

MALTA – BRIEF INTRODUCTION NOTES ON THE LAND AND ITS CULTURE

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The Land

Three major islands, Malta, Gozo and Comino, and some islets form the Maltese archipelago, in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, south of Sicily, just about 100 kilometres from the island with which it has shared history for a very long time. The distance from North Africa is 288km. The whole area, commonly known as Malta, is about 246 kilometres. The longest distance is about 27km, and the widest is 14km. There are numerous harbours, sandy beaches and low hills, but no rivers or mountains. Tourism is the major industry. Its sunny climate and rich history largely contribute to make Malta a major resort for holidaymakers throughout the year, and particularly during the hottest season. The population is about 370,000, but many more live in various parts of the world, particularly in Australia and Canada.

The capital city is Valletta, the centre of administration, an important commercial spot, characterised by a number of harbours, the main one being the Grand Harbour, the site of numerous historical events.

Archaeological evidence goes back to 7,000 years, when the earliest people are believed to have reached the island from Sicily. Malta is well known for its megalithic temples, now acknowledged as the oldest free standing stone buildings in the world. The Hypogeum, a vast underground cemeterial complex, is an early document of what may be considered as the profoundest definition of Malta: the fusion of culture and religion. Apart from the megalithic temples, the cart tracks, commonly assigned to the Bronze Age, are another unique aspect of the impressive historical character of the island.

The Phoenicians, the Carthaginians and the Romans have all shaped the identity of early Malta. In 60 A.D. St Paul was shipwrecked in Malta, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, and since then the strong Christian tradition of the island is believed to have started. The Arabs ruled Malta between 870 and 1090, succeeded by the Normans and then the Order of St John. The Knights of Malta are mainly remembered for their rich architectural heritage scattered throughout the place. Napoleon invaded Malta in 1798 and forced the Order to leave Malta. The uprising of the Maltese against their French occupants soon led to the British blockade. They asked for the British protection in 1802, and the islands were annexed to Britain under the Treaty of Paris in 1814. Malta attained independence from Britain in 1964, and ten years later became a republic. In 1979 it ceased to be a military base.

Maltese is the national language of Malta. It goes back to the Arabic period, and is the only national language in Europe which belongs to the Semitic family. Its grammar is basically Arabic, but it is written in the Latin script. It has been hugely influenced by Italian and English, which have both enriched its lexical and idiomatic stock as well as its syntactical patterns. Maltese and English are the official languages of Malta.

In various respects the history of Malta can be said to closely reflect the historical

evolution of Europe. Throughout the centuries it has managed to absorb all influences coming from outside and to mould them according to its own nature, thus giving room to the development of a unique identity equally typical of the region and distinctive. Religion, language and domination have all contributed to a very great extent to the formation of its character. It has managed to survive and eventually to become sovereign.

Towards a cultural definition of Malta

The history of the small ethnic community living in Malta is closely reflected in the evolutionary process of Maltese culture, especially in its written literary heritage. Malta could never do without foreign contacts, and consequently any historical consideration is bound to assume a comparative character. Foreign contacts were nothing less than foreign occupations, even though some inner force enabled these influences to be absorbed and reshaped according to the local characteristics. Religion, language, architecture, family and social customs have all become Maltese as time and space gradually removed them from their original source. Through isolation distinctive identity was developed.

Different cultures, political attitudes, world visions and social customs finally crossed each other in 19th century Malta and determined to a great extent the beliefs and modes of the people for a long time to come. What may superficially look like a mere historical background, buried in a relatively remote past, is actually the real foundation on which contemporary Malta is built. Languages – the spoken one, the earlier, namely Maltese, of Semitic origin; the written one, the more recent, namely Italian, resembling whatever was European – were finally put in direct conflict. The past and the present transformed themselves into two ways of being, and colonialism and the concept of sovereignty became items on a new national agenda demanding that a decision be soon taken. The important role assumed by English can be easily explained through its contemporary internationality, apart from the fact that in Malta it was also the language of the British colonial rule.

History in Malta is perhaps more debated than actually known; at times it even assumes the role of an arbiter between political parties in search of self-justification. What is this multidimensional Maltese self made up of? A few comments on some of the more important components of this phenomenon can immediately suggest a plausible answer. Religion, originally Christian, namely Oriental, has become Catholic, namely eminently Latin, especially since the arrival of the Knights of St John in 1530. The language is basically Semitic, whereas the national character is fundamentally European. The Maltese, Catholic in their overwhelming majority, call their God with the Arabic world "Alla", derived from "Allah". Most of the terms used in Church liturgy are originally Semitic, forming part of an exclusively Catholic ritual. The older Mediterranean layer and the more recent European one blend into one whole.

Colonialism has left an indelible mark on all aspects of life in Malta, including the psychology of the average inhabitant, the well meaning islander in search of new acquaintances, still striving to understand that the relationship with the sea cannot be his major concern if he is to establish his reality on firm ground. But political emancipation has provided the people with the full rights any people can dream of, and democracy in Malta is an old, uninterrupted tradition.

Perhaps the old man still lingers on in the Maltese, but he has to come to task with himself and realise that he is politically new, namely free after so long. As Malta's supreme dignity lies in the remote past – there are some of the more outstanding temples of old

– contemporary life demands development of all sorts. Land development frequently implies the loss of whole areas intimately associated with the ancient past. Where is national dignity actually to be found, and what is it made up of? Can the past and the present go hand in hand together?

The intriguing paradox lies in the fact that this is what keeps the Maltese people going on. Reconstruction is a perennial process, and the end of the job seems to be possible only in theory. The island's heritage is essentially in stone, and man has to be a builder of some sort. Navigation gave way to construction. Assuming the function of an imaginative archetypal pattern – as Maltese poetry amply shows – the stone signifies stability, continuity, actually a sort of historical eternity, a witness to the past. On the other side of the picture, there is at sea, resembling the eternal flux, restless mobility, indecisiveness. But stones which constitute a building can also look like objects, almost toys. What is apparently a physical act may betray psychological traits. The superficial builder is perhaps a profound researcher. And what is being unearthed seems to be nothing less than the self, both individual and collective.

To detect the relationship between individuality and collectivity may be enough to merely establish matters quantitatively. This is what we normally mean by a "trend", a massive, initially voluntary but finally instinctive, participation in an act. When such an act is shared by a relatively large portion of society, it is bound to take the shape of a ritual. And there we are: Maltese history recognises its prehistorical birth in ritual, and since then it seems that the islander has not changed substantially. His attitude towards his heritage in stone is still ritual. He builds churches with the same facility he constructs villas. A church may resemble a villa, and vice-versa. A church is not only useful but also symbolical; so is a Maltese house. It is not merely an abode; it is also an image of the inhabitant.

All this may mean that different cultures did not simply meet in Malta and leave their trace. They have also produced specific psychological traits, an unquenchable thirst for the new. All eras, Phoenician, Carthaginian, Roman, Spanish, Arab, Norman, French, British, just to mention the major dominations, simultaneously denote submission to superior forces and the gradual formation of an indigenous identity through assimilation and adaptation. Rejection frequently forms part of the process, since the Maltese self is highly critical. Foreign dominations have moulded the Maltese character, and the latter has proved to be strong enough as to reshape any influence.

The main evidence of this phenomenon can be found in the language which, together with religious tradition (pre-Christian and Christian), largely explains the fact that the tiny Maltese community has managed to survive on its own and eventually to attain the status of a nation and a state. Oneness, or the idea of unity, gave it the strength to live amidst diversity of all sorts.

The language is the most characteristic feature of the island's national identity, and its description as a mixed medium of expression exemplifies what Malta has gone through for many centuries. Whilst the Maltese tongue sharply distinguishes the people from any other, it is also an unquestionable document of linguistic subjugation. The Maltese language is equally a source of pride as well as evidence of past colonialism. But, again, subjection is already challenged, way back in the 9th century A.D., by a sort of quest for freedom. What was initially an Arabic dialect imposed on the then tinier community grew up into a fully fledged language. Since the Norman Conquest Maltese has been extensively exposed to non-Arabic, essentially Sicilian and Italian influences. What happened in the case of language can be safely considered as a major pattern of one complex process pervading the whole of Maltese reality.