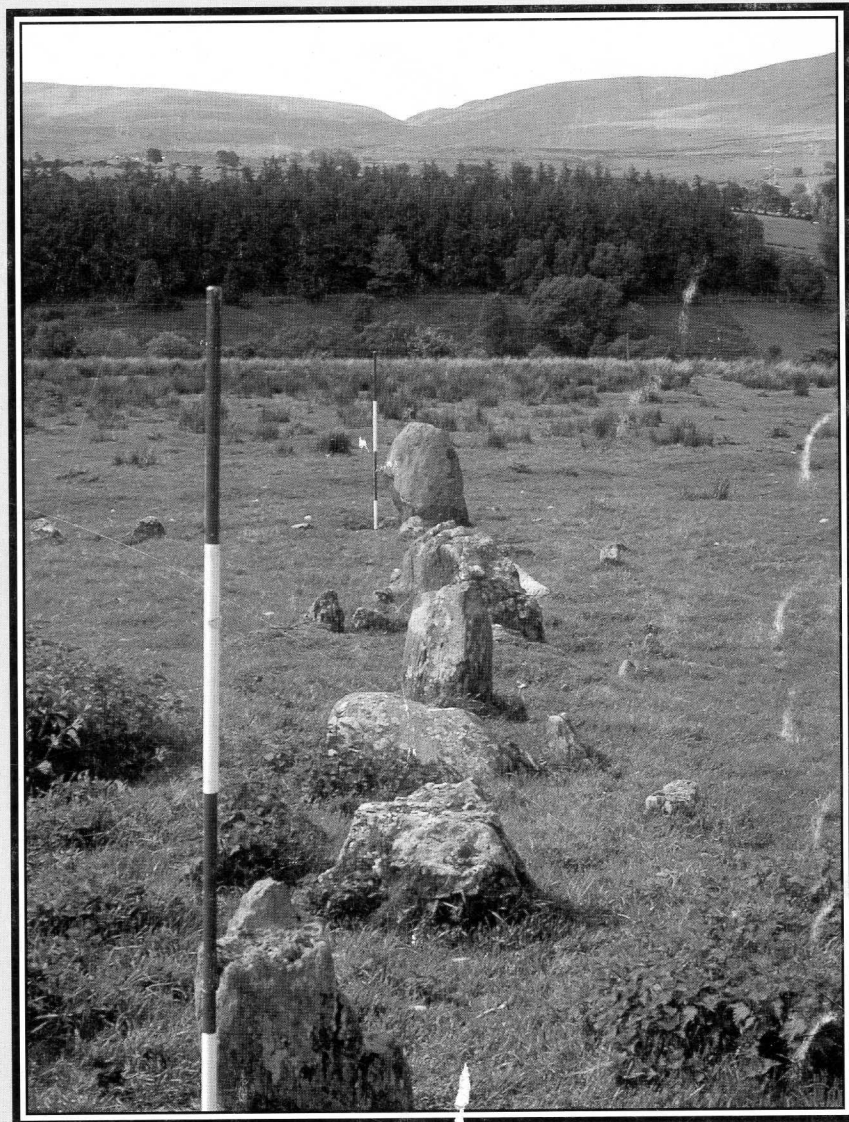


# Astronomy, Cosmology and Landscape

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## Birth and celestial bodies in Lithuanian and Latvian tradition

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### Abstract

This article deals with Lithuanian and Latvian ethnographic data disclosing people's attitude towards celestial bodies and their influence on a live organism during its birth. The available sources show that various qualities of a person are seen to be determined by the phase of the moon in the most important moments of his or her life, including appearance, health, character, wealth, and happiness. A person's appearance is determined quite directly: the waxing moon is usually linked with a pleasant and youthful appearance, and the waning moon, conversely, brings about a uncomely and aged appearance.

The analysed sources give us reason to suppose that the influences of the sun and the moon on people are very similar. The waxing and the waning periods of the moon correspond respectively in general terms to the morning (day) and evening (night) sun.

Although folk knowledge about the phases of the moon dominates in the analysed sources, there is also some information about stars. This demonstrates that in the Lithuanian and Latvian tradition there existed a belief that stars are connected with human fate and the most important moments of life: birth and death.

This synthesis of folk traditions concerning the influence of celestial bodies on an organism that is coming to life shows that of some of the main principles of modern astrology were familiar in the ancient culture of the Balts.

### Introduction

In scientific discussions of the ways in which celestial phenomena were perceived and understood in Lithuanian and Latvian traditional cultures, a somewhat categorical opinion prevails that astrological beliefs were not characteristic of these cultures. As the ethnographic evidence relevant to this question was missing from such discussions—not even summarized—one gains the impression that this opinion is based not so much on the real facts but stems from a negative attitude towards astrology as pseudo-science. This paper aims to redress the balance by using ethnographic evidence as the basis for a discussion of the influence of celestial bodies on new-born babies in Lithuanian and Latvian tradition. By synthesising and analysing the scattered fragments of evidence available from empirical ethnography, we hope to find traces of some of the main astrological principles in traditional Baltic culture, which determined the influences that particular celestial bodies were believed to have upon the health, character, and fate of a new-born human being.

### Stars

Both in Lithuanian and Latvian traditional culture there exists the idea that a star shines in the sky for every man living on the Earth. When a man is born a star starts shining and when he dies that star falls down. Within rural communities there exists a strong opinion that there are as many stars

in the sky as people on the Earth. The brightness of a star corresponds to the status of a man: bright stars belong to good, wealthy and noble people; dimmer stars to the poor, sinners, etc. (Vaiškūnas 1996, 139; Straubergs 1944, 42–4). Lithuanian historian T. Narbut mentions a myth that the goddess of fate, Werpeja (“spinner”), starts spinning the thread of life of a new-born man and there is a star at the end of that thread (Narbut 1835, 71–2). The Latvians, like the Lithuanians, believed that “the Latvian goddess of fate Vērpēja put a thread into the hand of a new-born baby and there was a star tied at the end of that thread. When a man dies the star breaks off and falls down” (Straubergs 1944, 42). This myth has the straightforward implication that peoples’ fates are reflected in the sky, that is in the stars. If that was so, then it was possible to make predictions about people’s fate by referring to the same stars. We do not have direct data about the immediate influence of stars and planets on birth. But a widespread saying “born under a lucky [or unlucky] star” suggests that the position of other celestial bodies at the moment of birth could have been observed and perceived as significant. However, we have very little evidence of this kind. One exception comes from the surroundings of Pandėlys (Rokiškis region): when a mare had a colt, people made predictions about its swiftness and strength according to the position of Ursa Major in the sky (Vaiškūnas 1996, 145). The Latvians prognosticated about the increase of sheep in a similar way: “If Greizie rati (Ursa Major) is over the cow-shed then the sheep will have lambs” (Straubergs 1944, 262). Generally, a clear starry sky forebodes a large family (many children and grandchildren) for the one who is being born (Straubergs 1944, 265).

## Planets and zodiacal constellations

Ethnographer A. Vitauskas provides interesting information from the pre-war Šiauliai district, though this information is not directly connected with birth. According to him, constellations are “objects of astrological observations for the present and future. Especially *Aušrinė* (‘Morning star’), *Derliaus* (‘harvest star’), and *Šeimynykštis* (‘retainer, servant’)”. Vitauskas maintains that “different positions of these three stars have different meanings; similarly, the different position of each star in the unstable structure of this star group”. According to the position of these stars, predictions were made about the coming season of the year, if it was going to be good or bad with regard to “standard of living or harvest” (Vitauskas 1937, 138–9). Such observation of the location of planets proves the existence of a fairly complex astrological system.

On the other hand, the question remains open of whether a set of constellations forming the circle of the Zodiac were used for astrological prognoses. This is despite the fact that we can find historical evidence that the circle of the Zodiac was familiar to the Lithuanians: the recent researches of specialists in folklore and ethnography demonstrate that there certainly was knowledge of a distinctive circle of Zodiacal constellations.

## The moon

There is a good deal of evidence demonstrating the existence of a traditional belief that the phases of the moon predetermine the character, appearance and health of a new baby. Researchers into the Lithuanian ethnic culture such as J. Balys (Balys 1951, 13), P. Dundulienė (Dundulienė 1975, 258; 1988, 38–9), and A.J. Greimas (Greimas 1990, 171–3) also paid attention to the influence of the moon on a living individual.

### *The influence of the moon on a baby before its birth*

There existed beliefs that events happening well before the time of birth had an influence upon the nature of a baby. This is clear from a variety of items of evidence. First, the phase of the moon on the parents’ wedding day is of great importance. If the wedding takes place when there is the waxing crescent in the sky, then the children of the couple will be “pretty; not tall; the first baby will be a girl” (SBK). If it takes place at full moon then “the family will be large and healthy”

(SBK; Šliavas 1993, 130). The Latvians consider that a woman married during the waxing moon “gets pregnant soon” (Straubergs 1944, 285).

The phase of the moon at the moment of sexual contact is also important. In the Latvian tradition we find evidence that the gender of a baby depends on the phase of the moon of that particular moment: “[people say] if the sexual contact is in the waxing moon so a boy is born, and a girl is born if the contact is in the waning moon” (Šmits 1940, no. 14781).

Another important factor is the parents’ behaviour before sexual contact. It is prohibited for a man to urinate in front of the moon, because he can lose his potency. And if he has sexual contact immediately after that, an abnormal child or even “a devil might be born” (SBK; LTA 790/21; LKAR 2/156; LKAR 2/388; LKAR 2/447/). The same is said concerning a woman (SBK). People believed that the moonlight could have an impact on the health of a baby. “If the moonlight falls on a sleeping pregnant woman then her baby might be born a sleepwalker or even anaemic” (SBK).

### *The influence of the moon on a baby at the moment of its birth*

It is supposed that the nature and health of a man are determined by the phase of the moon at the time of his or her birth. Ethnographic data indicate the characteristics of a man born at a certain phase of the moon, and these are summarised in the tables that follow. Positive qualities are italicised. The figure next to each characteristic feature shows the number of places where it is mentioned. The sources used are listed after each table.

Children born during the waxing of the moon:

|                                    |    |  |   |
|------------------------------------|----|--|---|
| <i>look young</i>                  | 22 | are angry  | 2 |
| are afraid of eyes                 | 12 | <i>are clever</i>                                  | 2 |
| are timid                          | 9  | <i>are happy</i>                                   | 2 |
| <i>are joyful and grow up well</i> | 8  | <i>eat a lot</i>                                   | 2 |
| <i>are nice</i>                    | 7  | <i>are of good nature</i>                          | 2 |
| are weak                           | 6  | <i>have teeth that grow faster and more easily</i> | 2 |
| cry at night                       | 4  | do not live to a venerable age                     | 1 |
| <i>are resistant to illness</i>    | 4  | <i>are tall</i>                                    | 1 |
| are frivolous                      | 3  | are lazy   | 1 |
| <i>are strong</i>                  | 2  | <i>are energetic</i>                               | 1 |

(Sources: SBK; EAA 9310; LTR 4232/61/; LTA 1252/73/; EAA 8808; EAA 8901; Šliavas 1993, 118.)

Children born during the waning of the moon:

|                                |    |                               |   |
|--------------------------------|----|-------------------------------|---|
| get old soon                   | 20 | <i>are quiet</i>              | 2 |
| are angry                      | 5  | <i>are not afraid of eyes</i> | 2 |
| <i>are strong</i>              | 5  | <i>are clever</i>             | 2 |
| are slow and not nimble        | 4  | <i>are brave</i>              | 2 |
| are sad / gloomy               | 3  | <i>are practical</i>          | 1 |
| are not nice                   | 3  | <i>live long</i>              | 1 |
| are thin                       | 3  | <i>are serious</i>            | 1 |
| are unhappy                    | 2  | are lazy                      | 1 |
| are unhealthy / fall ill often | 2  | are hypocrites                | 1 |
| do not live long               | 2  | grow bad                      | 1 |

(Sources: SBK; EAA 9310; EAA11.)

Children born at full moon:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <i>are nice and plump</i>               | 4 |
| <i>are very strong and healthy</i>      | 3 |
| <i>are wealthy, happy and live well</i> | 3 |
| <i>are very clever</i>                  | 1 |
| <i>are lazy</i>                         | 1 |

(Sources: SBK; LTR 4232/55/; LTR 4232/61/; EAA 9310; EAA 8901; Šliavas 1993, 118.)

Children born at the waning crescent:

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| <i>live badly</i> | 2 |
|-------------------|---|

(Source: EAA 89010.)

Children born at new moon (emptiness):

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| <i>are greedy</i> | 1 |
|-------------------|---|

(Source: EAA 9310.)

The Latvians have retained quite a lot of information about the influence of the moon on a new-born baby. The Latvians suppose that the children born during the waxing of the moon:

|   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| <i>look young for a long time, do not turn grey</i> | (LTT 2417, 2418, 2419, 2420, 2422) |
| <i>are healthy</i>                                  | (LTT 6856)                         |
| <i>are nimble and joyful until their old age</i>    | (LTT 2417)                         |
| <i>are happy</i>                                    | (LTT 2421, 2483)                   |

The ones who are born during the waning of the moon:

|   |                         |
|---|-------------------------|
| <i>turn grey and get old soon</i>                                 | (LTT 6856, 2424, 6847)  |
| <i>lose their teeth early</i>                                     | (LTT 6856)              |
| <i>are not nice</i>   | (LTT 2484, 2423)        |
| <i>are gloomy</i>   | (LTT 2417)              |
| <i>die more often</i>   | (Straubergs 1944, 263)  |
| <i>[boys] usually remain bachelors / [girls] become old maids</i> | (LTT 6856, 6848, 19831) |

People born at full moon:

|                           |                        |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>are the wealthiest</i> | (Straubergs 1944, 263) |
|---------------------------|------------------------|

### ***The influence of the moon after birth***

The cycle of lunar phases continues to influence the life of children after their birth. Certain things should be done at the appropriate phase of the moon. For instance, a child baptized during the waxing moon has the following qualities when he or she grows up:

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <i>remains young for a long time</i> | 8 |
| <i>is healthy</i>                    | 1 |
| <i>is honest, happy, and wealthy</i> | 1 |
| <i>is joyful</i>                     | 1 |
| <i>is nice</i>                       | 1 |

A child baptized at the waning crescent:

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <i>is unhealthy</i> | 1 |
| <i>is strong</i>    | 1 |

A child baptized at full moon:

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <i>is very strong</i> | 1 |
|-----------------------|---|

(Source in each case: SBK.)

The phase of the moon was also important when weaning a baby from the breast. According to P. Višinskis (Vishinskij 1935, 151), the Samogitians weaned a girl on the third day of the waxing crescent so that she would “not get old and remain young for a long time”. A boy was weaned in the first quarter or at full moon in order that he would be “healthy and full like the moon”. And some mothers weaned their boys in the last quarter of the moon wishing their sons “not to be adventurers in love”. If a boy was weaned from the breast in the waxing moon, then “he would run after girls even when he was old” (EAA 94010). (Latvian traditions contain the same belief (Straubergs 1944, 263).) Girls were also weaned at full moon in the expectation that they would be “full and nice” (EAA 94010). The author of the report noted that if a married Samogitian woman had a girl and she wanted her second child to be a boy then she had to wean her daughter from the breast on the third or fourth day of the waning phase, when the moon is gibbous. If she did so in the waxing phase then she would have another girl.

The behaviour of a grown man in relation to the lunar phase cycle continues to influence the fulfilment of his fate. The phase of the moon is important, for example, when matchmaking, getting married, or even building a house. This means that it is possible to influence fate by choosing a certain time for a given action. However, it was also supposed that the lot of an adult depended on his parents, this dependence finally taking its effect at the time of their death. It was believed that dying parents could take away the good fortune of their children, since the phase of the moon on the day of death determines the children’s future. For instance, if father or mother dies at full moon then they “leave happiness to their children”; children “live happily and they do not lack anything, their homes do not grow poor”; and sons “get rich” after their father’s death. If a father dies in the waxing phase of the moon, they say that “the family gets richer”, or “a son gains riches” until he grows up. The same happens to daughters if their mother dies in the waxing moon. If a parent dies while the moon is waning, then their children become unhappy: “they start living hard, their riches keep vanishing, their homes get empty, and they can die early” (Balys 1981, 43). The same belief is confirmed in Latvian traditions (Straubergs 1944, 291–2).

## The sun

Lithuanian ethnographic sources do not contain much information about the influence of the sun at the time of birth, and one gets the impression that there was little interest in this. Nonetheless, the data that have survived show that people believed that the position of the sun above the horizon did have an influence upon the nature of a baby.

### ***The influence of the sun on a baby before its birth***

The time of a wedding was thought to determine the sex of any future babies. It was believed that people who get married before midday can expect many sons (Straubergs 1944, 285). In the surroundings of Pakruojis it was prohibited for a pregnant woman to look at the sun or moon through dark glass during an eclipse. If a woman did so then she might have black children (EAA 94010).

### ***The influence of the sun at the moment of birth***

The Lithuanians of Gervečiai (Belarus) supposed that babies born in the evening die whereas those born in the morning grow, i.e. live (LTR 4232/55/, /706/). They also maintained that children born in the daytime are happier (EAA 1). More information on this point has been found in Latvian sources, which is as follows.

It is supposed that children born in the daytime (with the sun) are happier, are fair of face; have a better nature; have a pleasant disposition and smile like the Sun; are clever; and have an easier life.

Those born at night are angry, stupid, and dark of face. However, there are some statements quite contrary to this: for example, children born at night are the liveliest and healthiest.

Children born early in the morning when the sun is rising, are said to be wise, sensible, and unusual; they marry early but they die early too; and their life is happy, but they are anxious.

Finally, children born in the evening and afternoon are slow, angry, and unhappy; girls do not stay married long and live only until middle age. However, there is also an opinion that children born in the evening live until old age (Straubergs 1944, 264–65).

### ***The influence of the sun on a baby after its birth***

There is a widespread opinion among Lithuanian people that a mother can harm the fate of her baby if she weans him away from the breast and then, after some period, starts nursing again. When such a baby grows up he has very “evil eyes” and he is called *atžindas* (Patackas and Žarskus 1990, 77–80). In Lithuania Minor (Prussian Lithuania) it was believed that a baby is like this if he is not nursed for one and a half days. A further opinion from Lithuania Minor is that a baby becomes *atžindas* if his mother does not return home until sunset and nurses her baby later (Balys 1937, 17).

We may assume, then, that the position of the sun above the horizon was of no less importance to the nature of a newborn baby than the phase of the Moon.

## **Discussion**

Having examined the available sources, it is possible to assert that the following qualities of a person are determined by the phase of the moon in the most important moments of his or her life:

- (1) appearance (in 37% of sources);
- (2) health (27%);
- (3) character (26%);
- (4) wealth (0.05%);
- (5) happiness (0.04%);
- (6) other (0.01%)

1. A person's appearance is determined quite directly: the waxing moon is usually linked with a pleasant and youthful appearance, and the waning moon, conversely, brings about an uncomely and aged appearance. It is interesting that the name of the waxing and the waning phases of the moon correspond to the main periods of person's life in Lithuanian and Latvian



languages. The waxing phase of the moon is called *jaunas* and *jauns* respectively in Lithuanian and Latvian, both of which mean “young”. The waning phase is called *senas* and *vecs*, which mean “old”.

2. The statements concerning the influence of the waxing moon on a person’s health are rather contradictory. On the one hand it is said that those who are born during the waxing phase of the moon are “afraid of eyes” (12 sources), weak (6), and cry at night (4), but on the other hand they are resistant to illnesses (4) and strong (2). It seems that the weakness of those who are born when the moon is waxing manifests itself not in poor health, but in their lack of resistance to other people’s negative influences. In other words, those ones who are born during the waxing moon are weak because they might be easily affected by other people’s “evil eyes”. It is supposed that children cry at night for the same reason. Babies who are born during the waning moon are strong (5 sources) and not afraid of “evil eyes” (2), but they are not healthy and are often ill (2).
3. The characters of people born during the waxing and waning moon are clearly differentiated. Joyful (8), energetic (1), and good natured (2), though timid (9) and frivolous (3), people are born during the waxing moon; whereas sad and gloomy (3), and angry (5), though brave (2), serious (1) and practical (1), people are born during the waning moon.

On the whole, babies who are born during the waxing moon have more positive qualities, with the ratio of positive to negative characteristics being 12:8. For the waning moon this is reversed: 8:12. Positive qualities linked with the full moon exceed negative ones by 4:1, although very few examples are recorded.

We can see that the changing phase of the moon is believed to modulate processes in the natural world and, as a result, there are favourable or unfavourable times for various of these processes. Yet the fate of a man, a plant or an animal is not considered to be fatalistic or finally fixed at the moment of birth. A man born in one or another period can influence his fate by carrying out the most significant activities of his life at a particular time. This can happen whether the timing was intentional or not. If, for example, a baby has been born at an unfavourable time, it is possible to give him the desired qualities by baptizing or weaning him from the breast at a certain time. For this reason, people who wanted to preserve a child’s beauty and youth tried to baptize him during the waxing moon if he had been born during the waning moon (Dundulienė 1975, 258). Likewise, if it was desired to increase a baby’s weight he would be weighed during the waxing moon (SBK).

The analysed sources give us reason to suppose that the influences of the sun and the moon on people are very similar. In general terms, the waxing and the waning periods of the moon correspond respectively to the morning (“day”) and evening (“night”) sun. As the material concerning the influence of the sun on people is scanty, it is necessary to use wider information in order to draw meaningful conclusions. It is possible that this can be found in sources concerning the sun and farm labour, which could be a topic for another article.

Although folk knowledge about the phases of the moon dominates in the analysed sources, there is also some information about stars. This demonstrates that in the Lithuanian and Latvian tradition there existed a belief that stars are connected with human fate and the most important moments of life: birth and death.

One reason for the diversity of the perceived relationships and the discrepancies between different sources might be extensive degradation of ethnic knowledge concerning the celestial bodies. The fragments of ethnic knowledge that survive are, more often than not, based on data from individual informants. If we seek to recreate elements of the system of knowledge about the influence of celestial bodies on a newborn baby or another other organism, it is necessary to analyse the information that has survived in the context of all Lithuanian ethnoastronomical knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

The survey presented in this paper suggests that we can find traces of certain general principles underlying astrological beliefs in Lithuanian and Latvian traditional cultures. In essence, these are as follows:

1. The celestial bodies have a predetermined influence on vital processes in the natural world as a whole.
2. The influence of the celestial bodies upon a living entity is greatest at the moment of birth. At that moment, natural characteristics are determined which have an influence on the entire development of the person, animal, or plant.
3. In spite of (2), it is possible to influence and adjust the characteristics of a living entity at certain times in its process of development, by timing actions with respect to the position of celestial bodies in the firmament.

A particular consequence of (3) is that by observing the moon, sun and stars, and by developing a suitable knowledge of their influences, it becomes possible to time certain key actions relating to a human life (such as the weaning or baptism of a baby) in order to neutralize any negative characteristics acquired as an inevitable consequence of the moment of birth.

The similarities between the Lithuanian and Latvian data give us reason to believe that astronomical/astrological beliefs that have survived in modern folk tradition might be remnants of a more complex system of knowledge which existed in the times of the community of the Baltic tribes.

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## **List of abbreviations and unpublished sources**

- EAA: Personal ethnoastronomy archives by J. Vaiškūnas in Kulionys village, Ūiulėnai district, Molėtai region, Lithuania. This materials were recorded during the period between 1988 and 1998.
- SBK: The “Synopsis of Beliefs” compiled by Jonas Balys from LTA (see below). This manuscript now belongs to The Department of Ethnology of the Institute of History at the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, Vilnius.
- LKAR: Archives of people’s art at the Lithuanian Folk Culture Centre, Vilnius.
- LTA: Archives of Lithuanian folklore. The materials in this archive now belong to LTR (see below). LTA and LTR are distinguished in the article in order to help the reader separate older information (LTA information was recorded between 1935 and 1940) from more recent data (LTR information has been recorded since 1940).
- LTR: Archives of manuscripts of Lithuanian Folklore in the Institute of Literature and Folklore at the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, Vilnius.
- LTT: Šmits 1940.

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