

Janissaries began as elite corps made up through the devşirme system of child slavery, by which young Christian boys, notably Armenians, Albanians, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Croats, Greeks and Serbs, were taken from the Balkans, enslaved and converted to Islam, and incorporated into the Ottoman army.^[5] They became famed for internal cohesion cemented by strict discipline and order. Unlike typical slaves, they were paid regular salaries. Forbidden to marry before the age of 40 or engage in trade, their complete loyalty to the Sultan was expected.^[6] By the seventeenth century, due to a dramatic increase in the size of the Ottoman standing army, the corps' initially strict recruitment policy was relaxed. Civilians bought their way into it in order to benefit from the improved socioeconomic status it conferred upon them. Consequently, the corps gradually lost its military character, undergoing a process that has been described as 'civilianization'.^[7]


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Origins

From the 1380s to 1648, the Janissaries were gathered through the *devşirme* system, which was abolished in 1638.^[11] This was the taking (enslaving) of non-Muslim boys,^[12] notably Anatolian and Balkan Christians; Jews were never subject to *devşirme*, nor were children from Turkic families. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "in early days, all Christians were enrolled indiscriminately. Later, those from what is now Albania, Bosnia, and Bulgaria were preferred."^[13]

According to military historian Michael Antonucci and economic historians Glenn Hubbard and Tim Kane, the Turkish administrators would scour their regions (but especially the Balkans) every five years for the strongest sons of the sultan's Christian subjects. These boys (usually between the ages of 6 and 14) were then taken from their parents, circumcised, and sent to Turkish families in the provinces to be raised as Muslims and learn Turkish language and customs.

Janissary	
<div>Türkei.</div> <div></div> <div>Janissaries in the 16th and 17th centuries</div>	
Active	1363–1826 (1830 for Algiers)
Allegiance	 Ottoman Empire
Type	Infantry
Role	Standing professional military
Size	1,000–1,400 ^[1] 7,841 (1484), ^[2] 13,599 (1574) ^[2] 37,627 (1609) ^[2]
Part of	Ottoman army
Garrisons	<u>Adrianople</u> <u>(Edirne)</u> <u>Constantinople</u> <u>(Istanbul)</u>
Colors	<u>Blue</u> , <u>Red</u> and <u>Green</u>
Equipment	Various
Engagements	Battle of Kosovo, Battle of Kriva Palanka, Battle of <u>Nicopolis</u> , <u>Battle of Ankara</u> , <u>Battle of Varna</u> , <u>Battle of Chaldiran</u> , <u>Battle of Mohács</u> , <u>Siege of Vienna</u> , <u>Great Siege of Malta</u> and <u>others</u>
Commanders	
Commander	Agha of the Janissaries

Once their military training began, they were subjected to severe discipline, being prohibited from growing a beard, taking up a skill other than soldiering, and marrying. As a result, the Janissaries were extremely well-disciplined troops and became members of the *askeri* class, the first-class citizens or military class. Most were of non-Muslim origin because it was not permissible to enslave a Muslim.^[11]

It was a similar system to the Iranian *Safavid*, *Afsharid*, and *Qajar era ghilmans*, who were drawn from converted *Circassians*, *Georgians*, and *Armenians*, and in the same way as with the Ottoman's Janissaries who had to replace the *unreliable ghazis*. They were initially created as a counterbalance to the tribal, ethnic and favoured interests the *Qizilbash* gave, which make a system imbalanced.^{[16][17]}

In the late 16th century, a sultan gave in to the pressures of the Corps and permitted Janissary children to become members of the Corps, a practice strictly forbidden for the previous 300 years. According to paintings of the era, they were also permitted to grow beards. Consequently, the formerly strict rules of succession became open to interpretation. While they advanced their own power, the Janissaries also helped to keep the system from changing in other progressive ways, and according to some scholars the corps shared responsibility for the political stagnation of Istanbul.^[11]

Greek Historian Dimitri Kitsikis in his book *Türk Yunan İmparatorluğu* ("Turco-Greek Empire")^[18] states that many Bosnian Christian families were willing to comply with the *devşirme* because it offered a possibility of social advancement. Conscripts could one day become Janissary colonels, statesmen who might one day return to their home region as governors, or even *Grand Viziers* or *Beylerbeys* (governor generals).

Some of the most famous Janissaries include George Kastrioti Skanderbeg, an Albanian who defected and led a 25-year Albanian revolt against the Ottomans. Another was *Sokollu Mehmed Paşa*, a *Serb* who became a grand vizier, served three sultans, and was the de facto ruler of the Ottoman Empire for more than 14 years.^[19]

Characteristics

The Janissary corps were distinctive in a number of ways. They wore unique uniforms, were paid regular salaries (including bonuses) for their service,^[20] marched to music (the *mehter*), lived in barracks and were the first corps to make extensive use of firearms. A Janissary battalion was a close-knit community, effectively the soldier's family. By tradition, the *Sultan* himself, after authorizing the payments to the Janissaries, visited the barracks dressed as a janissary trooper, and received his pay alongside the other men of the First Division.^[21] They also served as policemen, palace guards, and firefighters during peacetime.^[22] The Janissaries also enjoyed far better support on campaign than other armies of the time. They were part of a well-organized military machine, in which one support corps prepared the roads while others pitched tents and baked the bread. Their weapons and ammunition were transported and re-supplied by the *cebeci* corps. They campaigned with their own medical teams of Muslim and Jewish surgeons and their sick and wounded were evacuated to dedicated mobile hospitals set up behind the lines.^[21]

These differences, along with an impressive war-record, made the janissaries a subject of interest and study by foreigners during their own time. Although eventually the concept of a modern army incorporated and surpassed most of the distinctions of the janissaries and the corps was eventually dissolved, the image of the janissary has remained as one of the symbols of the Ottomans in the western psyche. By the mid-18th century, they had taken up many trades and gained the right to marry and enroll their children in the corps and very few continued to live in the barracks.^[22] Many of them became administrators and scholars. Retired or discharged janissaries received pensions, and their children were also looked after.

Recruitment, training and status

The first Janissary units were formed from prisoners of war and slaves, probably as a result of the sultan taking his traditional one-fifth share of his army's plunder in kind rather than cash; however the continuing enslaving of dhimmi constituted a continuing abuse of a subject population.^[24] Children were kidnapped at a young age and turned into soldiers in an attempt to make the soldiers faithful to the sultan. Nevertheless in poor areas officials were bribed by parents to make them take their sons, thus they would have better chances in life.^[25] Initially the recruiters favoured *Greeks* and *Albanians*.^{[26][27]} As borders of the Ottoman Empire expanded, the *devşirme* was extended to include *Armenians*, *Bulgarians*, *Croats*, *Hungarians*, *Serbs* and later islamized people from Bosnia and Herzegovina,^{[28][29][30][31][32]} in rare instances, *Romanians*, *Georgians*, *Ukrainians* and southern *Russians*.^[26]

In response to foreign threats, the Ottoman government chose to rapidly expand the size of the corps after the 1570s. Janissaries spent shorter periods of time in training as *acemi oğlans*, as the average age of recruitment increased from 13.5 in the 1490s to 16.6 in 1603. This reflected not only the Ottomans' greater need for manpower but also the shorter training time necessary to produce skilled musketeers in comparison with archers. However, this change alone was not enough to produce the necessary manpower, and consequently the traditional limitation of recruitment to boys conscripted in the *devşirme* was lifted. Membership was opened up to free-born Muslims, both recruits hand-picked by the commander of the Janissaries, as well as the sons of current members of the Ottoman standing army.^[33] By the middle of the seventeenth century, the *devşirme* had largely been abandoned as a method of recruitment.^[34]

The prescribed daily rate of pay for entry-level Janissaries in the time of *Ahmet I* was three *Akçes*. Promotion to a cavalry regiment implied a minimum salary of 10 *Akçes*.^[35] Janissaries received a sum of 12 *Akçes* every three months for clothing incidentals and 30 *Akçes* for weaponry, with an additional allowance for ammunition as well.^[36]

Training



Janissary, before 1657



1768 depiction of the Agha of the Janissaries, the commander of the corps



Registration of boys for the *devşirme*. Ottoman miniature painting from the *Süleymanname*, 1558.^[23]

When a non-Muslim boy was recruited under the devşirme system, he would first be sent to selected Turkish families in the provinces to learn Turkish, the rules of Islam (i.e. to be converted to Islam) and the customs and cultures of Ottoman society. After completing this period, acemi (new recruit) boys were gathered for training at the Enderun "acemi oğlan" school in the capital city. There, young cadets would be selected for their talents in different areas to train as engineers, artisans, riflemen, clerics, archers, artillery, and so forth. Janissaries trained under strict discipline with hard labour and in practically monastic conditions in *acemi oğlan* ("rookie" or "cadet") schools, where they were expected to remain celibate. Unlike other Muslims, they were expressly forbidden to wear beards, only a moustache. These rules were obeyed by Janissaries, at least until the 18th century when they also began to engage in other crafts and trades, breaking another of the original rules. In the late 16th century a sultan gave in to the pressures of the Janissary Corps and permitted Janissary children to become members of the Corps, a practice strictly forbidden for 200 years. Consequently, succession rules, formerly strict, became open to interpretation. They gained their own power but kept the system from changing in other progressive ways.^[11]



Mustafa Kemal Atatürk wearing the traditional Janissary uniform at a masquerade ball during his early years in the Ottoman Army.^[37]

For all practical purposes, Janissaries belonged to the Sultan and they were regarded as the protectors of the throne and the Sultan. Janissaries were taught to consider the corps their home and family, and the Sultan as their father. Only those who proved strong enough earned the rank of true Janissary at the age of 24 or 25. The Ocak inherited the property of dead Janissaries, thus acquiring wealth. Janissaries also learned to follow the dictates of the dervish saint Haji Bektash Veli, disciples of whom had blessed the first troops. Bektashi served as a kind of chaplain for Janissaries. In this and in their secluded life, Janissaries resembled Christian military orders like the Knights Hospitaller. As a symbol of their devotion to the order, Janissaries wore special hats called "börk". These hats also had a holding place in front, called the "kaşıklık", for a spoon. This symbolized the "kaşık kardeşliği", or the "brotherhood of the spoon", which reflected a sense of comradeship among the Janissaries who ate, slept, fought and died together.^[11]

Even after the rapid expansion of the size of the corps at the end of the sixteenth century, the Janissaries continued to undergo strict training and discipline. The Janissaries experimented with new forms of battlefield tactics, and in 1605 became one of the first armies in Europe to implement rotating lines of volley fire in battle.^[38]

Organization

The corps was organized in *ortas* (literally: center).^[39] An *orta* (equivalent to a battalion) was headed by a çorbacı. All *ortas* together comprised the Janissary corps proper and its organization, named *ocak* (literally "hearth"). Suleiman I had 165 *ortas* and the number increased over time to 196. While the Sultan was the supreme commander of the Ottoman Army and of the Janissaries in particular, the corps was organized and led by a commander, the *ağa*. The corps was divided into three sub-corps:

- the *cemaat* (frontier troops; also spelled *jemaat* in old sources), with 101 *ortas*
- the *bölük* or *beylik*, (the Sultan's own bodyguard), with 61 *ortas*
- the *sekban* or *seymen*, with 34 *ortas*

In addition there were also 34 *ortas* of the *ajemi* (cadets). A semi-autonomous Janissary corps was permanently based in Algiers, called the Odjak of Algiers.

Originally Janissaries could be promoted only through seniority and within their own *orta*. They could leave the unit only to assume command of another. Only Janissaries' own commanding officers could punish them. The rank names were based on positions in the kitchen staff or Sultan's royal hunters; 64th and 65th Orta 'Greyhound Keepers' comprised as the only Janissary cavalry,^[40] perhaps to emphasise that Janissaries were servants of the Sultan. Local Janissaries, stationed in a town or city for a long time, were known as yerliyyas.^[41]



A pair of Solaks, the Janissary archer bodyguard of the Sultan

Corps strength

Even though the Janissaries were part of the royal army and personal guards of the sultan, the corps was not the main force of the Ottoman military. In the classical period, Janissaries were only one-tenth of the overall Ottoman army, while the traditional Turkish cavalry made up the rest of the main battle force. According to David Nicolle, the number of Janissaries in the 14th century was 1,000 and about 6,000 in 1475. The same source estimates the number of Timarli Sipahi, the provincial cavalry which constituted the main force of the army at 40,000.^[1]

Beginning in the 1530s, the size of the Janissary corps began to dramatically expand, a result of the rapid conquests the Ottomans were carrying out during those years. Janissaries were used extensively to garrison fortresses and for siege warfare, which was becoming increasingly important for the Ottoman military. The pace of expansion increased after the 1570s, due to the initiation of a series of wars with the Safavid Empire and, after 1593, with the Habsburg monarchy. By 1609, the size of the corps had stabilized at approximately 40,000 men, but increased again later in the century, during the period of the Cretan War (1645–69) and particularly the War of the Holy League (1683–99).^[42]

Paper strength of the Janissary corps

Year	1400	1484	1523	1530	1547	1574	1582	1592	1609	1654	1666-7	1687-8	1699	1710-1
Strength	<1,000 ^[2]	7,841 ^[2]	7,164 ^[2]	8,407 ^[2]	12,131 ^[2]	13,599 ^[2]	16,905 ^[2]	23,232 ^[2]	37,627 ^[2]	51,047 ^[2]	47,233 ^[2]	62,826 ^[2]	67,729 ^[2]	43,562 ^[2]

Equipment

During the initial period of formation, Janissaries were expert archers, but they began adopting firearms as soon as such became available during the 1440s. The siege of Vienna in 1529 confirmed the reputation of their engineers, e.g. sappers and miners. In melee combat they used axes and kilijs. Originally in peacetime they could carry only clubs or daggers, unless they served as border troops. Turkish yatagan swords were the signature weapon of the Janissaries, almost a symbol of the corps. Janissaries who guarded the palace (Zülüflü Baltacılar) carried long-shafted axes and halberds.

By the early 16th century, the Janissaries were equipped with and were skilled with muskets.^[43] In particular, they used a massive "trench gun", firing an 80-millimetre (3.1 in) ball, which was "feared by their enemies".^[43] Janissaries also made extensive use of early grenades and hand cannons, such as the abus gun.^[21] Pistols were not initially popular but they became so after the Cretan War (1645–1669).^[44]



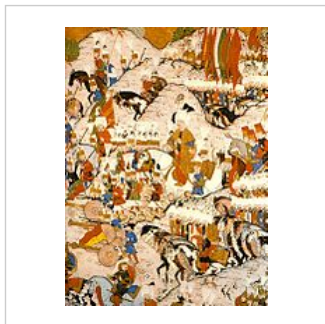
Turkish guns 1750–1800.

Battles

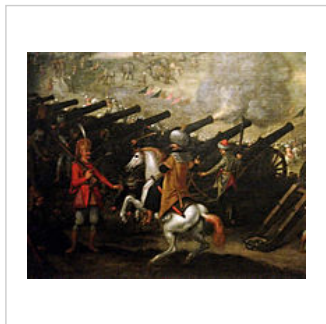
The Ottoman Empire used Janissaries in all its major campaigns, including the 1453 capture of Constantinople, the defeat of the Mamluk Sultanate of Cairo and wars against Hungary and Austria. Janissary troops were always led to the battle by the Sultan himself, and always had a share of the loot. The Janissary corps was the only infantry division of the Ottoman army. In battle the Janissaries' main mission was to protect the Sultan, using cannon and smaller firearms, and holding the centre of the army against enemy attack during the strategic fake forfeit of Turkish cavalry. The Janissary corps also included smaller expert teams: explosive experts, engineers and technicians, sharpshooters (with arrow and rifle) and sappers who dug tunnels under fortresses, etc.



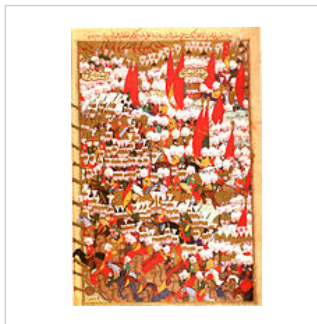
Janissaries battling the Knights Hospitaller, who are depicted wearing Eastern Armour, during the Siege of Rhodes in 1522.



Battle of Mohács, 1526.^[45]



A Janissary, a pasha and Sultan Murad III's expedition to cannon batteries at the Siege of Esztergom in 1543.



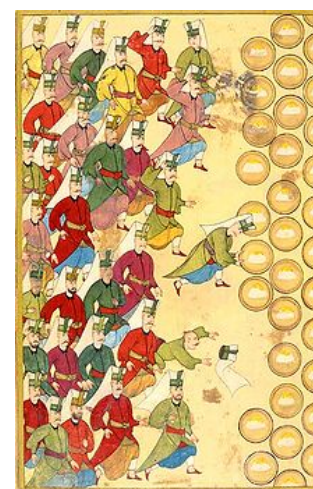
Revolts and disbandment

As Janissaries became aware of their own importance they began to desire a better life. By the early 17th century Janissaries had such prestige and influence that they dominated the government. They could mutiny and dictate policy and hinder efforts to modernize the army structure. They could change Sultans as they wished through palace coups. They made themselves landholders and tradesmen. They would also limit the enlistment to the sons of former Janissaries who did not have to go through the original training period in the *acemi oĝlan*, as well as avoiding the physical selection, thereby reducing their military value. When Janissaries could practically extort money from the Sultan and business and family life replaced martial fervour, their effectiveness as combat troops decreased. The northern borders of the Ottoman Empire slowly began to shrink southwards after the second Battle of Vienna in 1683.

In 1449 they revolted for the first time, demanding higher wages, which they obtained. The stage was set for a decadent evolution, like that of the Streltsy of Tsar Peter's Russia or that of the Praetorian Guard which proved the greatest threat to Roman emperors, rather than effective protection. After 1451, every new Sultan felt obligated to pay each Janissary a reward and raise his pay rank (although since early Ottoman times, every other member of the Topkapi court received a pay raise as well). Sultan Selim II gave Janissaries permission to marry in 1566, undermining the exclusivity of loyalty to the dynasty. By 1622, the Janissaries were a "serious threat" to the stability of the Empire.^[47] Through their "greed and indiscipline", they were now a law unto themselves and, against modern European armies, ineffective on the battlefield as a fighting force.^[47] In 1622, the teenage Sultan Osman II, after a defeat during war against Poland, determined to curb Janissary excesses. Outraged at becoming "subject to his own slaves", he tried to disband the Janissary corps, blaming it for the disaster during the Polish war.^[47] In the spring, hearing rumours that the Sultan was preparing to move against them, the Janissaries revolted and took the Sultan captive, imprisoning him in the notorious Seven Towers: he was murdered shortly afterward.^[47]

The extravagant parties of the Ottoman ruling classes during the Tulip Period caused a lot of unrest among the Ottoman population. In September 1730, janissaries headed by Patrona Halil backed a rebellion by 12,000 Albanian troops which caused the abdication of Sultan Ahmed III and the death of the Grand Vizier Damad Ibrahim. The rebellion had been crashed in three weeks with the massacre of 7,000 rebels, but it marked the end of the Tulip Era and the beginning of Sultan Mahmud I's reign.^{[48][49]} In 1804, the Dahias, the Jannisary junta that ruled Serbia at the time, had taken power in the *Sanjak of Smederevo* in defiance of the Sultan and they feared that the Sultan would make use of the Serbs to oust them. To forestall this they decided to execute all prominent nobles throughout Central Serbia, a move known as Slaughter of the Knezes. According to historical sources of the city of Valjevo, heads of the murdered men were put on public display in the central square to serve as an example to those who might plot against the rule of the Janissaries. The event triggered the start of the Serbian Revolution with the First Serbian Uprising aimed at putting an end to the 370 years of Ottoman occupation of modern Serbia.^[50]

In 1807 a Janissary revolt deposed Sultan Selim III, who had tried to modernize the army along Western European lines.^[51] This modern army Selim III created was called Nizam-ı Cedid. His supporters failed to recapture power before Mustafa IV had him killed, but elevated Mahmud II to the throne in 1808.^[51] When the Janissaries threatened to oust Mahmud II, he had the captured Mustafa executed and eventually came to a compromise with the Janissaries.^[51] Ever mindful of the Janissary threat, the sultan spent the next years discreetly securing his position. The Janissaries' abuse of power, military ineffectiveness, resistance to reform and the cost of salaries to 135,000 men, many of whom were not actually serving soldiers, had all become intolerable.^[52]



Banquet (Safranpilav) for the Janissaries, given by the Sultan. If they refused the meal, they signaled their disapproval of the Sultan. In this case they accept the meal. Ottoman miniature painting, from the *Surname-i Vehbi* (1720) at the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul.



Patrona Halil with some of his supporters, painting by Jean Baptiste Vanmour, ca. 1730–1737.

By 1826, the sultan was ready to move against the Janissary in favour of a more modern military. The sultan informed them, through a fatwa, that he was forming a new army, organised and trained along modern European lines.^[53] As predicted, they mutinied, advancing on the sultan's palace.^[53] In the ensuing fight, the Janissary barracks were set in flames by artillery fire resulting in 4,000 Janissary fatalities.^[53] The survivors were either exiled or executed, and their possessions were confiscated by the Sultan.^[9] This event is now called the Auspicious Incident. The last of the Janissaries were then put to death by decapitation in what was later called the Tower of Blood, in Thessaloniki.

After the Janissaries were disbanded by Mahmud II, he then created a new army soon after recruiting 12,000 troops. This new army was formally named the Trained Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad, the Mansure Army for short. By 1830, the army expanded to 27,000 troops and included the Sipahi cavalry. By 1838, all Ottoman fighting corps were included and the army changed its name to the Ordered troops. This military corps lasted until the end of the empire's history.^[54]

Janissary music

The military music of the Janissaries was noted for its powerful percussion and shrill winds combining *kös* (giant *timpani*), *davul* (bass drum), *zurna* (a loud *shawm*), *naffir*, or *boru* (natural trumpet), *çevgan* bells, *triangle* (a borrowing from Europe), and *cymbals* (*zil*), among others.^[55] Janissary music influenced European classical musicians such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven, both of whom composed music in the Turkish style. Examples include Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 11 (c. 1783), Beethoven's incidental music for *The Ruins of Athens* (1811), and the final movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, although the Beethoven example is now considered a march rather than Alla turca.^[56]

Sultan Mahmud II abolished the *mehter* band in 1826 along with the Janissary corps. Mahmud replaced the mehter band in 1828 with a European style military band trained by Giuseppe Donizetti. In modern times, although the Janissary corps no longer exists as a professional fighting force, the tradition of Mehter music is carried on as a cultural and tourist attraction.

In 1952, the Janissary military band, *Mehterân*, was organized again under the auspices of the Istanbul Military Museum. They hold performances during some national holidays as well as in some parades during days of historical importance. For more details, see Turkish music (style) and Mehter.

Popular culture

- In Bulgaria and elsewhere, and for centuries in Ukraine, the word Janissar (яничар) is used as a synonym of the word renegade.
- The Janissary Tree*, a novel by Jason Goodwin set in 19th-century Istanbul
- The Sultan's Helmsman*, a historical novel of the Ottoman Navy and Renaissance Italy
- Salman Rushdie's novel *The Enchantress of Florence* details the life, organization, and origins of the Janissaries. One of the lead characters of the novel, Antonio Argalia, is the head of the Ottoman Janissaries.^[57]
- The novel *Janissaries* by David Drake
- Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (*The Magnificent Century*) is a 2011–2012 Turkish historical fiction television series. Written by Meral Okay and Yılmaz Şahin. The Janissaries are portrayed throughout the series as part of the Sultan's royal bodyguard. The First Oath of their military order is recited in Season 1 at the Ceremony of Payment.
- Janissaries are the unique unit of the Ottoman Empire in Civilization IV, V, and expansions of VI.

See also

- Devşirme system
- Ghilman
- Mamluk
- Military of the Ottoman Empire
- Sağaliba
- Genízaro
- Ottoman decline thesis
- The Auspicious Incident
- Agha, a civilian and military title in the Ottoman Empire
- Malassay, elite infantry of the Adal Sultanate

References

Notes

- Nicolle, pp. 9–10.



A 15th-century Janissary, drawing by Gentile Bellini, who also painted the renowned portrait of Sultan Mehmed II



Janissaries marching to Mehter martial tunes played by the Mehterân military band. Ottoman miniature painting, from the *Surname-i Vehbi* (1720) at the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul.

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