

NAMES OF THREE BALTIC COUNTRIES – LITHUANIA, LATVIA AND ESTONIA

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Abstract

This article – based on historical and linguistic data – summarizes the origin of the names of the three Baltic countries– Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia. This is a short overview of hypotheses for possible origins of these names. As typically, ethnonyms are closely connected with the names of the territories or countries, genetically closest Baltic nations –Lithuanians and Latvians – most likely got their names from local hydronyms – river names. Though it is characteristic that the localization of the designated rivers is still being discussed. The origin of the name of the Estonians is rather opaque and has many different hypotheses. However, the origin Old Germanic or Old Baltic etymon is considered more credible. The article also introduces the contemporary names of these three countries (endonyms as well as exonyms) used in other languages of the world.

Key-words: *toponymy, ethnonym, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia*

Résumé

Cet article - basé sur des données historiques et linguistiques - résume l'origine des noms des trois pays baltes – Lituanie, Lettonie, Estonie. C'est une courte présentation générale des hypothèses sur les origines possibles de ces noms. Comme d'habitude les ethnonymes sont étroitement liés aux noms des territoires ou des pays, les pays baltes plus proches du point de vue génétique – les Lituaniens et les Lettons – tirent très probablement leurs noms d'hydronymes locaux - les noms de rivières, bien qu'il soit caractéristique que la localisation des rivières désignées soit toujours en cours de discussion. L'origine du nom Estoniansis est plutôt opaque et repose sur de nombreuses hypothèses différentes. Cependant, l'origine de l'étymon Old Germanic ou Old Baltic est considérée comme plus crédible. L'article présente également les noms contemporains de ces trois pays (endonymes ainsi que exonymes) utilisés dans d'autres langues du monde.

Mots-clés : *toponymie, ethnonyme, Lituanie, Lettonie, Estonie*

Introduction

The aim of this article is to summarize previous scientific conclusions about the origin of the names of the Baltic countries – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. These three comparatively small countries are neighbours situated on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. However, they belong to completely different language families: Latvian and Lithuanian – the closest relatives – belong to the Baltic branch of the Indo-European language family, while the Estonian language is a Uralic language of the Finnic branch. The history of the names of these countries is rather complicated and has long been the subject of discussion among linguists, historians, archaeologists, etc. This article is an attempt to introduce a wider onomastic readership with the main facts and possible etymological hypotheses for these three country names, or choronyms (see ICOS Terms: *choronym* – ‘proper name of a larger geographical or administrative unit of land’). The article also introduces the names of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia used in other languages.

Lithuania

The origin of the name Lith. *Lietuva* (Lithuania) is not entirely clear. This name (in Latin form *Litua*) was first mentioned in the 11th century in the Annals of Quedlinburg (*Annales Quedlinburgenses*). The annals chronicle March 9th of 1009, when St. Bruno was killed: *Sanctus Bruno qui cognominatur Bonifacius archepiscopus et monachus XI. suaeconuersionis anno in confinio Rusciae et Lituae a paganiscapite plexus cum suis XVIII, VII. Id. Martijpetijtcoelos* (“St. Bruno, an archbishop and monk, who was called Boniface, was slain by Pagans during the 11th year of this conversion at the Russian and Lithuanian border, and along with 18 of his followers, entered heaven on March 9th”) (Zinkevičius 2010: 22). The form (Gen. sg.) *Lituae* – mentioned in the text most likely reached the authors of the chronicle from the Slavs: cf. Polish *Litwa*, Russian *Лит(ъ)ва*, mentioned several times in the first chronicles (in 1040, 1113, 1132, etc.). In Russian annals, the term referred not only to the land but also to its inhabitants. The East Slavs would have probably heard such choronym from the Lithuanians themselves: cf. *Литъва* = Lith. *Lietuva* (phonetically *i<ie<ē<Ancient Baltic ei*) (Būga RR II: 151, Zinkevičius 2010: 13). The form *Lettowen* was mentioned in documents from the early 12th-13th centuries written in German, where Germ. *e* denotes the diphthong *ie*. In Latin, Lithuania was called *Lethovia*, other recorded variants *Lettovia*, *Lettavia* (*rex Lethovie* 1254, *rex Lettowie* 1254, *episcopus Lettowie* 1260), while Lithuanians are called *Lethovini* (with a Slavic suffix *-ini*, cf. Polish *Litwini* ‘Lithuanians’), sometimes *Lethones* (with a Latin suffix *-ones* – in The Livonian Chronicle of Henry).

Recently, the hypothesis of the hydronymic origin of this name has become popular. Researchers tend to associate the name of the country with the name of a

river (potamonym) near which the Lithuanian state possibly originated. One such conjecture is the name of a small tributary that branches from the river *Neris–Lietava*, known today as *Lietauka* with Slavonic suffix (Kuzavinis 1967: 135–137, also supported by Salys 1983: 153, Zinkevičius 2010: 15–16). In turn, the origin of the river name is associated with the verb *lieti* ‘pour’, which genetically leads to the reconstructed Indo-European root **l̥i-* with the meaning of flowing, pouring. In terms of motivation, the name is explained by physiography: the river flows in the lowlands, it has low banks, so it easily overflows. The original form of the reconstructed potamonym was probably **Lietā*, but with suffixes *-ava* or *-uva*, which are common in Baltic toponymy and could have an aggregate meaning. Apparently, the term originally referred to a small area, most likely between the Neris, Nemunas and Merkys rivers (Zinkevičius 2021). With the unification of the Baltic tribes in a common territory, the name also gained a wider meaning. It must be concluded that the name *Lietuva* was used to call not the entire area in which people spoke Lithuanian (it was not even completely established yet), but only that part, which formed the primary nucleus of the Lithuanian State (Zinkevičius 2007: 35, 82). The only doubt is the fact that the river is very small, only 11 km long, but it is not far from *Kernavė*, the centre of the former statehood (13th–14th cent.). In addition, it is mentioned that there may have been several hydronyms of this root in this region in the past (Salys 1983: 153, Zinkevičius 2010: 15). Hypothetically, it is possible another river was actually the source of the name, for example, *Lieta* – a tributary of the river Rusne.

There are other less popular explanations of the origin of the name of Lithuania, e. g., Simas Karaliūnas (1995, 2015) has put forward a hypothesis linking the name *Lietuva* with the Lith. lexeme *leičiai* ‘entourage, regiment, troops’, derived from the Indo-European root **liet-* ‘go together, accompany, escort’. In the 14th–15th centuries *leičiai* are said to be soldiers who helped strengthen the power of the ruler (Lith. *kunigaikštis*) in the annexed lands (Dubonis 1998). But these hypotheses seem unlikely.

The romantic theory of the origin of the nation was widespread in the 15th–16th centuries: Lithuanians were believed to be descendants of the Romans (it was based on numerous lexical similarities between Latin and Lithuanian – even the notable Polish chronist Jan Długosz supported this idea), thus, an attempt has been made to interpret the name *Lietuva* as distorted *L’Italia*. (Zinkevičius 2010: 9–10). Attempts were also made to associate the name *Lietuva* with the Latin *litus* ‘seashore’ (such etymology was also supported by linguists Alois Walde, Max Vasmer, and Ernst Fraenkel). The connection with the Lith. *lietus* ‘rain’ is also considered to be a folk etymology: Lithuania is said to be a ‘rainy land’ (Zinkevičius 2010: 11–12), but at the same time it does not stand up to criticism because it is not the land where it rains the most.

In Latvian in the 17th century, Georgius Mancelius calls neighbouring Lithuania by a name “Lietuviskazeme” (‘Lithuanian land’) and “Leišazeme” (‘Leiša Land’) < ethnonym *leitīs*. Another author of the 17th century, Georg Elger used the ethnonym *leiši* for the Poles, and for the Lithuanians–*lietuvnieki* (Karulis I: 530). Lithuania – nowadays Latv. *Lietuva* – was also called *Lietava*– with the suffix *-ava*. Latvians know the ethnonym *leiši* ‘Lithuanians’, which, according to the Latvian linguist Jānis Endzelīns, has been borrowed from the Curonians – an ancient Baltic tribe – and used without stylistic restriction even before the current form of the ethnonym *lietuvieši*, which was recognized as the norm during the time of independent Latvia (Zinkevičius 2010: 27, Karulis I: 529). Endzelīns recognizes the form *lietuvīs* as a word of “high style” and poetry.

In other languages Lithuania is known as: Ukrainian, Belarusian – *Літва*, Russian, Bulgarian – *Литва*, Czech, Slovak and Slovenian – *Litva*, Polish – *Litwa*, Armenian – *Լիտվա* (pronounced *litva*), Vietnamese – *Litva* // *Li-tuy-a-ni*, German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Dutch – *Lit(h)auen*, Icelandic – *Lit(h)áen* // *Lithaugaland*, in many languages the name is taken from Latin: Italian, Spanish, Romanian, Albanian– *Lituania*, Portuguese – *Lituânia*, French – *Lituanie*, Irish – *An Liotuáin*, English – *Lithuania* (the name has entered as a hybrid form of Latin and Slavic already in the 17th century – Zinkevičius 2010: 20), Serbian, Macedonian – *Литва̀нија* and Croatian – *Litvanija*, Greek – *Λιθουανία*, Hungarian – *Litvania*, Turkish–*Litvanya*, Chinese–立陶宛 (pronounced *litáowǎn*), Japanese–リトアニア (pronounced *ritowaniya*), Estonian – *Leedu* // *Leedumaa*, Finnish – *Liettua* (in the latter two cases, the word is borrowed directly from the Lithuanian language). (See more in Balode 2021a).

Latvia

The name of Latvia is recorded for the first time in various forms in the historical documents of the 11th-13th centuries: in Russian texts *Лѣтъгола* (12th century, as a tribal name), *Лотыгола* (13th century), *Лотыгольскаяземля* (1264), Latin *Letthigallia* (1206, 1225/1226), *terra Letthorum* (1208), *Letthia* (1209), *Lettia* (1210), *Leththia*, *Lettowia* (1253), German *Letland*. In the 14th century this name – *Lettya* (1336), *Lettia* (1359) – was used in a narrower, but sometimes broader, sense because until the 17th century legal terms were vague and volatile, and the boundaries of ethnic and state formations were unclear. In the 17th-18th centuries, dictionary authors used the Latvian collocation term “Latviskazeme” (‘Latvian land’) (Georgius Mancelius, 1638), “Latviešuzeme” (‘Latvian land’) (Johannes Langius, 1777, moreover, applying it only to the western part of the territory – Kurzeme), “Latvjuzeme” (‘Latvian land’) (Gotthard Friedrich Stender, 1789) (Bušs 2013: 17). By the 17th century, in an anonymous German-Lithuanian dictionary manuscript from Lithuania, we see for the first time, German *Liefland* translated as

Latvija. This form also appears in 1837 in the newspaper *Das Inland*. It is believed that Lithuanians made this name independently, according to the patterns of word formation in their language. The Latvian poet and publicist, Juris Alunāns, coined a new name *Latva* (1857), on the basis of questionable Latv. verb *lāt* 'live harmoniously'; for comparison, the Polish form *Łotwa*.

The modern name *Latvija* 'Latvia' in this form has been used relatively recently – the first use of the name *Latvija* in the Latvian texts was registered in 1862 in the newspaper "Pēterburgas Avīzes" (No. 6) (Karulis 1992: 507). Six years later, it was used in a leaflet issued by the newly established Latvian Relief Society for Deprived Estonians ("Latviska palīdzības biedrība priekš trūkumu ciezdamiem igauņiem"). In 1869, the name *Latvija* was actively promoted by the newspaper "Baltijas Vēstnesis" (about ten uses). In 1870 it was also used by other Latvian newspapers. Fricis Brīvzemnieks was the first to use this word in poetry (1869); In the 1870s it was found in the works of several poets. The introduction and spread of the name *Latvija* was facilitated by the workers of the national awakening - Neo-Latvians (*jaunlatvieši*) (Atis Kronvalds, Auseklis, Andrejs Pumpursetc). Although in the late 1850s and early 1860s, a number of country names ending in *-ija* (e.g. *Austrija*, *Francija*, *Itālija*) were already relatively familiar, it is believed that the term *Baltija* (from the *baltisks* 'Baltic', which is after the German *baltisch*) made by "Pēterburgas Avīzes" was the most influential example of the introduction of the name *Latvija* into the Latvian language.

The name of the country *Latvija* was coined from the ethnonym or the name of a nation or tribe. Latin ethnonym forms *Lethi*, *Letthi*, *Leththi* and *Letti*, registered in the 13th century documents, denoted both Latgallian tribes (*Letthivel Letthigalli*, 1206), and in the Russian chronicles – all the Balts. The oldest known use of the ethnonym *latvis* (Latwis) 'Latvian' dates back to 1648, which was later widely used in Romantic poetry. The modern variant of the ethnonym *latvietis* 'Latvian', derived with the suffix from the mentioned form *latvis*, was used at least as early as 1625. There is an obviously incorrect form *Latweesis* registered at the end of the 17th century in the manuscript of Christopher Führer's Latvian-German dictionary, and form *Latweetis* in another manuscript of an anonymous dictionary (*Manuale Lettico-Germanicum*).

The origin of the ethnonym *latvis* 'Latvian' is older than the name of the country or territory; its derivation is not quite clear. Probably, the ethnonym is derived from the older word forms **latuvis* or **latavis*, which in turn are derived from proper name (potamonym) **Lātuva* or **Latava*. So, most likely it is an ethnonym of hydronymic origin: for comparison, there are several rivers with the same root in Latvia – *Late*, *Latupe* (in the manuscript of one Latvian-German dictionary recorded as *Lata*, *Latava* (Karulis 1992: 505)), or in Lithuania – *Latavà*, *Latuvà*, as well as *Lātupis* (Vanagas 1981: 182), which in turn is related to the

ancient Greek *λάταξ* ‘a drop’, Irish *lathach* ‘sludge, mud’, Old High German *letto* ‘clay’ etc. and derived from the Proto-Indo-European root **lat-* with the original meaning ‘moist, liquid; swamp, puddle, bog’, for comparison also the Proto-Indo-European **lat-*, **let-*, **lot-* ‘to flow’ (for more details see Būga 1958: 454-459; 1961: 530; Endzelīns 1974: 542; Karulis 1992: 505–506, etc.). The location of this possible river is still being discussed. Linguists mention contradictory river locations: Jēkabs Lange – in Eastern Vidzeme; Jānis Endzelīns – in the vicinity of the civil parish of Lejasciems; Ojārs Bušs – as a tributary of the river Gauja in the Gulbene district; Kazimieras Būga – a river in the Vilnius area. Also in Lithuania, for example, close to the current Latvian border there are several rivers with this root in their name. The ethnonym may have originally meant ‘people living by the Lata/Latava River’, while the name of the river in its original meaning could be analogous to the Latv. name *Mālupe* (‘clay river’) or *Dubļupe* (‘mud river’) (Bušs 2013: 26). According to Zigmas Zinkevičius (1984: 363), the ethnonym *latvis* comes from the ancient name of the territory *Latva*, *Latuva*, which – most probably – on its turn has hydronymic origin: see some potamonymic examples mentioned above.

Another different hypothesis of the origin of the name *latvieši* and *Latvija* was suggested by the Lithuanian linguist Simas Karaliūnas (1995a: 47–49): he argued that the direct derivation basis could have been, in the Latvian dialect, the word *lata* ‘strip of land; field’ and *late* ‘field, plot of land’.

In conclusion, it could be said that Latvians, from the point of view of the origins of self-designation, belong to a nation whose ancestors lived by a river flowing in a clay riverbed or worked in clay fields (Balode, Bušs 2015: 14).

Ethnonyms used in other languages are coined from the Latvian word *latvis*, e.g. Lithuanian *lātvīs*, Russian *латыш*, Polish *lotysz*, German *Lette*, English *Lett* (nowadays *Latvian*), Estonian *läti* and Finnish *lätti* (nowadays *latvialainen*). Although in 1923 an order was adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia, according to which the name of the Republic of Latvia in Romance languages was *Lettonie*, English – *Latvia*, and Germanic languages – *Letland*, however, different variants of the name are used today.

Latvia (Latv. *Latvija*) as a country name in other languages is mainly used as an endonym (or name identical to the one used in the original language) (often without the letter “j”): Lithuanian, Slovenian *Latvija*, Russian, Bulgarian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik *Латвия*, Belarusian, Ukrainian *Латвія*, Macedonian *Латвија*, Azerbaijani, Uzbek *Latviya*, Turkmen *Latwiýa*, English, Indonesian, Norwegian, Finnish, Swahili, Vietnamese *Latvia*, with slight deviations in pronunciation: Arabic *لاتفيا* (transliterated as *latfya*), Welsh *Latfia*, Somali *Latfiya*, Tatar *Latviä*, Mongolian *Ламву*, Esperanto *Latvio*.

Estonian *Läti* and previously used Swedish *Let* could be called conditional exonyms (or names which differ from the name used in the original language) that originate from earlier names of the Latvian nation.

Other Latvian names-exonyms are as follows: Polish *Łotwa*; the name with this root derived from the adjective is used in Czech and Slovak – *Lotyšsko*. From the ancient Latin form *Lettonia*, such an exonymous form has been established in other languages as well: Italian *Lettonia*, Romanian, Spanish *Letonia*, Portuguese *Letónia* (European Portuguese) or *Letônia* (Brazilian Portuguese), Bosnian, Croatian *Letonija*, Macedonian, Serbian *Летонија* (pronounced *letonija*), Greek *Λετονία* (pronounced *letonia*), Turkish, Kurdish *Letonya*, French *Lettonie*, Albanian *Letoni*.

The German name *Letland* is also borrowed by Icelanders, Luxembourgers, Swedes, Danes (*Letland*), and Dutch (*Letland*). In Yiddish, Latvia is called *לעטלאַנד* (transliterated as *Letland*).

The Latvian name as an exonym is also used by Livs (*Leṣmō*), Hungarians (*Lettország*), Armenians (*Լատվիյա*, transliterated as *Latvian*), Georgians (*ლათვიის*, transliterated as *latviis*), Hindi (*लातविया*, transliterated as *Laataviya*), Nepalese (*लाटविया*, transliterated as *Lāṭaviyā*), Irish (*anLaitvia*), Hawaiians (*Lakawia*), Japanese (*ラトビア*, transliterated as *Ratobia*), Koreans (*라트비아*, transliterated as *Lateubia*), Chinese (*拉脫維亞*, transliterated as *Lātuōwéiyǎ* or *Latêrveiya*). (See more in Balode 2018: 24–25).

Estonia

The name of the modern Republic of Estonia (Est. *Eesti Vabariik*) has a multiplex history. The name of the territory and country cannot be separated from the ethnonym. Until the 18th-19th centuries, Estonians called themselves *maarahvas* ‘people of the land’ or ‘peasants’ (Beyre 2007). The current self-name *eestlased* ‘Estonians’ most likely descended from the tribes mentioned in the work of the Roman historian Tacitus “Germania” (c. 98 AD) Lat. *Aestii* / *Aestiorumgentes*, described alongside Germans and Goths. Most researchers believe that the name was applied to the present-day Baltic tribes, while others believe that it referred to the entire region of the Eastern Baltic. The same ethnonym *Esti*, *Aesti* or *Haesti* also appears in the 6th century in the works of the ancient writer Cassiodorus, etc. Adam of Bremen in the 11th century mentions three islands, the northernmost is called *Aestland*. The form *iestlatum* (sic!) can be found in Scandinavian runes (11th century).

Scandinavian sagas are considered the earliest source (second half of the 12th century), where the place name *Eistland* is used in the modern sense. Danish

historian Saxo Grammaticus mentions the land *Hestia*, *Estia* and the ethnonym *Estones* as a plural form of *Esto* in his chronicle “Gesta Danorum” (12th-13th centuries). The name *Astlāndah* (أستلاند) can be found on the map (1154 AD) by the Arab geographer al-Idrisi, which is possibly applicable to Estonia or to the part of Latvia that used to be a part of Livonia. From the Scandinavians, the word reached Germany, replacing the diphthong *ei* with the long vowel *e*: *Ehstland* ‘Estonia’, *Ehste* ‘Estonian’, later abbreviating the root's vowel: *Estland* (DEP). From German, this name also entered Latin texts. The Latin name *Estonia*, known from the Chronicle of Henry (13th century), originated from the plural form of the Latin ethnonym *Estones*. It was not until the 19th century, during the national awakening, that the name *Eesti* ‘Estonia’ established itself in Estonian. The name was popularized by the Estonian writer Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, as well as the journalist, poet Johann Voldemar Jannsen. The first issue of his newspaper “Perno Postimees” (1857) addressed its readers “Terre, armas Eestirahwas!” (Hello, dear people of Estonia!). At the beginning of the 20th century, forms were used in parallel – both *Eestimaa* and – less often – *Eesti*. Today, *Eestimaa* is used only as poetry or historicism. (DEP)

Regarding the aforementioned endonym *maarahvas* ‘land people’ or ‘rural people’, which was used as late as the 19th century, attempts have been made to link its origins to prehistoric times, but no evidence has been found. Another hypothesis explains this ethnonym as a medieval literal translation from the German *Landvolk*. The term used in Russian chronicles for Estonian tribes and sometimes other Finno-Ugric peoples of the Baltic Sea is Chud (чудь, ‘unknown hostile people, persecutor; stranger’). (Grünthal 1999: 46; DEP)

There are several hypotheses for the origin of the Estonian word *Eesti*. Riho Grünthal (1997) divides them into four groups. Proponents of the Germanic origin derive the name from the Gothic tribal name *aistan* ‘respect, honor’ or *āst*, *eest* ‘barn, granary’. T. E. Karsten points to a link with the sea name *Estmere*, which is based on the Germanic root **aist-mar* ‘amber sea’. On the other hand, the Lithuanian linguist Simas Karaliūnas (2003) offers a hypothesis of Baltic origin, comparing the analyzed word with the Kurzeme place name *Aistere* (in documents *Ayster*) and a small *Aista* river in Lithuania, assuming, among other things, that the meaning of this word was ‘land, grass, field’. Representatives of the third group, based on the Scandinavian sagas, associate the word with the Germanic root, which means ‘east’: cf. Old Scandinavian *eist*, *austr*, Icelandic *austr*, Danish *øst*, Swedish *öster* (*öst-*), Old Germanic **aues*. Semantically, this explanation would be acceptable, but phonetically *ae ~ ai ~ ei* does not correspond to the historical diphthong *au-*. Attempts have also been made to search for the origin in Latin, explaining with Latin *aestusmaris* ‘rise and fall, floods’ or *aestuarium*

‘lagoon’. Today, however, the Old Germanic and Old Baltic hypothesis is considered more credible.

In some European languages, the name of Estonia has come from German *Estland* – in Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Dutch, *Eistland*–in Icelandic. The Latin name *Estonia* is used in Italian, Spanish, Polish, English– *Estonia* (earlier in English also *Esthonia*), Irish *An Eastóin*, Japanese エストニア/*Esutonia*/, Greek *Εσθονία/Esthonia*, Slovenian *Estonija*, Turkish *Estonya*, French *Estonie*, Russian *Эстония*, Slovak *Estónsko*, Czech *Estonsko*, custom name for Chinese 爱沙尼亚/*Aishaniya*/. Apparently, the name of the country in Lithuanian is derived directly from the Estonian ethnonym *Eesti–Estija*, in Livonian–*Ēstimō*, in the Sami language *Estteana*, Hungarian *Észtország*. The Finns are using the exonym – *Viro*, arising from a historically independent area *Virumaa*, with which the Finns have had the greatest contact.

In contemporary Latvian language, the official name for Estonia is the exonym, *Igaunija*. Historically, this was derived from the name of the southern part of Estonia –*Ugaunija*, which is mentioned in the Chronicle of Henry and pronounced with the sound *ü*. In Latin, the area was called *Ungannia* or *Ugaunia*. Today, territorially, it roughly corresponds to Võru, Pelva, part of the Tartu and Valga districts. The origin of this name is associated with the name of the hill *Uandimägi* near Otepää. However, there are other hypotheses for the origin that derive it from the Slavic word *юг* ‘south’. In modern Latvian, two separate words are distinguished – the name of the respective area is *Ugaunija*, but the name of the country is *Igaunija*.

ABBREVIATIONS

Est. – Estonian

Gen. – genitive

Latv. – Latvian

Lith. – Lithuanian

sg. – singular

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