

BUILT MORE THAN 5,500 YEARS AGO,
THE MEGALITHIC TEMPLE OF MNAJDRA
IS AMONG THE OLDEST FREE-STANDING
BUILDINGS IN THE WORLD.

Isle of the Ancient Mariner

MALTA, A MEDITERRANEAN SEAFARERS' HAVEN FOR 6,000 YEARS

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Hermès flew
until the distant island lay ahead,
then rising shoreward from the violet ocean
he stepped up to the cave. Divine Kalypso,
the mistress of the isle, was now at home.
A deep wood grew outside, with summer leaves
of alder and black poplar, pungent cypress.
Ornate birds here rested their stretched wings—
horned owls, falcons, cormorants—long-tongued
beachcombing birds, and followers of the sea.
Around the smoothwalled cave a crooked vine
held purple clusters under ply of green;
and four springs, bubbling up near one another
shallow and clear, took channels here and there...
But he saw nothing of the great Odysseus,
who sat apart, as a thousand times before,
and racked his own heart groaning, with eyes wet
scanning the bare horizon of the sea.

—HOMER, ODYSSEY V.54–89
ROBERT FITZGERALD, TRANS.

Homer called this island “Ogygia,” where the divine nymph Calypso held the “master mariner and commander” captive for seven long years, but the Maltese call it Gozo. The cave itself is said to be a grotto high in a cliff overlooking the beach at Ramla Bay, on the north side of the island, the second largest in the Maltese archipelago.

Jutting from the waves of the wine-dark sea, Malta and her siblings—Gozo, Comino, Cominotto, and Filfla—present to the eastbound sailor an aspect of stunning grandeur, a sheer wall of yellow limestone rising more than 120 meters from the water to its crown. On the far side of the island, this giant table slopes gently into the surf, greeting the water with sandy beaches and wide bays, listing where it was left by tectonic forces millions of years ago. What lies between is a rocky, rolling plateau, devoid of fresh water and arable only in small, dusty plots where human trials have sifted the stones from the thin, dry soil. Few trees interrupt this landscape, and through the centuries and millennia the Maltese have accustomed themselves to wresting a living from this inhospitable rock.

If the landscape seems hardly Homeric in its bounty, the island pays back this debt many times as a convenient and sometimes critical port of call. Standing astride the Mediterranean’s east-west shipping lanes 100 kilometers from Sicily and 320 from North Africa, midway between the eastern centers of Alexandria and Constantinople and the kingdoms of Western Europe, Malta has a rich history as a waystation for seafarers, castaways, marauders, and fleets. Although only 27 kilometers long, Malta has more than its share of fine harbors, with Valletta’s Grand Harbor, protected by its forts and bastions, among the greatest natural anchorages in the world.

For six centuries Malta was a Phoenician outpost, first as a waystation for ships traveling between the Near East and North Africa and later as a Carthaginian colony. Scattered across the island amid more recent chapels and farmhouses are ancient Punic mausoleums, long abandoned and emptied of their contents, but Phoenicia’s legacy remains in the modern Maltese language, tempered by additions of Arabic, Italian, and English. After the Phoenicians came the Romans, and, in A.D. 58 or 60, the apostle Paul, like Odysseus, was shipwrecked on Malta—called “Melita” in the Bible—along with a boatload of prisoners en route to Rome for trial: “And the barbarous people shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold.” (Acts 28:1)

Malta’s strategic value as a port of call ensured that it was hotly contested more recently as well. In 1530, the island was given by the Spanish emperor Charles V to the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, a crusading order that had been driven from its previous headquarters, Rhodes, seven years before by the Ottoman sultan Süleyman the Magnificent. But Süleyman was not finished with the knights, and in 1565, eyeing Malta as a staging ground for an invasion of Europe, the sultan dispatched a vast armada of 200 ships and 40,000 trained soldiers to seize the island. Forewarned of the attack, Grand Master Jean de la Vallette summoned the knights from their castles on the continent, and against impossible odds 700 of their number and 9,000 Maltese irregulars drove back the Ottoman forces after a momentous siege of four months, virtually ending the Ottoman threat to Western Europe. In 1798, the island played host to Napoleon, and, in 1943, to American and British armies launching their attack on Sicily—“along came the Yankees, in numbers never seen before,” bringing chocolate and nylons, “plenty of nylons,” in the words of writer Victor A. Vella.



Long before the Yankees, before Napoleon and the knights, before St. Paul, Phoenicians, Romans, and Odysseus—before Britain’s Stonehenge (ca. 2800–1800 B.C.) and Egypt’s Great Pyramid at Giza (ca. 2680 B.C.), Malta was home to a mysterious people, known to archaeologists only after the places where their remains have been found—names like Zebbug, Ggantija, and Tarxien. Because few of their villages have survived, little is known of the island’s Neolithic inhabitants, but it is probably safe to say that, like the latter-day Maltese, they tilled its thin soil and harvested fish from the surrounding waters. Certainly they were mariners: There are hints of communication with nearby Sicily, and the brightly painted fishing boats, or luzzus, that still sail from the harbor of Marsaxlokk resemble nothing so much as scaled-down versions of ancient galleys. .

If the villages of these people are largely a blank, their temples have survived in abundance, and it is from these great megalithic structures—the oldest free-standing stone structures in the world—that most of our knowledge derives. Among all of the temples on Malta and Gozo, two stand preeminent: Mnajdra and Ħaġar Qim (3600–2500 B.C.), situated a half kilometer apart on a sloping hillside overlooking the sea on the southern coast of Malta. Both temples have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and, from 1998 through 2002, Mnajdra appeared on the World Monuments Fund’s list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. Gazing out over the stones of Mnajdra to the silvery Mediterranean and the uninhabited islet of Filfla, one can imagine its ancient priests marking the progress of the seasons, making sacrifices to their deities, and praying for the sick, much as they did on Salisbury Plain or the Nile. The southernmost of Mnajdra’s three sanctuaries faces due east, and at sunrise on the equinoxes a shaft of light penetrates the inner sanctuary and illuminates the altar on the rear wall, making the site among the earliest solar observatories in the world. Statues of a “fat lady” found at the other Maltese temples suggest that their primary deity was a goddess of fertility, and anatomical votives would seem to indicate a role in healing.

Today Mnajdra and Ħaġar Qim are among Malta’s premier tourist attractions, attracting thousands of visitors every year. This popularity has its price. Like cultural monuments in high-traffic areas the world over, Mnajdra and Ħaġar Qim face threats from many directions—from vandals, the elements, and now garbage. As more people have come to the megaliths seeking cultural education, spiritual enlightenment, or just a pretty outing on a sunny day, their importance to the country’s national identity, image abroad, and economy has grown. The government has set aside about four square kilometers around the sites as a heritage park, banning development and angering local residents who have used the land freely for generations. Vandals attacked Mnajdra in 1996 and again in April 2001, when they cut through the surrounding fence, toppled more than 60 of the temples’ giant stones, and scratched what were described as “satanic” symbols on the rocks.

The ensuing investigation focused on bird hunters who for generations have wielded their weapons from rough stone blinds on the hillsides nearby. It soon emerged that less than a week before the

THE RENAISSANCE HILLTOP CITY OF MDINA, ABOVE, WAS MALTA’S CAPITAL UNTIL 1530 WHEN THE KNIGHTS OF ST. JOHN BUILT FORTIFICATIONS SUCH AS THOSE AT SENGLEA, BELOW, ABOUT THE ISLAND’S PRINCIPAL HARBOR.





vandalism occurred, the Malta Planning Authority had served eviction notices to about twenty hunters, ordering them to demolish illegal blinds they had built within the bounds of the park. Rumors also circulated about a possible connection to the operators of two limestone quarries some 250 meters northwest of Mnajdra, which had been shut down by the police in 1997 after they refused to comply with a government order to cease operation, but no connection was ever proved or disproved. Yet while the police interviewed a number of people, including an expert in cults brought in to examine the so-called satanic etchings, no one was ever arrested or prosecuted for the crime.

At the time, the government was roundly castigated for poor security at the site, which was embraced only by a cheap fence of plastic netting and lacked any 24-hour guard presence. In the year following the attack, a sturdy, metal fence was built around Mnajdra, along with several additional guard shelters there and at Ғаgаr Qim; floodlights were installed to illuminate the sites at night; and a round-the-clock guard was posted. With a \$20,000 grant from WMF and American Express, restorators were able to repair the extensive damage, so that today, to all but the trained eye, it looks exactly as it did before. But the bird hunters and their blinds remain, and walking between Ғаgаr Qim and Mnajdra early in the morning, it is not unusual to encounter a hunter or two smoking a cigarette, shotgun across his knee as he waits for the flapping of wings overhead.

If there was a positive side to the tragedy, it was that it served as a catalyst for a long-mooted reorganization of Malta's government cultural institutions and an updating of its Antiquities Act of 1925. In the new Cultural Heritage Act of 2002, administration of archaeological sites was consolidated in two organizations within the Ministry for Youth and the Arts: Heritage Malta, responsible for public education, facilities, and day-to-day administration of museums and archaeological sites; and the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, responsible for scientific investigation, land-use issues, and policy development. In November 2003, Minister for Youth and the Arts Jesmond Mugliett



THE LOWER TEMPLE AT MNAJDRA, BELOW, FACES THE EQUINOCTIAL SUNRISE, WHEN RAYS OF SUNLIGHT PENETRATE ITS INNER SANCTUARY, LEFT. A GRAFFITO, ABOVE, ATTESTS THAT MNAJDRA'S TEMPLES WERE ONCE ROOFED. AT RIGHT, AN INTERIOR DETAIL OF THE ANCIENT TEMPLE.



announced an international design competition to address one of the other great threats to Fġaġar Qim and Mnajdra, water damage. Originally roofed, the temples were never meant to stand exposed to the elements. During rainstorms, water washes the fill from between the limestone megaliths, causing them to collapse. It also penetrates the limestone, thereby weakening it; then as the rock dries in the parching sun, surface layers begin to flake away. "The future of the structures depends on their being shielded from the elements," says Eneix of the Old Temple Study Foundation, which is working to preserve the temples and educate the public on their importance.

The design competition will, according to the official brief, encompass planning for the entire heritage park, including a visitors' center and construction of a "temporary covering" over each temple site. The government has earmarked €200,000 in European Union funds to begin work and has set an aggressive timetable for the project, with submissions due and the jury scheduled to meet in April 2004, and construction to begin by the end of the year. Proposals will be evaluated by a jury of architects and conservation experts from Malta, Germany, Egypt, Jordan, and Italy.

But in an ironic twist of fate, while Heritage Malta works to preserve the two sites, the Ministry of Resources and Infrastructure is trying to convert the two nearby quarries, known as Tal-Maghlaq and Qasam il-Kbir, into landfills. Seeking to comply with a European Union directive to close another landfill at Maghtab in 2004, the government came up with a plan to open a new one at the adjacent site of Ghallis. But because Ghallis is not expected to be ready by the time Maghtab closes this coming June, resources minister Ninu Zammit commissioned a study to identify a temporary solution.

A committee comprising representatives from the Malta Resources Authority, the Malta



FġAĠAR QIM , LEFT, IS LOCATED JUST A FEW HUNDRED METERS EAST OF MNAJDRA. PARTS OF THE SITE SUCH AS ITS CENTRAL COURT, ABOVE, HAVE REQUIRED ARTIFICIAL SUPPORT, THE LIMESTONE BLOCKS WEAKENED OVER THE CENTURIES FROM EXPOSURE TO THE ELEMENTS. DETAILS OF THE TEMPLE, INCLUDE AN ANCIENT ALTAR, RIGHT, AND THE TEMPLE'S WEST ENTRANCE, BELOW, AND CENTER COURT, LOWER LEFT.





**MODERN FISHING BOATS
PATTERNED AFTER ANCIENT
GALLEYS ARE MOORED IN MALTA'S
HARBOR AT MARSAXLOKK.**

Environment and Planning Authority, and the landfill contractor WasteServ Malta evaluated sixteen possible quarries, including ten operational and six disused ones, and selected Tal-Maglaq and Qasam il-Kbir as the only suitable options based on their size and the proximity of other potential sites to public water supplies. The committee's analysis noted that Tal-Maglaq and Qasam il-Kbir are "in very close proximity to two world heritage sites," but did not address the basic geology of the area or the implications of burying up to two million cubic meters of garbage within 250 meters those two sites. The committee's report has been widely criticized as flawed, with various parties suggesting that Maghtab could continue to be used until Ghallis is ready, or that Ghallis could in fact be ready in time. Malta's Green Party, local governments and members of parliament, Greenpeace, and UNESCO have all expressed opposition to the plan, but no resolution has yet been reached.

Standing hushed in Mnajdra's inner sanctuary, beneath the cool blue sky before the equinoctial sunrise, it is easy to forget the bird hunters, quarries, and destructive elements, and feel the presence of the people who built these great temples and the priests who celebrated their mysterious rites within. As the sun rises over the hillside to the east—a sliver of bright orange light, growing inexorably into a great golden disc—shade is transformed into the light of day, and the shadows of the ancient Maltese vanish into the corners to be supplanted by school groups, archaeologists, and tourists. Vandals can reach any site and neglect can unseat the best-laid plans. But, with vigilance and help, these great stones will still stand—archaeological treasures, national symbols, and tourist attractions—in another thousand years. ■