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WHAT ARE KINGS?

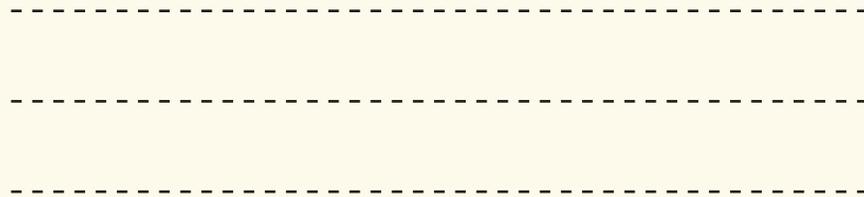
edifying and truthful stories

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WHAT ARE KINGS?

edifying and truthful stories



with pictures from the metropolitan museum,
the british library and the new york public library,
the drawings of nika dubrovsky





WERE THERE ALWAYS KINGS AND QUEENS?

**Dear Reader:
We have all
read fairy tales
about kings
and queens,
princes and
princesses,
dragons and
castles.**



I T'S ALL TRUE! They really existed!
Well, except for the dragons. Dragons
didn't really exist. Somebody just
made that part up (Also the talking fish.)
But the kings and princesses and castles
definitely existed.

For much of history, most people lived
under monarchies. That meant they took
one person and everyone had to do anything
he said, until that person died, and then
they'd just do the same thing with his son
or sometimes daughter. Sort of like a game
of Simon Says, except the same person
always gets to be Simon, and the game
goes on forever. This was referred to as
“government.”

There are two common mistakes people
make about kings. One is to think that
they were always there: that there's
just something odd about humans that
makes them want to give one person all
the power. No. That's wrong. The other
mistake is to think maybe people long
ago behaved that way, but that's because
people long ago were slightly stupid, and

hadn't figured out how to hold elections or online surveys, but we certainly don't have anything like kings now. That turns out not to be true either. It might seem to be, because we no longer have anyone dressed in elaborate costumes who can order somebody's head chopped off – at least, in most places, we don't – but as we'll see, things haven't changed nearly as much as we like to think.

One thing no one can deny: kings are fun to think about. That's why people like to dress up as them, or play games where they get to be kings or queens, or why there are so many books and stories about them. So why write another one? Well, mainly to ask: why do we find kings and queens so interesting? What is it we really like about them, and what is it we'd find annoying or even terrifying if one was actually around? Where did they come from and why do they never seem to go away? Is it possible to keep all the things we like about kings and queens and get rid of all the other ones?

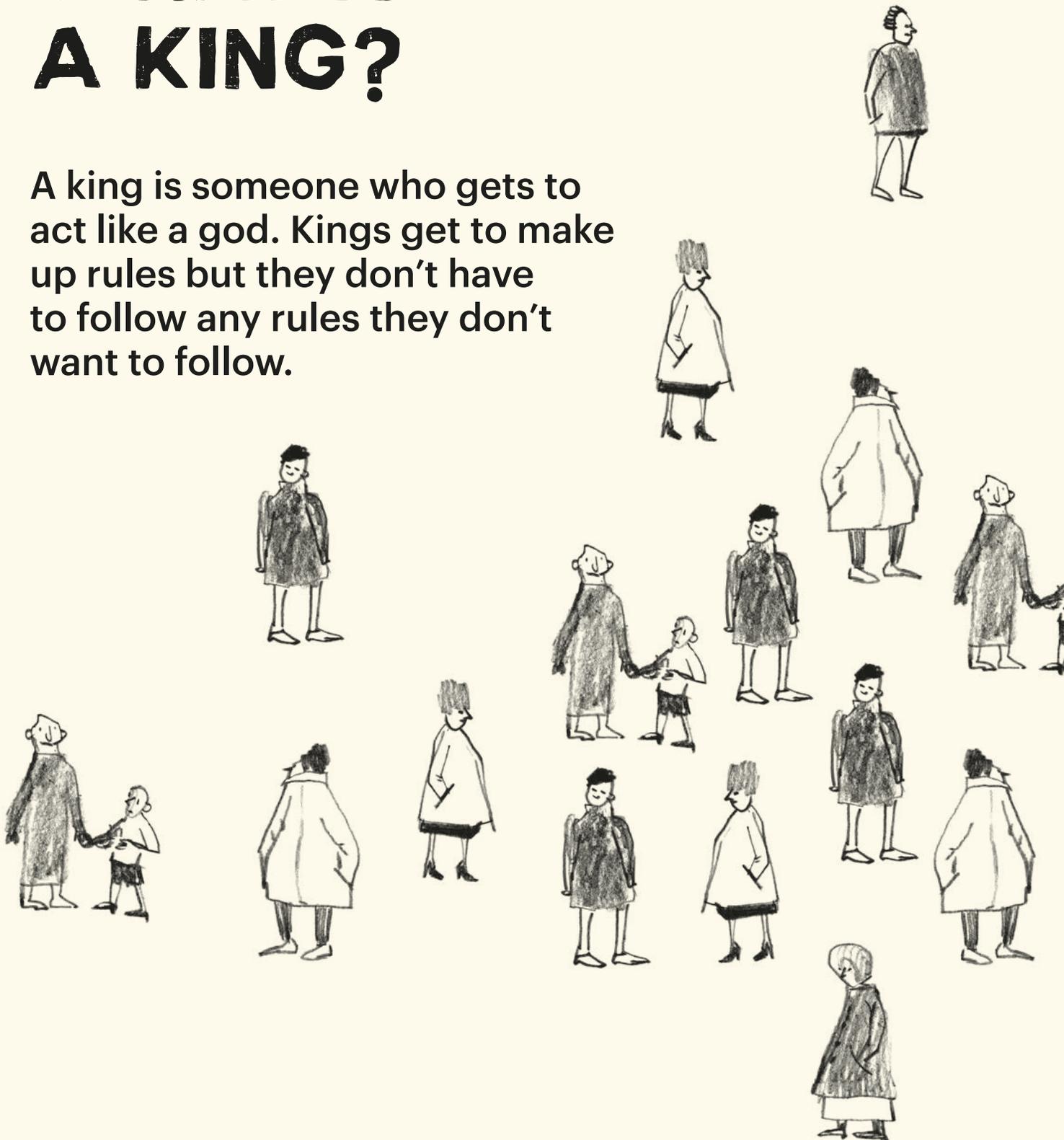
This book, then, is an illustrated collection of questions and answers to help us get to the bottom of all this. But it's also meant to be entertaining because, let's face it, kings and queens are pretty entertaining. We'll see what happens when some people get to do absolutely anything they want, and other people try to come up with all sorts of clever strategies to keep them out of trouble. We'll see what happens when servant girls conquer the world, mummies pretend they're still alive, and parents build make-believe towns for their children. But we don't want to give too much away.

We hope you have as much fun as we did figuring all this out!

Nika and David

WHAT IS A KING?

A king is someone who gets to act like a god. Kings get to make up rules but they don't have to follow any rules they don't want to follow.



So once upon a time, someone managed to convince everyone else around them either that they were a god, or, maybe just that everyone had to treat them like one.





WERE THERE ALWAYS KINGS AND QUEENS?

No. But people long ago did used to imagine that the Sun and Moon, or the Ocean, or other great mysterious forces of nature were Gods.

Here it gets difficult. We don't really know what people were thinking back in the Ice Age. But if we look at people who live roughly the same way today, for instance, who hunt animals and collect plants rather than breeding or growing them, we discover some interesting patterns. They don't have kings. But almost always, they imagine that animals have kings. For instance, people who hunt reindeer or seals, will imagine there is a spirit called 'Master of the Reindeer' or 'Mistress of the Seals', who might sometimes look like a Reindeer or Seal or sometimes like a person, who maybe is the ancestor of all the reindeer or seals, or maybe just takes care of their animals and punishes humans if they kill them for no good reason.

But there is never a ‘Master of the Humans’.

Sometimes, there are gods who are a little like that, say, who are said to have discovered distinctly human things like marriage, fire or clothing, but they’re almost always extremely silly gods. The Masters and Mistresses of the Animals tend to be quite serious. But these ‘Tricksters’ as they’re called, tend to bumble around like idiots, and invent things by accident, say, by farting, or blowing their nose, or banging their heads on something. They’re all-powerful but also greedy and stupid, and just generally the last sort of people you’d want to have around. So it’s probably all for the best that after creating the world or human society they then got lost somewhere and were never seen again.



IT WAS ALMOST AS IF EVERYONE COULD ALREADY IMAGINE WHAT PEOPLE WITH GODLIKE POWERS WOULD BE LIKE, AND WANTED TO MAKE CLEAR THEY WANTED NOTHING TO DO WITH THEM.



SO WHERE DID THE FIRST KINGS COME FROM?

How do you convince someone who already knows you that you're actually a god, or should be treated like one? Well probably, you don't.





THAT'S WHY KINGS USUALLY COME FROM FAR AWAY.

Wherever the first kings came from it was likely someplace other than the place they ruled. To this day, most kings and queens insist their family is from a country different from the one they're king and queen of.

It is very hard to figure out when the first kings appeared in history. But archaeologists have dug up the graves of people who look a lot like kings and queens as far back as twenty or thirty thousand years ago, back in the Ice Age, when much of Europe and North America was covered with frozen glaciers and people were hunting mammoths. Every now and then they discover a grave completely full of beads and necklaces and crowns and scepters made from ivory and shells, and other things people thought were very precious at the time. They seem extremely regal. Whoever was buried in them was clearly very important and considered different from everybody else. But when archaeologists inspect the bodies more carefully, they usually discover they were different in other ways as well. Most were physically strange. Some were really tall, almost like giants, some were dwarfs or hunchbacks. Even the ones that seemed ordinary from their skeletons probably didn't look very ordinary at the time. (Maybe one of their eyes was brown and one was blue. How would we know?)



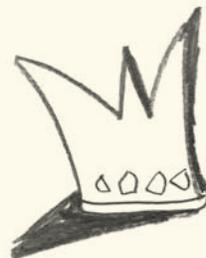
What does it all mean?

Well we can't know for sure, but what we do know is that mammoth-hunters spent a lot of time making really elaborate and beautiful costumes for some very unusual-looking people, the kind of thing that later would have been called 'fit for a king' – but that aside from that, there was no sign of a kingdom. There isn't the slightest evidence of any palaces, courts, treasuries, armies, or anything like that. Instead, people seem to have scattered out in little family groups in the summer, and then in the winter gathered together in what were almost tiny cities where they had feasts and festivals. Sometimes they built great collective houses covered in mammoth teeth. But never do you see special palaces or forts or mansions just for kings.

So who were these strange people?

Our best guess is: maybe they were play kings. Maybe strange-looking people were considered divine, just because they looked so strange; maybe they even treated them like gods sometimes, for instance during festivals or other celebrations, even though at other times they were just ordinary (if strange-looking) people. Maybe theatre and games where one person was made king and could do anything they liked came first, and only later did people forget that they were just playing.

But how did that happen?



Enlil was the Sumerian king of the gods. Some people used to think gods were just imaginary kings. It seems much more likely that kings were imaginary gods!



Still, that doesn't explain how some people ended up in a position where they could tell everyone else what to do, let alone pass that position on to their children. How? Was it because they were so charming or beautiful that people just somehow wanted to do whatever they said? Or were they so clever they managed to trick everyone into thinking they were gods? Or were they just really big and scary? And even if they were more charming or brilliant or terrifying than anyone else, how did they manage to convince everyone to let their children take over when they died, since their children might just as easily be weak or ugly or stupid?

We don't know. But that isn't going to stop us from guessing! So here's one idea: maybe it was all just a game that went terribly wrong.

Let's go back to those gods again. Even people who don't have kings often think gods and goddesses act a little like kings, imposing all sorts of rules on us, and punishing anyone who breaks them.

Now, some of these rules are usually very sensible ('be generous to strangers' or 'don't break other people's things') but others just seem totally random ('you can never eat corn when it's raining' or 'every Friday you have to eat fish') and often, no one knows why these rules exist but still, they are quite sure if they don't follow them, something very bad will happen even if they're not sure what. Say, you eat corn when it's raining, and then somebody's cat gets hit by lightning – then you're in trouble because everyone will think it's your fault.

So here's one idea. Maybe it was all a game of make-believe. Let's imagine during certain times of year people would dress up in costumes and pretend to be gods and goddesses and dragons and monsters. This isn't hard to imagine because there are still some places – from Greenland to Tierra del Fuego – where they still do. Let's also imagine (since this is true too) there are drums, music, dancing, games and speeches in funny voices when the gods

appear, but also very complicated rules about who could sing what song or dance what dance and how they had to do it.

So far this seems like innocent good fun but here's where it gets difficult. In everyday life you don't need anyone to enforce the rules. It's enough to know everyone will get mad at you if you break the rules and then someone's cat gets hit by lightning. But when the gods actually show up, it's different. There are too many rules. But you also don't want the people playing gods to enforce the rules because gods should be too high and mighty to have to pay attention to who's sitting when they're supposed to be standing or talking out of turn. So you get someone to be 'Master of Ceremonies'.

Often these ceremonies were the only time anyone got to order anyone else around. So you had to be careful that the person who enforces the rules isn't taken too seriously. So often that person would be a clown. They enforced the rules but the rules didn't apply to them. They could be as silly as they liked. In fact they were supposed to be silly. But they were also a little like police, they could punish people for breaking the rules. Sometimes they'd intentionally try to confuse everyone, do the ceremony wrong, tell jokes, pretend to fall flat on their face, but no one was supposed to laugh – if anyone laughed, they'd make them pay a fine, or throw them in the air, or take their clothes away.

Since they could do anything, sometimes they'd make up new rules.

Now let's imagine these games started lasting for weeks or even months, which did sometimes happen. Well, maybe at some point, people forgot that they were playing a game. Maybe they started acting like that all the time and the people who got to make up the rules became kings.



**HOW DO WE
KNOW THAT
THEY ARE
REALLY KINGS?**

Because they have kingly
things!



When we see a picture of a person, we know that person is a king or queen because they're wearing crowns, holding orbs and sceptres, and are dressed in beautiful clothes. Usually they were wearing at least one thing that no one else was allowed to wear. For instance, in some kingdoms, only the king and his family could wear bright red, or certain kinds of fur. This was considered very important.

Kings and Queens have the very best clothes and live in the very best houses. Quite often they have extremely large hats. The Ottoman Caliph sometimes wore a turban that was half as tall as he was, and Maya kings would wear feather headdresses that were often several times bigger than their heads. Even when they weren't big, for instance, royal hats were often very expensive. For instance, on important occasions the Queen of England wears a hat that would probably be worth billions of dollars, if you could buy it (which of course you can't). Every year tourists flock to England and visit the Tower of London and stare at the 'crown jewels', which are very large pieces of extremely rare polished rock (diamonds, rubies, emeralds...) set in hats ('crowns') that the royal family has kept for generations. Everyone likes to fantasize about someone stealing the crown jewels, but as you might guess it would be very difficult, since the Queen keeps a small army (called 'beefeaters') just to protect her hats.

The only people who can really get away with stealing kings' or queens' hats – or their robes, or orbs, or necklaces, or sceptres, or other Very Important Objects that royal people always seem to keep around – are other kings and queens. For instance, the largest diamond in the world, called the Koh-i-Noor, which is now one of the crown jewels, was frequently stolen from each other by kings and emperors in India, some of whom would occasionally wear it, but otherwise keep it guarded somewhere but not tell anyone where, and others, never wore it at all, since they were afraid another king would steal it. Eventually England conquered India and took it away and gave it to Queen Victoria.

If you think about it though, only a king can really steal another king's things because otherwise, how would you stop them from taking it back? (Of course you could hide it somewhere, but then you'd be like a dragon, sitting on a hoard of treasure that no one ever got to see. What's the fun of that?)

Still, a lot of people like to fantasize about kingly things so very kingly that if you somehow got hold of them, you'd instantly become a King or Queen yourself. That's why we have legends like King Arthur and Excalibur: whoever holds the sword, becomes king. We don't know of any kingdoms that really worked like that. Still, everybody loves stories like that, just like everyone loves to think someone might steal the crown jewels.

Why? Maybe stories like that are a way to ask questions no one knows how to answer, like: do people obey a king because he's king, or is he king because they obey him? Was Louis XIV or Suleiman the Magnificent really a king, or just some guy dressed as a king? (Well, either way, the latter would be the case.) Is there really any difference?



WHAT MAKES ROYALS DIFFERENT AND THE SAME?

Some kings want to see themselves as wise and just, and other kings want to see themselves as outside of morality entirely, they can just do anything they want.

Mariana of Austria



Caligula



not Caligula



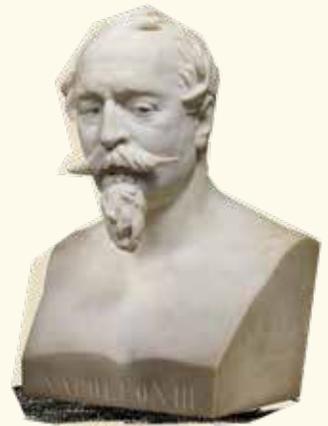
one of Three
Kings who visited
Jesus after his birth

**OTHER KINGS
AND QUEENS
ARE AMBITIOUS
AND WANT
TO CONQUER
EVERYONE.**

Mariana of Austria



**Queen Mother Pendant
Mask: Iyoba | Edo peo-
ples**



Louis Bonaparte

What makes kings and queens different from each other



Caligula

Caligula was the third Roman emperor, and most people thought he was completely insane, since he declared himself a god, married his sister, made his horse a senator, and at one point declared war on the ocean. Either that or he had a really sarcastic sense of humour. Eventually they killed him.

Catherine I

Catherine wasn't from a royal family, she just married well (to Peter the Great, king of Russia), and managed to take over Russia when he died. Actually nobody knew her background because everyone was forbidden to speculate where she came from. She was mainly remembered for being nice to her servants, which was unusual in Russia at the time, but after she died her enemies made up all sorts of terrible stories about her.





Louis Bonaparte

Louis Napoleon was the last king of France. Louis was grandson of the famous Napoleon Bonaparte, who had crowned himself emperor in 1804, and conquered most of Europe then lost it again. In 1842, Louis was President of the French Republic and his term was about to expire, so instead of stepping down, he made himself emperor. Problem was at the time, France didn't really have an empire any more. So Louis decided to create one by invading Mexico. This went very badly and since Louis died France has had no desire for monarchs of any kind.

Mariana of Austria

Mariana became Queen of Spain when her husband the king died, but her son, Charles his heir, was only three years old. He became King Charles II, but was described at the time as inbred, lame, epileptic, incapable of understanding schoolwork, and almost always sick. Everyone assumed he would die soon but in fact he lived on for years, allowing his mother to run the government.

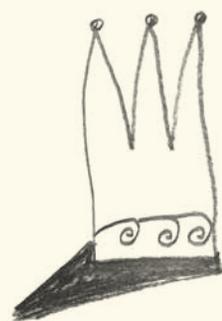


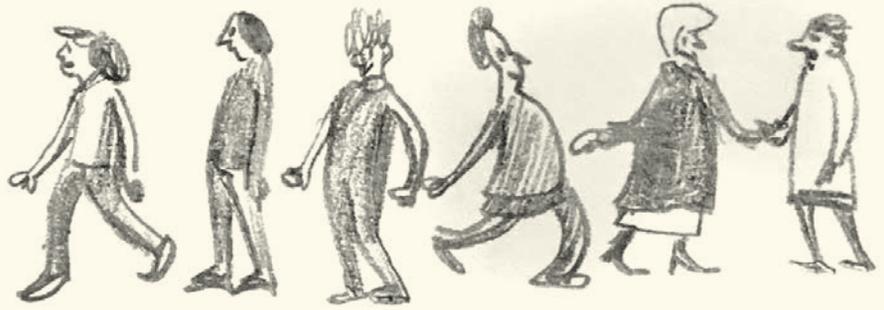


Some kings are known for their wisdom, others for their stupidity. Some kings love peace, others live for war and conquest. Some are pious, others have contempt for religion. Some collect books, others burn them. Some are outright crazy. Since people didn't see kings and queens very often, they would spend a lot of time speculating about what the king, or his wife or wives, or mother or children, or closest advisors, were really like. Was he a good king or a bad king? This allowed some to say that the king himself was probably very nice, it's just his evil advisors who were causing him to raise taxes or take away their children to serve in the army or otherwise make life difficult.

Sometimes though everyone agreed the king was awful, there was just not too much they could do about it. For instance, Henry III of England who built the Tower of London (that's where the current Queen keeps her hats) was so universally hated that when a large part of the tower he was building collapsed, there were celebrations for days in London.

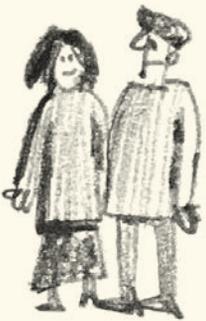
A lot of kings have extreme personalities: either they are unusually kind, or unusually cruel. In southern Africa, for instance, people remember Shaka, the founder of the Zulu kingdom, as a terrifying king, who went completely crazy when his mother died, and ordered thousands of his own subjects killed. Sometimes he would throw parties and execute anyone who made a mistake with the dance steps. At one point he forbade anyone to drink milk for a year, since milk reminded him of his mother. On the other hand, Mushoeshoe, King of the Basotho, was equally famous for being the nicest king anyone had ever heard of. He was always kind and helpful to those around him. And he refused to execute anyone under any circumstances. His advisors were always trying to find someone who'd done something so awful even Mushoeshoe would order him killed. The closest they came was once they found some cannibals, who had killed and eaten the King's beloved grandfather Peete. "Can't we at least kill them?" they said. "They ate your grandfather!" Mushoeshoe thought about it and finally said "No. If they ate my grandfather, then their bodies are my grandfather's grave. I can't desecrate my grandfather's grave! That would be wrong. So let them go and tell them to stop eating people because that's disgusting."





WHAT IS A KINGDOM?

Kings and queens come
and go, but the kingdom is
supposed to last forever.

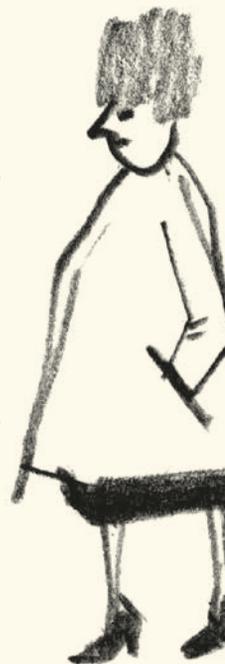
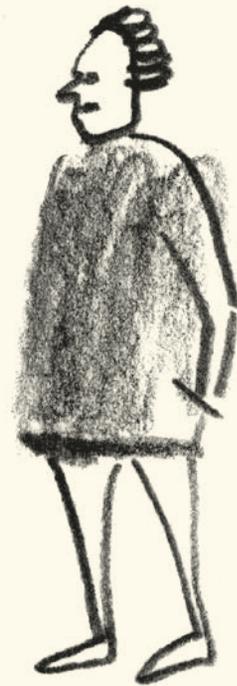




KINGDOMS REALLY DON'T LAST FOREVER. VERY FEW THINGS REALLY LAST FOREVER. BUT EVERYONE HAD TO PRETEND THAT IT WOULD.



WHO ARE THE PEOPLE KINGS RULE OVER??



Even though royal dynasties almost always insisted they were originally from some faraway land, and therefore not really part of ‘the people’.

Often 'nations' are people once ruled by a certain line of kings. British people are still ruled by Queen Elizabeth, but French people are people who were once ruled by Louis XVI — until they killed him.



But in a way that's exactly what makes them all the same. They were called 'commoners' because that was something they all had in common: that they weren't kings.



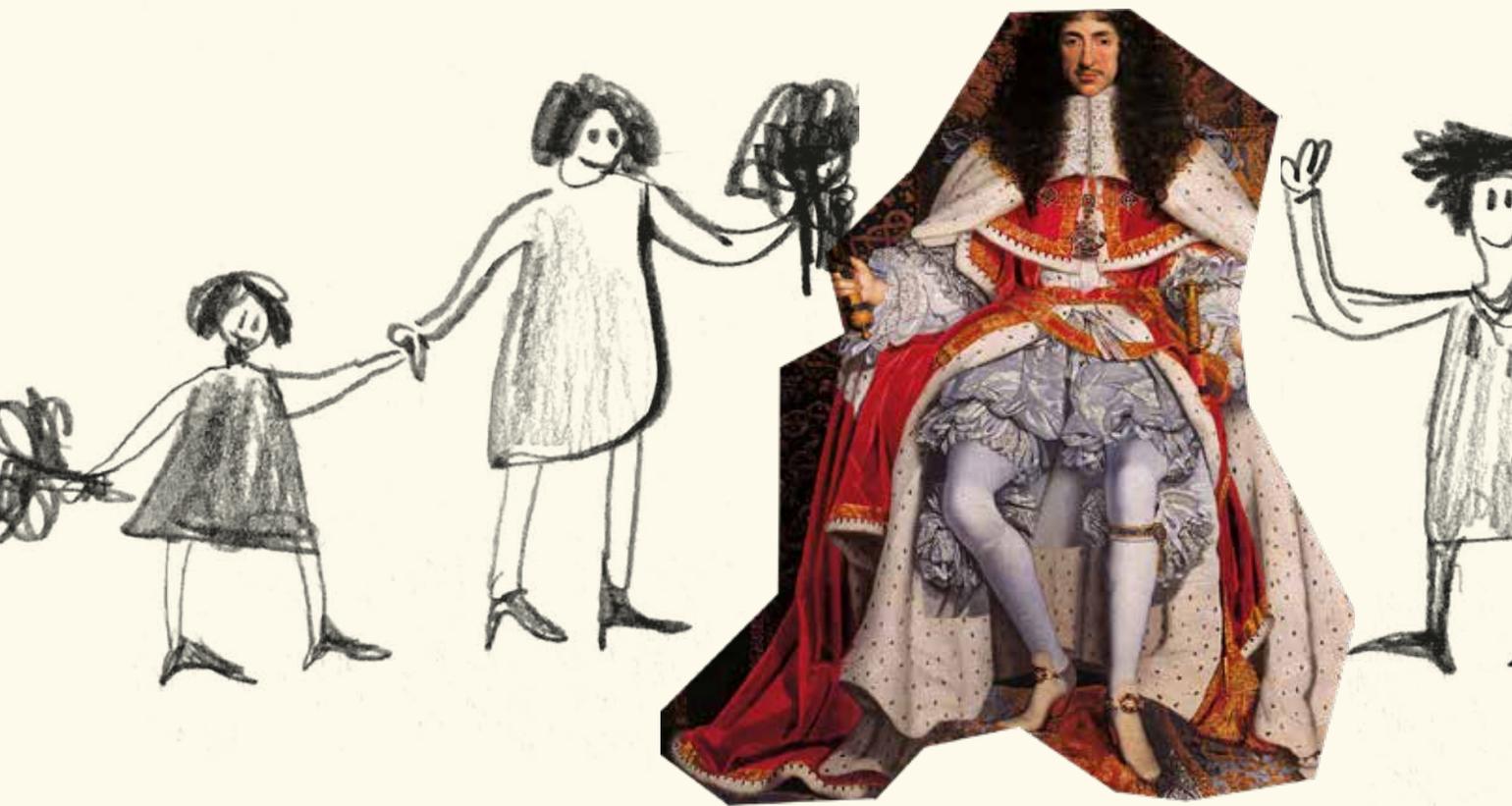
WHAT DO THE PEOPLE HAVE TO DO FOR THE KING?

Whatever the king wanted.



The king's subjects had to show respect: to bow down or even crawl in his presence, and constantly remind him how great he was, as if otherwise he might forget and think he was just an ordinary person. They also had to feed him and his court – that is, his family, fellow nobles, councillors, and servants. Kings and queens always liked to surround themselves with strange and extraordinary people: poets, jugglers, dwarfs, or eunuchs... and also lots of soldiers. These people needed food, and usually the best possible food. (That's why the Queen's guard in England are called "beefeaters".)





BUT DOESN'T THAT MAKE KINGS A LITTLE BIT LIKE CHILDREN?

Yes. In many ways it does.



Kings and queens often act in very childish ways: they are self-obsessed, they spend much of their time playing games, they get angry very easily or even throw temper tantrums. But they're also like very spoiled children: everyone has to indulge their whims, and even if they tell really stupid jokes, everyone has to pretend it's funny.

Childish kings



Sometimes, of course, kings actually were children. If an old monarch died, and his son was still very young, often he would become king, but his mother (called the 'dowager') would run the government. But then it became a problem to decide when the king was finally grown up. How old would he have to be? Twelve? Eighteen? Thirty? In ancient Egypt, there was a Pharaoh known to history as Thutmose III who became king when he was only two. So his mother, Hatshepsut, ran the kingdom. It turned out she ran it extremely well; she built beautiful cities and

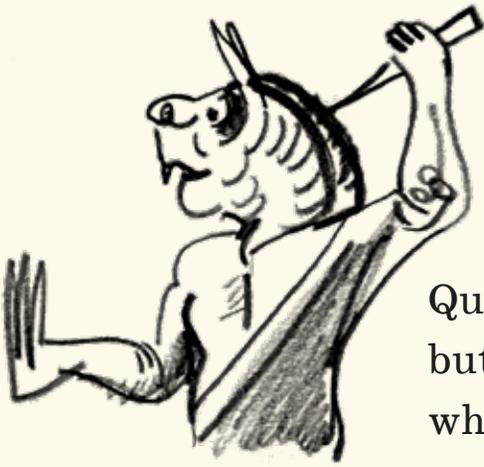
monuments; Egypt was never so rich and peaceful. Hatshepsut started wearing a fake beard and dressing as a man in public, saying she was Pharaoh herself. Meanwhile she told her son he needed to finish his education. Thutmose turned out to be so good at school he became an athlete, an historian, scientist, and architect. So then Hatshepsut gave him an army and told him to go conquer someone – mainly to get him out of town. (He eventually conquered much of the Middle East.) Finally, after 22 years, Hatshepsut died, and Thutmose went on to become one of the most famous Pharaohs in Egyptian history. At some point, however, someone, we don't know who, erased Hatshepsut's name from all public buildings. Some people think it was Thutmose, who was still angry at his mother for taking so long to let him take the throne.

Sometimes, too, people just treat kings like children. Perhaps this is not too surprising, since kings so often act in such childish ways – and even more, perhaps, because they also don't really know how to take care of themselves and need other people to take care of them all the time. In Madagascar, there was a famous

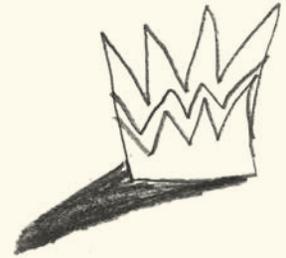
Queen named Ranavalona, who became ruler when her husband died. At the time she was about fifty years old, but everyone called her 'the little girl' and all the most important politicians in the kingdom, who were also her lovers, were referred to as her 'nursemaids'. Those politicians ran a great empire, but everyone pretended the empire was just there so the Queen could have anything she wanted, and all her subjects were her 'playthings'.

Ranavalona would sometimes play the same trick as Hatshepsut: when she got bored of having one of her boyfriends around too much, because she wanted to spend more time with a different one, she would give him an army and tell him to go conquer someone. It was just a way to get him out of town.





Queen Ranavalona had a terrible temper, but she also had a son, named Radama, who she loved so much she felt he could do no wrong. Every time she became angry at someone, she'd say "off with his head!" or order that person to be killed in some terrible way. They would be taken away to prison to be executed in the morning; but usually, that night, Radama would walk into the prison and let them go again. Obviously the guards didn't dare try to stop the prince. Nobody would mention any of this to Queen Ranavalona, who would always quickly forget she ever sentenced them to death to begin with.



WHAT DO THE PEOPLE EXPECT KINGS AND QUEENS WOULD DO FOR THEM?

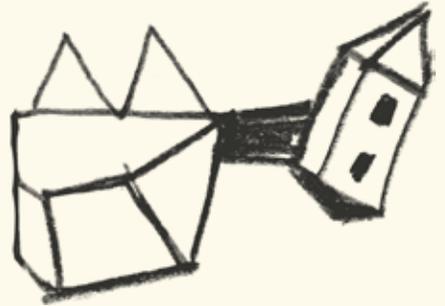
Everywhere you go, people seem to ask for the same things: health, safety, wellbeing and justice.



After all, isn't that what most people want from the government now? In a way it's odd that we want the same things from the government that people wanted so long ago, but maybe these are the things you need to have if you want to get anything else.



It was a very common idea that if the king was a good king, there would be good crops, good weather, and certainly no volcanoes blowing up or tsunamis or hurricanes or anything like that. If the king was a bad king...



THIS MIGHT SEEM ODD, TOO, BUT EVEN TODAY, IF THINGS GO TERRIBLY WRONG, EVEN IF IT'S A NATURAL DISASTER, PEOPLE TEND TO FIND A REASON TO GET ANGRY AT THE GOVERNMENT.

WHAT IF A KING GETS SICK?

It was often thought that if the king becomes sick, the whole country becomes sick.





BUT PEOPLE ALSO THOUGHT THE KING WOULD ONLY GET SICK, OR BAD THINGS HAPPEN, IF THE KING WAS DOING SOMETHING WRONG. IT'S A LITTLE LIKE THE CAT WHO GOT HIT BY LIGHTNING, AND THEN EVERYONE STARTS ASKING WHO MUST HAVE BROKEN A RULE.



KINGS LIKE CEREMONIES

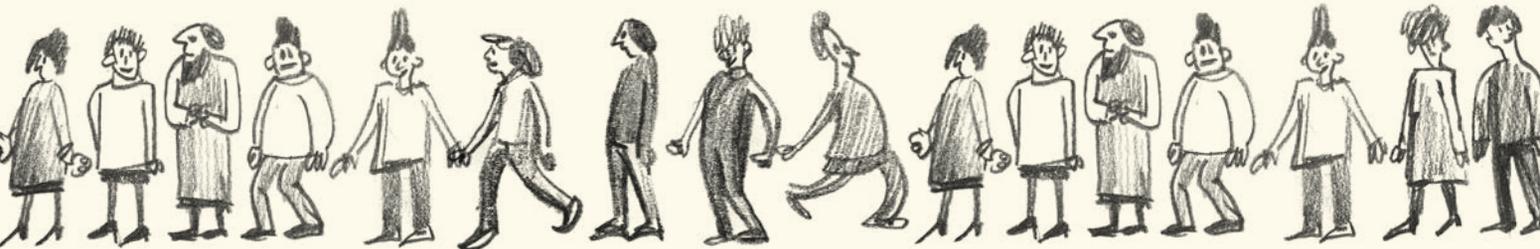
When kings become very powerful, they become a little like gods. They can do anything they like. They can take people's things or even kill them for no particular reason and everyone has to pretend this was an excellent idea. Usually powerful kings make up elaborate rituals – which are like games – where everyone has to do whatever the king says: for instance, sing songs about how great he is.

But if the king becomes less powerful, and ordinary people have more say in how the kingdom is run, they might change the rules, to make it much harder. They might say “you are a god, so you can't be treated like ordinary people. You should never touch the ground but instead always float over it.” But what that really means is the king always has to have people carry him around, which makes it hard for him to get out and see what his people are really up to. Or maybe they'll say the king can't ever see the sun, or cross a river, or that he can only sleep on his back so every night he has to be surrounded by people with sticks who poke him if he rolls over. In cases like that, it might become so annoying to have to be king that no one really wanted to do it. In some parts of Africa, it used to be that rich men would go around carrying swords to make sure no one tried to kidnap them and force them to be king. Nowadays, most kings just do ceremonies. Ceremonies are a little like games for adults, except they're not usually much fun. Kings and queens appear at important events, like say the opening of a new building, they put on magnificent clothing, maybe they lay

down a stone or cut a ribbon, but mostly they just make the event seem more important just by being there. And even though kings no longer have the power to order anyone around, everyone near them will pretend they are still very, very important, because that means those standing near them are important too.

Back in the Middle Ages, people used to argue about these ceremonies all the time. Nobles and important people liked to be seen around kings, because they made them seem important, but they didn't want anyone to think the king could just totally push them around. For instance, there was once a fierce warrior named Rollo the Viking, who conquered the French province of Normandy. Eventually Charles II (called 'the Simple' because he was not too bright), agreed to recognise Rollo as Duke of Normandy if he accepted Louis as his king. Rollo agreed, and they organized a grand ceremony. But there was one problem. Part of the ceremony was that Rollo had to bow down and kiss the king's big toe. Rollo decided that was going too far. He wasn't going to kiss the king's foot. But the king's men said, no, those are the rules, he had to do it or he couldn't become Duke. So he came up with a compromise. When it came time to do the ceremony, he grabbed the king by the foot, flipped him upside down, and only then, kissed his big toe. That was considered acceptable, because at least he had followed the rules.





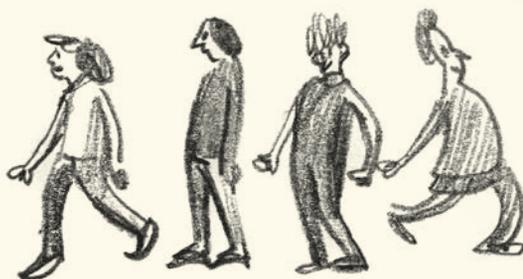
WHAT ARE KINGS ALLOWED TO DO?

In theory, anything, but of course in reality there's usually only so much killing or random crazy behavior you can get away with before someone gets fed up and slips some poison in your drink, like they did with Caligula.

Sometimes kings were seen as actual gods, but usually they are just people who get to act like gods. For instance: often God is seen as sitting up in heaven, throwing down lightning purely at random. He's basically just playing around, even though as a result, people get killed. Some kings tried to imitate that: they'd just kill people for no reason, just to show, they didn't have to have a reason. Just then, like Zeus, they were seen as perfect judges for the behaviour of everybody else.

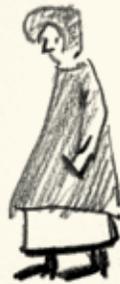


WHAT IS FORBIDDEN FOR THEM?





So instead, people around the king will make up rules that no one else has to follow. His advisors might say, “you are so powerful, we have to protect people! So you better not ever look at ordinary people, or point at them, or eat or drink in their presence, or go out in the day time, or maybe, even, touch the ground.”



Kings who can do anything... break all the rules.



Sometimes kings were expected to do things that no one else would ever do, just to prove that they were nothing like other people. They would kill all their brothers or marry their sisters or do things that would be completely illegal, not to mention wrong, if done by anyone else. By doing so they proved there was no right or wrong for kings. That worked well for them as long as things were going well. Everyone would say, “the king must be a god, or how would he be able to do things like that and get away with it?” But then if things started going wrong, say, the rains didn’t come or there was a plague and everyone started dying of disease, they’d start saying “maybe the king isn’t a god after all. Maybe he’s just a criminal.”

Esigie, who was king of Benin in West Africa, was a great warrior who liked to break all the rules. One day he was marching his army into battle against his brother Arhwaran, and a giant bird flew across the path of his army. The priests that were with the army immediately told him “you must turn back! The bird is a portent sent by a god, a warning, that if

you fight today, a great disaster will ensue.” He said, “but how do I know it isn’t a disaster for my brother?” So he shot the bird with an arrow, cooked it and ate it for lunch. Then he won the battle and burned down his brother’s town. From then on, the kings of Benin carried a metal image of the bird, which they called the ‘bird of disaster’, on top of a stick to show just how much they didn’t care what the gods told them.

Gradually though, the priests got the upper hand. They managed to convince Esigie, and later kings of Benin, that if he was pretty much a god himself, then it wasn’t safe to ordinary subjects to even look at him. It would be like staring at the sun. They might hurt their eyes. So from then on Benin kings had to stay at home most of the time and when people came to visit they would be hidden behind a screen. So whenever a baby was born they would be brought in to see the king, but they would only be allowed to see his knee. They also convinced the king that he was so pure and good that it would be very bad for him to touch the ground, which was after all dirty, but instead of carrying him, they mostly insisted he couldn’t go anywhere without people rolling out carpets in front of him, and rolling them up behind. This made it very difficult for him to get up and about.

As a result, before long, Benin’s kings couldn’t lead armies any more after all, and it became very difficult to run the government. So his mother and his wives, who didn’t have to hide behind screens or walk only on carpets, ended up doing most of the government business.



BEING A KING BE VERY DANGEROUS

In some kingdoms, it was unusual for a king to die of old age; other nobles or would-be kings were always trying to kill them.



ING OR QUEEN CAN DANGEROUS

Being a queen was dangerous too. The Ottoman sultan Ibrahim the Mad once ordered his entire harem drowned (only one got away). Occasionally the tables were turned.



The Shilluk king, who lives in East Africa, has as many as a hundred wives, but if his senior wives all agree they're tired of having him around, they can order him executed. A hundred royal wives means there's always a very large number of princes. This creates big problems when the king dies, and often the princes all end up slaughtering each other until there's only one left. So being a prince is

scary too. As a result sometimes princes run away and hide. Once in the 1400s the son of a Chinese emperor disappeared like that. His father sent out great fleets of ships to explore the world to see if they could find him. They got as far as Africa, and some people think might have even discovered America, until eventually someone found the prince hiding near the palace.

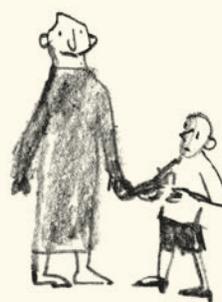


WHY WERE COMMONERS SURE THEY WERE NOT ROYALTY THEMSELVES?

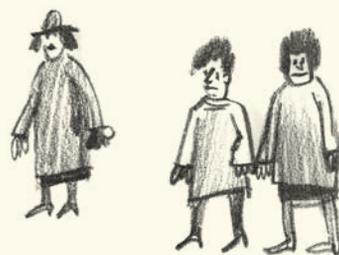


Sometimes ordinary people dreamed they were really princes and princesses, just no one would admit it.





Any child who was very brave or clever might try to convince people they were really a prince or princess which wasn't completely impossible, since as we've seen, sometimes princes did run away. Usually everybody laughed at them. But every now and then, it worked!



HOW CAN ONE PERSON CONTROL SO MANY?



It's not clear most kings did control their subjects very much.

Nowadays, the government can keep track of everything you do, so they can make up rules about what you can buy, sell, eat, wear, how much noise you can make, and what you spend your money on. Kingdoms weren't like that. They could make up all sorts of laws, and usually did, but half the time people didn't even know what the laws were. But for some reason, everyone was convinced kings were very, very powerful.



HOW DO THEY MANAGE TO HOLD ON TO THEIR POWER?

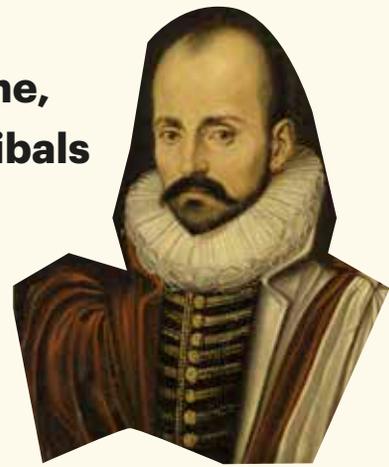
Mostly they just had to stay alive. Otherwise they didn't have to do anything at all, as long as everyone believed they were all-powerful.



Since kings didn't really know what ordinary people's lives were like, some would get curious, put on disguises, and pretend to be a stranger from out of town. So everyone would say "it's a good idea to be very nice to strangers because it may turn out to be the king!"



Montaigne, On Cannibals



People who don't have kings find all this very strange. Why treat one man like a god, just because of who his father was? Four hundred years ago, the French writer Montaigne wrote about some people from Brazil, called Tupinamba, who were taken to Paris to meet the king. (Back then European explorers used to just kidnap people and take them to Europe to show them off. Needless to say the people they kidnapped were not pleased.)

Montaigne talked to some of the Tupinamba and asked, "what do you think of our great city?" They said, "Your city is very strange. Here you see people in huge beautiful homes, there you see people sleeping on the street. Why don't the homeless people burn the big houses down?"

"Also," they said, "we met the king. He's just a little boy! But he was surrounded by big strong men with beards and weapons. They're there to protect the king, everyone says. But no one is forcing them to do it! Why doesn't one of them just ignore the little boy and make himself king?"

Montaigne admitted he had never thought about this before but they had a point. One of his friends, who had the complicated

name of Etienne de la Boetie, ended up writing a book about the problem. We think we obey the king because we'll be punished if we disobey. But why do the army and executioners obey the king?

Kings always have bodyguards, and bodyguards always have weapons: sticks or swords or guns. Some kings are very cruel, and make their bodyguards kill anyone who offends them in any way. In Buganda, there was one king so mean he once executed one of his wives for sneezing. But nearby live the Shilluk, and their king is always surrounded by executioners who will someday execute him, when his wives get tired of him. Ultimately the king is dependent on the guards, not the other way around.

If the guards all just ignored him, what would he do? And anyway, there aren't that many guards: all somebody would have to do is get rid of twenty or thirty men with swords or guns and the king would be helpless. Montaigne's friend's book was called 'On Voluntary Servitude' because, he said, really this is something we do to ourselves. Imagine everyone just decided to pretend the king wasn't there. Or if every time he ordered someone to do something they just said "I prefer not to." There would be nothing he could do!





DO KINGS REALLY NEED ORDINARY FOLK?

Yes. But often, Kings and Queens would pretend they were so perfect, they didn't need anything from anyone.

As we've seen, this was very silly because in reality kings and queens were like small children — they couldn't do anything on their own. Some couldn't even dress themselves — though to be fair they often wore costumes so elaborate, it probably did take two or three other people just to put them on. But maybe for this very reason they sometimes liked to pretend they were so perfect they didn't actually need anyone's help in anything. Sometimes they even started to believe it. In 1525 in Germany there was a peasant revolt, and one lord swore he was going to execute each and every one of his peasants who was involved. His brother wrote him a letter that said “so I hear you are thinking of taking up a trade!” That is, with no peasants to feed him, he'd have to get a real job like a hat-maker or a pastry chef or something like that.





WHAT DID KINGS DO FOR FUN?

Mostly they liked to kill things.



OK, this isn't entirely fair. It's true a lot of kings loved wars and executions, but most liked parties, games, dances, theatre, art and poetry too. Still, the thing kings everywhere seemed to like best was hunting. Sometimes they'd hunt animals you can't even eat. Egyptian kings hunted lions and the king of Nepal still hunts tigers. Maybe it's because kings like to think they're a little like a ferocious animal themselves.

NOBODY WOULD BE ALLOWED TO MAKE FUN OF THE KING, BUT WHY WERE JESTERS ALLOWED TO?

Since everyone was expected to constantly remind the king how great he was (lest he forget), it was usually a very bad idea to tell him things he didn't want to hear. There was one exception.





**COURT JESTERS
EXISTED AROUND
THE WORLD AND
WERE EXPECTED
TO SAY EXACTLY
WHAT NO ONE
ELSE COULD.**

Court jesters



Royal courts generally had the best of everything: the best food, the nicest looking people, the smartest people (brought in as royal advisors), the best musicians, jugglers, acrobats, even the tallest and shortest people, since if anyone was really unusual in any way, that person would probably end up being taken to the king, because everything and everyone that was truly extraordinary should naturally end up in the palace.

This was especially true, for some reason, of little people. There appears to have been no part of the world, from Africa to South and Central America to Europe, India, China and Japan, where royal courts didn't have dwarfs. It got to the point sometimes when parents tried to figure out ways to stunt their children's growth, just so they could get to live at court. The army of King Rudolf II, of Bohemia and Hungary,

had one regiment of dwarfs, and another regiment of giants, and the Aztec king Moctezuma II kept a troupe of dwarfs around him at all times both to entertain him and to give him advice on affairs of state. This might seem an odd combination, but actually, it's not at all unusual.

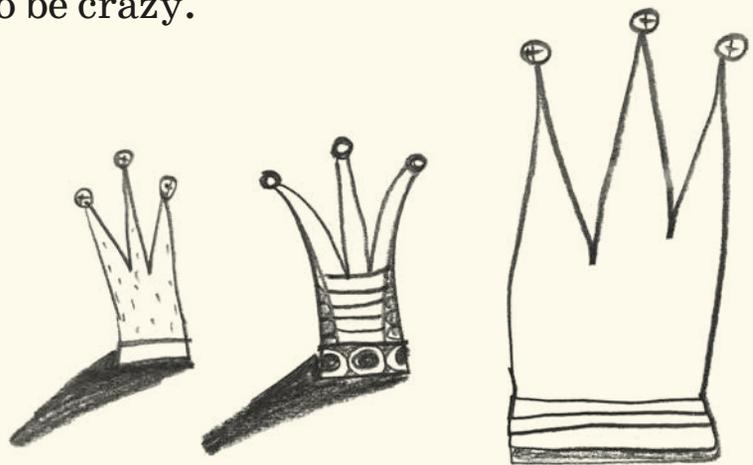
You see, kings had a problem. Most people were scared of them, and usually for very good reasons. No one wanted to make the king angry. So they'd always agree with everything he said. Sometimes kings had fun with that, for instance, King Charles II of England once asked a group of scientists to tell him why a dead fish weighed more than a live fish; they came up with all sorts of elaborate theories, until finally, he told them, it wasn't really true. Still, being surrounded by yes-men could be a problem because if a king developed a really stupid plan or got a really bad idea, no one would tell him. Wise monarchs realised they needed to have someone capable of criticising them, pointing out the flaws in their projects, but they also didn't want that person to be someone that everyone else took seriously. The solution? Get a hunch back dwarf to dance a silly dance, or stand on his head, and then tell you what a terrible idea they had. In fact, if you get a comedian to make fun of every idea you come up with, you can test them all for problems, and you never have to worry about

anyone important being seen to publicly question you.

Jesters didn't have to be small or unusually shaped, sometimes it was enough for them to have severe mental health issues. It might seem odd for a king to seek the advice of crazy people, but often they were thought to see the world from a different perspective, to have insights other people didn't. But then the question is whether they were really crazy, or just pretending. If they were too clever, they might get in trouble. King James VI of Scotland had a bad habit of not bothering to read all the documents his advisors handed him to sign; to show him how stupid this was, his court jester snuck a paper into the pile where the king agreed to let the jester be king for a week, and the king to become his jester. Sure enough the king signed the document without reading it, and when



he was told what happened, he was quite upset. (Oh and if you're wondering, no he didn't actually change places with the jester, but he didn't punish him either.) Scottish jesters were sometimes a little too clever, which caused Scottish parliament to pass a law in 1449 called the 'Act for the Putting Away of Feigned Fools' which authorized sheriffs to arrest anyone advising the king who turned out to just be pretending to be crazy.



WHY DO PEOPLE TREAT KINGS AS IF THEY AREN'T REAL?

Because kings are sacred. They're supposed to be like gods, maybe even to be gods, or like works of art that you'd put on a pedestal. To say something is sacred means most of all 'don't touch!'



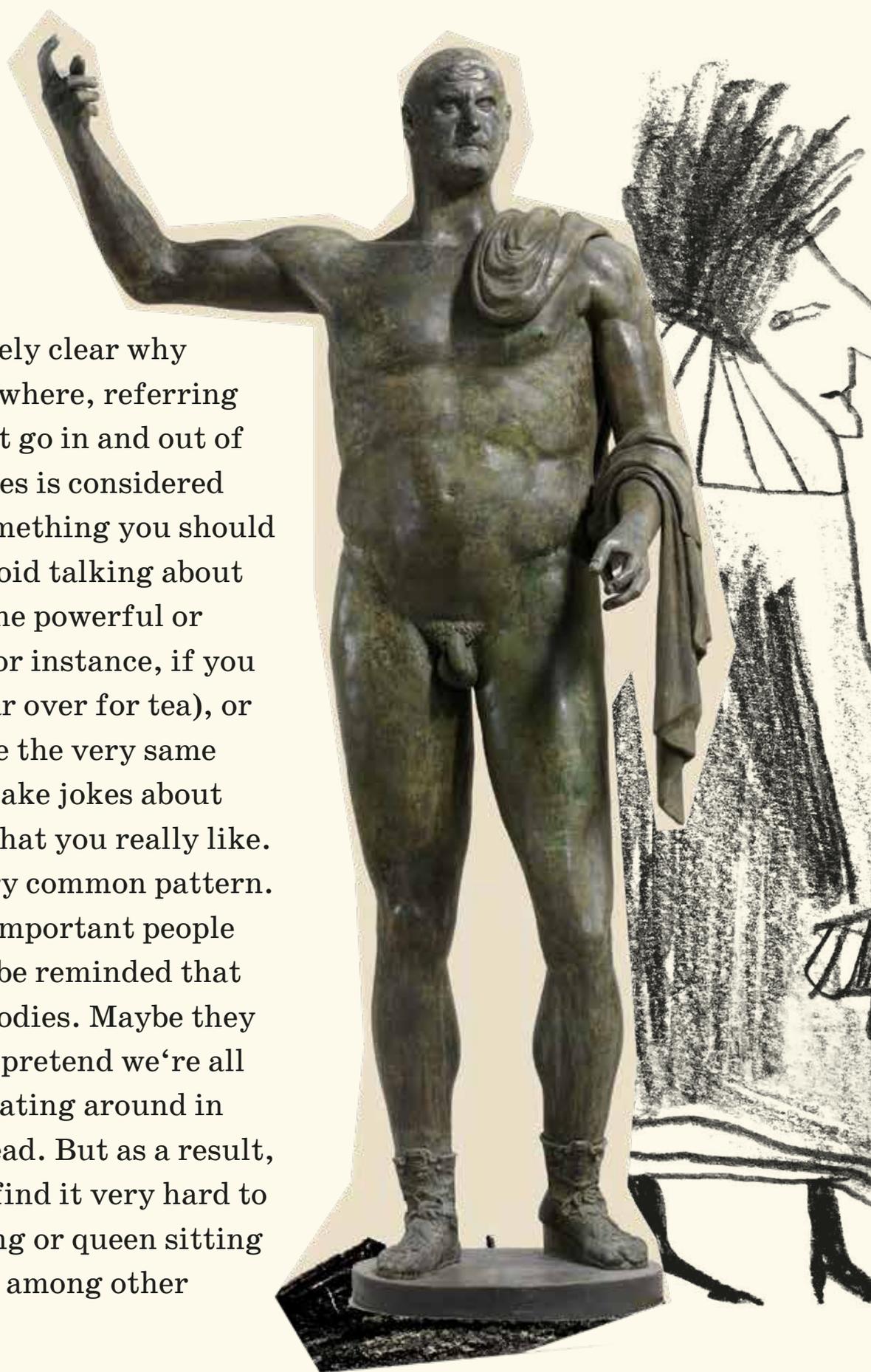


But only if they touched you first. The same went for talking to a king, or even looking at one. You had to be very careful.

For some reason whenever we want to treat someone like they're better than us, we pretend they don't have bodies. We especially avoid talking about anything that goes in and out of their bodies (or anyone's body really): that's why you can't talk about farting or bleeding or sex or death or going to the bathroom when someone very important is around – or at least you have to be very careful how you do so. With kings and queens it's even worse. Coughing or sneezing or even giggling in front of the king or telling the wrong kind of joke could get you in big trouble.



It's not entirely clear why almost everywhere, referring to things that go in and out of people's bodies is considered rude, and something you should especially avoid talking about around anyone powerful or important (for instance, if you have the vicar over for tea), or why these are the very same things you make jokes about with people that you really like. But it's a very common pattern. Maybe very important people don't like to be reminded that anyone has bodies. Maybe they prefer we all pretend we're all just ideas floating around in someone's head. But as a result, most people find it very hard to imagine a king or queen sitting on the toilet, among other things.





Often kings and queens claimed their bodies were totally different than those of commoners.

DO KINGS AND QUEENS REALLY HAVE 'ROYAL BLOOD'?

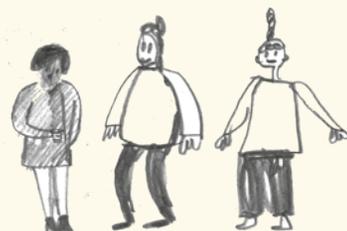
People say kings have ‘royal blood’, even ‘blue blood’ but nobody’s quite sure what that means. If a vampire bit a king, would they have royal blood too?

Some people think kings themselves are a little like vampires. Even ‘Dracula’ was the name of a real king, Vlad III of Wallachia, who didn’t really drink anybody’s blood but did a lot of awful things to anyone who disagreed with him. Back then you always had to remove your hat in the presence of a king (only the king got to wear a hat: his crown). Once, when some Turkish ambassadors refused to remove their turbans, Dracula ordered them nailed to their heads! Around the same time there was a Hungarian noble woman named Countess Elizabeth who treated her servant girls so badly that there was a rumor she used to kill them and take baths in their blood to keep her skin young – though it seems unlikely that was really true.

Probably the most famous story about scary kings who live off their subjects is the story of Zahhak, a very bad king of ancient Persia. Zahhak didn’t start bad. He just really loved food. So the Devil – so the story goes – appeared in his court disguised as a cook. “Why do you always just eat vegetables?” he said – because back then people were vegetarians. “You should kill animals and drink their blood! It’s much tastier!” And the cook made tasty meat dishes and they were so good that Zahhak said “this is wonderful! You have made me so happy. You can have any reward you wish.” And the Devil said, “all I wish is to kiss you on the shoulders.” So the king agreed and the Devil kissed him once on each shoulder. But soon after, snakes started growing out of the king’s shoulders on those exact spots. First he tried to cut them off but they just grew back. And they got bigger and bigger

and hungrier and hungrier. Finally he called in a doctor – but it was just the Devil again, in disguise. And the doctor said “snakes like that eat brains! You have to feed them human brains or otherwise they’ll get so hungry they’ll eat your brain.” So Zahhak had to send out spies into his kingdom every day to kidnap people to feed their brains to the snake. This went on for many years until one day his people figured out what was happening, rose up, and overthrew him. According to one story, they didn’t kill him, but left him chained in a cave to be hungry for all eternity.

In Kurdistan, Kaveh, the simple blacksmith who led the rebellion against Zahhak, is the national hero. Every year they light fires on mountaintops to remember his rebellion.



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**DO
KINGS
DIE?**

YES

But they really don't
like to talk about it.

The death of a king
is always a big
problem.





A lot of kings
consider it very
unfair that they
should have to die –
they get anything
else they want!



Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh travels to the end of the earth, and finds a magic fruit that will make him live forever. But he never gets to eat it; instead, he loses it when a snake eats it when he's not paying attention. (That's why snakes never die, the story says. Back then they used to think snakes were immortal.)

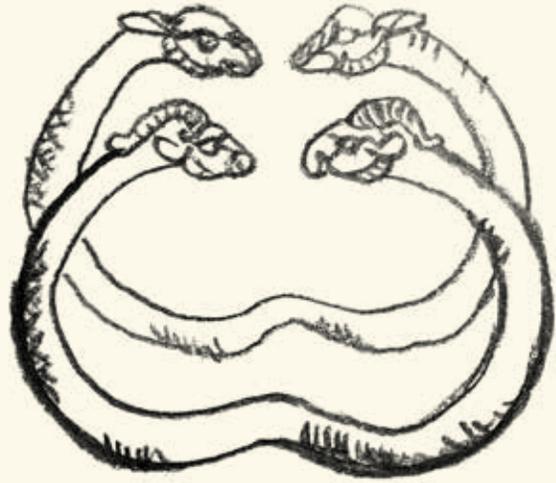
Some kings are very successful, so successful they really can do anything they want, and there's nothing their subjects can do to stop them. They might even defeat all the other kings who live nearby in wars, and end up ruling over vast empires. But even then, there's always one enemy they can never defeat; one way kings will always be just like anybody else. Eventually, they grow old and die.

This fact that kings will grow old and die usually makes them very angry because they're used to always having their way. Why can't they just issue a proclamation and make Old Age and Death illegal, like they do with everything else that annoys them? But they can't.

The very first royal epic we know of is about a Sumerian king named Gilgamesh who conquers every possible enemy. But he can't conquer death. Finally he sets off on a great quest to become immortal, but it is the only task he ever fails at.

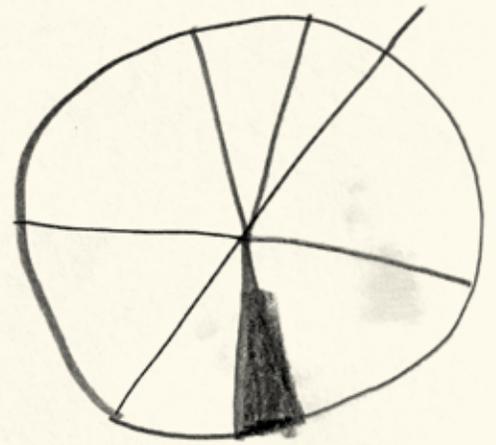


**Why living forever makes life
difficult for other people**



If kings are very successful, like Gilgamesh, they almost always started worrying about death. Probably the most successful king of all time was Alexander the Great, since he conquered the world – or, most parts of the world that he actually knew about. There was a novel about Alexander’s life that was probably the most popular book in the whole world during the Middle Ages: everywhere from Germany to India to Samarkand to Malaysia. The book was all about the things Alexander couldn’t conquer – how he tried to fly to the sky pulled by giant birds, and failed, or tried to make a submarine to see the bottom of the ocean, and failed – but the biggest one of all was his attempt to find the Fountain of Eternal Life. In one version he actually did find it, in the Garden of Eden, but just as he was about to take a drink, an angel appeared to tell him if he did so, he’d live forever, but he’d never be able to leave the Garden. He thought about it and decided: this may be paradise, but I wouldn’t be much of a king if I had to stay in a garden for a million years. Also it would get boring. So he didn’t drink the water after all.

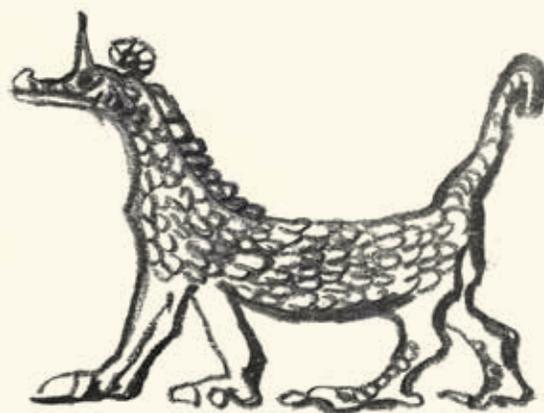
If they couldn’t live forever, kings would at least want to be remembered forever: they’d try to build the biggest temple, or library; they’d found cities, change the course of rivers, plant the hanging gardens of Babylon, or even, like Genghis Khan or



Tamerlane, make towers out of human skulls, just so people would remember that they did it. Still, their biggest problem was how to do or make something so big, or so impressive the next king wouldn't do something even better. It was especially difficult when everyone had to pretend the old king wasn't dead. This sometimes happened. In ancient Egypt, for instance, there were gigantic pyramids, and the kings buried under the pyramids still had their own priests and even servants telling everyone that they had become gods and were much more important than the current king. This was extremely intimidating. Every Pharaoh had to worry: "well, everyone treats me like a god now, but I bet they're all asking themselves whether I'll ever be able to build a pyramid as big as my father's."

At least Egyptian mummies stayed inside their tombs and didn't actually go wandering about. This wasn't true in Peru. The Incas also mummified their dead kings (called Incas), but then acted as if they weren't dead. Or, the way it worked was like this: when the king died, his eldest son became the new Inca. But he didn't inherit the palace, or the royal lands, or the royal servants. They continued to belong to the dead king, and were managed

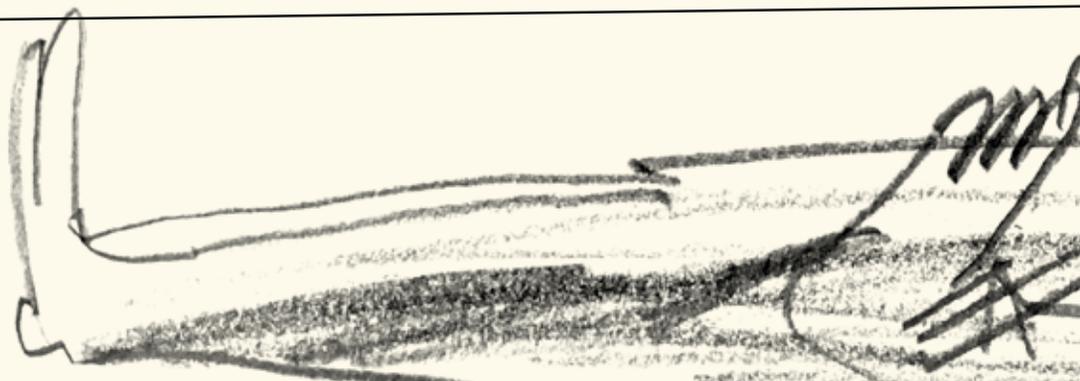
by all the other sons who didn't become Inca. They used to bring the mummy out, carried around like live kings were carried around at important events, and the dead king would visit friends, attend games and ceremonies, even host parties. The new Inca only inherited the army, so he was expected to go off and conquer new lands that he could use to support his own palace, and servants, until he died and became a mummy and his son had to do the same thing. That's why the Inca empire grew so quickly. But it meant the Inca capital, Cuzco, was a very odd city, since all the most important people in it were dead. And it meant each new king felt he had to do something extremely big and important in order to impress all his dead ancestors who were still wandering around.



HAS ANYONE REALLY BECOME IMMORTAL?

One reason why kings would often make things that were really gigantic is simply to overcome the reality of their own death.

But that creates problems too, because if one king succeeds in creating something so huge so he'll always be remembered for it, then the next king has to make something even bigger.

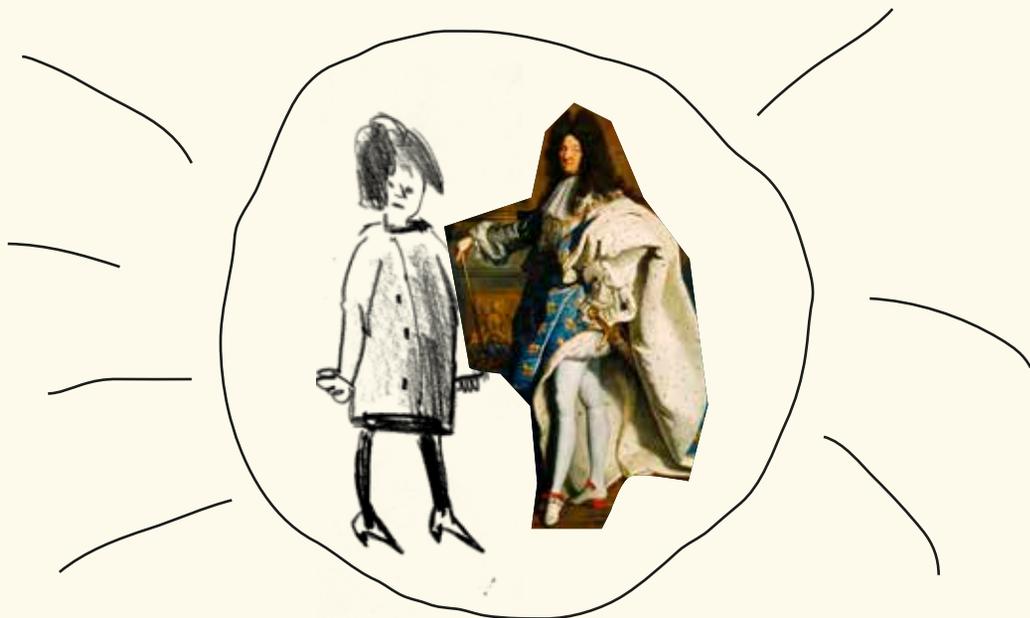


MANAGED TO



DO KINGS AND QUEENS FALL IN LOVE?

Yes. But it usually made life difficult. For royalty, a marriage was usually a political alliance between two countries. But that didn't mean they didn't have feelings!





So kings and queens, princesses and princesses, did fall in love. But imagine how complicated that would be if you were always surrounded by servants waiting on you hand and foot but also spying on everything you do, and the whole kingdom is gossiping about you.

WHO WAS MORE POWERFUL: KINGS OR QUEENS?

Usually it was the king, but if the queen was very clever, she could run circles around her husband and everybody else.





We like to think that back in the days of kings and queens, men were entirely in charge, and women just worked and had children or looked pretty, and that it was only recently that all this changed. But sometimes things are not quite that simple. You can find women and girls running whole kingdoms in the Middle Ages, like Eleanor of Aquitaine in France or Lakshmibai in India who fought the British; it's much rarer to find woman CEOs running banks or big corporations today. Obviously we want things to be better than the Middle Ages! And in a lot of ways they are. But in others we haven't even caught up with them yet.



Nobody knows if Semiramis was real or whether it's just a story, but for a long time, she was the most famous woman in history.

Some had hundreds of wives they locked away so no one else could see them; others were trapped in the palace themselves, and only their wives or mothers could go out. Sometimes in China, or some African kingdoms, the king's mother would really run the government, while the king went off to war or busied himself with games and ceremonies; sometimes if the king died, either his wife or daughter would take over instead. Some Queens even strapped on armour and fought in wars.

Often though, you get the feeling that most men back then didn't want women to become kings because they were afraid women would be too good at it. Most men are very insecure. There's a Middle Eastern story that illustrates this. Once upon a time, there was a Great King of Assyria named Nonus. He had a servant named Semiramis, a girl who was very clever and pretty, and he dearly loved.

Every year there was a great festival, and one game they played during the festival was ‘King for a Day’ — someone would pretend to be king and everyone would play along. So one day before the festival Semiramis asked if she could be Queen for a Day and Nonus agreed, and ordered everyone to make believe Semiramis was really Queen.

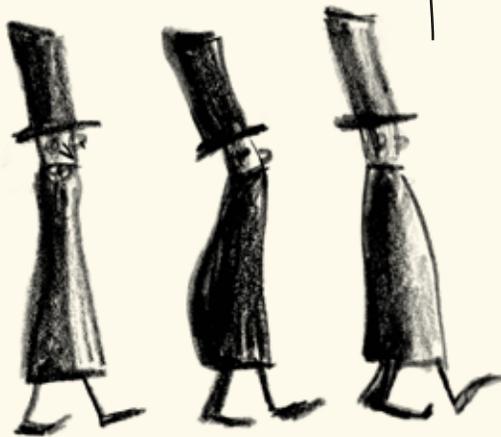
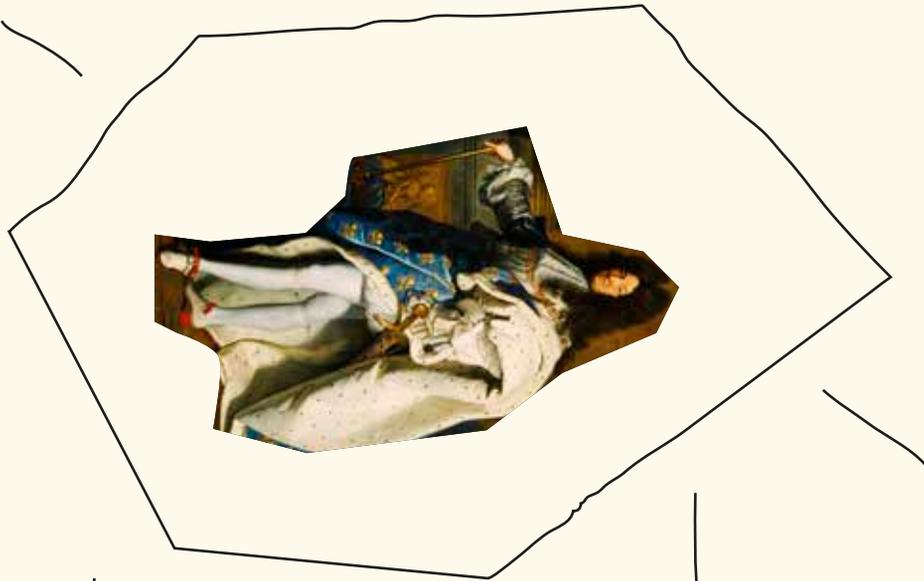
As soon as the crown was placed on her head, Semiramis called in the king’s generals and bodyguard. She asked them “I think King Nonus treats you very badly. You don’t really like him, do you?” Before the day was over, Nonus was locked away somewhere, and Semiramis was really Queen. And it turned out Semiramis was much better at running the kingdom than Nonus, or any other man: she built the giant city of Babylon, and its beautiful hanging gardens, and many other great cities as well, and conquered a giant empire that stretched all the way from India to Ethiopia.



WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT: KING, OR KINGSHIP?

When they say the king is dead, long live the king,
what they really mean is that the king's body is
dead but the kingship lives forever.





**SO IT'S NOT NECESSARILY
THAT THERE'S A NEW KING.
IT'S THAT THE KINGSHIP
IS A 'CORPORATION' MADE UP
OF ALL KINGS, LIVING OR DEAD.**

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE FOR MANY PEOPLE TO ALSO BE ONE PERSON?



That was the idea of the 'corporation'. A corporation is an immortal body made up of lots of mortal ones. This is a very strange idea, but it's important because there are still 'corporations' today, and they are very powerful.

In the 13th century, Medieval lawyers invented the corporation. Take a monastery for example. Let's say there are a hundred monks who make up the monastery. In a hundred years, they'll all be dead? But there will still be a hundred monks there – just, different ones. So you could say: each monk is mortal, but the monastery is immortal. You can treat the monastery like it's just one person who can own land, borrow money, make promises – just, a very strange sort of person who has no body so he will never get old and sick and die. Soon monastic orders, guilds, even cities started declaring themselves corporations too.

But then Medieval lawyers asked: what about kings? Well, kingship is a corporation too, made up of all the kings, just only one of them is alive at any given time.



**HOW CAN A BODY BE
IMMORTAL? HOW CAN
A BODY BE COLLECTIVE?
HUNH??**





WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A NATION AND A KINGDOM?

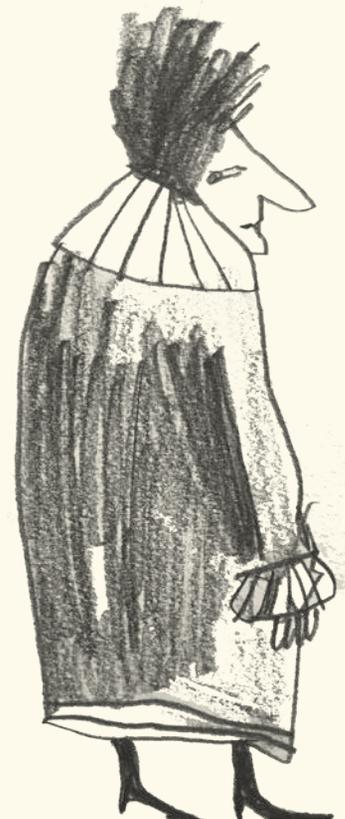


In some ways nothing. To be Russian or Nigerian is to be part of an immortal body. Any one Russian or Nigerian body will die, but the nation continues forever.



(We'll get back to the corporations in a moment.)

Most countries nowadays aren't kingdoms, and even where there are kings and queens, they don't have a lot of power. Ever since the American revolution in 1776, and then the French revolution in 1789, and then a whole series of other revolutions, just about everyone made it clear they were tired of having one person rule over them for no particularly good reason. So now everyone insists that 'sovereignty' (that's the power kings used to have) now belongs to something called 'the people': the subjects that the kings used to rule over are now the rulers. But what does that actually mean? And who are "the people" anyway? These are difficult questions. Nobody's quite sure. Most of the wars fought in the last two hundred years – and there have been a lot of them – have been fought between people who had different theories as to what the answer might be.





**BUT WAIT, IS IT
EVEN POSSIBLE
FOR EVERYONE
TO BE A KING?**



Obviously not, who would they rule over?

Still, even though we can't really all be kings, modern nations insist that in a sense, we are. After all, if a policeman can arrest you or lock you up or even shoot you if you try to run away, what gives him the right? Well the usual answer is: he's enforcing the law. But what if you ask, okay, but why do you have to obey the laws? Anybody can make up a law! What if I made a law that says everyone has to spend an hour a day painting chickens blue. Would people have to do it? So the answer to that is: well, there's a constitution, which tells you how to pass proper laws. But what if you ask, why is the constitution so great? I could write one of those too. Why wouldn't my constitution be better? Then the answer is: the constitution was instituted by The People! Oh. So how did the People institute that constitution? Well, the answer to that is: by a revolution (i.e., the American, French, Haitian, Mexican revolution...)

But then you might ask: but wait, isn't revolution illegal? You're saying you have to do what the government says because two hundred years ago some people overthrew the government? How does that make any kind of sense?

SO YOU SEE WHY PEOPLE HAVE TROUBLE WITH THIS SORT OF THING.

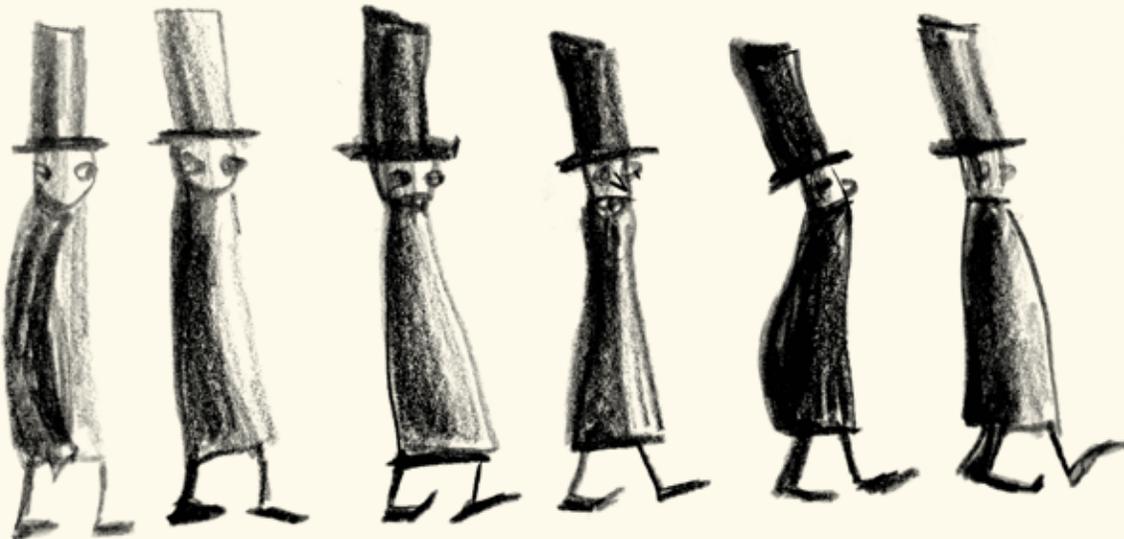
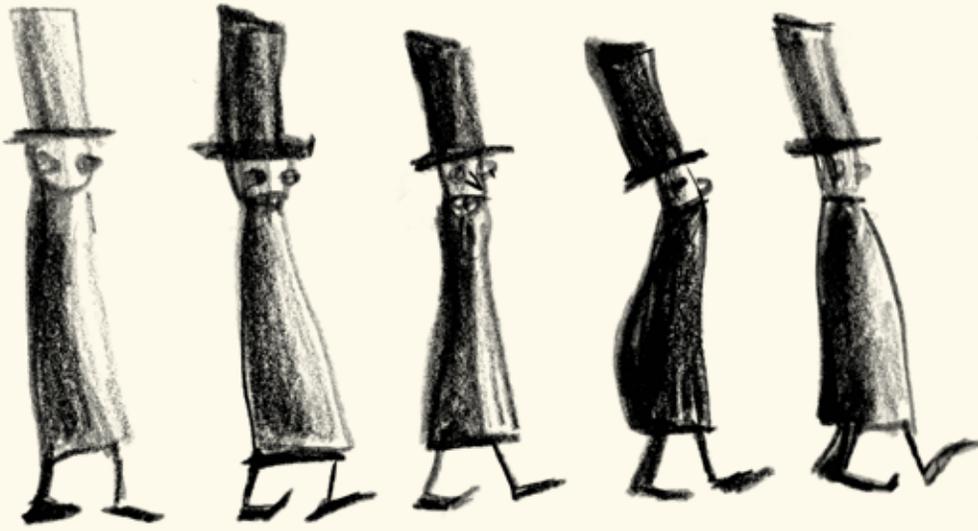
ARE THERE STILL KINGS AROUND TODAY?

In a way, yes. Corporations are little kingdoms, and their CEOs are very much like kings.

Corporations after all are totally top-down: they have rulers who can tell people to do whatever they like. In governments there are what's called 'checks and balances', different parts of the government keep an eye on each other and keep each other honest. Inside a corporation it's still just like a kingdom because the CEO just gives orders and nobody can really object. He's like a little god.

THERE ARE OFFICIAL KINGS AND QUEENS LIKE THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND OR KING OF THAILAND, BUT ASIDE FROM ONE OR TWO (THE KING OF SAUDI ARABIA) THEY DON'T REALLY COUNT AS THEY CAN'T TELL ANYONE WHAT TO DO.





Are CEOs really the kings and queens of our day?

Now, it might seem strange to say that CEOs of big corporations are the kings and queens of our day, because in a lot of ways they are very different. Most obviously: they can't order anybody killed. Also the people they rule over are in theory there of their own free will, unlike a king's subjects, who are subject to the King of France because they happened to be born in France, or to the Mughal Emperor because they happened to be born in India. Finally, CEOs rarely pass their power on to their children. (They pass their money on to their children, who thus actually tend to be very powerful, but they usually don't become CEOs of the same company.)

Perhaps the main reason CEOs don't seem much like kings and queens of old is because they tend to be very boring. Kings might be a lot of things but they were very rarely boring. In fact, not only did they have all the power, it was considered perfectly normal to have fun with it: to make up crazy new costumes, or crazy new games, to fill their courts with games and music and jesters and freaks, and generally enjoy themselves. CEOs wear suits that all look the same, usually you can't even remember what color their suits were, and they have to pretend they are very serious and only think about money. However, they can give whatever orders they like without having to give a reason, and

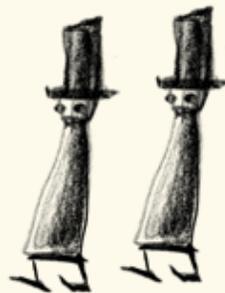
even though they can't kill anyone outright, they can say two magic words ("you're fired!") and whoever they said it to that person disappears from their kingdom just as surely as if he said "off with his head."

Many corporations are bigger than countries, and certainly far richer, and have thousands and thousands of employees. Amazon, or Google, or Toyota or Walmart have veritable armies of workers, many wearing uniforms and doing exactly what they're told every minute of the day, precisely as if they were in the army, and the CEO was their commanding officer.

And even though CEOs might seem very boring from the outside, they tend to develop all the same strange obsessions as kings did. They will try to show off that they have the very best of everything. They dream of conquering other CEOs and becoming emperors. They also often feel it is somehow wrong that they should ever have to die. Walt Disney, for instance, who created Disney films and Disneyland, not only wanted his name to live forever, but rumor has it, when he was about to die of cancer, he had his body frozen and placed in an underground vault, much like an Egyptian mummy, hoping someday when doctors discovered a cure for cancer, they would thaw him out and cure him. Other CEOs have become fascinated in blood transfusion, so they're almost literally vampires, or with the idea that they could upload their minds onto computers so even if their bodies

disappear, it still won't matter.

Why, then, do we still have people who look and act a lot like kings, even though they are usually not nearly as colourful or interesting? Some people say it's because if you have a really big organisation, you need to have one person making all the important decisions. But if that were true, we'd still have kings running countries too. Maybe it has something to do with war. Most kingdoms were always at war, or preparing for war, or thinking they might be at war at any moment. Most corporations are competing with other corporations. Maybe when that's the case, everything has to be organised at least a little like it is in the army, where there's always someone on top and someone else who has to do whatever he says. Maybe if we relax and learn to get along a little better, we won't need kings and can find something new to worry about.



The man with
the beard definitely
doesn't think
equality is possible.

IS EQUALITY POSSIBLE?

If one person has all the
power, then everyone else
is equal.



Sometimes during the 20th Century revolutionaries tried to give one man – like Stalin, or Chairman Mao – all the power, so he could get rid of all the other powerful people and make everyone equal. This never worked out very well.

In the past, some people thought it was good to have a king because they really hated rich people, or aristocrats. Sometimes they'd even try to kill or get rid of all the powerful people except the king, because they'd say "in relation to the king, everyone is equal".



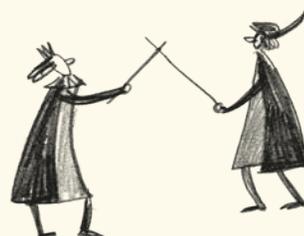
The end



Another idea is that, maybe we don't feel we need kings or CEOs because of war and competition, but so that everyone can feel the same. Remember how kings and queens almost always insisted they came from someplace far away? The Kings of England aren't really English (they used to be French, now they're mainly German), kings in Malaysia insist they are not Malay (in fact, most claim to be Greek, descended from Alexander the Great), Swahili kings on the East Coast of Africa claimed to be from Persia, and so forth. So 'the people' are all the same first and foremost because they are a totally different kind of people from the king.

That's one reason saying "the people can all be kings now" doesn't make a lot of sense.

Maybe we should go back to the very beginning, when there were just play kings. Maybe in the future we can just make up kings, or gods, whenever we need to, so some group of people will have something in common with each other, and then put those kings or gods away again when we don't need them any more. Or maybe we don't need any new kings, we can just use the ones we already have. In Madagascar, when France conquered the island, they tried to find all the kings and pay them off to support the new government. But people told them, "well we have royalty now but they're not really important or powerful – the important kings are the dead kings, because they're older and wiser. Their ghosts are still here, and they speak through the living: there are mediums who fall into a trance and speak with the voice of the dead king. And when it's a king who's speaking, we have to do whatever they say." So the French generals would try to find the dead kings, but it turns out the people who the kings spoke to were very poor old women. They could never figure out whether they should take this seriously or not. It was very confusing. Maybe in the future we can bring in any dead king we like to make decisions when no one else knows what to do, but otherwise, they'll go back to wherever ghosts go and leave us alone.





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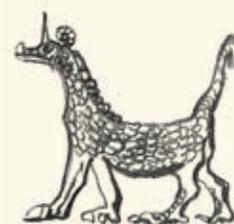
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WHAT ARE KINGS?

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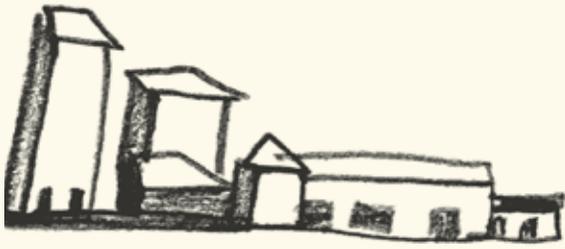
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