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## Death Abroad in the Skalds' Sagas

### Kormák and the Scottish *blótrisi*

In the medieval Icelandic poets' sagas, similarities in character, plot structure, the repertory of motifs, and what will be seen as the over-reaching ideological objectives of these works suggest a dominant model, copied with variations.<sup>1</sup> In these stories of the poets Kormák, Gunnlaug, and Hallfreð, of Þórð and Björn from the latter's saga, and Þormóð from *Fóstbröðra saga*, one of the common motifs, hitherto unrecognized, is that the poets generally die far from their main locus of activity, poetic and social. In order to situate the discussion of death abroad, rather than at home, in the skalds' sagas, it will be useful to establish some oppositions and complementarities of a larger order.

First, in formal compositional terms we have the conjoining or juxtaposition of prose and verse, both shot through with unhistorical elements. The critical issues here are well known. The poets' sagas are further characterized by contrast in their conceptions of the poetic personality, and of deviant and normative behavior. Saga authors saw versifying as a potential threat to social ecology. Poetry's potential for

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<sup>1</sup> As suggested in Bragg 2004, Ch. 4, The Saga Skalds.

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**Abstract:** A little noted feature of the Icelandic skalds' sagas is the protagonist's death abroad. The study focuses on Kormák and his fatal encounter with the Scottish *blótrisi* ('sacrifice giant,' as it has been called). Affinities with the giant rustics of Celtic tradition, who often accompany the goddess of territorial sovereignty in events leading to the death of a failed king, are explored. Kormák's several personal weakness are projected against the mythic grid of the king's responsibilities. The pagan deity Cromm Crúaich, associated with many standing stones in Ireland, is also reviewed. The poets' sagas offer a troubled but ultimately controlled ground against which to view and appreciate the collective accomplishment of skaldic poetry. The motif of the poet's death abroad underlines that verse is his sole heritage and that the disruptive poetic personality, after having been contained at home, is literally buried abroad. Kormák's death may be seen as both paradigmatic for the skalds' destinies and one of the richest in allusion, bringing the Celtic-inflected Kormák back to his extra-Icelandic origins.

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public ill is allegorized in both the temperament and the life of the poet type, with its multiple, often trivial or unnecessary, conflicts. Like feud and its gradual resolution in the family sagas, the poets' sagas are similarly about containment.

A brief discussion of the temperament and behaviour of the poets will lay the ground for closer examination of their destinies. The saga protagonists from the 10th and early 11th centuries are multifaceted — poets, fighters, wits, raiders and traders — but they also have personalities shot through with contradiction and ambiguity. Key descriptors of personality are often introduced early in the sagas in community-assigned nicknames or are delivered in judgmental scenes between protagonists and their fellows. Kormák is judged impetuous. Gunnlaug is called indecisive and snake-tongued; Hallfred, malicious, temperamental, the difficult skald. Enthusiastic but irresolute, Kormák, Hallfred, and Þormóð court young women but inexplicably stop short of marriage, while Björn and Gunnlaug allow circumstance to intervene. But they then persist in jealousy and bitterness, their stoic posturing infused with self-pity.

Poets' relations with their communities seldom run smoothly and, short-tempered and impatient, they are prone to take bad advice. Their lives, caught at an adolescent stage, often appear to lack a larger purpose. The irresolution of the artistic personality and its uneasy interface with the community are generative of poetry that must be seen as an active expression of the poet's social agency. The impromptu stanzas are speech acts of courting, defamation, or self-advancement that are intended to affect their surroundings. The verses do not encapsulate the moment so much as give it its edge.

A different kind of containment is the division of the poet type into several figures or even into separate *personae* depending on locality. The protagonist often has an antagonist who suggests an alter ego, a man who is also both poet and fighter, typically a man more successfully integrated into his social circumstances. This brother may also be the deceiver and betrayer. Despite armed duels, contention between men culminates in its most stylized form, in alternating poems with the ratchet effect of feud. The flyting between Björn and Þórð in *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa* is perhaps the best known. With the two poets so similar in ability, the rival is an exteriorization of the poet's own incompleteness. With the woman — not loved until lost — a middle ground between the two antagonists, the rival is no less a prerequisite than the beloved for poetic creation.

Another important dimension of the splintered effect is the contrast between the poet at home in Iceland and abroad. Whatever his assessment by the community in Iceland, the Icelander's performance as warrior in Norway, the Baltic, and the British Isles is unquestioningly recognized. It establishes that the poet suffers no gender inadequacy, despite his irresolution in marriage matters. Generally the poet is successful abroad when he had been frustrated at home and is an effective warrior and king's man. The instability he generates is not exported, underlining its exclusive relevance to Iceland. Once abroad, the poet becomes the man of his verses.<sup>2</sup>

In two important ways the destiny of the poetic personality is also extra-Icelandic. To grasp the significance of this we must return to saga beginnings. The history of Norwegian contacts with the remainder of Europe and Iceland's particular ethnogenesis made the Celtic lands prime candidates to embody alterity. Kormák bears an Irish name and is described as dark-haired and -eyed. Like Hallfreð, Þormóð has curly dark hair. Gunnlaug is characterized by light chestnut hair, dark eyes, an ugly nose. These aberrations from the ethnically homogeneous west Norse are the physical homologues of differences in temperament. With their suspect origins, the poets are not fated to die in Iceland (Björn from Hítardal the one exception). Hallfreð perishes in the Irish Sea and is buried in the Hebrides. Björn Ásbrandsson, the Breiðavík Champion, ends his days as a respected but not entirely secure leader among the overseas Irish in *Írland it mikla*, the Greater Ireland that lay somewhere in the North Atlantic. Þormóð falls in battle in Norway at Sticklestad near Trondheim when just returned from Sweden; Gunnlaug is treacherously killed in a duel near the Norwegian-Swedish border.

As for Kormák, after a last interaction with Steingerð and her second husband, he and his brother Þorgils leave Norway for the British Isles and we immediately sense a major shift in the narrative away from conventional saga naturalism. Kormák is successful as a raider although no specific events are cited. The brothers found the city of Scarborough, whose name echoes Þorgils's nickname *skardí* 'cleft-lip.' Kormák meets his end in combat, but not the formal duel in which he engaged in Iceland. The laconic account of this final and fatal encounter is worth quoting in its entirety.

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<sup>2</sup> This line of thought is further developed in Sayers 2003, under the title "Fracture and Containment in the Icelandic Skalds' Sagas."

Eitt sinn, er þeir höfðu herjat, rak Kormákr flóttu, en liðit var tils skips farit; þá kom at Kormáki ór skógi blótrisi Skota, ok tóksk þar atgangr harðr. Kormákr var ósterkari, en risinn trollauknari. Kormákr leit til sverðs síns, ok var rennt ór slíðrum. Kormákr seildisk til ok hjó risann banahogg. Risinn lagði þó svá fast hendr at síðum Kormáks, at rifin brotnuðu, ok fell Kormákr ok risinn dauðr ofan á hann, ok komsk Kormákr eigi upp. Í annan stað fara menn at leita hans, ok finna ok fluttu hann til skipa.<sup>3</sup>

Although exception will be taken to the rendering of some key terms, this passage in the most recent and authoritative translation reads as follows:

On one occasion, after they had been raiding, Kormak was pursuing the enemy as they fled, but his troops had gone to the ship. Then a giant whom the Scots worshipped as an idol came out of a forest in pursuit of Kormak, and a bitter struggle ensued. Of the two, Kormak was the weaker; the giant had more of a troll's strength. Kormak felt for his sword, but it had slipped from its scabbard. Kormak stretched out his hand for it and struck the giant his deathblow. The giant gripped Kormak's sides so firmly, however, that his ribs broke, and Kormak fell with the dead giant on top of him, and could not get up. His men, meanwhile, went to look for him; they found him, and brought him to their ships.<sup>4</sup>

Kormák's opponent is known only under the nonce word *blótrisi*. 'Sacrifice-giant' has been a common, literal if not explanatory, rendering; the most recent translator provides a kind of gloss ("a giant . . . worshipped as an idol") but it is difficult to understand just what this should mean. Earlier suggested identities are a tall druid and a standing stone. A more specific identity or allusion is considered below but the epithet *trollauknari* 'more troll-eked', that is, augmented in strength like a troll or through troll-dom, points to the supernatural or, at a minimum, to a non-human opponent. But first, in attempting to relate this death to Kormák's life and career and to refer it to other skalds' deaths abroad, there are a number of questions that must be addressed: do the final four skaldic stanzas, which apostrophize an absent woman assumed to be Steingerð, contain some misunderstood allusion, a kenning perhaps, that may have prompted the creation of the Scottish

<sup>3</sup> *Kormáks saga* (1939: 299).

<sup>4</sup> *Kormak's Saga* (1997: 223).

giant in the prose text? Is there any blurred reflection of Celtic belief or cult? Does the saga conclude with a couple of random anecdotes or are these final incidents consonant with the themes and motifs that inform the saga?

To address the first question, the only lexical candidate as a possible source for the giant figure is the phrase *strengmarr stýrir* 'steersman of the cable-steeds' (1939: 299, st. 82), a kenning for a Viking.<sup>5</sup> Although there are no significant manuscript variants that might suggest another allusion, if this phrase were taken as a Hibernicism, it could be seen as OIr. \**srengmar* 'great-cabled' or 'greatly-pulled' (OIr. *sreng* actually deriving from ON *strengr*), but unless we imagine the erection of a standing stone, this leads nowhere and we are still far from the giant. The short answer to the question is then that the final verses seem not to have generated, directly or indirectly, the death scene in the prose. At most there is mention of a sword and, perhaps a bit more telling, the motif of the embrace (1939: 299, st. 82), where we may imagine that thoughts of Kormák hugging Steingerð, or of her in her husband's arms, might have prompted the prose author to invent the fatal embrace with the Scottish giant. We now turn to the other questions.

One rewarding approach to Kormák's fatal encounter, one that reveals it as thematically consistent with the main thrust of the saga, is to view it as an exploitation of the Celtic paradigm of the death of a failed king (or, occasionally, hero). One of the best known examples of these royal deaths is that of King Conaire in the Irish *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (*The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*). The great king's sin has been partiality in the legal judgment of criminal conduct. As the involuntary infractions of a series of tabus takes him to the hostel and feast where he will die, he encounters a hag, the goddess of territorial sovereignty in her guise of loathly lady and harbinger of royal death. She is in the company of a giant rustic male, what translators have often called a 'churl.' The Irish term is *bachlach*.

Is ed ro gob Conaire cona lúagaib da Áth Cliath. Is and dosn-árrid in fear maeldub co n-ocnúil 7 oenláim 7 oenchois. Mael garb for suidiu. Cía fo-certa míach di iadublaib for a mullach ní foichred uball for lár, acht ro giúlad cach uball dib for a findiu. Ó fo-certa a rub ar géscoe

<sup>5</sup> McTurk translates "rigging-steeds" but *taug*, not *strengr*, was generally used of most of the standing and running rigging, and *reip*, when lines, e.g., the halyards, were made of hide, preferentially walrus hide because of its strength. *Strengr* should then be seen as a reference to the anchor cable.

ima-tairisfeadh doib. Sithremir cuing n-imeachtair ceachtair a dá lurgan. Mét mullaig for got cech meall do mellaib a dromai. Gaballorg iairn ina láim. Muc mael gearr dub dóiti for a muin 7 sí oc síréighim, 7 ben bélmar már dub duabais dochraid ina diaid.<sup>6</sup>

Conaire was still making for Áth Cliath when there overtook him a man with short, black hair and one eye and one hand and one foot. His hair was rough and bristling—if a sackful of wild apples were emptied over it, each apple would catch on his hair, and none would fall to the ground. If his snout were thrown against a branch, it would stick there. As long and thick as an outer yoke each of his shins; the size of a cheese on a withe each of his buttocks. In his hand a forked iron pole; a singed pig with short, black bristles on his back, and it squealed constantly. Behind him came a huge, black, gloomy, big-mouthed, ill-favoured woman.<sup>7</sup>

The man, who identifies himself as Fer Cailli or Man of the Woods, addresses Conaire in friendly fashion but this is surely mocking or ironic, since he knows that by accompanying Conaire to the hostel he will force him to break yet another of his tabus. The squealing, singed pig is intended for the fatal feast. With his huge, forked iron staff, this dark, bristly-haired figure is seen elsewhere in Celtic narrative and, indeed, in French and English romance derivatives, as a Lord of the Animals, a master of the natural world — but also a psychopomp. The description of the *vilain* ‘churl’, whom Yvain meets in Chrétien de Troyes’ romance, shows how cohesive this set of motifs remained.<sup>8</sup>

Without subscribing to Dumézil’s conception of a tripartite archaic Indo-European society, it is undeniable that early Irish narrative offers innumerable sets of three’s, linked through homology. In the death of kings these play out as follows. Offences against the principal functions of the king, which are the exercise of justice and the maintenance of productive relations with the supernatural (these two linked), are punished with injury to the head, either fatal or sufficient to disbar him from rule: forced tonsure or scalping, blinding, strangulation/

<sup>6</sup> *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (1975: 11).

<sup>7</sup> *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel* (1981: 71).

<sup>8</sup> *Le chevalier au lion (Yvain)* (1967: vv. 286–324), which seems to have a more direct parallel in the Fenian tale called *Tóraighecht in ghilla dhecair (The Pursuit of the Troublesome Servant)*. For an English treatment, see *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*. On a point of detail, the giant herdsman in *Yvain* imposes his will on his herd of bulls by brute physical force, seizing their horns in his hands, much as the *blótrisi* crushes Kormák’s ribs in his arms.

choking, dying of thirst. This is the aerial dimension. Cowardice and inadequacy as a military leader is punished by wounds with weapons — terrestrial dimension. Sins in the somatic dimension of fertility, sexuality, the husbandry of the land and stock are punished, without weapons it should be noted, by injury to the lower body and limbs. Here we may situate Chrétien's Fisher King and numerous Irish figures who die from wounds with domestic tools in maritime environments or by drowning or interment — subterranean and submarine dimension.<sup>9</sup> Just as the goddess is polyfunctional, so the failed king could sin in all three spheres, and then be caught in the paradigm of the triple death — by hanging, wounding, and drowning, a long-lived motif in European story.<sup>10</sup>

As an aside and making allowances for the rather different circumstances, closer to real life on the land, Steingerð, in her outspokenness and degree of empowerment, is a good proxy for the Great Queen, and, indeed, a statement such her declining to replace one knife with another ("Steingerðr kvazk ekki skyldu kaupa um knifa" [1939: 298]), with its overt sexual imagery of blade and sheath, is not too distant from (although an inversion of) Irish Medb's programmatic remark that she always had a man waiting in the shadow of her current lover. With Steingerð in this role, we can assign Bersi to the quasi-royal function, in light of his social, legal and economic successes, Þorvald *tinteinn* to the function of those who lived off the land and sea, and Kormák to the warrior function, in which he will be judged. But we should not look for too rigorous an application of the Irish paradigm in the saga.

The range of "sins" (to stay with the Irish conception) for which Kormák must atone in the British Isles includes indecisiveness, rashness, and, more categorically, 1) too little respect for the supernatural (especially in the handling of iron and weapons), 2) nonchalance in judicial matters (attitudes toward divinely overseen judicial dueling), and 3) willed or unwilled dysfunction in sexual matters, especially in the social dimension that might be expected to lead to offspring via socially condoned marriage. That the recourse to judicial dueling does not lead to a true resolution of contention may also been viewed as dysfunction in the legal sphere. Lastly, his poetic gift is squandered in narcissistic verses of self-promotion that do not advance the community's agenda, let alone grace a Norwegian *jarl's* or king's rule. Our

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<sup>9</sup> See Picard 1989.

<sup>10</sup> See Sayers 1992.

attention is recalled to these inadequacies when Kormák faces the *bachlach*, as we may provisionally name him, and initially suffers his sword falling from its sheath before he can mount his attack. While he does inflict a fatal wound, the giant, without weapons and in his death throes, clutches Kormák in a last embrace, and falls forward in a dark parody of sexual congress, crushing Kormák's ribs and bearing him to the ground in a quasi-burial. This is not the warrior's death, hardly even a judicial duel of the kind Kormák had earlier willingly engaged in, because the opponents are not con-specific and one is unarmed. Such a death is also extra-legal, since Kormák has no standing in the British Isles and he and the giant are not legal peers. Death is subject not to human and social law but to natural law in its embodiment of human relations with the divine and supernatural. At the same time, it is a lonely death, outside the community and so many other categories, noted above.

Kormák's "death abroad" exhibits links with his life in Iceland but also shows how his genetic heritage, if we may mix conceptual worlds, prepares for a destiny in his temperamental home in the Celtic realms. Irish kings and heroes typically die at Samhain at the divide of the light and dark half years, our Hallowe'en, and perhaps we may think of Kormák's fate as realized, in quasi-historical terms, at the end of the summer raiding season somewhere on the Scottish coast.<sup>11</sup>

I now return to the term *blótrisi* in the context of this conception of the Irish *bachlach*. The earlier notion of a "sacrifice giant" is steered by the word *blót* which does, indeed, refer to sacrificial offerings. But, as the sacrifice of living beings was a feature that distinguished heathen cult from Christianity (Christ's sacrifice excepted), we should rather see it as a metonymical expression for 'pagan' and then view Kormák's opponent as a 'heathen giant' or 'giant heathen', while still letting some notion of human sacrifice resonate in the background. As for *bachlach*, the Irish term meant 'peasant, rustic', literally one carrying a staff, likely a herdsman's staff or crook, and originated in Latin *baculus*. It appears in Old Norse as *bagall* and is more likely to have been loaned from Irish in the first settlement years of Iceland than from Latin. But in Latin and Norse the word was used of the bishop's crozier or staff. I suggest that some notion of the Irish *bachlach* figure, characterized in both name and appearance by his staff, plus the religious association of Norse *bagall*, led to the use of the word *blót* in our nonce compound

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<sup>11</sup> See Hicks and Elder 2003.



*blótrisi*: heathen, staff-bearing, implicated in religious belief, but I must concede that our saga makes no mention of a staff. Still with etymology, explicating the poet's name *Kormák/Cormac* as *Corb-mac* 'raven's son' fits well enough into this context of the final battleground and the poet's second from last stanza (st. 84) has warm blood falling on the raven's beak. This matching on points of detail should not draw attention from the fact that the incident must also be situated in the medieval pan-European culture of the monstrous, where, I would suggest, physical aberrancy is the vehicle for a variety of ideological, psychological, and sociological concerns, and reflexes of the monster range from brutish, earth-oriented Norse trolls to Celtic divinities in their trickster roles disguised as cantankerous ill-favored servants.

In recognition of the fact that the mute Scottish giant does indeed have much that suggests a Celtic standing stone, a second strand in the identity of *Kormák's* opponent may be explored. These stone installations were called *menhir* in Breton, *cromlech* in Welsh, *cromm-liac* in Irish. *Cromm* is generally understood as 'bent, bowed, crooked, aslant' but since the stones seem not to have been erected out of line with the perpendicular (whatever their current alignment) *cromm* might better be understood in this context as 'overbearing', even 'prostrating', in a combination of height advantage and menace or demand for respect. A great number of still preserved stones are called *Cromm Dubh* (*dubh* = 'black') or *Cromm Crúach* in Irish tradition, for example, a principal stone in the circle at Grange Lios. Local folklore associated with the last Sunday in July (*Domhnach Chromm Dubh*, Garland Sunday) and a proliferation of uncritical assertions about Celtic mythology have made *Cromm Dubh* into a fertility god, bent under the weight of the harvest, an interpretation in which *crúach* is read as 'stack of corn'.<sup>12</sup> The story-telling tradition also made the deity into a pagan chieftain who opposed Patrick's proselytizing and was then turned into a sea stack or other natural feature. The carved head, broad-browed but narrow-chinned and thus a rather beetling figure, until recently part of the church wall at Cloghane, Co. Kerry, was also called *Cromm Dubh*, and was associated with now Christian ritual of ascending Mount Brandon.

Our earliest evidence for this figure is a good deal sparer. Medieval Irish narrative, while giving pride of place to mythological and legendary characters and events, however contrary to nominal Christian

<sup>12</sup> See MacNeil 1962.

conduct, reveals next to nothing about pagan Celtic cult. At the very most we have a poem from the *dindshenchas* or “lore of prominent places” devoted to Mag Slecht. The poem is written from a Christian perspective, deploring the pagan practices of the past, when the Irish “slew their hapless firstborn with much wailing and peril, to pour their blood round Cromm Cruaich” (“marbtais a claind toisig trúaig / conimmud guil ocus gáid / a fuil do dáil ’mon Cromm Crúaich”).<sup>13</sup> The expected return on this sacrifice was milk and corn, or the fertility of the land and stock. Mag Slecht was the scene of such worship and this name is etymologized as ‘plain of adoration’ or ‘genuflection.’ Consistent with this etymology, the verb *sléchtaid* ‘kneels, bows down, prostrates’ figures in the poem and this, in turn, is consonant with the name of the idol, based on *cromm*. But, given the cluster of related motifs, there is reason to believe that the place-name might originally have been based on *slecht* ‘cutting, hewing’, and thus have referenced the acts of human sacrifice. Similarly, while the second element of *Cromm Crúaich* is understood as deriving from *crúach* ‘stack of corn’, an adjectival homonym meant ‘gory, bloody’ and the nominal form ‘slaughter, carnage.’ This, too, is consistent with the interpretation of the deity as originally one to which sacrifices were made. According to this tradition, Mag Slecht was the site of twelve standing stones (“ranged in rank stood idols of stone four times three”), while the figure of Cromm was made of gold (conceivably an Old Testament touch). The poem ends with the coming of Patrick who drove out the “strengthless goblin” with a sledgehammer.

The lore associated with standing stones makes this an attractive identification of the tall, erect figure that, wounded (or dislodged), falls forward over the poet. The Scottish *blótrisi* can be seen as offering a fairly close parallel, in both the appearance of the figure and the semantics of the term, to Cromm Dubh/Cruaich, with *blót* ‘sacrifice’ matching *crúach* ‘slaughter’ and *cromm* as ‘overbearing’ matching *risi* ‘giant.’ Even the contrast of the weaker (*ósterkari*) Kormák with the giant augmented in strength through sorcery (*trollaukinnari*) seems inversely matched in the victorious Patrick and the “strengthless” Cromm Crúaich. Since both the fatal incident and the relevant term *blótrisi* are without other reference in Icelandic texts, this may well be as far as this argument can be carried. At a minimum, we do have in the *bachlach* of story and the bloodthirsty deity and stone representa-

<sup>13</sup> *Metrical Dindshenchas* (1924–35: 4.18–23).

tions two threatening figures with overtones of the psychopomp that invite the consideration of Kormák's death scene in a wider, richer context, both geographical and religious/ideological.

In conclusion, I return to the skalds and their stories as an ideologically cohesive group of narratives. The disruptive potential of court- and slanderous verse is cast as a whipping boy for other abuses of power on a far greater scale that were being experienced at the time of the sagas' composition. Situated in an ideal past, the sagas show the anti-social menace of poetry to be ultimately containable and thus, for Iceland's longer-term prospects, without consequence. In their combination of individual virtuoso verse and community-voiced judgmental prose, they offer the reconciliation in art and in the past that was judged difficult to achieve in society and in the present. The poets' sagas offer a troubled but ultimately controlled ground against which to view and appreciate the collective accomplishment of skaldic poetry. The occasional verses, spur-of-the-moment, ironically prove the most long-lasting and, like the medieval Icelander abroad, are projected as Iceland at its best. The motif of the poet's death abroad underlines that verse is his sole heritage and that the disruptive poetic personality, after having been contained at home, is literally buried abroad—a little like a burial in unhallowed ground beyond the churchyard. Despite the problems still attendant on Kormák's fatal encounter in Scotland, his death may now be seen as both paradigmatic for the skalds' destinies and one of the richest in allusion, bringing the Celtic-inflected Kormák back to his extra-Icelandic origins.

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