

The Highest God and His Oracular Disclosure

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Abstract. *The question of the Most High God is very difficult to address from many points of view. First, because of the disproportionality of ancient sources. Most sources are epigraphic in nature, including simple dedications or those resulting from a covenant, and contain rather little information that can be addressed in detail. The literary sources are four in number and raise serious problems of interpretation. The numismatic ones are completely missing from the context in the case of Hypsistos. Moreover, the way the subject has been treated in modern historiography, especially in relation to pagan sympathisers or God-fearers orbiting around the synagogue environment, makes this sensitive issue even more cautious. Finally, the perception itself of the identity of this Most High god, as well as the typology of the cult, its potential unitary character is another thorny issue. Two of the epigraphs discovered in the Lycian town of Oinoanda, that of Chromatis and the oracular response of Apollo of Claros, are, we believe, a very good starting point for clarifying some of the imagological aspects of this abstract and anonymous god.*

Rezumat. Chestiunea Zeului Prea înalt este foarte greu de abordat din multe puncte de vedere. În primul rând, din cauza disproporționalității surselor antice. Majoritatea surselor sunt de natură epigrafică, inclusiv simple dedicații sau cele rezultate dintr-o promisiune, și conțin destul de puține informații care pot fi analizate în detaliu. Izvoarele literare sunt în număr de patru și ridică serioase probleme de interpretare. Cele numismatice lipsesc cu desăvârșire din context în cazul lui Hypsistos. Mai mult, felul în care subiectul a fost tratat în istoriografia modernă, în special în legătură cu simpatizanții păgâni sau cu adoratorii zeului care orbitează în jurul mediului sinagogii, face această problemă sensibilă și trebuie tratată cu precauție. În fine, percepția în sine a identității acestui Zeu Prea Înalt, precum și tipologia cultului, potențialul său caracter unitar reprezintă o altă problemă spinoasă. Două dintre epigrafele descoperite în orașul lician Oinoanda, cea a lui Chromatis și răspunsul oracular al lui Apollo din Claros, sunt, credem, un foarte bun punct de plecare pentru clarificarea unora dintre aspectele imagologice ale acestui zeu abstract și anonim.

Keywords: Hypsistos, oracles, Oinoanda, Claros, Didyma.

At least three literary ancient sources mention the diminishing role, whether not disappearance of certain oracles through the late Hellenistic period and the beginning of the Principate (i.e. 2nd century BC to 2nd century AD). Among them, the most prominent is certainly Plutarch who, in two of his Pythian dialogues, is very reluctant to the idea that they would ever be revived. Prior to him, the satire writer Juvenal pleaded in his sixth satire (vv. 553-6) that: “Whatever an astrologer says, they will believe it has been reported from the spring of

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Hammon, since oracles cease at Delphi and the murkiness of future afflicts mankind.”² Plutarch remarks with regret that precisely at Delphi, where he was a priest in AD 95 at least “the theology of mantic revelation was still a lively subject”³. He could envisage a modest revival during his lifetime. The reality was that, at least at Delphi the temple seemed to be deserted all the time as it was devoid of crowds like it used to be once⁴. Therefore, “Plutarch’s classic and melancholy statement on the general disappearance of the oracles leaves it unclear when most of them became extinct”, as Saul Levin says in his study *The Old Greek Oracles in Decline* or if they truly became so or just devoid of people. Strabo, in his *Geography*, remarked that in his time Dodona and Epirus were quite depopulated and the oracular centre was rarely consulted⁵. So says the Christian writer Clement of Alexandria about the oracle of Ammon at Siwah, that it was “honoured by the desert sands” and “was forsaken”. In his *Protreptikos* (2, 11, 1), Clement states: “So do not search diligently for godless shrines or the mouths of caves full of gibberish, or the Thesprotian cauldron, or the tripod of Kirrha, or the Dodonian bronze. Commit to the realm of aged legends the old tree-stump, once honoured by the desert sands, and the oracle there which has decayed along with the oak itself. Kastalia’s spring has been silenced, like the other spring at Kolophon, while all the other prophetic founts are likewise dead, and empty of their boasting — finally! — have been unmasked, now waterless along with their particular legends. Tell me too of the futile oracles that other kind of divination — or rather dementia! — Apollo’s oracles at Claros, the Pythian, and Didymaean, and those of Amphiaros and Amphilochos.”

But did the oracles really ceased? Not at all. It was too early at that time for a statement as such. For example, at Delphi the mantic sessions occurred unceasingly until 392, when the Roman emperor Theodosius I banned all pagan cults in the empire. As for Didyma and Claros, on the other hand, at least the 2nd and the 3rd centuries were particularly flourishing.

It was Polymnia Athanassiadi who, at the beginning of one of her studies concerning the oracles in Antiquity, stated that “oracles were the psychiatrists of the ancient world.”⁶ Thus they responded to the need of the enquirers to receive revealed answers by the gods themselves and are a clear indicator regarding the metaphysical preoccupations of the time. The reality proved that, at least Didyma and Claros did not cease and did not lose their vigour, but their vitality increased and so did the topics addressed by the enquirers, particularly belonging to some delegations of several cities: either what measures should be taken to eradicate the effects of “the great plague” during the Antonine period (AD 165-180) and of some particular earthquakes, or, more interestingly, questions were addressed about the nature of

² LEVIN 1989, 1599.

³ LEVIN 1989, 1600.

⁴ LEVIN 1989, 1605.

⁵ DILLON 2017, 323.

⁶ ATHANASSIADI, 1992, 45.

soul, about the ether, about the nature of divinity, and if we are to believe the Christian writer Lactance (*Divine Institutions*, 4, 3, 11-15), Apollo of Didyma was even required about the nature of Jesus Christ himself! Therefore, it was during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD that the most sophisticated oracular responses were issued at the most representative Anatolian apollinic oracular centres. At least at Claros we have two important types: the pestoracles, i.e. those which contain cultic instructions to fight against the plague (*loimos*), and the so-called theological oracles. Particularly these Clarian theological oracles offer a very interesting perspective not only for the potential comparison that could be made with the image of God as Theos Hypsistos or simply Hypsistos in the *Sibylline Oracles*, but also due to the thematic shift that could be perceived in their approach.

The theological oracles, as they were named by Arthur Darby Nock in 1928, were conceived to respond mostly to the metaphysical needs of the enquirers⁷. If we are to trust the *Tubingen Theosophy*, a certain oracular response was rendered when Apollo was asked by a certain Theophilos, if he were *the* God or another, a question that could in itself contain the idea of oneness⁸. Both the unique character of this single supreme deity called ‘the Aether who sees all’ and the idea of hierarchization of the divine world are most clearly stated in the oracular response discovered at Oinoanda, a small Lycian city in southern Anatolia. The Aetherial god is perceived here as a self-born in essence, untaught, motherless, unshakeable, not to be contained by any name or bearing no specific name. He is polyonymic as he could bear many names according to his very diversified attributes⁹. Apollo, like the other gods are only ‘a small portion’ of this higher god that dwells in fire and they are all his messengers (1.7.4). Yet, we cannot agree to Stephen Mitchell’s theory that these gods were just ‘demoted to the rank of angels’ and we could have here a ‘soft monotheism’, according to Dillon’s definition¹⁰. It is rather a henotheistic perception within the limits described by Max Muller and Henk Versnel¹¹. It is needless to underline in this respect that this highly sophisticated metalanguage, corresponding to a negative theology, employs ideas specific to Neoplatonic, Neopythagorean and late Stoic conceptions of the period¹². But this language could be easily understandable for the common people as well in this very competitive period for all the cults on the Eastern fringe of the Empire, be they pagan, Jewish or Christian. This is why only half a century later, another small altar was embedded into the Hellenistic wall of the city, at a very close distance, in full awareness of the oracle’s content, with the inscription: ‘Chromatis

⁷ BUSINE 2005, 195; MERKELBACH, STAUBER 1996, 2-5.

⁸ BUSINE 2005, 111. See also BUSINE, 2014, 207-208 for the problems of addressability and authenticity.

⁹ BELAYCHE 2010, 164 for the polyonymous formulae attested in *heis theos*-type of acclamations.

¹⁰ MITCHELL 2003, 154-155. The definition of ‘pagan monotheism’ itself is highly controversial. See BELAYCHE 2005, 35-36.

¹¹ CHIAI 2010, 189; VERSNEL 1990, 232-6; VERSNEL 2000, 85-8. See also CHANIOTIS 2010, 112-113; VAN NUFFELEN 2010, 16-21.

¹² BUSINE 2005, 206-7 ff. with other examples.

(dedicated) the lamp to the Most High God, in fulfilment of the vow'. The place is very important, as Alan Hall noticed in 1978, because Chromatis and her private group of Hypsistarians could pray to their god in the precinct identified by Mitchell with a house of prayer (*proseuche*), watching the first sunrays at dawn that struck the polygonal Hellenistic wall¹³, similar to the prescriptions of the Clarian oracle: 'to him (=the god) then look and pray at dawn, turning your gaze to the East' (1.7.4). The Hypsistarians therefore identified their own highest god with that described by the oracle.

Furthermore, another interesting inscription was found on a rectangular block with a statue of Clarian Apollo on the top, it was discovered at Melli (former Kocaaliler) in Pisidia, and reads: 'To the gods and goddesses according to the interpretation of the Clarian Apollo'. It belongs to the group of ten other epigraphs with a similar content spread throughout the empire that could refer, according to Mitchell, to the prescriptions of the Clarian oracle given to the Oinoandans¹⁴: 'Traditional worshippers will have sought clarification and reassurance through an interpretation. The "gods and goddesses" text fulfils exactly this role. Claros explained that even though the Olympians ranked below the highest god, it was right to continue to worship them in the traditional way'¹⁵.

In various instances, Anatolian inscriptions provide examples of divine hierarchization, where gods acted as divine messengers of a superior god and their position was not considered as degraded. Their function was to mediate the communication between the superior god and the mortals¹⁶. For example, Men acted as an advocate (*parakletos*) for a sinner in relation to Zeus in a confession inscription¹⁷. In other instances, in most of the situations when Men received dedications together with other deities like Artemis Anaitis, he is placed in a position that could be considered superior hierarchically.

Returning to the Highest god, there are numerous examples when he is accompanied on the dedications both by other gods and by divine beings that could be considered angelic in nature. Due to the fact that in almost all the dedications the other divine assistants are placed mostly *after* the Most High God, but venerated *along with* him, could be a proof of their lesser position within the divine hierarchy and not of the existence of a so-called 'pagan monotheism'. Thus, in Cos, (Zeus) Hypsistos was venerated together with Hera Ourania, Poseidon Asphaleios, Apollo, and 'other gods'¹⁸. At Neisa, in Caria, a thanksgiving of the lykiarkhes Marcus Aurelius Dionysios (?) is addressed to the Most High God, to the Mountain Mother (Meter Oreia), an unknown god whose name is incomplete (Kele--) and to 'all the gods (and) goddesses' (1.7.3). A

¹³ HALL 1978, 265-7.

¹⁴ MITCHELL 2003, 151; BUSINE 2014, 206.

¹⁵ MITCHELL 2003, 154.

¹⁶ CHANIOTIS 2010, 139-140.

¹⁷ BWK, 5. See also CHANIOTIS 2010a, 126 (with an English translation).

¹⁸ ZP 79.

dedication written on a rectangular stone block from Stratonikeia in Caria is placed 'To Zeus the Most High, Hekate the Saviour, Zeus Capitolinus and the Fortune of the venerated emperor Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus Pius' (1.2.1). A certain Ariagne, sacred slave of the Autochthonous Mother of Gods erected an altar together with her son, Paramonos, in Leukopetra, near Beroia in Macedon, according to the command (kat' epitagen) received from the Most High God. This divine order is mentioned twice in this inscription¹⁹. Moreover, a priest of Men Ouranios, Quintus Numerius, dedicated an altar to Theos Hypsistos in thanksgiving, in accordance with an oracular vision (kata khrematismos) that he received from this god. Finally, there is a curious case on a Lydian epigraph that mentions the oath accomplished by a certain Meltine who prayed for her husband Glaukos, where the name of Theos Hypsistos, initially written on the stone, was thereafter erased and replaced by that of Hosios kai Dikaios. Georg Petzl gives two possible explanations for this: either Hosios kai Dikaios was a divine mediator between her and Theos Hypsistos and was perceived as being issued as an emanation by the latter²⁰ or that this Hosios kai Dikaios was actually the Most High God in his predominant aspect of holy and just²¹. We will return to this idea.

Divine beings, angelic or not, are frequently met in the company of the Most High God, especially in north-eastern Lydia and Caria, where thanksgivings are given to him and to the Divine (Theios)²², the Royal Divine (Theios Basilikos)²³, the Great Divine (Megalos Theios)²⁴, the Good Divine²⁵, the Heavenly Divine Angel (Theios Angelos Ouranios)²⁶, the Divine Angel (Theios Angelos)²⁷ or the Good Angel (Agathos Angelos)²⁸. At Ankyra, in Galatia, a dedication mentions that the buildings there were erected 'To the Great Most High and Heavenly God, to his holy angels, and for his venerable house of prayer'²⁹.

It was probably due to both his solar attributes, but also as a god of justice that the Most High God was twice identified in inscriptions with Helios³⁰, who had the capacity of being an all-seeing god (*pantepoptes*), just like the Aetherial Clarian supreme god with whom the Oinoandan Hypsistarians identified their deity. He is the dreadful and vengeful protector of both living and the dead, and also their saviour. At Amastris, in Paphlagonia, his image was that of a dreadful supreme eternal omnipotent master who rules everywhere. It was 'by prophetic

¹⁹ ZP 68.

²⁰ PETZL 1998, 22-23.

²¹ PETZL 2014, 76-77.

²² H 1.1.22; 1.1.26; 1.1.27; 1.1.28; 1.1.29; 1.1.31; 1.1.32 (Stratonikeia, Caria).

²³ ZP 149 = 1.1.8 (Labraunda, Caria); 1.1.34; 1.1.35 (Stratonikeia, Caria).

²⁴ H 1.1.30 (Stratonikeia, Caria).

²⁵ H 1.1.33 (Stratonikeia, Caria).

²⁶ H 1.1.23 (Stratonikeia, Caria).

²⁷ H 1.1.24; 1.1.25; 1.1.36 (Stratonikeia, Caria).

²⁸ H 1.1.37 (Stratonikeia, Caria).

²⁹ H 1.5.1.

³⁰ H 1.4.2 (Amastris, Paphlagonia); 1.3.8 (Pergamon).

voice' that an altar was raised 'to the Most High God, he who is in the power of youth, who has power of everything, who cannot be seen, whose gaze is so dreadful that overthrows the mortal ground'³¹. We encounter the same accent on its immortality set in two other dedications: (a) one from Pergamon, where Zopyrios erected an altar and the lamp with a support to 'God, Lord, the One who is forever'³², and (b) the other from Hadrianopolis in Bithynia, related to Aurelius Epithymetos, his wife Basilike and their children who dedicate an altar to Theos Hypsistos as an immortal god (*theos athanatos*)³³. One of the funerary imprecation inscriptions from Akmonia in Phrygia provides the image of the Most High God as the protector of the dead, using a preventive curse called the Eumenian formula against any eventual desecrator of the grave. The potential culprit is thus menaced that he 'will have to reckon with the Most High God and may the sickle of curse come into his house and leave no one behind'³⁴.

As a polymorphic god, he probably absorbed identities of many local deities in Macedon and Samaria (gods of the mountains), the Bosphoran area (an Iranian god), Syro-Palmyrean area (god of the heaven), and even in western Asia Minor most probably Zeus Bronton (the Thundering Zeus). In a series of inscriptions from Palmyra dated from the beginning of the 2nd century to the second half of the 3rd century, the dedications addressed to Zeus Hypsistos kai epekoos have as Palmyrian translation the name of Baalshamin the Great and Merciful³⁵.

Even remote, situated in the uppermost spheres of the universe, the Highest God has a personal bond to the dedicants by communicating with them directly or through intermediaries, helping the ones in need and providing them the means for their salvation. It was a whole community belonging to a village next to Prusa in Bithynia that provide thanksgivings to Zeus Hypsistos according to a vow, because the god determined Paterion (we do not know how, probably through a divine order) to 'generously' donate to the rural community an arable land that produced ten *medimnoi*³⁶. We suppose he might have done that in a very difficult period for the whole community, during a famine, earthquake or any other similar calamity. There are numerous situations when certain individuals, either alone or together with friends, relatives³⁷, the whole families provide dedications and ex-votos to the god for their deliverance from grave dangers³⁸ (Gaius Pescennius Onesimos from Kyzikos in

³¹ H 1.4.4.

³² H 1.3.10.

³³ H 1.4.6.

³⁴ H 1.6.9.

³⁵ SANIE 1981, 159.

³⁶ H 1.4.10.

³⁷ H 1.2.1 (Bagis, Lydia); 1.2.15 (Thyaira, Lydia).

³⁸ H 1.4.1 (Amaseia, Pontus).

Mysia even adding ‘for the victory’³⁹), for their own well-being⁴⁰, personal⁴¹ and family deliverance⁴², or even ‘for saving his cattle and his family’⁴³. Aurelius Hekatomnon from Stratonikeia in Caria, in his altruism erected an altar and prayed to the Royal Divine and the Most High ‘for himself and for the children, wife, friends, relatives, his immediate family and for the city’⁴⁴. Some dedicants found themselves at the mercy of the god: having made a vow, Aurelius Asklepiades together with his family deliver thanksgiving to the Most High God at Aizanoi in Phrygia ‘because of the merciful delivery from many sufferings’⁴⁵.

As a token of appreciation for deliverance from their diseases, some of the dedicants provided votive objects with the representation of the healed parts of their body, a practice that is attested for other thaumaturgic healing gods like Asklepios or Sarapis. A bronze plaque now in custody of the Museum for Arts and Crafts in Hamburg has an accurate representation of a partial human face, between cheekbones and the eyebrows, where the character seems to be eye-crossed. The text can read: ‘To the listening Most High God, Aurelia Artemisia from Ephesos, having made a vow and found his pity dedicated (this)’⁴⁶. In other instances, *epekoos* that we encounter as epithet here is accompanied by a visual representation of ears — as a token of appreciation for the fact that the god listened to the prayer of the dedicant without delay — or a support for lighting a lamp⁴⁷. Another bronze female torso of an unknown Anatolian provenance has the following incised inscription: ‘Moscheni, in fulfilment of the vow, to the Most High God’.

The god also manifested himself through visions, epiphanies, commands and oracles, and this is why many times we encounter expressions like *kat’ onar*⁴⁸, *kata epitagen*⁴⁹, *kata khresmon*⁵⁰ or *kata keleusin*. This reflect a close personal relationship with the god and a good

³⁹ H 1.3.6 = ZP 148.

⁴⁰ H 1.6.1 (Aizanoi, Phrygia); 1.6.13 (Eumeneia, Phrygia); 1.2.14 (Silandos, Lydia): ‘for their own well-being and for the children’.

⁴¹ H 1.2.20 (area of Thyateira, Lydia).

⁴² H 1.1.23 (Stratonikeia, Caria); 1.1.24 (Stratonikeia, Caria); 1.1.8 (Lagina, Caria): ‘for himself and the members of his family’.

⁴³ H 1.6.17 (Nakoleia, Phrygia).

⁴⁴ H 1.1.25 (Stratonikeia, Caria).

⁴⁵ H 1.6.2 (Aizanoi, Phrygia).

⁴⁶ H 1.1.5 (Ephesos, Ionia; 3rd century AD). The epithet *epekoos* also appears on an inscription from Alexandria Troas, where the unknown dedicant provides thanksgiving to the listening Most High God (H 1.3.1).

⁴⁷ H 1.6.26 (Tiberiopolis, Phrygia; 2-3rd centuries AD). There are good examples of bronze lamp-hangers of Anatolian provenance in the J. Paul Getty Museum of Malibu, California (H 1.10.1; 1.103-10) with representation of dolphins and other visual motives.

⁴⁸ ZP 98 (Edessa, Macedonia; 2nd-3rd centuries AD).

⁴⁹ H 1.3.7 (area of Miletupolis, Mysia).

⁵⁰ H 1.1.18 (Rhodian Peraia, Caria; 2nd-3rd centuries): dedication in thanksgiving by Ariston to Zeus Hypsistos ‘in accordance with the oracle’ (*kata khresmon*). H 1.1.5 (Ephesos; 3rd century AD): a certain Hermias give thanks to Zeus Hypsistos ‘in accordance with the oracle’ (*kata khresmon*).

deal of confidence. In Pergamon, Glykina is grateful to Theos Hypsistos probably because after enquiring the god she could make a decision⁵¹. Oracles could be delivered not only to individuals, but also to the professionals. Two Milesian honorary inscriptions are dedicated by local professional associations (city gardeners and razor-fishermen) to praise their benefactor, Ulpius Carpus, the priest and prophet of the Most High God, that receive both the epithet of saviour (*sōtēros*) and the holy (*hagiotatos*)⁵².

From a curious inscription belonging to the area of Nakoleia in Phrygia we find out that the honoured character was a man of a noble offspring named Zosimos, highly esteemed in his fatherland, whom Robin Lane Fox considered wrongly to be Christian⁵³. As the 3rd century text of the epigram reads, he most probably belonged to the ‘people of the Most High God’ and, according to the translation of Angelos Chaniotis, ‘wrote whatever mortals need on a folded tablet with spiritual writings and Homeric verses, predicting for the wise the future’. From a fourth century magic papyrus (*PGM* 7.1-148) we can see how this type of Homeromanteion could work. It functioned like a dice oracle, in a very similar way to the 28 astragalomanteia discovered in southern part of Anatolia and published by Johannes Nolle recently. In this papyrus, the 216 hexameter verses from Iliad and Odyssey were ordered in groups of six verses and served as answers to mantic enquiries. The oracular process began with the invocation of Apollo, and not Hermes as in Anatolia. Three dice were used to find the right combination corresponding to the proper verse⁵⁴.

Finally, a 2nd century inscription from Termessos in Pisidia reads: ‘Tychos, the one also named Attalianos, son of Hermaios, grandson of Hermaios, the Syrian, a *paroikos*, erected (this monument) to the listening Most High God, with a foot that follows the god, in accordance with the gods command⁵⁵. According to Mitchell, a bronze left foot of a normal size should have been placed above the small inscribed column⁵⁶, in reminding of the materiality of the divine presence and visitation (*epiphaneia*), and in the event of reiteration of the divine revelation (*parousia*)⁵⁷. Most probably, the epiphanic tangible presence of the Most High God was perceived as a miracle for the foreign Syrian resident of Termessos, but not necessarily as a healing miracle. All indications that we have point to the fact that in this case, this extraordinary epiphanic miracle concerned rather a miracle of faith, that determined Tychos to follow the god. The god ordered him (*kata keleusin*) to remind people of the epiphany and to advertise the power of god. As in other instances of divine feet and footprints analysed by Georgia Petridou

⁵¹ H 1.3.9 (Pergamon; 1st-2nd century).

⁵² H 1.1.12 and 1.1.13 (Miletos; Hadrian’s reign).

⁵³ LANE FOX 1988, 404.

⁵⁴ CHANIOTIS 2010b, 258; CLUZEAU 2014, 169.

⁵⁵ H 1.7.11. See also CLUZEAU 2014, 161 who translates ‘footprint’.

⁵⁶ MITCHELL 1999, 143, no. 231.

⁵⁷ PETRIDOU 2015, 80-81.

in her studies, this *ichnos* monument, together with its material representation, could have become an object of viewing and prostration (*proskynesis*)⁵⁸.

Unlike other deities present in the Anatolian area (notably Men and Anaitis, Asklepios, Isis or Sarapis), the emphasis in the case of the Most High God is not on aretology and the exaltation of divine powers in order to glorify the attributes of divinity, but rather this type of theological message is *implicit* in the kind of language used and the emphasis on the exceptional characteristics of the god, the close, direct and personal link between the divinity and the worshipper, his quality of protector and saviour, all-powerful supreme god and arbiter of destinies. The god probably did not need aretologies in the Hyspistarian view, but thanksgivings, humble obedience, total compliance and prayers. We therefore have to deal with a healer, saviour anonymous god that communicates with the dedicants through visions and epiphanies, whose real identity had to remain unknown due to the dedicants' own volition in this respect.

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⁵⁸ See LUCIAN, *True Story*, I, 7, where the Herakles and Dionysos footprints were regarded as such. PETRIDOU 2015, 77.

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