

CHINA
200ish BCE
HAN DYNASTY



WE MADE IT! WHERE SHOULD WE PARK?



THE ORIGINS OF IMAGINATIVE PLAY CAN BE EXPLORED IN THE PRACTICE OF PUPPETRY.

ONE HISTORICAL SOURCE OF PUPPETRY IS THE HAN DYNASTY, ESTABLISHED IN 202 BCE.



PUPPETS IN CHINA ARE THOUGHT TO DERIVE FROM STATUETTES THAT WERE BURIED WITH EMPERORS.



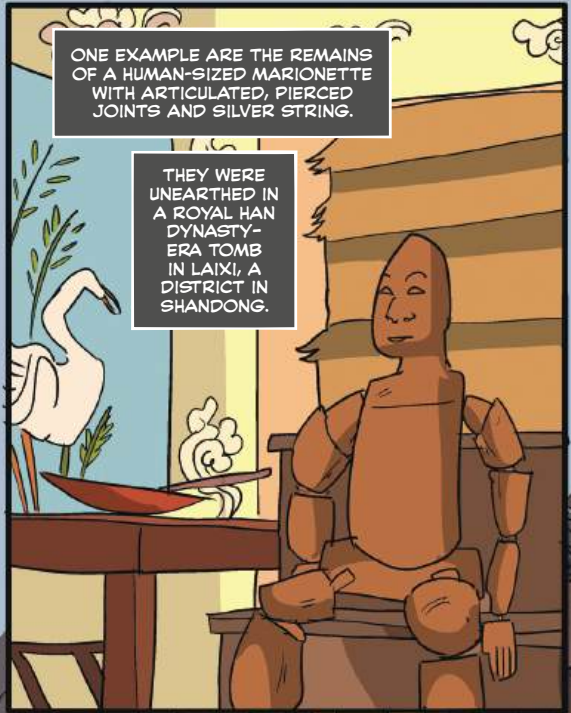
THIS, INSTEAD OF BURying THEM WITH FORMERLY ALIVE HUMANS AS "COMPANIONS IN DEATH."



THE TERRACOTTA WARRIORS OF QIN SHI HUANGDI ARE A PROMINENT EXAMPLE OF THIS.



BUT OTHER KINDS WERE PREVALENT AS WELL-LIKE CLAY STONE STATUES AND WOODEN MARIONETTES!



ONE EXAMPLE ARE THE REMAINS OF A HUMAN-SIZED MARIONETTE WITH ARTICULATED, PIERCED JOINTS AND SILVER STRING.

THEY WERE UNEARTHED IN A ROYAL HAN DYNASTY-ERA TOMB IN LAIXI, A DISTRICT IN SHANDONG.



CHINESE PUPPETRY ITSELF IS THOUGHT TO HAVE BEGUN IN RITUAL, MOSTLY REVOLVING AROUND FUNERALS AND THE PURIFICATION OF EVIL SPIRITS FROM HOMES, TEMPLES, AND PALACES.



HERE WE ARE IN A NEW HOUSE, WHERE AN EXORCISM PLAY CALLED ZHAO XUANTAN TAMES THE TIGER IS BEING PUT ON.



BASED IN LEGEND, ZHAO XUANTAN, ONE OF NINE SUNS THAT WAS BROUGHT TO EARTH, BECAME KNOWN AS A POWERFUL DEITY.



SO POWERFUL THAT PERFORMING HIS RITUAL PLAY WOULD CAUSE A NESTING DEMON TO FLEE A NEW HOUSE IN TERROR, LEAVING IT IN PEACE.

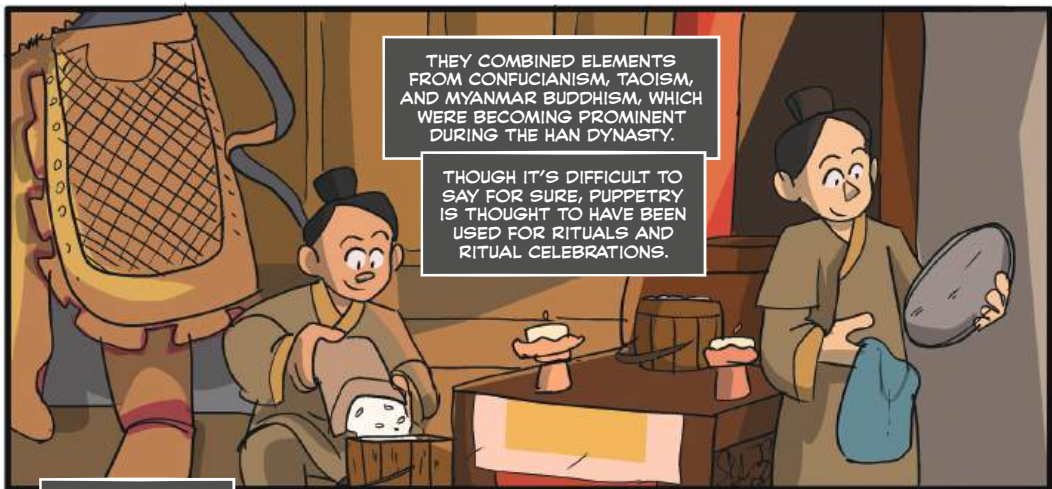


FOR LARGER AND MORE IMPORTANT STRUCTURES, LIKE THIS TEMPLE, THE SAME IDEA OF PUPPETRY APPLIED BUT ON A MUCH LARGER SCALE.



EVEN MORE POWERFUL PLAYS WERE NEEDED TO BANISH MORE POWERFUL EVIL SPIRITS.

THESE RITUAL PLAYS DATED BACK TO THE ZHOU DYNASTY (1046-256 BCE).



THEY COMBINED ELEMENTS FROM CONFUCIANISM, TAOISM, AND MYANMAR BUDDHISM, WHICH WERE BECOMING PROMINENT DURING THE HAN DYNASTY.

THOUGH IT'S DIFFICULT TO SAY FOR SURE, PUPPETRY IS THOUGHT TO HAVE BEEN USED FOR RITUALS AND RITUAL CELEBRATIONS.

LIKE MARRIAGES, FOR EXAMPLE.



OR KUILEI WEI SANGJIA YUE*, WHICH WERE FUNERAL RITUALS THAT INCLUDED A FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT.

*TRANSLATION: FUNERAL PUPPETRY

FROM THE MOMENT THESE PUPPETS ENTERED THE STAGE, A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP OF TRUST BEGAN BETWEEN THE PERFORMERS AND THE AUDIENCE. THESE WERE RITUALS, BUT THEY WERE ALSO PERFORMANCES, THE LATTER OF WHICH BECAME PREVALENT DURING THE HAN DYNASTY.

WARRIOR TALES, RECOUNTING ACTUAL EVENTS CELEBRATING HAN DYNASTY MILITARY VICTORIES, BECAME POPULAR AND HAD POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE, AS OPPOSED TO JUST BEING RITUAL.



IF YOU ARE SO CAPABLE, THEN WHY ARE YOU ONE OF MY SUBJECTS, HAN XIN?

YOUR POSITION IS MANDATED BY THE HEAVENS, MY SOVEREIGN. IT IS NOT SOMETHING HUMANS CAN CHANGE.

THEN WHY WERE YOU TAKEN CAPTIVE BY ME?

YOUR MAJESTY CANNOT COMMAND THE TROOPS BUT IS GOOD AT COMMANDING THE COMMANDERS.

THE GREAT GENERAL HAN XIN IS AN EXAMPLE OF SUCH A PLAY. AS ONE OF THE "THREE HEROES OF THE EARLY HAN DYNASTY," HAN XIN'S STORY WAS RETOLD IN EPIC PROPORTIONS.

WARRIOR TALES SHOW THAT THE HAN DYNASTY CAN BE THOUGHT OF AS THE EARLIEST PRACTITIONERS OF HISTORICAL REENACTMENT.

TODAY'S REENACTMENTS—MOSTLY CENTERED AROUND BATTLES—ARE EDUTAINMENT EVENTS. BUT THEY SERVE A SIMILAR PURPOSE AS ANCIENT WARRIOR TALES.

SINCE THE HAN DYNASTY'S UNIFICATION WAS SEEN AS A MASSIVE ACCOMPLISHMENT, THEY NEEDED TO BECOME IMPORTANT PARTS OF CULTURAL MEMORY.

HAVE MERCY, HAN XIN!



WARRIOR TALES REINFORCED THAT IMPORTANCE THROUGH PERFORMANCE.

THEY MAY HAVE ALSO SERVED AS STATE PROPAGANDA IN THE CASE OF THE HAN DYNASTY, TO LEGITIMIZE THE EMPEROR'S RIGHTFUL RULE.



HISTORICAL REENACTMENT LETS PEOPLE SAFELY INHABIT OTHER ROLES, BECOMING HEROES AND VILLAINS.



THEY CAN SIMULATE INVOLVEMENT IN MONUMENTAL EVENTS WITHOUT PARTICIPATING IN THEM DIRECTLY.

KIND OF LIKE WHEN I PLAYED TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES AS A KID. BUT, UH, SAFER.

HAN XIN, HAVE MERCY!



EVENTUALLY, PUPPETRY WAS USED FOR BOTH RITUAL AND ENTERTAINMENT PURPOSES—OFTEN IN COMBINATION!

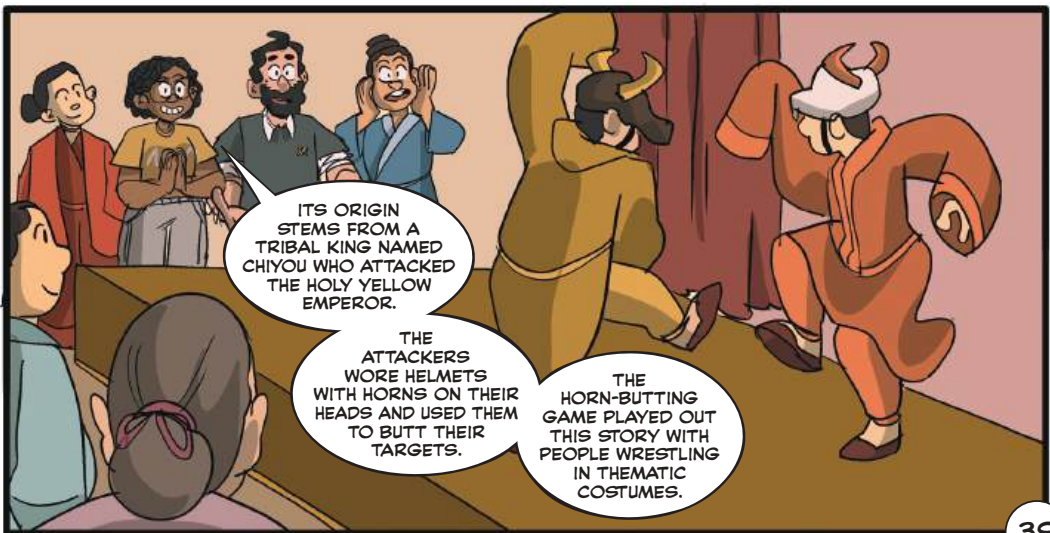


THE BAIXI, OR A HUNDRED ENTERTAINMENTS, WERE A BIG PART OF THAT.



BY 229 BCE, HAN EMPEROR WUDI HAD ESTABLISHED WHAT WAS KNOWN AS BAIXI, OR "A HUNDRED ENTERTAINMENTS."

THIS WAS A FESTIVAL THAT FEATURED PUPPETEERS, JUGGLERS, MAGICIANS, ACROBATS, DANCING, AND MARTIAL ARTS DEMONSTRATIONS.



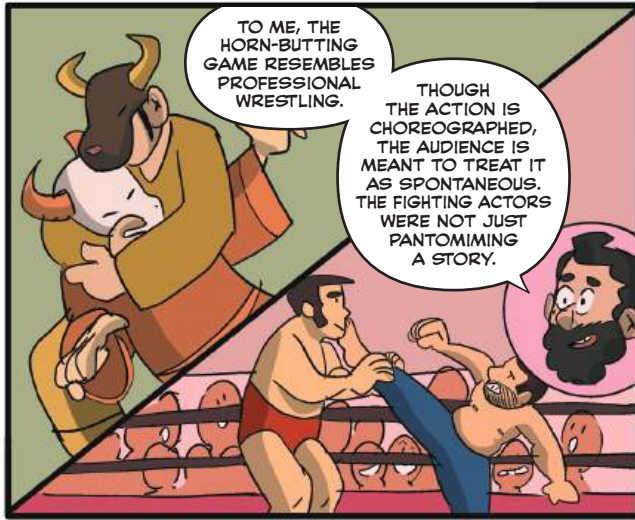


THESE PERFORMANCES EVENTUALLY PICKED UP ELABORATE TALES, SUCH AS HUANG OF THE EASTERN SEA, TELLING THE STORY OF A MAGICIAN WHO, DESPITE HIS HEROISM, FAILS AT DEFEATING A LEGENDARY WHITE TIGER.



HE'S TOO OLD!

DON'T DOUBT! HE'S STILL GOT THE SWORD!



TO ME, THE HORN-BUTTING GAME RESEMBLES PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING.

THOUGH THE ACTION IS CHOREOGRAPHED, THE AUDIENCE IS MEANT TO TREAT IT AS SPONTANEOUS. THE FIGHTING ACTORS WERE NOT JUST PANTOMIMING A STORY.



THEY WERE TRYING TO SIMULATE BATTLE IN A REALISTIC MANNER WITHOUT ACTUALLY HURTING THEIR OPPONENT. WHICH IS WHY THE GAME ENDED UP HAVING A VERSION USED FOR MARTIAL ARTS TRAINING EXERCISES.



STORYTELLING IS A FUNDAMENTAL PART OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR.

WHEN YOU READ OR HEAR A STORY, YOU FORM A RELATIONSHIP WITH IT. YOU BECOME INVESTED AS IT PULLS YOU ALONG.

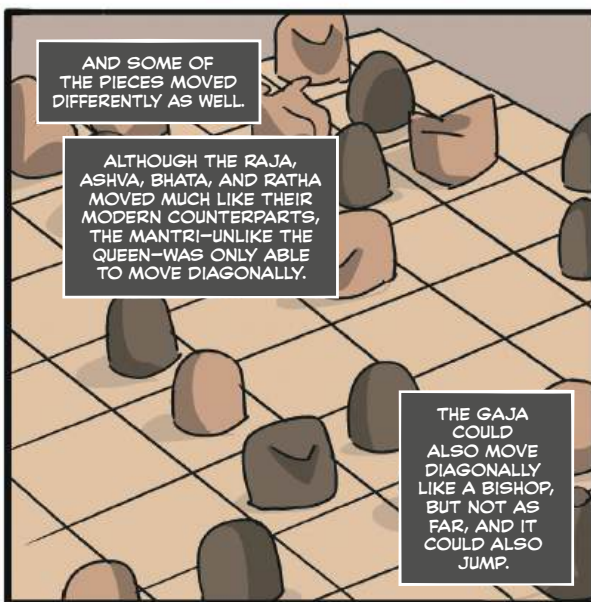
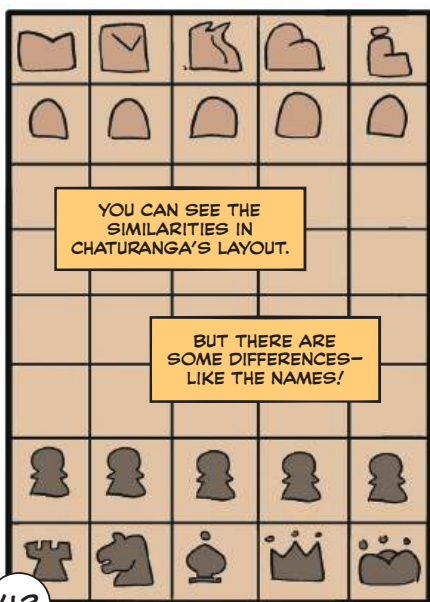


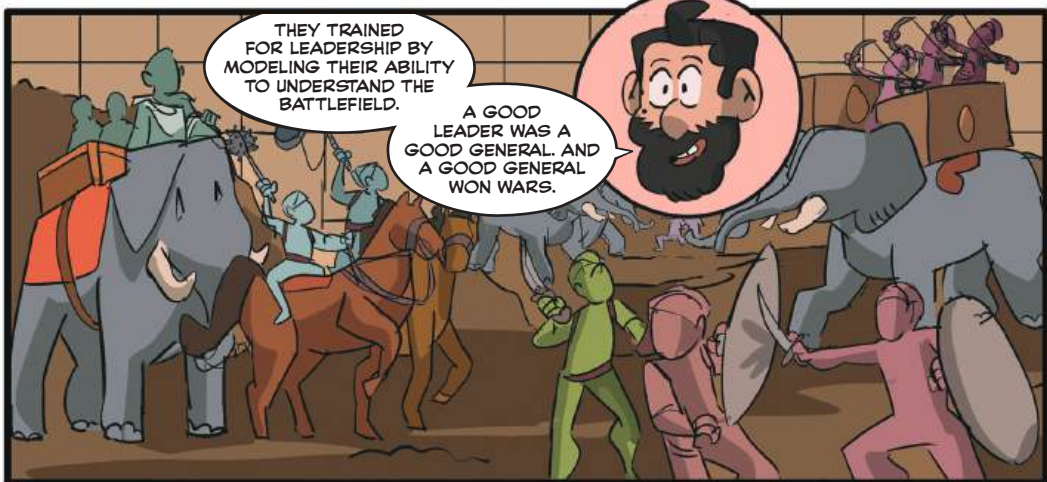
AND WHEN YOU FEEL YOU ARE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN A STORY, THE ACTIONS AND THEMES ARE MORE POWERFUL.

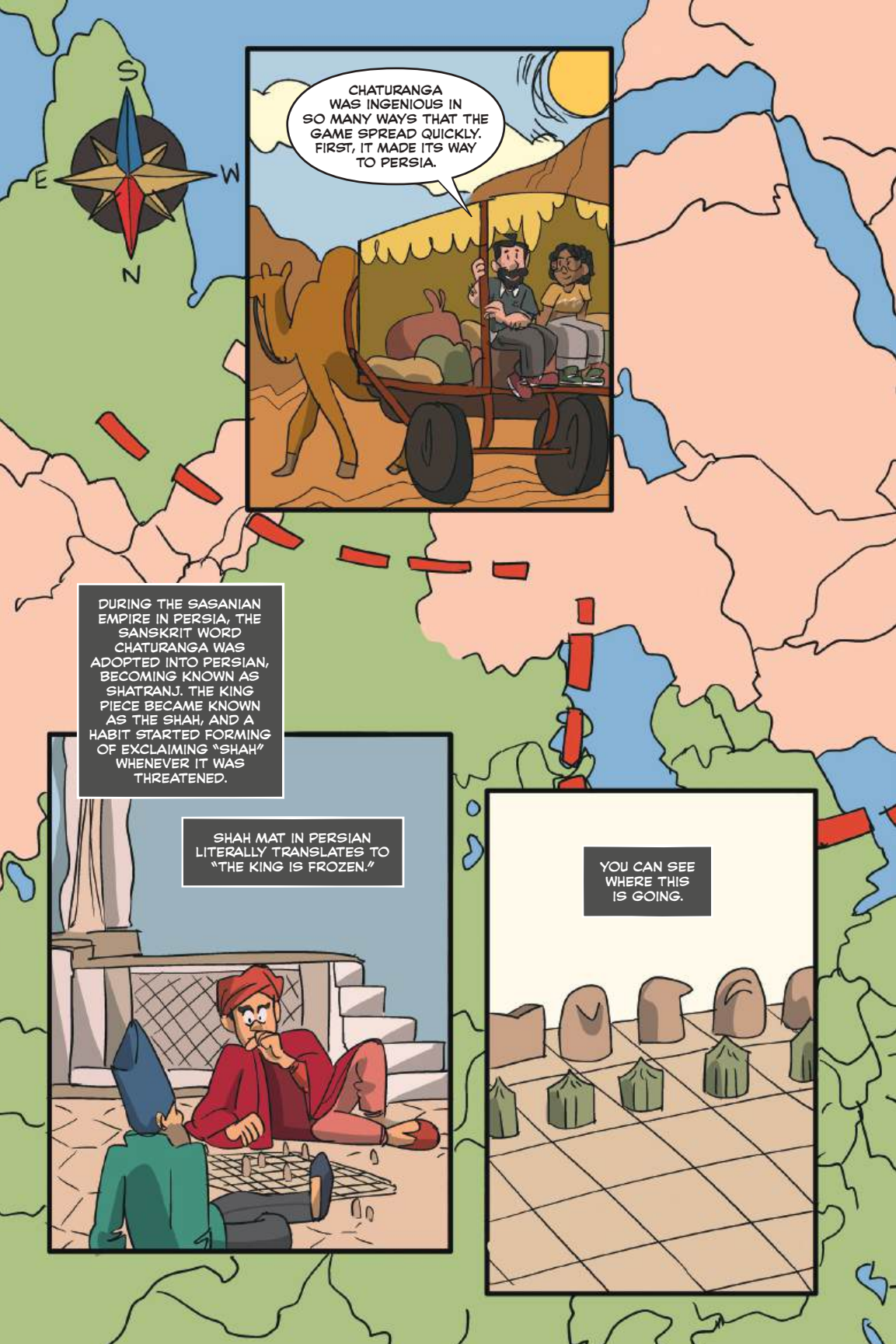


PATALIPUTRA, INDIA

SIXTH CENTURY
THE GUPTA EMPIRE







CHATURANGA WAS INGENUOUS IN SO MANY WAYS THAT THE GAME SPREAD QUICKLY. FIRST, IT MADE ITS WAY TO PERSIA.



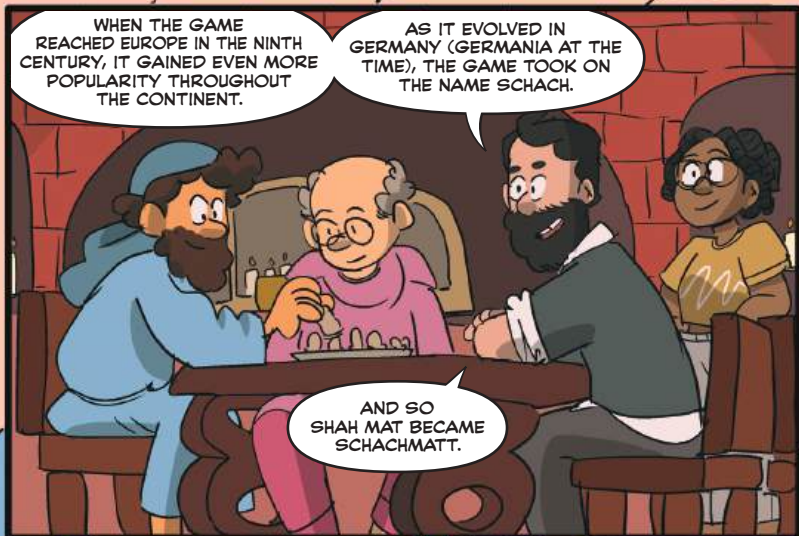
DURING THE SASANIAN EMPIRE IN PERSIA, THE SANSKRIT WORD CHATURANGA WAS ADOPTED INTO PERSIAN, BECOMING KNOWN AS SHATRANJ. THE KING PIECE BECAME KNOWN AS THE SHAH, AND A HABIT STARTED FORMING OF EXCLAIMING "SHAH" WHENEVER IT WAS THREATENED.

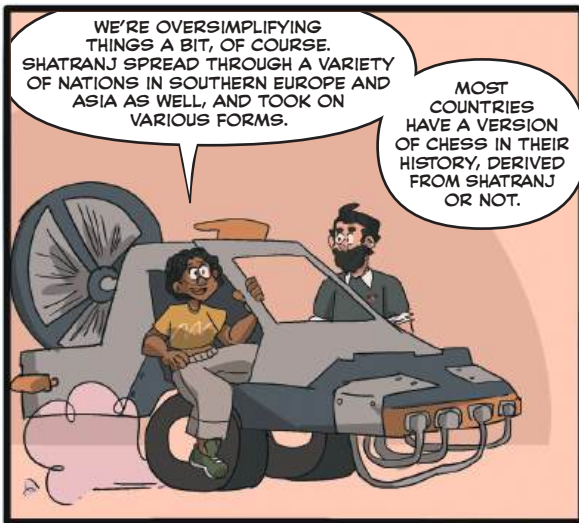
SHAH MAT IN PERSIAN LITERALLY TRANSLATES TO "THE KING IS FROZEN."



YOU CAN SEE WHERE THIS IS GOING.







WE'RE OVERSIMPLIFYING THINGS A BIT, OF COURSE. SHATRANJ SPREAD THROUGH A VARIETY OF NATIONS IN SOUTHERN EUROPE AND ASIA AS WELL, AND TOOK ON VARIOUS FORMS.

MOST COUNTRIES HAVE A VERSION OF CHESS IN THEIR HISTORY, DERIVED FROM SHATRANJ OR NOT.

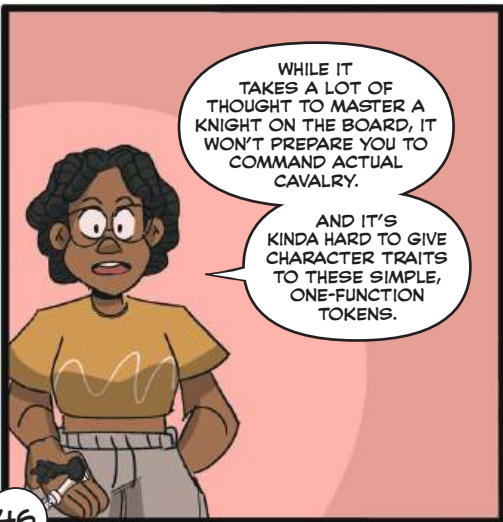


THOUGH WHAT WAS ORIGINALLY CHATURANGA ENDED UP EXERTING THE MOST GLOBAL INFLUENCE, OTHER SIMILAR BOARD GAMES HAVE BEEN UNEARTHED FROM AROUND THE ANCIENT WORLD AND STILL REMAIN POPULAR TODAY.



GAMES LIKE CHATURANGA WERE CREATED TO MODEL BATTLE, SPECIFICALLY USING STRATEGY TO OUTTHINK YOUR OPPONENT.

BUT EVEN THOUGH CHATURANGA IS INTELLECTUALLY RIGOROUS, IT'S HARD TO LOOK AT IT AS SIMULATING ACTUAL WARFARE.



WHILE IT TAKES A LOT OF THOUGHT TO MASTER A KNIGHT ON THE BOARD, IT WON'T PREPARE YOU TO COMMAND ACTUAL CAVALRY.

AND IT'S KINDA HARD TO GIVE CHARACTER TRAITS TO THESE SIMPLE, ONE-FUNCTION TOKENS.



BUT CHATURANGA AND CHESS DID LEAD TO GAMES THAT CAME CLOSER TO SIMULATING MILITARY CAMPAIGNS, WHICH BECAME A BIG PART OF MODERN TTRPGS.