

TOWARDS THE RUSSO-OTTOMAN PEACE (1810-1812): A DIFFICULT BEGINNING OF DIPLOMATIC CAREER FOR THE BRITISH AMBASSADOR STRATFORD CANNING

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ABSTRACT

THESE FEW LINES ARE A SMALL PART OF OUR RESEARCH CONCERNING STRATFORD CANNING'S ACTIVITY IN CONSTANTINOPLE AND HIS IMPRESSIONS OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE, INCLUDING THE ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES. THE BEGINNING OF STRATFORD CANNING'S CAREER IN CONSTANTINOPLE GIVES US AN IMPORTANT EXAMPLE OF AMBITION AND SENSE OF DUTY WITHIN THE DIPLOMATIC WORK OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. THE WILLING INVOLVEMENT OF THE YOUNG AND INEXPERIENCED AMBASSADOR IN THE NEGOTIATIONS THAT LED TO THE PEACE OF 1812 SUSTAINS THE EXAMPLE. ALTHOUGH SPECIALISTS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITISH AND EASTERN DIPLOMACY MEASURE ON DIFFERENT SCALES THE IMPORTANCE OF HIS INVOLVEMENT DURING THE RUSSO-OTTOMAN NEGOTIATIONS, HIS EFFORTS CANNOT BE DENIED.

KEYWORDS: STRATFORD CANNING, DIPLOMACY, OTTOMAN EMPIRE, RUSSIAN EMPIRE, TREATY OF BUCHAREST.

1. Introduction

The Russo-Turkish war (1806-1812) coincided with the opportunity of developing a successful career in diplomacy for the young Stratford Canning de Redcliffe. The purpose of these lines is not that of building a general presentation of the Russo-Turkish war, nor that of presenting the tragic loss of Bessarabia by the Romanians (which has already well been done by other Romanian and Moldavian historians¹), but to emphasize

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¹ For example, Ion Nistor, Războiul ruso-turc din 1806-1812 și pierderea Basarabiei (Glasul Bucovinei, Cernăuți, 1938); Paul Cernovodeanu, Basarabia, drama unei provincii românești în context politic

Stratford Canning's involvement in the diplomatic negotiations that led to the peace of 1812. We are interested in how he managed to attract the ottomans on his side while the French pressure was very hard to deal with, and at the same time, we follow his involvement in the Russo-Turkish conflict and the mediation between the two belligerents. Moreover, the sources allow us to get an insight into the way he perceived the ottoman space. Thus, the official documents, but also the fragments of the ambassador's memoirs and private papers are very important for our purposes.

As far as the historiography is concerned, we have to mention Stanley Lane Poole's book², who emphasizes the great role of Stratford Canning in the negotiations that led to the peace. His two volumes concerning Stratford Canning's life are an important source for us because it contains vast quotations of the memoirs, as well as of the official and the private papers of the ambassador. On the other hand, Allan Cunningham, in his few lines about the 1812 peace, within his book *Anglo-Ottoman Encounters in the Age of Revolution: collected essays*, expressed his belief that Stratford's contribution was useful for the peace but not quite decisive³. We shall try to get a closer look into Stratford's efforts during the years 1811-1812 in order to express an opinion on the matter. As far as the official documents are concerned, very useful for our research are the papers edited by Paul Cernovodeanu⁴.

2. The first contact with the Ottoman Empire

When Stratford Canning first set foot in Constantinople in 1808 it was due to his cousin, George Canning, who was placed at the head of the Foreign Affairs Department. George Canning had sent his younger cousin to be the secretary of Robert Adair, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in those days. When the diplomatic duties sent Adair away one year later, Stratford received a letter from his cousin on the 30th of July 1809 announcing him that he would be the British plenipotentiary minister to

internațional 1812-1920 (Albatros, București, 1993); Ion Șișcanu, Raptul Basarabiei 1940, (Ago, Chișinău, 1993); Armand Goșu, Între Napoleon și Alexandru I. Principatele Dunărene la începutul secolului al XIX-lea (Academia Română, București, 2008).

² Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888).

³ Allan Cunningham, *Anglo-Ottoman encounters in the Age of Revolution: collected essays*, vol. 1 (edited by Edward Ingram, London, 1993), 150.

⁴ *Rapoarte Consulare și Diplomatice Engleze privind Principatele Dunărene (1800-1812)*, edited by Paul Cernovodeanu (Istros, Brăila, 2007).

Constantinople⁵. Thus he was left in charge of the old duties of Robert Adair who now had to deal with more important affairs in Vienna. Little did he know then that this was going to be just the first of his five appointments as ambassador to Constantinople.

Stratford's first impressions of the Ottoman Empire approach various aspects which, on the whole, offer us a wide outlook on the Ottoman world seen through the eyes of a young man who lived and was educated on British land. His depiction of the Ottomans at the beginning of the nineteenth century concerns the landscape, the administration, the military force and the sultan. Those first years in Constantinople were the beginning of a long process of knowledge concerning the Ottoman Empire for Stratford, the ambassador of whom Winston Churchill would say many years later that gain „a wider knowledge of Turkey than any other Englishman of his day”⁶. The space is not enough here for us to offer all of the ambassador's descriptions, but just a few lines.

He wrote his first impressions about the Ottoman Empire to his cousin George Canning on the 27th of April 1809: “Very false notions are entertained in England of the Turkish nation. You know much better than I do the mighty resources and native wealth which this enormous empire possesses. [...] But the government is radically bad, and its members, who are all alive to its defects, have neither the wisdom nor the courage to reform it. The few who have courage equal to the task know not how to reconcile reformation with the prejudices of the people. And without this nothing can be effected. Destruction will not come upon this empire neither from the north or from the south; it is rotten at the heart; the seat of corruption is in the government itself. Conscious of their weakness, and slaves to the Janissaries, of whom they have not discretion to make a proper use, the ministers have lately introduced at home the same system of deceit that they have so long employed in their intercourse with foreign powers.”⁷

Stratford insists in his memoirs, as we can see from Poole's vast quotations, on the weakness of the Ottoman Empire and of the sultan: “Russia, France, Austria, and even Persia had by turns contracted the area and drained the resources of the empire. From the corrupt monotony of his seraglio the Sultan had to send forth his firmans, his emissaries, his bands of irregular soldiery, or, it might be, his naval armaments, against an invading

⁵ Stanley Lane Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 46, 47.

⁶ Leo Gerald Byrne, *The Great Ambassador* (Ohio State University Press, 1964), 9.

⁷ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 51.

enemy, a rebellious chief, or an armed insurrection. Several great families, several unsubdued tribes, and here and there an over-powerful pasha had succeeded in braving and circumscribing the imperial authority. The Mamluks still prevailed in Egypt. The most important part of Syria was under the sway of a Christian Emir. Ali Pasha of Janina exercised royal power in the provinces bordering on Greece, and Greece itself, excited by Russia, was preparing to burst the fetters which had so long bound her to the Ottoman throne. Serbia, Montenegro, and the Danubian Principalities were all more or less in league with Russia”⁸.

But what he truly enjoyed was the landscape and the historical background of the area: “No month of May or June, during my repeated detentions in Turkey, ever closed without a pilgrimage on my part to those sequestered labyrinths, where Flora seemed to have scattered her whole lapful of blossoms, and where the long rich grass supplied a welcome feast to endless lines of horses, tethered at suitable distances and neighing joyfully to each other. There was also on the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus a shrine of natural beauty [...] towards the end of July I asked and obtained a short leave of absence. My object was to make a tour in Asia Minor and to visit several places of ancient celebrity in that region. It took me several weeks to accomplish this purpose.”⁹ But he was very disappointed of the fact that “a stagnant industry and general misrule were the monuments which time had left of Ottoman domination in the second capital of the Roman Empire and throughout those extensive regions which had been the successive seats of civilization, ever varying, generally advancing, from the earliest periods of social settlement and historical tradition.”¹⁰

However, during these years he was attracted neither to Constantinople, nor to the office of diplomat: “My heart was not there. I had no predilection for diplomacy. My tastes, my hopes, my prospects were at home, in my native land, in its gigantic metropolis, the seat of enlightened legislation, of civilizing power, and of honorable contention for the greatest result of thought and the noblest prizes of ambition [...] I was neither blind to the

⁸ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 50.

⁹ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 60.

¹⁰ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 49.

beauties of nature nor deaf to the voice of ages; but all these appeals to my attention, however forcible, however seductive, possessed in my view but a passing interest.”¹¹

3. Becoming a British diplomat in Constantinople

The fact that Stratford remained in Constantinople even after his cousin's resignation from the Foreign Office was again due to George Canning. He wrote to Stratford on the 9th of October 1809 and persuaded him to remain: “I may or may not have it in my power at some future time, to take you by the hand again. If not, you have a profession in which you may be useful to your country and do credit to your friends and yourself, and you must not lightly abandon it”¹². And that is how Stratford remained for two years more in Constantinople. But, as Stratford wrote in one of the letters he sent to his sister, remaining in Constantinople was a very unhappy duty¹³.

Stratford's main concerns were the French military successes. In a time when the French Empire controlled almost the entire Europe and Russia seemed to be still on Napoleon's side, Stratford's attempt to defeat the Eastern French policy by attracting both Turkey and Russia on the British side seemed bold. Stratford had to stop Napoleon's plans of offering Turkey either to Russia or to Austria in exchange of military support. This objective had been established by George Canning. Robert Adair tried, without success, to fulfill it. Now Robert Adair had to try his luck in Vienna and his mission in Constantinople was left in Stratford's hands. But the new head of the Foreign Office, Wellesley, had no interest in the activity of the young ambassador and sent no word of political instructions to him. From the summer of 1810 to the spring of 1812 Wellesley and his under-secretary sent only sixteen dispatches to the young ambassador and not one of them contained instructions concerning the difficult negotiations which Stratford was then conducting at the Porte¹⁴. Allan Cunningham also agrees with Stanley Lane-Poole on the matter that Stratford was left alone by the Foreign Office at a very critical moment¹⁵.

¹¹ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 69.

¹² Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 79.

¹³ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 80.

¹⁴ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 128.

¹⁵ Allan Cunningham, *Anglo-Ottoman encounters in the Age of Revolution: collected essays*, vol. 1 (edited by Edward Ingram, London, 1993), 146.

The two years were exhausting, and during them Stratford's diplomatic style took shape. Cunningham says he "acquired his irascible mien at this time, partly as policy, partly because of his constant frustration. His letters home were sufficient to allow his mother to envisage him storming and raging and she cautioned him against exploding among foreigners and strangers. Stratford cultivated a pose of lofty severity, which gave his face the look of a well-kept grave. But this was not done for the sake of the Ottomans for the simple reason that he hardly saw any- it was impossible, he decided, to have them to dinner or other social occasions. Like Adair, he worked through dragomans and, as the sociology of oriental diplomacy did not really interest him, he saw no purpose in standing at a dragoman's elbow while he jabbered in Ottoman Turkish.[...] Why, then, the grim countenance, except as a measure of self-control? It was adopted for a wider, more important audience than Ottoman officials: it was to remind his own staff, his fellow countrymen in the East, the whole European colony that he was the British ambassador and, no small thing, a Canning."¹⁶

He had the chance to see how far the ottoman authority went and if it was firm or not in 1811 during an argument between a Turkish minister and a Persian official. Although at first the Turks threatened him with beheading, when he threatened back with Persian revenge, they decided to spare him. This was a true scale for measuring his risk in solving a problem that the British sailors had with some French pirates on Ottoman territory. On the 3rd of November 1811 he "seized the hint and called upon the commander of our force in the Archipelago to take the law in his own hands. Captain Hope [...] entered the port of Napoli di Romania, and demanded the restitution of the prizes detained piratical by a French privateer under the guns of that fortress. The privateer captain ran his prizes ashore, and burned them; several shots were fired by our corvette; the fortress was mute, and it remained to be seen how the lesson would be taken at Constantinople. In due time I was invited to the Porte, and a formal complaint was addressed to me. Justifying the act of our officer, I threw its responsibility on the French who had defied, and on the Turks who had not vindicated the rights of their neutrality."¹⁷ After a few tense dispatches the Turks forgot about the incident and Stratford's boldness remained without bad consequences concerning the British ambassador.

¹⁶ Allan Cunningham, *Anglo-Ottoman encounters in the Age of Revolution: collected essays*, vol. 1 (edited by Edward Ingram, London, 1993), 147.

¹⁷ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 100.

But there was another reason, except Turkish weakness, that influenced the Divan to reconcile with the young minister. Stratford had started unofficially to correspond with St. Petersburg and the Turks were acquainted with the situation. Now he was formally invited to write direct to the plenipotentiaries at Bucharest. He accepted on condition that the piracy firmans were first granted. The firmans which had been promised for more than a year were finally issued and he was able to turn his whole energies to the negotiation for peace¹⁸.

Stratford had sent reports to the Foreign Office concerning the Russo-Ottoman war and the difficult situation that the Turks were confronting facing the Russian demands in 1811 as well as the efforts of the French ambassador to convince the belligerents to keep the war going even in march 1812¹⁹. As we said before, no instructions came from London, and the young ambassador took the matter into his own hands. Thus, he willingly accepted to cooperate with the Ottomans and sent letters to the Duc of Sierra Capriola, the ex-Neapolitan minister and Canning's correspondent in St. Petersburg, and to Andrei Italinski, former Russian ambassador to Constantinople who was now in charge of the Russian negotiations with the Ottoman officials sent to Bucharest. Stratford asked in return for unreserved confidence. He recommended moderation to Russia unless the Porte would throw itself into the arms of France and he explained that the Ottomans saw any concessions in Asia as a threat to their independence and security. While Stratford was trying to reconcile the belligerents, Latour-Maubourg, the French ambassador to Constantinople, kept trying to prevent a Russo-Ottoman agreement as the historian F. Ismail also emphasizes.²⁰ Stratford wrote in his memoirs about those days the following: "Having no encouragement, not even an instruction from home, I was obliged to fight the battle in my own way. The difficulty was to possess the Porte's confidence and at the same time to maintain our rights against French aggression and Ottoman perverseness. I had to dispose the Turkish ministers to a peace with Russia on the basis of territorial concession, to nourish in their minds a perpetual mistrust of France, and, without committing my Government to make them look solely to England for counsel and support. My principal

¹⁸ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 102.

¹⁹ *Rapoarte Consulare și Diplomatice Engleze privind Principatele Dunărene (1800-1812)*, edited by Paul Cernovodeanu (Istros, Brăila, 2007), 354, 387.

²⁰ F. Ismail, *The making of the treaty of Bucharest, 1811-1812*, in "Middle Eastern Studies", vol. 15, no. 2 (May, 1979), 173, 174.

allies in the struggle were the confidential correspondence with Petersburg and the successes of our great commander in Spain. It was only by assuming a tone of self-reliance and determination that I could hope to make up for want of years, experience, and authority”²¹.

F. Ismail reminds the fact that when it came to winning the Ottomans` trust, although the Swedish agent Horn was sent to Bucharest with the special purpose of facilitating the Russo-Ottoman agreement in order to induce the Ottomans to form an alliance with Russia and Sweden, Sultan Mahmud wrote: “none of the infidels, apart from the Englishman [Stratford Canning] are reliable. Each is seeking to further his own interests.”²² Indeed, it seems that Stratford had won the Porte’s confidence in those days. The Sultan himself sent a message to Stratford in February 1812 announcing him of the recognition of the “perfect friendship which England professes for my Sublime Porte”.²³ But a couple of months later the Ottoman Government was afraid to be completely open and to show its belief in Stratford’s good intentions, at least not until Stratford accepted to show them the original letters he had received from Russia, and this affected the young ambassador as we can see from a letter he sent to the head dragoman: “I have just received your letter in which you tell me that the Reis Effendi will not appoint a meeting with me until I send him the originals of the letters I have received from Russia and that till we meet he will not inform me of the state of the negotiations at Bucharest. You will observe to his Excellency in answer that there is something so extraordinary and so little like confidence in his message that I am unable to comprehend the meaning of it. I wrote to Russia at the request of the Porte. My letters have had the fullest success. Not only has the Russian Government modified its proposals, but it has also accepted my interference and authorized its minister to continue his correspondence with me. I have every hope therefore of being useful to the Porte at the present crisis. I desire to be so. But without reciprocal confidence it is impossible for me to act to any good purpose.”²⁴ However, Stratford’s negotiations with the Russians were going well; so well that, when England and Russia were still formally at

²¹ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 153.

²² F. Ismail, *The making of the treaty of Bucharest, 1811-1812*, in “*Middle Eastern Studies*”, vol. 15, no. 2 (May, 1979), 177.

²³ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 163.

²⁴ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 172.

war, Stratford was informed that “by the express order of the Emperor” [Czar Alexander] Italinski was ordered to proceed to Constantinople to arrange an alliance with the Porte in concert with the British ambassador²⁵. But, of course, the Porte was not that willing to throw herself in any war alliance for the moment. So this matter remained to be solved for later when Stratford was no longer an ambassador to Constantinople.

The Romanian historian Armand Goșu, just like Allan Cunningham, does not emphasize the importance of the role played by Stratford in the Peace agreement. For him the most important moment of Stratford’s diplomatic interference in the negotiations was reached during the first days of May 1812 when Stratford sent a secret agent to Bucharest, the Scottish Thomas Gordon, with a new letter for Italinski in which the Austrian plans of a military agreement with the Porte were revealed²⁶.

In June 1812 Stratford was able to inform the Foreign Office, which was now led by Castlereagh, that a “Definitive Treaty of Peace between Russia and the Porte was signed on the 28th ultimo at Bucharest” and to explain that his efforts were not in vain in the midst of all the French and Austrian intrigues to prevent the Peace²⁷. In his memoirs Stratford wrote later: “At length I had the satisfaction of learning that the definitive treaty was signed. It stands in history as the Treaty of Bucharest, and in that city it was signed on 28th May, 1812. It had still to be invested with the ratifications of each belligerent. And until that indispensable formality should be executed, I could not feel entirely at ease. The Russians would have to restore a part of their conquests; the Turks would have to give up a portion of the Territory which they had hoped to recover; their enemies would remain in possession of the left bank of the Danube and its delta and mouth. Then there was the Russian proposal of an alliance, and the Porte’s reluctance to lose ground on the Asiatic frontier”²⁸.

Recognition from his contemporaries came. Castlereagh, unlike Wellesley, recognized the young ambassador’s merits. How could he have not when Czar Alexander himself instructed Nesselrode to convey to Castlereagh his recognition of the efficient

²⁵ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 171.

²⁶ Armand Goșu, *Între Napoleon și Alexandru I. Principatele Dunărene la începutul secolului al XIX-lea* (Academia Română, București, 2008), 266.

²⁷ *Rapoarte Consulare și Diplomatice Engleze privind Principatele Dunărene (1800-1812)*, edited by Paul Cernovodeanu (Istros, Brăila, 2007), 417-422.

²⁸ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 174.

manner in which “M. de Canning” contributed to accelerate the Peace agreement with Turkey, “cet evenement si important par les consequences qu’il devait avoir”²⁹. The Czar sent also a present for Stratford: a snuff-box with his own portrait set in diamonds. The Duke of Wellington wrote later about “the great statesman who at that period conducted the foreign affairs of Great Britain” and induced the Porte to make peace with Russia, as referred to Wellesley. But Wellington was wrong and those contemporaries, not only the Sultan or Czar Alexander, but also the simple embassy secretaries like David Morrier contradict this view. David Morrier wrote in 1869: “Now this great service was effected by Stratford Canning, then plenipotentiary at Constantinople, without one word of instruction or even of notice, and still less of encouragement, from the Foreign Office, then fast asleep under the Marquis of Wellesley”³⁰. The success Stratford obtained in 1812 certainly assured him some confidence in his own abilities, but he was not blinded by that moment. He still wanted to return home and later he wrote in his memoirs: “My satisfaction was that of a traveler who had fallen among thieves and after much rough handling had escaped providentially with his clothes on his back.”³¹

As a conclusion we could say that despite the contradictions among historians, Stratford’s efforts should not be underestimated. He turned out to be an example of great initiative and determination within the diplomatic world even from his first appointment to Constantinople, especially if we take into consideration his young age and the fact that he acted without instructions. And we hope the lines above served to emphasize properly our view on the matter.

²⁹ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 175.

³⁰ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 176.

³¹ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of the Right Honourable Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe from his Memoires and Private and Official Papers*, vol. 1 (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1888), 182-183.

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