

At the crossroads of history

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An archipelago of three rocky limestone islands at the centre of the Mediterranean, Malta has been inhabited for more than 7,000 years, experiencing wave after wave of conquest that has made it a microcosm of island history.

The earliest surviving settlements are to be found on the island of Gozo, the Ggantija Temples are a megalithic pagan complex, similar in appearance to Stonehenge, dating back to around 3600 BCE, and probably built by settlers from Sicily, which lies around 60 miles to the north.

The Phoenicians colonised the islands between 800 and 480 BC, taking advantage of Malta's protected harbours to set up trading posts. They were followed by the Carthaginians and then the Romans.

One of the first written references to Malta comes from St Paul, who was said to have been shipwrecked on the island: "We discovered that the island was called Melita. The natives treated us with uncommon kindness. Because of the driving rain and cold they lit a fire and made us all welcome." St Paul also claims to have healed the father of Publius, a local Roman official.

In 870, as part of their conquest of much of the Mediterranean, the Arabs took Malta, leaving an influence that endures today through the Maltese language and a number of place names including Mdina and Zejtun. They ruled until 1090 when the Normans arrived. When the Knights Templar were driven out of Cyprus by the Turks they relocated to Malta in 1530.

Thirty-five years later, the great Siege of Malta took place. Some 700 Knights of Malta, aided by several thousand local

people, held out against the Ottoman army of more than 30,000 led by Mustafa Pasha. After three months and the death of one of Mustafa's favorite commanders, the Arabs abandoned the siege. In gratitude for his victory Grand Master Jean La Valette, who had led the resistance, founded the city which is today Malta's capital, Valletta.

The Knights of Malta are responsible for much of Malta's architectural heritage, building monuments such as magnificent St John's Co-Cathedral. What's more, they gave a Maltese falcon (a real one), every year to King Philip of Spain, who ruled the islands until ceding them in 1530.

In 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte stopped off to sack Malta on his way to Egypt, ending the long reign of the Knights in the process.

But Admiral Nelson soon annihilated the French fleet at the battle of Aboukir bay stranding Napoleon's army in Egypt and making the defence of Malta impossible. In 1800 the Royal Navy, in conjunction with the local people, overwhelmed and expelled the French forces.

Malta now fell under the control of the British and would remain so for the next 164 years. It was used as a hospital station for troops engaged in the Crimean war and again during the First World War.

In June 1940, Italy declared war on the Allies, launching a ferocious bombing campaign that was continued by the Luftwaffe. The Axis resolved to bomb or starve Malta into submission by attacking its ports, towns, cities, and Allied shipping supplying the island. The Maltese had survived their second great siege and the entire island was awarded the George Cross by King George VI in 1943. Malta was



Left:
Sculpture of the
Mother Goddess from the
neolithic Tarxien temple

Right:
Roman era
mosaic in Rabat



A Unique Heritage Experience

Heritage Malta – the national agency for museums, conservation practice and cultural heritage – has recently inaugurated a new ERDF funded project at St Paul’s Catacombs in Rabat, featuring a visitor centre, walkways and a number of accessible catacombs. The project is worth 9.2 million, 85% of which is co-financed through the European Regional Development Funds.

Apart from the works at St Paul’s Catacombs, the Archaeological Heritage Conservation Project also included also conservation and embellishment of two UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Gantija Temples and Tarxien Temples. St Paul’s Catacombs are an outstanding example of Malta’s catacombs and are also on the tentative list for future inscription as a World Heritage Site. The project also incorporated a number of scientific studies, including archaeological research, environmental

studies and ground penetrating radar scans, the construction of new visitor facilities, 3d navigation through parts of the site, new interpretation of the site and its different phases, and access to previously inaccessible areas and to a number of catacombs. The site’s interpretation includes a number of audio-visuals with information on various aspects of the site.

Heritage Malta has also implemented an interactive immersive experience of the Catacombs through a setup of virtual reality goggles and 3D navigation systems using the Oculus Rift technology. While this technology is still a prototype, the experience is one of a kind. This system has been implemented in conjunction with St Martin’s Institute of IT and is intended to give an experience of the St Paul’s Catacombs, especially to those who cannot physically visit the tombs. ■

then used as a springboard by the Allies for their invasion of Sicily and Italy.

After the war and a short period of political instability due to the Malta Labour Party’s unsuccessful attempt at “Integration with Britain,” Malta was granted independence on September 21, 1964.

Under its 1964 constitution, Malta initially retained Queen Elizabeth II as Queen of Malta, with a Governor-General exercising executive authority on her behalf. On December 13, 1974 (Republic Day), however, it became a republic within the Commonwealth, with the President as Head of State. A defence agreement signed soon after independence and re-negotiated in 1972 expired on March 31, 1979 when all British military forces were withdrawn.

Malta adopted an official policy of neutrality in 1980 and, for a brief period was a member of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries. In 1989, Malta was the venue

of an important summit between US President Bush and Soviet leader Gorbachev, their first face-to-face encounter, an event that signaled the end of the Cold War.

Malta joined the European Union on May 1, 2004, and in 2008 became a member of the European single currency zone.

Since then, Malta’s location at the crossroads of the Mediterranean has made it the first step into Europe from people fleeing conflict and poverty in Africa: between 2008 and 2012, Malta received on average the highest number of asylum seekers compared to its national population: 21.7 applicants per 1,000 inhabitants.

In mid-November of 2015, a two-day summit in Malta of more than 60 European and African leaders ended with agreement on the establishment of a €1.8bn “trust fund” that could double to €3.6bn, earmarked for efforts to tackle the EU’s biggest ever migration crisis. ■

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Left:
The Defence of Mdina is a depiction of the Arab/Muslim period in Malta

Right:
Knight of Malta by Titian, c1550

