycle) will limit ATP generation, so the energy charge within
the cell will begin to decrease and this will activate AMP deaminase in order to maintain the energy charge within strictly controlled limits.

3. As a result of the activation of AMP deaminase, the AMP concentration will decrease and further limit the activity of the citric acid cycle (via NAD:ICDH activity), further restricting ATP generation; this will lead to a feed-forward process so that the energy charge can only be maintained by decreasing the total adenylate pool to a minimum level (approx. 50% of its trophophase level). Flux through the citric acid cycle will be further limited to a basal level, thereby restricting the supply of intermediates for anabolic processes, which will be further down-regulated by the decreased cellular ATP concentration, bringing them into line with the growth-limited environment.

4. When NAD:ICDH activity falls, citrate accumulates, which could further limit PFK activity. Citrate is translocated into the cytosol for cleavage by ATP: citrate lyase to provide cytosolic acetyl-CoA for lipogenesis.

5. The cytosolic pyruvate carboxylase together with ATP: citrate lyase and malate dehydrogenase allow a ‘transhydrogenase cycle’ to generate cytosolic NADPH independently from the ‘citrate/malate cycle’ (Evans et al., 1983), thereby providing sufficient reducing power for lipogenesis.

That *M. circinelloides* and *Mort. alpina* have such an involved mechanism for the sensing of oncoming N-limited growth should not be a surprise. These fungi are commonly isolated from soil, which is a N-limited habitat, so that intricate mechanisms to deal with N-depletion from the environment would be an expected environmental adaptation.

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