



Malta | History, Language, Map, & People

History of Malta



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The largest island is called Malta, and to differentiate it from the country, it is often known as Malta Island. Then, there is Comino and Gozo. Completing the set are the uninhabited islands of Kemmunett and Filfla. Malta is located about 58 miles south of Sicily, 180 miles north of Libya, and 180 miles east of Tunisia.

The geographical proximity to all these countries probably emphasizes the area's strategic importance. People have tried to use these islands as a naval base throughout history since it gives easy access to [Europe](#), Africa, and the Middle East. While it might seem like a nice position to be in, history proves otherwise.



Flag of Malta

The islands have seen the rule of Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Greeks, Arabs, Normans, Aragonese, Knights of Saint John, [French](#), [British](#), and others. This diverse ruling history has left an indelible cultural mark on the culture of Malta.

Today, Malta is the world's 10th smallest country, occupying an area of just 122 square miles and home to a population of around 525,000. However, in the distant past, things were quite different. For one, the archipelago wasn't always an archipelago! Malta stands on an underwater ridge that connects Sicily to Northern Africa.

This entire ridge served as a dry land bridge between Europe and Africa in the latter part of the Miocene epoch. For a long time, it was believed that the archipelago's first inhabitants dated back to 5700 BCE. Now, we know with relative certainty that the first inhabitants arrived sometime around 5900 BCE.



Peoples

Similarly, another misconception was that these people were Sicilians. After analyzing the DNA of archaeological artifacts, we know that both Europeans and Africans existed in this part of the world. These Neolithic people made up fishing and farming communities. In the early days, they lived in caves and villages. One of the earlier reasons to believe that they were from Sicily was the pottery designs, which match those of Sicilians.

There is also some evidence of hunting activities, but we believe that the people did not rely on it as much. But, like any civilization, this one evolved as well. As these people came into contact with other cultures, their pottery designs began to change. Anyhow, the people continued farming until the land gave in.

The soil could no longer sustain agriculture, and the land saw a prolonged period of drought. For the following millennium, the islands were abandoned. Life returned sometime around 3900 BCE. This second wave of the settlement involved a cult of the dead.

Language

Maltese and English are accepted as official languages by Malta and the EU. North African Arabic and a Sicilian dialect of Italian were combined to create Maltese. The only Semitic language that is formally written in Latin is this one. In schools, English is used as a language of teaching. Up until 1934, the majority of the populace could understand Italian because it was the official language of the church and the government.



Tarxien Cemetery phase



The Tarxien Cemetery culture arrived soon after that, and around 2500 BCE, the Borg In-Nadur people settled in the region.

The presence of such a group can be gleaned from the collective tombs cut into rocks. Archaeologists have even found an underground burial chamber known as Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, containing many human remains.

The chamber has been given the status of a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Other constructions from this time consist of the Ggantija Temple in Gozo, one of the oldest free-standing structures in the world. This civilization lasted for about 1,500 years. Their disappearance is not entirely understood, but some speculate that they might have been wiped out by other warring peoples, while others think they could have fallen victim to climate change.

The Tarxien Cemetery culture arrived soon after that, and around 2500 BCE, the Borg In-Nadur people settled in the region. Around the 8th century BCE, the Phoenicians began to make contact with the islands. There is some evidence of their presence as urban culture.

The presence of Phoenician tombs indicates a healthy population that probably used the site to expand their seafaring ambitions. Some existing temples were converted into



Phoenician structures. They would have used the area as an essential outpost in their Mediterranean trade routes.

A settlement was present in the present-day cities of Mdina and Rabat, which the Phoenicians called Maleth or “safe haven.” There is more robust evidence of Carthaginian presence. Around the mid-6th century BCE, some of the Phoenician colonies fell under Persia’s rule, including Malta.

Archaeological evidence assures us that by the 4th century BCE, Malta had become a trading post, connecting the two sides of the Atlantic: Sicily in the North and Tripolitania in the South. Another interesting thing that happened in this era was the inclusion of Hellenized motifs.

In architecture and pottery, we notice Hellenized features start to become prominent; however, due to a lack of evidence, nobody is sure of the extent to which the society was Hellenized. Some claim that it could have been a Greek colony, i.e., an *aphakia*, while others refute any such assumption. Jump forward to the 3rd century BCE, and we know for certain that Malta was raided by the Romans.



The Second Punic War



In the Second Punic War, the islands came under the control of the Romans. According to the Roman historian Titus Livius (commonly known as Livy), The Punic garrison on the island surrendered to the Romans, and the archipelago became a part of the Sicilian province. Still, the Romans did not interfere in the domestic affairs of Malta. In 60, Saint Paul the Apostle was shipwrecked on Malta and started preaching Christianity.

The Roman era brought interesting changes to the archipelago. The city of Maleth was renamed Melite and started expanding. It grew to such an extent that it occupied most of the expanse of the modern-day city of Mdina and even a little bit of Rabat.



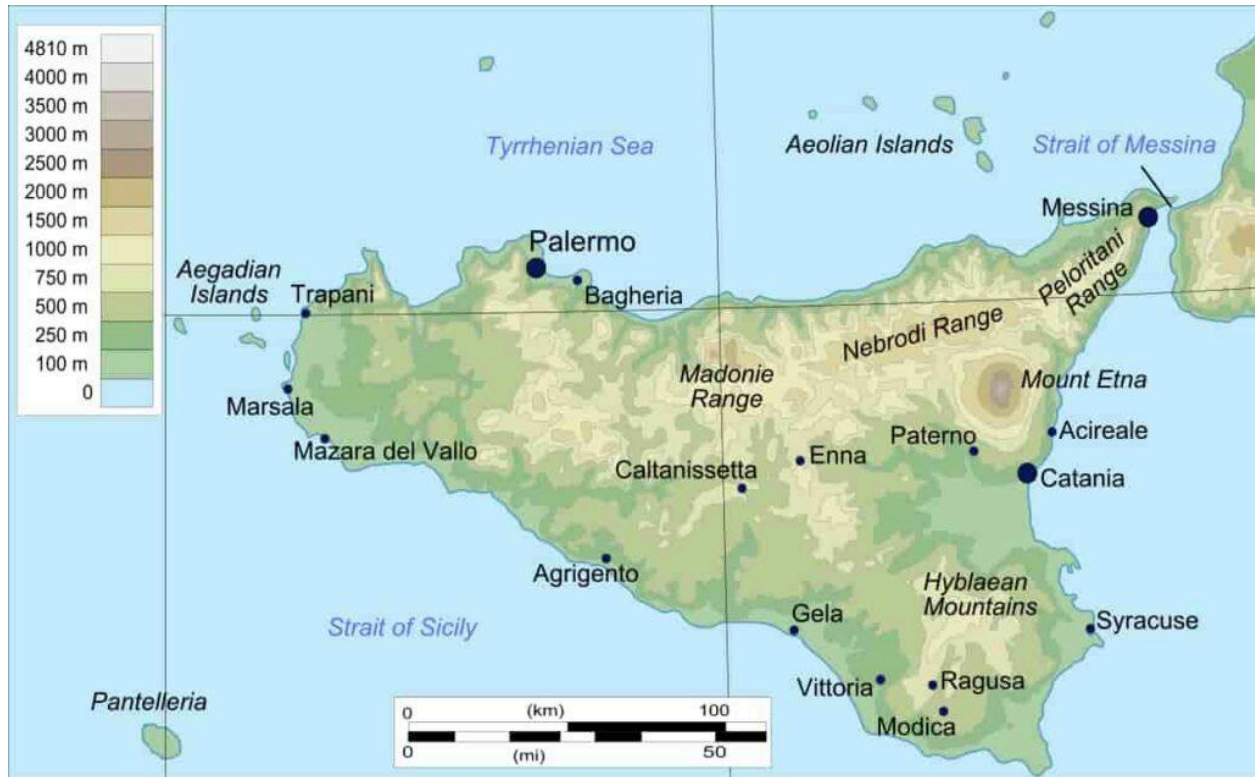
Archaeological evidence reveals that the city employed adequate defensive maneuvers like building thick walls on all sides. Not only that, but the settlement also had protective ditches. Evidence of the [Roman](#) presence in the area is unmistakable. The antiques and other remains show a clear connection to Sicily.

Malta eventually fell under the rule of Constantinople in the 6th century. Some people believe that the Vandals and the Ostrogoths may have occupied the islands briefly in the 5th century, but there is no conclusive evidence for this hypothesis. Under Byzantine rule, Malta remained a part of the Sicilian province. Evidence from this era shows that the islands may have played an important strategic role for the empire as harbors for the next couple of centuries.

During this time, the improved fortifications may have reduced the size of the main settlements. In the late 9th century, Muslims from North Africa took over the city of Melite. After the city's destruction, some historians claim it remained uninhabitable until 1050, while others think it might have been thriving until that point.



Muslim Conquest of Sicily



A Muslim uprising in 1122 was squashed, and the islands were reconquered. The Muslims were allowed to practice their religion freely until the 13th century.

The Byzantines tried to take the Muslim settlement back but to no avail. Nevertheless, the islands changed hands once again with the Norman conquest. They took over Sicily and, from there, continued onward to Malta. The Muslim and Christian presence in the previous millennium had substantially impacted the island. Even after it fell to the newfound Kingdom of Sicily, a healthy Muslim population remained in the area.

A Muslim uprising in 1122 was squashed, and the islands were reconquered. The Muslims were allowed to practice their religion freely until the 13th century. Malta had many influences. The [Byzantines](#) had brought Eastern Orthodox, the Arabs had brought



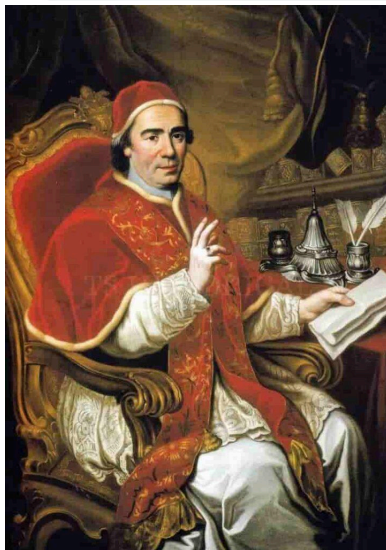
Islam, and now, the Europeans were bringing Roman Catholicism. One of the primary reasons for this was the migration of Sicilians to the islands.

The archipelago would undergo many changes, indicative of the changes in the north. Malta continued to have strong links with North Africa. However, a few [historians](#) believe that there were no Muslim civilians or serfs in the region by the mid-13th century.

In 1530, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V gave Malta to the Order of Saint John. They were more commonly known as the Knights Hospitaller, which was a military order of the Roman Catholic [Church](#). The Knights ruled the islands for the next 275 years, making the island their domain. The Knights were initially tasked with providing assistance, medical or otherwise, to pilgrims.

The [Ottoman Empire](#) had laid siege to Malta in 1565 but failed to capture the settlement. For the next two centuries, the Knights turned the island into their home, but by the late 18th century, the Order was declining.

Rising of the Priests



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In 1775, the Maltese revolted against the Knights in a rebellion known as the Rising of the Priests; it is also remembered as the Maltese Rebellion of 1775. The uprising was squashed, and the leaders were killed or exiled.

The Knights had not interacted much with the Maltese; still, they managed to imprint much of their cultural identity on the population. However, the Knights' declining prowess meant that they could not rule the archipelago for much longer, and so, in 1798, Napoleon took over the islands. Still, the French presence on Malta was short-lived, as the [British](#) took it over by 1800. Two years later, the French signed the Treaty of Amiens with the British, in which the British were supposed to leave the island.

The British failed to adhere to the treaty. The Maltese demands for self-rule were not heeded, as the Maltese harbors were an essential strategic asset for the British.

The Maltese were refused home rule, and until the 20th century, the islands' political status underwent several changes. During the Crimean War, the economic condition of the islands improved, but after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, they retracted.

In 1921, the Maltese were given the right to self-govern under British rule. The British retained the right to control foreign and military issues while the local government handled domestic affairs. In 1933, tensions flared again as the archipelago returned to a strict colonial regime. During the [Second World War](#), the Axis powers bombed the islands, but the locals did not surrender.

The British acknowledged the bravery of the local people. In 1947, Malta was given the right to self-govern again. It was revoked in 1959 and then restored in 1962. The islands received their official independence on September 21, 1964. On December 13, 1974, Malta became a republic.

The rule of the Nationalist Party from 1962 to 1971 was an era of alignment with the West. In contrast, the rule of the Malta Labour Party emphasized the sovereignty of the country, leading to the complete withdrawal of British rule by 1979.

The Nationalist Party retook the reins in the 1990s and applied for inclusion in the European Union. In 2004, Malta became a member of the EU after a referendum. Today, Malta is the fourth most densely populated sovereign country globally, despite



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being the 10th smallest by area. Its capital, Valletta, is the smallest capital in the European Union by area and population.

Today, Malta is a great tourist destination. Its warm climate and recreational outlook on life offer an excellent resort for tourists. Several architectural and historical monuments provide a window into the country's rich history.

