



ORIGINAL PAPER

Maltese History And Its Cultural Heritage

Ileana Mihaela Chirițescu¹⁾, Floriana Anca Păunescu²⁾

Abstract:

The seven islands in the Ionian Sea form one of the smallest states in the world – Malta. The Phoenicians called it Malat, the Greeks called it Melita or Melite, and the Maltese called it Ghasel, meaning honey. The Maltese gave it this name because of the specific color of the soil, the rocks, but also because of the tradition of honey cultivation on the territory of Malta. Malta's cultural heritage is inversely proportional to the size of the state. Seven megalithic temples are found on the islands of Malta and Gozo, each the result of a distinct stage of cultural development. The two temples on the island of Gozo, dating from the Bronze Age, are impressive for their gigantic structures. Some other examples in this regard, given by UNESCO experts, are the monuments: Auberge de Baviere, Church of the Shipwreck of Saint Paul the Apostle, Mantel Theatre, the Library located in the heart of the capital Valletta and many others. From the strong cultural wealth of Malta we cannot omit the The Sovereign Military Order of Malta (SMOM), officially the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta. The birth of the Knights Hospitaller dates back to around 1048. The original hospitaller mission became the main activity of the order, growing ever stronger during the 20th century, most especially because of the contribution of the activities carried out by the Grand Priors and National Associations in many countries around the world.

Keywords: *tradition, culture, heritage.*

¹⁾ Lecturer, Ph.D., University of Craiova, Department of Applied Modern Languages, Romania, Phone: 004 0251411552, Email: chiritescumihaela@yahoo.com. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2272-7580.

²⁾ Associate Professor, Ph.D., University of Craiova, Department of Applied Modern Languages, Romania, Phone: 004 0251411552, Email: anca.paunescu18@gmail.com. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9646-7718.

Introduction

Malta is the country with the smallest capital in the European Union. The capital Valletta is a true open-air museum. Moreover, the whole country is captivating with its magnificent constructions and cultural diversity. Malta has two official languages - English and Maltese.

Malta's geographical position has made this country a strategic pole throughout history.

Since 1964, Malta has gained independence from the United Kingdom as a sovereign and independent Commonwealth territory. Until 1974, Malta had the Queen of Great Britain, Elizabeth II, as head of state. In 1974, Malta became a Republic. In 2004, Malta was admitted to the European Union. And in 2008, Malta joined the Euro zone.

The origins of the island of Malta

The origin of the term *Malta* has several variants. The most well-known is that the origin of the word *Malta* comes from the Greek language, from the Greek word *meli*, which means *honey*. The Greeks said of the island of Malta that it was as sweet as honey. The Greeks made this claim, probably based on Malta's honey production; an endemic subspecies of bees lives on the island.

Later, the Romans took this name and adapted it to *Melita*, which can be considered as a Latinization of the word *meli*.

In another variant, it is claimed that the word *Malta* comes from the Phoenician *Maleth* which translates as *a haven or port* and refers to the many bays of Malta.

Such a small country has such a vast history. It is believed that the Maltese islands were first settled in 5200 Î.H., mainly by Stone Age hunters or farmers who came from Sicily. This assumption is based on the fact that the pottery found by archaeologists at the Skorba Temples is similar to that found in Italy.

The population of Malta cultivated grain, raised animals and had faith in a representation of fertility. In mythology, the earth is a primordial element, the genesis and creation of man. Earth is part of the four elements that make up the world around us, along with water, fire and air. In many mythologies, he is personified and he establishes with the sky, a harmonious relationship of eternal love. Earth and sky are contrasting, opposite elements, like man and woman, and complement each other. Therefore, it was said that in prehistoric times, the Maltese worshiped a personification of fertility.

From the Early Neolithic period, there are prehistoric agricultural settlements, open areas and caves, the most spectacular of which is Ghar Dalam.

According to the site VisitMalta "Ghar Dalam Cave is a highly important site as it was here that the earliest evidence of human settlement on Malta, some 7,400 years ago, was discovered. The display area consists of two parts: the cave and the museum, which exhibits a remarkable wealth of finds from animal bones to human artefacts. An overlying river running at right angles formed the cave. It is some 144 metres deep, but only the first fifty metres are open to visitors. The lowermost layers, more than 500,000 years old, contained the fossil bones of dwarf elephants, hippopotami, micro-mammals and birds. Above the pebble layer that follows is the so-called 'deer' layer, dated to around 18,000 years ago. The top layer dates to less than 10,000 years and holds evidence of the first humans on the Island". (<https://www.visitmalta.com/en/a/info/ghardalamcavemuseum/>)

Maltese History and Its Cultural Heritage

Around 3500 Î.H., these people built some of the oldest free-standing structures still in existence in the world, in the form of the megalithic temples of Ggantija on the island of Gozo. Other early temples are those at Hagar Qim and Mnajdra. The temples have a special architecture and design in the shape of a trefoil, they were used between 4000 and 2500 Î.H. Because archaeologists have found traces of animal bones and knives there, it was concluded that animals were sacrificed in those temples.

It is suggested that animal sacrifices were made to the Goddess of Fertility whose statue is now at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta.

Around 2500 Î.H., this population apparently disappeared, most likely due to famine, and the Maltese islands were depopulated for a longer period. In the Bronze Age, another pollution appeared in the Maltese islands. This population cremated their dead and bequeathed other smaller megalithic temples called dolmens. Because these dolmens were similar to those built in Sicily, it is said that this pollution also came from Italy. Moreover, this migration is also understandable, given the fact that Sicily is 80 km from Malta. During the Phoenician period, it seems that the Phoenicians used the island of Malta as a stopping point on their way to the Eastern Mediterranean. The Phoenicians lived in today's Mdina, that is, the first capital of Malta. After the fall of Phoenicia in 332 I.H. the area came under the control of Carthage, in the past it was a Phoenician colony. During this period, the inhabitants of Malta cultivated olives and carob trees (trees whose seeds are used for animal consumption, and flour for humans. In the past, the grains were used to weigh precious stones, called carats. This is where the unit of measurement for gold comes from, namely in carats.

In 218 Î.H., after the Second Punic War, Malta was conquered by the Roman consul Tiberius Sempronius Longus. Since then, Malta has come under the jurisdiction of the province of Sicily.

Romanization of the island was difficult.

Over the years, the Maltese islands have experienced real development, rising to the rank of a municipality. In 53 the Apostle Paul together with the Evangelist Luke were shipwrecked on the island staying for 3 months. Moment in which Christianity began to prosper.

In 395, when the Roman Empire split in two, Malta remained in the Western Roman Empire. Since then it has been conquered several times: 454 – 464 – the Vandals (Eastern Germanic tribe), after 464 by the Ostrogoths (Germanic people from the Baltic Sea area), in 533 it was regained by the Byzantine Empire until 870. They also introduced Greek families in the Maltese population.

In 870 after a hard fight between the Byzantines and the Muslims, the latter managed to loot and kill the inhabitants of the island. Remaining unpopulated until 1048 – 1049, when it was repopulated by the Sicilian Muslims. Sicily in turn was under Muslim occupation.

The Siculo-Arabic language that will evolve into the Maltese language. The Normans captured Malta in 1091 as part of their conquest of Sicily. The Norman period was a productive one; Malta became part of the newly formed Kingdom of Sicily, which also included the island of Sicily and the southern half of the Italian Peninsula. The Catholic Church was restored to the role of state religion, Malta coming under the ecclesiastical authority of the Diocese of Palermo.

The kingdom passed into the hands of the Hohenstaufen dynasty from 1194

to 1266. Malta was part of the Holy Roman Empire for 72 years. Malta was declared a county and marquisate, but its trade fell into ruin. For a long time, only a fortified garrison remained. The mass expulsion of the Arabs took place in 1224 and the entire Christian male population of Celano in Abruzzo was deported to Malta in the same year. In 1249, Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, decreed the expulsion of all other Arabs from Malta or their conversion to Christianity. Malta was ruled by the House of Barcelona, an Aragonese dynasty, from 1282 to 1409. Relatives of the kings of Aragon ruled the island until 1409, when it officially passed to the Crown of Aragon. In 1551, the population of the island of Gozo (around 5,000 people) was enslaved by pirates and taken to the Barbary Coast in present-day Libya. The knights' rule ended after Napoleon captured Malta on his way to Egypt during the French Revolutionary Wars in 1798.

Between 12 and 18 June 1798, Napoleon lived at the Palazzo Parisio in Valletta. The statue of Napoleon can still be found today at the Palazzo Parisio in Valletta.

According to Wikipedia “he reformed national administration with the creation of a Government Commission, twelve municipalities, a public finance administration, the abolition of all feudal rights and privileges, the abolition of slavery and the granting of freedom to all Turkish and Jewish slaves.^{[108][109]} On the judicial level, a family code was framed and twelve judges were nominated. Public education was organised along principles laid down by Bonaparte himself, providing for primary and secondary education. He then sailed for Egypt leaving a substantial garrison in Malta”. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malta>)

The French armies that remained behind Napoleon were not appreciated by the Maltese. So the Maltese drove out the French, and to their aid appeared the armed forces of Great Britain. At 1800 General Claude-Henri Belgrand de Vaubois surrendered together with the French armies in Malta, and they asked Sir Alexander Ball that the island of Malta become a British dominion. The Maltese people drew up a Declaration of Rights specifying that His Majesty has no right to cede the island of Malta to anyone, and if he chooses to withdraw his power, the Maltese have the right to choose another sovereign, specifying that the island belongs only to the inhabitants.

In 1814, as a result of the Treaty of Paris, Malta officially became part of the British Empire, being used for maritime transport and representing the headquarters of the fleet. After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Malta's position midway between the Straits of Gibraltar and Egypt proved to be its main asset, as it was considered an important point on the way to India, a central trade route for the British.

During the First World War, between 1915 and 1918, Malta became known as the Nurse of the Mediterranean due to the large number of wounded soldiers who were brought to Malta.

During World War II, Malta played a very important role for the Allies; as a British colony, located close to Sicily and the Axis transport corridors, Malta was bombed by the Italian and German air forces. Malta was used by the British to launch attacks on the Italian navy and had a

Maltese History and Its Cultural Heritage

submarine base. It was also used as a listening and reading station for German radio messages, including the decryption of Enigma traffic.

The bravery of the Maltese in the Second Siege of Malta impressed King George VI, who collectively awarded the whole of Malta the George Cross on 15 April 1942.

Some historians argue that this decoration caused Britain to accept disproportionate losses in the defense of Malta, as the credibility of the British Empire would have suffered if Malta surrendered.

The George Cross stands as testimony to an act of heroism and devotion by the brave Maltese soldiers, which has remained forever famous in history.

According to Eric Grove “Malta was now enabled to play a key role in the Mediterranean campaign. After the loss of the surface striking forces, its effect on Axis supply lines had been, at best, marginal. There were always more supplies at Tripoli than could be transported to German troops at the front. Indeed the effort put into supplying Malta was disproportionate... In this way, therefore, Malta eventually vindicated, at least to some extent, the effort put into preserving it as a base across Axis communications. And after the Allied victories in North Africa, late in 1942, to which the island had finally contributed, the long siege of Malta was raised at last”. (Grove, 2011: https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/siege_malta_01.shtml)

On 21 September 1964, after intense negotiations with the United Kingdom, Malta gained its independence. Initially, it retained Queen Elizabeth II as Queen of Malta. On December 13, 1974, Malta proclaimed itself a Republic. Currently, Malta is a republic whose parliamentary system and public administration are closely modeled on the Westminster system. Malta has a real cult for the politicians who have ruled it. Everywhere, there are statues of heads of state, ministers and prime ministers, with mayors, but also with political representatives who have worked throughout history to make Malta a true force in Europe today.

Malta seems to be a special land both from the point of view of brave deeds throughout history, the settlement and the dream landscapes, the rich tradition of which it can be proud.

Malta was mentioned in the fifth book of the New Testament (Acts of the Apostles). It is said in the book that the Apostle Paul was shipwrecked on Melita Island. And the fact that the name Malta comes from Melita (island of honey - as the ancient Greeks called it) is indisputable. Saint Paul the Apostle is considered by Maltese Catholics to be the protector of the country.

Tourism in Malta

According to Wikipedia “three times more tourists visit than there are residents. Tourism infrastructure has increased dramatically over the years and a number of hotels are present on the island, although overdevelopment and the destruction of traditional housing is of growing concern. In 2019, Malta had a record year in tourism, recording over 2.1 million tourists in one single year”. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malta>)

Ileana Mihaela Chirișescu, Floriana Anca Păunescu

Malta is one of the most attractive tourist destinations in Europe. An open-air museum, a country with an important cultural and historical tradition, Malta fascinates at first sight with the charm of a special island.

Malta is an archipelago consisting of six islands: Malta, which is the largest in area (246km²), Gozo (67km²), Comino (3.5km²), Cominotto, Filfla and St. Paul, the last three being uninhabited.

Located about 90 km south of the island of Sicily and 290 km from the coast of Africa, Malta is actually a low calcareous plateau, with a maximum height of 417m (the island of Gozo). Located in the center of the Mediterranean Sea, the Maltese archipelago combines natural beauty with 7000 years of history.

Over the years, Malta has combined tradition and culture, but also modern beaches. The country stands out for its calcareous stone, which has a golden-yellow color, like honey.

The trip to Malta could start from the capital Valletta, magnificent with its unique streets in shape and decoration, with brightly colored balconies, with statues lining the streets, with magnificent cathedrals, with landscapes that take your breath away.

Valletta is the most fortified capital in the world; 13 empires fought for it. The capital of Malta is named after the great master Jean de la Vallette.

The Ioannit Knights being very rich and having material resources, they fortified the city and contributed to its development. Valletta had sewage under the pavement and even the hospital used silver cutlery. The use of this metal was chosen both for its antiseptic properties, but also to show the greatness of the order of the Knights of Ioannina.

The buildings in Valletta are built in the Baroque style.

In Valletta can be admired - the Tritons Fountain, the new Parliament building, the Georges Pompidou center, the Royal Opera, Palazzo Ferreria, the Church of Our Lady of Victory, the church of St. Catherine of Alexandria, Auberge d'Italie, Palazzo Parisio (Napoleon's residence), St. John's Cathedral, Upper Barrakka Gardens, Lower Barrakka Gardens, Court of Justice, National Library of Malta, Palace of the Grand Masters.

In the Lower Barrakka Gardens there is a neoclassical temple built in 1810 in memory of the British admiral Sir Alexander Ball. When you look towards the Grand Harbour, you can also see the Siege Bell erected in memory of the victims of the Second World War.

The Barrakka Gardens, built in 1775, has many monumental statues and a magnificent view of the three cities in the sky. In the Upper Barrakka Gardens, we find a statue called *Les Gavroches*.

The city was officially recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980. Today, Valletta is a cultural and tourist center of Malta, a very popular tourist destination among travelers.

The Tritons Fountain was built between 1952-1959. The fountain consists of three bronze figures of mythological tritons supporting a huge circular basin that measures 5 m in diameter and weighs about 3 tons. Two of the tritons are seated, while the third is kneeling and balanced on a seaweed base. The face of each Triton is visible when viewed from the City Gate. Their position gives a sense of strength as well as spiral movement that contributes to the fountain's monumentality. The water jets were also designed to convey the feeling of movement. The triton figures represent Malta's links with the sea, and their design was inspired by the Fontana

Maltese History and Its Cultural Heritage

delle Tartarughe in Rome. After the fountain plate was damaged in the 1980s, a bronze pillar depicting a flight of seagulls was added to the fountain to support its weight.

The parks and gardens located in Floriana and Valletta would be very difficult to describe in words. These are spectacular for those who have the privilege of visiting them and viewing their impressive palette of colors. The most famous are Upper Barrakka Gardens and Lower Barrakka Gardens, which, in addition to the vegetation itself, also offer spectacular views of the sea. The three cities can be admired in the distance - Birgu or Vittoriosa, Senglea, Cospicua or Bormla. The three cities are fortified, majestic, with magnificent buildings built in the Baroque style. They are all crossed by an old wall, a clock, a tower, a fort, Also impressive are the colorful boats specific to Malta. The same colorful boats can also be seen in the fishing village of Marsaxlokk. Blue, red, yellow, green - the predominant colors on Maltese boats - make an excellent contrast to the honey-colored old buildings bathed in the scorching sun of the magnificent Maltese island.

Marsaxlokk is a fishing village where every Sunday there is an impressive fish market where the Maltese get their supplies for the whole week. Somehow, time seems to stand still at Marsaxlokk, where the traveler is mesmerized by the hundreds of brightly colored boats with two eyes in front (the eyes of Osiris).

Mdina is the old capital of the state of Malta. A city with an ancient history, from whose hills you can admire the sea, but also the green hills of Malta. In fact, Mdina was a defensive fort, as it is built, on top of a hill; and the entrance to the city is on a defensive bridge. The city is limited between its own walls, with narrow streets, with houses built in the old style, but in which barons lived. Mdina is also called the City of Silence because only 299 people live here, all with roots from families with a rich history. Mdina is a closed society, just like the walls that surround the city. If someone from outside this city intended to purchase a home here, they could only do so with the consent of the entire community.

On Sundays, impressive religious processions take place in Mdina, in which almost the entire city participates. People dress up for the holiday, Catholic priests go out into the streets with magnificent statues on catafalques. The gentle breeze of Malta waves the impressive flags hoisted on the buildings that bear within their walls thousands of years of victorious history.

According to Marcel Proust “the real voyage of discovery consists, not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes”. (Proust, 1993:132)

Conclusions

The traveler will be impressed by the magnificent island of Malta. It is strong, it has withstood many enemies who wanted to conquer it throughout the ages. Malta represents a conglomeration of peoples, an amalgam of colors, a bold fusion of modern and classic, a harsh but victorious history together with a tasteful modernism.

Even the language spoken in Malta is an amalgam - the Maltese language is of Arabic origin with some old Sicilian influences, a pre-Italian language. But all the inhabitants of Malta speak English. Maltese is the only Semitic language in the European Union. Maltese is distinguished from other Semitic languages by its writing system, based on the Latin alphabet plus diacritical marks. Also, Maltese is the only one that was formed as an independent language, with independent literary norms. Maltese

has similarities to urban varieties of Tunisian Arabic, but over time Maltese has also adopted grammatical patterns from Italian, Sicilian and English.

The small island of Malta is actually great by settlement, by the courage shown throughout time, by the mixture of peoples, by the impressive colors that we see on the balconies of Valletta, by the brightly colored luzzu boats of Vittoriosa and Marsaxlokk. The color of honey found in the stone from which the old buildings are built, bathed in the mild Maltese sun - all this amalgam gives the impression that the traveler is an actor in a high-class movie. In fact, it is no coincidence that Malta earns enormously from cinematography because highly successful film productions have been filmed in Maltese cities. So Malta is a dream country that deserves to be admired both for its rich history and for its beauty.

Authors' Contributions

The authors contributed equally to this work.

References:

- Grove, Eric, (2011). *The Siege of Malta in World War Two*, retrieved from https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/siege_malta_01.shtml.
- Proust, Marcel, (1993). *À la recherche du temps perdu*, tome 5: *La Prisonnière*, Paris: Librairie générale française.
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malta>
- https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/siege_malta_01.shtml
- <https://www.visitmalta.com/en/a/info/ghardalamcavemuseum/>

Article Info

Received: March 18 2024

Accepted: April 04 2024

<p>How to cite this article:</p>

<p>Chirișescu, I. M., Păunescu, F. A. (2024). Maltese History and Its Cultural Heritage. <i>Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques</i>, no. 81, pp. 43 – 50.</p>
--