



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Foreign Places:
The Mediterranean: Malta**

The Mediterranean

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The Mediterranean Report Six: Malta

Malta was inhabited as early as 5,200 BC by settlers from nearby Sicily. Because of its strategic importance and crossroads location, it experienced centuries of warfare between, and occupations by several Neolithic and Bronze Age tribes, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantians, Arabs, Byzantians again, Normans, Arabs again, Normans again, Swabians (Germans), Angevins (French, but enemies of the Normans), Geonese/Pisans/Venetians, Angevins again, Aragonians (Spanish), pirates, Sicilians, Spanish (Charles V owned Sicily, which owned Malta.), Knights of St. John of Malta---formerly of Rhodes, French again (under one of Napoleon's Armies of Egypt), and British. Presently, and breaking tradition, the Malta citizens are in charge of themselves.

June 8, 2006, at sea, destination Malta



We were on the Med today, as the ship made its way to Malta. During this at-sea day, the passengers had time to take advantage of a *Minerva II*'s amenities, such as the library, the pool, the spa and gym, and for the rock hounds, lectures on the Islands of Antiquity. I spent most of the day on our cabin balcony, lazing away in the peaceful Mediterranean waters, shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The *Minerva II* in calm waters.

We met people who were taking their first cruise. One couple mentioned they were a bit woozy from the "rocking of the ship." Pity them if in the future, they are on an ocean voyage, or worse, if their ship sails into rough waters. I suspect they will be inoperable. During one of my less than pleasant times in the U.S. Navy, my ship, a slow moving hulk, could not outrun a nasty storm in the East China Sea. We attempted to make our way to the safe harbor of Kagoshima, Japan, but fierce winds, with waves breaking over the bow of the ship, kept us away from the port.

Acute sea sickness is not fatal, but if you are suffering from it, you wish it were. For the better part of the first day of the storm, I was praying the grim reaper would put me out of my misery. Then, for some unknown reason, the ship's motions ceased bothering me. I was no longer sea sick, a notable exception to the junior officers (JOs) aboard. My newly found hardiness resulted in my standing several days of watches on the bridge, while the remaining JOs staggered around the decks or wallowed in their beds.

Absolute Zero, Wine, and XO

Earlier, I mentioned this cruise attracted a different sort of crowd. After all, how many party animals are interested in spending two weeks looking at archeological sites? Early in the voyage, we met an interesting couple from Oregon. She was an attorney. He was a physicist. I write "was" to be consistent with the verb tenses in these reports. I don't mean the ship had two burials at sea. Just the opposite. We found them lively company and looked forward to conversations about lawyering, piles of rocks, and absolute zero.

Absolute zero. From a high school science class, I recall that absolute zero described a temperature somewhere below zero. Not being a studious sort, I paid little attention to the concept. Anything frozen was close enough to absolute zero for me.

Our new friend was a renowned expert on absolute zero. His mate informed us PBS and he were in the process of making a film about the subject. Cool.

I was tempted to call my friend Absolute Zero, but he was too nice a guy for such a derisive moniker. Let's call him Russ, because that was his name. We had this conversation, which I paraphrase:

Reporter, "I've not done much study of physics, but I read layman's stuff on the subject. ...What do you think of the book, *The Elegant Universe*?"

Russ, "Ah, string theory. Greene (the author) and his peers are brilliant. But their theories can't be proved or disproved."

I was not tied-up with string theory, but I was curious. I was under the impression absolute zero could not be proved or disproved either.

Russ disagreed and went on to explain how one could prove absolute zero with experiments. It was stimulating conversation, if you are into absolute zero. (No party animals here!) Over a glass of wine, I had an absolute zero guru speaking to me about his favorite subject.

For most of my life, I had not given much thought to absolute zero. But I was aboard a ship of smart people, and smart people tend to talk on a subject about which they are smart. Later, as a smart computer network person, I could talk about why the Internet is unintelligible. For now, while Russ explained the Kelvin scale, cryogenics, and liquid Helium baths, I switched from wine to XO.

Night Time Entertainments (I)

Minerva II's guests had several choices of restaurants for the evening meal, as well as selections for after-dinner entertainments. A jazz quartet was available. A pianist in another lounge plunked out Peter Duchin songs. A string quartet played classical music. For this night at sea, the most popular after-dinner option was at the main theater where the ship's Indonesian crew performed the *Ramayana*.

Until a few years ago, I thought I was familiar with *Ramayana*, but I discovered I had confused the word with a menu item in an Indian restaurant.

Waiter, "Yes sir, what would you like?"

Reporter to be, "I'll take the *Ramayana*, and hold the anchovies."

Foreign words confuse me. I wish Indian restaurants would be more forthcoming and advertise their Indian food in English. Anyway, the *Ramayana* is a performance of a famous Hindu story, set to words, music, and dance.

A learned (what else) guest sitting next to me offered his view of *Ramayana*, "Can't see how they are going to carry this off. The *Ramayana* performance is at least three hours long, and this show is less than half that."¹

I offered, "Well, they'll just leave out something. You know, like a Bach concert, where the orchestra omits part of the music because people are leaving to make it to work on time."

The Smart Person failed to smile or acknowledge he was talking to someone besides himself, "I've written plays. I love the *Ramayana*. It's one of my specialties," as he proceeded to inform me the *Ramayana* contained, "...24,000 couplets. So how do they intend to approximate the original, with only an hour and a half?"

I wish I could have mustered a Clint Eastwood response, "No problem, just omit one line of each couplet, and there you go, you've cut down the play by half."

The show started, and we watched an entertaining program featuring a handsome king, a beautiful princess, an evil demon, and a white monkey. The cast received a standing ovation.

¹ I did not pull out my notepad for this conversation, which was recreated after I returned to my cabin.

June 9, 2006

The evening before we arrived at Malta, the ship's skipper informed all aboard that this port entrance was one of the most striking man-made harbors in the world...sorry person-made.

The decks were crowded as we slowly made our way into what was a spectacular port, the city of Valletta. It resembled a scene from a fantasy movie. I snapped the photos in Figures 2 and 3 from the starboard and port sides of the ship respectively.

What was eye catching about the Malta harbor was the color of the buildings. All structures were the same color, as if they had been painted with the same brush, as seen in Figures 2 and 3. No gray rocks, as we had seen at other stops. Instead, the buildings were honey-colored stones. They gave off a Disneyesque hue, befitting this legendary port. We learned this tint was favored for all buildings because the island was a big chunk of honey-colored limestone.



Figure 2. Valletta from the starboard side.



Figure 3. Valletta from the port side.

The Knights Again

Valletta is the capital of Malta. It was created by the Knights of Malta, with the first stone of the city laid in 1566. Most of the buildings in Figures 2 and 3 were originally used as forts to guard against invaders.

The Knights of Malta was the same order we visited during our stay at Rhodes. There, they were called the Knights of Rhodes. In 1453, Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Empire, but the Knights continued to hold Rhodes until 1522, when an Ottoman siege finally forced them to leave the island.

With nowhere to go, but with a fine Christian reputation, in 1530 the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V gave the Knights the island of Malta to serve as their next military base. As best we know, the citizens of Malta at that time were not consulted about this transaction.

The Knights of Rhodes could no longer be called by this name, because they were no longer "of Rhodes." So, they became known as the Knights of Malta. It was at Valletta where they built the harbor fortress shown in Figures 2 and 3. This garrison helped prevent Muslim expansion into Europe. It was held by the Knights until 1798, when French emperor Napoleon I took possession of the island.

The Turks were relentless in their pursuit of Malta. In 1565, the Muslim Süleyman I attacked the island but the Christian Knights withstood a summer-long siege and, with a relief force from Sicily, (owned by like-minded Christians from mainland Europe) drove off the Turks. It was after this battle that Valetta was built, and it became one of the most formidable strongholds in the Mediterranean. Let's learn more about this order:²

The knights were absolutist rulers and governed the islands with little regard for the inhabitants, who were denied full membership in the order. The order owned property in many parts of Europe, and each year a percentage of the income from this wealth was sent to Malta, where it was used to support the elegant living of the knights and to build fortifications, equip the navy, and hire soldiers.

Valletta

Valletta is a stunning city. Palaces, castles, cathedrals, and museums are in abundance. If you happened to pass by Malta, stop in at the Auberge de Castille, formerly the place of residence for Spanish and Portuguese occupants, and now the Malta prime minister's office. Take a walk through Valletta's beautiful streets. Take in the main street, which is full of shops and restaurants, as seen in Figure 4.



Figure 4. The main street in Valletta.

The island of Malta appears to be affluent. I walked around a lot, and came across no urban ghettos. Hundreds of shops, many high-end, offer just about everything available at a very large fancy American shopping center.

We were not on this cruise to shop. I, for one, was on the cruise to look at piles of rocks and stones. To that end, I visited a prehistoric Malta temple.

² "Knights of Malta," *Microsoft Encarta* 2006, Microsoft Corporation, 1993-2005. Also, John Samut Tagliaferro, *Malta, its Archaeology and History* (Miller House, Miller Distributors: Tarxien Road, Airport Way, Luqa Malta, nd).

Hagar Qim and Pre Hagar Qim

On our way to this place, our guide informed the tour group that Malta was the most densely populated nation in the European Union (400,000 living in an area of only 122 sq mi). She added that its population, thanks to the Knights of Malta, was 98% Roman Catholic. Its position in the Mediterranean made it a convenient stepping stone between Europe and Africa for merchants as well as armies. The large, protected natural harbor at Valletta insured it would be the object of desire for the various princes, kings, sultans, and popes who sought to station their troops and build their churches in this part of the Mediterranean.

The site of Hagar Qim is said to be one of the oldest in the world. Figure 5 is a photo of a model of this temple, which I snapped in a museum. The roofs are not shown, nor do they exist at the site (shown shortly). It is believed roofs existed with a corbelling technique in which stones were placed on top of one another in an inward fashion, with perhaps mud, wood, or animal skins capping the top.

Our guide stated Hagar Qim is the oldest standing building on earth. This temple was built around 3,000 - 2,500 BC, but archeologists claim temples were being built on Malta as early as 4,100 BC. Prior to this date, the earliest undisputed evidence of human's presence dates back to 5,200 BC. These early people are thought to have come from Sicily and originally, they lived in caves and rock shelters.

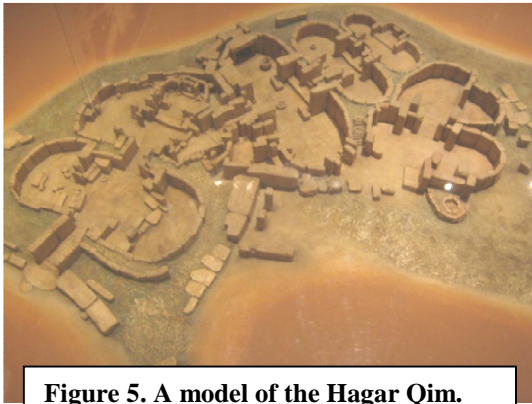


Figure 5. A model of the Hagar Qim.

During this time, called Neolithic Malta, it is believed the inhabitants worshipped the life cycle and the female. Fragments of female figurines have been found in what the scientists believe had been a shrine. There is no disagreement that for centuries the female and associated fertility cults were an integral part of their religion. It is believed the many recovered artifacts of fat women were created to worship fertility. Granting equal time for the other sex, "a number of phallic statues has also been uncovered, showing (the) recognition of this organ's reproductive powers."³

³ Ibid., Tagliaferro, 20.

Figure 6 shows the front of this temple. Archeologists believe the Maltese temples were three times higher than the ruin shown here. I have drawn a red arrow to identify the temple entrance and to help us understand its size. This entrance is about 7 1/2 feet high, so the original temple must have been an impressive structure, visible from far away.

Notice the size of some of the stones. They weigh several tons. Forklifts had yet to be invented, so the movement and placement of these stones was a prodigious task. Many round stones have been recovered at these sites. It is believed they were placed under the stones to help in moving them around. The experts also think a large stone was pulled into place by building a dirt ramp to the desired location and then hauling the stone up the ramp. How the Maltese haulers managed to prevent the rounded rocks from sinking into the dirt ramp is not explained.

The exact functions of the rooms in the temple are a matter of conjecture. But most agree they served as crypts and places of worship. The experts also think the population of Malta during this temple building era was around 11,000. At least twenty-three temples are known to have existed, and these people were probably divided up into groups of about 2,000 people. Whatever the division may have been, it takes little imagination to realize a lot of these folks' time was spent hauling and placing stones. One can only conclude they were really into life cycles, females, and phalluses to have expended so much of their time and energy on these temples.



Figure 6. Front of Hagar Qim.

We entered the temple, and once again I wished I could have been transported back in time. I could not help but marvel that I was walking through a building older than the pyramids. I wondered what the day-to-day life was like for the people who lived here? How they conducted their rituals? Who hauled the stones? Where the fertility rites exciting?

We could touch anything that caught our eye. I ran my hand over a stone altar, knowing someone else had likely done the same thing, over 5,000 years ago. My spell was broken when our guide mentioned that UNESCO will soon place a high fence around this temple, and tourists might not be allowed to go inside.

As we walked around and though the temple, the guide explained certain stone shapes led archeologists to believe animals were slaughtered (outside the temple) as part of a ritual. It appears the meat was placed in the temple as an offering to...no one is sure, perhaps as an offering to a life cycle god, a "mother goddess of fertility,"⁴ or to a phallus. I have my own theory. It involves an oracle.

The guide and Tagliaferro (see footnote 4) mentioned the probable existence of an oracle at these temples:

Whilst the priests conducted their magico-religious ritual within the temple's apses, the people and their animals gathered in the outside forecourt. Other holes are thought to have served the oracle, where an often ambiguous or obscure response was provided (an answer) to a question, or perhaps a dream might be interpreted.

How on earth archeologists make these kinds of inferences is beyond me, and as I said, I look forward to learning their secret. Anyway, Figure 7 shows what the experts think is an oracle hole, viewed from outside the temple.

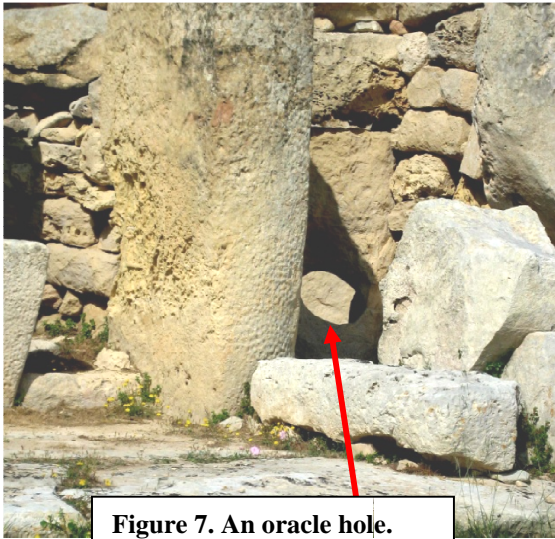


Figure 7. An oracle hole.

I think it possible that an oracle inside the temple made use of his/her exalted position as follows:

Throughout history, there are records of our ancient ancestors relying on another person to help explain the god that was in favor at that time. For example, in the fourth millennium BC, each town in what is now Iraq constructed a cult center in the form of a shrine or temple.⁵

Within the temple, a god was set up as the town's "owner." Trouble was, the very people who set up the god did not know what displeased or pleased the god.

This problem was solved. Like today, some people in these ancient Iraqi towns claimed they had the gift of knowing the dispositions of the god, what was right or wrong, what a person should or should not do. These people eventually became a specialist profession (known today as a priest, pastor, etc.) and by acting in the god's name, assumed the right to demand gifts on behalf of the god (known today as tithes).

It's a logical comparison. Iraq is not that far away from Malta, and we are speaking of about the same time in history.

⁴ Ibid., Tagliaferro, 20.

⁵ William R. Polk, *Understanding Iraq* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 20.

As to my theory: A person outside the temple, speaking through the oracle hole, "Hey, oracle, what say the fertility goddess today?"

Oracle, "She say she is hungry. She say to cut a side of beef from the bull you just killed and pass it through the oracle hole. I'll make sure she gets it."

A few centuries later, after money was invented, coins took the place of meat. The oracle stayed around but took on different names. ...Anyway, just a theory.

In approximately 2,500 BC, this civilization came to an end. No one knows why. Perhaps because the new inhabitants of Malta were users of metal, and the vanquished people's wooden weapons were no match for steel blades. They stayed around until the Phoenicians sailed into town.

Then, around 253 BC, Rome decided to challenge the status quo of Malta and other parts of this area of the Mediterranean. The Punic Wars followed, and Malta was plundered and ransacked by the Roman army of Attilius Regulus.⁶ Still later, the Roman Empire disintegrated and Malta was taken over by the Byzantines. Next...never mind. No sense in being repetitive about history repeating itself.

I will close with a promise to myself to return to this island to explore its rich history in more detail.

⁶ Ibid., Tagliaferro, 41.