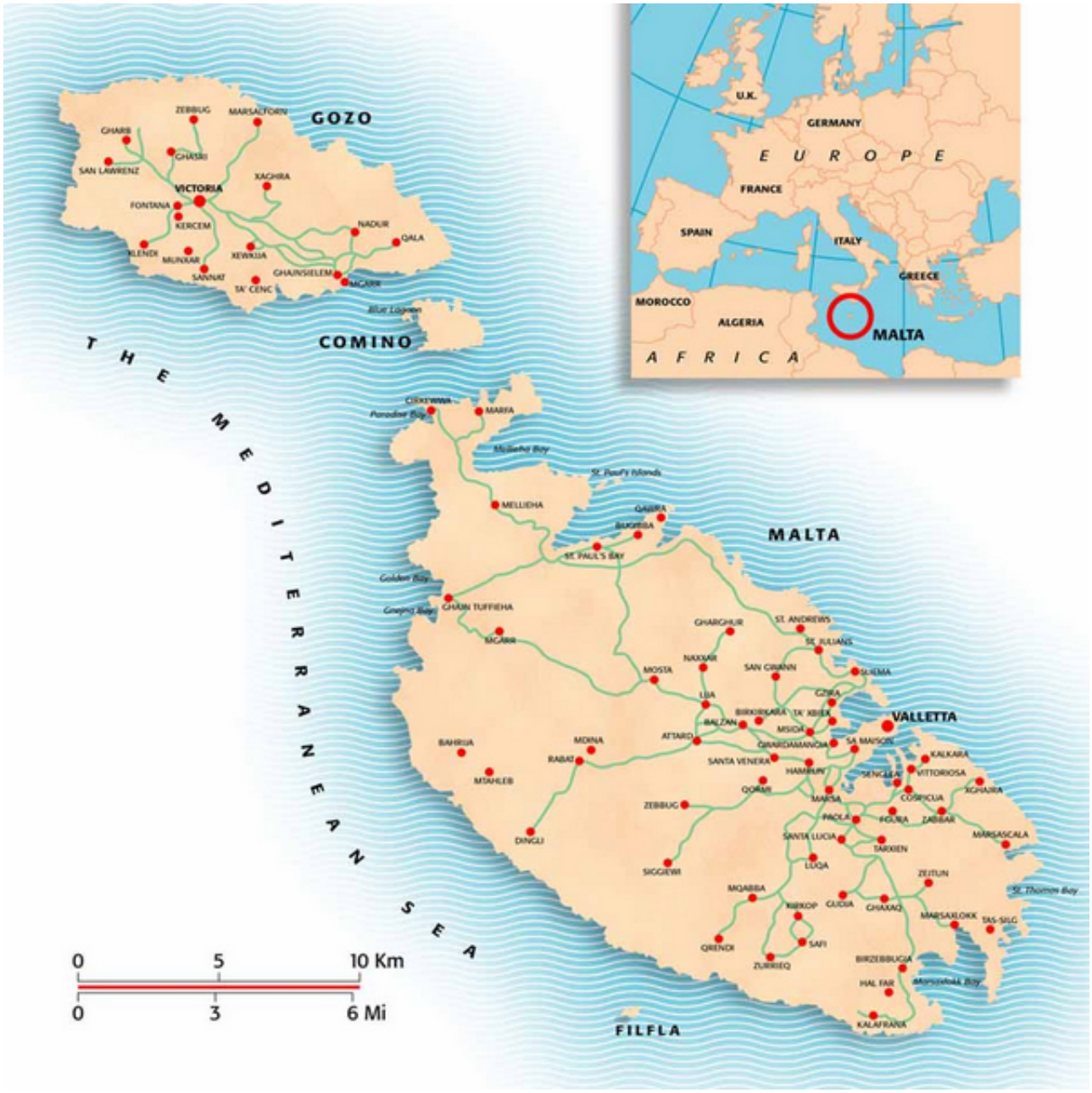
THE SIEGE OF MALTA

[This Monday's Archive was originally published in TTP on December 4, 2009. Malta is, for me, the world's most interesting island. This essay helps to explain why. All the photos are mine © Jack Wheeler save for the one above. And note – in the TTP side bar you now find The Magic Of Malta: join your fellow TTPers and come with me and Rebel to explore Malta early this November.]

TTP, December 4, 2009

Valletta, Malta. This small European island country in the Mediterranean south of Sicily and close to the north coast of Africa is where civilization emerged from the Stone Age. It is where Western Civilization was saved from being conquered by Islam.

The story is both ancient and is at the vanguard of the future. Come and meet the heroic Christian people of Malta.



It begins over 7,000 years ago, when a handful of Stone Age tribes in Sicily rafted 55 miles south to land on Gozo. They lived in caves, then huts, fished, hunted, farmed with primitive tools for they had no metal - and over a period of more than a thousand years taught themselves how to construct massive buildings of stone.

This is the Temple of Ggantija (*zhee-gan-tee-zha*). Built almost 6,000 years ago (around 3600 BC), it is the oldest free-standing structure in the world. It is older than the pyramids in Egypt by a thousand years, older than Stonehenge by 15 centuries.

The enormous stones weighing several tons were cut from the limestone bedrock with tools of stone and antler horn for they had no metal, and moved using small round-cut rocks as ball bearings for they had no wheels.

It wasn't long before they were building giant megalithic temples on Malta, such as at Hajjar Qim (*hah-jar seem*) where some of the blocks weigh 20 tons...

...and the extraordinary rock-cut necropolis known as the Hypogeum (*hi-po-gee-um*), the only prehistoric underground temple in the world.

Over a thousand years (3500-2500 BC), the temple and burial complex (eventually housing 7,000 skeletons) was carved out and down - dozens of chambers, with rock-cut replicas of above-ground temples including simulated corbelled roofs. (A corbelled roof uses stone slabs that progressively overlap each other until the room is roofed over.)

These folks figured out all by themselves how to build these extraordinary temples to their gods and goddesses close to six thousand years ago. Nobody taught them. They were the first. It is here at Ggantija and Hajjar Qim and the Hypogeum that man began his climb out of the cave to civilization.

Perhaps it from the Megalithic Maltese that the Egyptians learned the skills needed for the pyramids. After all, they disappeared from Malta soon after the pyramids along the Nile emerged around 2500 BC - and the pyramids were built with limestone blocks, just like the Maltese Megalithic Temples.

The ancient Greeks knew Gozo as Ogygia, the island where the nymph Calypso kept Odysseus entranced for seven years in her cave, according to Homer's *Odyssey*. The cave is a small hole in the cliffs above Ramla Bay. They knew Malta as Melite, sweet as honey, from *meli*, honey. Maltese bees still make fabulous honey.

But the Greeks stuck to Sicily (*Magna Graecia*, Greater Greece), while the Phoenicians colonized Malta from their new capital, Carthage, in present-day Tunisia. That lasted until the Romans wiped Carthage out in 146 BC. So Malta became Roman.

The story of how Malta became Christian is told in Acts 27-28. In 60 AD, St. Paul was arrested in Judea and put on a ship for trial in Rome. A storm wrecked the ship on Malta at a place forever known as St. Paul's Bay. The Maltese treated him and the others with kindness, and Paul in turn healed the ailing father of the Roman governor, Publius.

Publius converted, and the Maltese became one of the first peoples to accept Christianity. For 400 years they remained happily Christian until Rome dissolved, their island was invaded by Vandals, then Goths, then the worst of all, Arabs with their religion of the sword in 870.

The Maltese never accepted Islam, practicing their Christian faith in secret for 200 years until a Norman knight rescued them. Roger I of Sicily (1031-1101) and his Normans had liberated Sicily from Moslem rule (in one battle at Cerami in 1063, he and a few hundred Normans killed several thousand Moslem "Saracens"), and followed suit with Malta in 1091.

The Arabs in Malta were free to practice Islam - and for 100 years kept demanding more privileges and picking fights with the Maltese. Finally the Maltese decided enough was enough, and in 1224 kicked every last Moslem off their Christian island.

At the eastern end of the Mediterranean, however, Christian disaster was looming. Although Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1194-1250) had won the Sixth Crusade -and peacefully in 1229 (the story, and that of the entire Crusades, is in The Real Crusaders, August 2005) - the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem was about to be destroyed by a Moslem horde called Mamelukes.

The final collapse came with the destruction of Acre in 1291, with 60,000 Christians slaughtered or enslaved.

The survivors of the principal order of knights defending Acre, the Knights Hospitaller (originally founded to care for sick pilgrims in the Holy Land), reestablished themselves on the island of Rhodes, becoming the Knights of Rhodes. They formed a powerful navy that swept the eastern Med free of Moslem pirates for 120 years.

They fended off an Ottoman Moslem invasion by Mehmed II in 1480, who had taken Constantinople and conquered the Byzantine Empire in 1453. But when his grandson, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1494-1566) invaded with an overwhelming force in 1522, the Knights of Rhodes - after withstanding the Moslem siege for six months - had to retreat to Sicily.

The King of Spain, Carlos I, had recently (1520) become Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and as such was aware of Suleiman's intention to conquer Europe for Islam. Charles' brother Ferdinand was Archduke of Austria. The brothers joined forces to defeat Suleiman's first attempt to take Europe at the Siege of Vienna in 1529 (not the Battle of Vienna, that was in 1683).

But Charles knew the Moslem sultan would try again, so in 1530 he made a deal with the homeless Knights of Rhodes camped out in Sicily. For payment of one Maltese falcon a year, he would give them governorship of one of his territories, Malta.

(Yes, the plot device of the Bogart classic, The Maltese Falcon, is based on this, which changes the real live falcon into a fabulously valuable statue of a falcon, and confuses the Knights of Rhodes with the Knights Templar which was disbanded by Pope Clement V in 1312).

Thus the Knights of Rhodes became the Knights of Malta. The Maltese welcomed them as their Christian defenders from the Ottoman horde and their Moslem allies, the Barbary pirates along Africa's north coast. Battles were continuous between the ships of the knights and pirates for 20 years. In 1551, a Moslem force of 10,000 captured Gozo and the island's entire population. 5,000 Christians, men, women, and children, were sold as slaves in Moslem slave bazaars across the Middle East.

Knowing a bigger invasion was to come, the Knights built huge fortresses on Malta. The attack came in 1565. Suleiman had bided his time for revenge over Vienna. His massive force would sweep over Malta, then Sicily, then Rome and all of Italy. From the Italian "soft underbelly of Europe" he would march on to destroy all of Christendom.

Only these infidel Knights now in Malta, whom he should have slaughtered to a man when he had the chance in Rhodes, stood in his way. The Knights' Grand Master, Jean de Vallette (1494-1568), prepared as best he could. He was 70 years old.

Suleiman had assembled the greatest armada since ancient times, close to 200 ships filled with 40,000 of his fiercest warriors, all crazed to die for Allah. Against them stood 500 Knights, about 2,000 Spanish and Italian mercenaries, and some 3,000 poorly armed and trained Maltese volunteers.

100 Knights defended Ft. St. Elmo, killing 4,000 invaders, until a deluge of the enemy slaughtered them all. The Ottoman general Mustafa Pasha had the heads cut off the Knights' bodies, the headless corpses nailed to crosses and floated across the bay to the Knights' remaining fortress, Ft. St. Angelo.

The tactic was meant to terrify the Knights. Vallette's response was to order the beheading of all

captured Ottoman soldiers, over a thousand, their heads stuffed into cannons, and the heads fired like cannon balls into the Ottoman encampments. It was the Moslems' turn to be terrorized.

The final siege of Ft. St. Angelo is one of the most epic in the history of warfare. Over 130,000 cannonballs were fired at the fort. The fighting was impossibly desperate. The whole population of Malta was inside the fort and they fought like banshees. At a critical breach of the fort's defenses, 70 year-old Vallette led the charge into the enemy, cutting them down with his sword until they retreated.

Vallette had also poisoned all the wells outside of the fort. The Moslem invaders began dying en masse of dysentery. Finally, after four months of non-stop bombardment and fighting with 25,000 dead, the Moslems gave up and fled back to Constantinople. The Knights of Malta had saved Christendom and all Europe hailed them as the greatest heroes since antiquity. Suleiman died in frustration and fury the following year.

The heroic Christian victory of the Siege of Malta in 1565 enabled Pope Pius V to organize a Holy League of Christian nations against the Moslem Turks, and assemble an armada to fight that of Suleiman's successor, Selim II. On October 7, 1571, 213 ships led by Charles V's son Don Juan of Austria met Selim's 282 off the port city of Lepanto in Greece's Gulf of Corinth.

210 Ottoman ships were destroyed or captured, over 8,000 Ottomans killed, 10,000 taken prisoner, 12,000 Christian slaves rowing the Ottoman galleys freed (vs. 30 Christian ships lost, 3,000 killed). The Battle of Lepanto is considered by historians to be the most important naval battle anywhere in the world since the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, when Octavian (later Augustus Caesar) defeated Antony and Cleopatra.

And it was made possible by the almost superhuman heroism of the Knights of Malta and the Maltese people six years before. 200 years later, Voltaire considered the siege to be the most famous event in European history: *"Rien est plus connu que la siege de Malte"* - "Nothing is so well known as the Siege of Malta."

Here is Ft. St. Angelo in Valletta's Grand Harbor today:

Malta was to become a British colony after England rescued it from Napoleon, and gained independence in 1964. To this day, the Siege of Malta is the defining moment in Maltese history. September 8th, the end of the siege, is Malta's national holiday.

The capital of Malta is named after the Grand Master during the siege, Valletta. Paintings of Christian Knights cutting down Moslem soldiers with bloodied swords are sold in curio shops. Tourists are encouraged to see shows depicting events of the siege, like dead Moslems hanging over the parapets:

and Vallette leading the battle.

From the beginning of human time, the people of Malta have been European. From the beginning of Christianity, the Maltese have been Christian. The Maltese are, right now, the most devoutly Christian people in Europe. Their churches are magnificent, like this of St. Paul's in Valletta:

The Christian people of Malta take great pride in how their ancestors stood up to Moslem terrorism in 1565. They cut their enemies' heads off and fired the heads as cannonballs by the thousands into the enemy camp. They are not ashamed, they are not embarrassed, they are enormously proud that their forefathers did what it took to protect their Christian nation from Moslem butchery and enslavement.

The Christian people of Malta could teach us a lot about what it takes to defend our country and our culture. They could use our help and support as well. If you are planning a visit to Europe, I couldn't encourage you more to include Malta in your itinerary.

The Maltese are hugely welcoming and friendly - and everyone speaks English as well as Maltese. They make great beer - Cisk is the best - and even better wine. The Marsovin Grand Maitre, with each vintage named after a Grand Master of the Knights of Malta, is fabulous.

So are the restaurants, like Peppino's, a favorite of Brad Pitt and Russell Crowe (both Troy and Gladiator were filmed in Malta, as well as many other films; the actor William Hurt is here this week filming Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*). So are the hotels, like mine, Hotel Juliani. Here's the view from my room:

There are great beaches (this is Ramla Bay, taken from Calypso's Cave) ...

Fantastic scenery (the arch is called The Azure Window)...

And the place is just plain cool. The Maltese are a heroic people. They should inspire us to fight for America. If you come here, you'll be inspired. You'll also have a wonderful time.