



TRANS HISTORY

FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE PRESENT DAY



a graphic novel by
ALEX L. COMBS
&
ANDREW EAKETT



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CANDLEWICK PRESS



The background of the page is a light purple line-art illustration. It features several diverse faces: a woman with braids in the top left, a woman with curly hair in the top center, a man with a beard in the top right, a woman with a pearl necklace in the middle left, a large Egyptian pharaoh's head in the middle right, and three more diverse faces at the bottom. The word "CONTENTS" is centered at the top in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

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PREFACE

Dear readers,

Thanks for picking up *Trans History: From Ancient Times to the Present Day!*

We hope this book will accomplish three things:

1. Help dispel the myth that trans people are a “new thing.”
2. Demonstrate that what it means to be trans varies greatly among trans people.
3. Empower trans people by helping them learn about trans history.

We’re nerds who are excited about trans history and want to share what we know! Over the years it took to research, write, and illustrate this book, it has become clear to us how urgently this information is needed. As the spread of misinformation about trans people continues to accelerate, there have been an unprecedented number of anti-trans laws introduced and passed in the US.

We are not accredited historians. So, when writing this book we stuck to the most well-known and documented research, finding primary sources whenever possible, and checking our understanding of the information with historians and other experts.

The first two chapters give examples of people whose lives provide evidence that trans people have existed much longer

than most people realize. We're not trying to prove that any of these historical figures would have identified as trans, but their lives are relevant to trans history. Chapter three primarily focuses on the emergence of sexology and the roots of trans medicalization in Europe. Chapter four brings us to the current medical model of transness, as well as the beginnings of political activism by trans people in the US and media representations of trans people. The final chapter shares a variety of trans and GNC people's perspectives presented in their own words.

This book is written from a specific viewpoint—that of two trans white-passing Americans raised in the US. Therefore, we wanted to avoid attempting to explain identities with which we're not personally familiar. Instead, when talking about other identities, we focused on how culturally dominant Western biases have been imposed on them. Our goal here is to share information while holding white people accountable and without perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

One beautiful thing about trans history, and the larger history of gender diversity on Earth, is that it's so vast and enormous it could never fit in one book. We hope that this comic will be a jumping-off point for further exploration!

CONTENT WARNING

Being trans ourselves, studying and writing about this history has been rewarding but difficult. The history covered in this book involves a lot of disturbing and anti-trans viewpoints, as well as violence against a variety of people who didn't conform to prevailing norms. Violence is not visually depicted in this comic (except for a skirmish in which the trans person has

the upper hand), but there is a lot of discussion of it. The book also includes discussion of abuse, suicide, racism, anti-Semitism, ableism, misogyny, homophobia, and violence against intersex people.

QUOTATIONS

Direct quotations from primary sources are used whenever possible and are indicated with quotation marks. You can find more info about these quotations in the notes at the end of the book. The only section that doesn't follow this rule is the "Community Voices" chapter, because it consists only of the words of the interviewees. A longer list of the sources we used is available as a downloadable PDF on the book's website: alexlcombs.com/transhistory.

The image features a stylized illustration of a stack of books and a scroll. At the top, a light pink scroll is rolled up and tied with a red string. Below it is a stack of several books with dark red covers and white pages. The word 'INTRODUCTION' is written in large, bold, black, outlined letters across the top of the stack. The word 'to' is written in a smaller, cursive, black font on the spine of one of the books. Below that, the words 'TRANS' and 'HISTORY' are written in large, bold, black, outlined letters, stacked vertically. The bottom of the stack shows the spines of more books, including one with a spiral binding on the right side.

INTRODUCTION

to

**TRANS
HISTORY**

Trans history could cover a wide range of questions:

Were there
trans people in
the past?

How has
history shaped
ideas about
trans people?

Where did
the word *trans*
come from?



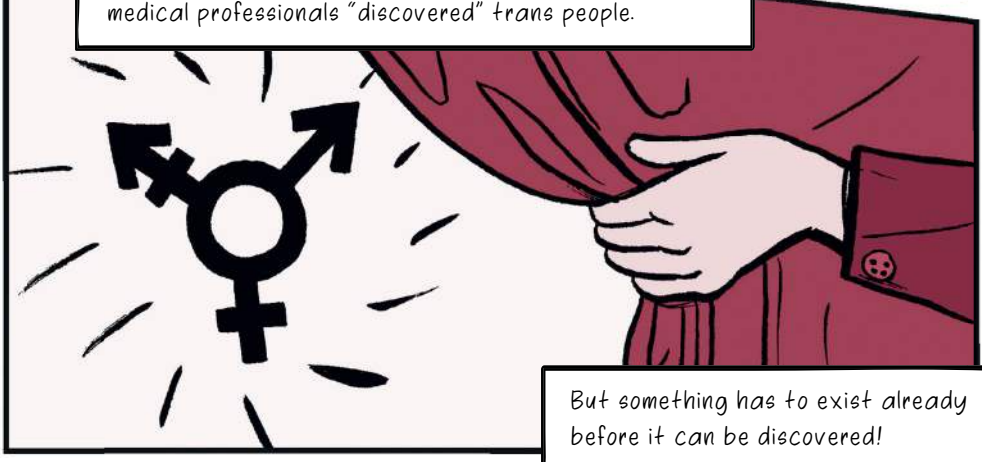
How have trans rights movements shaped history?



What's the history of trans-affirming medicine?



Often, trans history is considered to begin in the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries, when Western medical professionals "discovered" trans people.



But something has to exist already before it can be discovered!

What does TRANS mean?



Trans is a word used to describe people and ways of existing in relation to gender.

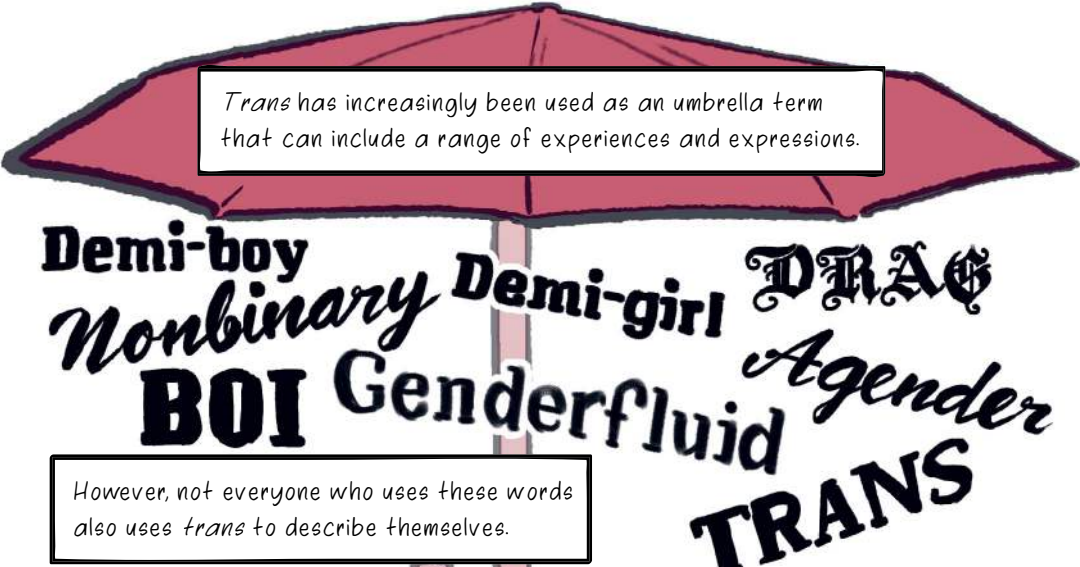
Other trans- words have contributed to its history:

- Transsexualismus
- Transvestite
- Transsexual
- Transgender
- Trans*

And trans can evoke many other ideas:

- Transition
- Transform
- Transcend
- Transmute

It can be many—sometimes contradictory—things.



Trans has increasingly been used as an umbrella term that can include a range of experiences and expressions.

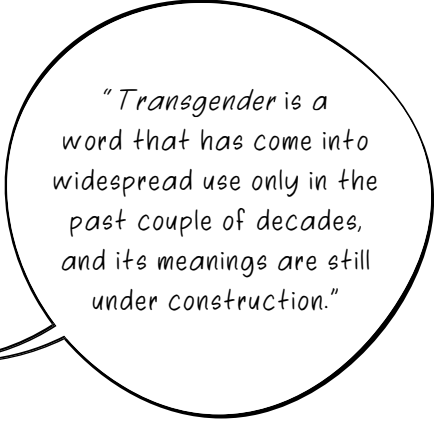
Demi-boy
Nonbinary
BOI

Demi-girl
Genderfluid

DRAG
Agender
TRANS

However, not everyone who uses these words also uses *trans* to describe themselves.

And even people who use the same word to describe themselves can have different reasons for doing so.



"Transgender is a word that has come into widespread use only in the past couple of decades, and its meanings are still under construction."



HISTORIAN
Dr. Susan Stryker
author of *Transgender History*

There are as many ways to be trans as there are trans people.

People often point to identities from cultures outside their own in order to show that trans people exist everywhere, but they are not exactly the same thing as trans, or as one another.

Besides trans, there are many other examples of culturally specific gender identities used by people living today, and they have unique and evolving histories that could fill entire books of their own.

Quariwarmi
ANDES REGION
in SOUTH AMERICA

Tchinda
Cape Verde

Fa'afafine and Fa'afatama
SAMOA

Two-Spirit
TURTLE ISLAND

Dilbaa and Nádleeahi
DINÉ (NORTH AMERICA)

Muxe
SOUTHERN MEXICO

Baté
CROW (NORTH AMERICA)

Hijra
INDIA and PAKISTAN

Winkte
LAKOTA (NORTH AMERICA)

Khawaja Sara
PAKISTAN

Māhū
HAWAII

Vakasalewalewa
FIJI

Leiti
TONGA

Omeggid
GUNA YALA

Travesti
SOUTH AMERICAN and LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES

跨兒
Kua er
HONG KONG

Phuying
THAILAND

X-gender
JAPAN

Burrnesha
ALBANIA

Although many people from these communities also identify as trans, there are many who intentionally don't.

It's important to remember that the LGBTQIA+ framework and the word *trans* are rooted in Western, European, and US cultures.



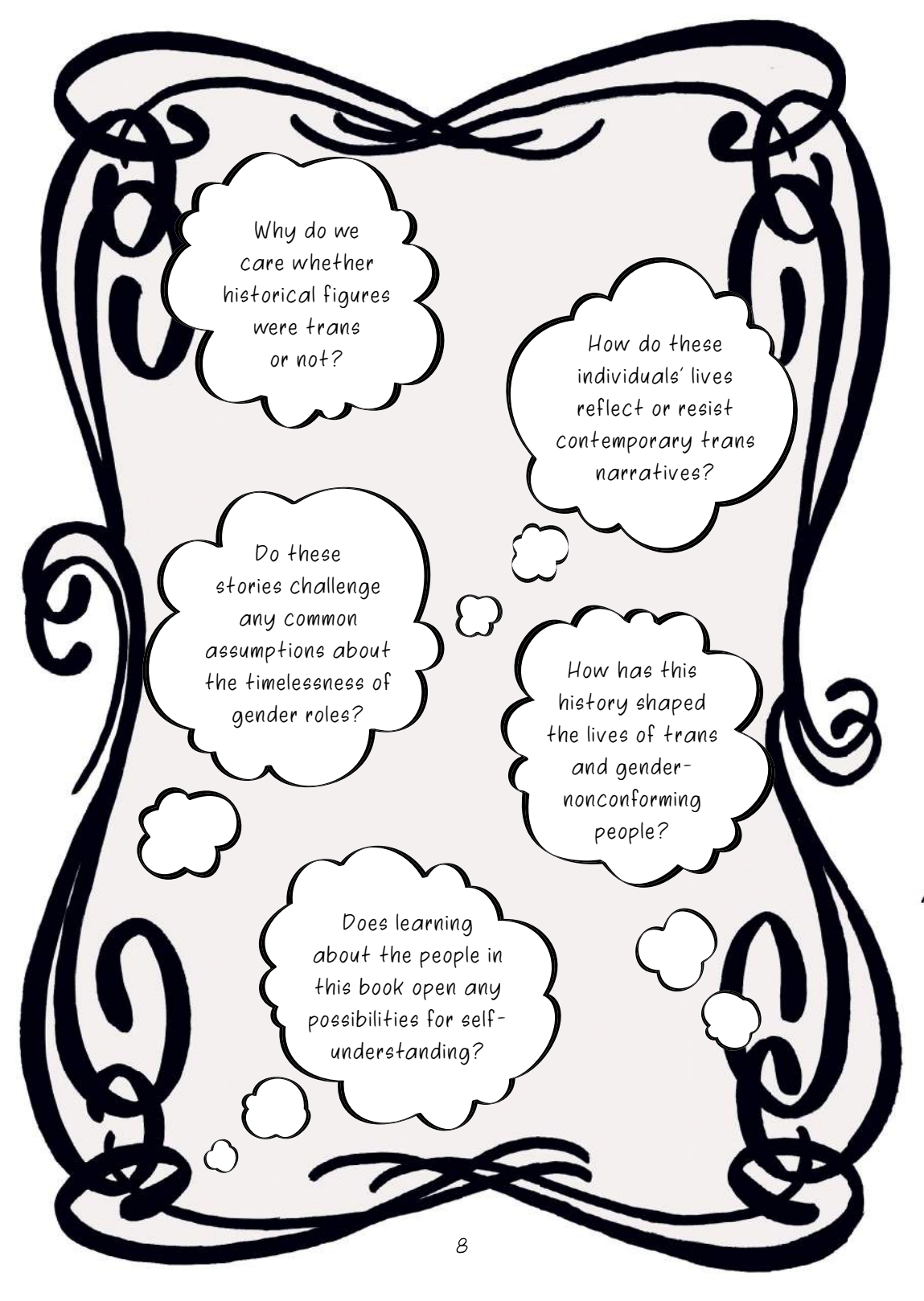
And so, while *trans* might be specific and modern, diversity in human sex and gender is not.

In fact, it goes back a lot further than you might think.

GENDER
DIVERSITY



What counts as *trans* history is still being debated, and the question "Were they *trans*?" may be unanswerable, but there are a lot of other questions that can be asked:



Why do we care whether historical figures were trans or not?

How do these individuals' lives reflect or resist contemporary trans narratives?

Do these stories challenge any common assumptions about the timelessness of gender roles?

How has this history shaped the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming people?

Does learning about the people in this book open any possibilities for self-understanding?

1

*A Long, Long
Time Ago:*

THE
ANCIENT
WORLD

In ancient Mesopotamia, the goddess Ishtar/Inanna was worshipped at least as early as 4000 BCE.

Her priesthood included people called *gala*, who are described by ancient texts as sharing some similarities with transfeminine people.



Terra-cotta relief of Ishtar from the second millennium BCE

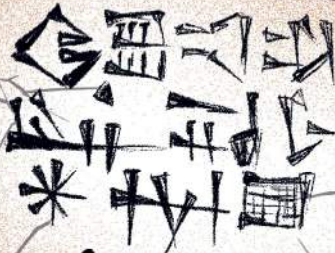
Ishtar / Inanna



Seal from the third millennium BCE featuring Inanna

The Assyrian epic of Erra describes these followers as people "whose maleness Ishtar turned female, for the awe of the people."

A fragment from a statue of a gala named Silimabzuta is the oldest record of someone self-identifying outside a gender binary.



Silimabzuta

Cuneiform from the third millennium BCE found in a temple to Inanna, courtesy of Cheryl Morgan



HISTORIAN

Cheryl Morgan

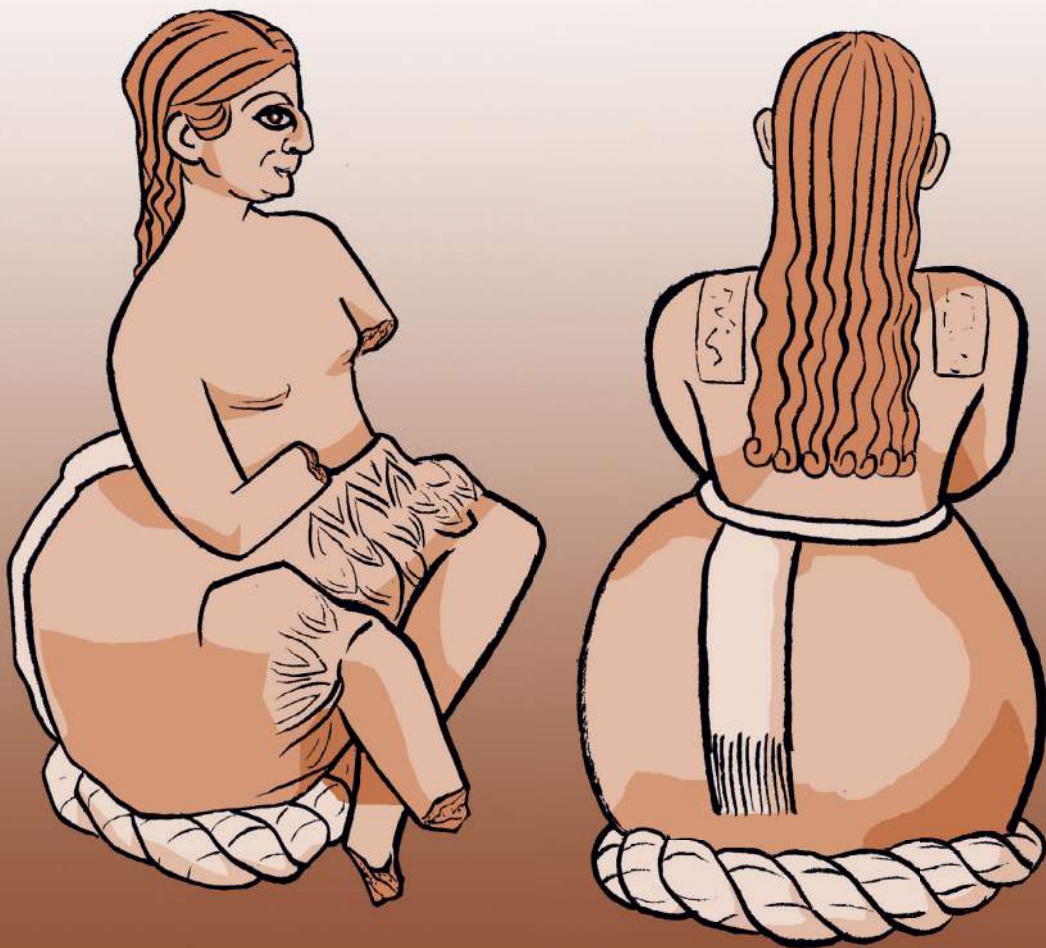
"The British Museum's Dr. Irving Finkel translated [the inscription on the fragment] as: 'Silimabzuta, hermaphrodite of Inanna.' The term 'hermaphrodite' is, of course, a post-Sumerian invention. . . .

The literal translation is more like, 'person-man-woman.'"

The rest of Gilimabzuta's statue has been destroyed, but it's speculated to have looked something like another one that was found in the same temple . . .

that of a singer named Ur-Nanshe, who may also have been a gala.

Ur-Nanshe

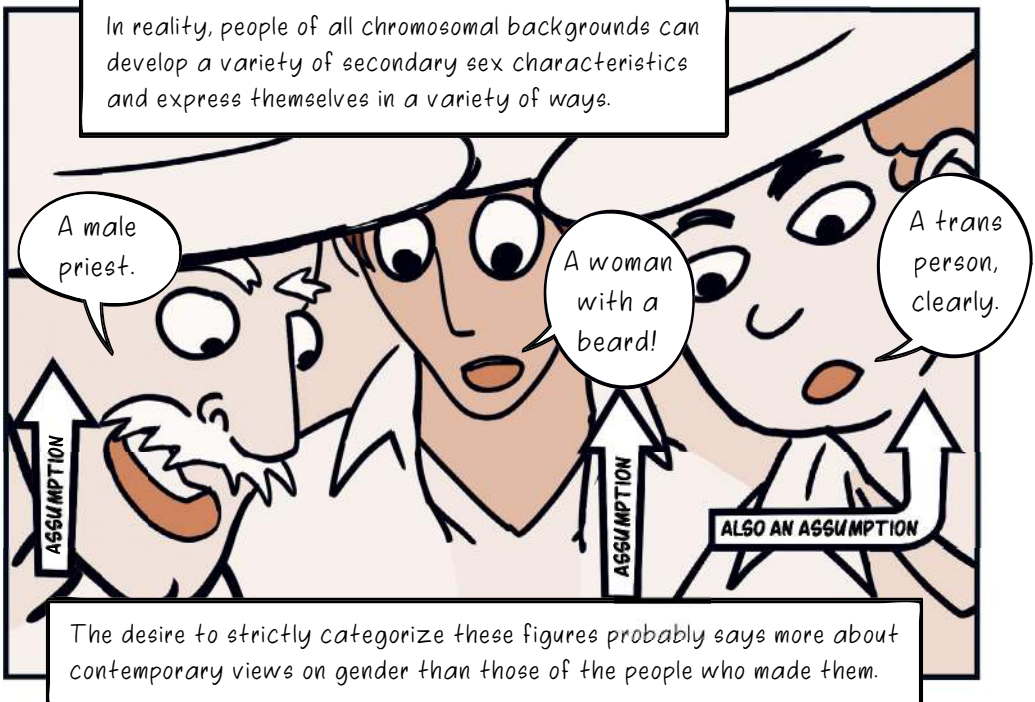


The masculine name of Ur-Nanshe, accompanied by the appearance of breast buds, has led researchers to speculate that Ur-Nanshe may have been a gala who had their testicles removed.

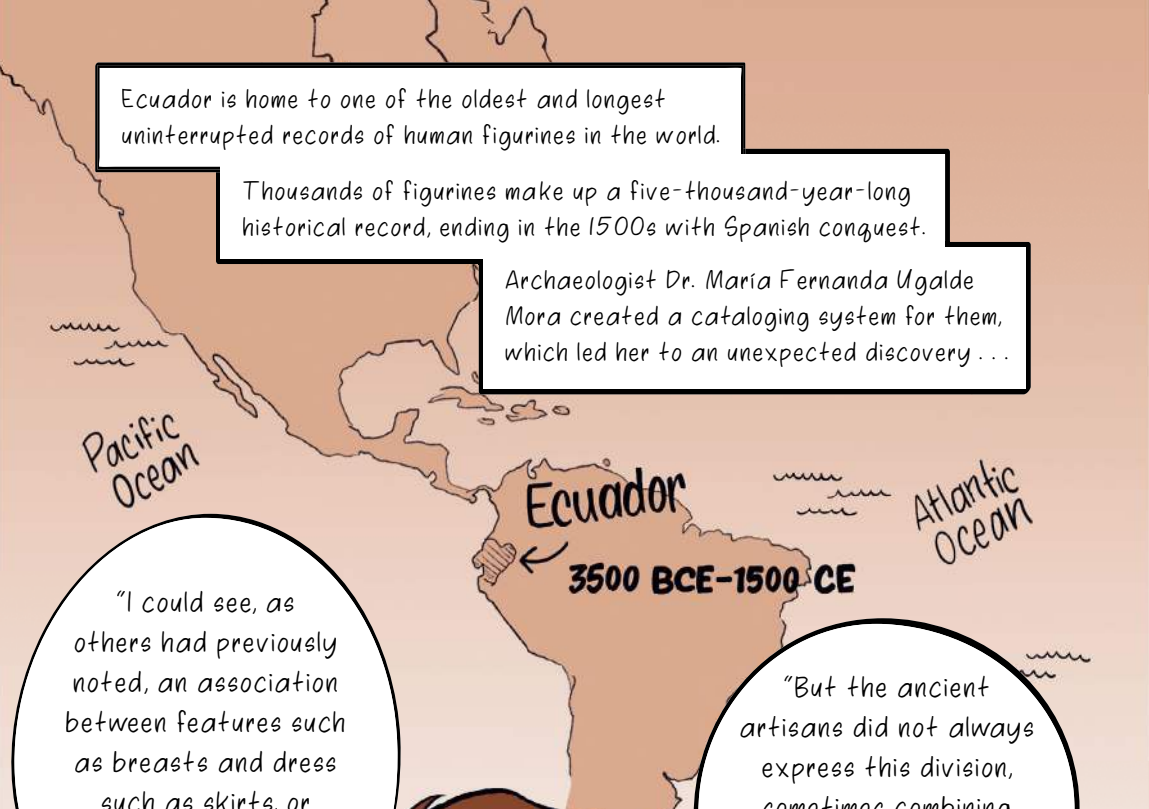
There's a tendency to use secondary sex characteristics (like facial hair and breasts) and expressions of gender (like clothing and hairstyle) to try to sort ancient artwork into binary sex/gender categories.



In reality, people of all chromosomal backgrounds can develop a variety of secondary sex characteristics and express themselves in a variety of ways.



The desire to strictly categorize these figures probably says more about contemporary views on gender than those of the people who made them.



Ecuador is home to one of the oldest and longest uninterrupted records of human figurines in the world.

Thousands of figurines make up a five-thousand-year-long historical record, ending in the 1500s with Spanish conquest.

Archaeologist Dr. Maria Fernanda Ugalde Mora created a cataloging system for them, which led her to an unexpected discovery . . .

"I could see, as others had previously noted, an association between features such as breasts and dress such as skirts, or a lack of breasts with loincloths.

"But the ancient artisans did not always express this division, sometimes combining female physical features with male dress and vice versa.

This did not happen often, but there are enough such figurines to build a category of what now might be described as nonbinary or transgender people."

Dr. Maria Fernanda Ugalde Mora

ARCHAEOLOGIST

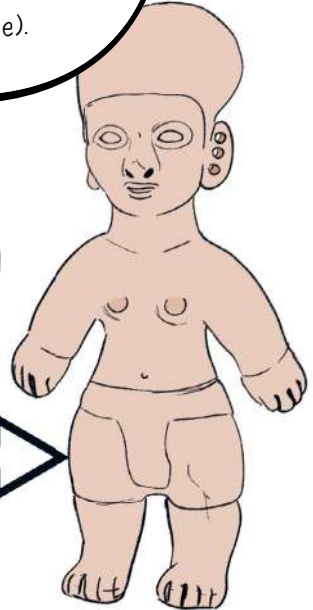
As opposed to being archetypal, the figures are thought to represent actual individual people.



Ninth to fourth century BCE

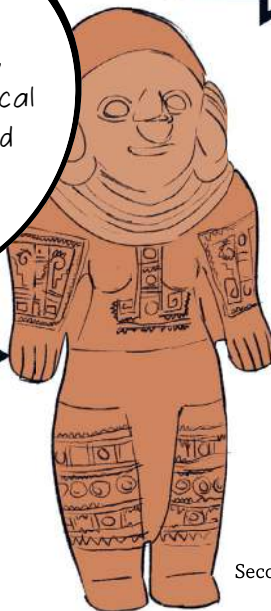
"Chorrera style, Formative Period, showing breasts (typical female attribute) and testicles (typical male attribute).

"Tolita style, Regional Development Period, showing female shape, breasts (typical female attribute), and at the same time loincloth and skirt."



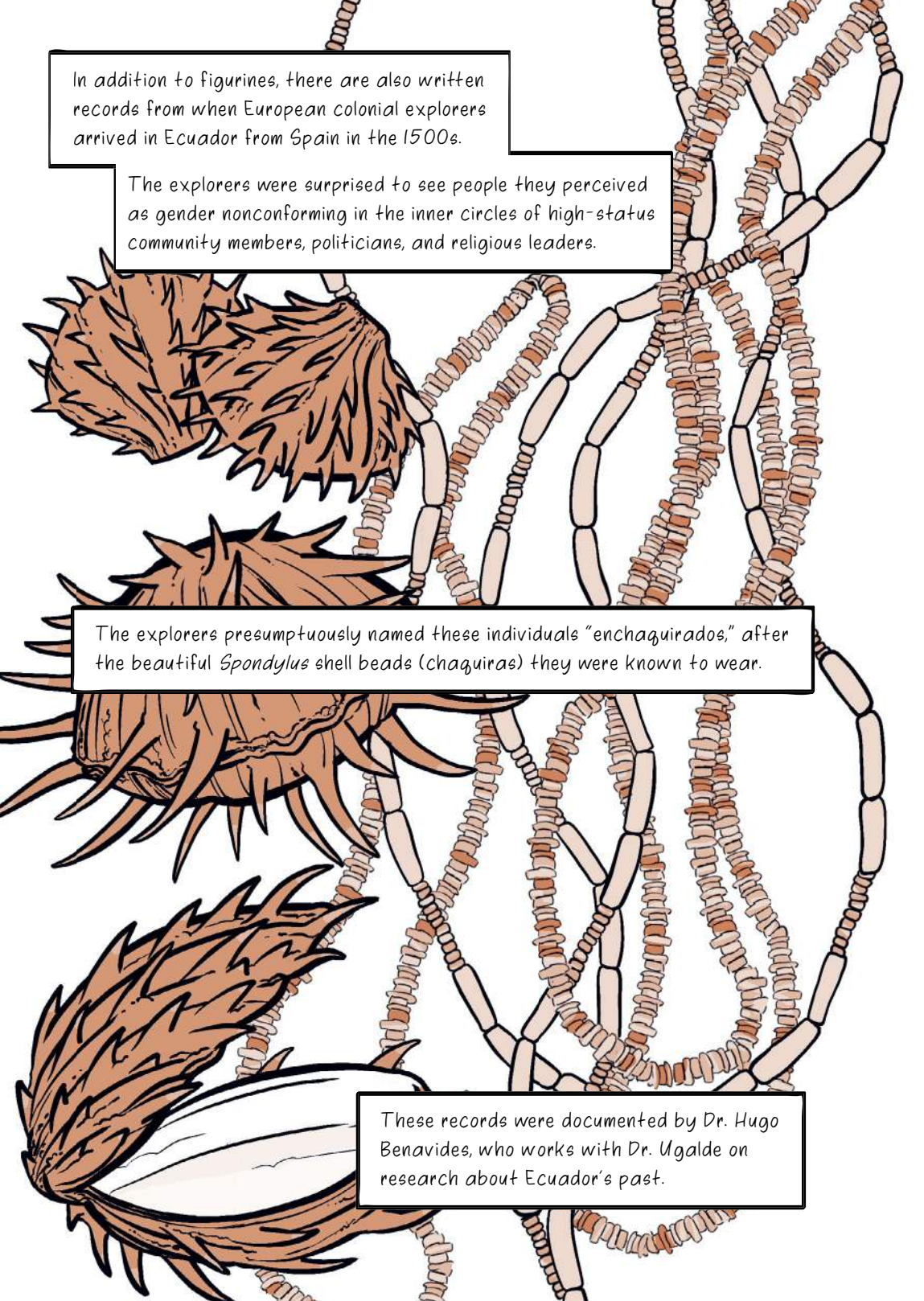
Ca. seventh century BCE to fifth century CE

"Guangala style, Regional Development Period, showing breasts (typical female attribute) and loincloth (typical male clothes)."



Second to eighth century CE





In addition to figurines, there are also written records from when European colonial explorers arrived in Ecuador from Spain in the 1500s.

The explorers were surprised to see people they perceived as gender nonconforming in the inner circles of high-status community members, politicians, and religious leaders.

The explorers presumptuously named these individuals "enchaquirados," after the beautiful *Spondylus* shell beads (chaquiras) they were known to wear.

These records were documented by Dr. Hugo Benavides, who works with Dr. Ugalde on research about Ecuador's past.

Today, people in some communities along the coast of Ecuador have reclaimed the word *enchaquirados* for themselves.



Dr. Ugalde cautions against applying the concept *transgender* to modern *enchaquirados* or to Ecuadorian communities of the past.

"I prefer to leave the past more open; like, they had their own categories, which I don't know and will never know.

But they teach us that gender diversity or fluidity is not white, and it is not just an impulse of big cities."

If the Ecuadorian figurines represent actual people, we don't know their names, and we can only speculate as to who they might have been.

But there were some ancient people who left detailed writings:

The ANCIENT EGYPTIAN EMPIRE

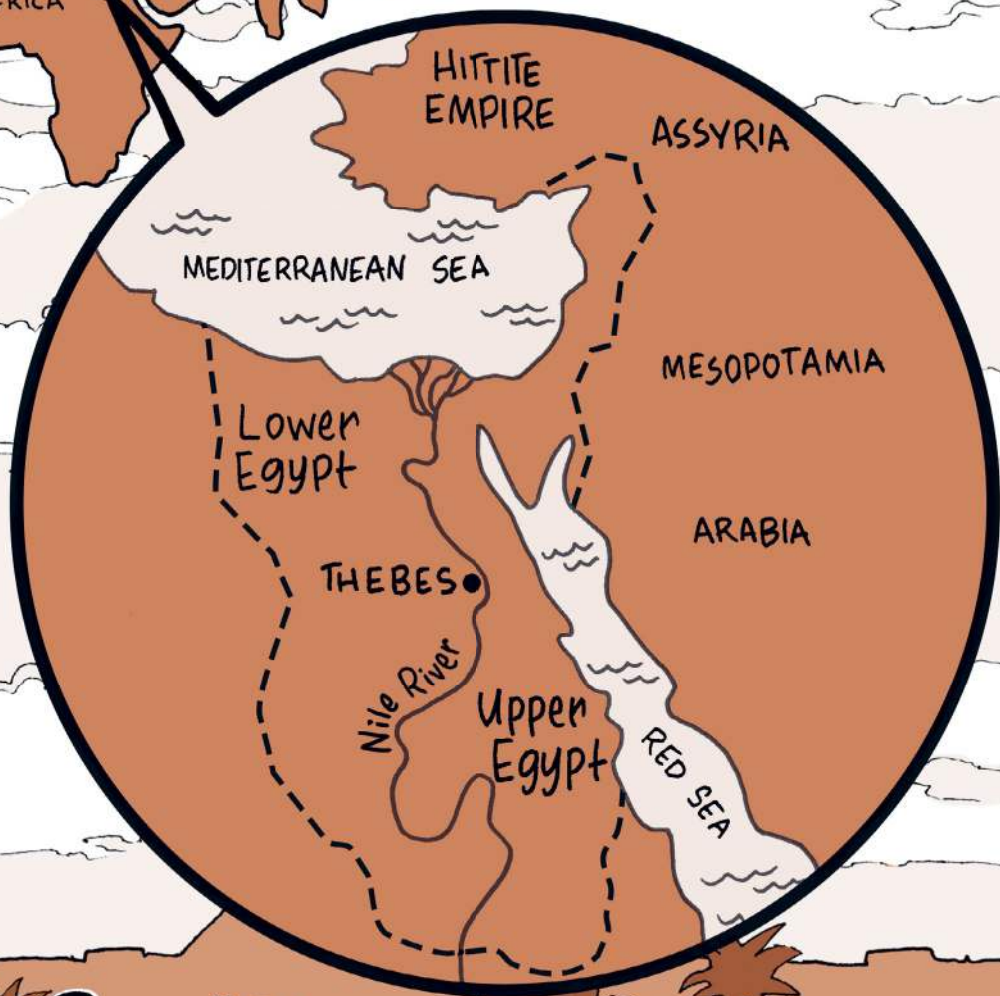
The background of the page is a stylized illustration of an Egyptian desert landscape. At the top, there are white, fluffy clouds against a light pinkish-tan sky. Below the clouds, two large, brown pyramids are depicted. In the foreground, there is a brown desert floor with several palm trees and some low-lying bushes. The overall style is simple and illustrative.

Based on a photo courtesy of the National Museum of African Art

3100 BCE - 332 BCE



AFRICA



HITITE EMPIRE

ASSYRIA

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

MESOPOTAMIA

Lower Egypt

ARABIA

THEBES

Nile River

Upper Egypt

RED SEA

The Kingdom of Upper and Lower Egypt

When archaeologists first learned about an ancient Egyptian pharaoh named Hatshepsut, they uncovered a story about a person who was raised to be a queen but instead became a king.

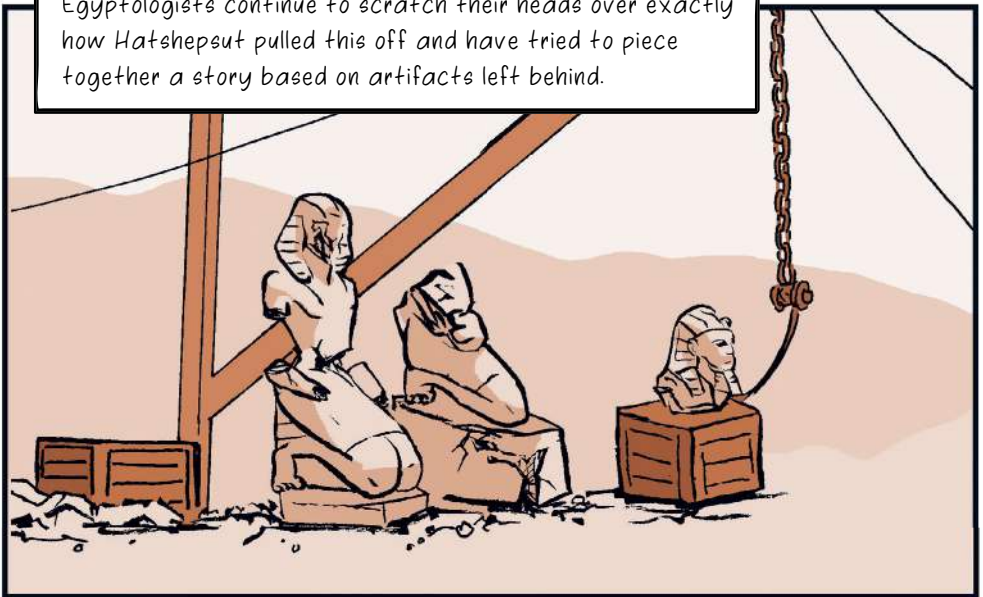
Pharaoh Maatkare Hatshepsut



Pharaoh Maatkare Hatshepsut is often celebrated as ancient Egypt's famous woman pharaoh, even as the first powerful woman in recorded history.



Egyptologists continue to scratch their heads over exactly how Hatshepsut pulled this off and have tried to piece together a story based on artifacts left behind.



The statues depicted in this section are based on those housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and are from the mid-1400s BCE (about 3,500 years ago).

Because there are many representations of Hatshepsut as a man, the subject of the pharaoh's gender has been much debated.



"... strange androgyny ..."

"... shocking in its blend of masculinity and femininity ..."

"... deeply schizophrenic ..."



Scholars of ancient Egypt continue to be stunned by depictions mixing masculine and feminine imagery, like these early shirtless Hatshepsuts with increasingly disappearing breasts.

These images also look strikingly like snapshots from a gender transition, even though modern gender transition didn't exist.



This is me, one month on pharaoh ...



Six months on pharaoh, and my chest is looking real flat ...

After Hatshepsut became pharaoh, official images were more consistent with other representations of men, but they still occasionally incorporated feminine traits, and feminine designations were usually used in writing.

NAME: The Living Horus: Mighty-of-Kas
Two Ladies: Flourishing-in-years
Gold-Horus: Divine-of-diadems
King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Maatkare
Daughter of Re: Hatshepsut Khenemet-Amun

LIVED: 1507 to 1458 BCE (almost 50 years)

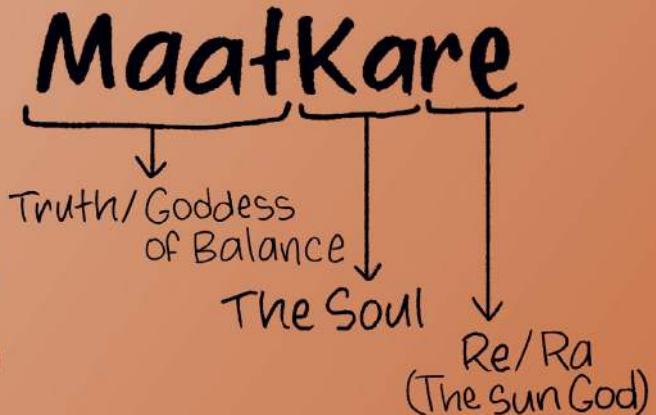
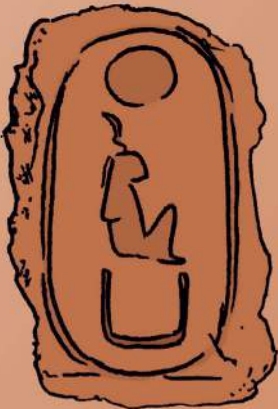
GENDER: Pharaoh

BLOOD TYPE: ?

LIKES: Monumental structures

DISLIKES: Toothaches

Hatshepsut's five throne names also incorporated both masculine and feminine meanings; *Maatkare* was used most often on monuments.



Since pharaoh was considered a male role, Hatshepsut's representations as a man have often been interpreted as a kind of public relations campaign in a bid for the throne.

And the mixing of gendered traits has sometimes been explained as Hatshepsut clinging to femininity or resisting becoming fully masculine.



Was it ... ?

I will make up
a story because
I want to be
pharaoh.

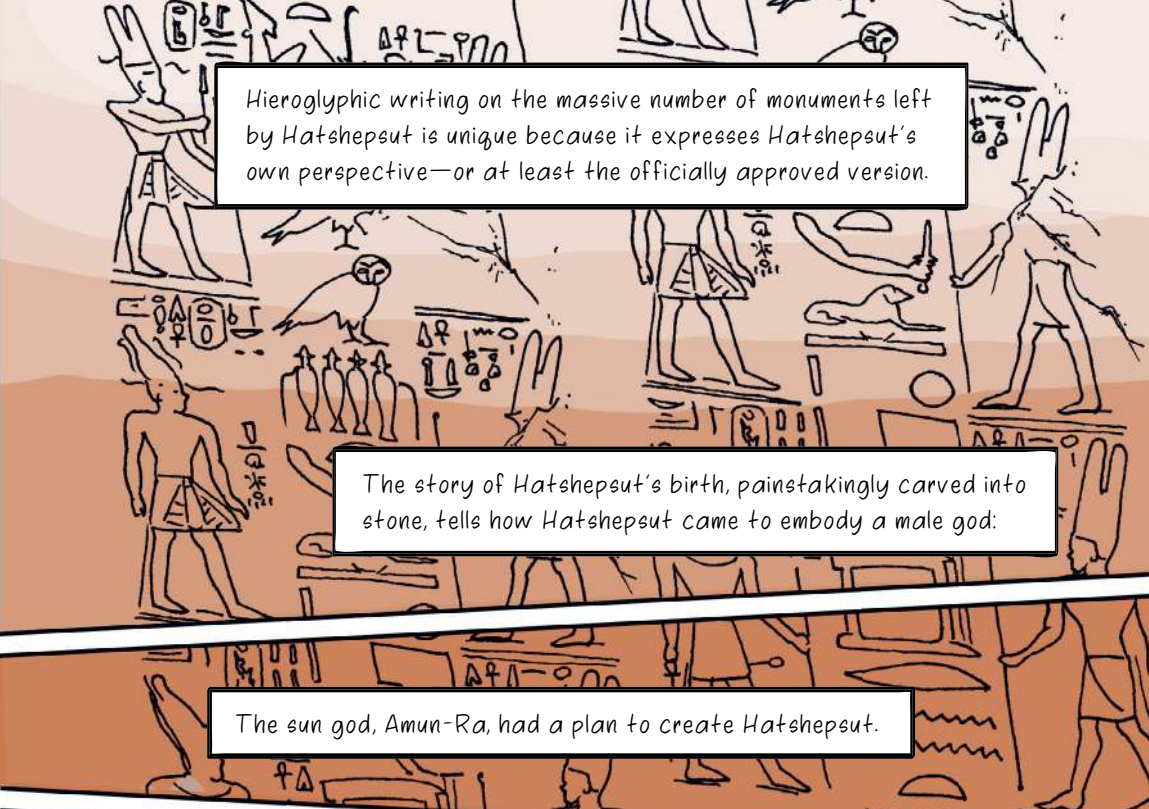
Or was it ... ?

I'm actually
a man, so I
should be
pharaoh.

Or was it something like ... ?

I know
that I am
pharaoh.

But it's also possible that occupying the masculine role of the pharaoh could have been an alignment of Hatshepsut's gendered feelings and/or presentation instead of being at odds with them.



Hieroglyphic writing on the massive number of monuments left by Hatshepsut is unique because it expresses Hatshepsut's own perspective—or at least the officially approved version.

The story of Hatshepsut's birth, painstakingly carved into stone, tells how Hatshepsut came to embody a male god:

The sun god, Amun-Ra, had a plan to create Hatshepsut.

After running it by the other gods, Amun gave the go-ahead to Khnum, the god who shapes humans on his potter's wheel.

"Go, to make her, together with her ka [soul], from these limbs which are in me."

Amun-Ra

Khnum

Amun-Ra then took the form of King Thutmose I and impregnated Queen Ahmose.



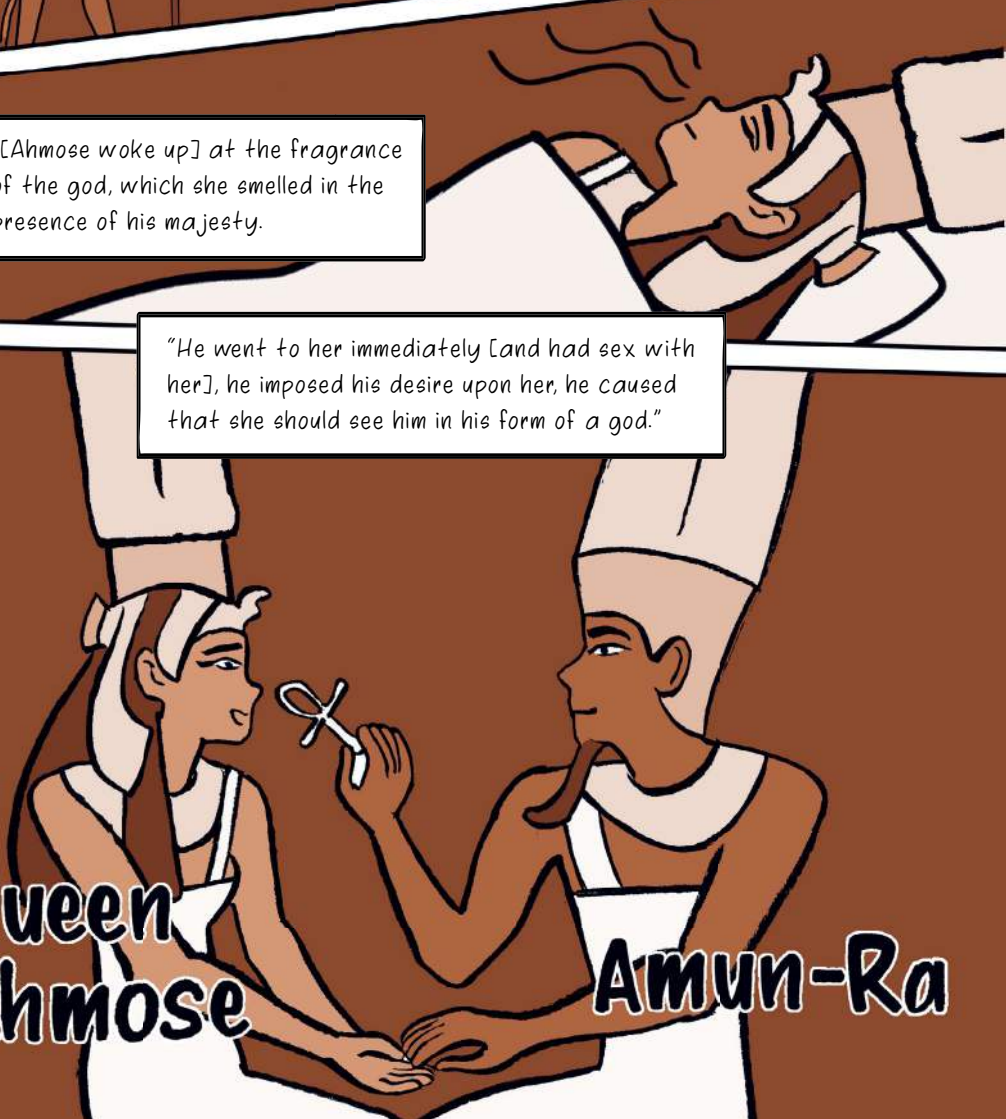
"[Amun-Ra] made his form like the majesty of this husband [Thutmose I]. He found her as she slept in the beauty of her palace.

"[Ahmose woke up] at the fragrance of the god, which she smelled in the presence of his majesty.

"He went to her immediately [and had sex with her], he imposed his desire upon her, he caused that she should see him in his form of a god."

**Queen
Ahmose**

Amun-Ra



The result was baby Hatshepsut.

"I have given
to thee to be before
the *kas* of all the
living, while thou shinest
as King of Upper and
Lower Egypt, of South
and North,

according as
thy father who
loves thee has
commanded."

Hatshepsut
Khnum

Hatshepsut's Ka


Heket

**Young
Hatshepsut**

Hatshepsut was "the bodily son"
and daughter of Amun-Ra, and
also united with Amun.

This was the first time
a pharaoh had recorded
the story of their birth.

The story goes on to give many
more details about Hatshepsut
growing up and becoming pharaoh.



Even though it may seem far-out, some historians assert that the story Hatshepsut's monuments tell ought to be respected as representing the pharaoh's earnest beliefs.

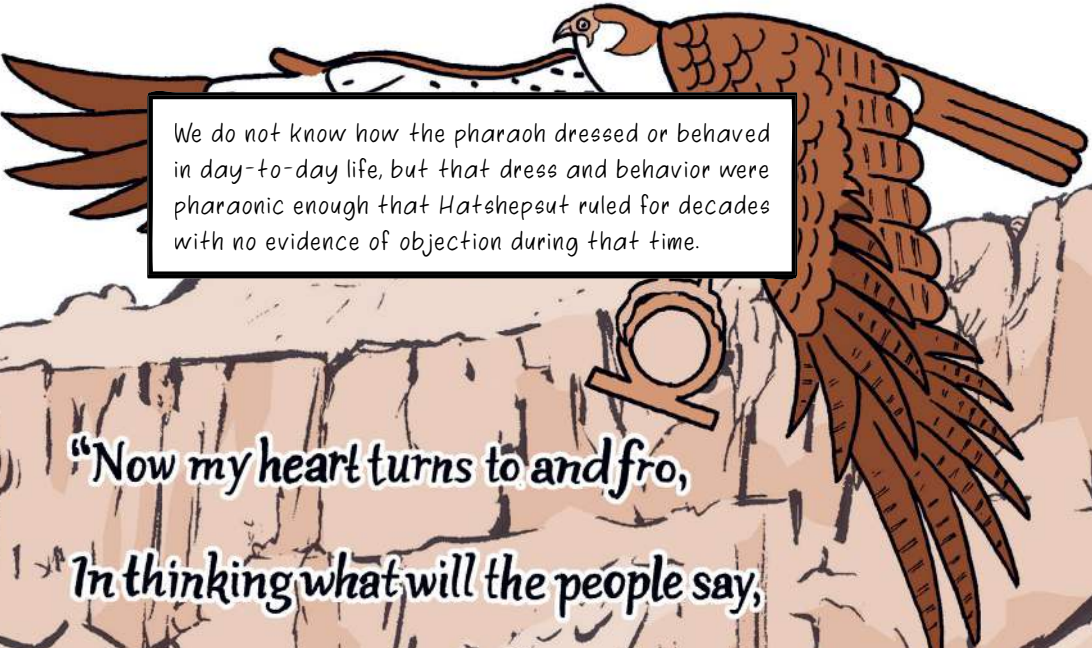
But establishing credibility may have been a problem for Hatshepsut, who left a message for the doubters:

**“Keep from saying ‘It is not the case!’
I give exact testimony.
All this has really happened.”**

Scholars have often assumed Hatshepsut was primarily motivated by power rather than personal identity.

But it's worth considering that Hatshepsut would likely have had multiple complex motivations and internal experiences, just like any other human.

Belief systems
Religion
Spirituality
Power
Subjective experience
Embodiment
Identity
Cultural
Family norms



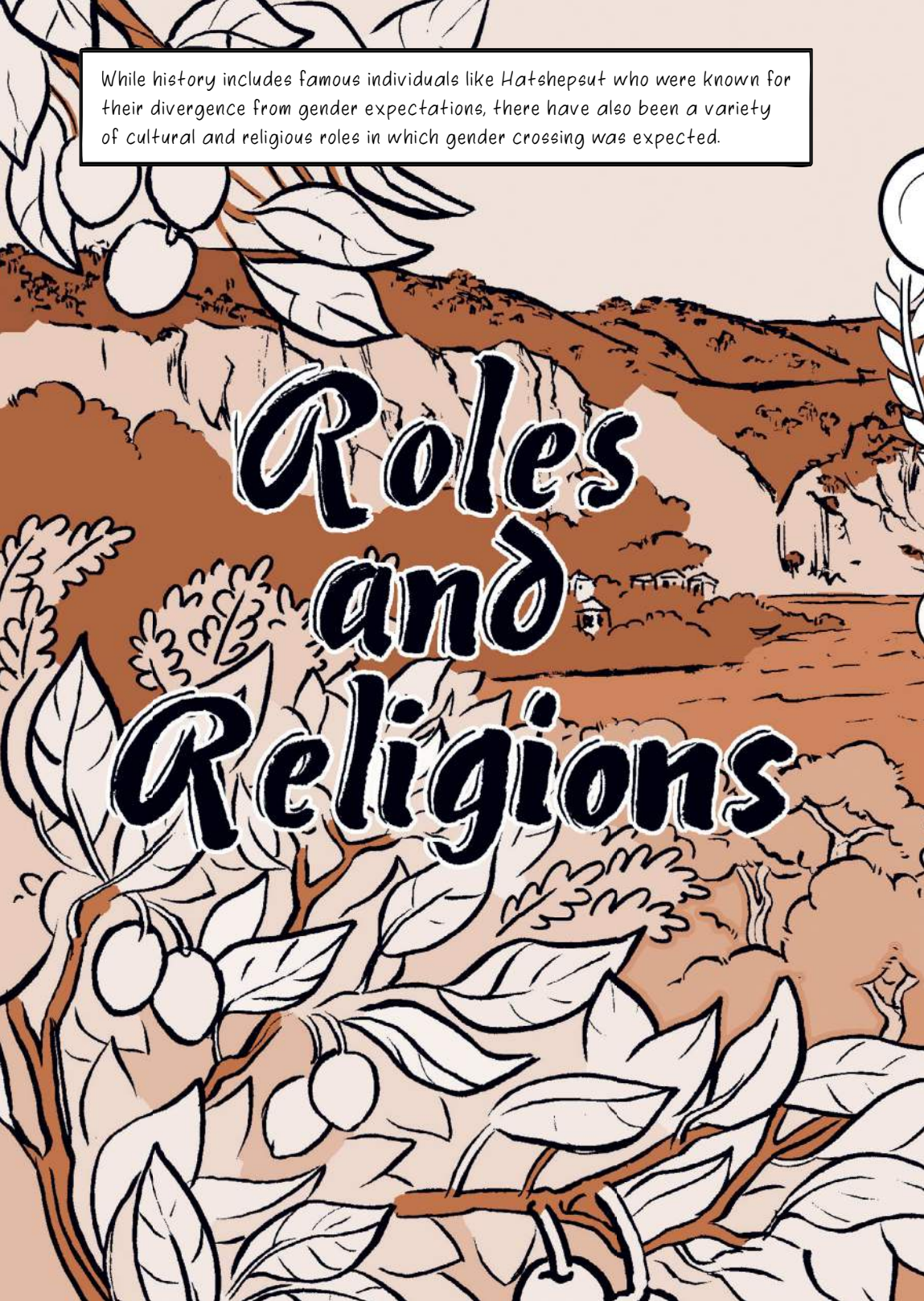
We do not know how the pharaoh dressed or behaved in day-to-day life, but that dress and behavior were pharaonic enough that Hatshepsut ruled for decades with no evidence of objection during that time.

“Now my heart turns to and fro,
In thinking what will the people say,
They who shall see my monument in after years,
And shall speak of what I have done.”

Hatshepsut died of natural causes at about fifty years old.

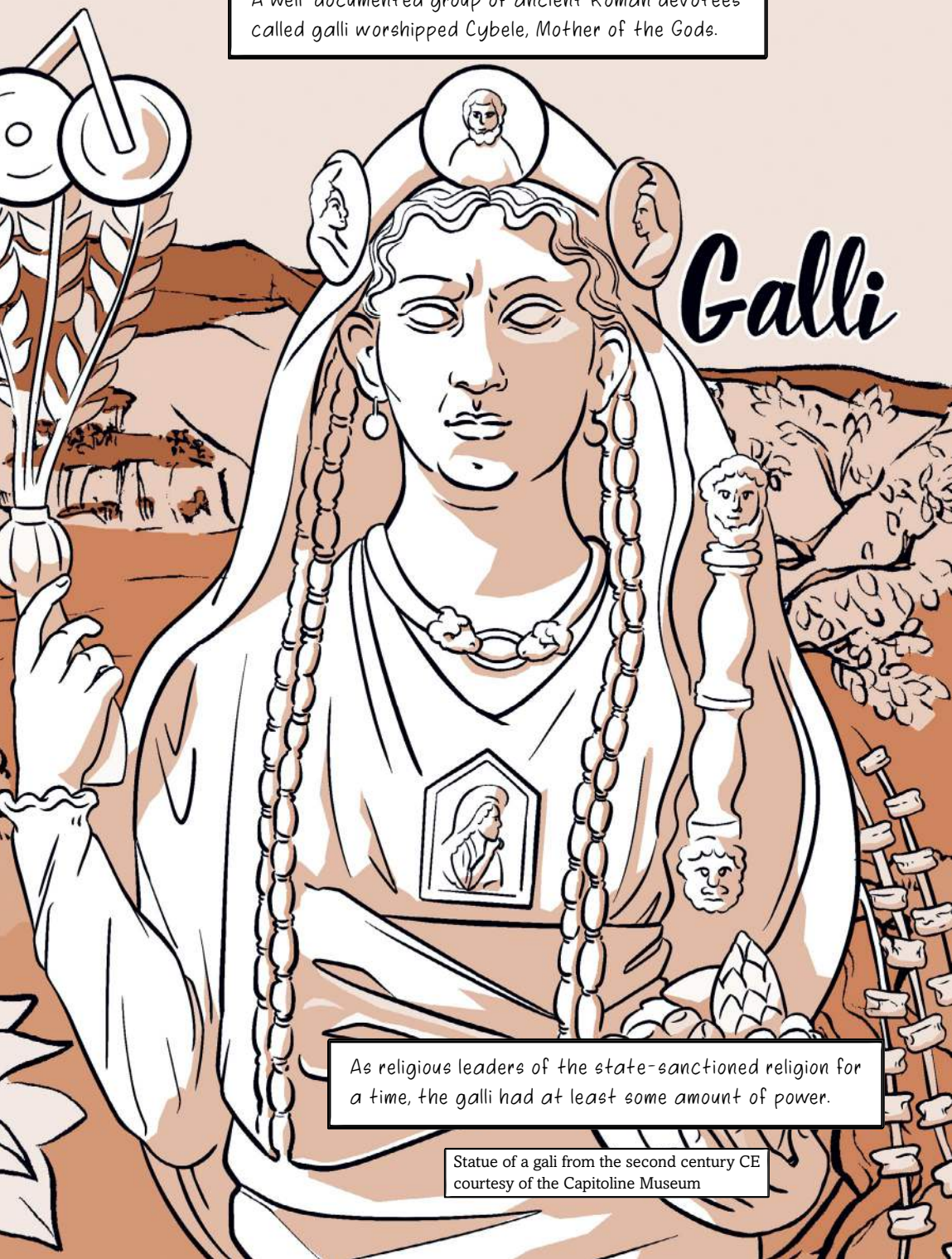
While history includes famous individuals like Hatshepsut who were known for their divergence from gender expectations, there have also been a variety of cultural and religious roles in which gender crossing was expected.

Roles and Religions



A well-documented group of ancient Roman devotees called galli worshipped Cybele, Mother of the Gods.

Galli



As religious leaders of the state-sanctioned religion for a time, the galli had at least some amount of power.

Statue of a galli from the second century CE
courtesy of the Capitoline Museum

They were regarded by the Roman mainstream as effeminate men, who were alternately accepted and condemned depending on who was in charge.

At times they were used as scapegoats for the ancient Romans' anxieties about foreign people, who were often associated with effeminacy (in contrast to traditional notions of Roman masculinity).

A second-century Roman novel called *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius* includes a stereotype of the galli:

"Next day they prepared to do their rounds, dressing in bright array, beautifying their faces un-beautifully, daubing their cheeks with rouge, and highlighting their eyes. Off they went, in turbans and saffron robes, all fine linen and silk, some in white tunics woven with purple designs and gathered up in a girdle, and with yellow shoes on their feet. The goddess they wrapped in a silken cloak and set her on my back, while they, arms bare to the shoulder, waving frightful swords and axes, leapt about and chanted, in a frenzied dance to the stirring wail of the flute."

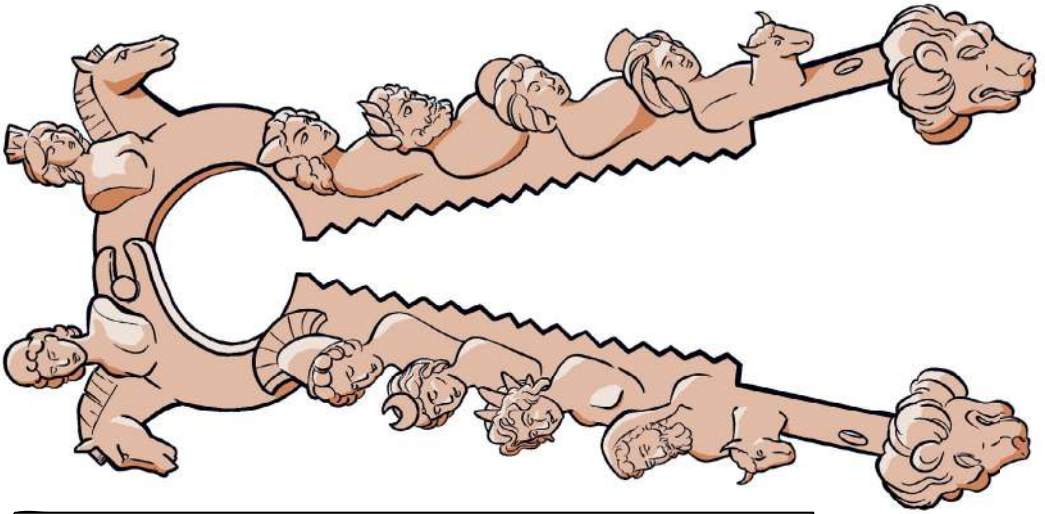
However, we don't know how they would have described themselves.

Statue of the goddess Cybele from the second century CE, based on an image courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

There were probably many factors that motivated people to join the galli.

The availability of this social role may have provided some people with an opportunity to align with a felt sense of sex/gender.

Ornate castration clamps found in the river Thames are thought to have been used as part of the galli's initiation.



There have been many religions that include devotees who undergo this body modification, who are often referred to as eunuchs.

The word *eunuch* generally means a person who had their testicles and sometimes penis removed in relation to performing a social role.

Christian New Testament,
Matthew 19:12, latter
first century CE

"For there are some eunuchs, who were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, who were made eunuchs by men: and there are eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake."

This passage demonstrates that the term *eunuch* may have had a complex meaning, or multiple meanings, that varied across time and place.

For example, as Dr. Howard Chiang explains, eunuchs working in Chinese imperial courts did not necessarily have cross-gender feelings:

"Modern definitions of masculinity and femininity tend to be articulated within a Western biomedical lexicon and its cognate understandings of the human body.

The absence of a Chinese word for sex until the 1910s suggests that the popular depiction of eunuchs as third sex people tells us more about our modern conceptual preoccupations than the historical experience of eunuchs themselves."



HISTORIAN
Dr. Howard Chiang
editor of *Transgender China*

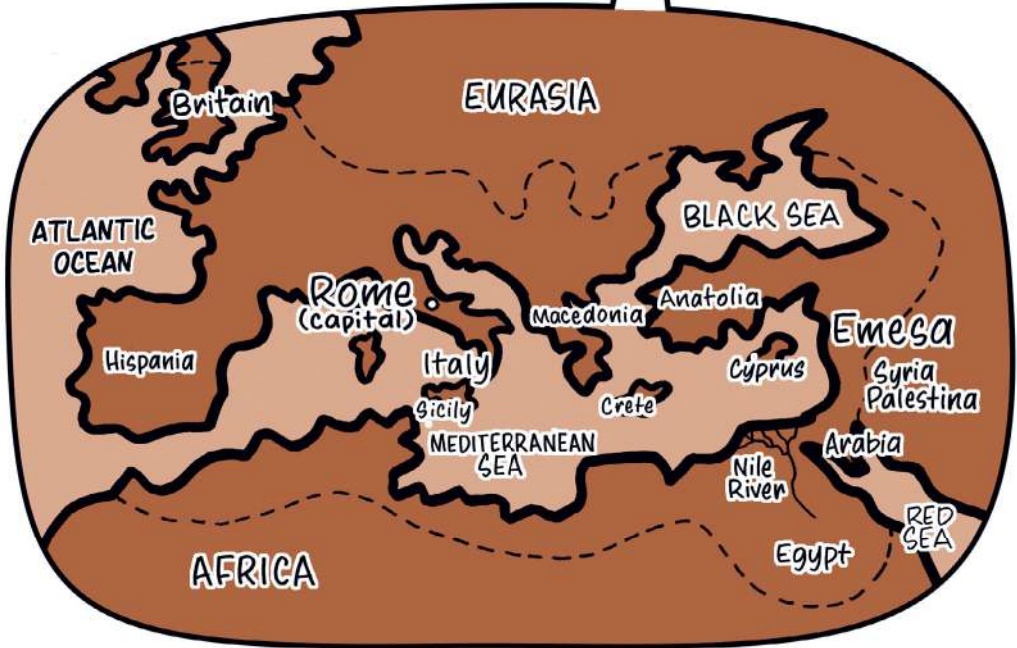
And just because people have the same surgery doesn't mean they share a common identity . . .

Having undergone specific body modifications doesn't necessarily mean someone was trans.

However, since body modification is a major desire of many modern trans people, it's often one of the few clues that someone from history might have had a trans-similar experience.

ANCIENT ROME

Third Century CE



Elagabalus

The emperor Elagabalus of ancient Rome has been an inspiration for many literary and artistic works over the past couple thousand years.



More recently, the emperor has been seen as a possible trans-similar person in ancient history because of reportedly wishing to be addressed as a woman and to have gender-confirming surgery.

Official coins from the rule of Elagabalus

**BORN:
204 CE**



• **Emesa**
Part of the
Roman Empire
(in modern-day Syria)



**Priest
training**



217-218 CE

Several emperors are
crowned, murdered,
and replaced



Age 14 Grandma says
Elagabalus is
the new emperor

• **Rome**

Reigns for
about five
years



222 CE

Age 18 Elagabalus
is murdered



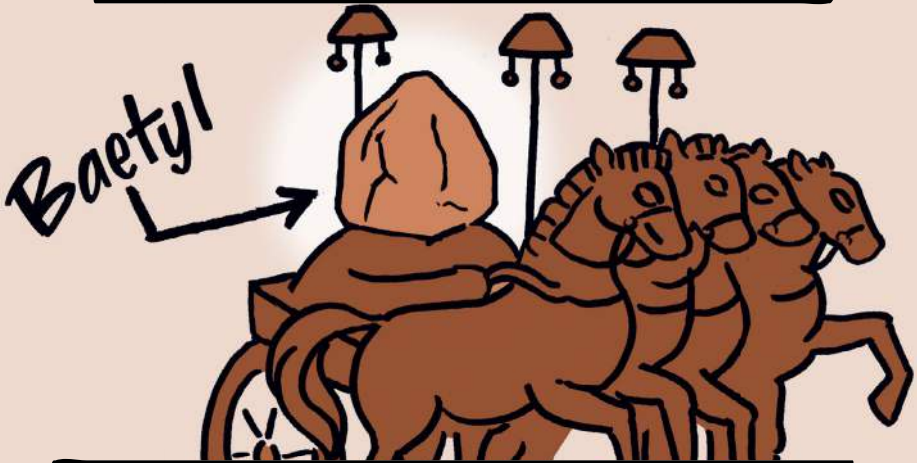
Elagabalus was raised as a priest of the sun deity Elagabal.

Sextus Varius Avitus Bassianus, Emperor Caesar, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Pius, Felix, Augustus, Pontifex Maximus, Pater Patriae



That's why historians came to use the name Elagabalus for this young person who had many names in life, none of which were actually Elagabalus.

The emperor was known to be a very enthusiastic devotee and placed the god Elagabal, represented by a black meteorite called a baetyl, at the top of the Roman Pantheon.



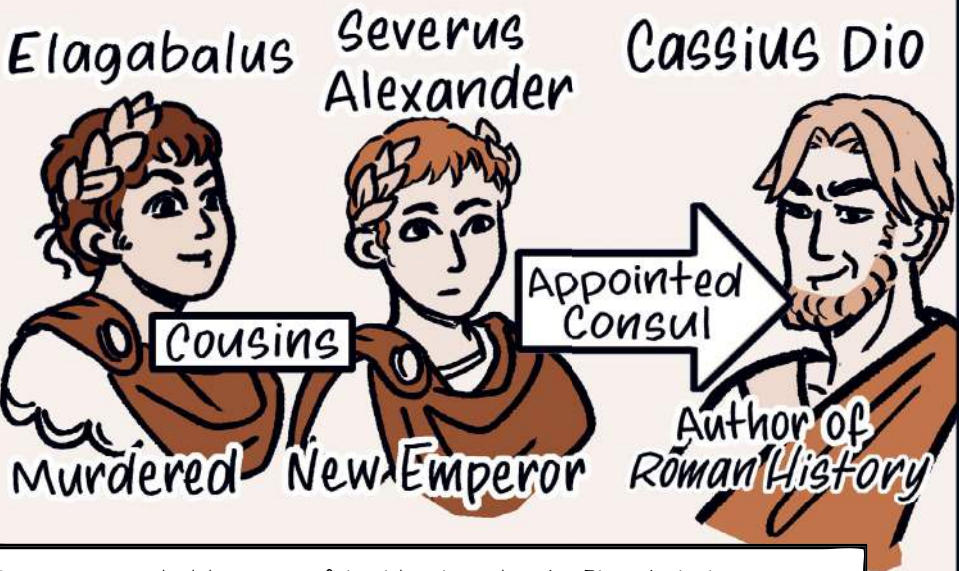
Elagabalus's practice of a religion from the East (which was considered foreign) was blamed for increasing discontent among Roman soldiers and elites. That, along with her gender presentation, may have contributed to her eventual assassination.

The Roman emperor and senate could systematically erase the evidence of a person's existence from history through a process called damnatio memoriae.

damnatio memoriae

The emperor's legacy was destroyed in this way, so unfortunately there are few remaining documents to tell the story.

The surviving accounts of what happened were written by Roman historians such as Cassius Dio, a senator who was close to the events.



Dio was appointed to a powerful political position by Elagabalus's successor, and so he had motivation to paint the former emperor negatively.

But although most of Dio's claims about Elagabalus are unverifiable and seem exaggerated, that doesn't mean all his stories were completely baseless.

Dio included many details related to Elagabalus's gender presentation that sound like descriptions of some transfeminine people.



"When trying someone in court he really had more or less the appearance of a man,

but everywhere else he showed affectations in his actions and in the quality of his voice."

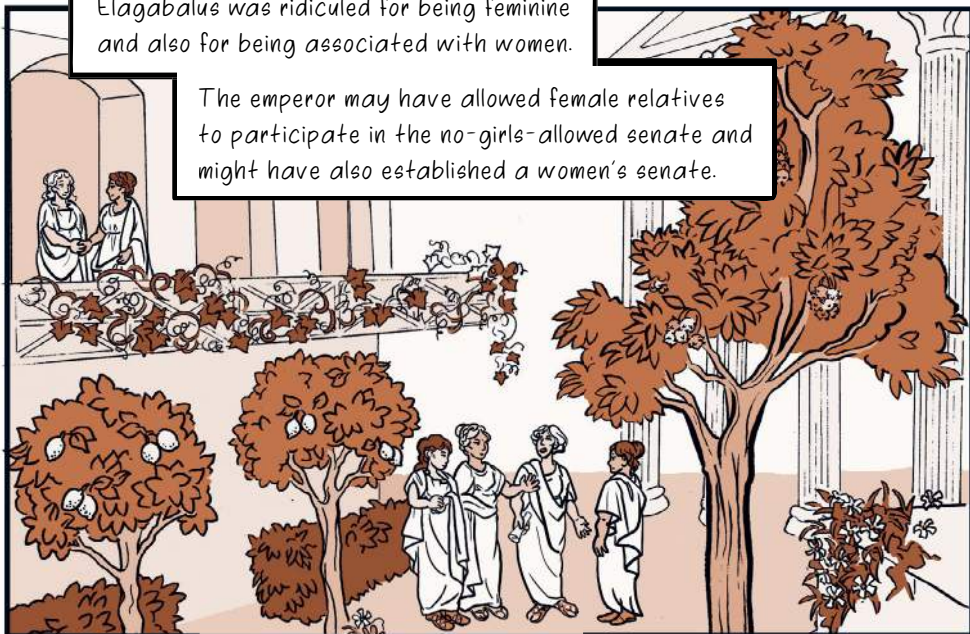


"He asked the physicians to contrive a woman's vagina in his body by means of an incision."

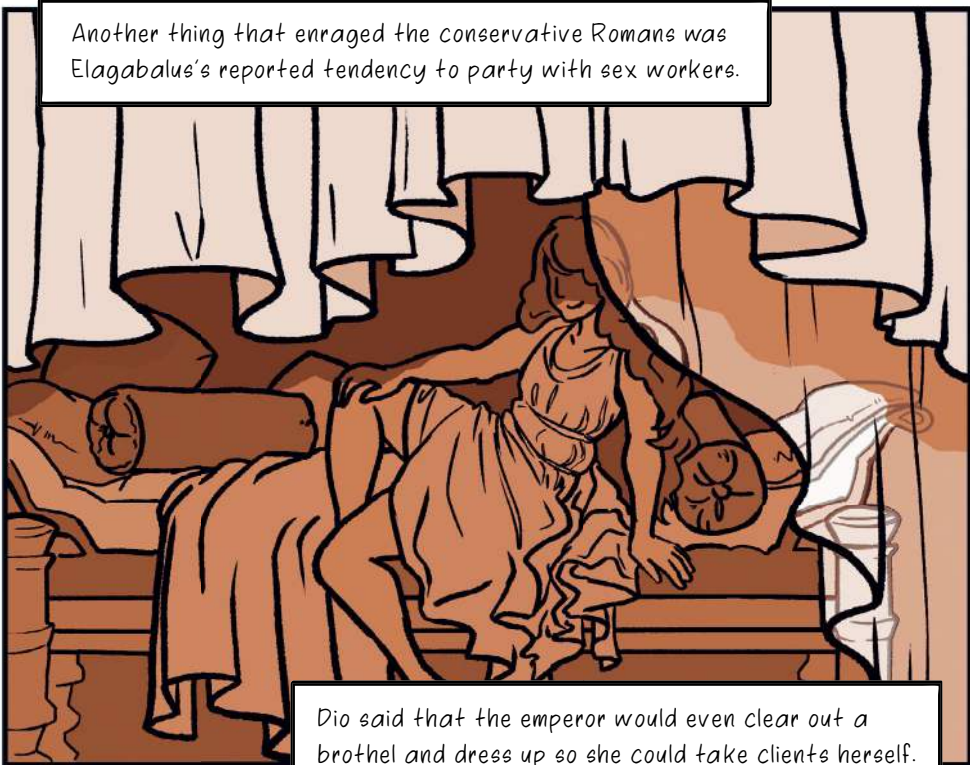


Elagabalus was ridiculed for being feminine and also for being associated with women.

The emperor may have allowed female relatives to participate in the no-girls-allowed senate and might have also established a women's senate.



Another thing that enraged the conservative Romans was Elagabalus's reported tendency to party with sex workers.



Dio said that the emperor would even clear out a brothel and dress up so she could take clients herself.

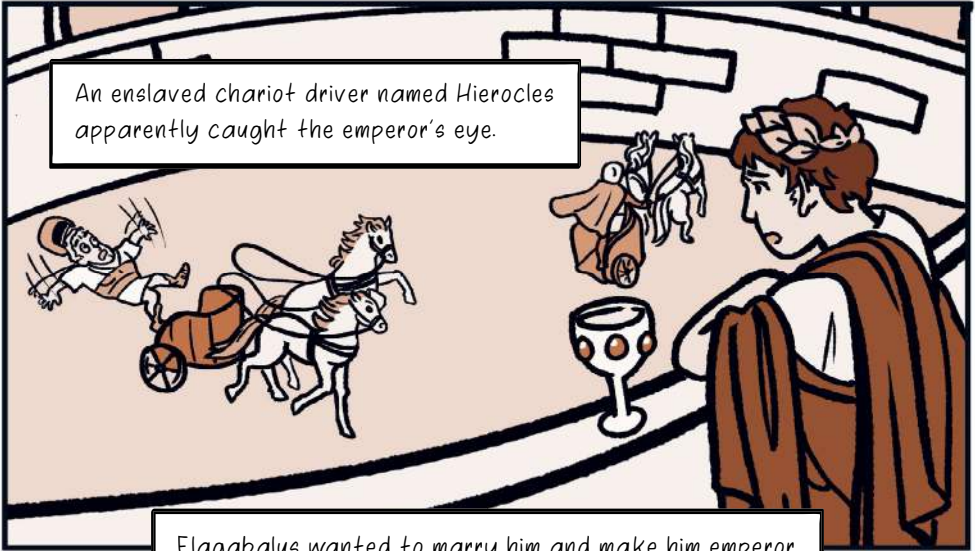
Dio's descriptions of Elagabalus's religious practices are somewhat outlandish:



Sacrificing animals like sheep and cows was common in Roman religion, but what actually transpired during Elagabalus's rituals is unverifiable.

Elagabalus is also rumored to have had a scandalous love life, even for a Roman emperor!

An enslaved chariot driver named Hierocles apparently caught the emperor's eye.



Elagabalus wanted to marry him and make him emperor, while she would take the role of the emperor's wife.



It's hard to say if this would have been more controversial because Hierocles was enslaved or because Elagabalus wanted to be a wife.

Elagabalus did get married several times, at one point to a Vestal Virgin named Aquilia Severa, which was particularly taboo in traditional Roman religion.

According to Dio, Elagabalus justified the marriage by saying the two would make "godlike children" (but they never did have kids together).

High Priest
of
Elagabal

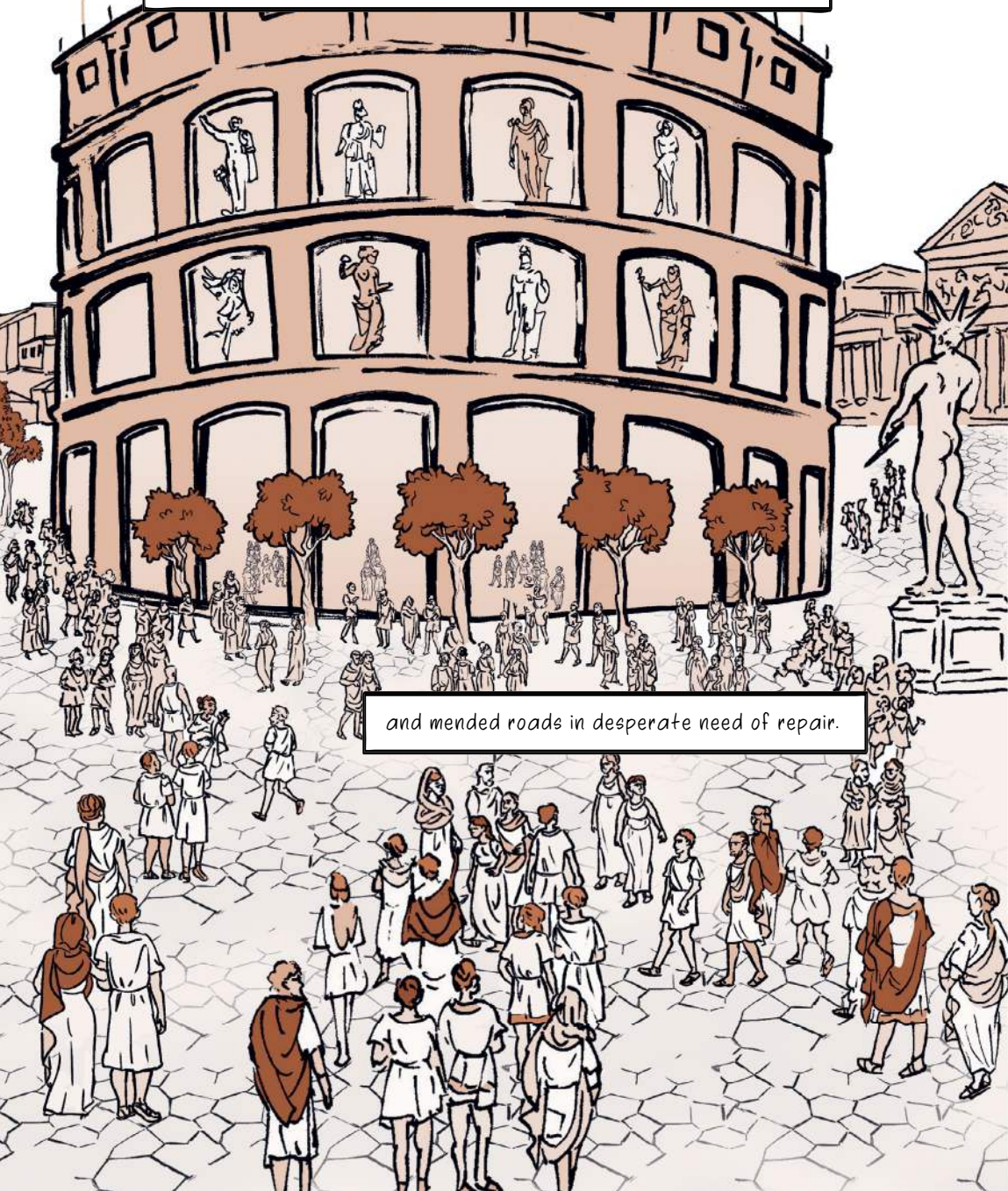
High
Priestess
of
Vesta



This marriage is actually one of the few verifiable facts from Elagabalus's reign.

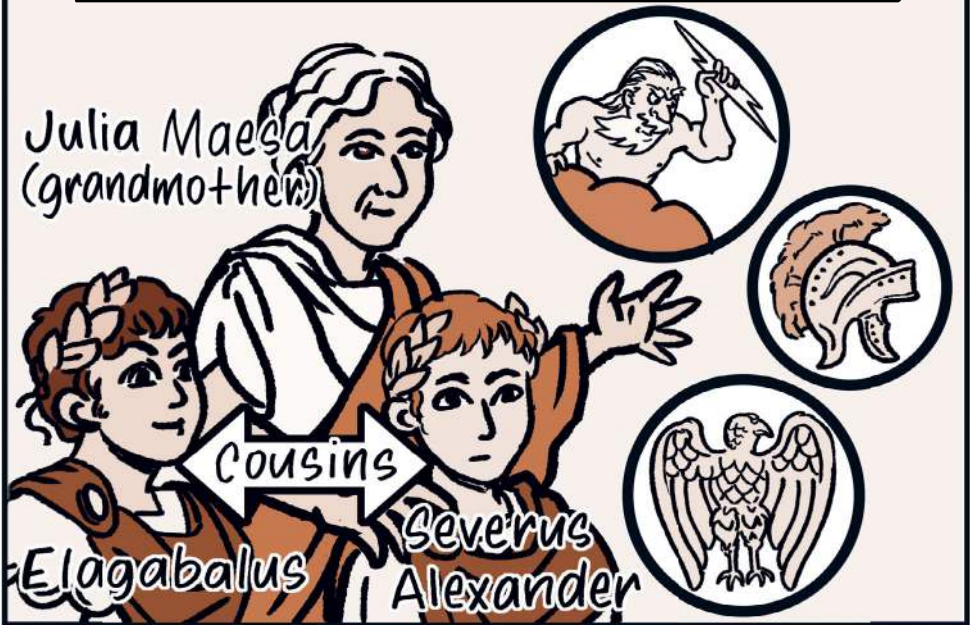
But it wasn't all scandal:

some of the less frequently repeated facts are that Elagabalus fixed the Colosseum, which had been struck by lightning . . .



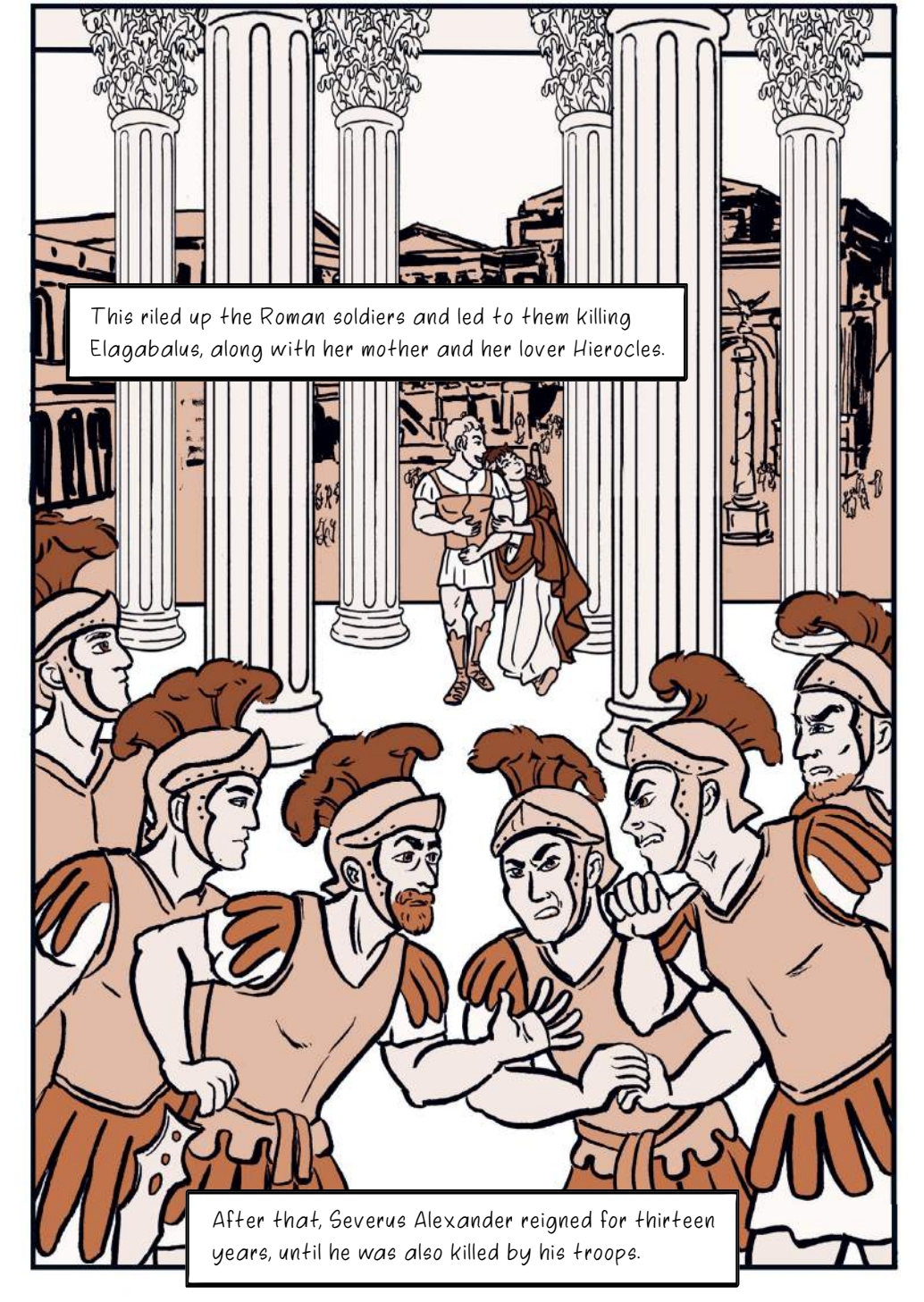
and mended roads in desperate need of repair.

While all this was happening, Elagabalus's grandmother Julia Maesa had begun grooming her younger grandchild Severus Alexander to present a more traditionally Roman (and masculine) public image.



According to the stories, when Elagabalus realized that Alexander had become better liked by both their grandma and the Romans, Elagabalus tried to kill Alexander.



A comic book panel depicting a scene in a Roman temple. In the foreground, several Roman soldiers in brown tunics and helmets with red plumes are shown in profile, looking towards the background. In the background, a man in a white tunic and a woman in a white dress with a brown shawl are embracing. The temple is filled with tall, white columns with ornate capitals. A text box is positioned in the upper left, and another text box is at the bottom.

This riled up the Roman soldiers and led to them killing Elagabalus, along with her mother and her lover Hierocles.

After that, Severus Alexander reigned for thirteen years, until he was also killed by his troops.

The emperor who came to be called Elagabalus is a figure shrouded in mystery, and untangling fact from fiction may be impossible.

**Ardent
feminist?**

**Queer
icon?**

**Evil
tyrant?**

**Normal
teenage
emperor?**

But Elagabalus's story has captivated the attention of those seeking trans stories, as well as those seeking salacious stories across the centuries.



Why do certain stories from history get repeated over and over, while others are not remembered at all?

Who is telling the story?

Why?

Who is the audience?

What does the story reveal about the point of view of whoever recorded it?

What were the motivations for recording it?



2

*Europeans Behaving
Badly:*

From the
OLD WORLD
to the

"NEW"

WORLD

Medieval Europe

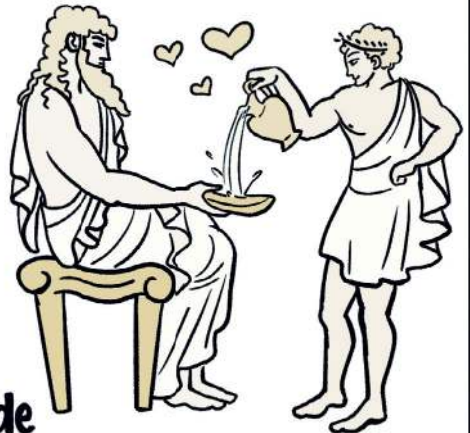
There were a variety of gender expressions and sexualities in medieval Europe.

And a variety of opinions about the subject!

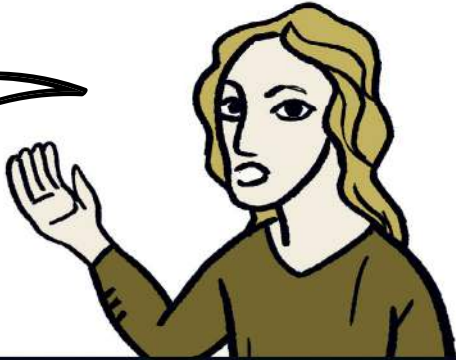
In the popular twelfth-century poem "The Debate of Ganymede and Helen," two beautiful youths argue the merits of hetero versus gay male love.

"For a man to be linked to a man is a more elegant coupling."


Helen VS. Ganymede



In ancient Greek mythology, Ganymede is Zeus's lover and became the constellation Aquarius.




A twelfth-century French monk rants about how gay people are everywhere in his poem "On Contempt for the World."

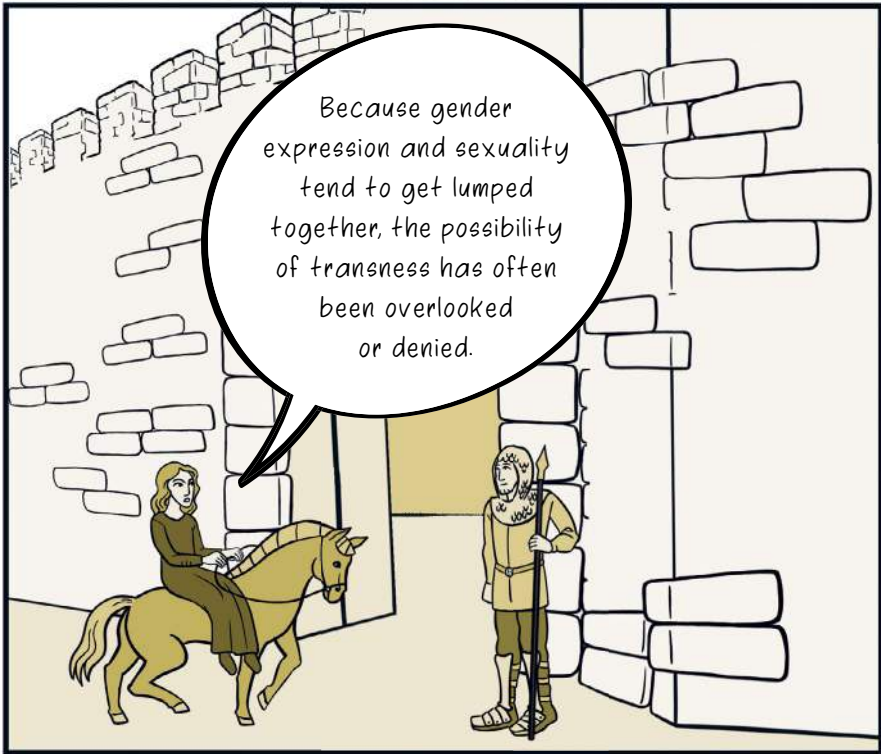


"The world teems with a countless brood of Ganymedes, alack!"

"This beast may be found dwelling in any house. . . . The castles, villas, sanctuary abound in them."



But what about trans people?



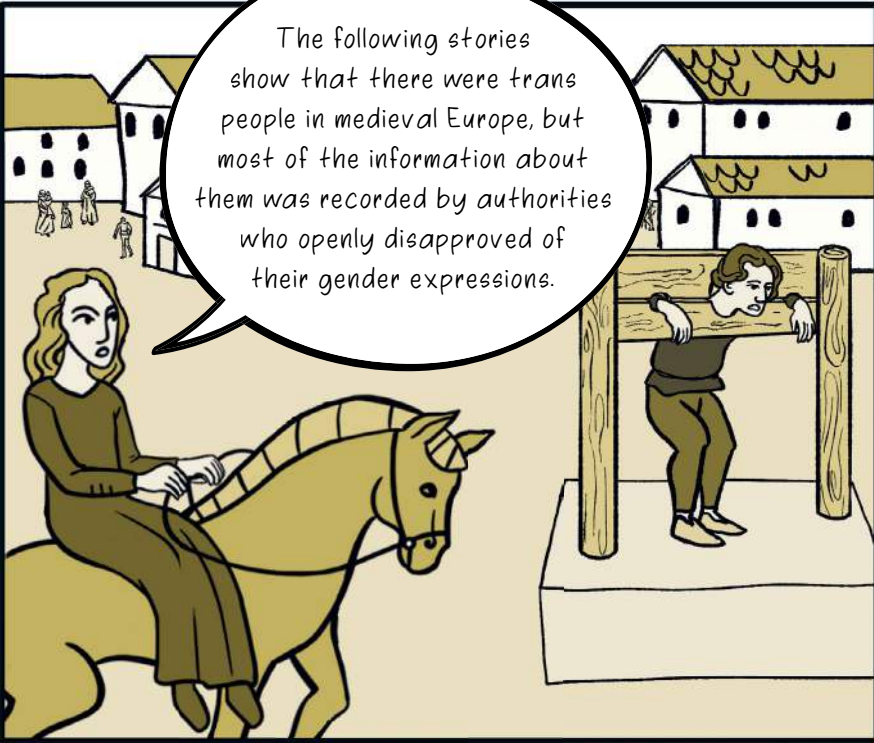
Because gender expression and sexuality tend to get lumped together, the possibility of transness has often been overlooked or denied.



Pssst...
Arrest records are a great source of info!



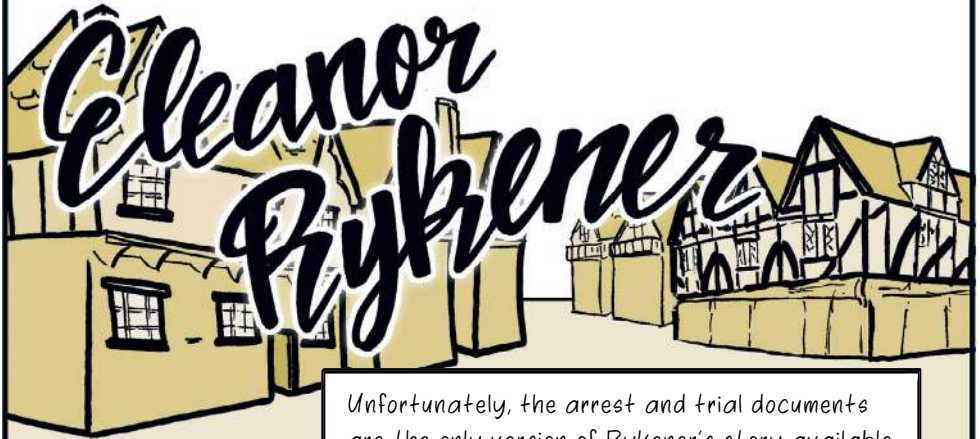
The following stories show that there were trans people in medieval Europe, but most of the information about them was recorded by authorities who openly disapproved of their gender expressions.



Unfortunately, though, they didn't usually record the defendants' side of the story...



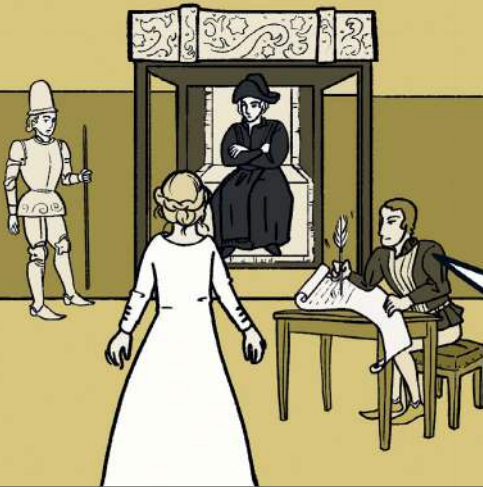
In 1393, Eleanor Rykener was arrested in London for doing sex work.



Unfortunately, the arrest and trial documents are the only version of Rykener's story available.

There are no visual records of Rykener.

The trial was recorded in Latin instead of the English that Rykener was actually speaking, so the statements are several times removed from what was originally said.



"John Rykener, calling [herself] Eleanor, having been detected in women's clothing, who were found last Sunday night between the hours of 8 and 9 by certain officials of the city lying by a certain stall in Soper's Lane committing that detestable, unmentionable and ignominious vice."

Eleanor Rykener had been making a living doing sex work, embroidery, and bartending.

In England at the time, sex work was somewhat tolerated . . .



"Priests pay the best."

But Rykener was scapegoated due to rising anxieties about perceived gender incongruence and, by extension, sexual violations.

The court asked invasive questions about Rykener's sex life, and Rykener freely shared details about sleeping with many, many people (including famous men and married women)!



And how many people have you slept with?

I don't know . . .
A lot!?

The court was more interested in specific sex acts than Rykener's personal feelings about gender.

"Who had taught [you] to exercise this vice,

and for how long and in what places

and with what persons?"



One clue as to Rykener's personal identity lies in the choice of the name Eleanor, which was somewhat outdated at the time. It would have evoked images of former queens and upper-class sensibilities.

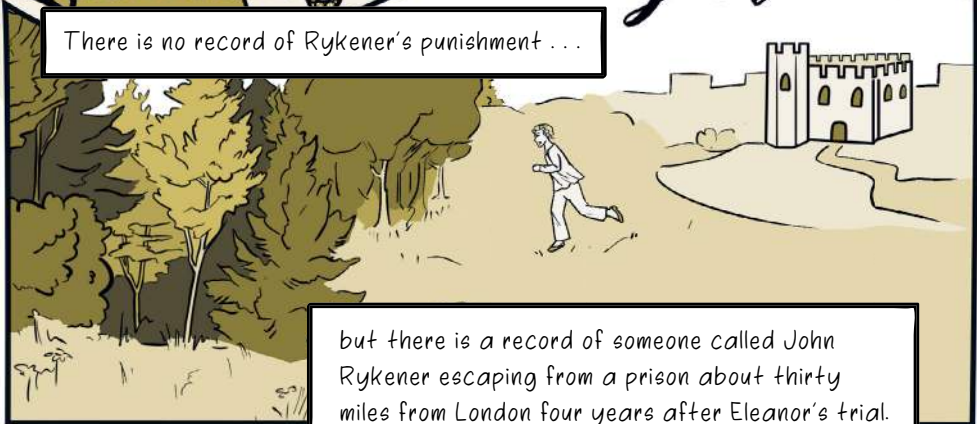


"The name Eleanor was meant to be appreciated because it was unique; it was meant to be recognized as playful."

MEDIEVAL HISTORIAN

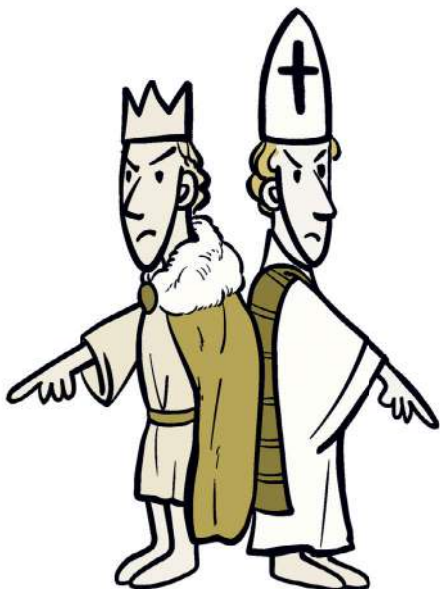
Dr. Hilary Rhodes

There is no record of Rykener's punishment . . .



but there is a record of someone called John Rykener escaping from a prison about thirty miles from London four years after Eleanor's trial.

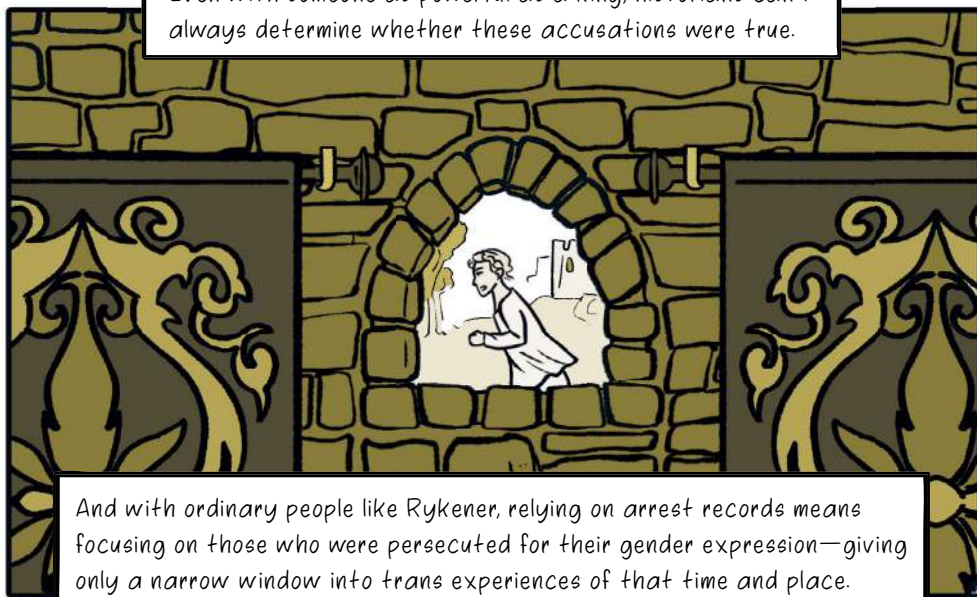
Rykener's trial took place in an environment where allegations of queerness were being used as a political weapon.



For example, several kings had been recently removed based on accusations of feminine behavior.



Even with someone as powerful as a king, historians can't always determine whether these accusations were true.



And with ordinary people like Rykener, relying on arrest records means focusing on those who were persecuted for their gender expression—giving only a narrow window into trans experiences of that time and place.

Early Modern Europe

As Europe moved out of the Middle Ages, perceived sex and gender transgressions became increasingly associated with witchcraft.

Church leaders also associated sodomy with foreignness and accused people from other lands of being responsible for spreading it among Christians.

The Catholic Inquisitions, which were created to punish heretics and to investigate Jews and Muslims who had (often under threat) converted to Christianity, began to include gay and trans people too.



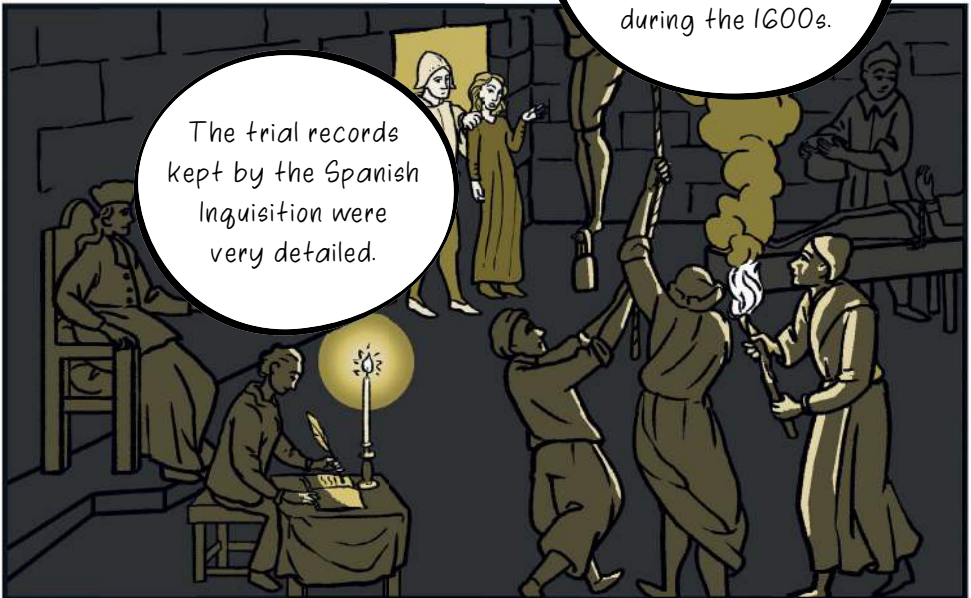
In turn, various social ills and natural disasters were framed as God being upset about sodomy.

In 1519, a Spanish friar gave a sermon blaming "foreign sodomites" for a plague, which resulted in a mob hunting down multiple people, who were then murdered.



Anxieties about sex were intertwined with anxieties about gender, so a handful of anti-crossdressing laws were passed in Spain during the 1600s.

The trial records kept by the Spanish Inquisition were very detailed.

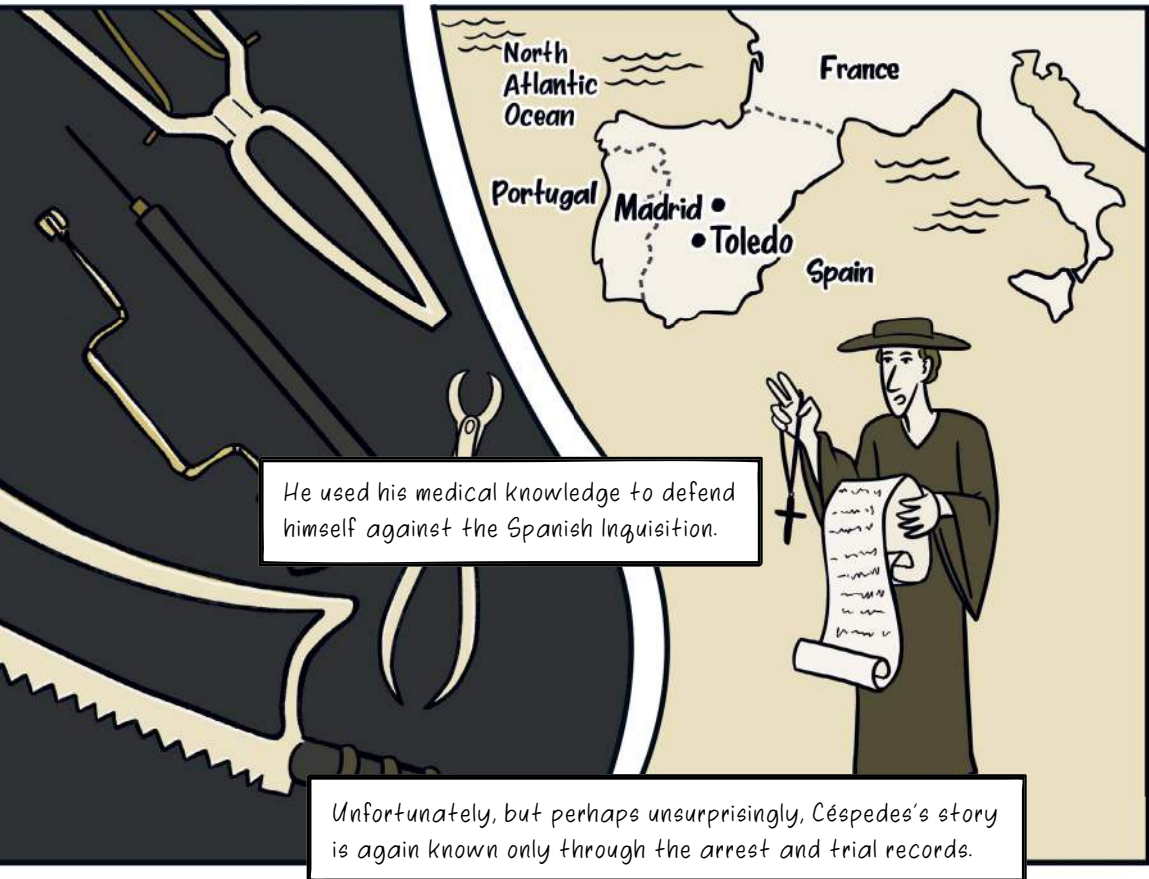


In 1587, Eleno de Céspedes was arrested and accused of making a deal with the devil and pretending to be a man.

Eleno de Céspedes

There are no visual records of Céspedes.

Born in Spain around 1545 to a Spanish farmer father and an enslaved North African mother, Céspedes was enslaved at birth, yet he grew up to be a self-educated medical professional.



As a teen, Céspedes married and became pregnant.

But by the time the baby was born, Céspedes's husband had left.

Leaving the child in the care of an acquaintance, Céspedes went to look for work.



Dressing and mostly passing as a man while working various jobs, including farmhand, shepherd, tailor, and soldier, Céspedes started studying medical texts.



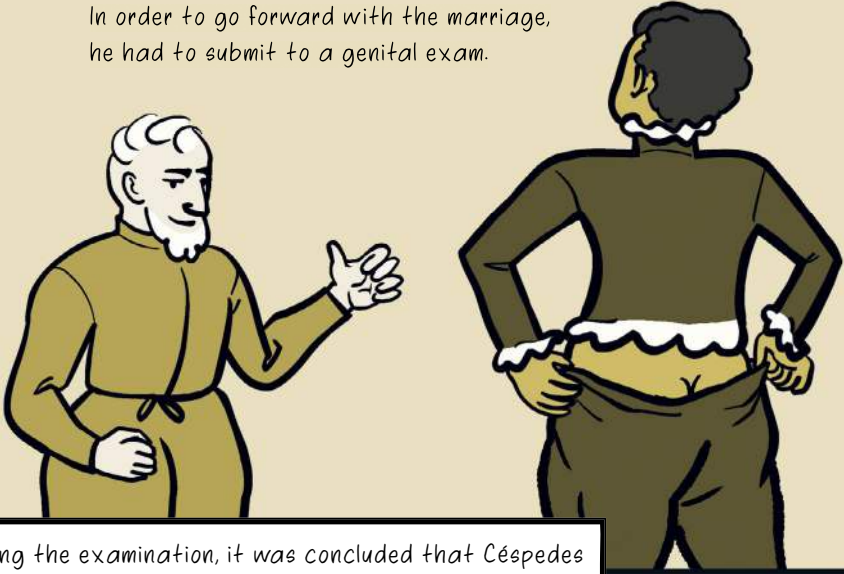
With some guidance from a Spanish surgeon, he learned to perform surgeries and started working as a licensed surgeon.



By the time of his arrest, he was in his forties, with a successful career and a new wife.

When marrying his wife, Céspedes came under suspicion due to his lack of facial hair. Therefore, the authorities concluded he must be a eunuch.

In order to go forward with the marriage, he had to submit to a genital exam.




During the examination, it was concluded that Céspedes did have a penis, and the marriage was approved.

But when a former fellow-soldier who'd served with Céspedes sent a letter questioning his sex/gender again, Céspedes was sent to the Spanish Inquisition.




The Inquisition would later claim that the penis seen during the pre-marriage exam must have been the result of witchcraft.

But Céspedes explained his situation differently:



"Many times people have been seen who are androgynous, who, in other words, are called hermaphrodites, who have both sexes, I too have been one of these,

and when I intended to marry I prevailed more in the masculine sex and was naturally a man and had all that was necessary for a man to be able to marry."

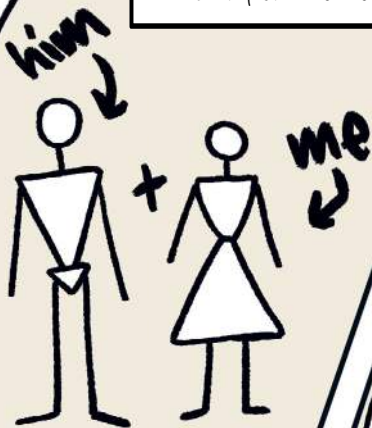


During the trial, the Inquisition obsessively scrutinized Céspedes's private parts.

His defense hinged on an unlikely story with details that today would be considered impossible and bizarre . . .

Céspedes told the Inquisition about how he'd given birth as a teenage wife during his first marriage.

But he said that as he was giving birth to his child, his own penis had also emerged from his vulva.



He explained that he still had his penis at the time of the recent pre-marriage exam...



but then a horseback riding injury caused it to atrophy.

In fact, he said, his penis had fallen off completely just a few days before the start of the Inquisition trial.

"At present I have only my woman's nature. The male member that emerged from me has just recently come off. . . .

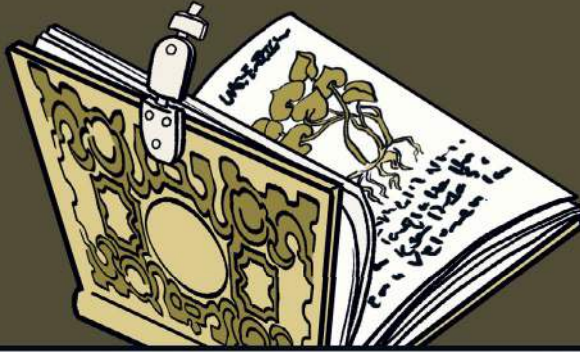
It only now finished falling off, after more than fifteen days."

As strange as it might sound, these details were actually based on then-familiar ideas.

And at least one other medical expert at the trial even attested to the plausibility of Céspedes's story.

Sounds legit.

Medieval concepts of biology were changing, but they still rested on classical foundations.



Several famous Greek and Roman philosophers were cited during the trial in support of Céspedes's defense.



It was thought that men and women existed on a scale, with their reproductive anatomy being inverted versions of each other.

WOMAN → **MAN**

A spontaneous sex change was considered theoretically possible, but really only going in one direction—from woman to man.