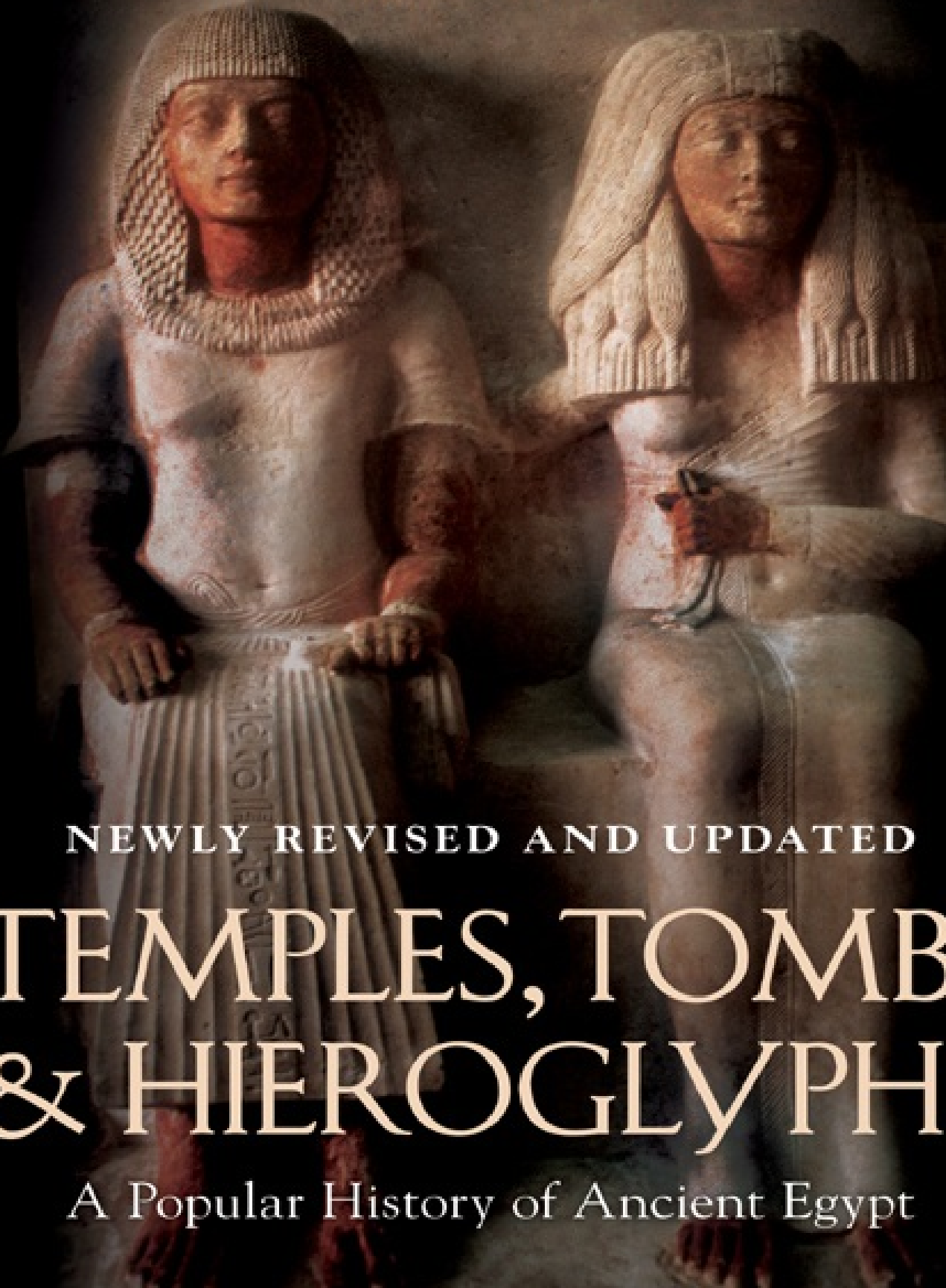


# BARBARA MERTZ

Author, as Elizabeth Peters, of the Amelia Peabody series



NEWLY REVISED AND UPDATED

## TEMPLES, TOMBS & HIEROGLYPHS

A Popular History of Ancient Egypt

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# Temples, Tombs & Hieroglyphs

A Popular History of Ancient Egypt

Second Edition

**Barbara Mertz**

 HarperCollins e-books

*To John A. Wilson*  
*1899–1976*  
*Scholar, teacher, humanist*

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## *Foreword to the First Edition*

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My *affaire de coeur* with ancient Egypt began in remote childhood, when I first encountered James Henry Breasted's *History of Egypt* at the local library; it is still flourishing, although many years and many distractions have intervened. It is necessary to make this highly subjective statement, I think, both to explain the reason for this book and to justify some of the statements which appear herein. There are occasions in the following pages when serious Egyptologists may be offended by what strikes them as a frivolous or fantastical tone. Frivolity there may be; but it should not be taken for disparagement of the field of Egyptology in general or of particular scholars and their pet theories. Few academic subjects are improved by being approached in a spirit of deadly seriousness. I suspect, in fact, that most of them can profit by a bit of kindly mockery, particularly if it is self-administered. That I venture to smile at a field to which I personally adhere above all others should be proof that I act from a general principle, and not from particular malice. "They do but jest, poison in jest; no offence i' the world."

It is only fair to warn the reader that this is not a history book. It is, rather, an informal study of Egyptology—a study of all things Egyptian. My criterion for selection of material has been very simple: I have included anything I found interesting. Hence you will encounter straight archaeological reporting, gossip, and historical theorizing in uneven quantities. You will also encounter—I hope—people. The individual has been rather out of fashion in serious history, although the trend is swinging back in his favor of late. I follow the fairly conventional viewpoint, which holds that events are the product both of The Man and The Background, but I do believe that the shape of events is fashioned by the particular man or woman who holds the reins of destiny at a particular moment in time. Therefore I have frankly and unashamedly talked about people when I was able to do so: about kings and queens for the most part, but also about artists, magicians, and even civil servants.

Any attempt to evaluate, or even describe, the character of a historical personage is difficult and highly subjective; often the biographer inadvertently tells more about himself than about the subject of his biography. In the case of ancient Egyptian individuals it is virtually impossible—in fact, you can leave out "virtually"—to do more than speculate. Our knowledge even of events is scanty and incomplete; insight into motives and influences is completely lacking. I have tried to indicate the points at which I leave solid ground and sail off into happy flights of fancy, but undoubtedly I have forgotten to label all the pertinent cases. My consolation is that the same error has been, and is being committed by professional historians.

I have often speculated as to why so many people are attracted to the study of archaeology. Certain appeals, such as the lure of buried treasure, are fairly obvious; it is to this imaginative human

urge that most popular books on archaeology cater. But there is another type of problem involved in archaeology, and in history in general, which also appeals to a wide audience—the people who like puzzles, riddles, and exercises in simple logic. When we, as students, read a history textbook, we are presented with a series of statements that we accept, with more or less indifference, as true. We do not see the skillful patchwork, the blending together of data from dozens of different sources, which creates a coherent picture of events; and we miss the fascination of following the mental processes by which the patches are matched and hooked together. To follow out these processes in detail is not only entertaining but also profitable, for in the end we find ourselves questioning the sources of certain statements, and even disagreeing with the conclusions which are drawn from them. Here is a consummation devoutly to be wished; the questioning mind should be developed by any person who reads a daily newspaper. I have tried to indicate some of the sources and some of the methods which we apply in order to derive what we call Egyptian history. Many of them transcend Egyptology but are seen just as clearly in this context as in others.





## *Foreword to the Second Edition*

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When I first set out to revise this book, I was naive enough to believe several kindly friends, who must have been blinded by affection, because they assured me that I wouldn't need to do very much. As I immediately discovered, I had to do quite a lot. Not only have (good heavens) forty years passed, but they have been years full of new discoveries and new interpretations, and even new characters in the story of ancient Egypt, some of whom were not known when I wrote this book. Contrary to the opinions of the uninformed, revisionism is an integral part of good historical scholarship. It may seem at times that revisionists have gone overboard in their attempts to find new ways of looking at old material, but it is a necessary process.

Despite my disingenuous disclaimer that I had included only material I found interesting, it became obvious to me that I had given short shrift to certain periods and certain topics. Another complication arose from the fact that in the interim I had written another book about ancient Egypt which covered some of the same material. I had to decide what to put in which book.

Having made my excuses I should add that producing a second edition of this book and the other *Red Land, Black Land*, has been a great adventure. I have kept up with the field to the best of my ability and made a number of trips to Egypt, but condensing the new material and fitting it into place presented a number of challenges. I hope I have met them adequately; if I have succeeded even in part much of the credit must go to my many friends and colleagues in the field, not only for their publications but also for the generous advice they have given me. I owe a special debt to Dennis Forbes, editor of *Kmt*, who took time from his busy life to go over the entire manuscript with his indispensably lethal marking pen. I am also indebted to Roxie Walker for tactfully correcting my misstatements on the subjects of bones and dating skeletons. Kristen Whitbread and Loretta St. John dealt with the electronic issues, if that is what they are called. Thanks to those ladies, I didn't have to call them anything.

This is a traditional, even "old-fashioned," history that focuses on people and events rather than on social change. In a way it can be read as a detective story, which sifts through a multitude of clues in order to determine what really happened. There are red herrings, the usual suspects, and detectival historians, for written history is, or should be, a synthesis and analysis of myriad, often contradictory clues. I might—indeed, I will—reiterate my belief that learning to question and analyze so-called facts is the most important lesson a student can learn. It is especially important in today's world, where we are barraged by information from so many disparate sources.



## *A Note on Names*

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I have avoided the Greek renderings of certain names, such as Khufu instead of Cheops. Ancient Egyptians didn't write the vowels, therefore you will find various spellings of names and other words: Amen, Amon, Amun; ushabti, shabti, shawabti; Harmhab, Horemheb; to mention only a few. There are also variations in the way certain consonants are transliterated: Cush or Kush, Saqqara or Sakkara, and so on. My versions are arbitrary, but so are those of most other people.



# *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*

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Dating based on William Murnane, *The Penguin Guide to Ancient Egypt*, Penguin Books, rev. ed., 1996.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

You will find different dates in different books; the further back in time, the greater the uncertainty. Chronologies are based on a number of sources, some more reliable than others. The general outline of dynasties comes from the Greek writer Manetho, who divided Egyptian history into families of rulers. Modern scholars have cast doubt on certain details, but the system is more or less fixed in stone.

You will sometimes encounter the terms C.E. (Common Era) and B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) instead of B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini). There is a reason for this, but I can't see the point of changing terms that have been in use so long.

## ARCHAIC PERIOD. 3150–2686 B.C.

Dynasty 0. Scorpion, Aha, Narmer

Dynasty I. Unification. Menes, Djer, Djet, Den, Queen Merneith

Dynasty II. Peribsen, Khasekhemui

## THE OLD KINGDOM. 2686–2181 B.C.

Dynasty III. Step Pyramid. Djoser, Khaba, Huni

Dynasty IV. Pyramids of Dahshur, Medum, Giza. Snefru, Khufu, Khafre, Menkaure

Dynasty V. Userkaf, Sahure, Unis

Dynasty VI. Teti, Pepi I, Mernere, Pepi II

Dynasties VII–X. Some partially overlapping.

MIDDLE KINGDOM. 2040–1782 B.C. Reunification

Dynasty XI. Intefs and Mentuhoteps

Dynasty XII. Amenemhats and Senuserts, Queen Sobekneferu

SECOND INTERMEDIATE PERIOD. 1782–1570 B.C. Breakdown of central government.

Dynasty XIII–XVI. Some overlapping. Hyksos

Dynasty XVII. Sekenenre Tao II, Kamose 1663–1570 B.C.

NEW KINGDOM. 1570–1070 B.C. Reunification

Dynasty XVIII. Ahmose, Amenhoteps and Thutmoses, Queen Hatshepsut, Akhenaton, Tutankhamon, Ay, Harmhab

Dynasty XIX. Seti I, Ramses I and II, Merneptah, Queen Tausert

Dynasty XX. Ramses III–XI, Herihor

THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD. 1070–525 B.C.

Dynasty XXI Smendes, Psusennes, Pinudjem

Dynasty XXII Libyan. Sheshonks, Osorkons, Takelots

Dynasties XXIII–XXIV. Libyan. Country divided.

Dynasty XXV. Cushite. Piankhi, Shabaka, Taharka

Dynasty XXVI. Saite. Psamtiks, Necho, Apries

LATE PERIOD. 525–332 B.C.

Dynasty XXVII. First Persian

Dynasty XXVIII–XXIX. Egyptian dynasts

Dynasty XXX. Nectanebo I and II

PTOLEMAIC. Conquest by Alexander the Great, 332 B.C.

Succeeded by Ptolemies and Cleopatras.

ROMAN. Conquest by Julius Caesar, 30 B.C. Egypt a Roman province.



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## THE TWO LANDS



*The Nebti name of Menes*

## GEB THE HUNTER

One bright summer afternoon in the year 5263 B.C., a man stood on the cliffs high above the Nile Valley. He was slightly built and only a few inches over five feet in height; his brown body was naked except for a kilt of tanned hide. But he held himself proudly, for he was a tall man among his people, and a leader of men. The people he led clustered about him—women peering timidly out from a tangle of black hair, hushing the children in their arms; men bearing their weapons, bow and arrow and stone and ax. The wind blew hot behind them; they had turned their backs on the desert. Once it had not been a desert. Once, in the time of their ancestors, there had been water, and green growing things, and animals to kill for food. Now the god had withdrawn his hand from their homeland. And so they looked with bright apprehensive eyes into the new land below, a green slash of life cutting through the growing desolation all around. The leader's keen vision saw the gleam of water and the flicker of birds' wings; his hunter's ears caught the far-off bellow of a hippopotamus. There was food below, and water; yet still the leader of the tribe hesitated. He knew the old life, with all its perils. Could he face the more chilling peril of the unknown and, unaware of destiny, take the first step toward the pyramids?

It is a pity that this picturesque episode must belong to fiction rather than history. Some of the details may be true. The first prehistoric cultures in Egypt are dated to around 5500 B.C., but not even the miracle of carbon 14 could give a date so specific as the one mentioned above. At some point in the remote past, man came out of the desert into the valley of the Nile and settled into small villages. He may have looked something like the leader of the tribe who, in a historical novel, would be christened Geb or Ab, or something equally monosyllabic and prehistoric. But it is unlikely that a single man with a vision initiated the transition from nomadic hunters to village farmers. The change

took place over long centuries.

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Admittedly, the signs of the great change are not dramatic when they are seen in dusty museum cases—flint knife blades and arrowheads, not very different at a casual glance from the crude tools of the hunters; tattered scraps of a woven basket that once held grain; the bones of a dog, appearing, to an untrained eye, like the bones of any wild beast. Yet the transition is more important than the pyramids and more exciting, in its implications, than the golden treasure of a Tutankhamon. We find ourselves here at the beginning of a long and momentous chapter in the great book of man. As the pages turn, we will meet kings and conquerors, poets and inventors. We will conjure up visions of treasure unsurpassed by the most luxuriant forms of imaginative fiction; we will encounter the darker aspects of the human spirit as well as its bright triumphs. Yet never again, perhaps, will we see the human animal take a step so gigantic as this first one, little known and poorly recorded as it is.

Scholars usually place the first “revolution” in man’s way of life between the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras. These terms, which mean “Old Stone Age” and “New Stone Age,” were coined to describe a change in the techniques of working stone implements, but it is the least significant of the differences between the two periods. The wandering hunters of the Old Stone Age became the farmers and shepherds of the Neolithic. The permanent settlement of a tribe implies agriculture and domesticated animals, and perhaps pottery—though there is considerable variation from place to place—and people continued hunting and fishing even after other means of food production were developed. The evidence of the transitional period in the Nile Valley is almost nonexistent—so far. One suspects that something is bound to turn up eventually, but perhaps not in the Nile Valley itself; there were hunter-gatherers wandering around the Western Desert, and possible signs of at least semipermanent habitation there as early as nine thousand years ago. For our purposes, however, the oldest known predynastic cultures of Egypt date from approximately 5400 B.C.

Life in the early village cultures was not exactly luxurious. The houses were built of mud and sticks and consisted of a single dark room, unfloored and unventilated except for a smoke hole in the roof. The bodies of the dead were laid in shallow holes scooped in the sand, with no covering except straw mats or skins. But in the goods buried with them we may see the groping of the human spirit toward the concept of immortality. They could only postulate a continuance of the life they knew; so the hunter has his spear, the woman her beads (*vanitas vanitatum*, against the fleshless skull), and the pitiful child bones sometimes huddle against the dust of a once-cherished toy.

The bones and their belongings can speak to us, sometimes with poignant clarity. And the mute stone and baked clay can speak as well, to those who know how to listen. So meager are the remains from this distant time, before the dawn of history, that archaeologists have developed ingenious techniques for wringing the greatest possible amount of information from each scrap. They rely upon the skills of many specialists—biologists, who can identify the species of the gnawed bones in the kitchen middens, geo-chemists, who analyze pottery, and paleobotanists, who ponder the withered grains left in the bottom of the granary basket by a thriftless ancient house wife. (Contrary to popular report, none of the “mummy seeds” found in Egypt has ever produced a living plant; there is a limit to the preservative qualities of even Egyptian soil.)

Most of the archaeological evidence from prehistoric Egypt comes from graves. There are a few village sites, and also the kitchen middens, an archaeological euphemism for garbage dumps. The prehistoric equivalents of beer cans and melon rinds are fish and animal bones, worn-out flint tools,

and scraps of broken pottery. There must have been settlements of some sort near these ancient garbage dumps, but not many have survived. From these scanty remains Egyptologists have defined a number of predynastic cultures, interrelated, but each having its own typical assemblage (the collection of objects produced and used by the people of a given culture). In this period, such an assemblage might include flint weapons, beads and amulets, baskets, and pottery.

I have never been able to decide which is duller, flints or pottery; but I distinctly remember the appalling blankness that used to seize my mind when I was asked to identify bits of pottery during an examination. Probably this attests to my underdeveloped imagination, for pottery has been one of the most useful tools of the archaeologist. The ordinary house hold pot has no intrinsic value, so people throw it away when it breaks, and tomb robbers sneer at it. Though a pot can be smashed, its fragments are virtually indestructible. For this reason pottery is an invaluable clue to chronology, since it is seldom removed from the spot in which it was originally dumped. But it is fair to say that no one ever dreamed of the far-reaching implications of potsherds until Sir William Flinders Petrie started thinking about them.

It is fitting that Petrie's should be the first name we mention, for he was truly *the* formidable figure in Egyptology. Some scholars call him the father of "scientific" archaeology (for certain dark reasons of my own, I prefer the adjective "critical"). To list his accomplishments in the methods of excavation alone would take pages, but even his pioneering work in technique was less important than his approach, rigorously logical and painstakingly exact. The new approach came from Petrie himself, not from his training; as he plaintively remarks, there was nobody around to train him. He arrived in Egypt at a time when Gaston Maspero, the dedicated French director of the Egyptian Antiquities Department, was beginning to insist upon rules and regulations in excavation, thus destroying all the fun of what had been a joyous free-for-all of plunder and wanton destruction. But Petrie, who carried on a loud private war with both native and foreign thieves, did not even think much of Maspero. Petrie had a marvelous gift of invective; his blasphemous comments upon inefficiency and crooked dealing were uttered in an elegant scholarly style, which gave them even greater force. In his autobiography, Petrie inveighs against other archaeologists, the Department of Antiquities, Maspero, the British Museum, the French in general, and a good many Egyptians in particular. This may suggest that it was Petrie, and not the rest of the world, who was out of step. He was; but only because he was leading the parade, and his contemporaries had not yet learned the precise and intricate measure of the movements he set. Very little of Petrie's passion is personal; the people he damns to the lowest pits are those who, through stupidity or venality, allowed his precious antiquities to suffer. He liked most of the Egyptians he worked with, and won their affection and loyalty so completely that the men he trained in excavation, inhabitants of a village called Quft, supplied archaeological expeditions with headmen and diggers for many years.

The aspect of Petrie's character that astounds us even more than his fanatical insistence on detail is his fantastic energy. He ranged over Egypt from the Delta to the cataracts of Nubia like a mythological dragon, gulping in raw material and ejecting it in the form of neat volumes that cataloged bones, stones, beads, and pots. The real proof of his genius is that stories are beginning to collect about him, as is the case with the absentminded scholars in other fields whose passion for the work leaves them little time for the unimportant amenities of everyday life. Petrie himself describes, with characteristic gusto, how he used to work naked in the stifling corridors of the pyramids like "the Japanese carpenter who had nothing on but a pair of spectacles, except that I do not need the spectacles." He thought nothing of walking ten or twenty miles across the desert to collect the weekly



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