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A History of Malta

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Introduction

The Maltese Islands, poised in the heart of the Mediterranean, have witnessed the unfolding of human history for millennia. Their strategic location has made them a focal point for commerce, conquest, and cultural exchange, attracting diverse peoples and powers who have each left their mark upon the land and its people. Through the ages, Malta's story has been shaped as much by its formidable geology and unique climate as by the ambitions of empires that coveted its harbors and citadels.

From the earliest evidence of human presence in the Mesolithic era, Malta's history emerges as a series of remarkable transformations. Ancient settlers traversed perilous seas to bring new ways of life to the islands, establishing communities that would, over centuries, develop distinctive spiritual and artistic traditions. The megalithic temples, among the oldest freestanding monuments in the world, stand as a testament to these early innovators, whose mysterious culture vanished as abruptly as it began, leaving behind only stones, art, and enduring mysteries.

Over generations, waves of migration and conquest brought new rulers and new influences. Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, and Arabs—each left their imprint on Maltese language, society, and traditions. Under their stewardship, Malta was both a crossroads and a refuge; its population shifted, adapted, and syncretized ancient beliefs and practices in response to a changing world. The Norman conquest heralded the re-Christianization and gradual Latinization of the islands, ushering in centuries of feudal rule where Malta was shaped by the contest between local identity and external authority.

The long tenure of the Knights of St. John saw Malta transformed into a bastion of Christianity and an architectural jewel. The Great Siege of 1565 remains one of the most celebrated episodes in island history, its legacy woven into the fortifications and cityscapes that define modern Malta. Yet the hospitality and cosmopolitanism that characterized much of the Knights' governance eventually yielded to new challenges—internal strife, economic decline, and the revolutionary fervor sweeping across Europe.

The end of the 18th century brought French reforms and upheaval, swiftly followed by British rule and a new era of strategic significance. Malta became an imperial stronghold, enduring the trauma of world war and emerging from colonialism into independence. As a sovereign republic, and later an active participant in the European Union, Malta has redefined itself in a rapidly changing world, balancing tradition with innovation, and local identity with a global outlook.

This book seeks to tell Malta's history in all its complexity: a narrative of survival, adaptation, and transformation. The threads of conquest and resilience, cosmopolitanism and defensiveness, reflection and reinvention weave throughout the centuries, forming the rich tapestry that is Malta's past. The islands' journey—at once unique and emblematic of the wider Mediterranean experience—offers profound insights into how a small land can play a great role in the history of nations.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Maltese Archipelago: Geography and Early Environment

Nestled in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea, roughly 80 kilometers (50 miles) south of Sicily and some 284 kilometers (176 miles) east of Tunisia, lies the Maltese archipelago. This small island nation, covering a total area of about 316 square kilometers (122 sq mi), occupies a strategic position that has profoundly shaped its history and development. The archipelago consists of three main inhabited islands: Malta, the largest; Gozo, to the northwest; and the much smaller Comino situated between them. There are also several uninhabited islets and rocks scattered around, such as Cominotto, Filfla, and the St. Paul's Islands.

Geologically, the islands are the result of tectonic activity on the Pelagian Platform, a shallow underwater ridge that connects Sicily and North Africa. The bedrock is predominantly composed of sedimentary rocks, primarily limestone, laid down in a marine environment between the late Oligocene and late Miocene epochs, roughly 30 to 5 million years ago. This limestone is a key natural resource, historically quarried for construction and still playing a role in the economy. The landscape is characterized by low hills, terraced fields, and an indented coastline featuring numerous bays, creeks, and natural harbors. The highest point on Malta is Ta' Dmejrek, reaching 253 meters (830 feet) above sea level near the Dingli Cliffs, which form dramatic sheer drops on the southwestern coast. The islands are tilted towards the northeast, influencing the drainage patterns and creating contrasting coastlines – low and indented on the east, and steep and rectilinear on the west.

Malta enjoys a Mediterranean climate, characterized by hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. The average annual temperature is around 23°C (73°F) during the day, with Valletta, the capital, boasting one of the warmest winter averages in Europe. Rainfall is concentrated between October and March, with summers being typically dry. Sunshine is abundant, particularly in the summer months. This climate, while appealing for its warmth, also presents challenges, as freshwater resources are limited and the islands produce only a fraction of their food needs.

The early environment of the Maltese islands, before significant human impact, would have differed in some respects from what we see today. While the precise extent of prehistoric forests is debated, evidence suggests a conifer forest was present, which was largely cleared by early farming communities. The natural vegetation is now primarily garigue, a low-growing Mediterranean scrub, and steppe. Reed beds are found near freshwater sources, and saltmarsh vegetation along the coast.

Prior to human arrival, the islands were home to a unique suite of endemic fauna, including dwarf elephants, dwarf hippos, and giant dormice. Bones of these fascinating creatures have been found in caves like Għar Dalam, offering a glimpse into Malta's ancient ecosystem. Intriguingly, recent research indicates that some of these animals, such as a species of tiny deer, coexisted with the earliest human inhabitants, who hunted them.

The geology and climate have always played a crucial role in shaping human activity on the islands. The easily quarried limestone provided building material for everything from prehistoric temples to modern structures. The scarcity of freshwater and limited arable land influenced agricultural practices and likely contributed to periods of environmental stress and even depopulation throughout history. The indented coastline offered natural harbors, providing shelter and facilitating seafaring, which was essential for both arrival and subsequent interaction with other Mediterranean cultures. Even the "cart tracks," mysterious grooves worn into the soft limestone, are a testament to how the very bedrock of the islands influenced early transport and activity.

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