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The Image of Suleiman the Magnificent in 16th Century Croatian and Slovak Literature

Abstract

The article discusses the matter of portraying Suleiman I the Magnificent in 16th century Croatian and Slovakian literature. The source material comprises three texts: Ferenc Črnko's Croatian chronicle titled *Podsjeđanje i osvojenje Sigeta* [*The Siege and Capture of Siget*], the Croatian epic tale *Vazetje Sigeta grada* [*The Capture of Siget Town*] by Brne Karnarutić and the Slovakian anonymous historical song *Piseň o Sigetském zámku* [*A Song about Siget Castle*]. By looking at these texts the author hereof contemplates what image of the Turkish ruler has been recorded in Slavic literatures.

Keywords

Suleiman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Empire, the Turks, 16th century, the Slovakian literature, the Croatian literature.

Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566) belongs to the group of the most distinguished Turkish sultans, and under his rule the Ottoman Empire experienced an intensive growth.¹ He was given the nickname Lawmaker; he was also a poet and an art connoisseur.² Contemporarily Suleiman is perceived in his home country as a powerful ruler, not only because he had subjected to himself orthodox Islam followers, but also due to his numerous victories gained in Europe.³

In Slavic literatures rarely can we find the figure of Suleiman or any Turkish leader known by name, since we definitely more often come across the

¹ Reychman, Jan, *Historia Jugosławii*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk 1973, p. 68.

² Łątka, Jerzy, *Sulejman II Wspaniały*, Dom Wydawniczy Bellona, Warszawa 2004, p. 8.

³ Mantran, Robert, *Stambul w czasach Sulejmana Wspaniałego*, Świat Książki, Warszawa 2014, p. 85.

Turks as a collective protagonist. Such an image is presented, e.g. in Slovakian historical songs, in which the Turks are perceived as cruel heathens (it is also reflected in the contrasting symbolic of fights between Christians and Muslims – the crescent against the cross.⁴ In the Croatian literature as well, the fight against the Turks is related to the concept of the outpost of Christianity⁵ and was one of the leading motifs in the Old literature:

Walka z Turkami była jednym z głównych tematów literatury chorwackiej od XV do XVIII wieku, pojawiającym się nie tylko w gatunkach elitarnych (poemat epicki), ale i folklorze. (...) Na kreowany w nich świat, sposób myślenia i wartościowanie miała wpływ nie tylko rzeczywistość polityczna, ale i fakt, że temat ten w zasadniczych aspektach został dobrze opracowany w wielu mowach łacińskich, obejmując takie elementy, jak: walka pomiędzy chrześcijanami, okrucieństwa tureckie, możliwość obrony ziem słowiańskich z pomocą zjednoczonej Europy lub bez niej.

The fight with the Turks is one the main themes in the Croatian literature from 16th to 18th century, appearing not only in elite genres (Epic poems), but also in the folklore. (...) The world created in them, thought patterns and values were influenced not only by the political reality, but also the fact that this theme in essential aspects was well researched in numerous Latin speeches, covering such elements as: the fight between Christians, Turkish cruelty, the possibility of defending Slavic lands with a help of the united Europe or without it. (BOROWIEC, ALEKSANDRA. 2007: 199.)

In the literary compositions presented in this paper we also perceive the presentation of the Turks as invaders of the Christian lands, however, we mostly concentrate on their leader i.e. Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. We shall consider how Suleiman – ‘a conqueror of Hungary and several peoples living around his Empire’ (FELCZAK, WAĆLAW. 1983: 125.) – appearing in two 16th century Croatian and one Slovakian pieces of literary work, describing the siege of Szigetvár⁶ fortress, lasting for more than a month in 1566.⁷ It was the sultan’s 13th military expedition during which he died on 4th September by the walls of the fortress.⁸ The captain commanding a regiment of defenders was Croatian ban Nikola Zrinski

⁴ Brtáň, Rudo, *Slovenské historické spevy a piesne*, Tatran, Bratislava 1978, p. 16.

⁵ Rapacka, Joanna, *Leksykon tradycji chorwackich*, Slawistyczny Ośrodek Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1997, p. 145.

⁶ In the pieces of work discussed hereunder other variants of this name have appeared: in the Croatian literary work there is the name Siget, and in a Slovakian one the name Sigot’.

⁷ Pavličević, Dragutin, *Historia Chorwacji*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań 2004, p. 153.

⁸ Felczak, Waćlaw, *Historia Jugosławii*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk – Łódź 1983, p. 174.

(around 1508–1566).⁹ He opposed the attacks of 100-thousand strong Turkish army led by Suleiman,¹⁰ but ultimately died in a battle against the Turkish army being the leader of the soldiers who remained alive,¹¹ thus he is compared to Leonidas.¹²

The first from the discussed pieces of work is the Croatian chronicle by Ferenc Črnko titled *Podsjeđanje i osvojenje Sigeta* [*The Siege and Capture of Siget*] written by Nikola Zrinski's chamberlain, which was published in Vienna in the Latin version in 1568.¹³ The second piece of work was a Croatian epic tale titled *Vazetje Sigeta grada* [*The Capture of Siget*] by Brne Karnarutić, inspired by Črnko's chronicle – probably one of its versions. The oldest known edition of Karnarutić's work comes from 1584, but it is possible that it had been printed before.¹⁴ The third work is a Slovakian historical song titled *Píseň o Sigetském zámku* [*A Song of Siget Castle*] by an anonymous author. According to written record, it comes from 1566, it would then be a piece of work older than Črnko's Croatian chronicle, but taking into account the content and structure thereof, it was probably created later than the date indicates.¹⁵

In *Podsjeđanje i osvojenje Sigeta* [*The Siege and Capture of Siget*] the most important figure in the battle for the fortress is Nikola Zrinski facing the Turkish army coming to the site. The names of more important Turkish invaders also appear there, e.g. Sultan Suleiman and Vizier Mehmed Pasha Sokolović.¹⁶ The Turkish army manpower is often emphasized, first skirmishes with the defenders and the final storm of the fortress. The author of the chronicle does not pay too much attention to their sultan. The beginning of the work describes a march of the Turkish army through the Hungarian land. At the back of the numerous army marches Suleiman himself, who reaches the fortress walls with his entourage on 6th August and starts laying siege to it.¹⁷ It shows the Sultan's arrogance, owing to the well-equipped Turkish army and his belief that the capture of Szigetvár is only a matter of time, and the fact that the Christians defending the fortress fiercely were outnumbered. The work emphasises the

⁹ The surname in the Hungarian versions reads Zrinyi.

¹⁰ Rapacka, Joanna, *Leksykon tradycji...*, pp. 14–16.

¹¹ Turnbull, Stephen, *Wojny złotego wieku. Od upadku Konstantynopola do wojny trzydziestoletniej*, Bellona, Warszawa 2007, p. 142.

¹² Szydłowska, Monika, „Spadkobierca etosu rycerskiego: obraz Nikoli Zrinskiego w chorwackiej i słowackiej literaturze XVI wieku”, *Studenckie Zeszyty Naukowe Instytutu Filologii Słowiańskiej UJ*, 8, 2016, p. 76.

¹³ Ratković, Milan, Brne Karnarutić, ‘Vazetje Sigeta grada’, *Opsada Sigeta*. Liber, Zagreb 1971, p. 27.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 38–39.

¹⁵ Kolbuszewski, Jacek, „Nad słowackimi pieśniami narodowymi”, *Pamiętnik Słowiański*, vol. XX, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków 1970, p. 235. If not stated otherwise, all translations of titles and quotations come from the author hereof.

¹⁶ Črnko, Ferenc, *Podsjeđanje i osvojenje Sigeta*, *Opsada Sigeta*, Liber, Zagreb 1971, p. 23.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

religious aspect: the Turks' war cry is 'Hala!', whereas the Christians cry out 'Jesus!' (ČRNKO, FERENAC. 1971: 21.), which clearly shows the differences between them, and at the same time underlines and establishes the image of a Turk heathen in the literature.

Črnko also mentions Suleiman at the very end of his work, after a description of Zrinski's death and seizure of the fortress, reveals circumstances of the sultan's death: 'Uostalom, veliki vezir sultanov Mehmet-paša s nekoliko vezira tako bijaše lukav da nijedan od nižih paša ili begova, ni janjičari ni ostali vojnici nijesu mogli saznati za smrt sultana Sulejmana, koji je umro još 4. rujna poslije ručka oko prve ure na »Šimlehevu«, četvrt milje daleko od Sigeta, kod sigetskih vinograda, dok nije bila već osvojena sigetska tvrđava i dok nije Sulejmanovu sinu Selimu u pismu javio smrt sultanovu. I da uopće ne iziđe na javu i da drugi ne obaznadu, Mehmet-paša ubije noću sultanova liječnika da ne bi razglasio njegove smrti.

Besides, great vizier Mehmed Pasha with a few viziers was so cunning that neither lower-rank pashas nor beghs, janissaries or other soldiers were able to know about Sultan Suleiman's death, who died on 4th September in the afternoon, around 1 p.m. at "Šimlehev" by Siget's vineyards, before Siget fortress was captured and until Selim, Suleiman's son in writing announced the Sultan's death. And not to let the truth be revealed and others know, Mehmed Pasha at night killed the Sultan's medicine man so that he would not be able to announce the Sultan's death. (ČRNKO, FERENAC. 1971: 23.)

Suleiman's death was then kept secret before the Turkish army, whereas soldiers, who were unaware of a huge tragedy that had happened to their nation were able to face bravely the defenders of the fortress.

Suleiman is portrayed in the chronicle as a proud commander, full of faith in the ability of his army. The author, however, concentrates most of all, on the events within the fortress and its captain Zrinski. In turn, the Turks are presented mainly as a powerful army, and it is probably the reason why their rules was not described in the work in great detail. The chronicler most of all emphasizes Suleiman's different religious denomination to the Christian faith. in turn at the end of the work devotes only a few sentences to the circumstances of his death. This conduct can be explained by the fact that Črnko, as Zrinski's servant, created a piece of work documenting his master's heroic deeds, therefore he focuses more on the fortress captain rather than the commander of the Turkish army. Such approach is also consistent with the genre assumptions of a chronicle, which being historiographic prose is characterised by, among other, a tendency to present moral values or panegirism.¹⁸

¹⁸ Głowiński, Michał, Kostkiewiczowa, Teresa, Okopień-Sławińska, Aleksandra, Sławiński, Janusz, *Słownik terminów literackich*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków 1998. Online: <http://www.istanbulview.com/muhtesem-yuzuil/>, pp. 263–264.

In contrast to Črnko's chronicle, Brne Karnarutić from the first verses of his epic tale *Vazetje Sigeta grada* describes Suleiman's numerous victories on the battlefields in Europe (among others, capturing Belgrade and Buda) and defeating the Kingdom of Hungary at Mohacz.¹⁹ The powerful Sultan decides to lay siege to Szigetvár, since the captain of the fortress is Nikola Zrinski, a soldier distinguished in battles against the Turks:

Začuvši Suliman, on turski slavan car,/ da ov hrvatski ban čini mu taku stvar/
odluči odlukom careve svitlosti/ prit silom i s bukom njegove jakosti/ ter mu
grad podsesti i rvuć dobiti (...).

Suleiman, /this famous Turkish Sultan,/ having heard that the Croatian ban does such a thing to him,/ decided with all might of his sultan majesty/to step forward and with the sound of his might / to lay siege to the city and capture it by war (...). (KARNARUTIĆ, BRNE. 1971: 45.)

Suleiman gathers his army to be able to set off for an expedition against Zrinski, since he wants to ultimately defeat the enemy who has several times opposed him. In this work we find detailed descriptions of preparations for a new expedition that draw the reader's attention and are rich in detail. The sultan appears to be a sensible and experienced leader in carrying long war campaigns, therefore he carefully prepares for the expedition to lay siege to this European fortress. Suleiman's knowledge of warfare is proven by the fact that he personally tries to watch over the number of his soldiers:

Silan car, hteć znati te njega vojska broj,/ k sebi čini zvati zbor pišac trikrat
troj (...).

The powerful Tsar, desiring to know the number of his soldiers,/ orders nine clerks to come to him (...). (KARNARUTIĆ, BRNE. 1971: 52.)

Zrinski himself in this piece of work tells us about the Sultan when he addresses his companions before the siege of Siget starts:

(...) i ovih starih lit soltan Soliman car/ ki se je razbukal kakono val morski/
ki nam srdit doukal veće neg lav gorski (...).

(...) and this old Sultan Suliman/ who has grown in power as a sea wave / who has tormented us more than a mountain lion (...). (KARNARUTIĆ, BRNE. 1971: 62.)

¹⁹ Karnarutić, Brne, *Vazetje Sigeta grada, Opsada Sigeta*, Liber, Zagreb, 1971, p. 44.

Therefore the captain of the fortress admits that the Sultan's power poses a deadly threat to the defenders. The comparison of Suleiman to a lion proves that Zrinski was fully aware of his physical strength (although it's not Sultan himself, but his army is so strong) and unrestrained pride.²⁰ Comparing the Sultan with a lion is consistent with the animal catalogue used for presenting the Turks (among others, to comparing his to a wolf or a fox). Despite an obvious outnumbering power of Suleiman, Szigetvár's captain claims that the Turkish ruler and his army are afraid of the Christian defenders, which aims at increasing spirits of the Christian knights in the face of looming hardships of fights.²¹ During the fight for the fortress Suleiman wants a fast victory and impatiently observes skirmishes, which he expresses in his conversation with Sokolovic: 'Ti znaš gorku čašu koja me sad poji!' – 'You know this bitter chalice that I drink from!' (KARNARUTIĆ, BRNE. 1971: 67.)

By giving the vizier a mace,²² he encourages him to fight more fiercely against the defenders and even demands from him that the fortress be burnt down and razed to the ground.²³ The Sultan does not take heed to means of gaining his goal, since he wishes to gain an unquestionable and spectacular victory over Zrinski. Suleiman craves for revenge on the man and the fortress, being salt in his eye, a symbol of steadfast braveness and lack of humility in the face of the power of Turkish military forces.

The Sultan's poor health did not give him an opportunity to enjoy capturing of the fortress. A sick person, burdened with anxiety over a final result of the battle (at the final stage of the siege he is not so sure of his army's victory) and grief about his unfulfilled dream, having Sokolovic as a witness, dies on 27th August. In the epic tale there is then a different date of Suleiman's death than in Črnko's chronicle. After the Sultan dies, Sokolović decides to hide the truth and does not announce this tragic news. He exercises his mater's last command and sets fire to the fortress, which ultimately falls, although its defenders bravely oppose the invaders until the end.²⁴

As Milan Ratković notes, in Karnarutić's work Suleiman is presented as a great Turkish ruler.²⁵ Despite being proud and motivated by his intention to get his revenge on one of Christian knights, the Turkish sultan does not lack talent in the field of military science. A fuller picture of Suleiman emerges here than from Črnko's chronicles, since Karnarutić devotes more time to the

²⁰ The lion may also be the symbol, among others, anger and wildness, but also a victory. More information on this subject can be found here: See: Kopaliński, Władysław, *Słownik symboli*, Oficyna Wydawnicza RYTM, Warszawa 2001, pp. 190–194.

²¹ Karnarutić, Brne, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

²² Kopaliński, Władysław, *op. cit.*, pp. 214–215.

²³ Karnarutić, Brne, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 69–70, 73–74.

²⁵ Ratković, Milan, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

sultan, describing a wide range of emotions in Suleiman the moment he takes the decision to capture the fortress until his death: confidence, belief in his own strength, anger, sadness, anxiety over future. Such portrayal of the Turkish ruler in the work makes us see that he seems to be a man struggling with himself and dissents from the image of a cool and disciplined sultan. Although in comparison with Črnko's chronicle, we find a more detailed description of Suleiman in the epic tale, Karnarutic's work is, most of all, an attempt to document the fights for Szigetvár, as Jan Máchal writes:

Verše jeho [eposu – pryp. M. S.] jsou vojenský tvrdé a neuhlazené – skladatel jejich byl vojín – a skladba jeho má spíše cenu kulturně-historickou než uměleckou.

His poems (of the epic tale – footnote by M.S.) are military in nature, hard and rough, their writer was a soldier and his work has more cultural and historical value than artistic one. (MÁCHAL, JAN. 1922: 164.)

The Slovakian historical song *Píseň o Sigetském zámku* begins with an apostrophe about Szigetvár,²⁶ and the first information about Suleiman appears in the seventh and eighth stanzas of the work, where we learn why the fortress is laid siege to:

Pyšný Soliman cisár,/ lidu tureckého,/ pokolení zlostného,/ srdce falešného,/ lidu pohanského,/ závidel je Zrínimu/ panství tak slávneho,/ myslil ve dne i v noci/ Siget' dobývati,/ Zríniho skaziti.

Proud Suleiman, Sultan of the Turkish nation,/ a generation of angry/ false heart,/ pagan people,/ envied Zrinski his famous fortune/ pondered day and night/ how to capture Siget,/ and humiliate Zrinski. (*Píseň o Sigetském zámku*. 1978: 90.)

In this extract we find a short, negative description of the Sultan: according to it he is a proud leader of heathens, characterised by falseness and anger, and in his actions he shows envy of Zrinski, surrounded by great fame, therefore he decides to prepare a military expedition to lay siege to this European fortress. It is a difference when compared to Karnarutic's epic tale, in which the Sultan wanted to get his revenge on the captain unyielding to his army and that made him decide to lay siege to Szigetvár. Motivations behind Suleiman's actions discussed in Slavic literatures are therefore low (revenge, excessive pride, envy) and far away from the knighthood's ethos.

²⁶ Brtáň, Rudo, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

The song portrays the figure of Suleiman as an active leader, full of energy and determination to gain victory. The Sultan takes active part in laying siege to the fortress: gives commands, encourages war cries, watches defeats of his army and undertakes further storm attempts. He wishes to capture Szigetvár in three days, therefore does not spare his army and becomes restless, when his actions, although do harm to the defenders, but they are not crushing enough for them to give up.²⁷ The situation in the Turkish camp changes when another storm, which was supposed to be a decisive one and sealing the invaders' victory, brings a huge defeat to them and more than a half of them lose their lives. This event has a huge impression on the Sultan, triggers off fear in him and intention to give up the siege of the fortress: Solimanovo srdce/ leklo se velice/ chtel přeč jíti, zrádce! Suleiman's heart /got frightened / and he wanted to go away, traitor!' (*Píseň o Sigetském zámku*. 1978: 95.)

The above passage indicates that the military defeat must have deeply touched Suleiman, who was ready to give up his plans and admit defeat. It contrasts with the image of a haughty Turkish ruler, as it emerged in the first verses of the historical song.

Suleiman did not manage to think over his plan of resigning from continuing the siege, because the devil appears and says that it would be a great dishonour to the Sultan power to give up the once undertaken goal. This argument convinces the Turkish ruler, who takes an oath that he shall not give up Szigetvár until he captures it.²⁸ This passage underlines the contract between the Christian defenders of the fortress, putting their trust for the future in God and the Turkish ruler quickly yielding to the Devil's words.

A storm undertaken with new energy brings increasingly better results, but satisfaction in the Turkish camp from the course of fights does not last long, because a bullet fired from a cannon from the fortress hit the Sultan's tent and wounds Suleiman, who three days later dies due to sustained wounds. The information about his death is hidden not to create panic within the army.²⁹ The Sultan, acting upon the devil's advice, dies being hit by a bullet shot from the Christian fortress: it appears to be a symbolic victory of Christianity over heathens, although it does not change the fact of the falling Szigetvár.³⁰

In the historical song Suleiman, apart from Zrinski, is the most important figure, therefore he is devoted much attention. The story of the devil's intervention that leads to the Sultan's changing his conduct, and at the same time contributes indirectly to his death is an interesting motif (its circumstances differ from the ones presented in the Croatian chronicle and epic tale). The narrator focuses on

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 91–94.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 95–96.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 98–99.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

underlining the differences between the Christian defenders of Szigetvár and the invaders following a different faith, called heathens in the work.

In the three pieces of work discussed hereunder Suleiman the Magnificent was shown as an experienced commander of a well-trained army, an infidel, but also as a man acting on strong impulse. The most laconic image of the Sultan is presented in Črnko's work titled *Podsjeđanje i osvojenje Sigeta* [*The Siege and Capture of Siget*]. It is probably due to the fact that the author participated in the described events and was close to Zrinski, therefore the information on Suleiman contained in his chronicle are poor of details. In turn Karnarutić's *Vazetje Sigeta grada* [*The Capture of Siget Town*] is a more extensive, richer in picturesque descriptions and details, therefore a more complex image of Suleiman emerges from the work. The Sultan is portrayed as a man heading his army, convinced of his power, but also having a violent character and impatience when he could not accomplish an intended result of his war activities. His urge to get revenge on a hateful enemy makes him unable to control his temper and keep rein over his emotions; he wants an ultimate victory. Whereas, the work titled *Piseň o Sigetském zámku* [*A Song about Siget Castle*] is mostly devoted to Suleiman and portrays him as an efficient soldier, but tormented by the feeling of uncertainty and threat in case of defeats. The Sultan cannot admit his ultimate defeat due to the feeling of disgrace he must have felt giving up the attempts to capture the Christian fortress.

16th century literary work created in Slavic countries and retelling the story of Szigetvár fortress fall there appears the figure of Suleiman as an outstanding leader of a powerful army and a ruler of the country threatening Christianity in Europe. In these pieces of work the Sultan is shown as a fear-inducing man by his power, but at the same time he is characterised as having excessive pride of his achievements and desire to accomplish further military successes.

Suleiman the Magnificent has also become a protagonist of Slavic literary texts at a later period. It appears very often in opposition to Nikola Zrinski, a defender of the fortress, who in 17th century Croatian literature would become a symbolic defender of Christianity.³¹ In certain cases there are only short notes about the Sultan in literary pieces of work (e.g. in 19th century Andreja Sládkovič's work titled *Gróf Mikuláš Šubić Zrinsky na Sihoti*).³² In turn, on the silver screen Suleiman has become the main Turkish hero of the serial *Wspaniałe stulecie* [*The Great Century*], telling the story of his rule over the

³¹ Rapacka, Joanna, *Dawna literatura serbska i dawna literatura chorwacka. Zarys dziejów*, Slawistyczny Ośrodek Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1993, p. 94.

³² The Sultan appears, for example, in a description of Turkish boats on the Drawa: "(...) na nich vesluje pestrá božia kára, – to Sulejman". "(...) in it a God's illustrious plague is rowing – it is Suleiman" Sládkovič, Andrej, *Gróf Mikuláš Šubić Zrinsky na Sihoti. Poézia*, Tatran, Bratislava 1972, p. 506.

empire,³³ which enjoyed huge popularity in Slavic countries, whereas in Turkey was received with a considerable criticism.³⁴ The figure of the sultan appears not only in literature and art, and the memory of his has not disappeared in culture, which is proven by a statue commemorating Suleiman (next to the second one in honour of Zrinski) raised in the Park of Polish and Hungarian Friendship near Szigetvár.³⁵ Even 450 years after Suleiman's death, in 2016, in the Hungarian town celebrations to commemorate the Turkish sultan took place in the presence of the authorities' representatives.³⁶

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³³ The serial was aired on the Polish TV, you can watch it on its website at <https://vod.tvp.pl/17069012/wspaniale-stulecie>.

³⁴ <http://www.istanbulview.com/muhtesem-yuzuyil/>

³⁵ Turnbull, Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

³⁶ Wyrzykowska, Małgorzata, 2017. Online: <http://www.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/974111,wegry-uroczystosci-w-rocznicy-smierci-sulejmana-wielkiego.html>

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