

HPCS7004

Women in the Middle Ages:
Sources from the Celtic Regions

Assignment 1

What light do the Welsh law codes shed on
virginity, marriage and divorce in medieval Wales?

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March 2026

The Welsh law codes, known as the Laws of Hywel Dda, or *Cyfraith Hywel*, consist of over forty manuscripts created between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. They are thought to be based on a conference held by King Hywel ap Cadell in the early tenth century although the earliest extant texts are from the late thirteenth century.¹

The law codes are grouped into four main redactions, three of which are in middle Welsh and one, which contains five related versions, is in Latin. The three Welsh redactions contain some of the same tractates, or collections of related text, but also have some significant differences. The Cyfnerth redaction, although dating from the fourteenth century is thought to contain the earliest version of the law code and comes from South Wales, as does the Blegywryd redaction, which is a translation of the Latin D version. The Iorwerth redaction is the earliest and longest manuscript and is thought to have been produced in around 1230.²

This essay will firstly consider the characteristics of medieval Welsh law which distinguish it from both canon and Anglo-Norman common law. It will then examine the content of the law codes which addresses virginity, marriage and divorce. Finally, it will explore the political and cultural influences which may have led to the production of *Cyfraith Hywel* and its usefulness as a source of information about the lived experience of Welsh women in the medieval period.

Each of the redactions contains a tractate specifically dealing with the Laws of Women but, as Roberts argues, it is important to consider other areas of the codes, particularly those dealing with children and inheritance along with the triads that appear throughout the texts as these also impacted the status and rights of women.³

In general, medieval Welsh law is notable for the emphasis on compensation of the victim rather than punishment of the perpetrator. It can be distinguished from canon law by its focus on the contractual rather than the moral obligations of couples and the acceptance of separation and divorce.⁴ Traditional Welsh practices of partible inheritance, including for illegitimate offspring, differentiate it from the importance that

¹ Cyfraith Hywel Project, *Cyfraith Hywel*, <<https://www.cyfraith-hywel.org.uk/>> (accessed 4 March 2026).

² Sara Elin Roberts, 'Emerging from the Bushes: The Welsh Law of Women in the Legal Triads', in *Law: Literature and Society* (CSANA Yearbook), ed. by J. F. Eska (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), pp. 59-60.

³ Ibid. pp. 58-59.

⁴ Robin Chapman Stacey, 'Divorce, Medieval Welsh Style', *Speculum*, 77.4 (2002), p. 1122.

both canon and Anglo-Norman common law place on primogeniture. However, being able to prove that a girl had maintained her virginity before marriage is a key theme of *Cyfraith Hywel*. Davies argues that this emphasis on virginity comes from the ease with which marriages could be started and ended.⁵ Men could have children with many women but in a society dominated by male-led kin groups a woman's role was to produce heirs for her husband's kin group and therefore she and her family must be able to demonstrate that any child she produced could be considered part of that group.⁶

The emphasis in the law codes on the importance of female virginity before marriage sheds a light on the ethos of Welsh medieval society. Owen argues that the concepts of honour and shame can tell us much about the behaviours which were considered acceptable and the distinct roles and responsibilities of men and women. Women were dishonoured if they did not maintain sexual purity whereas a man could be shamed if his virility were called into question. Honour and shame are equated with a material price, or *sarhaed*, related to the person's status in the social hierarchy.⁷

It was the responsibility of a girl's family to maintain her virginity from the onset of puberty, assumed in the law codes to be at age twelve, until she reached marriageable age at fourteen.⁸ McAll highlights a difference with the situation in Ireland where children of both sexes were often fostered out at this age. In Wales, it was essential that the girl stayed with her birth family who were responsible for testifying to her virginity.⁹

When a girl married, several contractual payments became due. Firstly, *amobr*, a payment for the loss of the girl's virginity was made to the feudal lord. The amount of this payment differed depending on the status of the girl's father. The purpose and

⁵ R. R. Davies, 'The Status of Women and the Practice of Marriage in Late-Medieval Wales', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), p. 106.

⁶ Morfydd E. Owen, 'Shame and Reparation: Women's Place in the Kin', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), p. 40.

⁷ Ibid. p. 48.

⁸ Ibid. p. 48.

⁹ Christopher McAll, 'The Normal Paradigms of a Woman's Life in the Irish and Welsh Texts', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), p. 8.

origins of *amobr* have been disputed, with some scholars arguing that it represented compensation to the lord for losing his *droit de seigneur*, that is his right to have sex with the girl on her wedding night. Others have stated that it is a payment for the loss of an asset, in effect a licence fee for the marriage. Jenkins argues that neither of these are the case in the Welsh medieval context, rather it is a payment for past protection, indicating that the lord had responsibilities for maintaining the virginity of the girls in his territory.¹⁰

It is interesting to consider who is responsible for paying *amobr* in different situations as this illustrates the value which a lord placed on a girl's virginity and who was responsible for protecting it. If a woman was given to a man by her father or kin-group, they paid the *amobr*. However, if a woman eloped and was reclaimed after consummation her father was not responsible for the payment. Jenkins argues that this indicates that the principal responsibility for *amobr* rested with the woman herself as the lord was unlikely to forgo the payment in these circumstances. On the other hand, if a virgin was raped, the rapist paid the *amobr*. If the rapist did not make the payment, then the lord would not receive it, presumably because he failed in his duty to protect a virgin.¹¹

The issue of a woman's virginity remained significant after the union had taken place. When the woman entered her new husband's bed for the first time, he became liable for *cowyll*, a payment to the woman for the loss of her virginity. Unlike *amobr*, this was not paid immediately but was held as part of the couple's common property until the marriage ended. However, a husband could reject his wife on the morning after the wedding night if he considered that she was not a virgin in which case she would not be entitled to *cowyll*.¹² The wedding guests were expected to enter the couple's bed chamber in the morning to witness the husband's declaration and possibly inspect the bedsheets as it could be that a virgin was expected to bleed on first having intercourse although it was known in medieval times that this was not always the case.¹³ The girl's close kin would be expected to assert her purity,

¹⁰ Dafydd Jenkins, 'Property Interests in the Classical Welsh Law of Women', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), pp. 73–74.

¹¹ Ibid. pp. 74–75.

¹² McAll, 'The Normal Paradigms of a Woman's Life in the Irish and Welsh Texts', p. 9.

¹³ Jane Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose', in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. by Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 63–64.

illustrating the importance of their close vigilance of her between the ages of twelve and fourteen.¹⁴

Virginity tests are a common theme in medieval Welsh literature, but the law codes do not specify any such tests. They do, however, suggest public shaming of a woman who was considered to have duped her husband into marriage. This consisted of cutting her nightgown so short that it revealed her sexual organs and buttocks. The 'false virgin' or *twyllforwyn* would not be entitled to any compensation unless she could hold on to the greased tail of a year-old steer. In this case she would be entitled to keep the steer as well as her share of the *argyfrau*, the moveable goods that she had brought to the union.¹⁵

The fate of the false virgin is further explored in triads which are found throughout the law codes. Triad Q106 from the Blegywryd redaction deals with three 'thrusts' which mean that compensation need not be paid. The first two elements are not relevant to this discussion of virginity, but the third and longest element of this triad deals with the issue of a 'false virgin'. It states that a man can push her with his hand or foot over the bed and if he does not kill her, he will not have to pay compensation. Furthermore, 'there is no redress to her for the thrust he made into her with his penis and let her be released with that thrust in her without compensating her for it'.¹⁶

Triad Q118, also from the Blegywryd tradition, equates the payments made at the time of a marriage to compensation for the shame experienced by the virgin. There are 'three shames of a maiden'. Firstly, when she is told by her father that she is to be married, and therefore *amobr* is due to the lord; secondly when the union is consummated and she receives *cowyll* from her husband; and thirdly when she leaves the bedchamber and has to face the community who know that she has had sex, at which point her father gives *agweddi*, or her marriage goods, to the husband.¹⁷ It is not known if medieval women experienced shame in this context or if they considered marriage and its consummation to be a rite of passage, but it is

¹⁴ McAll, 'The Normal Paradigms of a Woman's Life', p. 9.

¹⁵ Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose', pp. 63-64.

¹⁶ Roberts, 'Emerging from the Bushes', p. 71.

¹⁷ Note, this triad refers to the marriage portion as *agweddi*, although elsewhere is it called *argyfrau*.

interesting that the feelings of a woman are considered significant enough to be referenced in a triad.¹⁸

In medieval Wales, a woman's status could change from maiden (*morwyn*) to wife (*gwraig*) in a number of ways. This change of status occurred following the act of sexual consummation, rather than through undergoing a specific ceremony.¹⁹

Through a close textual analysis of the 3 Welsh redactions of the law codes and the Latin versions B and E, Charles-Edwards identified nine types of union. Within this list, he distinguished four groups.²⁰

The first group consists of 'unions by gift of kin' which can either be classed as *priodas*, where the woman brings with her an *argyfrau* amounting to at least half of the husband's moveable goods, or *agweddi* if the *argyfrau* is less than this. In the second group, although the kin do not gift the woman to the man, both the kin and the woman consent to the union. This group has three variations: *cariadas*, where the woman 'does not leave her house but is visited openly there by the man'; *deu llysuab* when a woman marries her stepbrother; and *llathlut goleu*, which was an open elopement. The third group contains two examples of unions that take place without the consent of the woman's kin but to which she herself consents: *llathlut twill*, an elopement carried out in secret; and *heichogi twill gwreic lwyn a pherth*, when the couple carry on a secret relationship but the woman continues to live in her birth family's home. The final group concerns 'unions to which neither the woman nor her kin consent': *kynnywedi ar liw ac ar oleu* which was a forced abduction; and *twill morwyn*, when a virgin is deceived into sleeping with a man, perhaps through getting her drunk.²¹ Charles-Edwards argues that while this list can be considered to be hierarchical, with *priodas* considered to be the most honourable form of union and *twill morwyn* the least honourable, it would not be correct to classify them as lawful and unlawful.²²

¹⁸ Roberts, 'Emerging from the Bushes', pp. 72-73.

¹⁹ Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose', p. 56.

²⁰ T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Nau Kynnywedi Teithiauc', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), pp. 25-37.

²¹ Ibid. pp. 35-36.

²² Ibid. p. 37.

In contrast to canon law, the Welsh law codes consider marriage to be a contract affecting the property rights of the parties involved rather than as a sacrament. The rules of inheritance differed in Wales as illegitimate male children had the same rights as their legitimate siblings and this may have led to the acceptance of unions that were formed in the ways described above.²³ However, by the fourteenth century most marriages were solemnised in the parish church, although some couples may have avoided this because of the costs involved. Evidence from court rolls shows that non-solemnised unions were still considered to be marriages and subject to the same contractual payments, as in the 1359 case of a woman whose status was contested in court, but she was ruled to be married because *amobr* had been paid.²⁴

As discussed above, *amobr* was the only payment triggered by a union that was due immediately. Marriage gifts could be livestock, household goods or cash but not land as women were not entitled to hold land in their own right.²⁵ If the husband accepted that his new wife had been a virgin before the marriage, the couple would agree on *cowyll*, which represented the wife's share of the moveable goods but these were held in common by the couple. To be entitled to *cowyll*, the wife had to specify which goods she wanted before getting out of the marriage bed on the morning after the wedding night. If she remained in the marriage bed for nine nights, she would become eligible to receive a portion of the moveable goods in *agweddi* if she left her husband for a legitimate reason or if he left her without good cause.²⁶

Although a husband was considered to be superior to his wife and she owed him a duty of sexual exclusivity, the law codes ascribe some rights to women within a marriage. Triad Q232 states that a woman can legitimately leave her husband, retaining her property rights if he has leprosy, is impotent or has bad breath.²⁷

Owen identifies three types of offence which could occur within a marriage, each of which would result in a different type of compensation. He lists these as:

- a offences by a third party against either the husband or wife;

²³ Jenkins, 'Property Interests in the Classical Welsh Law of Women', p. 67.

²⁴ Davies, 'The Status of Women and the Practice of Marriage', p. 104.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 109.

²⁶ McAll, 'The Normal Paradigms of a Woman's Life', p. 10.

²⁷ Roberts, 'Emerging from the Bushes', p. 63.

- b offences by the husband against the wife;
- c offences by the wife against the husband.²⁸

If a third party injures or kills either the husband or the wife it is considered an offence against the husband and he, or his estate, would be entitled to *sarhaed* to compensate him for injury or dishonour, or *galangas* in the event of a death.²⁹

Under the second category of offence, a payment of one third of the husband's *sarhaed* would be paid by him to his wife if he beat her without legitimate cause. He could beat her without compensation if she were unfaithful, insulted him or gave away items to which she was not entitled. Further ways in which a man could cause offence to his wife would be by committing adultery or refusing to have sex with her. In these cases, she would be entitled to compensation, known as *gowyn* or *wynebwerth*, of 120d. for the first offence and £1 for the second. After a third offence of adultery, not only could a woman leave her husband without losing her rights to *cowyll* and *agweddi*, but she was also expected to leave him or to be shamed. In these circumstances, she could attack or kill her husband's concubine without any legal consequence.³⁰

The greatest offence that a woman could commit against her husband was to have sex with another man. Triad Q73 enumerates the three reasons for which a woman could be accused of adultery:

....one is seeing the man and the woman emerging from the same bush one on either side of the bush, the second is finding them both under one blanket, the third is seeing the man between the two thighs of the woman.³¹

Roberts points out the humorous tone of this triad but asserts that it demonstrates a principal of the Welsh law codes which seek to enable a conclusion to be reached from circumstantial evidence even if direct eyewitness reports of an offence is not available.³²

²⁸ Owen, 'Shame and Reparation', p. 50.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 50.

³⁰ Owen, 'Shame and Reparation', p. 51.

³¹ Roberts, 'Emerging from the Bushes', p. 68.

³² Ibid. p. 68.

If accused of adultery, the woman would need to provide witnesses who would swear an oath to her innocence: 7 witnesses for the first offence, 24 for the second and 50 for the third.³³ If the adultery were considered to be proven, the husband could reject the wife and she would lose all of her rights although, triad Q119 appears to imply no matter what a woman did, she could keep her *cowyll*, *argyfrau* and *wynebwerth* if she had already received them because of a previous infidelity by her husband.³⁴ If the husband chose not to reject his wife, he could beat her but then he would not receive *sarhaed* because it was not possible to have revenge and receive compensation for the same offence.³⁵

If a husband died, the widow had to stay in the marital home for nine days and then leave taking only her share of the moveable goods. However, it is unclear where the woman was expected to go as she had no land of her own so would rely on being able to return to her birth family or perhaps to stay with adult children.³⁶

As in other aspects of the law affecting women, the approach to divorce in *Cyfraith Hywel* is at odds with medieval canon law which only allowed separation and annulments in exceptional circumstances.³⁷ In contrast, the Welsh law codes not only set out the circumstances under which couples could legitimately separate, as we have seen above, but they also enumerate the arrangements for the distribution of goods following a separation. Davies argues that divorce was common and was regarded as ‘the termination of a contract, not the annulment of a sacrament’.³⁸

Different arrangements were in force if the marriage lasted for more or less than seven years, although it is not clear why this distinction was made. If a couple separated for legitimate reasons within the first seven years of marriage, the woman would only be entitled to retain the three contractual payments which were agreed at the start of the union. Firstly, she could keep her *agweddi*, which in this context refers to the portion of the goods held in common in the marriage, the amount of which was related to the status of her father. Secondly, she retained her *argyfrau*,

³³ Owen, ‘Shame and Reparation’, p. 52.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 53.; Roberts, ‘Emerging from the Bushes’, p. 73.

³⁵ Richards, *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century*, p. 172.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 169.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 170.

³⁸ Davies, ‘The Status of Women and the Practice of Marriage’, p. 112.

that is the personal possessions which she brought to the marriage and, thirdly, the *cowy//* which her husband agreed to pay her for the loss of her virginity.³⁹

If the marriage lasted seven years, the status of the woman's father became irrelevant, and the goods held in common were divided between the couple based on the stipulations in the law codes. The *Iorwerth* redaction contains a detailed list of how livestock, household goods, children and food should be divided between the couple. As far as livestock are concerned:

The pigs go to the man and the sheep to the woman. If they have only one kind they are to be divided into two halves. And if there be sheep and goats, the sheep go to the man and the goats go to the woman. If they have only one kind, they are to be divided.⁴⁰

The eldest and youngest children went with the father, while the mother kept the middle children and each partner received one quern stone. The upper bedding went to the woman, but the man could keep the 'clothes which are under them until he marry'. Household tools and other items were split between the couple.⁴¹

Writing in 1980, Dafydd Jenkins interpreted this passage as a desire to ensure that each party had sufficient goods to set up a new household after the divorce although he does question why the two quern stones necessary for grinding grain would be separated.⁴² More recently, scholars have questioned this reading of the text. Stacey argues that this passage is much more likely to be a warning to divorcing couples about the impact that a separation could have on their economic future as well as their standing within the community, particularly as the goods were separated in public. She considers such a public ceremony to be similar to other legal 'burlesques' with the witnesses considering it to be 'humorous, pathetic, wasteful, and even obscene.'⁴³ Indeed, it seems less than practical that '[t]he man is entitled to all the hens and one cat, and all the others go to the woman' when the purpose of the cats

³⁹ McAll, 'The Normal Paradigms of a Woman's Life', p. 20.

⁴⁰ 'Iorwerth', in *The Welsh Law of Women: Studies Presented to Professor Daniel A. Binchy on His Eightieth Birthday, 3 June 1980*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980), p. 163.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* pp.163-64.

⁴² Jenkins, 'Property Interests in the Classical Welsh Law of Women', p. 84.

⁴³ Stacey, 'Divorce, Medieval Welsh Style', pp. 1119-1120.

would be to protect the hens and their eggs from predators.⁴⁴ Furthermore, even an equal separation of moveable goods would not leave the couple in an equitable position after divorce because women were unable to hold land, so even with livestock and tools a woman would not be able to set up a new home easily. Additionally, it is likely that it would have been harder for a woman to obtain a new partner than it would be for a man, given the importance placed on female virginity.⁴⁵

When considering the medieval Welsh law codes as a source which can tell us about the lives of women at this time, it is important to note that the law codes were not a corpus of statutes issued by a sovereign and enforced by the apparatus of the state. Rather they represent customary law, which was developed over time, both before and after the extant redactions, and were used by lawyers who needed to understand 'traditional customs, rights and obligations'.⁴⁶ The contents of *Cyfraith Hywel* come from many periods and contexts, which is not made obvious in the texts, and present an artificially static representation of a society which was undergoing considerable social, political and economic changes.⁴⁷

As the law codes were not statutory, they do not in themselves provide evidence of whether their provisions impacted the lives of women living in medieval Wales. As ecclesiastical records were lost during the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century, very little evidence remains of wedding customs which operated at this time. There is also scant evidence in the limited surviving court rolls, and what does exist consists of civil cases between private parties or cases brought to protect the lord's interests. In some ways this lack of evidence is not surprising as marriages were largely private contracts which may have been written down but could have been verbal agreements between families. Along with these limitations, Davies also highlights geographical and linguistic restrictions on the usefulness of the court rolls in assessing if the Laws of Women represented a real-world reality. The examples which he identifies are from the northeastern Marches, which was socially and legally conservative and the court rolls were produced 150 years after the law codes

⁴⁴ 'Iorwerth', p.163.

⁴⁵ Stacey, 'Divorce, Medieval Welsh Style', p. 1121.

⁴⁶ Gwennyth Richards, *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century*, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), p. 158.

⁴⁷ Davies, 'The Status of Women and the Practice of Marriage', p. 93.

were redacted, written in Latin by English-speaking scribes, who may have struggled to find suitable terms to express the unique concepts of customary Welsh law.⁴⁸

Working within these restrictions, Davies identified a case relating to disputed *amobr* which indicate that some aspects of the Laws of Women were in operation in the fourteenth century. Adda ab Adda Ddu had refused to pay *amobr* to the lord of Dyffryn Clwyd when he married a widow. He argued that the payment was not due because his wife had inherited her English husband's lands on his death and was therefore subject to English, not Welsh, law.⁴⁹ This case demonstrates that *amobr* was expected to be paid and that it was assumed that women could not be land holders in Wales. Davies also refers to another case from Dyffryn Clwyd in 1343 concerning the breakdown of a marriage. The couple had agreed that in such an eventuality the party responsible for the breakup would have to pay the other party 30s. and pay 30s. to the lord. In this case, the decision about which party was guilty was left to twelve witnesses who attended the marriage. This case demonstrates a real-world example of the use of witnesses as it is described in the Law of Women.⁵⁰

Richards argues that Dyffryn Clywd was not typical of how the laws operated throughout Wales and that, in fact, many Welsh noble women held land and that English common law had a great influence on the Welsh nobility of the thirteenth century because of the extensive intermarriage between English and Welsh noble families. She further asserts that Welsh princes may have championed the native laws as a way to emphasise their power in ruling over a united and independent country but they often applied English common law to themselves and their families if this suited their political ambitions, citing the example of Llewelyn Fawr ensuring that his younger legitimate son became his heir instead of his older, illegitimate one.⁵¹

It may be that the most detailed sections of the law codes are the ones which least represent reality. For example, Stacey argues that the tractate on the separation of goods on divorce may have had several social, cultural and religious purposes and in fact it is a form of literature, expressing moral concerns and perhaps attempting to

⁴⁸ Ibid. pp. 94-98.

⁴⁹ Davies, 'The Status of Women and the Practice of Marriage', p. 103.

⁵⁰ Ibid. pp. 108-109.

⁵¹ Richards, *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century*, pp. 160-161.

bring Welsh practices more in line with canon law's views on marriage, divorce, concubinage and inheritance. Equally, they may have been a political commentary inspired by the case of Joan, wife of Llewelyn Fawr who engaged in an adulterous relationship.⁵²

In the absence of court or church records, medieval literature can provide a useful source for how the law codes affected women's lives. Welsh praise poetry and narrative prose both show a strong influence of the concepts of shame and honour. The second Branch of the *Mabinogi* contains examples of the payment of *sarhaed* resulting from perceived insults to Branwen's kin related to her marriage to Matholwch and his subsequent rejection of her.⁵³

In conclusion, the Welsh law codes tell us much about how women were perceived within the male dominated Welsh medieval society. The emphasis placed on the importance of female virginity illustrates a woman's role as a provider of heirs for her husband's kin group. While a man's illegitimate children could inherit equally with their legitimate siblings, it was important to prove the paternity of the children and the laws around virginity and adultery emphasise this. The rules for the behaviour of couples during marriage and divorce show that different standards were expected of men and women. Medieval Welsh women lived in a society which accepted that divorce was possible, in contrast to canon law.

While there is little evidence to show whether the laws were enforced either within kin groups or through the courts, it is likely that they served a significant purpose in setting expectations for behaviour and to warn of the outcome of any transgressions. They should also be seen in the context of literary sources from the period which may give an indication of how the laws operated in practice.

⁵² Stacey, 'Divorce, Medieval Welsh Style', p. 1125.

⁵³ Owen, 'Shame and Reparation', pp. 58-60.

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