

The scourge of the land and sea

An awful outlaw or a romantic hero?

As long as people sailed through the rivers and the high seas there were those who tried to gain wealth by depriving others of their possessions. The existence of the sea rovers or, more precisely, sea robbers, is intricately connected with the developed commerce and conflicts among different communities and countries. In peaceful times in well-organized states piracy is usually viewed as an abomination and pirates are social outcasts living on the verge of normal communities under the strict official rule. They are the violent strangers, dealing with death and destruction, bringing flames, slavery and plunder. Hence the sea robbers are the aliens – cruel, colorful, constantly drunk, and, to some extent, free. They are definitely very different from the ordinary folks.

In this article I would like to explain the difference between pirates and corsairs and present, in short, the tradition of Western piracy. The important factor of sea roving was the daily existence of mariners which distinguished typical sailors from land dwellers. I would like to describe the reality of life aboard the ship in the golden age of sail. It might be helpful in developing a better understanding of the romantic allure of piracy which survived to our very days.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe in his probably most famous work, *Faust*, put into the mouth of Mephistopheles memorable words:

I know a little of navigation:

War, trade, and piracy, allow,

As three in one, no separation¹.

And indeed: he was right. Nowadays – in the 21st century – the dire risk of being robbed while at sea does not want to cease to exist. In fact only in 2011 there were at least 437 pirate incidents recorded worldwide². It is not only a problem of huge container ships which are kidnapped for ransom³. It might be said that this kind of actions are a specialty of the Horn

1 J. W. Goethe, *Faust*, [on-line:] <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/FaustIIActV.htm> [26.10.2014].

2 D. Petrovic, *The fight against piracy: one aspect of Germany's maritime security*, "Facts & Findings", [on-line:] http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_35520-544-2-30.pdf?131209084140 [26.10.2014].

3 A good illustration of this kind of incidents might be the 2013 movie *Captain Phillips* which is based on the true story of hijacking of the American vessel *Maersk Alabama* in 2009.

of Africa residents. However, even the regular yachtsmen on different waters are endangered, especially when they abandon their vessels during perilous weather conditions⁴. Although in the international law acts the pirates are called *hostis humanis generis* – enemies of mankind – and countries have the right to fight the threat of piracy it is still extremely difficult to overcome⁵. And the economic losses are estimated to be billions of dollars yearly.

According to Article 101 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a pirate is anyone who commits illegal acts of violence against another ship for private ends with the aim of personal enrichment and who carries out the attack outside the country's territorial waters⁶.

It is clearly visible that this definition of piracy is rather narrow since many attacks take place in the harbors or on the coastal waters. Historically pirates were also attacking land and the cities but they were doing it from the sea. And thus we came to a terminological problem. Tom Bowling, the author of *Pirates and Privateers*, states that “a pirate is a sea-robber, an exploiter of weakness. If a pirate has the power he will take what's yours”⁷. However, not all sea rovers were pirates. Beside the term *pirate* we know of corsairs, privateers, filibusters, freebooters and buccaneers, not to mention local names given to those who indulge in this type of crime business⁸. Not all of the terms mentioned above meant people carrying out illegal actions. Or, at least, they were not considered illegal by specific countries.

Generally speaking the privateer or corsair was a legal pirate. *Privateer* derived from the private man-of-war, while *corsair* has French roots of cruising for purchase⁹. The captain who wanted to become one had to obtain for his ship and crew a letter of marque or a letter of reprisal from the state's government and he was free to attack ships of the enemy country during wartime. This practice has existed in Europe as a part of maritime warfare since the Middle Ages and it became widespread on the oceans in later times. It was often applied by the weaker countries against powerful enemies which possessed strong navies – this was observed during the reign of queen Elisabeth I when the English sea dogs were struggling with rich and well armed Spaniards in the 16th century¹⁰. Later on, in late 18th and early 19th

4 Such cases are reported among others in the publication of P. Gelder, *Total Loss*, London 2001.

5 Some shipping companies recruit armed security teams and employ them on the vessels cruising through the most dangerous waters of the Indian Ocean.

6 D. Petrovic, op. cit.

7 T. Bowling, *Pirates and Privateers*, Harpenden 2008, p. 7.

8 For example 18th century Thames River's pirates were called *Mudlarks* – ibidem, p. 14. Japanese pirates ravaging Japanese, Korean and Chinese coasts for several centuries were known as *wako*, *waegu* and *wokou* respectively – S. Turnbull, *Pirate of the Far East*, Oxford 2007, p. 4.

9 B. Little, *The Sea Rover's Practice. Pirate Tactics and Techniques, 1630 – 1730*, Washington 2005, p. 221-222.

10 A. Konstam, *Elizabethan Sea Dogs 1560 – 1605*, Oxford 2000, p. 4.

century, privateering became very popular on the East Coast waters of the United States since the young American nation was unable to organize a fleet which could rival the British¹¹. The aim of the privateers was to capture the enemy merchant vessels and seize all valuable cargo. The ships were often kept as prizes and sometimes even served as the corsair's cruisers in their later careers.

It is not surprising however that these acts of lawful robbery were not seen as such by the crews of the intercepted vessels or their authorities. Even though letters of marque stated clearly that the privateer is in fact performing his duty when he was caught by the enemy his fate often was no different to that of a mere pirate. And that was simple – hanging. It shows that the practice of privateering was not a safe business but it had certain bonuses for mariners. The majority of the loot was shared among the crew and the discipline on board were not as strict as on a regular warship. The cruises for prey were generally shorter than transoceanic travels therefore daily conditions for the crew members were better and the contracts lasted for a specific duration, not infrequently only for one trip. In England becoming a privateer could also save the able seamen from being forced to serve aboard HMS ships with far worse financial gains, if any¹².

The problem with the armies of privateers surfaced during the time of peace. When the war ended they were stripped of their, often quite profitable, professions. Furthermore as a consequence several corsairs ended up as pirates attacking anything they could conquer. They became outlaws hunting for the loot.

And the spoils are roots for the other names of the pirates – filibusters and freebooters – which mean those who fight for booty. These terms come from the corrupted Dutch word *vryjbuiter*¹³. Conversely, a buccaneer had a more peaceful meaning. This term comes from a type of grill for smoking the meat used by inhabitants of the Antilles's backwoods during the 17th century¹⁴. Those hunters took the opportunity and started to raid Spanish ships and thus became the notoriously famous pirates of the Caribbean.

However the opposite way of action was still possible. During the golden age of sail and piracy some extraordinary pirate leaders became royal pupils and admirals, promoted to nobility. And some even turned their backs on their former comrades and transformed into pirate hunters. Francis Drake is a splendid example of the former case. Initially, this English

11 A. Konstam, *Privateers & Pirates 1730 – 1830*, Oxford 2001, p. 3.

12 Ibidem, p. 15, 18-19.

13 B. Little, op. cit., p. 222. Some authors claim that the word *filibusters* derived from the small 'flibotes' (fly boats) they sometimes used – A. Konstam, *Scourge of the Seas. Buccaneers, Pirates and Privateers*, Oxford 2007, p. 6.

14 A. Konstam, *Scourge of the Seas...*, op. cit., p. 21.

steersman and smuggler crossed the Atlantic Ocean to capture Spanish gold. After the successful raid he came back to his country and found the favor of queen Elisabeth I. In another expedition Drake not only attacked the Spanish ships – he managed to cross the strait which was subsequently named after him – but also took over several Spanish towns and caught the galleon carrying tons of silver. With that he gained not only wealth and fame but also the nobility. Later sir Francis Drake became the second-in-command during the fight with the Great Spanish Armada¹⁵. The latter instance might be illustrated by the figures of Woodes Rogers or Henry Morgan. Woodes Rogers was born in an affluent seafaring family. In 1709 he took part in a privateering expedition during which he saved the mariner Alexander Selkirk¹⁶. Afterwards he served as governor of the Bahamas and was fighting with the local piracy¹⁷. Before the times of Rogers there was also another man who gained his name through ruthless actions. Henry Morgan originally was a buccaneer. However, his highly successful raids against the Spanish settlements in America – especially Porto Bello in the present-day Panama – ultimately brought him fame in England, nobility and the title of vice-governor of Jamaica¹⁸. And nowadays we can enjoy the rum which bears the name and picture of sir Henry Morgan on its label...

As I explained piracy could lead to successful careers in the state governments and it did not meet with condemnation as a rule. In fact at some historical moments piracy was not perceived as a reprehensible crime at all.

The European antiquity is usually described as a time of great Greek philosophers or the era of dominance of the powerful Roman Empire. However, it was also the time of incredible growth of various forms of sea robbery. To the ancient Greeks it was as common a practice as trade and many literary and historiographic works give us clues that it was not disgracing. Quite the contrary – piracy was a claim to fame because of the bravery, agility and resourcefulness of men who chose such an occupation. Moreover, it was not uncommon for merchants to attack their fellows if the opportunity presented itself¹⁹. Ancient pirates were stealing not only cargo and ships, taking crews as prisoners and selling them to slavery but they also attacked numerous temples and cities for rich spoils and abducted local people for slave markets. In Homeric poetry several characters – among them Achilles and Odysseus –

15 M. Perzyński, *Zawód pirat. Opowieść o morskich rozbójnikach od epoki brązu do ery atomu*, Gdańsk 2012, p. 168-175.

16 Who later became the model for Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe.

17 For more details consult: D. Cordingly, *Pirate Hunter of the Caribbean. The Adventurous Life of Captain Woodes Rogers*, New York 2011.

18 M. Perzyński, op. cit., p. 230-236.

19 T. Łoposzko, *Tajemnice starożytnej żeglugi*, Gdańsk 1977, p. 215-217.

perform such acts of robbery and they are not criticized²⁰. Piracy in the Mediterranean Sea still lasted when the Romans worked hard to make it Mare Nostrum. In fact even Caesar himself was caught by the pirates in his early career and was forced to pay a handsome ransom²¹.

Similar events became a rule during the Viking Age in Northern Europe when significant part of the Scandinavian society indulged in sea roving. For various German tribes war, fighting and fame constituted the true purpose of existence and they were quite happy to plunder their neighbors who confessed akin ideology since “success in war was key to power and status”²². And later Vikings were no different. The name which is nowadays commonly used to describe those people comes from the Scandinavian word *viking* which meant a pirate raid²³. These Norsemen most often sailed the Baltic and Northern Seas on their famous longships propelled by sail and oars. Those vessels were sleek, long, thin and fast and they drew little water which enabled the crew to penetrate rivers²⁴ and safely strand the ship when attacking coastal settlements or monasteries. If a Viking warrior was successful and talented he could win much more than just a peaceful dwelling in the country as an aged man. If he claimed to be a descendant of a fine aristocratic family, had enough charisma and money gain along the renown through numerous fights he could even become a king. Such was the case of Olaf Tryggvason who gained wealth and fame during Viking raids²⁵ and became the ruler of Norway at the end of the 10th century²⁶. To some people just the title of a sea king – the commander or a band of sea wolves – was enough. They were the kings without land.

The twilight of the Viking Age did not extinguish piracy in Northern Europe – after all Slavs were receptive students. However, in the high Middle Ages this practice slowly started to be perceived as disgraceful, cruel and godless. When the Hanseatic League dominated the Baltic Sea it had a menacing enemy – the Vitalian Brotherhood whose members originally worked as privateers. In the late 14th century they were so powerful and successful in plundering various merchantmen that a couple of Scandinavian monarchs asked the master of the Teutonic Knights to intervene. The Order had a mighty fleet and it easily conquered

20 M. Perzyński, op. cit., p. 16-17.

21 T. Łoposzko, op. cit., p. 229.

22 J. Haywood, *Historical Atlas of the Vikings*, London 1995, p. 20.

23 R. Chartrand, K. Durham, M. Harrison, I. Heath, *The Vikings. Voyages of Discovery and Plunder*, Oxford 2006, p. 15.

24 I. Heath, *The Vikings*, London 1985, p. 6.

25 While plundering England Olaf became a Christian and later he brutally tried to force his subjects to accept Christianity.

26 J. Haywood, op. cit., p. 32.

Gotland – the main stronghold of the pirates²⁷. Even if the Teutonic Order acted against the pirates it does not mean that other knights were not interested in piracy. In the first quarter of the 16th century the Knights of St. John were granted the territory of Malta. It was a great base for a naval military order²⁸. The Order was not only fighting with Muslims who had well-developed privateering practices which concentrated on Christian slaves who were used, among others, as oarsmen in galleys²⁹. In fact their activities were not different than those of their enemies. Admittedly, the Knights were freeing Christians serving on Muslim vessels – except for those who managed to accept Islam – the converts were killed. Nevertheless, at the same time they were attacking trading ships and they were capturing non-Christians for enslavement³⁰.

Mediterranean pirates for tens of centuries were using galleys. These ships were propelled mostly by oars and sails were used only in favorable winds. They were sleek and fast and carried many men able to fight on board of the attacked vessels. Such galleys were effective on close basins with many islands to hide from strong gales but they were not proper to use on the open oceans. Atlantic waters were crossed by more sturdy sailing ships. During the golden age of sail and piracy in the 17th and 18th centuries many different types of vessels existed and not all of them were used for long trans-oceanic voyages. The popular culture tends to show the Caribbean pirates sailing on huge three-masted warships while in reality they usually used much smaller one-masted vessels called the sloop or two-masted schooners³¹.

A privateer [or a pirate ship] had to be seaworthy, capable of cruising the enemy sea lanes regardless of the weather conditions. Crucially, she must be capable of handling well in strong breezes with more sail than was commonly carried, and able to sail as close to wind as possible³². Armament was less important, although a privateer had to have sufficient firepower to overawe any merchant ship it came across. The idea was not to fight enemy warships or well-defended merchantmen in a conventional sea battle, but to capture the enemy by intimidation, preferably without damaging her hull or cargo. As most privateers had a comparatively large crew

27 S. Wrzesiński, *Potępieńcy średniowiecznej Europy*, Kraków 2007, p. 130-131.

28 S. Willis, *Fighting Ships. From the Ancient World to 1750*, London 2010, p. 143.

29 Muslim pirate leaders were often granted admiral's titles in Ottoman fleets or high positions in the state administration – M. Perzyński, op. cit., p. 108, 117-119, 122.

30 *Joannici – korsarze Chrystusa*, [on-line:] <http://ryuuk.salon24.pl/397035,joannici-korsarze-chrystusa>, <http://ryuuk.salon24.pl/397035,joannici-korsarze-chrystusa,2> [29.10.2014]; M. Kozłowski, *Joannici – Kawalerowie Rodyjscy i Maltańscy (cz. 1)*, [on-line:] <http://histmag.org/Joannici-Kawalerowie-Rodyjscy-i-Maltanscy-cz.-1-7601> [29.10.2014].

31 In Europe pirates and privateers also used smaller vessels such as cutters and ketches.

32 It was needed for speed since sea-rovers wanted to outmaneuver and outsail their prey and outrun the possible enemies.

compared with their mercantile opponents, boarding was the favoured recourse if the enemy chose not to surrender on demand. This large crew was required to man prize vessels [...]³³.

Pirates and privateers were using vessels for various actions but generally their goal was to gain wealth. They could do it by stealing property either at sea from the intercepted vessels or by attacking settlements on land. Killings, cruelty and rapes definitely were not the primary objectives. Yet sometimes it was necessary to get rid of dangerous or useless people for example to save food supplies. An exemplary form of brutality might have also been employed for intimidation. We should not forget that pirates in general were not against slavery and if the opportunity arose they stole “living goods” and sold them themselves. However, the capacity of their vessels was usually restricted and thus they often took prizes or just the most valuable collectibles. Sometimes the spare property was simply destroyed. Sea rovers were also interested in food, water and alcoholic beverages. Even though they usually did not spend extended periods at the open sea supplies were of course crucial to sustain their very existence.

In fact sea roving could be an extremely dangerous and unhealthy way of living. It did not only mean the possibility of dying in a physical confrontation with the prey or navy – to die by the sword, bullet, cannon fire, ordinary fire, flying splinters of wood, drowning, by being crushed by the falling yards and rigging or, if caught by the authorities, by execution – preferably a dishonorable yet uncomplicated and effective hanging. The sea practice itself was hazardous. We must remember that it was a time when modern meteorology or GPS was unknown. People who decided to sail the briny seas could rely only on what they could see and what they learnt about certain waters from their predecessors. And even if they noticed a storm approaching with the limited speed of their vessels they did not have any chance to hide from upcoming difficulties. Even today huge ships built from modern materials and with state-of-the-art technology are being lost to the vicious storms and extreme waves. It is assessed that in single decade of the 19th century – from 1860 to 1870 – 2500 ships of the British fleet only were lost at sea³⁴. And it was already the time of magnificent clippers, much slimmer, longer, faster and sturdier than the vessels used in the former era.

There is a saying that during the golden age of sail men were made of steel and ships were made of wood. And indeed sailors had great need for strength. Besides difficult weather conditions and dangers of fights a daily life on board sailing vessels was a hard enough struggle. Even the most common practice of manning the yards could be seen as perilous:

33 A. Konstam, *Privateers & Pirates...*, op. cit., p. 31.

34 D. Pike, *Sztormy*, Warszawa 2013, p. 27.

safety devices have been in use only for the last few decades so ancient sailors were climbing the shrouds barefooted any without any protection. Moreover, the ships were comparatively small for the size of their crews and mariners usually had very little space for sleeping since cabins were reserved for the chosen few officers. A warm bunk – or rather a hammock – system was common. But even if a seaman finished his watch and went to bed he could be called on board the moment he fell asleep because of the sudden wind change. Mariners usually did not have many clothes so they were not changing. Soaked garments were drying on the bodies. It could lead to many diseases and skin problems were common among the sea folk as well as thermal injuries such as frostbite or sunburn³⁵. Lower decks were stuffy, filled with rats, lice and cockroaches. Furthermore, numerous illnesses were widespread among the crews, especially malaria, yellow fever and, most of all, scurvy. Some diseases, for example the ague, were particularly dangerous to those not acclimatized to the new environment. In fact in the golden era of piracy “far more seamen died from disease than battle or accident [...]”³⁶. Sailors must have looked quite horrible to those who stayed on the land – a bunch of dirty, ill and foulmouthed scum wrapped in rags. No wonder that people were afraid of these devil’s companions.

The food and water on board were especially foul. A typical diet consisted of salted pork, boiled beans and scrags. The main problem with sustenance was the lack of long term storage and keeping the food in the edible state. Meat often was moldy and infested with maggots and bread was covered with weevils yet it was consumed by the hungry crew. And water, which was always in short supply, very soon started to stink and became green, turning into a miniature aquarium. Still it was so precious that men did not use it for washing their bodies. The lack of rudimentary hygiene and bad supplies led to an almost endemic dysentery and typhus³⁷. Since the supply of drinking water on longer voyages was quite problematic “spirits in one form or another were the principal drink at sea”³⁸. A daily ration of rum, brandy or beer was so high that the majority of mariners were constantly drunk.

Daily chores of the crew were already demanding but since their vessels were made of impermanent materials they needed special treatment from time to time. Wear and tear of equipment should lead to regular replacements and the hull itself was endangered by naval shipworms. If it did not undergo a tiring process of careening with time it could start to take

35 L. Kaltenbergh, *Czarne żagle czterdziestu mórz*, Warszawa 1979, p. 97.

36 B. Little, op. cit., p. 88.

37 L. Kaltenbergh, op. cit., p. 98-99.

38 B. Little, op. cit., p. 90.

water faster than the crew could pump it out or it could simply disintegrate on the raging waves. And such waves could also be the reason of serious seasickness.

Moreover, if a mariner was serving on board the regular merchantmen or the Royal Navy ship he had to take enormous care about the discipline since the hierarchy was strict. The captain was “the first after god” and he had total control over his crewmen. Flogging or battering was the most common practice along deducting money from the promised salary, also in case of minor offences. Even swearing or discontentment expressed aloud could lead to severe punishment. Death penalty was used ordinarily but other punishments, such as keelhauling, often led to the same result³⁹. Moreover, the British fleet regularly suffered from crew shortages and officers readily accepted people hijacked by press gangs on the streets or in the taverns. Able seamen in major British harbors were endangered even when they were sober and without any debts. Sometimes mariners were so scared of the possibility of impressment that they refused to go on land⁴⁰. No wonder that some chose a more negligent life⁴¹ with at least a real perspective of gaining riches and fame.

Cruel actions of the captain and injustice on board could lead to mutiny and if it was successful the newly-made pirates were choosing a leader. But even such captains were faced with the insolent, knavish and generally disorderly crews⁴². Pirate societies were much more egalitarian than the normal societies of their times or crews of regular ships. Nationality, race, religion and previous social status were not of much importance. This unorthodox tolerance was of course quite suspicious and constituted yet another difference between the outlaws and “peaceful” citizens. However, there were several rules concerning the lives of sea robbers which everyone had to obey. Pirates were brothers and all spoils were divided according to services and rank and injured or crippled got special rake-off⁴³. This theme as well as some customs shared by the sailors’ community were often used by the popular culture. Various Hollywood productions such as *Cutthroat Island* or *Pirates of the Caribbean* tend to show pirates covered with tattoos, dressed up in flashy outfits, with colorful birds, golden earrings or wooden legs, with a pipe and a bottle of rum in the hand. And it really was a part of an

39 E. Koczorowski, J. Koziarski, R. Pluta, *Ceremoniał morski i etykieta jachtowa*, Warszawa 2008, p. 94-97.

40 C. Woodard, *Republika piratów*, Kraków 2014, p. 49-50.

41 „Yet pirates, for whom severe discipline was anathema, sometimes inflicted severe punishments, including marooning and death, upon their own” – B. Little, op. cit., p. 86.

42 A. Konstam, *Elizabethan Sea Dogs...*, op. cit., p. 7.

43 M. Perzyński, op. cit., p. 210-212, 217.

outlaw mariners' tradition, apart from foul language, little aversion to religion and numerous superstitions⁴⁴. Black or red flags, frequently adorned with skulls or skeletons, also existed⁴⁵.

Piracy was often a desperate form of protest against social injustice and corruption of the authorities. In fact there were cases when the people supported pirates, treated them as heroes and demanded their liberation from the hands of local governors⁴⁶. Some freebooters surely desired freedom and a place where they would be treated humanely. They did not think about the future, they were trying to take as much from life as it was possible and concentrate on the present. And for sure they were not crueler than their contemporaries. In comparison to what the Spanish did to the indigenous population of the Americas the pirate activity was a mere childish play⁴⁷.

We can observe that sea robbery not necessarily lead to the condemnation of the mariner in his fatherland since it could have been exploited in the state service which turned piracy into the privateering practice. In several cases initial outlawry ended up in official posts. However, the vast majority of pirates remained exiles, even though at the same time they could have been perceived as the brave adventurers in their nimble vessels. In my opinion, considering the reality of a sailor' existence and its hardships, illegal actions and atrocities of piracy, it is not surprising that the western culture created a romantic vision of piracy in literature, music, games or movies⁴⁸. Even if it is rather hard to accept that an enormously filthy drunkard with black stumps instead of proper teeth, infested by lice and covered in blemishes can be viewed as a handsome and interesting character. It is probably more connected to the everlasting allure of freedom and the outlaws not bound by strict state rules. Hence, the answer to the question put in the title of this article should read as follow: both.

44 For example tattoos, parrots and golden earrings served as good luck charms. Amulets and talismans also were popular. And to this day many mariners think that leaving the harbor on Friday, whistling or women on board will bring bad luck – L. Kaltenbergh, op. cit., p. 198, 310-314; E. Koczorowski, J. Koziarski, R. Pluta, op. cit., p. 215-217.

45 M. Perzyński, op. cit., p. 262-265.

46 C. Woodard, op. cit., p. 328.

47 M. Perzyński, op. cit., p. 211 – 213.

48 In the last decade several books on pirates – fiction and non-fiction – were released, for example Tim Severin's trilogy *The Adventures of Hector Lynch*. In Poland popular fantasy writers M. Mortka and J. Komuda published works about sea rovers. When it comes to music pirates and sea went out of shanties to various rock bands – members of Alestorm dedicated their music solely to the pirate theme. In the 2014 the Americans aired at least two TV series on pirates (*Crossbones; Black Sails*). Lots of recent popculture material is also devoted to Vikings.

ABSTRACT

The article concentrates on the issue of piracy. The author explains various terms connected with the sea roving phenomena and, in short, describes the Western tradition of piracy and privateering. The later part of the text is devoted to the presentation of the reality of the daily existence of sailors serving on board the ships during the golden age of sail and piracy in the 17th and 18th centuries. The last part of the article mentions the romantic aspect of being a mariner and the influence it had on popular culture.

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