Maltese Culture

The culture of Malta is the culture of the Maltese islanders and reflects various societies that have come into contact with the Maltese Islands throughout the centuries, including neighbouring Mediterranean cultures, and the cultures of the nations that ruled Malta for long periods of time prior to its independence in 1964.

The culture of prehistoric Malta

The earliest inhabitants of the Maltese Islands are believed to have been Sicani from nearby Sicily who arrived on the island sometime before 5000 BC. They grew cereals and raised domestic livestock and, in keeping with many other ancient Mediterranean cultures, formed a fertility cult represented in Malta by statuettes of unusually large proportions. Pottery from the earliest period of Maltese civilization (known as the Ghar Dalam phase) is similar to examples found in Agrigento, Sicily. These people were either supplanted by, or gave rise to a culture of megalithic temple builders, whose surviving monuments on Malta and Gozo are considered the oldest standing stone structures in the world. The temples date from 4000–2500 BC and typically consist of a complex trefoil design.

Little is known about the temple builders of Malta and Gozo; however there is some evidence that their rituals included animal sacrifice. This culture disappeared from the Maltese Islands around 2500 BC and was replaced by a new influx of Bronze Age immigrants, a culture that is known to have cremated its dead and introduced smaller megalithic structures called dolmens to Malta.

The development of modern Maltese culture

The culture of modern Malta has been described as a "rich pattern of traditions, beliefs and practices," which is the result of "a long process of adaptation, assimilation and cross fertilization of beliefs and usages drawn from various conflicting sources." It has been subjected to the same complex, historic processes that gave rise to the linguistic and ethnic admixture that defines who the people of Malta and Gozo are today.

Maltese culture has both Semitic and Latin European origins and a British legacy is also evident. The Latin European element is more readily apparent in modern Malta because of virtually continuous cultural impact on Malta over the past eight centuries and the fact that Malta shares the religious beliefs, traditions and ceremonies of its Sicilian and Southern European neighbors.

Catholicism

It is said that in Malta, Gozo, and Comino there are more than 360 churches or one church for every 1,000 residents. The parish church (Maltese: "il-parroċċa", or "il-knisja parrokjali") is the architectural and geographic focal point of every Maltese town and village, and its main source
of civic pride. This civic pride manifests itself in spectacular fashion during the local village \textit{festas}, which mark the feast day of the patron saint of each parish with marching bands, religious processions, special Masses, fireworks (especially petards), and other festivities.

Making allowances for a possible break in the appointment of bishops to Malta during the period of the Fatimid conquest, the Maltese Church is referred to today as the only extant Apostolic See other than Rome itself. According to tradition and as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, the Church in Malta was founded by St. Paul in 70 CE, following his shipwreck on these Islands. The earliest Christian place of worship in Malta is said to be the cavern on the north-east of Malta, now known as St. Paul's Grotto, where the apostle was imprisoned during his stay on Malta. There is evidence of Christian burials and rituals having taken place in the general vicinity of the Grotto, dating back to the 3rd century CE.

Further evidence of Christian practices and beliefs during the period of Roman persecution can be found in the many catacombs that lie beneath various parts of Malta, including St Paul's Catacombs and St Agatha’s Catacombs in Rabat, just outside the walls of Mdina. The latter, in particular, were beautifully frescoed between 1200 and 1480; they were defaced by marauding Turks in the 1550s. There are also a number of cave churches, including the grotto at Mellieha, which is a Shrine of the Nativity of Our Lady where, according to legend, St. Luke painted a picture of the Madonna. It has been a place of pilgrimage since medieval times.

The writings of classic Maltese historian, \textbf{Gian. Francesco Abela} recount the conversion to Christianity of the Maltese population at the hand of St. Paul. It is suggested that Abela's writings were used by Knights of Malta to demonstrate that Malta had been ordained by God as a "bulwark of Christian, European civilization against the spread of Mediterranean Islam." The native Christian community that welcomed Roger I of Sicily was further bolstered by immigration to Malta from Italy, in the 12th and 13th centuries.

For centuries, leadership over the Church in Malta was generally provided by the Diocese of Palermo, except under Charles of Anjou who caused Maltese bishops to be appointed, as did - on rare occasions - the Spanish and later, the Knights. This continued Malta's connections with Sicily and Italy, and contributed to, from the 15th century to the early 20th century, the dominance of Italian as Malta's primary language of culture and learning. Since 1808 all bishops of Malta have been Maltese.

During the Norman and Spanish periods and under the rule of the Knights, Malta became the devout Catholic nation it is today. It is worth noting that the Maltese Inquisition (more properly called the Roman Inquisition) had a very long tenure in Malta following its establishment by the Pope in 1530; the last Inquisitor departed from the Islands in 1798, after the Knights capitulated to the forces of Napoleon Bonaparte.
The Normans

Under Roger II, King of Sicily, Christianity was restored as Malta's principal faith.

The later years of Norman rule over Malta brought massive waves of immigration to the Islands from Sicily and from the Italian mainland, including clergy and notaries. Sicilian became the sole written language of Malta, as evidenced by notarial deeds from this period, but this was eventually supplanted by Tuscan Italian, which became the primary literary language and the medium of legal and commercial transactions in Malta. A large number of Sicilian and Italian words were adopted into the local vernacular.

Traces of Siculo-Norman architecture can still be found in Malta's ancient capital of Mdina and in Vittoriosa, most notably in the Palaces of the Santa Sofia, Gatto Murina, Inguanez and Falzon families.

The Knights of St. John

The population of Malta increased considerably during the rule of the Knights, from 25,000 in 1535 to over 40,000 in 1621, to over 54,463 in 1632. This was primarily due to immigration from Western Europe, but also due to generally improved health and welfare conditions, and the reduced incidence of raids from North African and Turkish corsairs. By 1798, when the Knights surrendered Malta to the forces of Napoleon Bonaparte, the population of Malta had increased to 114,000.

The period of the Knights is often referred to as Malta's Golden Age, as a result of the architectural and artistic embellishment of the Islands by their resident rulers, and as a result of advances in the overall health, education and prosperity of the local population during this period. Music, literature, theatre and the visual arts all flourished in Malta during this period, which also saw the foundation and development of many of the Renaissance and Baroque towns and villages, palaces and gardens of Malta, the most notable of which is the capital city, Valletta.

The city of Valletta, one of several built and fortified by the Knights of Malta.

Contact between the Maltese and the many Sicilian and Italian mariners and traders who called at Valletta's busy Grand Harbour expanded under Knights, while at the same time, a significant number of Western European nobles, clerics and civil servants relocated to Malta during this period. The wealth and influence of Malta's noble families - many of whom trace their ancestry back to the Norman and Spanish monarchs who ruled Malta prior to the Knights - was also greatly enhanced during this period.
Maltese education, in particular, took a significant leap forward under the Knights, with the foundation, in 1530, of the *Collegium Melitense*, precursor to today's University of Malta, through the intercession of Pope Clement VIII. As a result, the University of Malta is one of the oldest extant universities in Europe, and the oldest Commonwealth university outside of the United Kingdom. The **School of Anatomy and Surgery** was established by Grand Master Fra Nicolas Cotoner at the *Sacra Infermeria* in Valletta, in 1676. The *Sacra Infermeria* itself was known as one of the finest and most advanced hospitals in Europe.

**British Malta**

British rule, from 1800 to 1964, radically and permanently transformed the language, culture and politics of Malta. Malta's position in the British Empire was unique in that it did not come about by conquest or by colonization, but at the voluntary request of the Maltese people. Britain found in Malta an ancient, Christian culture, strongly influenced by neighboring Italy and Sicily, and loyal to the Roman Catholic Church. Malta's primary utility to Great Britain lay in its excellent natural harbors and strategic location, and for many decades, Malta was essentially a "fortress colony".

Malta was an important link in Britain's naval routes across the Mediterranean.

Throughout the 19th century, Malta benefited from increased defense spending by Britain, particularly from the development of the dockyards and the harbor facilities. The Crimean War and the opening of the Suez Canal further enhanced Malta's importance as a supply station and as a naval base. Prosperity brought with it a dramatic rise in the population, from 114,000 in 1842, to 124,000 in 1851, 140,000 in 1870, and double that amount by 1914. Malta became increasingly urbanized, with the majority of the population inhabiting the Valletta and the Three Cities. Malta's fortunes waned during times of peace in the early 20th century, and again after World War II, leading to massive waves of emigration.

Although Malta remained heavily dependent on British military spending, successive British governors brought advances in medicine, education, industry and agriculture to Malta. The British legacy in Malta is evident in the widespread use of the English language in Malta today. English was adopted as one of Malta's two national languages in 1936, and it has now firmly replaced Italian as the primary language of tertiary education, business, and commerce in Malta.

The British period introduced the Neoclassical style of architecture to Malta, evident in several palaces built during this period, in the Greek revival portico of the parish church of Sta. Marija Assunta in Mosta, and in the soaring spire of St Paul's Anglican Cathedral which, alongside the massive Baroque dome of a nearby Catholic church, dominates the Valletta skyline.

Neogothic architecture was also introduced to Malta during this period, in the Chapel of Santa Maria Addolorata at Malta's main cemetery, and in the Carmelite Church in Sliema. Sliema itself, which developed from a sleepy fishing village into a bustling, cosmopolitan town during the British period, once boasted an elegant seafront that was famed for its Regency style architecture, that was strongly reminiscent of the British seaside town of Brighton.
Impact of World War II

Perhaps as an indirect result of the brutal devastation suffered by the Maltese at the hands of Benito Mussolini's Regia Aeronautica and the Luftwaffe during World War II, the United Kingdom has replaced neighboring Italy and Sicily as the dominant source of cultural influences on modern Malta. The George Cross was awarded to the people of Malta by King George VI of the United Kingdom in a letter dated 15 April 1942 to the island's Governor Lieutenant-General Sir William Dobbie, so as to "bear witness to the heroism and devotion of its people" during the great siege it underwent in the early parts of World War II. The George Cross is woven into the Flag of Malta and can be seen wherever the flag is flown.

The "culture clash" between pro-British and pro-Italian elements in Malta reached its apex in February 1942, when British Governor Lieutenant-General Sir William Dobbie ordered the deportation of 47 notable Maltese, including Enrico Mizzi, leader of the Nationalist Party, and Sir Arturo Mercieca, Chief Justice of Malta, who were suspected by the Colonial authorities of being sympathetic to the fascist cause. Their exile in Uganda, which lasted until March 8, 1945, was and remains a source of controversy among the Maltese.

British traditions in modern Malta

British traditions that live on in Malta include an efficient civil service, a military that is based on the British model, a Westminster-style parliamentary structure, a governmental structure premised on the rule of law, and a legal system based on common law. Another British legacy in Malta is the widely popular annual Christmas pantomime at the Manoel Theatre. Most Maltese families have adopted turkey and plum pudding as Christmas treats in place of the more traditional Maltese rooster and cassata.

Due to Malta forming a part of the British Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries, and a considerable amount of intermarriage having taken place during that time period, the existence of British or Irish surnames is increasingly common. Examples include: Alden, Atkins, Crockford, Ferry, Gingell, Hall, Hamilton, Harmsworth, Harwood, Jones, Mattocks, Moore, O'Neill, Sladden, Sixsmith, Smith, Strickland, Turner, Wallbank, Warrington and Woods.