# A History of the Maltese Islands

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## Introduction

The Maltese Islands sit in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, a tiny archipelago that has punched far above its weight in the grand sweep of history. Comprising the main islands of Malta, Gozo, and Comino, along with several smaller uninhabited islets, this nation covers a mere 316 square kilometers. To put that in perspective, it is smaller than many major cities around the world. Yet, despite its diminutive size, Malta has been a focal point of strategic, cultural, and military significance for millennia. Its story

is one of resilience, adaptation, and an almost uncanny ability to attract the attention of empires.

Geographically, Malta is located approximately 80 kilometers south of Sicily, 284 kilometers east of Tunisia, and 333 kilometers north of Libya. This central position made it a natural stopping point for ancient mariners traversing the Mediterranean. The islands' harbors, particularly the Grand Harbour on Malta, are among the finest in the Mediterranean, providing safe anchorage for fleets throughout history. It is no exaggeration to say that whoever controlled Malta controlled a vital node in the network of sea routes that connected Europe, Africa, and the Near East.

The name "Malta" itself is shrouded in mystery. Some scholars trace it to the Phoenician word "Malat," meaning a place of refuge or shelter. Others suggest a Greek origin, possibly linked to the word for honey, "meli," as the islands were known in antiquity for the quality of their honey production. The ancient Greeks called the main island "Melite," a name that appears in various classical texts. Regardless of its etymological roots, the name has endured through the centuries, a constant thread linking the modern nation to its ancient past.

The history of human habitation on the Maltese Islands stretches back to around 5900 BCE, making it one of the earliest settled locations in the Mediterranean. The first inhabitants were likely farmers who crossed from Sicily, bringing with them domesticated animals and grain seeds. These early settlers found a landscape quite different from today's arid terrain. The islands were once covered in forests and supported a richer ecosystem, including dwarf elephants and hippopotami, whose remains have been found in caves across the islands. Over time, human activity and climate change transformed the landscape into the rocky, terraced terrain familiar to modern visitors.

What makes Malta truly exceptional in the archaeological record is its collection of megalithic temples. Built between roughly 3600 and 2500 BCE, these structures are among the oldest free-standing stone buildings in the world, predating both Stonehenge and the Egyptian pyramids. The temples at Ħaġar Qim, Mnajdra, and Tarxien, along with the underground Hypogeum of Ħal-Saflieni, represent a level of architectural and engineering sophistication that is staggering for their time. How a small island community with limited resources managed to construct such monuments remains one of the great puzzles of prehistoric archaeology.

The temple-building civilization eventually collapsed around 2500 BCE, and the reasons for this decline are still debated. Some theories point to environmental degradation, as deforestation and soil erosion took their toll on the islands' agricultural capacity. Others suggest that a plague or famine decimated the population. There is also evidence of a new wave of Bronze Age settlers arriving around this time, possibly displacing or absorbing the earlier inhabitants. Whatever the cause, the islands

entered a quieter period before the arrival of the Phoenicians around the eighth century BCE.

The Phoenicians were the great traders and navigators of the ancient Mediterranean, and they recognized the strategic value of Malta immediately. They established a colony on the main island, using it as a waypoint on their trade routes that stretched from the Levant to the Strait of Gibraltar. The Phoenician period left a lasting mark on Maltese culture, including the introduction of their language and religious practices. The famous Cippi of Melqart, bilingual inscriptions in Phoenician and Greek, were instrumental in deciphering the Phoenician script in the eighteenth century.

Following the Phoenicians, Malta fell under the influence of Carthage, the great North African city-state that dominated the western Mediterranean. Carthaginian rule brought further development, and the islands became an important outpost in their commercial and military network. Archaeological evidence from this period includes tombs, pottery, and inscriptions that reveal a society deeply connected to the broader Punic world. The Carthaginian era set the stage for Malta's eventual absorption into the Roman Republic.

The Roman conquest of Malta occurred in 218 BCE during the Second Punic War. The Roman historian Livy records that the Carthaginian garrison on the island surrendered without much resistance to the Roman consul Tiberius Sempronius Longus. Under Roman rule, known as the period of "Melita," the islands prospered. The Romans brought their characteristic infrastructure, including roads, villas, and public buildings. The catacombs at Rabat, near the old capital of Mdina, are a testament to the Roman presence and the early adoption of Christianity on the islands.

The story of Saint Paul's shipwreck on Malta in 60 CE is one of the most famous episodes in Maltese history. According to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul was being transported to Rome as a prisoner when his ship was wrecked on the islands. He spent three months there, during which time he reportedly performed miracles, including healing the father of the Roman governor, Publius. Publius is said to have converted to Christianity and became the first Bishop of Malta. Whether one views this account as literal history or pious legend, it has had an enormous impact on Maltese identity and culture.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Malta came under the control of the Byzantine Empire. This period, lasting from 535 to 870 CE, saw the islands integrated into the Eastern Roman administrative and religious system. Byzantine influence is evident in the architectural remains and the spread of Orthodox Christianity, although the islands remained relatively peripheral to the empire's main concerns. The Byzantine era was brought to an end by the Arab conquest in 870 CE, an event that would transform Maltese society in profound ways.

The Arab period, lasting from 870 to 1091 CE, is often overlooked but was crucial in shaping the Maltese language and agricultural practices. The Arabs introduced new irrigation techniques, crops such as cotton and citrus fruits, and a system of place names that persists to this day. The Maltese language itself is a direct descendant of Siculo-Arabic, the Arabic dialect spoken in Sicily and southern Italy. It is the only Semitic language written in the Latin script and remains a unique linguistic artifact of this period.

The Norman conquest of Malta in 1091, led by Count Roger I of Sicily, marked the beginning of the islands' integration into Western Christendom. The Normans expelled the Arab rulers but allowed the Muslim population to remain, at least initially. Over time, however, the islands were gradually Christianized and incorporated into the Kingdom of Sicily. The medieval period saw Malta governed by a succession of European powers, including the Swabians, Angevins, and Aragonese, each leaving their own imprint on the islands' culture and institutions.

The arrival of the Knights of Saint John in 1530 was a watershed moment in Maltese history. The Knights, also known as the Hospitallers, had been expelled from Rhodes by the Ottoman Empire and were granted Malta by Emperor Charles V. They transformed the islands into a formidable fortress and a center of Catholic resistance to Ottoman expansion. Under their rule, Malta experienced a cultural and architectural renaissance, with the construction of churches, palaces, and fortifications that still define the islands' landscape.

The Great Siege of 1565 is perhaps the most celebrated event in Maltese history. For four months, a vastly outnumbered force of Knights and Maltese civilians held off a massive Ottoman army. The siege ended with the withdrawal of the Ottomans, a victory that sent shockwaves through Europe. The heroism displayed during the siege became a source of national pride and cemented Malta's reputation as the "Island of Heroes." The Knights' Grand Master, Jean Parisot de Valette, went on to found the new city of Valletta on the Sciberras Peninsula.

Valletta, named after its founder, is a masterpiece of Renaissance urban planning and military architecture. Built in the aftermath of the Great Siege, it was designed to be both a functional city and an impregnable fortress. Its grid pattern of streets, lined with grand palaces and churches, reflects the ambitions of the Knights to create a worthy capital for their order. Today, Valletta is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the political and cultural heart of Malta.

The eighteenth century saw the Knights' power gradually wane, even as they continued to embellish the islands with Baroque architecture. The period was marked by internal strife, financial difficulties, and a growing disconnect between the Order and the Maltese population. The French Revolution provided the pretext for Napoleon

Bonaparte to seize Malta in 1798, as he sailed east toward Egypt. The Knights surrendered with barely a fight, ending over 268 years of their rule on the islands.

Napoleon's stay in Malta was brief but disruptive. He abolished the feudal system, closed convents, and looted the islands' treasures. However, his reforms also introduced modern legal and administrative concepts. The Maltese, initially hopeful, quickly grew disillusioned with French rule, particularly when the French began seizing church property. A popular uprising led to a blockade of the French garrison in Valletta, with the Maltese seeking assistance from the British Royal Navy.

The British period, which began in 1800 and lasted until 1964, was the longest continuous era of foreign rule in Maltese history. Initially, the islands were a protectorate, but they soon became a formal British colony. The British recognized Malta's strategic value, particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which increased the importance of Mediterranean shipping lanes. Malta became a major naval base and a key link in the chain of British imperial defenses.

The twentieth century brought profound changes to Malta. The islands suffered heavily during both World Wars, particularly during the Second World War, when they endured relentless bombing by Axis forces. The award of the George Cross to the entire Maltese population by King George VI in 1942 was a recognition of their collective bravery. The post-war period saw a gradual move toward self-government, culminating in independence in 1964 and the declaration of a republic in 1974.

This book aims to tell the story of the Maltese Islands from their earliest human inhabitants to the present day. It is a story of a small place that has been shaped by great forces, from the megalithic temple builders to the Knights of Saint John, from the Arab conquerors to the British Empire. Each chapter will explore a distinct period, examining the political, social, and cultural developments that defined it. The goal is to provide a comprehensive yet accessible account that does justice to the richness and complexity of Maltese history.

The sources for this history are varied, ranging from archaeological evidence and ancient chronicles to modern scholarly analysis. Where the historical record is incomplete or contested, this will be noted. History is rarely a straightforward narrative of facts; it is often a tapestry woven from fragments, interpretations, and sometimes outright guesswork. The reader is encouraged to approach this account with a critical eye, recognizing that our understanding of the past is always evolving.

One of the challenges of writing a history of Malta is the tendency to view the islands solely through the lens of their foreign rulers. While it is true that Malta has rarely been fully independent until the modern era, the Maltese people have always had their own distinct identity, shaped by their unique language, customs, and experiences. This book will strive to give voice to the Maltese themselves, not merely

as passive subjects of empire but as active agents in their own story.

The Maltese language, or "Malti," is a case in point. It is a living testament to the islands' layered history, combining a Semitic base with heavy influences from Italian, Sicilian, French, and English. It is the national language of Malta and a source of deep cultural pride. The survival and flourishing of Malti, despite centuries of foreign domination, is a remarkable achievement and a key element of Maltese identity.

Religion has also played a central role in Maltese history. The Catholic faith, introduced according to tradition by Saint Paul, has been a defining feature of Maltese culture for nearly two millennia. The islands are dotted with churches, some of them architectural gems, and religious festivals remain a vibrant part of community life. The influence of the Church has extended into politics, education, and social norms, sometimes in ways that have been controversial.

The physical landscape of Malta is itself a historical document. The fortifications of Valletta, the temples of Ħaġar Qim, the catacombs of Rabat, the medieval streets of Mdina, all tell stories of the people who built and used them. Even the humble farmhouses and terraced fields speak to centuries of agricultural labor and adaptation to a challenging environment. To walk through Malta is to walk through layers of history, each era leaving its mark on the land.

The sea has always been Malta's lifeline and its greatest threat. It brought traders, invaders, and settlers, but it also isolated the islands and made them vulnerable to attack. The harbors that made Malta so valuable also made it a target. The history of the islands is in many ways a history of the Mediterranean itself, reflecting the broader patterns of trade, warfare, and cultural exchange that have shaped the region.

In the chapters that follow, we will journey through time, from the mysterious cave dwellers of the Neolithic to the modern, independent nation of Malta. Along the way, we will encounter saints and sinners, heroes and villains, builders and destroyers. We will see how a tiny archipelago in the middle of the sea became a crossroads of civilizations, a fortress of Christendom, and ultimately, a sovereign state. The story of Malta is, in miniature, the story of the Mediterranean world.

It is hoped that this book will serve both as an introduction for those new to Maltese history and as a refresher for those already familiar with its broad outlines. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive academic treatise but rather a readable and engaging narrative that captures the essence of the Maltese experience. History, after all, is not just a collection of dates and events; it is the story of people, their struggles, their achievements, and their enduring legacy.

As we begin this journey, it is worth remembering that the Maltese Islands, for all their smallness, have never been insignificant. Their story is one of survival against the

odds, of cultural synthesis, and of an unyielding spirit that has carried them through millennia of change. From the depths of prehistoric caves to the heights of modern statehood, Malta's history is a testament to the resilience of small places in a big world.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Cave Dwellers

The Maltese Islands have been home to human beings for an extraordinarily long time. The earliest evidence of human habitation dates to around 5900 BCE, a period known to archaeologists as the Ghar Dalam phase, named after the cave on the outskirts of the modern town of Birzebbuga where the first traces were discovered. These initial settlers were not pioneers in the strictest sense; they had crossed the short stretch of water from Sicily, a journey of roughly 80 kilometers that, while not trivial, was within the capabilities of Neolithic mariners. They arrived on islands that, while modest in size by continental standards, offered a surprisingly varied landscape of hills, valleys, and coastline. The interior was probably not as denuded of vegetation as it is today, though even then the islands would have lacked the dense forests found elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin.

What they found when they arrived was not an untouched wilderness. The Maltese Islands had their own unique fauna, remnants of a much earlier era when the islands were connected to the Sicilian landmass during periods of lower sea levels. Dwarf elephants and hippopotami had evolved here, isolated from their mainland ancestors and shrinking over generations in response to the limited resources of island life. These creatures had long since vanished by the time the first humans set foot on Maltese soil. Their bones, however, were abundant. Fossilized remains of dwarf elephants, along with those of hippopotami, bats, birds, and turtles, littered caves and rock fissures across the islands. For the new arrivals, these bones were simply curiosities, remnants of a world they could not have imagined. For modern archaeologists, they have become windows into a vanished ecosystem.

The Ghar Dalam cave itself is an impressive geological formation, stretching back some 200 meters into the limestone hillside. When it was first systematically excavated in the late nineteenth century by the British naturalist John H. Cooke and later by the Italian-Argentine archaeologist Antonio Bresciani, it revealed a sequence of deposits that told a story spanning thousands of years. The deepest layers contained the bones of those extinct animals, undisturbed and ancient. Above them lay a sterile layer of clay, suggesting a period when the cave was flooded or otherwise uninhabitable. Then came the human layer, dark with charcoal and rich with broken pottery, animal bones, and fragments of fired clay. It was this layer that announced the arrival of the first Maltese.

The pottery found at Ghar Dalam and similar sites is distinctive. Known generally as Ghar Dalam ware, it is simple, hand-made pottery with no decoration or only the most basic incised patterns. The shapes are utilitarian: bowls, jars, and cooking vessels. The clay was sourced locally, though the techniques used to shape and fire it clearly owed a lot to Sicilian traditions. This is an important clue. It suggests that the first settlers brought with them not just seeds and livestock but a whole cultural package, a set of skills and habits refined over generations in a larger landmass. They were not experimenting from scratch; they were transplanting a way of life.

The lifestyle of these early colonists was essentially agricultural. They cultivated wheat and barley, crops that had been domesticated in the Fertile Crescent millennia earlier and had spread westward across the Mediterranean. They kept sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs, animals that provided meat, milk, hides, and labor. Evidence from Ghar Dalam and other sites indicates that they supplemented their diet with fishing and the gathering of shellfish from the coast, though the sea does not appear to have been as important a food source as it would become in later periods. Settlement was not limited to caves; open-air sites have been found, though these are harder to identify and excavate due to the heavy agricultural use of the land over subsequent millennia.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Ghar Dalam period is how little we know about it. The archaeological record is sparse and frustratingly incomplete. There are no monumental buildings, no elaborate burials, no readable inscriptions. Everything we know comes from the detritus of daily life: broken pottery, charred seeds, animal bones, the occasional stone tool. Reconstructing a society from such fragments is a bit like trying to understand a novel by reading only its scraps. Archaeologists have done remarkable work with what they have, but there are vast gaps. We do not know what language the cave dwellers spoke, what they believed about the world, how they organized their communities, or what they called the islands they inhabited.

Following the Ghar Dalam phase, Maltese prehistory entered a period known as the Grey Skorba phase, named after a site in the northwest of Malta, and then the Red Skorba phase, identified with pottery decorated with a distinctive reddish-brown wash. These phases, spanning roughly from 4500 to 4100 BCE, are transitional. The pottery becomes slightly more sophisticated, with better firing techniques and occasional decorative motifs that suggest contacts with other communities in the central Mediterranean. The agricultural economy continued much as before. Yet something was clearly changing beneath the surface, building toward the extraordinary flowering that was to come.

A question that has puzzled scholars is why Malta was not settled earlier. The islands are visible from Sicily on a clear day, and there is evidence of human habitation in Sicily going back tens of thousands of years. Mesolithic hunter-gatherers roamed the Sicilian coast and must have known of the islands lying to the south. Yet there is no

convincing evidence of a human presence on Malta before the sixth millennium BCE. The most likely explanation is that hunter-gatherer societies had little reason to colonize a small island. Their economies were based on mobility, on following herds and exploiting seasonal food sources. Islands, with their limited and often unpredictable resources, were not attractive to them. It was only with the advent of agriculture, with its emphasis on sedentism and food storage, that islands became viable places to live. Farming communities thought in terms of land and harvest, and the Maltese Islands, for all their smallness, had land worth farming.

The transition from the Ghar Dalam culture to the later stages of Maltese prehistory was gradual, but it set the stage for what comes next in our story. Before we get to the era of the great temples, however, it is worth noting what the cave dwellers left behind in terms of spiritual or ritual expression. At Ghar Dalam and other early sites, there are occasional finds that hint at symbolic thinking: a smoothed stone in an unusual shape, a fragment of pottery with a seemingly deliberate pattern, a cache of objects buried together. Whether these represent genuine ritual acts or merely the accidents of daily life is a matter of interpretation. The honest answer is that we cannot be sure. These early Maltese lived in a mental universe entirely foreign to our own, and the material traces they left behind are stubbornly opaque when it comes to questions of belief and meaning.

The islands themselves during this period were undergoing their own slow transformation. The forests that had once covered the higher ground were being cleared for agriculture and fuel. Deforestation was probably not a deliberate act of environmental destruction. It would have been a gradual process, driven by the need for building timber, cooking fuel, and arable land. Yet the consequences were significant. Without tree cover, the thin Mediterranean soils were vulnerable to erosion, particularly during the heavy rains of autumn and winter. Over centuries, the fertile topsoil would have washed down the hillsides and into the sea, leaving behind the exposed limestone that characterizes much of the Maltese landscape today. This process would accelerate dramatically in later periods, but its roots lay in these earliest centuries of human habitation.

The animal bones found at Ghar Dalam and other Neolithic sites tell us not just about the diet of the cave dwellers but also about the ecology of the islands. Alongside the remains of domesticated species, there are bones of wild animals, including deer and fox, suggesting that the harbor seals may have occasionally hauled themselves onto Maltese shores. The presence of bird bones, including those of migratory species ranging from ducks to raptors, indicates that the islands lay on important migration routes, just as they do today. For the first settlers, these wild resources would have provided a valuable supplement to their farm-based economy, especially in lean years.

One of the challenges in studying the earliest Maltese is the nature of the evidence itself. Much of what we know comes from excavations conducted in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when archaeological methods were considerably cruder than they are today. Antonio Annetto Caruana, who directed the excavation of the Hypogeum in 1910 and who was also involved in work at Ghar Dalam, was a meticulous observer by the standards of his time. But he did not have access to radiocarbon dating, satellite remote sensing, or any of the other tools that modern archaeologists take for granted. His interpretations, while often shrewd, were shaped by the intellectual assumptions of a Victorian scholar. Sir Themistocles Zammit, a Maltese polymath who served as the first curator of the National Museum of Archaeology and who conducted important excavations across the islands, did much to professionalize Maltese archaeology. Even so, much of his work, conducted in the early decades of the twentieth century, has had to be revised in the light of later evidence.

The question of population size during the Ghar Dalam phase is another area of uncertainty. Estimates vary, but most scholars suggest a community of at most a few hundred individuals, possibly spread across several settlements on the main island of Malta and perhaps also on Gozo. This is a tiny population, even by the standards of Neolithic farming communities. One of the consequences of small population size on islands is genetic drift. Over generations, the limited gene pool can lead to a higher prevalence of certain traits, both physical and medical. Studies of modern Maltese populations have occasionally looked for traces of such island effects in the gene pools, though the results are complicated by the many waves of immigration that followed in later millennia.

Despite the small population, there are signs that the cave dwellers were not isolated. The pottery styles show clear connections to Sicilian traditions, and some stone tools were made from obsidian, a volcanic glass not found on Malta. The nearest sources of obsidian are the islands of Pantelleria, Lipari, and Sardinia. The presence of obsidian artifacts in Malta is evidence of maritime contacts, though whether these were direct voyages or a chain of exchanges between intermediate communities is unknown. Either way, it is clear that even these earliest settlers were part of a wider Mediterranean world. The myth of Malta as a place of isolation is just that, a myth. From the very beginning, the islands were connected to the currents of trade and movement that crisscrossed the sea.

The burials of the Ghar Dalam period are simple by the standards of later Maltese prehistory. Skeletons have been found flexed and laid to rest in shallow graves, sometimes with a few pots or stone tools as grave goods. There are no elaborate tombs, no monuments, no evidence of a complex funerary ritual. The dead were apparently buried without the ceremony that would later characterize the temple-building period. Whether this reflects a simpler set of beliefs about death or simply a lack of resources is a matter of debate. It is also possible that the more elaborate burial sites of this period have simply not survived or been found. Malte's archaeological record is a patchwork, and our understanding of it shifts with every new

discovery.

The stone tools of the Ghar Dalam phase are well-made but unspectacular. Flint and chert, both available on the islands, were knapped into blades, scrapers, and arrowheads using techniques that were standard across the Neolithic Mediterranean. There are also ground stone tools, including axes and grinding stones, which would have been essential for woodworking and grain processing. The quality of the stone-working is competent but does not suggest a high degree of specialization. In a small community, most people would have been jacks-of-all-trades, capable of making their own tools, building their own shelters, and feeding their own families. Specialization comes with larger populations and more complex social structures, neither of which existed in Neolithic Malta.

Animal husbandry was a central part of the economy, and the bone evidence has allowed zooarchaeologists to reconstruct the balance between different livestock species. Sheep and goats were the most numerous, as one might expect on a dry, rocky island where these hardy animals can thrive on sparse vegetation. Cattle were less common but still present, providing a source of milk, meat, and traction. Pigs appear in smaller numbers. This pattern is broadly similar to that found in contemporary Sicilian sites, reinforcing the idea that the settlers transplanted a Sicilian-style economy to Maltese soil.

The agricultural calendar of the cave dwellers would have been dictated by the Mediterranean climate, with its hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. Planting would have been done in autumn, after the first rains softened the soil. Harvesting would have followed in late spring, before the summer heat dried out the crops. Grain would have been stored in ceramic jars, protected as much as possible from damp and vermin. The success or failure of the harvest would have been a matter of collective survival. A bad year, brought on by drought or blight, could mean hunger. Two or three bad years in a row could be catastrophic. Life on an island, however fertile, was always a gamble against the weather.

There is no conclusive evidence that the cave dwellers had any form of centralized leadership or social hierarchy. The apparent uniformity of the archaeological record, the lack of prestige goods or elite burials, and the small population all suggest a relatively egalitarian society. This does not mean that everyone was equal in every respect. There were surely skilled and unskilled individuals, elders who commanded respect and youngsters who did not, men and women whose roles were defined by the practical necessities of subsistence farming. But there is no sign of a chief or a ruling class, no evidence of the kind of social stratification that would become apparent in later periods.

Water was a critical consideration, as it has always been on Malta. The islands have no permanent rivers and rely on natural springs, wells, and, in later periods, cisterns and

aqueducts. During the Neolithic, the primary water sources would have been springs and seasonal streams, known locally as wadis when dry and carrying water only after heavy rain. The location of settlements was probably determined in large part by access to fresh water. Away from the coast, the thin soil layer sits atop porous limestone, which means that rainfall drains quickly underground. The first settlers would have had to learn the hydrology of the islands, identifying reliable springs and managing their water use with considerable care.

The weather patterns of the Maltese Islands today are generally thought to have been broadly similar to those of the Neolithic period, though this is an area of ongoing research. Paleoclimatologists studying sediment cores, pollen sequences, and other environmental proxies have been able to reconstruct past climate conditions with increasing precision. The evidence suggests that the Mediterranean climate during the sixth and fifth millennia BCE was broadly similar to that of today, though with some regional variations. The islands would have experienced the same seasonal rhythms of dry summers and wet winters, the same northerly gales in winter, the same relentless sun in summer.

The relationship between the cave dwellers and the sea deserves further attention. The short crossing from Sicily was made in boats that have left no archaeological trace. Were they simple dugout canoes, or more sophisticated vessels built from planks? The technology of Neolithic seafaring in the central Mediterranean is poorly understood, but finds from other regions, such as the Pesse canoe from the Netherlands and plank-built boats from the Danube region, suggest a range of small craft would have been available. The important point is that the sea was not a barrier but a highway. The people who colonized Malta were, by definition, people willing to trust themselves to the water. Their descendants would maintain that relationship with the sea, for better and for worse, for millennia to come.

In terms of physical appearance, we know little about the cave dwellers. Skeletal remains from this period are few and often poorly preserved. What evidence exists suggests a population similar to other Neolithic groups in the central Mediterranean: probably short by modern standards, with robust bones reflecting a physically demanding lifestyle, and dental health that was variable, often compromised by a diet coarse with ground grain. They were not so different from us in their fundamental biology. Their challenges were practical: growing enough food, staying healthy, raising children to adulthood, and coping with the unexpected hazards of life on an island.

The fire was central to their daily lives. It provided warmth during the winter months, light after darkness, a means of cooking food, and a deterrent against wild animals. Hearths have been identified at several Neolithic sites, and the ubiquity of charcoal in the archaeological record testifies to the constant burning of fuel. The question of what they burned is more interesting than it might first appear. Wood was the obvious choice, but as deforestation progressed, alternatives had to be found. Animal dung,

dried and mixed with straw, has been used as fuel in Mediterranean communities for thousands of years and is a likely supplement on Neolithic Malta.

The transition from the cave dweller period to what comes next was not marked by any sudden upheaval or catastrophe. There is no evidence of invasion, mass migration, or abrupt cultural change between the Ghar Dalam phase and the later phases of Maltese prehistory. Instead, the changes seem to have been gradual, driven more by internal developments than by external events. The population may have grown slowly. Agricultural techniques may have improved. Contacts with other communities may have brought new ideas. The stage was being set for Malta's most extraordinary achievement: the construction of the great temples.

Before we leave the cave dwellers, it is worth noting the sheer span of time involved. The Ghar Dalam phase lasted for roughly 800 years, from around 5900 to 5000 BCE. The subsequent Skorba phases took the story forward another 900 years or so, to around 4100 BCE. That is nearly two millennia of continuous human habitation on the islands, a period longer than the time that separates us from the Roman Empire. For most of that time, the Maltese were a quiet, unremarkable farming community, producing pottery and raising sheep on a rocky archipelago in the middle of the sea. Then something changed, and a community of farmers began to build monuments that would astonish the world. Understanding the cave dwellers helps us understand the foundation upon which that later achievement was built.

The Maltese landscape itself preserves faint traces of these earliest settlers, though they are largely invisible to the untrained eye. A scatter of pottery sherds in a plowed field, a patch of dark earth in a cave deposit, a fragment of animal bone eroding from a cliff face: these are the signatures of the Ghar Dalam people. Modern development, with its roads, buildings, and tourism infrastructure, has encroached on many sites. Urban expansion around towns like Birzebbuga, Zurrieq, and Qormi has sealed or destroyed deposits that might otherwise have yielded new information. It is one of the ironies of Maltese history that the very development that makes the islands prosperous today also threatens the evidence of their most ancient past.

Scientific techniques are now allowing researchers to extract more information from old finds. Radiocarbon dating, which measures the decay of the carbon-14 isotope in organic materials, has become more precise and requires smaller samples. Stable isotope analysis of animal and human bones can reveal information about diet and mobility. aDNA (ancient DNA) profiling can shed light on biological relationships and population movements. As these methods are applied to Maltese material, the picture of the cave dwellers will become clearer. For now, we must be content with the fragments and the theories they support.

The caves themselves deserve a final word. Ghar Dalam, with its five distinct layers spanning from the Pleistocene to the Bronze Age, is the most famous, but Malta and

Gozo have a rich repertoire of caves, many of which show evidence of human use. Mixta Cave on Gozo, the "twin" of Ghar Dalam, has yielded Neolithic material. Gher din on the outskirts of Rabat is another. These caves were not merely shelters; they were the first homes of the Maltese, the places where the first fires were lit on the islands and the first children were born to parents who had chosen to make Malta their world. That world was small, its horizons limited, its challenges many. But it was a world they had made their own, and it was the world that would, over the course of thousands of years, produce one of the Mediterranean's most consequential civilizations.

It is tempting to speak of the cave dwellers as a single, unchanging group, frozen in time for a thousand years. Of course they were not. Each generation faced its own set of problems, made its own decisions, and left its own slightly altered mark on the islands. The woman who carefully knapped a flint blade in 5400 BCE was no more the identical of a man doing the same thing in 5100 BCE than a modern Maltese office worker is of a medieval farmer. The temptation to speak of "the Neolithic Maltese" as a single category is strong, but it obscures the dynamic reality of human life. People adapt, experiment, fail, and try again. The cave dwellers were no less human for their simplicity.

The connections between Malta and the wider Neolithic world throw light on the processes by which islands are colonized and absorbed into larger cultural networks. Malta was not the only Mediterranean island to be settled in this period. Crete, Cyprus, and the Balearic Islands all saw Neolithic colonization. In each case, the process appears to have followed a similar pattern: an initial wave of farming settlers, a period of consolidation, and then the development of increasingly complex societies. Malta was part of this broader phenomenon, and its later achievements with the temples were not an isolated marvel but part of a pattern of island-driven cultural innovation that archaeologists are still working to understand.

The term "cave dwellers" itself is something of a misnomer. While caves were certainly important as shelters and storage spaces, there is also evidence of open-air habitation during the Ghar Dalam period. The problem is that open-air sites are far more vulnerable to disturbance than caves. Over the millennia, plowing, building, and natural erosion have destroyed or scattered most traces of above-ground Neolithic settlements. Caves, sealed by collapses or deliberate filling, have preserved their contents far more effectively. Our modern image of the cave dwellers as a cave-centered society may be biased by the survival of evidence rather than by the reality of Neolithic life.

Reconstructing the physical appearance of the Neolithic landscape is a task that draws on both archaeology and ecology. Pollen analysis, which can identify plant species from the pollen grains preserved in sediment layers, has helped to build a picture of the vegetation that existed before and during the period of human settlement. Studies from sites in Sicily and southern Italy suggest a Mediterranean maquis: a scrubby mix

of wild olive, carob, pine, and aromatic herbs. This type of vegetation is poor in terms of agricultural productivity but resilient in the face of drought. It would have provided fuel, building material, and habitat for wild animals, but it would not have fed a growing population indefinitely. As farming expanded, so the natural vegetation would have retreated, replaced by cropland and pasture.

The creatures of the Maltese Neolithic are not confined to farm animals and wild birds. The fossil record, mentioned earlier, tells of a much older fauna that included species found nowhere else. Dwarf species are a common feature of island faunas, the result of evolutionary pressures on small, isolated populations. Elephants and hippos are poorly suited to life on small islands with limited food, and over thousands of years, natural selection would have favored individuals that were smaller and required less food. The result was creatures that would have been recognizable to a modern observer but strangely diminished in size. Their extinction, probably caused by the combination of climate change and the arrival of human hunters, left the islands without any large native fauna. By the time the cave dwellers arrived, the only large mammals were the domestic animals they had brought with them.

The chemical analysis of pottery residues has revealed details about the diet that would otherwise be invisible. Lipid analysis of the fats absorbed into the walls of cooking vessels has shown that both dairy products and meat were processed in Maltese Neolithic pots. This confirms the archaeological evidence from animal bones and gives us a more rounded picture of what was on the menu. Grain-based porridge or flatbread, roasted or boiled meat, cheese or yogurt, perhaps the occasional fish or gathered fruit and nuts: the diet was monotonous by modern standards, but it was adequate and provided the calories needed for a life of physical labor.

The social dynamics of a community numbering in the difficult to reconstruct with any confidence. Kinship would have been the fundamental organizing principle, as it was in most Neolithic societies. Families would have cooperated in farming, child-rearing, and defense against the hazards of island life. Marriage partners would likely have come from within the community, given the small population and the practical difficulties of traveling elsewhere. Over time, such a pattern of endogamy would have strengthened bonds within the community but also increased the risk of genetic problems. How the cave dwellers managed these tensions is beyond our knowledge, but every small community faces them in some form.

Symbolism and early ritual behavior are difficult to pin down in the archaeological record of the Ghar Dalam phase, yet there are hints. Small figurines, crude but recognizably human or animal in form, have been found at several Neolithic sites in the central Mediterranean, including Sicily. Whether similar objects have been found on Malta is a matter of ongoing research and interpretation. The challenge is distinguishing between a deliberate representation and a fortuitous resemblance. A naturally water-worn pebble that looks vaguely like a face might be picked up and

kept for its suggestive shape, or it might be thrown away without a second thought. The line between symbol and accident is often invisible after five thousand years.

The Maltese Islands, at the time of their first settlement, had no metals, no writing, no wheel, and no beasts of burden beyond cattle. Their inhabitants lived by the rhythms of the agricultural year, by the cycles of birth and death, and by the practical wisdom passed down from parent to child. They were, in many ways, at the very beginning of a long journey. The temples, the fortifications, the palaces, the cathedrals that would later define Malta had no precedent in their world. Yet the seeds were already present: a willingness to work stone, a capacity for collective action, a relationship with the sea, and an attachment to the islands that would sustain generation after generation. The cave dwellers were not the authors of Malta's grandeur, but they were its first chapter, and without their quiet persistence, none of what followed would have been possible.

It should be noted that the absolute chronology of the Ghar Dalam and related phases continues to be refined as new radiocarbon dates are obtained. Earlier estimates placed the beginning of the Maltese Neolithic somewhat later than current dates suggest. The calibration of radiocarbon dates, which converts raw radiocarbon ages into calendar years using records of past atmospheric carbon levels drawn from sources such as tree rings and lake sediments, is a complex process and subject to ongoing revision. The dates given here, around 5900 BCE for the onset of the Ghar Dalam phase, represent the current scholarly consensus but are not set in stone, so to speak. Future discoveries and refinements may push these dates forward or backward by a century or more.

Our knowledge of the earliest Maltese is, as this chapter has made clear, fragmentary and provisional. We know enough to sketch the broad outlines of life on the islands in the sixth and fifth millennia BCE. A small community of farmers, living in a mixed economy of crops and livestock, connected to Sicily and the wider Mediterranean, managing with limited resources, adapting to an environment that was generous in some ways and parsimonious in others. We do not know their names, their myths, their songs, or their quarrels. We do not know how they resolved disputes, mourned their dead, or celebrated their joys. These are the limits of archaeology, and we must be honest about them. The cave dwellers left no memoirs, no chronicles, no monuments that speak in anything but the most elliptical way. Yet they were here, and they endured, and that in itself is a fact worth recording.

The story of Malta's earliest settlers is, at its heart, a story of colonization and adaptation. The islands were colonized by people from elsewhere, who brought with them their own cultural traditions and who then modified those traditions to suit their new environment. This pattern of transplantation and adaptation would repeat itself many times over in Maltese history, from the Phoenicians to the Arabs to the Knights of Saint John. The cave dwellers set the template. They arrived, they adapted, they persisted. And in doing so, they laid the groundwork for a civilization that would,

against all expectations, produce some of the most remarkable stone architecture the world has ever seen.

The question of when the Maltese began to think of themselves as a distinct people, rather than as an offshoot of the Sicilian Neolithic, is an intriguing one, but it is one that the archaeological record is unlikely to answer definitively. National identity, in the modern sense, was millennia in the future. Yet the physical separation of the islands, the shared experience of life in a constrained environment, and the long continuity of settlement would have fostered a sense of place. By the time the first stones of the great temples were being quarried and moved into position, the communities undertaking that work had been Maltese farmers for over a thousand years. That is a long time, long enough for a distinctive local culture to have emerged, even if we can only glimpse it dimly through the lens of broken pottery and scattered bones.

The cave dwellers, then, are the starting point of Maltese history. They are the first chapter in a story that stretches from the Neolithic to the present day. Their world was small, their tools were simple, and their ambitions were probably modest. But they were the first to call Malta home, and their legacy is the islands themselves, shaped and reshaped by human hands over thousands of years. As we move forward in time to the era of the temple builders, we will see how a community of farmers became a community of architects, engineers, and priests. The transformation is one of the most remarkable in Mediterranean prehistory, and it begins, as all things do, with the people who came before.

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