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Collecting oral histories for the purpose of stimulating community involvement at Tell Balata, Palestine

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Science – Wish – Reality

**International Conference on the
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■ Collecting oral histories for the purpose of stimulating community involvement at Tell Balata (Palestine)

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■ Introduction

Close to the city of Nablus (Palestinian West Bank) the archaeological site of Tell Balata is located. The tell was inhabited in the Chalcolithic period and from the Middle Bronze Age up to Hellenistic times. It has been identified with the biblical city of Shechem (see Wright 1965). In 2010 the “Tell Balata Archaeological Park Project” was started to preserve the site and to develop it sustainably. The aim is to turn it into an archaeological park with visitor facilities, such as an on-site visitor centre. Raising the awareness and participation of the local community with concern to the value, vulnerability and management of the site are important aspects of the project. This is done by means of various activities, of which one focuses on gathering oral histories about the site from the members of the local community. In this paper the aims, challenges and subsequent results of this part of the community project are presented.

■ The project

The “Tell Balata Archaeological Park Project” is a joint venture between the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MOTA-DACH), the Faculty of Archaeology of Leiden University (*Faculteit Archeologie, Universiteit Leiden*), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) department in Ramallah. It is funded by the Dutch Ministry for Foreign Affairs, through the Dutch representative office in Ramallah. The project, which started in the spring of 2010 and runs till 2013, aims to

save the site from further decay and to turn it into a sustainable and visitor-friendly site park.

The main habitation phase consisted of a Middle Bronze Age city, of which the remains of a massive city wall, two impressive gates, a fortress temple and some domestic houses are preserved (Fig. 1). It dates back to the 2nd millennium BC (ca 1700–1200). The site was excavated between 1913 and 1934 by a German expedition and between 1956 and 1968 by an American team, but mostly neglected ever since. As the “uncrowned queen of Palestine”, the site is however important, both for its history as well as for its development potential. Together with the old town of Nablus and various other historical sites in its vicinity, it is listed on the Inventory of Cultural and Natural Sites of Potential Outstanding Universal Value of Palestine (Taha 2009).

In order to preserve and develop the site, its future management is being organised, with raising the awareness of the local community with concern to the value and vulnerability as one of the main focus points. For that reason the members of the local community are as much as possible involved in every aspect of the project. An important focus has been placed upon developing activities in the field of education and outreach; various activities have been carried out in this sphere, consisting of community days, archaeological summer courses for children, a logo competition with local students, etc. This also includes an extensive educational programme whereby a teachers handbook is being developed on the archaeology and history of Palestine (see also van den Dries forthcoming). Moreover, the project aims to enhance the tourism value of the site, whereby interpretive materials such as site leaflets, site interpretation and road signs have been



developed in collaboration with local governmental and commercial partners. Most importantly, the project aims to work with the local community in establishing the archaeological park. The visitor centre has, for instance, been designed by local architects, all building and promotion material is fabricated locally and the park staff will consist of local community members. The park aims to attract sustainable tourism, which can develop local socio-economic benefits for the area. The gathering of oral histories from local community members was an integral part of this community work. The idea for this arose out of the “Awareness, Promotion and Education” strategy that was developed with the input from a local community centre in 2010. With the help of two archaeology students from Leiden University who are doing their master in heritage management at the Faculty of Archaeology, as well as with Palestinian members of the project, 26 interviews were subsequently undertaken during the six week summer campaign of 2011.

■ Our aims with oral history

Oral history is a rather popular method used in the humanities, social sciences and all kinds of culture studies to collect and record narratives from individuals. It consists of interviews that focus on the perspective of the participants, like their personal memories and commentaries of events, anecdotes, eyewitness accounts etc. It is often associated with folklore or the worldviews

of indigenous groups, as it has been extensively practised by anthropologists to gather information of other cultures, but it originates from historical research. As a method it was developed to gather information on historically significant events.

Within archaeology, it is being applied as well, albeit not very often. As oral history usually is associated with collecting people’s accounts about particular events or experiences, it may at first instance not seem very relevant for archaeology, as by definition most archaeological sites lack still living eye-witnesses. Yet, it can be a very useful method for involving local and indigenous groups in archaeological interpretations and management processes (Geurds 2007). Another well-known example is its application in community archaeology, e.g. the project at Quseir, Egypt (Moser et al. 2002, 236). According to Moser et al. oral history should even be central to any community archaeology project. Not only does conducting interviews result in additional information about archaeological remains and about the community’s perspectives on their heritage, it is also important in communicating the aims of the project and thus to strengthen community involvement (ibid. 222–223, 236). As such, it also has the potential to provide insight into the values, concerns and wishes of the local community in relation to future management plans.

It is these aims that were central to our oral history project at Tell Balata. Firstly, we intended to document and preserve stories, anecdotes and knowledge about the recent history of the site

and the archaeological research that has been done in the past. Since especially the people who participated in the German and American excavations of the 1920s and 1960s were already very old, it was important to collect their memories and information as soon as possible. For instance, it may show what things were done, when, where and why. There was particular interest in this by MOTA-DACH because nearly all documentation of the German excavations was lost in the Second World War. This information could not only be of use for the excavation campaign of 2011 but for all future research on the site.

Secondly, our team wanted to involve the community in the project and to raise awareness and support for the management and maintenance of the site. As the site is situated in the middle of a lively community and is heavily being used, for instance as a playing field, a recreation area, a walking path and a site for olive cultivation (Fig. 2), the development of the site into an archaeological park may seriously affect the community. It aims at bringing socio-economic benefits through employment and tourism, but it also changes the way in which the site can be used. Any future management and development model of the site therefore has to take the values, wishes and concerns of the local community into account. As such, it is important that the community feels connected to the site and that it is involved in the investigation, management, development and maintenance of the site. During the Quseir-project it was experi-

enced that local people had a strong desire to be kept informed about the progress of the project (Moser et al. 2002, 238). As our project had the desire to inform the community, we decided to use the interviews as one of the ways to provide them with information. For their part they could pose questions, express concerns and provide suggestions. Such an exchange of ideas was considered important to avoid potential future conflicts, or – at least – to get an idea about tensions, and to come, ultimately, to locally relevant and sustainable solutions. The information that would be gathered this way was meant to be used for the management plan and the development of the visitor centre. As such it was considered important to gather opinions and wishes concerning the work to turn the site into an archaeological park and the future management of the site. The site is part of the daily life of the villagers, so their ideas and present-day use of the site have to be taken into account when writing the management plan.

Finally, we wanted to collect interpretive material that could be used for exhibitions in the visitor centre, like photo-portraits of the former and present workers, video recordings of children playing at the site, old documents, information about finds, anything. As the entire “Tell Balata Archaeological Park Project” has the aim to assist the Palestinian team in expanding their skills in this kind of activities, the oral history sub-project implicitly contributed to the capacity building goals.



2 | The tell is intensively used by the local community, for instance as a playground, a short-cut road and a picnic spot, but also for olive production. For that reason the community needs to be involved in the development and future management of the site.

■ Method

As it is crucial for the success of an oral history project to prepare well in advance, the fieldwork was preceded by a thorough preparation. The initial scope of the oral history project was developed in the summer of 2010 by the joint project during brainstorm sessions as part of the “Awareness, Promotion and Education” strategy in Nablus. This was followed by more extensive preparations in early 2011 in Leiden. Before the 2011 field-season, we conducted background research on the site and the community and the students practised with voice recording, videotaping and interviewing. Since the budget was very limited, we decided to use simple material because we did not need broadcast quality. Extra digital storage capacity was organised in order to archive and backup all material that would be collected.

We also discussed the strategies to get in contact with the interviewees. During the initial brainstorm sessions in Nablus, the project team had expressed possible concerns that it would not be very easy to talk to local women. As such, it was agreed that the oral history team would have to include somebody from the local project staff who was familiar with the local situation to arrange the interviews. Such aspects were however difficult to prepare in detail. We intended to work with local Palestinian students for capacity building reasons and translation purposes, and they would have to play a major role in defining the approach. However, this aspect of shared collaboration was complicated because the Palestinian students, who would participate in the oral history project, were not known yet at this phase.

Other things that were difficult to decide on, was for instance the sample of participants. We knew in advance that we had to face challenges with the concept of “community”, due to its heterogeneity (see, e.g. Smith / Waterton 2009, 18). A community can be linked to the research subject because of its geographic connection to the site, but also through social, economic or cultural aspects. Therefore, multiple people would have to be consulted to retrieve the various views and values that may be present in the community. We wanted to direct our oral history project to the people living close to the site, which consisted of the inhabitants of Tell Balata village, with an emphasis on the direct neighbours and land owners. We also wanted to focus on the inhabitants of the Balata Refugee Camp, as well as to people otherwise connected to the tell – such as former and present field workers and children playing at the site. As there was only limited time available, we therefore faced the challenge of selecting people from a very close community, with lots of family ties, whilst unintentionally excluding others. This can

be a sensitive issue, regarding the family relations and the large number of landowners, which can lead to possible discontent towards the project. The joint project team finally decided to interview the most directly involved community members first, but we also made an inventory of people that have to be interviewed in a later phase.

In advance, we also discussed the questions we would like to pose to the various groups of people. These consisted of general questions relating to historical knowledge and to the use and perceptions of the site. Additionally, more person-specific questions were formulated, related to the specific connection the interviewee had with the site or the project.

■ Results

We conducted the interviews during the fieldwork campaign of the summer of 2011. At that time excavations and site maintenance activities were going on, so there was already quite some attention for the site from the local community. Almost everyone in the Balata village knew about the project and it was not very hard to get people interested in participating in the oral history project, although it was experienced that many people at first thought they had nothing to tell us. As all kinds of people were willing to be interviewed, from a sheikh to policemen of the Nablus Tourism Police, from elderly ladies to young children, a total of 26 interviews could be conducted (Fig. 3). Except for a few interviews for which permission was not granted, they were all taped with a digital voice recorder. Some were put on video as well and nearly all participants were photographed.

■ Regarding our first aim, it turned out that there were indeed a lot of memories and information about Tell Balata present within the community, even about the old excavation campaigns. Not just the relatively recent American excavations were remembered, but even the much earlier German ones were recalled by many respondents. They all had interesting stories to tell about the excavation work and about the (international) archaeologists, such as on the differentiation of the work and the wages. We also discovered that although there was a lot of knowledge about the ancient habitation of the tell, it did not always match with the archaeological interpretations. Moreover, there were stories about the history of the site unrelated to archaeology, for example concerning the role it played during the Palestinian resistance in the 1970s and 1980s. These historical narratives bear at least as much significance to the locals as the archaeological habitation history. We also documented some local legends about the history of the site – like a story about a king and his slaves, played by



3 | Related to the project's goal of capacity building and inter-cultural dialogue, a young Palestinian archaeologist, Wala Ahmed Gazal, worked together with the students from Leiden, Annemiek Rhebergen and Sarah-Jayne Nogarede, in gathering oral histories. The fact that the team consisted of women made it easier to gather testimonies from local woman.

a group of children at the site, but they did not seem to be too abundant.

■ Another interesting result concerned the workmen that helped with the excavation during the field campaign of 2011. They not only indicated that they knew the necessary field-methods and techniques in order to undertake their work, but that they were very interested in learning more about the history and archaeological interpretations of the site, too. It had never occurred to the excavation team that the workers would want to know these things in such detail, as they had never expressed it before. This information has been taken into account for future training and outreach activities in the management plan.

■ With respect to the construction of the park, the visitor centre and its future management we retrieved some useful perspectives, too. Overall, the reactions of the local community to the plans for the archaeological park were positive, as it matched their awareness of the historical importance of the site, as well as their desires for economic opportunities deriving from a tourism attraction. People expressed, for instance, their plans for providing facilities for tourists, such as souvenir shops with local products. As such, the development plans for the visitor-centre was generally well received, even though some ownership aspects are yet to be solved. In effect, many people expressed their local pride about the tell – one man proudly showed us his view on the tell from his bedroom – as well as a positive response to the fact that preservation and presentation work was being done.

However, there were also some concerns: community members often use the site for picnics and recreation, and they explicitly expressed their wish that this would remain possible in the future – an important issue when considering the fact that recreational areas in the Nablus region are scarce due to the political context. Also the use of the site as a shortcut to the other side of the village was discussed. This latter issue was already known to the project team and they could assure the community that it was taken into account and that a new path will be constructed. We also discussed issues like overflowing garbage containers, dumping of car tires and inflammable material and it turned out that these concerns were shared by the community, too. Various solutions were expressed, for instance by the owners of the garages surrounding the site on how pollution could be prevented. In this sense, many community members expressed a desire to become more involved with the maintenance and management of the site, so that together they can help turn the site into something they can be proud of once again after years of neglect. On the practical side, it turned out that not all visual recordings of the interviews will be useful for showing in the visitor centre. For instance, on one occasion we filmed a conversation while in the background the wife of this interviewee is falling asleep on the sofa. Although it might be considered as rather funny, such footage was obviously not selected for further interpretive purposes. Another reason is that the video recordings did not suit all circumstances, like interviews in open air, and did not yield qualitatively good material.



روايات حول تل بلاطة

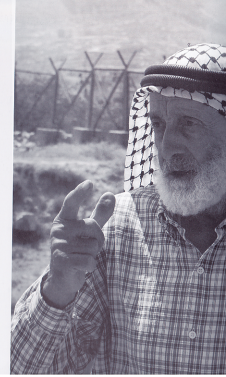
جبر محمد سلمان (94 سنة)
Jabr Mohammad Salman (94)

عمل مع البعثة الأمريكية في الحفريات التي تمت في تل في الخمسينات والستينات من القرن الماضي وخلال تلك الفترة وجد عدد من القطع الأثرية الجميلة كحجر من الرخام مزخرف برسمة هي حوزة
وأما ما نأخذ من العظم من الفترة الكنعانية إلا أنه من كل حوزة حوزة
الثلاث كانت فيه البطان والعمارة غير موجودات ولكن الكثير رأيت أنه أهميته
رغم أنه غير مثقل، أما الرجال الذين ساعدوا في الحفر عليه لم يحصدوا
ديار إضافي للمعلم الجديد.

Jabr Mohammad Salman has worked with the Americans when they excavated here in the 1950s and '60s. Back in those days he found quite some nice things, such as a marble stone decorated with a drawing of a tree and a ruler, or a copper figurine of the Canaanite god Baal. However, he did not dig deeper hands or eyes, but for Dr. Wright it was important to find the items who had helped finding it got one extra dollar for their good work.

في إحدى المرات وجدنا حجرا كبيرا والذي اعتقدت أنه يستخدم
لمحور الزيتون ولكن أبو عيسى تجاوز عمي على صحة هذا الاعتقاد
ولم يصدق بأن هذا الحجر كان يستخدم كمحصرة للزيتون

We once found a big stone, which I thought was used to make olive oil. My friend Abu Isa and I, however, had many doubts.



دينا نافع فقها (12 سنة)
Dunya Nafez Fuqaha (12)

نور علي مسعود (11 سنة)
Nour Ali Masuod (11)

Stories about Tell Balata

وما نأخذ من قرية بلاطة تعرفنا الكثير من القصص عن تل بلاطة ومنها
عن ملك اسمه الحاشي، وقد كان ليما نطعمنا خبز حبه، وجميعنا يظنون
منه اننا أكثر من العفرين أن يفرحوا، وفي أحد الأيام قدم أحد الخدم ووضع
الدم في طعام الملك، والملك كان محتاجا للدرء، فلقد يسأل كل من في
التبعية عن دوره، وفي النهاية كانت المعلومة بأن جاء رجل كان المظاف قد جلبه
في السابق كان ليلة الحاح، ليلة الملك، وهو الأمر يستدعيه الملك على ما
لعله سببا في ذلك الملك شاكرا لسيده، وقل له ان يعود إلى اسمه سليمان
شعرة مرة أخرى، بمعنى القصص تلم القديت غابا بتعليقها في القصص
الاستدعاء وهم يستخدمون الحجر الكبير أمام المعبد ككرسي للتمسك

Dunya (left above) and Nour (right above) are two girls that know a lot about the site. Dunya's uncle, one of them is about the king, El Hachash. "The king was a really mean man who tortured his people and let them pay far more taxes than he was allowed to. One day his slaves poisoned his food, and the king badly needed medical treatment. He asked everybody in the city for a cure, and at last he came to a man whom he had tortured badly in the past. To his surprise this man gave him the cure, and he said that he could forgive the king for what happened before. The king was so thankful for this that he never treated anyone badly ever again." Some stories the girls often get out on the site with their friends. They use the great standing stone as the king's throne.



4 | At the end of the campaign, a booklet with the testimonies of 24 interviewees – old and young, male and female – was produced. It was distributed during the “family day” amongst the interviewees and to all other interested community members.

At the end of the campaign, all interviews were transcribed and analysed. The recordings, photographs and the video material were archived and the collected information was presented in a report, which is available for consultation for the next phases of the project. The archive will be stored in the on-site visitors' centre, where it will be made accessible for presentational purposes and further research. Additionally, a bilingual (Arabic and English) booklet “Stories about Tell Balata” (Fig. 4) was produced. It contains the portraits of 24 participants and some quotes from their accounts. This booklet was given to all people that participated in the project and it was distributed on the “community day” that was held at the end of the campaign, whereby ca 700 visitors were present. The booklet will also become available at the website and at the visitor centre.

Conclusions and recommendations

By means of the oral history project at Tell Balata, valuable knowledge about the recent history of the site, memories, commemorations and joyful stories surrounding it, as well as views regarding the management of the park have been retrieved from the local community. It has turned out very useful to gather accounts and perceptions of ordinary events rather than just historically significant ones. In doing so, we noticed a lack of

knowledge about the distant, archaeological past of the site and a wish to learn more about this and the daily lives of the people who lived there in the past. In this respect, there is a clear task for the project and the future park managers, and our joint efforts to develop a teacher's handbook seem to suit such a demand as well.

How valuable it is to archive oral histories for future generations, is shown by the recent passing away of one of the oldest local excavators at the German and American excavations. He was in his nineties and died just before the oral history project started. The project leaders had often talked to him on prior occasions, so many of his stories, memories and perspectives were known, but his death was nevertheless very unfortunate for the project. As he had always been a passionate local supporter for the current preservation and management activities at the site and as he probably would have been glad with the first results, he was honoured by putting his portrait on the cover of the booklet.

In addition, the oral history project has turned out to be a useful communication tool. Whilst collecting stories and other valuable information, we could further discuss the future plans of the site with local respondents and ask for their opinions about them. In this way they learned that their views are needed, appreciated and taken into account and we learned – although the respondents were mostly enthusiastic about the plans – that the project needs to work on some

concerns as well. The oral histories thereby also illustrated the need for further and more detailed stakeholder meetings with a broader range of local community members and groups, which will be undertaken as part of the future management plans for the site.

At the same time, awareness was raised about the importance of this site. The (international) attention for the site made clear to the community that it still is valued by others too, like researchers and tourists, and that it is worthwhile to take good care of it. On the other hand, it also showed us the strong bond the local people already have with their site, the values they attach to it and their wish to be involved in the project and the future management of the site. In this regard, many community members considerably appreciated the production and distribution of the booklet with their accounts, which was locally printed. The project team had planned this in advance, but we had not expected that it would have such an impact. As it was not a huge financial investment, this is surely worth considering for other oral history projects.

Of course we encountered difficulties as well. For instance, the oral history project was, and should be dependent on the involvement of the Palestinian team members. This is not only because of language issues and of increased cultural sensitivity and access to local community members, but also because of obvious reasons of capacity building and project ownership. However, this joint research element was not always easy to organise. It only became clear after the summer campaign had started, that there would be no Palestinian students available to jointly undertake the oral history project. At this point, our lack to speak fluent Arabic became problematic, as we could not hope to grasp the nuanced and carefully formulated answers of the participants. It was only when a Palestinian member of the excavation team volunteered to assist with the translations that the oral history project could continue successfully. She not only acted as a translator but she also gave essential cultural and religious background information to the students of Leiden University. Such issues clearly illustrate the need for locally instigated and developed oral history projects for the future.

However, despite the language difficulties and cultural misunderstandings that it brought along, the team consisting primarily of foreigners also had some advantages. As in their view we did not know much, most interviewees were quite willing to inform us extensively, or to show us how proud they were of their heritage. The idea that people from so far away were interested in them, in their community and their site, might have contributed to this.

The work is by no means finished. There are many more community members to talk to, more people to involve, more stories to collect. It could also be useful to visit respondents a second time to gather additional memories. Especially since some stories – like emotional testimonies of how the site was used to hide from Israeli soldiers – are only told after a relation of trust has been established. Also, several people at first thought they had nothing to tell us, it took a while before they understood that the project was interested in all kinds of information and stories, even what games they used to play at the site as children. Furthermore, there is a need to check up on some of the results, as it was not always possible to verify whether some stories were accurate. Therefore, future research will be necessary, preferably in even closer collaboration with our Palestinian colleagues. Projects like these always benefit from a long-term duration. Yet, on the basis of our experiences so far, we believe that collecting oral histories can be a very helpful start to involve local communities in heritage management projects. It may not always be possible to organise and not all places have the right circumstances, but in principle it should be attempted to include an oral history project in any heritage management project – not just in community archaeology projects.

■ **Erinnerungen sammeln, um Verbundenheit zu stärken** ***Oral history* am Tell Balata (Palästina)**

Der Archäologiepark Tell Balata ist ein dreijähriges Kooperationsprojekt (2010–2013) des palästinensischen Ministeriums für Tourismus und Altertümer (Abteilung Archäologisches Kulturgut, MOTA-DACH), der Fakultät für Archäologie der Universität Leiden in den Niederlanden und der UNESCO (Ramallah) mit dem Ziel, den Fundplatz vor dem Verfall zu bewahren und ihn als besucherfreundlich gestaltete Anlage zu erhalten. Der Siedlungshügel in der Nähe von Nablus birgt die Reste einer mittelbronzezeitlichen Stadt mit einer gewaltigen Stadtmauer, zwei imposanten Toren, einem befestigten Tempel und Wohnhäusern aus dem 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr. (ca. 1700–1200). Der Tell Balata, auch die ungekrönte Königin Palästinas genannt, steht zusammen mit der Altstadt von Nablus und anderen Plätzen im Umfeld auf der palästinensischen Vorschlagsliste zur Eintragung in die Liste des Kultur- und Naturerbes der Welt.

Ein Kernpunkt des Kooperationsprojekts ist die Sensibilisierung der Anwohner für den Wert

und die Schutzbedürftigkeit der Fundstelle. Aus diesem Grund wird die Bevölkerung in größtmöglichem Maße an dem Projekt beteiligt, z. B. durch Interviews, in denen Anwohner zur Fundstelle befragt wurden. Die 26 Gespräche, die eine junge einheimische Archäologin und zwei Archäologiestudentinnen aus Leiden gemeinsam führten, sind in einer kleinen Broschüre nachzulesen, die an die Bevölkerung verteilt wurde.

Ein solches Vorgehen erwies sich als sehr hilfreich, um ortansässige Bevölkerung in Denkmalpflegeprojekte einzubinden. Sicher ist es organisatorisch nicht immer möglich, aber grundsätzlich sollte man versuchen, die Methode der so genannten *Oral History* in alle künftigen Kulturerbe-Projekte einzubinden.

■ About the authors

Monique van den Dries studied Prehistory of North-western Europe at Leiden University. She worked for several bodies in the Dutch heritage management and subsequently became a lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Archaeology where she teaches Archaeological Heritage Management and coordinates the Heritage Management specialisation for master's students. Since 2008 she has been participating in the ACE project and is one of the project leaders of the "Tell Balata Archaeological Park Project" with a special focus on the community and communication aspects.

Sjoerd van der Linde obtained his BSc in Archaeology at Leiden University and his MA in Managing Archaeological Sites at University College London. His PhD focuses on the development of an ethical and sustainable framework for managing archaeological sites in the developing world. He is currently involved with the ACE project and in teaching aspects of Archaeological Heritage Management at Leiden University.

www.tellbalata.com

Illustration credits

1 and 2 | M. H. van den Dries, Archive Tell Balata Archaeological Park Project. – 3 | A. Rhebergen, Archive Tell Balata Archaeological Park Project. – 4 | M. H. van den Dries.

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