

**'Draumar mínir villa oss': On the Use of the First Person Plural in Contexts of
Individuals in Skaldic Stanzas**

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Gísli Súrsson speaks this sentence when he is telling his wife Auðr about his dreams (ÍF VI: 75–76). The pronoun *oss* is apparently not used to indicate plural in this context, because Gísli refers to his own feelings that he had when he awoke. The poet commonly uses first person singular when he speaks for himself and first person plural when he speaks for a group of people (e. g., as a part of an army in battle descriptions). But there are numerous examples where the poet uses the plural when he is speaking about himself alone. In this paper I argue that this use of the plural can very often be explained on the one hand by metrics, and on the other hand by the content and context of the stanza.

Plural Pronouns

The use of plural personal pronouns (*vér* and *oss*) and plural possessive pronouns (*ór-/vár-*) in the context of individuals is, above all, influenced by metrics. They can be used for alliteration (Refr¹ 2, 3.1-2: *þér eigum vér veigar/ Val-Gautr, salar brautar*), for internal rhymes (GSúrs 34.7: *oss gein hjórr of hjassa*), or even for both (ESK 6, 67.3-4: *ber koma orð frá órum./ Óláfs, bragar stóli*). The pronoun *oss* is the most commonly used plural pronoun for these purposes and it occurs, above all, in vowel alliteration:

Villa oss, ef² elli
oddstriðir skal biða
(mér gengr Sjöfn í svefna
sauma) mínir draumar;³ (GSúrs 17.1-4)

This half-stanza also shows that the singular pronouns *mér* and *mínir* are not influenced by metrics, but are chosen because of the stanza's content. Hence, singular and plural forms are frequently used in the same stanza.

There are only few uses of plural pronouns that are not influenced by metrics. In these cases the context of the stanza may provide an answer. For example, in lausavisa 24, Sigvatr Þórðarson remembers his life with Óláfr inn helgi as he looks at the men of King Sveinn who are playing in the street (ÍF XXVIII: 16):

minnumk ek, hvar manna	<i>prose word order:</i> ek minnumk, hvar
minn dróttinn lék sinna	minn orðsæll dróttinn lék opt forðum
opt á óðals-toptum	ok vér á óðals-toptum manna sinna.
orðsæll ok vér forðum.	(Sigv Lv 24.5-8)

'I remember where my famed master and I often played once at his men's properties.'

¹ I use the abbreviations given in *Lexicon Poeticum*.

² Observe that *ef* is unstressed and therefore not an alliterating stave.

³ For the most part, I use Finnur Jónsson's edition, but in some stanzas I use the edition of ÍF, when it is closer to the manuscripts.

Here, *vér* could be translated as plural, because Sigvatr may possibly be referring not only to himself but also to King Óláfr's whole retinue. Nevertheless, the translation of the pronoun *vér* as singular is, in my opinion, more plausible, because the poet is speaking about his relationship to his dead master in the whole stanza.

More difficult to explain is the use of *vér* in lausavísa 57, in which the poet Kormákr refers to his conflict with Þórvaldr tinteinn when he says:

Fekk sás föggu vífi	<i>prose word order:</i> sás fór stórum nær
fór nær an vér stórum	föggu vífi an vér fekk högg af hjalmar
högg af hjalmar skíði	skíði í miðjan hattar stall
í hattar stall miðjan	(Korm Lv 57.1-4)

'He, who came much closer to the beautiful woman than I, got a blow from a ship's helm's tiller in the middle of the hat's perch (> head).'⁴

The pronoun *vér* in line 2 is not influenced by metrics because a full internal rhyme (aðalhending) is required in even-numbered dróttkvætt lines. This is already given by *fór* and *stórum*. In the prose context (ÍF VIII: 294) it is told that Kormákr and Þórvaldr are each commanding their own ships in the retinue of King Haraldr gráfeldr. Therefore, the first impression could be that Kormákr is speaking for his ship's crew. But Kormákr is in fact referring to his personal conflict with Þórvaldr, who has married Kormákr's beloved Steingerör. Therefore, *vér* has to be translated as singular.

A comparable situation can be seen in the quarrel between Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld and a companion of Þórgrímr trolli⁵ in Greenland, in which they discuss who is better skilled at using the harpoon for seal-hunting:

Betr lézk beita skutli,	<i>prose word order:</i> betr lézk kunna beita
Baldr hælir því skjaldar,	skutli an vér; skjaldar Baldr hælir því;
(þollr hleypr hart of hellur	hlunnjós þollr hleypr hart of hellur;
hlunnjós), an vér kunna;	(Þorm Lv 4.1-4)

'He thinks he knows better than I how to wield the harpoon, the shield-Baldr (> warrior) boasts of this; the launching-steed's tree (ship > seafarer) races vehemently over rocks.'

The pronoun *vér* has to be translated as singular here; this is also supported by a sentence Þormóðr delivers to introduce this stanza: '*Óvist þykki mér, hvárt þú beittir betr en ek*' (ÍF VI: 230).

The pronoun *oss* is not influenced by metrics in two stanzas by Víga-Glúmr. In stanza 1 he reflects upon the unjust behaviour of Þorkell and his son Sigmundur, who have annexed a part of Víga-Glúmr's property (ÍF IX: 20):

Nær gengr mér ok mínum	<i>prose word order:</i> enn græni garðr
menþöll, hjúum öllum	gengr nær mér ok öllum mínum hjúum,
(þverr við glaum) enn græni	menþöll, an oss of varði; glaum þverr
garðr, an oss of varði;	við; (VGL 1.1-4)

'The green fence came closer to me and my whole household, necklace-tree (> woman), than we expected, (my/our) joy diminishes.'

A translation as plural is possible, because Víga-Glúmr is addressing his mother, who can be included in the statement *an oss of varði*. Furthermore, he is not only speaking

⁴ For the English translation I have usually used *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (1997). For Kormákr's stanzas I also use O'Donoghue 1991.

⁵ Þórgrímr trolli was one of the men who killed Þormóðr's sworn brother Þórgeirr.

for himself but also for his whole household (*öllum mínum hjúum*). Similarly, the poet laments that he has lost his property in stanza 9.3-4 (ÍF IX: 90): *oss kom breiðr í búðir/ bogggr af einu hoggvi* 'It came to us in (our) farm a wide ranging harm from a single blow.' The plural pronoun here may have been chosen for the same reason, that is to say, Víga-Glúmr is referring not only to his situation but also to that of his whole household. One reason may be that the stanza continues with the plural:

bás, fleinmarar, fjóra	<i>prose word order:</i> bás vér sötum
fullkátir vér sötum,	fullkátir fjóra tögva vetra, fleinmarar
(nú's) mǫ-grennir (minna	mǫ-grennir; nú's mitt setr minna
mitt ⁶ setr) tögva vetra	(VGL 9.5-8)

'after we have sat contented forty winters, feeder of the blood's seagulls
(> ravens > warrior), now my property is decreased'

In ÍF the whole stanza is nevertheless translated as singular. A possible explanation is that the plural *fullkátir vér sötum* is influenced by metrics (see below) and that Víga-Glúmr's fate is closely connected to him having killed Þorvaldr krókr (ÍF IX: 77-85).

Finally, the poet Gunnlaugr ormstunga uses the plural pronoun *oss* when he speaks about his fight against Hrafn Óundarson:

<i>Oss</i> gekk, mætr, á móti,	<i>prose word order:</i> Hrafn, mætr
mótrunnr í dyn ⁷ spjóta,	mótrunnr, hjörva hriðgervandi,
hriðgervandi hjörva,	gekk jafnan framliga á móti oss
Hrafn, framliga jafnan;	í spjóta dyn; (Gunnl Lv 13.1-4)

'Hrafn, the splendid battle-tree (> warrior), who is making a storm of swords (> battle), pressed on constantly against me/ us in the clash of spears (> battle).'

I prefer the translation with a singular pronoun, because the final duel between the two rivals is emphasised in the saga. But if we look exactly at the context in the saga, then we see that Hrafn has fought against Þorkell svartí before, and Gunnlaugr against the brothers Grímr and Óláfr (ÍF III: 101-103). Therefore, a translation with a plural pronoun is also possible.

Plural Verbs

Plural verbs can also be influenced by metrics, but this is often more difficult to explain than plural pronouns. Nonetheless, the use of a plural verb for internal rhyme is easy to explain. For example, the plural form *þóggum* is used instead of the singular form *þá*, because it has to rhyme with *ægis*: *áðr þóggum vér ægis* (Sigv Lv 4.3). A similar example is found in a lausavísa of Björn hitdælakappi: *ok vóggum þorn þeygi* (Bjhit Lv 18.5).

In other examples, internal rhyme is used in the sequence 'vowel + consonant + j', where 'j' of the plural forms can also be used to lengthen and stress the syllable: *hér sverjum þess, hyrjar* (Egill Að 1.7). In this line *sverjum* is used instead of *sver* (*ek*) to rhyme with *hyrjar*. In other words, [erj] and [yrj] are used as a half internal rhyme

⁶ Observe that the singular pronoun *mitt* is also influenced by metrics (alliteration).

⁷ Finnur Jónsson has copied the emendation by Konráð Gíslason: *styr* instead of *dyn* (see Skj.AI: 197). I prefer *dyn* which is found in manuscripts and is not complicated in the translation. Therefore, I use the edition of ÍF.

(*skothending*). This sequence is also used for *aðalhending*: *hæft skiljum brag, vilja* (Bjhit Lv 1.2). Other examples for *aðalhending* are:

Bjhit Lv 17.2	<i>þess unnum þør Gunnar</i>	[<i>unnum</i> instead of <i>ann (ek)</i>]
Has 63.6	(<i>oss kjósum þat</i>) <i>ljósi</i>	[<i>kjósum</i> instead of <i>kaus (ek)</i>]

The sequence [ǫf] of the plural form *hǫfum* in the line *jǫfurs dýrð hǫfum skýrða* (ESk 6, 66.2) is not used as an *aðalhending*, even though it rhymes with *jǫfurs*, because [ýrð] of *skýrða* lies in the penultimate syllable and is, as a consequence, the second part of the internal rhyme. Moreover, in stanza 69.1 of the same poem, an *aðalhending* is not required in odd lines (*Óláfs hǫfum jǫfra*). Therefore, in both stanzas it may also be possible to use the singular form (*hef ek*). Finally, in *Háttatal* 80, the plural forms *sporum* and *gorum* are used for the end-rhyme:

Lof's flutt fjorum	hefk hans forum
fyr gunnorum	til hróðrs gorum
(né spurð sporum	ypt óvorum
spjöll) gram snorum;	fyr auðs þorum.

The plural form of the verb need not be solely influenced by the requirements of rhyme, but sometimes also by the strict count of syllables in *dróttkvætt* stanzas. This means that a disyllabic plural form may be used instead of a monosyllabic singular form⁸ to obtain the required six syllables per line: *leikum sárt við bleikan* (Eg Lv 30.6). But this is not without problems, because a monosyllabic singular form can be combined with a pronoun to obtain the required count of syllables. This is shown, for example, in a similar line by Egill Skalla-Grimsson: *leik ek við hal bleikan* (Eg Lv 29.2). Furthermore, the line *háði, kunnum hróðrs-smíð* (Ormr 1, 2.3) differs among manuscripts: *kvnvm* (SnE R, W, U) versus *kan ec* (SnE T) [see Skj.AI: 415].

If the singular form of a disyllabic plural verb is also disyllabic, then one can hardly use the syllable count as an argument. In *líkn reynum svá, lauka* (GSúrs 33.7) the plural verb *reynum* can also be interchanged with the singular form *reyni(k)*. This is also shown in a line by Egill (Lv 36.5) which differs among manuscripts: *leifum vætr, þótt Laufa* (Egils s. K) versus *leift ek⁹ vætr þo at laufa* (Egils s. M) [see Skj.AI: 57].

The trochee (/x) at the end of the line, which is 'usually provided by an independent disyllabic word' (Whaley 1993: 591), requires the use of a disyllabic plural form instead of a monosyllabic singular form (+ pronoun). Therefore, in *lýðr nemi ljóð sem kvðum* (Þúriðr 1.7), only the plural form can be used. However, disyllabic singular forms may also be used at the end of the line: *hárir menn, es heyrik* (Sigtv 11, 12.3). Therefore, in *sparðak jó, þanns áttum* (Korm Lv 24.7), the singular form *átta(k)* is also possible.

The plural verb + pronoun can be used to obtain the required six syllables. This is shown, for example, in *vér kunnum skil skeppa* (Korm Lv 33.3). *Ek kann* is not feasible, because there would then only be five syllables in the line. There are examples in which the plural form is used although there are more than six syllables per line: *hrein getum hála launa* (Sigtv 9, 1.1) and *hlutum dýran grip, stýra* (Esk 11,

⁸ Most of the weak verbs are disyllabic, whereas the strong verbs are monosyllabic in present/ past indicative.

⁹ In most manuscripts *ek* is not written as an enclitical form, but it should be regarded as such for the metre.

3.2). But there are also examples in which the count of seven syllables can be explained:

Nú skulum gǫfgan geisla/ goðs hallar vér allir (ESk 6, 7.1-2)

nú gerik enn, þvít unnum/ ættgóðu vel fljóði (Rv 19.5-6).

In stanza 7.1 *skulum* is necessary because of *allir* in the following line. *Allir* (instead of *allr*) not only fits the syllable count but a disyllabic word is also required by the trochee in the metre. Similar reasoning also explains the seven syllables in 19.5: the plural form *unnum* has to be used, because the monosyllabic singular form *ann(k)* is not permitted at the end of the line.

Finally, there are verb forms which appear to be plural forms, for instance *erum* and *hǫfum*, which prove to be singular forms onto which pronouns are affixed enclitically, e. g.: *mjók erum* [= *er mér*] *tregi/ tungu at hræra* '(my) tongue is sluggish for me to move' (Egill St 1.1-2) and *hǫfum* [= *hefr mik*] *gramr framðan* 'the king has honoured me' (Hfr Lv 5.6). These examples show that the third person singular is used here in combination with the pronoun *mér* or *mik*. Axel Kock illustrated the change from *er mér* to *erum* as follows:

'3. sg. pres. **er-miR* blev genom synkope av ultimas i-ljud till **eRuMR*, och eftersom slutljudande *-mR* i infortistavelse blev till *-m(m)*, uppstod av **eRuMR* formen *erum* med en betydelse motsvarande isl. *er mér*' (Kock 1919: 70).

This examination shows that many plural forms can be explained by metrics, but I have also given some examples in which the singular and plural form of a verb are possible. Therefore, other criteria should be considered. As I wrote in the introduction, the poet commonly uses the plural when he speaks for a group. I have noticed that the poet acts as such a speaker above all in battle descriptions. This is apparent when Þorgils is telling Guðrún that he and his fellows have killed Helgi, the murderer of Bolli (ÍF V: 194):

Sóttum heim at Helga;
hrafn létum ná svelga;
ruðum fagrröðuls eiki
þás fylgðum Þórleiki.

Þria létum þar falla
þjóðnýta gǫrvalla
hjálms allkæna þolla.

Hefnt teljum nú Bolla. (ÞorgHöll)¹⁰

'We went home to Helgi, we let ravens gorge on corpses, we reddened the oak of the nice sun (> shield > sword) when we accompanied Þórleikr. There we let fall three very good (and) experienced helmet-trees (> warriors). We reckon that Bolli is now revenged.'

Still, some stanzas by Egill Skalla-Grimsson are difficult to explain: he uses plural forms, although he fights alone against the berserk Ljótr according to the saga context (ÍF II: 201-204):

¹⁰ Finnur Jónsson has emended *fagrröðul* into *farröðul* to get a better kenning for shield. Furthermore, I prefer *hefnt teljum nú Bolla* (AM 132 fol.) instead of *þó teljum hefnt Bolla* (ÍB 225, 4to) [see Skj. AI: 205].

Höggum hjaltvönd skyggðan, ¹¹	stýfum Ljót af lifi,
höfum rönd með brandi,	leikum sárt við bleikan,
reynum randar mána,	kyrrum kappá errinn
rjóðum sverð í blóði;	komi örn á hræ, jörnum (Eg Lv 30)

'Let us beat with the polished hilt-twig (> sword), we strike shields with the blade, we test the shield's moon (> sword), we redden the sword with blood, we shorten the life of Ljótr, we play painfully with the pale man, we silence the strong warrior with iron, the eagle is coming to the body.'

A reason for the use of plural may be that Egill, who wants to help Friðgeirr defeat the berserk, is calling to arms. According to the saga, Egill arrives at the battlefield with Friðgeirr and his fellows and says *forum holms á vit, sörvar* 'let us go to the duelling-place, warriors' (Eg Lv 28.2). But after that, he is fighting alone with Ljótr: *biúmk til vígs, en vægðar/ vón lætka ek hçnum* 'I am prepared to fight, I give him no hope of mercy.' (Eg Lv 29.5-6)

More difficult to explain is the use of the plural in *lausavísa* 40, in which Egill speaks to his friend Einarr skálaglamm about his most glorious deed [IF II: 268/9]:

Börðumk einn við átta,	'I fought alone with eight, and twice
en við ellifu tysvar,	with eleven. I fed the wolf with
svá <u>fungum</u> val vargi	corpses, I killed them all myself.'
varðk einn bani þeira;	(Eg Lv 40.1-4)

The metre and the context in the saga would also allow the use of *fekk ek* instead of *fungum*. This stanza demonstrates that it is not always possible to conceive the poet to be speaking on behalf of a group in battle descriptions. For example, in *söddum hrafna á holdi hçlðs* the singular is suitable because Kormákr is speaking about himself throughout the stanza:

Svá kveðk snyrti-Freyju	at vegskorðan verði
snimr trúða ek brúði,	varrskiðs nemit síðan,
gamðis vangs of gengna	söddum hçlðs á holdi
greipar báls ór skçlum,	hrafna, mér at tafni (Korm Lv 23) ¹²

Prose word order: Svá kveðk greipar báls snyrti-Freyju of gengna ór skçlum gamðis vangs - snimr trúða ek brúði - at vegskorðan varrskiðs nemit verði mér síðan at tafni; söddum hrafna á holdi hçlðs.

'Thus, I declare the elegant Freyja of the hand-clasp's fire (> gold > woman) to be gone from [my] hollows of the hawk's plain (> arm > palm) - too soon I trusted in the bride - [so] that the abductor of the prop of the sea-ski's way (> ship > sea > woman > Bersi) shall later be my prey - I have fed the ravens on the flesh of men.'¹³

¹¹ Finnur Jónsson has chosen *hjalta vendi* from the manuscript W (AM 461, 4to), but I prefer *hjaltevönd skyggðan* from the other manuscripts because of internal rhyme (*höggum* and *skyggðan*).

¹² I have chosen the stanza's editing by ÍF (VIII: 231/2) because it is closer to manuscripts. Finnur Jónsson has emended *vegskorðan varrskiðs nemit* into *vegskorða varrskiðs funa* to get a better kenning for a woman. But it is also possible that this is a kenning for a man (Bersi), and I have chosen this for the translation.

¹³ I use the translation of Heather O'Donoghue (1997: 65) which is geared to ÍF.

Another domain in which the poet speaks for a group is the presentation of his poetry. When he is reciting praise poetry, he sometimes includes the audience:

enn vér gótnum,	'and we have made the praise of the king
stillis lof,	like a stone bridge'
sem steinabrí	(Hál 16.2-4)

It is possible that the poet uses the plural to indicate that he is also speaking for all poets: *oss dugir satt of snotran/ sælinga kon mæla* 'it behoves us to speak true of the wise offspring of wealthy men (> king)' (Steinn 1, 7.3-4). In my opinion, however, it is more suitable to give a singular translation when the poet tells about the process of making poetry: *framm/ hornstraum getum Hrímnis/ hræra* 'I am able to produce a horn's stream of the Hrímnir (= giant > mead of poetry)' (EVald 1.2-4) and *vekjum mjóð Súðra* 'I recite Súðri's mead (> poetry)' (GSúrs 20.2). There are also examples where these poetic formulae are influenced by metrics: *né Yggs fyr líð leggjum* 'I don't stop making verses' (Korm Lv 14.7) and *hæft skiljum brag, vilja* 'I make a clear verse' (BjHit Lv 1.2).

Finally, in love poetry, the use of the plural is influenced by metrics most of the time, as for example when Kormákr expresses his love to Steingerðr:

Brunnu beggja kinna	<i>prose word order:</i> björt ljós beggja
björt ljós á mik drósar	kinna drósar brunnu á mik of feldan
(oss hlægir þat eigi)	eldhúss við - oss hlægir þat eigi -, [...]
eldhúss of við feldan [...]	þrö muna eldask oss of ævi
(þrö muna oss of ævi/ eldask)	(Korm Lv 2.1-4, 7-8)

'The bright lights of both her cheeks (> eye) burned upon me from the fire-hall's felled wood, no cause of laughing for me in that, [...] the longing will burn my whole life.'

rendak alt et iðra	<i>prose word order:</i> rendak brágeislum
(eyrar geirs) at þeirri	alt hús et iðra at þeirri; erum fúsir at
(hlins* erum Hørn at finna)	finna geirs eyrar hlins Hørn ¹⁴
hús brágeislum (fúsir)	(Korm Lv 15.5-8)

'I ran my eyelid candles (> eye) all inside the house for her, I am eager to find the Hørn [= Freyja] of the spear bank's flame (> arm > gold > woman),'¹⁵

These examples show that in stanza 2.3 and 2.7 the pronoun *oss* is used for vowel alliteration, and in stanza 15.7-8 the plural form *erum fúsir* is used to provide a disyllabic word (*fúsir*) at the end of the line. But there is one stanza spoken by the poet Hallfreðr in which the plural verb *unnum* is not the result of metrics. Hallfreðr recites this stanza on hearing that his beloved Kolfinna has married Griss [ÍF VIII: 150]:

¹⁴ This kenning for a woman is complicated because of the word *hlins*, which has been emended in different ways: *hins* (Björn Magnússon Olsen), *hyrs* (Finnur Jónsson) and *húns* (Ernst A. Kock). Also the first part of the kenning (*geirs eyrar*) is interpreted differently [see: ÍF VIII: 219/20].

¹⁵ I prefer the translation by Heather O'Donoghue, who has used Finnur Jónsson's emendation 'even though this spoils the line's rhyme, because it does give the relatively straightforward kenning' (O'Donoghue 1997: 45).

þvíð álgrundar endis
 áttgóðrar mér trúðu
 betr unnum nú nýtja
 nær an heitin væri.

prose word order: þvíð unnum nú nýtja
 áttgóðrar álgrundar endis trúðu nær
 betr an væri heitin mér

(Hfr Lv 3.5-8)¹⁶

'for I love the well-born pole of Endil's eel-land (> sea > woman) almost
 more now than if she had been promised to me'

It is not clear why *unnum* has been chosen, because *ann ek* is also possible. In other stanzas *unnum* is indeed influenced by metrics (e. g., SkrautO 1.2 and Rv Lv 19.5). Especially interesting is a stanza by Rognvaldr jarl in which he uses a sentence similar to Hallfreðr:

nú grik enn, þvíð unnum
 ættgóðu vel fljóði,

'for I love the well-born woman'
 (Rv Lv 19.5-6)

The reason for this use of the plural remains elusive: it is not always possible to explain each use of the plural in the context of individuals. But this examination has shown that the majority of plural forms are influenced by skaldic metre. Moreover, the context of some stanzas can help us to understand the use of the plural. However, there are examples which can be explained neither by metrics nor by content.

In conclusion, I present an example which shows, once again, the difficulties we encounter when we examine the problem of the use of the plural instead of the expected singular. This stanza, spoken by Grettir (14.7-8), is handed down differently in different manuscripts. In AM 556a the plural forms are used, whereas in AM 551a (et al.) the singular forms are used [see Skj.AII: 434]:

hvít, ef hér skulum láta

hvít ef hér skal láta

hvert sinn fyr oss vinna (AM 556a)

hvert sinn fyr mik vinna (AM 551a)

Neither variant can be justified by metrical needs. However, saga literature may provide an explanation for such variants. If the same phenomenon also occurs in saga literature, then its explanation may also explain the variants in skaldic poetry. This approach is justified because saga literature is not governed by metrics.

I have discussed a phenomenon in skaldic poetry which has, to my knowledge, never been studied before, although it is very important for the interpretation and translation of skaldic verses. I have shown the necessity to examine both the content and context of skaldic stanzas carefully in order to obtain the best possible reading, regarding the interpretation of singular versus plural pronouns and singular versus plural verb forms.

¹⁶ Finnur Jónsson has emended *álgrundar endis* into *eldgrundar Endils* to get a better kenning for a woman.

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