

How An Advanced Ancient Civilization Mysteriously Vanished

Long before the Parthenon of ancient Athens, before the First Temple of Israel at Jerusalem, before even the earliest pyramids for Egypt's god-kings, a mysterious island civilization built some of history's earliest wonders.



The Infographics Show - <https://youtu.be/RMWcOZWAGiM>

Malta is one of the world's smallest countries, so then how did it end up with so many of the world's oldest monuments? Made up of two main islands, and three smaller ones, the tiny country of Malta could fit inside the city of Philadelphia. But, despite its size, it holds a wealth of history. About 7,000 years ago, settlers from Sicily arrived on Malta. A unique civilization grew up, and by 3600 BC, people on Malta began erecting monumental temples, some of the oldest stone buildings in the world.

For 1500 years, this culture thrived in isolation, apparently free from external threats. Then, around 2000 BC, it faded away. Eventually, Malta became subsumed by the cultures of its Mediterranean neighbors.

The Temple People, as they're known today, only began to come to light in the nineteenth century, and archaeologists are still piecing their story together. By about 4000 BC, people on the islands began burying their dead in the cave complex known as the Xagħra (SHAH-rah) Circle on the northern island of Gozo. The site must have been especially significant, because the practice continued for centuries. But the limestone was prone to caving in, so eventually the caretakers added support columns.

Over time, the site gained more and more architectural features, with a massive stone entrance, new compartments added for later burials, and altars for sacrifices. The remains of an estimated 800 individuals have been discovered at Xagħra. Priests or other participants disarticulated the body parts, sorting skulls and other bones into separate compartments.

But Xagħra was far from alone among the sacred sites of ancient Malta. All told, there are about 20 major temple complexes from a civilization that only occupied 122 square miles.

Located next to Xagħra are the Ġgantija (j-gan-TEE-yah) Temples. Appropriately enough, the Maltese word Ġgantija refers to giants, who, according to folklore, built the colossal structures. You can understand the reasoning: the biggest stone in this complex is estimated to weigh 50 tons. In reality, a significant workforce would have to haul the blocks into place. And a clue to how they did it lies at another temple site called Tarxien (tar-SHEEN), on the largest island, also called Malta. Tarxien, which includes four temple buildings, dates to about 3100 BC, and includes the richest decoration of the sites. Relief carvings of animals and spiral patterns adorn the spaces. The buildings follow the same general shape as Ġgantija and the other temples of this early period. Before each building is an oval courtyard, perhaps where the public would gather during ritual events. The imposing door frames are called trilithons: two tall standing stones hold a horizontal lintel. Doors would have an animal hide cover, and on the inside a central chamber leads to several circular rooms called apses—usually three—in a cloverleaf pattern. Each apse would have been topped by corbels—layers of decreasing size—to create partial domes.

Animal remains indicate that sacrificial slaughter took place in the temples. Many of the apses contain an altar. Holes in the floor would catch the blood. Clay and carved figures lay in the temples. The most characteristic statues of the early phases are rounded female figures with exaggerated features, usually interpreted as fertility symbols. But other shapes occur as well. At Xagħra, a cache of several stone idols included some that were simple geometric forms and others with details like clothing and hair.

Taken from: *The Infographics Show* - <https://youtu.be/RMWcOZWAGiM>

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Outside Tarxien, lie several stone rollers—essentially long wheels—as if waiting for curious archaeologists trying to figure out the ancient Maltese construction methods. But the history of transportation on Malta also held an odd puzzle. Parallel grooves in the limestone criss-cross the island, almost resembling a primitive railroad. One recent experiment seems to show that they were formed by the repeated journeys of wagons. Thin soil, moisture and pressure wore away the rock, eventually making a path unusable and forcing people to take another route.

The whole island was under pressure. Soon after people arrived, most of the trees were cleared for farmland. The thin soil soon began eroding, which would remain a challenge for Malta up to the present day.

At one especially remarkable site, chipping away at Malta's limestone bedrock enabled an architectural marvel, the underground tomb complex, or Hypogeum (high-puh-JEE-uhm) of Hal Saflieni (hah sah-FEE-nee). The remains of more than 6,000 people were interred here, arranged into piles totalling 200,000 bones. The entire structure was carved in place out of the limestone, with elements like columns imitating the structural elements in the above-ground temples. The uppermost layer began with the sculpting of existing caves. Over time, the Temple People carved additional chambers in two descending layers. The second level contains spaces for rituals, including a room known as the "Holy of Holies," which shows the same kind of corbelled dome ceiling as the temples.

Researchers have detected that the space emits a low resonant sound, barely audible. According to their theory, the acoustics of sacred places such as this added to the spiritual experience, as the ritual-goers' bodies picked up the vibrations. The shaking itself may be the result of tectonic activity: Malta lies right on the boundary between the European and African plates of the Earth's crust. In any case, the Hypogeum creates echoes of extraordinary length.

But why so many elaborate temples in such a small area?

According to the archaeologists who excavated the Xagħra Circle, there may have been a social competition going on, with each community showing a kind of civic pride in their lavish construction. Enormous energy went into the digging of a necropolis or the sliding of multi-ton slabs. All the while, the agricultural productivity may not have been keeping up.

Another enigma: the Temple People seem to have gotten most of their food from the land, and to have consumed very little seafood. Toward the end of the era of the Temple People, a prized imported red pigment from Sicily seems to have become less available, perhaps indicating an economic slump. The social collapse in the archaeological record shows up at 2500 BC, when all monumental construction stops.

A transition begins to a completely different culture, marked by the cremation of the dead. Ecological decline may have played a role. There's no evidence of an invasion, or an epidemic. What remains shows the complete cycle of a civilization that flourished, and then returned, like its own dead, to the Earth.

What do you think it would take for a whole civilization to collapse?