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Naval Organisation and Royal Power in Twelfth Century Denmark

The conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity and its inclusion in Latin Christendom brought far-reaching changes to its socio-political, military and economic structures. This transformation can be undeniably identified particularly well in Denmark which, apart from sharing a land border with the Holy Roman Empire, also had a long history of political interaction with the North German polities. The long period of sporadic civil wars that the country suffered from 1131 to 1157, as well as Denmark's domination of the Baltic Sea during the Valdemarian period (1157-1227), led to the emergence of a strong monarchy in the Scandinavian realm, which would effectively transform the existing institution of naval levy – the *lething* – into a more closely controlled, more effective form of armed service more in line with the increased political and military control of the Danish king.¹

Early twelfth-century Denmark was a largely decentralised kingdom with a relatively weak monarchy which was often subjected to armed uprisings by members of the extended royal family and the regional aristocracy.² Primary sources generally identify three main regional actors in medieval Denmark: the Jutlanders – those residing in Jutland and the neighbouring island of Fyn –, the Zealanders, who inhabited the island of Sjælland and its surrounding islands, and the Scanians, who lived in the current Swedish counties of Skåne, Halland and Blekinge. Sjælland contained many of the monarchy's landed properties, and its inhabitants appear to have been steadfastly loyal to the king; the Jutlanders and Scanians, on the other hand, are usually portrayed as untrustworthy or treacherous. Each one of these groups would have had its own *þing*, or assembly, which was largely controlled by the regional aristocracy.

The long periods of both internal and external warfare throughout the century, however, led to a gradual strengthening of royal power. Many aspects of society, such as social ordination or the economic infrastructure, changed substantially during this period of Danish state building, and military organisation is no exception.³ The significant evolution of the Danish naval forces in the twelfth century sits at the centre of these reforms, and is crucial in order to understand the transformation of Danish society and the crown's foreign policy during the Valdemarian years.

1- Organisational Aspects: The *Lething* and the *Hærræ Mæn*

When the civil war period started in the 1130s, the Danish forces were organised in a typically Scandinavian manner. The king, bishops and lay magnates had their own personal retainers, or *lið*, who were full-time warriors equipped by their employers. The bulk of the population, however, were only expected to provide armed service under certain conditions and for a limited amount of time.⁴

The monarchy's main instrument to muster large armies was the *lething*. While the origins of the institution, which also existed in Norway and Sweden, are unclear, the *lething* was in essence a naval

¹ Erik Ulsig, "Højmiddelalder (1050-1350)", in *Middelalderens Danmark. Kultur og samfund fra trosskifte til reformation*, ed. Per Ingesman et al. (Copenhagen: GEC Gads Forlag, 1994) 30-32.

² Lars Hermanson, "Vertical Bonds and Social Power: Ideals of Lordship in Twelfth-Century Scandinavia", in *Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Bjørn Paulsen and Søren M Sindbæk, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011) 65-66.

³ Ulsig, "Højmiddelalder (1050-1350)", 30.

⁴ Niels Lund, "The armies of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut: leding or lið?", *Anglo-Saxon England, Volume 15*, (1986): 114.

levy.⁵ Its original function was probably to combine the manpower of the free farmers with the core of aristocratic retinues; the relatively small number of the magnates' ships could be thus bolstered by large numbers of free farmers sailing in collectively owned boats. The concept is not radically different from contemporary levied peasant forces from anywhere in Europe, the main striking difference being the existence of vessels collectively owned and maintained by the peasantry, which is understandable given the maritime nature of Scandinavian warfare. The earliest organisational structure of the *lething* is unknown, but it seems very likely that every free farmer who owned a certain amount of land would have been expected to take part in this type of levy. During the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, the *lething*, initially controlled by the regional aristocracy through the *þings*, or assemblies, was steadily brought under royal jurisdiction.⁶ In 1085, Knut II attempted to introduce compensation for neglect in the *lething*, thus forcing those who failed to appear to pay a fine.⁷ While king's enterprise failed – and he got murdered in the ensuing revolt –, it seems that such a mechanism was implemented by later monarchs, as a charter from 1117 directly mentions fines for neglecting to provide armed service.⁸

The Danish kings of the early twelfth century, thus, relied on the *lething* as both an offensive and defensive instrument. The flexibility of the institution was remarkable, as service could be required from specific assemblies instead of the whole country, but it was also very slow to muster, especially when the country was under attack. During the later stage of the civil war period – 1146-1157 – Denmark was divided into three different parts, each ruled by a king, and these monarchs consistently failed to stop Wendish raiders from attacking Denmark's shores, as their own retinues were too small and the *lething* took too long to gather.⁹ When the wars ended in 1157 with Valdemar I's victory, the newly crowned king sponsored a number of campaigns against Rügen, the main nest of Wendish piracy in the Baltic, expeditions which reached their zenith with the island's conquest by Danish forces in 1168-1169.¹⁰ And once the immediate threat of the Wends was settled, Valdemar radically reformed the Danish *lething's* structure.

In 1169, the existing naval levy was divided into two distinct institutions: the *lethingh* proper, composed of the peasantry, and the *hærræ mæn*, comprising the lay and ecclesiastical nobility's retinues.¹¹ The *lething's* structure was changed considerably. Under the new Valdemarian system, one quarter of all men liable for service would serve in the coastguard *lething*, the *wdgerds ledingh*, each summer for sixteen weeks, even if the country was not in immediate danger.¹² The levy was to be

⁵ Rikke Malmros, "Leiðangr in Old Norse court poetry", in *Maritime Warfare in Northern Europe. Technology, organisation, logistics and administration 500 BC-1500 AD*, ed. Anne Nørgård Jørgensen et al. (Copenhagen: PNM, 2002), 277-278.

⁶ Niels Lund, *Lið, Leding og Landeværn. Hær og samfund i Danmark i ældre middelalder*, (Roskilde: Vikingeskibshallen, 1996), 127; Niels Lund, "A Bishop in Arms: Absalon and the *leding*", in *Archbishop Absalon of Lund and his World*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen and Inge Skovgaard-Petersen, (Roskilde: Roskilde Museums Forlag, 2000) 15-17.

⁷ GD, 849-859.

⁸ Niels Lund, "If they neglect military service, they shall emend to the king. The scutage in Danish charters and laws", in *Maritime Warfare in Northern Europe. Technology, organisation, logistics and administration 500 BC-1500 AD*, ed. Anne Nørgård Jørgensen et al. (Copenhagen: PNM, 2002), 274.

⁹ Erik Arup, *Danmarks historie I til 1282*, (Copenhagen: H Hagerup's Forlag, 1925), 212; KS Nielsen, "The amphibious capacity of the medieval Danish armies", in *Maritime Warfare in Northern Europe. Technology, organisation, logistics and administration 500 BC-1500 AD*, ed. Anne Nørgård Jørgensen et al. (Copenhagen: PNM, 2002), 66-67.

¹⁰ GD, 1281-1299.

¹¹ Nielsen, "The amphibious capacity of the medieval Danish armies", 66-67.

¹² Lund, "If they neglect military service", 272.

mustered rotationally, and thus each man had to serve one every four years. During the remaining three years, armed service was commuted for a payment, the *rethær lething* or *lethang withe*. This payment, however, was not used to finance the levy, as the mustered districts had to provide the ship, weaponry and victuals for their own men; the *rethær lething* was paid to the king, and thus directly contributed to royal finances.¹³ This new levy system maintained a good portion of the *lething* afloat during the summer campaigning months, and could act quickly in case of an attack. The entirety of the *lething*, however, was subject to muster in case of an immediate threat; in 1184, for instance, all the ships of Sjælland and its neighbouring islands were gathered to counter a large Pomeranian fleet.¹⁴

The *hærræ mæn*, or the king's and the bishop's men, were composed by the magnates and their retainers. While the ordinary *lething* peasants' – *innæ bondæ* – service was largely commuted for monetary payment, the monarchy retained the higher strata's armed service mostly unchanged.¹⁵ In order to understand the reasoning behind this decision, the changing tactics of the period have to be taken into account.

In the opening years of the civil war period, Erik Emune rose in rebellion against his uncle, King Niels. When the royal army faced the pretender's forces in Fotevik, on the southern shore of Skåne, in 1134, a small force of German heavy cavalry hired by Erik routed the royal forces; this instance is the first recorded use of European-style heavy cavalry in Scandinavia.¹⁶ This prompt victory helped Erik claim the throne for himself. During Erik II's short reign (r. 1134-1137), it seems that the king encouraged the use of mounted warriors, and Saxo Grammaticus claims that the monarch was the first Danish ruler to carry warhorses on naval expeditions by assigning four horses to each ship.¹⁷ Almost every battle description from the 1146-1157 period mentions the crucial role that cavalry had during these engagements; it is safe to assume that by the time Rügen was conquered the majority of the Danish aristocracy and their retainers would fight on horseback.¹⁸ In the Law of the Retainers – *Lex Castrensis* – of Sven Aggesen, written in the 1180s, retainers are directly identified as mounted knights.¹⁹

The *hærræ mæn*, thus, could provide specialised armed service that could often be more valuable than a large peasant force. Through the *lething* reform, those who served as the king's and the bishop's men had to provide armed service to the king whenever he required it – regardless of the frequency or length of the service – and faced a substantial compensation fine if they neglected service; those who failed to pay this compensation, moreover, could be demoted and included in the coastguard *lething* organisation instead.²⁰ It also appears that service as a retainer was much more restrictive during this period; given the substantial costs that the equipment and training of the heavy

¹³ *Ibidem*; Bjørn Poulsen, "Tribute as Part of the Financial System of the Medieval Danish King" in *Taxes, tributes and tributary lands in the making of the Scandinavian kingdoms in the Middle Ages*, ed. Steinar Imsen, (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2011), 282-283.

¹⁴ GD, 1508-1509; KS Nielsen, "The amphibious capacity of the medieval Danish armies", 67.

¹⁵ Lund, "If they neglect military service", 272.

¹⁶ GD, 969-971; Anne Nørgård Jørgensen, "Naval Bases in Southern Scandinavia from the 7th to the 12th Century", in *Maritime Warfare in Northern Europe. Technology, organisation, logistics and administration 500 BC-1500 AD*, ed. Anne Nørgård Jørgensen et al. (Copenhagen: PNM, 2002), 179.

¹⁷ *Maritime Danorum expeditioni primus equos adiecit, quaternos singulis nauigiis mandans*; GD, 976 (he was the first to introduce horses on a Danish naval expedition, assigning four animals to each ship; GD, 977).

¹⁸ See GD, 1011-1109.

¹⁹ LC, 34-35.

²⁰ Lund, "If they neglect military service", 272.

cavalryman entailed, very few well off farmers could afford to train their sons to be part of the magnates' retinues.²¹

From the reform of the *lething* onwards, therefore, the Danish monarchy had two distinct armies at its disposal; modern academia has, quite accurately, divided these two armies as the private and public armies.²² A small but very well trained and equipped force, comprising the *hærræ mæn*, was available to the king as his private army, which he could take on campaign whenever he liked. The much larger force of the peasant *lething*, on the other hand, also served under royal authority in a number of campaigns, but its mobilisation and usage was regulated by the laws of the land, and therefore could not be used at the monarch's pleasure – therefore effectively making this army a public force, an army of the country rather than an army of the king. There appears to have been some leeway on the *lething's* service, however, as the naval levies could voluntarily choose to serve in offensive expeditions – this occurrence, however, was not common, and seems to have been limited to the Baltic crusading campaigns of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.²³

The change of tactics and the rise of cavalry contributed to the transformation of the principles of military organisation, thus creating the small, more professional army of the king's and the bishop's men. These forces, however, needed a type of ship which was very different from their forebears' vessels. While naval warfare was still practised during the late twelfth century, it became increasingly uncommon, and the priority of the nobility would have been to acquire ships which could carry their mounted force across the Baltic.

2- The Evolution of the Danish Warship

As well as the evolution of military institutions, the transformation of the instruments used for war is crucial in order to understand the changes which took place in twelfth-century Denmark. The main and most obvious item to be taken into consideration is the warship itself; the radical and relatively quick transition of the ruling class from the sea-based predatory warrior to the mounted knight must have considerably changed the naval needs of the Danish magnate. While the archaeological sources are preciously scarce in the 12th century, the combination of material remains and written sources shed some light on the typological changes of the Scandinavian warships of the period.

The warship remains of the eleventh century can be safely classified as typologically similar to earlier Viking Age vessels; the expeditions undertaken by the Danish aristocracy of the period were not excessively different from earlier plundering campaigns.²⁴ Eleventh-century longships, such as the Skuldelev 2 – named after the homonymous village at Roskilde Fjord –, were long and sleek ocean-going ships with very limited cargo space apart from the crew and their belongings.²⁵ Taking the aforementioned ship as reference, the dimensions of the ship quite clearly establish its relatively small measurements for an ocean-crossing vessel.

²¹ Michael H Gelting, "The Problem of Danish 'Feudalism': Military, Legal and Social Change in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries", in *Feudalism. New Landscapes of Debate*, ed. Sverre Bagge, Michael H Gelting and Thomas Lindkvist (Turnhout:Brepols, 2011), 166.

²² Lund, "If they neglect military service", 272-273.

²³ Nielsen, "The amphibious capacity of the medieval Danish armies", 70.

²⁴ E.g. HK, 564, 570, 617, 627.

²⁵ Jan Bill, "Castles at Sea. The warship of the High Middle Ages", in *Maritime Warfare in Northern Europe. Technology, organisation, logistics and administration 500 BC-1500 AD*, ed. Anne Nørgård Jørgensen et al. (Copenhagen: PNM, 2002), 52.

The Skuldelev 2 was built in Dublin in 1042, and its high quality indicates that it probably belonged to a considerably well-off magnate.²⁶ The overall length of the ship is of 30 metres, with a beam of 3.8 metres.²⁷ The Skuldelev's draught is very small, about a metre, while the waterline amidships would be approximately the same.²⁸ In order to be rowed efficiently, the longship needed a crew of ca. 60 men, but it could probably carry between 70 and 80 men when fully loaded.²⁹ A ship of such dimensions would be a very effective raider, as it would have been a fast sailer and could be rowed quite far upstream due to its insignificant draught. These features, however, are incompatible with a fighting ship that could carry four warhorses and a full complement of fighting men.

When twelfth-century written and pictorial sources are taken into account, it seems very unlikely that the traditional Scandinavian raiding craft would have been completely abandoned, as it offered serious logistical advantage when plundering the enemy's coastline; the typology of the magnates' ships – or, at least, part of the magnates' ships –, however, must have changed significantly in order to adapt naval logistics to the new tactical realities of warfare on land.

There are three passages in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* which make a direct reference to the differences between types of warships employed both by the Danes and their Wendish counterparts. The first of these excerpts mentions that Valdemar I, when campaigning in Pomerania in the 1170s, was unable to follow the lighter craft of the Danish fleet upstream with his own ship due to its large draught, and was thus forced to anchor the royal vessel in the mouth of the river.³⁰ Draught would not have been an issue with a ship with the dimensions of the Skuldelev 2, whose draught was very similar to other smaller raiding vessels; only a much bulkier vessel with a larger transport capacity would have encountered this type of problem.³¹

The second excerpt alludes to a campaign which took place in 1184, when Duke Bogusław of Pomerania led a Wendish fleet against the Danish island of Rügen. Absalon, Archbishop of Lund, hastily gathered the Danish ships in order to intercept the Pomeranians before they reached Rügen.³² The archbishop ordered the mustering of all the ships from Sjælland and the surrounding islands; the vessels of the nobility, as well as the peasantry's, were recalled for service regardless of their size, and regardless if the ships were raiding craft – *navis piratica* – or transport ships – *navis oneraria*.³³ The inclusion of transport vessels as fighting ships might suggest that large, bulky craft was customarily used for war.

The third passage further strengthens the role of transport ship as a warship. When the Danish and Pomeranian fleets met in Greifswald Bay, the Pomeranians placed food transports in front of their

²⁶ Ole Crumlin-Pedersen, "Splendour versus duty. 11th-century warships in the light of history and archaeology", in *Maritime Warfare in Northern Europe. Technology, organisation, logistics and administration 500 BC-1500 AD*, ed. Anne Nørgård Jørgensen et al. (Copenhagen: PNM, 2002), 266.

²⁷ *Idem*, 260.

²⁸ Bill, "Castles at Sea", 52.

²⁹ Crumlin-Pedersen, "Splendour versus duty", 266-267.

³⁰ *Itaque rex propter fauces fixa ancora sedem nauigio consciuit, magnitudinem euis paruitate amnis admittere nequeunte*, GD, 1168 (For this reason King Valdemar found a mooring for his ship by dropping anchor close to the mouth, seeing that the meagreness of the stream would not admit its great draught; GD, 1169).

³¹ The Skuldelev 5, a small raiding vessel and contemporary to the Skuldelev 2, had a draught of 0.6 metres, only 30 cm smaller than its Irish-built counterpart's. Crumlin-Pedersen, "Splendour versus duty", 260-263.

³² GD, 1508-1509.

³³ *Minores rates maioribus, onararias piraticis sociavit plebique demum ac nobilitati promiscuum corripiendarum nauium usum concessit*; GD, 1508 (Associating smaller with larger craft, transport vessels with raiders, he even further allowed the habit of commandeering ships to ordinary folk and nobles without distinction; GD, 1509).

battle array, since these were somewhat more impressive-looking than the raiding vessels.³⁴ This ruse, although ultimately unsuccessful, initially led the Danes to believe that the Pomeranians had received German reinforcements. If the big and bulky food transports could be mistaken for warships, therefore, it is safe to assume that high-sided large warships were indeed employed by twelfth-century Danish armies.

The evidence from written sources is further strengthened by the remains of a twelfth-century vessel found in Bergen, Norway. The ship, known as “The Big Ship from Bryggen”, had been built in Western Norway in the winter of 1187-1188, and while it was considered a large ship at the time, it was not the only vessel of similar dimensions to be built during the late twelfth century.³⁵ The Big Ship’s length is very similar to the Skuldelev 2’s, around 30 metres in total; its beam, however, reached around 10 metres, twice the size of the longship’s width. The Big Ship’s height amidships towered at 3.4 metres at the very least, and when loaded, the ship’s sides still rose 2.2 metres above the water, double the eleventh century longship’s height.³⁶ The carrying capacity of the Big Ship is also to be taken into account, as the vessel could carry around 120 tonnes – almost four times the amount of any twelfth-century Scandinavian transport ship.³⁷

| | Skuldelev 2 – Magnate Longship | Skuldelev 5 – <i>Lething</i> Longship | Skuldelev 1 – Trading <i>Knarr</i> | Big Ship from Bryggen |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Dating | 1042 | c. 1040 | c. 1040 | 1187-1188 |
| Length | 29.3 m | 17.3 m | 15.84 m | c. 30 m |
| Beam | 3.8 m | 2.5 m | 4.8 m | c. 9-10 m |
| Draught | 0.9 m | 0.6 m | 1 m | 1.2-2 m |
| Board (amidships) | 0.9 m | 0.6 m | 1 m | 1.4-2.2 m |
| Crew | 60-80 | c. 30 | 6-8 | Unknown |
| Tonnage | c. 26 tonnes | c. 8 tonnes | c. 25 tonnes | c. 120 tonnes |

The dimensions of the “Big Ship” compared to 11th century Danish longships and trading vessels

While the Big Ship has been solidly identified as a transport ship, its mere existence proves that large clinker-built vessels of Nordic tradition with large carrying capacities were being built in twelfth-century Scandinavia.³⁸ Ships of similar dimensions and shape could have been employed as warships too, given that some of the largest ships employed by the warring aristocracy seem to be reasonably similar to their contemporary transport ships.

³⁴ *Naues quibus alimenta uehebantur aliquanto puraticis prestantiores inter ipsas et continentem admouit, armate multitudinis speciem uacua lignorum effigie adumbraturus. Quo uultu deceptus Suno Bogiszlauum auxilia a Theutonibus mutuatum credebat*; GD, 1514 (Between these and the mainland he moved the food transports, which were somewhat more impressive-looking than the raiding vessels; that was because he wanted to simulate the appearance of an armed multitude with a display of useless hulls. This façade caused Suno to imagine Bugislav had been lent German reinforcements; GD, 1515).

³⁵ Arne Emil Christensen, “Comments on the new Dendrochronological Dates”, in *The Bryggen Papers. Supplementary Series No 7. Ships and Commodities* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2001), 65; Anton Englert, “The Dating and Origin of the “Big Ship” from Bergen”, in *The Bryggen Papers. Supplementary Series No 7. Ships and Commodities*, (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2001), 45-47.

³⁶ Bill, “Castles at sea”, 52.

³⁷ Englert, “The Dating and Origin of the “Big Ship” from Bergen”, 46.

³⁸ *Idem*, 47; Bill, “Castles at sea”, 52.

3- Conclusions: Military Change in a Socio-Political Perspective

The evolution of the Danish navies, in regards to both organisation and equipment, correlates with the main socio-political processes of twelfth-century Denmark. Royal power was considerably strengthened after the civil wars, among other things, because most of the aristocracy was brought to heel or killed during the struggle; Sven Aggesen's *Law of the Retainers*, written in the 1180s, portrays the relationship between monarch and aristocracy as one of more clear-cut subordination than the eleventh-century ideals of the king as *primus inter pares*.³⁹ The monarchy further strengthened its position through the introduction of sacral kingship; until 1170, Valdemar I was *Rex Danorum* – King of the Danes –, but his son Knut VI was anointed as junior king that year, and the royal title was forthwith altered to *Dei Gratia Rex Danorum* – that is, King of the Danes by the Grace of God.⁴⁰ When Knut's brother, Valdemar II, acceded to the throne in 1202, his full title was *Dei Gratia Danorum Slavorumque Rex, Dux Lucie, Dominus Nordalbingie*; he was, by the Grace of God, King of the Danes and Slavs, Duke of Jutland and Lord of Northalbingia.⁴¹ While it was through increased royal power that the monarchy managed to successfully reform the *lething*, the reform itself bolstered the king's military might as well as his fisc – and it was through this increased martial potential that Denmark was able to establish a series of suzerain polities throughout the Baltic from the 1180s onwards.

The traditional socio-political community of early medieval Denmark would suffer notorious changes during this period too. While the idea of an egalitarian Viking society is a sheer fantasy, the well-off free farmers often had personal bonds with aristocrats and kings, whose retinues were bolstered by the farmers' sons; these social bonds all but disappeared when the mounting costs of the heavy cavalryman prevented the rich peasantry from sending their sons to the magnates' forces.⁴² The division between two different navies also affected the peasantry in a similar way, since summer expeditions where all the *lething* went on campaign became increasingly rarer, thus excluding the non-privileged *laboratores* from the prospect of plunder. The regional assemblies still largely relied on the allodial peasant as the primary agent of public life – especially in the judicial system –, but the authority of the assemblies themselves – e.g. in the gathering of the *lething* – had been considerably reduced.⁴³

The process described in this article, therefore, should be understood as both a cause and a consequence of the wider social, political and economic processes taking place in twelfth century Denmark. European ideas of kingship, social ordination, and warfare shaped the socio-political organisation of the country with very clear outcomes in case of the military institutions; the division between privileged and non-privileged groups was established through the reform of the *lething*, and this divide was further widened through the dissolution of once common social bonds between the wealthy allodial peasantry and the aristocracy.

³⁹ LC, 36-38.

⁴⁰ Sverre Bagge, "Ideologies and mentalities", in *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Volume I, Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 469.

⁴¹ Aksel E Christensen, "Tiden 1042-1241", in *Danmarks historie, Bind 1, Tiden indtil 1340*, ed. Aksel E Christensen et al. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1977), 373.

⁴² Gelting, "The Problem of Danish 'Feudalism'", 166.

⁴³ Michael H Gelting, "Legal Reform and the Development of Peasant Dependence in Thirteenth-Century Denmark", in *Forms of Servitude in Northern and Central Europe: Decline, Resistance, and Expansion*, ed. Paul Freedman and Monique Bourin, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 346-347.

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