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CHAPTER 10

Ethnic aspects of the settlement of Iceland

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Despite periodic questioning of the historical value of the early Icelandic sources (this relates above all to the family sagas) there is a clear tradition of seeing the settlement process as an action taken by Norwegian refugees seeking release from the oppression of 'king' Harald Fairhair. However, even simple statistics do not support such a simplified picture. Of 435 named settlers in Iceland only ca. 130 are said to have come from Norway. There were also ca. 50 settlers from the British Isles while the origins of the majority are not specified.¹

These numbers did not attract much attention among the students of the heroic settlement period. There were very few serious attempts to break with the traditional view. Two complex analyses have been offered recently by Herman Pálsson (1996 and 1997) who traced both Celtic and Sami/Lappish influences in the early history of Iceland. Celtic blood admixture seems to be still attestable by genetic studies.² Still more radical was Barði Guðmundsson (1967) who questioned the Norwegian origins even of those settlers who actually came from Norway. After sophisticated argumentation he located the origins of early Icelandic culture in East Scandinavia, i.e. Denmark and south Sweden, where descendants of the migrating tribe of Heruli were supposed to have survived from the sixth century onwards.

These works suggest that the settlement of Iceland was a complex process where different ethnic and cultural elements were active in the formation of a specific society that underwent progressive uniformisation. Studying this process calls for co-operation of several disciplines, which may lead to an understanding of its complexity.³ Historians, archaeologists, linguists and anthropologists should attempt to break down the national myth of original ethnic unity trying to avoid traps of political interpretations.⁴

¹ Rafnsson, 1974, pp. 222ff.

² Saugstad, 1977.

³ See promising results of such an interdisciplinary approach in Fenton and Pálsson, 1984.

⁴ cf. Byock, 1992.

I do not aim here to produce any complex theory. I just want to show the potential of exploring well-known data when put in a framework of the settlement's anthropological interpretation. Such study must refrain from any political sentiments while breaking the dominating picture, which, of course, is a much easier task for a foreigner. I have already tried similar critical assessments of the prevailing interpretations of the past 'ethnicities' of the Goths and Slavs.⁵

To start with it is necessary to consider the circumstances of the settlement period. The Viking Age in Northern Europe was a time of continuous political perturbations due to the ruthless campaigns launched by ambitious leaders who sought stabilisation of their power and tried to enlarge their domains at the expense of their less lucky or less clever neighbours. The outcome of this game was a growing number of disappointed former and would-be leaders, whose choice was either to be subordinated or to flee in hope of finding better chances elsewhere.

However, it was not only an élite that was 'pushed' to move. Development of sailing technology and navigation knowledge as well as a spread of entrepreneurial attitude offered many people the chance to travel which included resettlement expeditions. Apart from access to a seagoing ship and complex logistics the will to go was also an important element of the circumstances enabling and limiting migrations. Thus, there could have been some 'natural' mechanism of selection because it was people of 'adventurous' character who risked such long and dangerous journeys. This seems to be supported by genetic studies.⁶

Successful raids of Scandinavians both eastwards (towards the Black Sea) and westwards (to the British Isles), opened new perspectives and established a new vision of the world around – the world that offered chances to improve personal economy, to gain fame and honour and/or to escape various troubles at home. It was a world with no strict political borders or with borders that could not be effectively controlled; a world that had no ethnic, cultural or even, to some respect, religious limits; a world where the most important obligation was subordination to the local power structure – whether it was an old one or established by invaders. Trading ventures, pillaging raids, invasions, and migrations formed a network of activities that bonded this 'world' together and promoted effective information exchange as well as demographic replacements.

In such circumstances the discovery of Iceland became quickly known and the new opportunity that it offered triggered multidirectional movements of those who had not yet established themselves comfortably in the new lands (mostly the shores of the British Isles and the Northern and Western Isles) and those who still did not take any decision to resettle. The news came like an advertisement of a "Promised

⁵ Urbańczyk, 1998; at press.

⁶ Berry, 1977, 67.

Land", with no oppressive paramount power centre, with extensive opportunities for land claims, and with no restrictions on the origin and social condition of the newcomers.

*Landnámabók*⁷ explains the arrival of only some of the settlers, leaving the rest with no details related to the reason for their migration. They could be listed as 'volunteers' who, for various reasons, decided to risk a journey and 'went to Iceland looking for land' (*Sturlubók* 68). Determination, access to a suitable ship, some capital in tools and animals, and knowledge of the location of Iceland were the only limits. There was no power that was able to control the inflow of settlers. So long as there was enough agricultural land and some basic modes of 'proper' behaviour were observed, there were no extensive conflicts. Just the opposite – it was important to fill the *oecumene* to achieve a number of inhabitants that made possible development of a well structured society.

It was important for those who came first and were able to claim large areas to fill them with people who were somehow subordinated. Those with ambitions for leadership desperately needed followers and supporters who would recognise them as leaders. An élite cannot exist without more or less subordinated masses. The earliest Icelandic sources list the leading families for every Quarter of the island, and it was these from whom the pagan priests, law-speakers and (later) bishops and abbots were recruited. It was these families who 'granted lands to [their] kinsmen and in-laws' (*S.* 280) and encouraged newcomers to settle within their 'domains' (e.g. *S.* 30), because these followers offered them the possibility to develop and reinforce their social power. It would not be surprising, then, if there was even some sort of recruitment within the ranges of the contemporary Scandinavian 'world'. *Landnámabók* lists several settlers who made pre-claims of land for people (usually their relatives) who were to come later (*S.* 184; 274). Some acted like entrepreneurs and 'sold off ... land to various settlers' (*S.* 126; 329).

Such mechanism meant that the process of peopling the island was very intensive and it took ca. 60 years to fill the then available *oecumene*. It was a massive migration with a defined destiny but with a decentralised decision-making process. Every family had to think it over very well and carefully prepare its resettlement. However, it was not necessarily a journey of no return or a one-way movement, for we hear of several cases when people who changed their minds decided to leave Iceland after some time (*S.* 146; 308) and nobody could really stop them. Of course, slaves and house servants were excluded from such decision-making and had to follow their lords. These people did not need to be, and could not all be of Norwegian origin because there was no controllable selection-mechanism that could have effectively been applied.

⁷ References in this text are to the Sturla Thordarson's version called *Sturlubók* written down in 1275–1280. All translations of *Sturlubók* are after H. Pálsson and P. Edwards, 1972.

Apart from the mass of simple ‘volunteers’ we have a substantial group of settlers who had specific reasons to move to Iceland. Most of the historians dealing with the period let themselves be persuaded by the author(s) of *Landnámabók* who cite ‘oppressions’ introduced by Harald Fairhair (S. 85; 134; 139; 155). In several cases the king confiscated lands or just expelled some families from Norway for reasons that we do not know (S. 135; 392). Otherwise we hear that people had to flee after they opposed Harald in the battlefield (S. 114; 161; 166; 378; 391) or killed his envoys (S. 229; 356; 359), or did not pay tributes due to the ‘king’ (S. 12; 84; 356). Thus they were not innocent victims of his outrageous behaviour; they were his political opponents who raised their arms against the expanding power of the early state and lost their case on the battlefield. Every central power claiming its sovereignty over some territory reacts in the same way to an open opposition by punishing the rebels. Of course, the time in question was a period when Harald I ‘was forging his way to power in Norway’ (S. 179) at the expense of local leaders who, quite naturally, did not like losing their independence. But it was political struggles that produced some losers who chose to emigrate rather than to wait for the consequences of their behaviour (S. 112; 156; 159; 267; 341; 344; 371).

They fled with bitter remembrance expressed in family memories and recorded by medieval historians who could not know that it was a situation typical of large parts of Europe where in the ninth and tenth centuries many new states emerged from the earlier tribal/chieftdom structures. All those states were created by using sheer power while swallowing larger and larger territories and producing larger and larger numbers of political and economic losers who had to be subordinated or to escape. What made the situation in Norway different was that there were both effective means of transport, and the islands of the North Atlantic which offered eventual settlers the same environmental conditions that they were used to. Those who rebelled against ‘kings’ and feared their revenge surely belonged to the élite which had no problem in buying a large ship or which possessed such a vessel earlier. The richest of them organised ‘convoys’ (S. 113; 211; 214) carrying their friends and followers who were persuaded to join the venture. Poorer ones could reduce their costs by buying shares in larger ships (S. 152; 228; 257).

Although Harald Fairhair as the successful ruler of a large part of Norway concentrated all the hate of the emigrants, Jarl Hákon Grjótgarðsson also forced several families to go to Iceland (S. 146; 147; 154; 225; 241; 270). This is not surprising, because every effective ruler had to organise the economic foundations of his power. Apart from the immediate revenues from looting and pillaging, it was necessary to have a stable basis for financing the state. Various taxes due from subordinated territory offered substantial and stable income. But, in the long perspective it was the ownership of agricultural land that both eased the control over adjacent

areas and furnished rents, or simply fed the constantly travelling king and his retinue. The easy way to gain more land was to confiscate the properties of political opponents (S. 229). Thus, even the families of those who fell on a battlefield could not feel safe just like those energetic 'widows' who managed to move to Iceland (S. 341) to re-establish there the position of their kin.

Many settlers are said to have had severe problems 'because of some killings' before they left for Iceland (S. 6; 29; 72; 89; 215; 216; 329; 376). Some of them seem to be notorious trouble-makers (e.g. S. 165; 215) of whom Eirik Thorvaldsson Raude is an outstanding example (S. 89).

There was, also, a very interesting group of men who sailed to Iceland because of King Harald, not, however, as his enemies but as his friends. They left Norway not because they were pursued by the king but because they were encouraged(!) by him (S. 154; 179; 310). These situations should be taken as evidence of the far reaching expansion plans of the Norwegian ruler, who had no logistical means of controlling the North Atlantic islands but tried to influence the situation even in distant Iceland. He delegated 'envoys' recruited from his faithful followers, supporters and members of his retinue (S. 229; 284) and stayed in contact with them later (S. 310).

All these people, political refugees, outlaws, kings' supporters and those who just sought improvement of their economic and social situation, together with their slaves, freedmen and servants, came to Iceland from Norway, the British Isles (including the Hebrides and Northern Isles), Denmark and Sweden. They had different cultural backgrounds, different life experiences and different expectations. If we add large numbers of Celts (cf. Pálsson 1996) and much less numerous but certain presence of some Sami/Lapps (cf. Pálsson 1997) it is clear that speaking of early Iceland as a Norwegian colony cannot be sustained.

This is even more true when we drop contemporary concepts of nation-states and do not try to replace the early medieval reality with a geopolitical situation that developed much later. Norway in its late medieval shape did not exist in the tenth century or even in the eleventh century. Thus, when Sturla mentioned *Hálogaland* (S. 29, 30, 41, 46; 86; 145; 152; 225; 238; 241; 251; 330; 345) it did not mean Norway because it took a very long time before Norwegian kings managed to include the northern stretch of the Scandinavian Peninsula into their effectively controlled territory.⁸ The tenth century Hálogalanders were not Norwegians and they organised a hostile opposition against territorial ambitions of Norwegian rulers. This situation changed slowly after the culmination of the outburst of conflict in 1030 when Hálogalanders were decisive in defeating and killing king Ólaf II Haraldsson.

Clear separation of Norway and Hálogaland given in *Landnámabók* finds support in other sources. The most explicit is the list of countries subordinated to the Hamburg

⁸ Cf. Urbańczyk, 1992, chs. 8 and 9.

archbishopric by the decision of Emperor Louis on 15 May 834. This document was falsified sometime in the eleventh century but it is still interesting that it mentions ‘... *Norweon* ... *Halligalandon* ... [and] *Screduindon* [*Samiland*] ...’ as separate countries.⁹ Yet for Adam of Bremen around 1070 Christian Norway reached only to the Arctic Circle.¹⁰

Thus, while it is obvious that it was the prevailing contacts with Norway, and the West Scandinavian experience with exploitation of the North Atlantic environment, which dominated in the process of the formation of Icelandic material culture and social organisation, the presence of settlers with different cultural/ethnic backgrounds cannot be denied. Studying this multi-cultural situation one should not limit discussion to the explicit geographical information given in *Landnámabók*. Both written sources and archaeological data make it possible to enlarge this list.

There must have been men from the West-Frankish/German Empire among the settlers of Iceland. Indirect German influences and contacts may be traced in names like Vilbald (*S.* 324), Saxi (*S.* 76), Viligisl (*Hauksbók* 16), Svávarr [= Sváfarr – Swabian warrior?] (*S.* 4) or Thjodrek [= Theoderic] (*S.* 302). The only direct evidence for temporary presence of a German in Iceland is to be found in *Grœnlendinga saga* (ch. 4). There we hear about Tyrkir the Southerner who despite his name (= Turk) appeared to be a German who was with Eirik’s family ‘for a long time’. Leif Eiriksson called him ‘foster father’ and took him to Vinland where he made his companions nervous by speaking German. This evidence shows how misleading names may be. Anyway, it would be strange if inhabitants of the northern parts of the post-Carolingian states did not take some part in migrations to Iceland.

However, I would like to reach still further in also trying to trace Slavic participants in the settlement of Iceland. No name given in *Landnámabók* resembles any Slavic form. But the settlers who came from Sweden and Gotland (e.g. *S.* 209) must have had various contacts with the Slavs. This would be the case also with some Norwegians who like Skinna-Björn ‘used to go trading to Novgorod’ before he went to Iceland. His son Miðfjarðar-Skeggi ‘went to plunder in the Baltic’ (*S.* 174 and *H.* 140). Such people were very likely to have aboard their ships Slavic slaves and/or companions recruited from among southern-Baltic pirates or inhabitants of the multi-ethnic emporia like Wolin/Jómsborg or Truso.

Such might have been the origin of that unlucky Náttfari who drifted away with one slave and a woman and had to settle in Iceland when Garðar Svávarson sailed back to Norway (*S.* 4). It may be guessed that this first permanent settler did not know how a land-claim should be properly marked because he made just cuts in trees. Regional leaders declaring their control over larger areas ‘explored the whole

⁹ *Diplomatarium Islandicum* I, 1A.

¹⁰ Adam, *Gesta Hammaburgensis* IV. 31.

district' like Skalla-Grim who used 'rivers to mark his land-claim right down to the sea' (S. 30). A smaller holder would 'carry fire around his land-claim' (S. 189 and 346) or 'built fires at every estuary to hallow his land-claim' (S. 218). The size of a given property might depend on how much land a benefactor 'could fence off in three days' (S. 75).

Náttfari paid dearly for his ignorance because he was later expelled by another newcomer who did not accept his claim (S. 247; see also *Reykdaela saga* I). Even if we do not know Náttfari's original name, it is not difficult to guess that he grew up in a milieu that was lacking vitally important knowledge of how to secure a land-claim in a way understandable to Scandinavians. Knowing that Garðar and his father kept lively contacts with the east, it is highly probable that Náttfari was of Slavic origin. Anyway, it seems quite possible that the first recorded settler of Iceland was not a Scandinavian.

Much more secure arguments for the participation of Slavs in the settlement of Iceland are to be found in archaeological reports. I am fully aware of the risks involved in attempts to identify ethnically elements of material culture. However, two types of complex sets of finds may convey substantial 'ethnic' information. One category may be graves richly equipped with a set of items that were typical of material from some distinct area. A good example from early medieval Scandinavia is a series of graves excavated in Birka.¹¹ They contained artefacts typical of tenth-century horse-warriors from Kievan Rus. Knowing of the close connections between the two areas it is not surprising that some 'Slavicised Scandinavians' or 'Scandinavised Slavs' of high status would be buried in the economic centre of Sweden.

Another category of ethnically 'loaded' structures are houses. Unlike portable objects they are witness to the physical presence of their builders and help to identify their ethnic roots. A house forms a private living space that everybody organises in a particular way so that it resembles a model imprinted by his/her cultural milieu. There is an infinite number of house-types differentiated by their shapes, sizes, building materials, inner organisation, position of doors, heating systems, roof supports, etc. In traditional societies house-types are important elements of socially recognised distinctions of group identity. Any member of a given society knew what a 'proper' house should look like and had the necessary skills to construct a particular form of a building, for it was a part of knowledge that was naturally acquired by the social process of education. Only in clearly hierarchical societies might members of the social élite adopt some 'foreign' patterns that would manifest their status.

However, the normal way to fulfil housing needs was to use life's technical and cultural experience. It did not matter whether one built a house within the same social milieu or in a newly settled locality. The only(?) possible exclusion from such

¹¹ Duczko, 2000.

a socially patterned behaviour might occur when a stranger was forced to construct some other model being either coerced or driven by the desire to fit the locally prevailing architecture. This would need, however, direct guidance or teaching by the members of the new social milieu. Such a situation, however, does not hold good for uninhabited areas.

This theory offers a glimpse of the ethnic background of some of the settlers of Iceland, for several settlement-excavations disclosed very interesting structures that stand out from any Scandinavian building tradition. They are so-called 'sunken huts' (*jarðhysi* in Icelandic) – next-to-rectangular depressions with vertical walls, stone ovens placed in one of the corners and roof constructions supported by posts standing in the corners and, eventually, along the walls. There are not many such structures discovered up till now, but they clearly follow one characteristic model strikingly different from Scandinavian large, long, heavy-walled buildings erected on the surface, with open hearths placed centrally and roofs supported by rows of posts linearly dividing inner space.

Two sunken houses excavated in 1977–78 in Arnarfjörður, northwestern Iceland are very good examples of the type in question. The area was settled by Geirmund Heljarskinn who came in a convoy with 'a large number of men' (S. 113) who were given farms in his claimed area (S. 115). The Eyri farm settled ca. 900 AD¹² consisted of several buildings of problematic relative chronology. Luckily enough, the sunken 'house I' found near the southern wall of the classic *skáli* was apparently older because a fragment of the long house wall slipped down into the deep depression of the already abandoned *jarðhús*.¹³ The house floor was rectangular (4.2 x 2.5 m²) dug 1.2 m. into the ground. There was a stone oven placed in the south-western corner and four roof-bearing posts. Similar but a little bit smaller was sunken 'house II'.¹⁴ Other houses of this type have been excavated in:

- Hvítárholt in Hrunamannahreppur, Árnessysla, Southern Iceland – 5 sunken houses of which at least one was clearly older than one of four long houses – all dated to the tenth century,¹⁵
- Hjálmsstaðir in Laugardal, Árnessysla; two phases dated to the tenth – early eleventh century,¹⁶
- Granastaðir in Eyjafjarðardal,¹⁷

¹² Ólafsson, 1980, p. 67.

¹³ Ólafsson, 1980, p. 42; see also a very clear stratigraphic sequence recorded as section H-G.

¹⁴ Ólafsson, 1980, Fig. 18.

¹⁵ Magnússon, 1973.

¹⁶ Ólafsson, 1992.

¹⁷ Einarsson, 1989.

- Stóraborg in Southern Iceland – small (2.4 x 2 m².) sunken house from the earliest phase of the settlement that started in the eleventh century,¹⁸
- a house similar to the one excavated at Hjálmsstaðir was discovered in 1999 in Hofstaðir in Northern Iceland.¹⁹

Eighteen such houses have now been identified by the author in various parts of Iceland, which implies a rather limited participation of the builders of such houses in the settlement of Iceland. That they belonged to the early settlers is confirmed by their relative chronology. In every case sunken houses belonged to the earliest phases of occupation when, according to the theory sketched above, people had free choice to execute their architectural preferences. It was the first generation of settlers only who, being in immediate need of erecting roofed constructions, had no time or no chance to learn other designs. Only with the passing of time were the regionally-prevailing models adopted in the process of acculturation that was stimulated by intermarriages and speeded up by developing contacts with neighbours. Thus it was already the second generation of a settled family that could effectively become 'naturalised'. This is a simple process commonly observed among all contemporary emigrants who do not choose to live in ethnic ghettos.

Bearing all this in mind, it can be argued that Icelandic sunken huts are strong indicators of the arrival of a limited number of immigrants who came from non-Scandinavian milieux. They more or less consciously expressed their ethnicity in a material way that was later overwhelmed by the dominating model. Considering the houses they built there is little alternative to the conclusion that they were Slavs or, at least, people who grew up among the Slavs which made them 'Slavs' culturally. Such houses, distinctively different from the Germanic sunken huts are known in thousands from all the lands settled by early Slavs in Eastern, Southern and Central Europe.²⁰

They took part in a massive wave of immigration together with other 'ethnicities', with pagans and Christians, with chiefs, servants and slaves, with male leaders but also capable women, with fugitives and 'volunteers', with enemies and friends of Norwegian rulers, with those who knew well the North Atlantic environment, and those who had to learn its advantages and limits. Their success depended not on their ethnic background but, first of all, on their determination and capability but, also, on their cultural adaptability. Thus, all these Celts, Sami, Germans and Slavs quickly 'dissolved' in the dominating Scandinavian culture so that it may be extremely difficult to find material evidence of their presence. Well-documented attachment of the Slavs to their traditional houses may thus be very significant and allows us to

¹⁸ Snæsdóttir, 1992.

¹⁹ Edvardsson, Lucas, Vésteinsson, 1999, pp. 32–41 and Fig. 3.4.

²⁰ Fig. 2 – after Kobylinski, 1997.

supplement the history of the Settlement with a little fragment that was not recorded in writing.

What is documented is that there were some ‘foreigners’ who settled in Iceland in the eleventh century as accepted members of the society which meant also tax obligations. Thus, the decision of the Althing taken in April 1096 acknowledged Bishop Gizzur’s ‘Tithe Statutes’ (*Tinndastatuta*) where paragraph 24 says: ‘The Icelanders are supposed to pay the tithe but foreigners do not have to pay here before they were here for three winters unless they established a household earlier. They have to pay in the spring when they established their household’.²¹ This reference shows just one aspect of the problem of ‘foreigners’ but it indicates that Icelandic society, just like other populations of that time, developed mechanisms of quickly naturalising strangers who wished to settle down and were ready to observe local rules.

Sammendrag

Etnisitet og det islandske landnámet

Historikere har i den seinere tid gitt uttrykk for at landnámet på Island var en mangfoldig prosess med forskjellige etniske og kulturelle innslag. Disse ulike etnisiteter var aktivt med på å utforme en særegen og mangfoldig samfunnsform som seinere skulle bli mer ensartet. Studier av dette problemfeltet fordrer samarbeid på tvers av faggrensene.

For det første er det viktig å vurdere forutsetningene for landnámsperioden. Det var en tid der handelsferder, plyndringstokter, invasjonene og migrasjoner utgjorde et slags nettverk som bandt nordboernes verden sammen. Dette nettverket resulterte i en effektiv utveksling av informasjon såvel som demografisk omskiftelighet. Under slike forhold ble oppdagelsen av Island raskt kjent, og de nye muligheter som da bød seg, medførte bevegelser i mange retninger. Ingen sentralmakt kunne kontrollere eller styre flyten av bosettere.

Politiske flyktninger, fredløse og de som kun søkte å forbedre sine økonomiske og sosiale betingelser kom til Island sammen med sine treller fra Norge, De britiske øyer, Hebridene, Vesterhavsoyene, Danmark og Sverige. Vi finner også spor etter bosetterne fra de nordre deler av det karolingiske riket. De hadde alle ulike kulturelle bakgrunn og forskjellige livserfaringer og forventninger.

²¹ *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, 22. Version D of this document has a chapter titled ‘*vm vtlenzka menn*’ written in red.

Jeg vil forsøke å etterspore bosettere med slavisk bakgrunn. Skandinaver fra Baltisk område hadde sannsynligvis med seg slaviske treller og/eller venner som var rekruttert fra sørbaltiske pirater eller folk fra multietniske emporia som eksempelvis Wolin/Lomsborg. Arkeologien kan utgjøre et grunnlag for å argumentere for at også slaviske folk deltok i landnåmet av Island.

Hus utgjør strukturer som er etnisk ladede. Hustyper kan være signifikante uttrykk for uttrykk for sosial gruppeidentitet. På Island er det gjennom arkeologiske utgravninger av bygningsstrukturer avdekket strukturer som skiller seg fra skandinavisk bygningsskikk. Disse husstrukturene består av såkalte grophus (isl. *jarðhýsi*). Grophusene er tydelig utformet etter samme modell.

Grophusene tilhører alltid den aller tidligste bosetningsfasen. Jeg vil hevde at disse husene antyder at noen av de tidlige bosetterne kom fra ikke-skandinaviske miljøer. En vurdering av husenes form og struktur får meg til å konkludere med at de som bygget husene var slaver, eller i det minste folk som hadde sin bakgrunn blant slaver, slik at de kulturelt sett kunne betraktes som slaver.

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