

# An annotated “The History of the *Necronomicon*”.

Annotated by David Haden, with 6,900 words of footnotes.

Prepared for Mr. H.P. Lovecraft’s 122<sup>nd</sup> birthday, 20th August 2012.

The short text “The History of the *Necronomicon*” was written by H.P. Lovecraft as an aid-to-memory or synopsis, sometime in the Autumn of 1927. Certainly the “History” was written before late November 1927— since at that time Lovecraft commented on the apparently completed text, in a letter that he wrote to Clark Ashton Smith.<sup>1</sup>

The “History” was first <sup>2</sup> published circa 1937, as a pamphlet from Wilson H. Shepherd’s Rebel Press.<sup>3</sup> Arkham House reprinted it in their second major Lovecraft book collection *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* (1943). Then they printed it again, seemingly with additional commentary, in 1948 <sup>4</sup> as part of the first issue of the *Arkham Sampler*

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<sup>1</sup> Lovecraft in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith, 27<sup>th</sup> November 1927:

“I have drawn up some data on the celebrated & unmentionable *Necronomicon*” — H.P. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters* II, p.201.

<sup>2</sup> The Chaosium collection *The Necronomicon: Selected Stories and Essays Concerning the Blasphemous Tome of the Mad Arab* (2002) notes that duplicate holograph typescripts of the text were: “privately circulated among his writer friends by HPL soon after he wrote it in 1927”. I regret that I have been unable to see more from this book.

<sup>3</sup> H.P. Lovecraft and Wilson H. Shepherd (1937). “History and Chronology of the *Necronomicon*”, The Rebel Press, 1937. S.T. Joshi states that this was a “Limited Memorial” edition, and so must have appeared shortly after Lovecraft’s death in 1937, although it is commonly listed in bibliographies as appearing in 1936. Such small fannish publishing ventures were notorious for appearing late.

<sup>4</sup> “History and Chronology of the *Necronomicon*, Together with some Pertinent Paragraphs”, *Arkham Sampler*, Winter 1948.

— a magazine which had a good print-run of 1,200 copies,<sup>5</sup> and so was presumably seen by many Lovecraft readers of the late 1940s. After the cultural interregnum of the 1950s a wider interest in Lovecraft grew up from the mid 1960s onwards, chiefly among the adherents of the counterculture. One small item produced in this new atmosphere was a new printing of the “History”, included in *The Necronomicon: a study* (1967)<sup>6</sup> along with a detailed account of uses of the *Necronomicon* in later Mythos fiction. This pamphlet was professionally typeset and printed, but was also apparently “underprinted”,<sup>7</sup> and thus presumably sold its print-run fairly rapidly.

In the mid 1970s the “History” appeared in the book *Lovecraft at Last* (1975, reprinted 2002), and the Greenwood Press book *H.P. Lovecraft Companion* (1977). In the 1990s it was included in the Arkham House book *Miscellaneous Writings* (1995).<sup>8</sup> At 2012 these three fine volumes appear to be out-of-print. More popular paperback books that include the “History” are: the Chaosium gamers’ collection *The Necronomicon: Stories and Essays* (1996); and the occultist-debunking book *The Necronomicon Files: The Truth Behind The Legend* (2003) which has an annotated version of the “History”,<sup>9</sup> but — like all of the above reprintings — I am currently unable to consult the *Files* book due to the cost involved.

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<sup>5</sup> Sheldon Jaffery (1982), *Horrors and unpleasantries: a bibliographical history & collectors’ price guide to Arkham House*. Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Owings (1967), *The Necronomicon: a study*, Mirage Associates.

I also have a memory of reading the “History” when I was a youth. The UK Panther Books fan website has contents lists suggesting that my Panther paperbacks would not have contained the “History”, so possibly it was a book had from a local library? Perhaps I was lucky enough to consult a library copy of the Greenwood Press book *H.P. Lovecraft Companion* (1977).

<sup>7</sup> The word is used in Robert Reginald, et al. (1979), *Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature: a checklist, volume 2*, p.848. Reginald’s source is a first-hand memoir by the owner of Mirage. I’m told that a limit of 600 copies was placed on the press by August Derleth at Arkham House.

<sup>8</sup> S.T. Joshi (Ed.) (1995), *Miscellaneous Writings: H. P. Lovecraft*. Arkham House.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Harms and John Wisdom Gonce III (2003), *The Necronomicon Files: the Truth Behind The Legend*, Red Wheel/Weiser.

More recently the “History” was published in translation, along with scholarly notes in Italian, in a 2007 book by Sebastiano Fusco.<sup>10</sup> This is available in print only, and has not yet been translated into English. I have not seen this book, and I can’t read Italian.

The Arab author Abdul Alhazred<sup>11</sup> was first introduced into Lovecraft’s stories in the “The Nameless City” (1921),<sup>12</sup> and the first mention of the *Necronomicon*<sup>13</sup> was in “The Hound” (1922).<sup>14</sup> Both name and book reappear again in “The Festival” (1923).<sup>15</sup> The author and his dreaded book were then most famously brought together by Lovecraft in “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926),<sup>16</sup> a

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<sup>10</sup> Sebastiano Fusco (2007), *La storia del Necronomicon di H. P. Lovecraft*, Venexia, Italy.

<sup>11</sup> Lovecraft states that this name was invented and given to him as a boy – either by his family lawyer or by himself. It was meant as a commentary on the young Lovecraft’s love of Andrew Lang’s version of the *Arabian Nights* tales, and Lovecraft’s all-round voracious appetite for reading — the idea of ‘all –has –read’ becoming transmuted into ‘Alhazred’. See: S.T. Joshi, David E. Schultz (2001), *An H.P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia*, p.186. This explains why the name Abdul Alhazred or APHazed makes no sense in terms of known Arab naming conventions. S.T. Joshi suggests a more meaningful version of the name would be Abd-el-Hazred.

<sup>12</sup> “In the darkness there flashed before my mind fragments of my cherished treasury of daemonic lore; sentences from Alhazred the mad Arab...” — from “The Nameless City” (1921).

“I fell to babbling over and over that unexplainable couplet of the mad Arab Alhazred, who dreamed of the nameless city: That is not dead which can eternal lie, / And with strange aeons even death may die.” — from “The Nameless City” (1921).

<sup>13</sup> On the origin and etymology of the word, see my text “A note on the origin and derivation of ‘Necronomicon’”, in the book *Lovecraft in Historical Context* (2010).

<sup>14</sup> “The jade amulet now reposed in a niche in our museum, and sometimes we burned a strangely scented candle before it. We read much in Alhazred’s *Necronomicon* about its properties, and about the relation of ghosts’ souls to the objects it symbolised; and were disturbed by what we read.” — from “The Hound” (1922). Elsewhere in the same story Alhazred is described as “the old Arab daemonologist”. A daemonologist is someone who studies beliefs about demons, or who (in fiction) studies the actual demons themselves.

<sup>15</sup> “when I sat down to read I saw that the books were hoary and mouldy, [...] worst of all, the unmentionable *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, in Olaus Wormius’ forbidden Latin translation; a book which I had never seen, but of which I had heard monstrous things whispered [...] I tried to read [it], and soon became tremblingly absorbed by something I found in that accursed *Necronomicon*; a thought and a legend too hideous for sanity or consciousness.” — from “The Festival” (1923).

<sup>16</sup> “Of the [Cthulhu] cult, he said that he thought the centre lay amid the pathless desert of Arabia, where Irem, the City of Pillars, dreams hidden and untouched. It was not allied to the European witch-cult, and was virtually unknown beyond its members. No book had ever really

major story which also repeats the famous couplet from the *Necronomicon* which Lovecraft had earlier given in his “The Nameless City” (1921).<sup>17</sup> Lovecraft made substantial use of *The Necronomicon* in “The Dunwich Horror” (1928), and passing mentions of the book occur in various Lovecraft stories written between 1927 and 1935.

For details of the subsequent uses of Abdul Alhazred and the *Necronomicon* in non-Lovecraft Mythos fiction, see books such as S.T. Joshi’s *The Rise and Fall of the Cthulhu Mythos* (2008),<sup>18</sup> and Daniel Harms’s *The Cthulhu Mythos Encyclopedia* (2008).<sup>19</sup> The latter also covers various appearances in role-playing games and popular media culture.

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hinted of it, though the deathless Chinamen said that there were double meanings in the *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred which the initiated might read as they chose...” — from “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926).

<sup>17</sup> For this famous couplet, see footnote 12.

<sup>18</sup> I believe the information in this was somewhat updated by the last sections of S.T. Joshi’s *I Am Providence* (2011).

<sup>19</sup> There are several editions of this. At 2012 the latest edition is the 2008 third edition.

## The History of the *Necronomicon*, by H.P. Lovecraft.

O riginal title *Al Azif*—*azif* being the word used by Arabs to designate that nocturnal sound <sup>20</sup> (made by insects) <sup>21</sup> suppos'd to be the howling of daemons <sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The Arabic word *Ma'azif* refers to an ensemble of open stringed musical instruments, such as a group of barbiton (i.e.: an ancient type of small and somewhat phallic-shaped upright lute, closely associated with wine drinking and wine poetry) — see: *E.J. Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1913-1936. The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (1976) also gives *azif* as a name for a player or performer of Arabian stringed musical instruments. In Arabic the 'azif of something refers to its particular implied-musical sound, and is broadly related to the idea of a sound being distracting (like insects) or pleasurable (like music). Today, Arab society tends... “to equate the Arabic word *ma'azif* with [any] musical instruments” — from the *Arab News*, 14th July 2003. The ancient use is confirmed in an article by Abu Bilal Mustafa Al-Kanadi:

“*As-sibaab* [i.e.: the first dependable ancient dictionary, written by al-Jawhari (d. circa 1002)], asserts that *ma'azif* signifies musical instruments, *al-azif* indicates one who sings — from the article “Music and Singing in the Light of the Quran and Sunnah”, *Islam World*, January 2008.

*Al Azif*, in the ancient desert Arabic of Alhazred's time, thus appears to mean something like ‘The Performer’ or ‘The Singer’.

However I can find no mention of specific Arabian folk beliefs related to the sounds of insects. Specifically, no nomadic Arab association of desert insect sounds with howling *jinn* (powerful genie-like deamons); or with the *afriit* (also called *afreet* or *ifrit* — a mischievous solo creature, similar but far less powerful than a *jinn*, and probably best likened to ‘the imps of the *jinn*’); or with the wider cultural belief in ghouls or *ghuls*. These categories of spirit are often confused and even chaotically jumbled in Arabic culture. They have also been subject to wild elaboration over time by the highly superstitious settled populations, and they appear to have been variously confused in western translations of the literature and in the many first-hand reports that arose from the western experiences of Empire. On the *ghuls*, which may interest Lovecraft readers the most, see: Ahmed Al-Rawi, “The Mythical Ghoul in Arabic Culture”, *Cultural Analysis*, Vol. 8, 2009. Ethnologists suggest that the modern Bedouin appear to understand *ghuls* as being confined to graveyards and ruins. But none of these types of spirit seem to have any relevance to night-time insect noises.

There is nothing relevant to be found, on insect folklore, in comprehensive modern books such as *Folk Traditions of the Arab World: a Guide to Motif Classification* (1995). Nor is there anything much in the readily available historical literature, except for some possibly-relevant folklore concerning locusts — although I regret I have not been able to examine Edward Westermarck's book *The Belief in Spirits in Morocco* (1920) or his *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan civilization* (1933). But the following is given in ‘Natural History of Arabia: Insects’, by Andrew Crichton in his *The History of Arabia: ancient and modern* (1843):

“The noise they [a swarm of locusts] make in flying is like the rush of a waterfall, and is stuns the inhabitants with fear and astonishment” [...]

The medieval Arabian word for swarming locusts was ‘*arbeh*. There appears to have been no specific Arabian word for the actual noise made by swarming locusts, although their sound is said to be able to be heard from great distances as the locust swarm rides the night wind. The sound

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of a mass of flying locusts is likened in ancient literature to cavalry chariots moving in secret, and Arab folk traditions were said to liken the physical form of locusts to that of “little horses”. It thus appears to me rather unlikely that there is any connection of *azif* to locusts, or any connection between locusts and a theoretical folk tradition about “howling daemons”. The Arabian understanding of locusts clearly seems to have drawn on martial themes, rather than on supernatural conceptions.

There is however, one interesting connection of locusts with pre-Islamic cult beliefs, which is also given in Crichton (1843):

“They [locusts] arrive toward the end of May, when the Pleiades [a star constellation] are setting, which leads the natives to suppose that the insects entertain a dread of that constellation” [...]

The above information on locusts and the Pleiades appears to have come to Crichton via John Lewis Burckhard’s *Notes on the Bedouins and Wababys* (1830), which would place the folklore directly in the traditions of nomadic Arabs rather than settled city Arabs. According to Joseph Henninger’s *Studies on Islam: pre-Islamic Bedouin Religion* (1981), there was once a pre-Islamic cult of the Pleiades among the nomads of Arabia. The lore based around the positions and intersections of the Pleiades (a constellation deemed beneficent by the nomadic Arabs) is reportedly still exercised among the modern Bedouin, where it is a proven form of natural weather calendar during the colder seasons.

The Pleiades star cluster is also known in the West as the ‘Seven Sisters’. In H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1930) he has cultists appear to allude to the ‘Seven Sisters’ as an abode or location of Nyarlathotep:

“To Nyarlathotep, mighty messenger must all things be told. And he shall put on the semblance of men, the waxen mask and the robe that hides and come down from the world of seven suns to mock...” — from “The Whisperer in Darkness”.

The star Aldebaran (from the Arabic: *Al Dabaran*, meaning “the follower”) appears to follow the Pleiades in the night sky, and this star was later given a role in the Lovecraft mythos by Lovecraft’s acolytes. For instance, Derleth refers to Celaeno, a planet around a star in the Pleiades cluster, which in Derleth’s fiction contains a library of stolen knowledge. Aldebaran also has a central place in *The King in Yellow*, mentioned by Lovecraft at the very end of “The History of the *Necronomicon*”.

<sup>21</sup> There is or was a very fearsome — although apparently soundless — insect of the desert night:

“another venomous insect, resembling a spider, which infests the desert, is that to which the Bedouins give the name *abou hanekein* [...] it makes its appearance only at night, and is attracted by fire. The Arabs entertain the greatest dread of them” — from ‘Natural History of Arabia: Insects’, by Andrew Crichton, in his *The History of Arabia: ancient and modern* (1843).

Crichton’s source here is Johann Ludwig Burckhard’s first-hand account of encountering the creature, given in his *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (1822), p.598 — although Burckhard calls it a “reptile like a spider” and identifies it as ‘Galeode phalangiste’ based on illustrations seen in *Travels in the Ottoman Empire* (1801). Burckhard notes no sound or folklore associated with the creature.

<sup>22</sup> This overall notion clearly originates in Western orientalist fantasy literature, specifically with William Beckford’s *The History of Caliph Vathek* (1784), in the Henley edition which was well known to Lovecraft:

“The good Mussulmans [i.e.: Moslems] fancied that they heard the sullen hum of those nocturnal insects which presage evil, and importuned Vathek to beware how he ventured his sacred person.” — from *Vathek*.

An explanatory footnote to this is given by Samuel Henley, who suggests that:

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Composed by Abdul Alhazred,<sup>23</sup> a mad<sup>24</sup> poet of Sanaá, in Yemen,<sup>25</sup> who is said to have flourished during the period of the Ommiade caliphs, circa 700 A.D.<sup>26</sup> He visited the ruins of Babylon<sup>27</sup>

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“the nocturnal sound called by the Arabians *azif* was believed to be the howling of demons”.

This note was given by Lovecraft as being his source, in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith of 27<sup>th</sup> November 1927:

“Azif is a real word. I cribbed it out of Henley’s learned notes to *Vathek*”

I have only found one print source that could account for Henley’s notion: John Richardson’s *A New Vocabulary Persian, Arabic and English* (1810) lists *azif* as: “Howling in the desert. The noise of thunder” (p.390). Possibly this was an early western misunderstanding of *al-aaʒif*, meaning the desert singer or the performer. But more likely it was a confused western rendering of *irʒiz* (the sound of thunder) and *azis* (rolling or bubbling thunder) as *azif*. Although perhaps there was even a pre-Islamic shamanic conflation, in which a good campfire singer was deemed one who was able to summon up and control the ‘voice’ of the thunder and the desert winds? I also wonder if the devout orthodox Muslims of Henley’s time understood the music of the Sufi mystics, or even music in general, as being “the howling of demons”? Yet I can find no evidence for either idea, at least in the western sources.

Incidentally, the alternative Grimditch *Vathek* gives a similar rendering to that of Henley:

“Many good Mussulmans, thinking that these sounds proceeded from those nocturnal insects which presage evil, besought Vathek to beware lest harm should befall his sacred person.” — from the Grimditch translation of *Vathek*.

There were a long line of inspirations for *Vathek*, as has been pointed out in Darrell Schweitzer in his “Some Ancestors of *Vathek*” (*Crypt of Cibulhu*, No.30, April 1985). Rather than the beginning of a tradition:

“*Vathek* comes at the end of a long tradition, that of the pseudo-Oriental moralistic tale” [and Beckford] “transcended what was by his time an already long-established and moribund genre.”

This raises the further possibility there may be some source, in these earlier western literary texts, for Henley’s specific claim about *azif* and insects and daemons? Perhaps there was even some western literary confabulation that was based on the howling to the Rifaiyah sufi mystics — known in the West as “howling dervishes” — and who were outlawed in 1925. Western travellers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reported that the fearsome howling of these crazed sufi dervishes could rival that of wolves. They were, however, a lesser sect confined largely to Syria and modern Turkey.

<sup>23</sup> See footnote 11.

<sup>24</sup> In early medieval Arabian culture, to be mad was to be *jinn*-possessed. Lovecraft has Alhazred living at a period before Arab medicine developed a classification and treatment scheme for the mad. A scheme which, when it came, was based on that of Galen (129-200). For a comprehensive and acclaimed study of the subject, see: Michael W. Dols (1992), *Majnun: the Madman in Medieval Islamic Society*, Clarendon Press.

<sup>25</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sanaá was described in a standard western gazetteer as a small city, the chief settlement in the Yemen, and the population was then a mix of Arabs and Jews. There was then still a special writers’ market there, where books were copied and young scholars instructed in the art of writing and copying.

<sup>26</sup> According to the 1902 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* there was a brief period of... “real internal tranquillity” from about 705 A.D. onwards in Arabia. This was under Hejjaj, a military general of

## and the subterranean secrets of Memphis<sup>28</sup> and spent ten years alone in the great southern desert of Arabia—the Roba el Khaliyeh<sup>29</sup> or

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the Omniade (also called Umayyad or Omayyad) Dynasty. This is the time period in which Lovecraft has Alhazred travelling and researching the *Necronomicon*.

<sup>27</sup> Babylon was at its height around 1,300 B.C., but the city had become a ruin by about 475 B.C. It became a ‘lost’ city from about circa 120 A.D., until rediscovery in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Lovecraft thus implies that Abdul Alhazred discovered its location about a thousand years before its actual rediscovery.

<sup>28</sup> Memphis was the Ancient Greek name for an Ancient Egyptian city sited strategically near the confluence of the upper reaches of the Nile delta. It was founded by Menes, who presumably lent his name to the boy in Lovecraft’s story “The Cats of Ulthar” (1920). It was the centre of the god-cult of Ptah, and the Greeks derived the name ‘Aegyptos’ from the name of Ptah’s temple in the centre of the city — this name later became ‘Egypt’. Interestingly, in relation to Lovecraft’s own mythology, Ptah is the deification of the archaic ‘primordial mound’ god of ‘risen land’, i.e. the god of submerged land that has risen from the sea or the Nile delta — this might remind one of the setting in Lovecraft’s “Dagon” and of R’lyeh.

At the time Alhazred is said to have visited Memphis, it was a ruin like Babylon. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century the Arabs took possession and plundered the ruins of Memphis, to obtain building material for a new city nearby. The city was vast, however, and many “subterranean secrets” must have long remained there and probably still remain today. An Arab visitor of the 13<sup>th</sup> century wrote after visiting the ruined city:

[even after] “all that more than four thousand years have done in addition to man, these ruins still offer to the eye of the beholder a mass of marvels which bewilder the senses and which the most skillful pens must fail to describe. The more deeply we contemplate this city the more our admiration rises, and every fresh glance at the ruins is a fresh source of delight [...] The ruins of Memphis hold a half-day’s journey in every direction.” — Abd-ul-Latif, given in: Emile Isambert, *Itinéraire descriptif, historique et archéologique de l’Orient* (1881), p.1009.

Lovecraft’s “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward” (1927) has a mention of... “that Darke Thing belowe Memphis”.

<sup>29</sup> A 250,000 square-mile and largely unexplored desert region, now called the Rub’ al Khali — although Donald Cole points out in his book *Bedouins of the Empty Quarter* (2010) that this is not a name known to the modern Bedouin there. It was first explored by two small-scale British explorations in the early 1930s. During one of these Harry St. John Bridger Philby (1886-1960) inadvertently documented a strange sonic phenomenon of the desert in the Rub’ al Khali, namely the “singing sands”, which may have some bearing on the idea of “the howling of daemons”:

“Quite suddenly the great amphitheatre [containing a rare desert well] began to boom and drone with a sound not unlike that of a siren or perhaps an aero-plane engine— quite a musical pleasing rhythmic sound of astonishing depth. Only once before, near Medina, had Philby heard singing sands, and then far off. Now they were near at hand, and were, of course, attributed by his [Arab] companions to *jinn*s [powerful daemons]; Philby soon saw that they were caused by a sand-slide set off by one of the men who had climbed the slope. This deduction he confirmed by manipulating the orchestra; while doing so, he plunged downhill and knelt on the singing mass; here he noticed a deep, sucking sound as he pulled hand or knee out of the slope, and felt a ‘curious but unmistakable sensation of a pulsing and throbbing below the surface, as in a mild earthquake.’” — from “Across the Rub ‘Al-Khali”, *Saudi Aramco Magazine*, November/December 1973. For a full account of the journey see Philby’s 1933 book *The Empty Quarter: being a description of the great south desert of Arabia known as Rub ‘al Khali*.

Only in 2006 was a proper large-scale scientific survey of this immense region finally undertaken.

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“Empty Space” of the ancients—and “Dahna”<sup>30</sup> or “Crimson”<sup>31</sup> desert of the modern Arabs, which is held to be inhabited by protective evil spirits and monsters of death.<sup>32</sup> Of this desert many strange and unbelievable marvels are told by those who pretend to have penetrated it.<sup>33</sup> In his last years Alhazred dwelt in Damascus,<sup>34</sup> where the *Necronomicon* (*Al Azif*) was written, and of his final death or disappearance<sup>35</sup> (738 A.D.)<sup>36</sup> many terrible and conflicting things are

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<sup>30</sup> Actually the name for a narrow strip of rolling sand hills that form the boundary between central and eastern Arabia. See: Donald Cole (2010), *Bedouins of the Empty Quarter*.

<sup>31</sup> Possibly so called because the women of the tribes living in parts of it, who used (and possibly still use) local dyes to create a vivid crimson ‘dami’ cloth. See: James P. Mandaville’s *Bedouin Ethnobotany: Plant Concepts and Uses in a Desert Pastoral World* (2011), p.142.

<sup>32</sup> This passage appears to be a borrowing by Lovecraft, from the 1902 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*...

“Arab fancy has attributed the additional protection of evil spirits and monsters of death. This greater desert, the “Roba el Khaliyeh” or “Empty Space” of geographers — the “Dahna” or “Crimson” of modern Arabs [...] “little or no credit can be attached to the relations of those who pretend to have explored it, and to have found wonders in its recesses.” — from the entry for “Arabia: Great Southern Desert”, in the 1902 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

<sup>33</sup> Again, this passage was basically borrowed from the 1902 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Of this vast desert, the *Britannica* states...

“it is never traversed in its full width, not even by Bedouins; and little or no credit can be attached to the relations of those who pretend to have explored it, and to have found wonders in its recesses.” — from the entry for “Arabia: Great Southern Desert”, in the 1902 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

This desert was deemed impenetrable and intensely hostile by Alhazred’s time, even without the presence of the alleged “monsters of death”. To spend ten years alone there, as Lovecraft suggests that Alhazred did, implies that by that time Alhazred had gained considerable occult powers, or else was treated as some kind of holy hermit and therefore looked after by local tribes. It is true that some frankincense trade routes were once able to completely cross this desert, but that was only until about the 300s (although it may have been the sharp and sudden decline in the frankincense trade due to changing fashions among consumers, rather than desertification, which actually caused these routes to become disused).

At the heart of the Rub’ al Khali was said to lie the fabled city of Irem, a sort of Arabian equivalent to Atlantis or the Garden of the Hesperides. In “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926), Lovecraft has Castro speculate that this lost city may be the centre of the Cthulhu cult:

“Of the [Cthulhu] cult, he said that he thought the centre lay amid the pathless desert of Arabia, where Irem, the City of Pillars, dreams hidden and untouched.”

<sup>34</sup> Major Arabian city, and the capital of the Ommiade caliphs under whom Alhazred lived. Muslims were in the minority in the city both during and after the Ommiade Dynasty. Christian Arabs appear to have predominated there at that time, and Jews also lived and worked there. “Authority based on learning” was apparently widespread in the city at that time.

<sup>35</sup> Lovecraft, by adding “or disappearance” and “conflicting”, appears to hold open the future possibility of new fictional appearances by Alhazred at a later date. An explanation would

told. He is said by Ebn Khallikan (12th cent. biographer)<sup>37</sup> to have been seized by an invisible<sup>38</sup> monster<sup>39</sup> in broad daylight and devoured horribly before a large number of fright-frozen witnesses. Of his madness many things are told. He claimed to have seen fabulous Irem, or City of Pillars,<sup>40</sup> and to have found beneath the ruins of a

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presumably have been along the lines that Alhazred had acquired long life in some manner, or been whisked into another dimension. For a full discussion on this point, see: Robert. M. Price, “Is Alhazred Still Alive?”, *Crypt of Cthulhu*, No.7, Lammas 1982.

<sup>36</sup> This was near to the time that Damascus definitively lost its independence, to conquest by Tiglath-pileser III. A little later there was a further radical shift for the city’s scholars — in manuscript and book production, as paper-making was introduced. Baghdad had a major paper-making factory by 794. A factory in Damascus later produced nearly all the paper used in Europe, seemingly from the 800s onwards.

<sup>37</sup> Lovecraft appears to mean Ibn Khallikan (1211–1282), but he has pushed Khallikan back in time by about a century. The real Ibn Khallikan wrote a *Biographical Dictionary* (“The Obituaries of Eminent Men”) which was translated into English and published in 1843 in volumes that ran to over 2,700 pages. His *Dictionary* makes substantial use of the sort of vivid informal anecdote (he does this because there were already more formal biographical dictionaries available in his time) that Lovecraft attributes to him for the fictional entry on Alhazred.

<sup>38</sup> In the beliefs of Arabian nomads the *jinn* and their lesser variants are “invisible or hidden creatures” ... “resembling humans but free from physical limitations” and they can thus shape-shift. They are especially threatening to men... “when they [men] are entirely absorbed in singing at the [camp] fire during the long Saharan nights, since they bring them to ecstasy and cause them to fall to the ground frothing at the mouth” — all quotes from a summary of the historic beliefs that draws on Arabic sources, given by Ewa Machut-Mendecka, “Witchcraft and sorcery in the prose of Ibrahim al-Kuni” IN: *Studies in Arabic and Islam: Proceedings of the 19th Congress*, 2002, p.236. Possibly the high prevalence of epilepsy, caused by consanguinity, is a scientific explanation for this phenomenon — since the musical beat and flickering flames of the campfire may induce an epileptic fit.

<sup>39</sup> The possible implication here is that one of the “monsters of death” of the Rub’ al Khali has followed Alhazred, or perhaps been summoned, from out of the empty desert.

<sup>40</sup> The 1902 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* can inform us of this city...

“Very gorgeous are the descriptions given of ‘Irem’, the ‘city of pillars’, as the *Koran* styles it [which] after the annihilation of its tenants, remains entire, so Arabs say, invisible to ordinary eyes, but occasionally, and at rare intervals, revealed to some heaven-favoured traveler.” — from the ‘Arabia’ entry, 1902 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

The Arab Sufi belief was that Irem (*Irem, Zhat al Imad*) was a magical garden-city constructed in the immense desert by the powers of the *jinn* (i.e.: Arabian ‘genies’, daemons with superhuman powers) under human direction. The human rulers of the city dared to believe themselves to be divine, and so before they could reach it their garden-city was erased from sight by a ‘noise’ from God. But the city still stands invisible and untouched in the desert, where God sometimes permits a traveller to catch a glimpse of it and so be reminded of the perils of hubris. The story and belief has been given or mentioned in the West a number of times: notably by *The Thousand and One Nights*; Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat*; Washington Irving in *Tales of the Alhambra* (1851, revised); and vividly and at length in Henry Iliowizi’s *The Weird Orient* (1900). The tales of Irem appears to have inspired Lovecraft’s story “The Nameless City” (1921), although he is careful in his story to show that the city being explored is even older than Irem: “one terrible final scene shewed a primitive-looking man, perhaps a pioneer of ancient Irem”.

certain nameless desert town the shocking annals and secrets of a race older than mankind.<sup>41</sup> He was only an indifferent Moslem,<sup>42</sup> worshipping unknown entities whom he called Yog-Sothoth and Cthulhu.<sup>43</sup>

In A.D. 950<sup>44</sup> the *Azif*, which had gained a considerable tho' surreptitious circulation amongst the philosophers of the age,<sup>45</sup> was secretly translated into Greek by Theodorus Philetas<sup>46</sup> of

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There may perhaps have been some Sufi traditions of 'dream travel' to the city of Irem and its fabulous gardens, but I can find no mention of this in the western scholarly literature. One western sufist claims that Irem is 'very important' to Sufi beliefs, but this may be a modern confabulation.

The notion of a mysterious 'lost' place which is simultaneously half in and half out of the real world is one that seems relevant to Lovecraft's conception of the Dreamlands and also of Kadath. The notion of travelling to an exotic city created by daemons, but never arriving there, also seems relevant to Lovecraft's projected novel "Azathoth" (1922). Also relevant to the idea of Lovecraft's shape-shifting Shoggoths is that *jinn* and their variants are credited with the same abilities. Avicenna (d. 1037) defined the *jinn* as...

"Airy animals capable of changing themselves into different forms" –quote by Avicenna, given in Duncan Black Macdonald's undated online scholarly essay: "Intercourse Through the Jinn; Spirits, Demons, and Ghosts in Islam".

There are also lesser deamons of the desert night which are called *afriit* or *afreet* (numerous spellings are used). In modern Bedouin belief these impish creatures mischievously taunt men with owl-like calls, and take on the appearance of animals or humans in order to lead men into lonely places, whereupon the *afriit* impishly vanishes. See: Joseph J. Hobbs (1992), *Bedouin Life in the Egyptian Wilderness*, University of Texas Press, p.60. In the western historical literature these beings are said to be more fantastical: to be larger; to dwell underground; to have wings; and to be made of fire like the *jinn*. The source for these over-heated descriptions might appear to be the more superstitious settled Arab populations, who have an absolute dread of the desert and its beings, since the Bedouin who actually live in the desert are significantly less credulous. Note that the name *afriit* does not appear to be the root of the modern 'affright', which is claimed to have its root in the ancient Northumbrian (the far north of modern England) 'fyrhtu'.

<sup>41</sup> Very possibly a reference to Lovecraft's own story "The Nameless City" (1921), in which the lost desert ruin conceals just such remains in its lower reaches.

<sup>42</sup> Sufi mystical asceticism had its very early and rather misty origins at about this time, and it may be that an Abdul Alhazred would have been able to take advantage of what appears to have been a period of relative intellectual ferment in Arabia.

<sup>43</sup> These two references should need no explanation for Lovecraft readers.

<sup>44</sup> 950 A.D. appears to be generally deemed by Christian scholars to be the moment when the long persecution and decline of the Christians began to end, and their rise to hegemony ushered in the Middle Ages.

<sup>45</sup> Prominent philosophers of the period from the 740s to the 950s included the famous Al-Kindi. The north of the British Isles also produced Bede of Northumbria, and Alcuin of York.

<sup>46</sup> A common first name, seen in various ancient histories. Perhaps the most superficially obvious possibility as a source is the Ancient Greek bucolic poet Theocritus, who was the student

Constantinople<sup>47</sup> under the title *Necronomicon*. For a century it impelled certain experimenters to terrible attempts,<sup>48</sup> when it was suppressed and burnt by the patriarch Michael.<sup>49</sup> After this it is only heard of furtively, but (1228) Olaus Wormius<sup>50</sup> made a Latin translation later in the Middle Ages, and the Latin text was printed

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of Philetas. He would however, be a strange choice for Lovecraft, since Theocritus wrote very conventional poetic works and, in Theocritus's own words: "I never sought after a strange muse".

I can find no mention of any "Theodorus" or "Philetas" in connection with Constantinople or Byzantium during the 900s. But Philetas was a Byzantine name for what was then the outlying pirate port of Phaselis, a port that had briefly housed the Byzantine fleet in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and which had afterwards become a regional market for pirated booty and plunder. On this point see: Sir William Mitchell Ramsay (1895), *The Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia: pt. I.*, p.19. In this context Lovecraft's seemingly-invented name would have meant simply: "Theodorus, who comes from the nearby place called Philetas".

Or might the name Theodorus Philetas have some loose anagram-like resemblance to Lovecraft's own sometime-pseudonym "Lewis Theobald Jr."? Perhaps: Theodr Bilejas?

<sup>47</sup> This was the opulent capital of Byzantium, effectively a re-location and continuation of ancient Rome. After periods of intolerance, the city was thriving in 950 A.D. It appears to have produced various great scholars and magicians, and in the 900s it was the only place where the old Greek classics were still read, copied and taught. To survive Byzantium developed extremely devious and subtle forms of diplomacy, hence the modern use of the word 'byzantine' in educated political rhetoric. It was from this city that the learning of the Ancient Greeks was carried (quite literally) to renaissance Italy — although much was also preserved by the Arab, Jewish, and Christian scholars who translated many Greek works into Arabic under the patronage of the Abbasid caliphs.

<sup>48</sup> Magic was common in Constantinople at that time, although not unregulated by law. In the 1910s, and perhaps before, there was a belief that... "from Constantinople magic was disseminated throughout Europe, along with other sciences." — quote from Lewis Spence's *An Encyclopaedia of Occultism* (1920). Only relatively recently has Byzantine magic received attention from mainstream scholars, as part of the strong up swelling of academic interest in Byzantium. It now appears that superstition and magic saturated Byzantine society. The key early and groundbreaking mainstream academic work is Henry Maguire's book *Byzantine magic* (2009). See also: Paul Magdalino's *The Occult Sciences in Byzantium* (2006); and Richard P.H. Greenfield's *Traditions of Belief in Late Byzantine Demonology* (1988). 'Late' in Byzantine Studies means after the year 1204.

<sup>49</sup> Patriarch Michael I, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch at Constantinople from 1043 to 1059. He is known to have conducted séances (*Arcana Mundi*, John Hopkins University Press, 2006, p.474), and commissioned works on alchemy (*The Occult Sciences in Byzantium*, La Pomme D'Or, 2006, p.18). Of Michael's séances, from a first-hand account left by Psellus:

"We hear about singing, monotonous movements of the limbs, blinking of eyelids, ingesting narcotics or hallucinogenics, and rubbing them in and inhaling them as well. After a while the prophetess Dosithea (the medium) began to speak softly; then she trembled; then she levitated. She spoke of cosmic subjects." — from George Luck (2000), *Ancient Pathways and Hidden Pursuits: Religion, Morals, and Magic in the Ancient World*, University of Michigan Press, p.134.

<sup>50</sup> Celebrated Danish doctor and antiquary, Olaus Wormius (1588–1655). Lovecraft here shunts him back in time by well over 300 years. For a detailed explanation of the likely reason for this move, see S.T. Joshi (2011), *I Am Providence*, pp.698-699.

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twice—once in the fifteenth century in black-letter (evidently in Germany)<sup>51</sup> and once in the seventeenth (prob. Spanish)<sup>52</sup>—both editions being without identifying marks, and located as to time and place by internal typographical evidence only. The work both Latin and Greek was banned by Pope Gregory IX<sup>53</sup> in 1232, shortly after its Latin translation, which called attention to it. The Arabic original was lost as early as Wormius’ time, as indicated by his prefatory note; and no sight of the Greek copy—which was printed in Italy<sup>54</sup> between 1500 and 1550—has been reported since the burning of a certain Salem man’s library in 1692.<sup>55</sup> An English translation made by Dr.

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<sup>51</sup> The ‘black letter’ style of printing type apparently originated among English typesetters, so the automatic assumption of Germany as the origin is perhaps not so clear cut as it might seem.

<sup>52</sup> Said to be a hotbed of occultism, although Lovecraft may not have known it in the 1920s...

“Spanish historians used to argue that Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was commendably free from magic and the occult, that what little there was proceeded from rural ignorance [...] This rosy view has since been invalidated by historians such as Caro Baroja, who has demonstrated the widespread participation of Spaniards in occult practices, well-intentioned and otherwise. Early modern Spain was no different in this respect from France, Italy or Germany...” — from David C. Goodman, *Power and Penury: Government, Technology and Science in Philip II’s Spain*, Cambridge University Press, p.3.

<sup>53</sup> Pope Gregory IX (c. 1145/70-1241) seems to have been keen on banning things in the 1230s. He banned the Jewish *Talmud*, for instance. His papal ‘Vox in Rama’ decree of 1233 — banning and damning black cats as satanic beings — was long believed to have been a trigger for wholesale cat massacres by Catholics across Europe. Lovecraft, an atheist, a devout cat lover and a student of strange lore, can hardly have failed to note this historical nugget for future use.

A letter from Lovecraft to Clark Ashton Smith (27<sup>th</sup> November 1927) elaborates the point slightly: Lovecraft states that Gregory placed the *Necronomicon* on the Catholic *Index Expurgatorius*. The *Index Expurgatorius* was a list of corrections issued to update the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, or list of forbidden books. But the Pope’s *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* was not issued until 1559. Probably as a consequence of Lovecraft discovering this fact, mention of the *Index Expurgatorius* was omitted from the circulated version of the “History”.

<sup>54</sup> The early printing revolution is generally demarcated as having happened in Europe from 1455 to 1550. By 1500 Italy had over 70 printers, although not all of these might have been printers of books.

<sup>55</sup> 1692 was the year of the height of the Salem witchcraft trials. I can find no record of any occult libraries being burned in New England at exactly this time. But later many of the books that were in Cotton Mather’s library were burned in Boston — see Alice Morse Earle’s book *Customs and Fashions in Old New England* (1893), p.145. Mather had had a minor role in the Salem witch trials.

Dee<sup>56</sup> was never printed, and exists only in fragments recovered from the original manuscript.<sup>57</sup> Of the Latin texts now existing one (15th cent.) is known to be in the British Museum under lock and key,<sup>58</sup> while another (17th cent.) is in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris.<sup>59</sup> A seventeenth-century edition is in the Widener Library at Harvard,<sup>60</sup> and in the library of Miskatonic University at Arkham.<sup>61</sup> Also in the library of the University of Buenos Ayres.<sup>62</sup> Numerous other copies

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<sup>56</sup> Doctor John Dee (1527-1608) was a real personage of early modern England, in the time of Shakespeare. He served as Queen Elizabeth I's 'divine' and her scientist-astrologer. He has been widely thought to be the model for the magician Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (c.1610). His occult library was extensive and renowned. His library was ransacked and dispersed by a superstitious mob while he was in Europe. For more on Dee and Lovecraft, see my detailed essay on the subject in my book *Lovecraft in Historical Context: a third collection of essays and notes* (2012).

<sup>57</sup> This line on Dee was added to the "History" manuscript a little later than the body of the text. This was done by Lovecraft so as to accommodate the use of a "quote" from Dee's *Necronomicon*, which formed the epigraph of Frank Belknap Long's story "The Space Eaters" (1927), which at that time had yet to see print. "The Space Eaters" story was also the first to include Lovecraft as a character. See: S.T. Joshi (2011), *I Am Providence*, for the details on this. Lovecraft later used Long's Dee edition in his "The Dunwich Horror" (1928).

<sup>58</sup> Lovecraft was probably thinking here of reports of the notorious locked "Private Case" in which were held the forbidden books of the British Museum Library. The "Private Case" was established around 1856, although there was a prior existing tradition of 'setting aside' certain forbidden books on their acquisition. For details on the Case, see Patrick J. Kearney's book *The Private Case: an annotated bibliography of the Private Case*, 1981. The Museum's Library formed as a merger of the Camden, Harleian, Old Royal, and Sloan libraries in 1753, and it opened in 1759. After enduring a period of neglect, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century it had become the finest library in the world. It later merged with other British libraries to become the British Library (the equivalent of the Library of Congress).

<sup>59</sup> A real library. The national library of France, like the British Library or the Library of Congress.

<sup>60</sup> A real library. In 1995 the F.B.I. arrested a man for stealing several hundred rare books about the occult from this library.

<sup>61</sup> Neither this fictional University or the fictional town should need any introduction to Lovecraft readers.

<sup>62</sup> A real library. The spelling Lovecraft uses is the old one, seen in use in magazines and books of the mid 1920s. The same spelling is used again in "The Dunwich Horror" (1927): Wilbur writes to... "the Widener Library at Harvard, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the British Museum, the University of Buenos Ayres, and the Library of Miskatonic University at Arkham" to try to obtain copies of certain pages from the *Necronomicon*. But why choose Buenos Ayres? Lovecraft hardly ever mentions South America, and appears to have never mentioned Argentina. Air tourism from America does not appear to have started at that time (see the history book: *Flying Down to Rio: Hollywood, Tourists, and Yankee Clippers*). Buenos Ayres in the 1920s was claimed to be the most culturally avant-garde city in South America — Poe was popular there in the 1900s, the writer Borges was emerging there in the mid 1920s, and the first Surrealist group outside France was founded in the city in 1926. There was also a darker side to the city: Lovecraft's attention might well have been drawn by reviews of the well-promoted book "The

probably exist in secret, and a fifteenth-century one is persistently rumoured to form part of the collection of a celebrated American millionaire.<sup>63</sup> A still vaguer rumour credits the preservation of a sixteenth-century Greek text in the Salem family<sup>64</sup> of Pickman; but if it was so preserved, it vanished with the artist R.U. Pickman,<sup>65</sup> who disappeared early in 1926.<sup>66</sup> The book is rigidly suppressed<sup>67</sup> by the authorities of most countries, and by all branches of organised ecclesiasticism.<sup>68</sup> Reading leads to terrible consequences. It was from rumours of this book (of which relatively few of the general public know) that R.W. Chambers is said to have derived the idea of his early novel *The King in Yellow*.<sup>69</sup>

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road to Buenos Ayres” (1927) a campaigning account of the real-life ‘white slave’ trade by which Jewish pimps filled the brothels of the city. Or possibly there was an occult connection that Lovecraft knew about through his Theosophist contacts...

“Séances, consultations with psychic mediums, the study of theosophy and the Kabbalah were all popular activities in Buenos Aires at the turn of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century.”  
David William Foster et al (1998), in *Culture and Customs of Argentina*, p.105.

A literary explanation might relate to the slight use of Buenos Ayres in Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan*. Lovecraft had read Machen by the time he wrote “The History of the *Necronomicon*”.

<sup>63</sup> Possibly this mention is related to Clark Ashton Smith’s story “The Return of the Sorcerer” (pub. 1931), in which scholarly American recluse John Carnby has a copy of the *Necronomicon*. Perhaps Smith had communicated this notion to Lovecraft, as one he might use in a future story? Carby is depicted by Smith as an aged scholar living in the suburbs of Oakland, who is rich enough to employ a secretary, and he has... “a singularly comprehensive collection of ancient and modern works on demonology and the black arts”.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Upton Pickman, depicted in Lovecraft’s story “Pickman’s Model” (1926), came of a Salem family. This fact is not a new addition to Pickman’s back-story, since it is given in “Pickman’s Model” thus: “you know Pickman comes of old Salem stock”. Salem was, of course, the site of the notorious witch-trials, and there are indeed many Pickman names to be noted in Salem’s historical record.

<sup>65</sup> Again, see H.P. Lovecraft’s short story “Pickman’s Model” (1926).

<sup>66</sup> The ‘early 1926’ date for the setting is not given in “Pickman’s Model”.

<sup>67</sup> Lovecraft was among the first generation of human beings who were able to write and publish in a fully open manner on religion and ideas.

<sup>68</sup> “Ecclesiasticism” refers to those groups who adhere to mainstream religious church-based practices.

<sup>69</sup> Robert.W. Chambers (1865-1933). New York artist who became an early author of the weird. The success of his early tales, when issued in book form, led him to take up full-time writing as a career. He later turned to turning out commercial romance-adventures in order to earn money, although some of these have science-fiction elements. He thereby became a best-selling author and quite wealthy. The first part of his book *The King in Yellow* (1895) contains a

## Chronology

*Al Azif* written circa 730 A.D. at Damascus by Abdul Alhazred

Tr. to Greek 950 A.D. as *Necronomicon* by Theodorus Philetas

Burnt by Patriarch Michael 1050 (i.e., Greek text). Arabic text now lost.

Olaus translates Gr. to Latin 1228

1232 Latin ed. (and Gr.) suppr. by Pope Gregory IX

14... Black-letter printed edition (Germany)

15... Gr. text printed in Italy

16... Spanish reprint of Latin text

August 2012. Designed for printing as a 6" x 9" booklet.

<http://tentaclii.wordpress.com/>

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collection of linked weird horror stories, which centre on a fictional evil book, said to contain a stage play, called *The King in Yellow*. Reading this fictional book brings misfortune and madness. Lovecraft had read Chambers's story "The Harbour Master" (1904) in 1926, and he first borrowed a copy of Chambers's *The King in Yellow* in April 1927 (S.T. Joshi, *I Am Providence*, p.677) while he was researching the long essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature".

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