

Mazara del Vallo

275.1 square kilometres

52,000 inhabitants

Province of Trapani – South Western Sicily

Mazara is located on the coast of Sicily nearest to Africa, just 10 kilometers separate it from Tunisia. Walking through its streets you will hear the voice of the Imam, who calls Muslims to pray.

The town preserves its Arab-Norman roots, but its history goes much further back, as far as the Upper Paleolithic Age.

The first evidence of human presence in the area is the site of **Roccazzo**, in the Roccazzo territory, where archaeologists have brought to light artefacts dating back to the 12th century BC, from the Bronze Age, as well as the most ancient necropolis known in Sicily and one of the oldest in Italy.

Other evidence regards the Phoenicians, a seafaring people, from Tyre, where present day Lebanon is located, who between the 6th and 5th centuries BC, transformed Mazara into an important trading post. It was they who named the city Mazara, signifying "rock."

Among the visible evidence of that period is a stone slab containing inscriptions which was discovered in the channel of the Mazaro River. It can be viewed at the **Museo del Satiro** (Museum of the Satyr). The famous statue of the Dancing Satyr, a precious testimony from the Hellenistic Age, was discovered by a local fishing boat commanded by Captain Francesco Adragna, when the bronze, exceeding 2 metres in length, was recovered in March of 1998 from the waters of the Sicilian Straits at a depth of 480 metres.

Page 1

During the Greek period Mazara became a settlement marking the boundaries between the Greeks of Selinunte and the Phoenicians, who settled mainly in Mozia, a small island close to Marsala.

In 406 AD, leadership of Mazara was taken over by Segesta, ally of Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, and the Carthaginian leader Hannibal, who conquered and defeated Selinunte, marking the end of the thriving Greek dominion, of which **Selinunte's archaeological park** is splendid testimony.

Roman rule began at the end of the Second Punic War. Traces of a Roman mosaic floor with a golden stag among its floral decorations, were discovered in 1933 beneath the terrace of San Nicolò Regale Church.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the territory was seized by the Vandals, followed by the Goths and Byzantines. But it was the year 837 AD that was to mark one of the most important milestones in the history of the town, the Arab domination.

The Saracens arrived in Sicily and came ashore at Cape Granitola, which marks the limits of Mazara's rocky coast by its tower and lighthouse. The Arabs divided Sicily in three districts: Val di Mazara (hence the current name of the city), Valdemone and Val di Noto. Thanks to the Arabs, Mazara experienced one of the most flourishing periods of its history. Muslims cultivated lemons and oranges that would become a symbol of this land, but grapes were forbidden because their religion did not allow the consumption of wine.

Page 2

Port activity with Africa and Spain resumed floridly.

The Arabs developed **the Kasbah**, the city's historical centre, with the installation of an urban network of streets typical of the medina.

The pope, however, concerned about the Muslim garrison, called for the intervention of the Catholic Ruggero D'Altavilla (Roger de Hauteville). In 1072, the Norman count defeated the Saracens and built his castle fortress, which overlooked the coast, testimony to the **Arco Normanno** (Norman Arch) in Mokarta Square. Mokarta was the name of the Saracen leader who in 1075, at the head of his soldiers, vainly tried to recapture the city.

The **Cathedral Basilica** of the Holy Savior was constructed by orders of Count Roger, praising God for his victory over the heroic Mokarta to whom the façade's bas-relief is dedicated.

During the same period several churches were constructed in Mazara, in order to restore the belief in the Christian faith. Among those erected were the Church of San Nicolò Regale, the Monastery of St. Michele (St. Michael) and the churches of Santa Veneranda, San Vito (St. Vitus by the Sea), La Madonna del Alto and the church of San Martino. The principle fortification was the castle of which today remains only a doorway (Arco Normanno) but at one time its walls had extended the entire surface of the present day '**Villa a Mare**' (public park).

Page 3

By 1513, the former fortress dilapidated and in ruins, was transformed into a prison, only to be demolished in 1880, twenty years after the unification of Italy.

After the Normans the city was dominated by the Franks of Swabia and the era of the Holy Roman Empire had its start.

Mazara, like the rest of the kingdom, lacked a prosperous economy: the high tax burden and the continuous exodus of its intolerable Muslims, brought on an epochal crisis, with the reappearance of large estates and the decrease in the population resulting in the reduction of handicraft and agricultural production.

Upon his death, Frederick II of Swabia, left no heirs so the Church offered the Sicilian crown to Charles I of Anjou, who assumed the title in January of 1266.

Mazara was forced to contribute money and men to the Angevins' fleet and army, causing the misery that brought about the state of mind which resulted in the revolt of the Sicilian Vespers in 1282.

The war raged on until 1317, and ended with the return of the crown to Frederick III of Aragon.

The king made his home in Mazara, together with his entire court. And it was in Mazara that his fourth son, Roger, was born and baptized in the Cathedral. The event was immortalised in a painting, of which two copies were made, one in 1608 and one in 1618: the first was destroyed in 1918, while the second was restored in 1712, and is now exhibited in the Diocesan Museum of Mazara .

The Aragon rulers remained in Sicily until the Peace of Utrecht, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession. Rule of the island passed to the House of Savoy, then to the Austrians and finally to the Spanish Bourbons, who in 1734 won the Battle of Bitonto in Bari, bringing together the fate of both Sicily and Naples. At the same time the explosion of the baroque style occurred. Eastern Sicily was rebuilt after the earthquake that almost levelled Val di Noto. All the cities flourished. Even Palermo was reborn with its wonderful historic centre. Sicilian nobles became indebted in order to reconstruct buildings that didn't cut a poor figure in respect to the new residences of Catania, the seat of the viceroy.

Page 4

Meanwhile, on the shores of the **Mazaro River**, work was already being carried out in the modernisation of the port and the development of plants for the processing of fish and grapes.

With the landing of Garibaldi at Marsala and the Battle of Calatafimi, the partisans fought the Bourbon army and Sicily was unified under the name of the House of Savoy in 1860, the year which gave origin to the new Kingdom of Italy.

Mazara, one of the most important **fishing ports** in Europe, was also classified among the 'Cities of Art' by the Region of Sicily in June of 2010. Due to its features, which are considered unique by a national survey, it is recognized by UNESCO as part of the world's humanitarian heritage. The city is home to more than thirty churches, many of which are along the route of the narrow streets in the Kasbah.

Cathedral Basilica of the Holy Saviour

The Cathedral is an example of Norman architecture which was built in 1093 by order of Count Roger D' Hauteville, as a vow made during the battle in 1072, which marked the final defeat of the Muslims.

Page 5

The event was remembered in 1584 by the marble high-relief on the main portal of the church, which represents the victory of Roger, "amurusso di Cristu e di la fidi!" (love for Christ and the faith), straddling his horse while the defeated but valiant Tunisian commander, **Mokarta** lay on the ground beneath him.

Surviving architectural elements of the Norman structure are its transept walls, the architectural space that intersects the nave and the apse perpendicularly and the half-vaulted apse surmounting the altar. Remains of the original building can be seen on the floor near the side entrance of the church, protected by a plate of glass. At the end of the 17th century, the church was transformed into a Baroque cathedral basilica with a Latin cross plan. In the same period the imposing bell tower was erected. In recent times the frescoes, faded with time, were recaptured and painted from scratch by the painter Giambecchina . The Cathedral has since been elevated to the rank of minor basilica by Pope John Paul II. It's interior is rich in works of art, among them the painted wooden "Cross", by an anonymous Sicilian master of the Norman era. On one side the image of Christ is depicted, on the other, the Mystic Lamb at its centre, and the symbols of the four Evangelists at its four points. The large marble group of "The Transfiguration", which majestically stands out against the backdrop of the altar, depicts Jesus on Mount Tabor, accompanied by the prophets Moses and Elijah, and the disciples Peter, James and John. The work was sculpted in 1535 by Antonello and Antonio Gagini.

San Ignazio

Built in 1701, the Jesuit church of San Ignazio (St. Ignatius) was damaged by bombing in 1943. It is constructed of carved stone. A marble bust of the saint by the artists Marabitti, is supported on a round frieze on the entrance portal. It is an example of the work of Angelo Italia and Giacomo Napoli, famous architects of the time, who are also credited with building the Collegio della Compagnia di Gesù (Jesuit College).

The College is a monumental building. The imposing baroque facade, skillfully carved from limestone, is characterised by large conical framed windows and above all a rich and impressive portal formed by a round arch bounded at its sides by two pairs of stone giants that support the above entablature with two composite capitals. It is the seat of the Centro Polivalente di Cultura, la Biblioteca comunale, Archivio storico e Museo civico (Multicultural Centre, City Library, Historical Archives and Civic Museum).

Page 6

San Francesco

The complex formed by the church and convent of San Francesco of Assisi also gives its name to the Islamic quarters par excellence, characterised by narrow streets and courtyards.

The church, dedicated to San Biagio (St. Blaise) in Norman times, was rebuilt in the Baroque Era and decorated with fine stucco and paintings that completely cover the interior masonry walls and the ceiling depicting both sacred and profane subjects. There is a remarkable 18th century portal that contains a round sculpture of the Stigmatization of St. Francis by Francis Incrivaglia (1730).

San Michele

The church of San Michele (St. Michael), which is annexed to the Benedictine Monastery, was built in Norman times and rebuilt in the 17th century. Its interior is a blaze of gold, marble and decorations. It houses twenty symbolic stucco statues which were created by Bartolomeo Sanseverino, its frescoes and valuable paintings are works of Mazara artist, Thomaso Sciacca, while its ceramic tiled floor is strewn with flowers, branches and figures. The bell tower with its typically oriental bell profile and rounded spire was constructed apart in 1771 and is joined to the prospectus of the monastery. It lies within the path of the Kasbah. Do not miss the wonderful view of the square.

Page 7

'Santa Niculicchia'

San Nicolò Regale (Regal St. Nicholas), one of three Norman churches that still exist in Mazara del Vallo, is affectionately called "Santa Niculicchia" by locals. Located on the left bank of the Mazaro River, it has a square plan with three apses and is considered one of the most beautiful Norman monuments in Sicily. It contains some interesting Roman mosaics of the late imperial age. The site is closed for worship.

San Vito – Mazara's Patron Saint

San Vito (St. Vitus) Church was built on the ruins of the Norman church in 1776. It rises on the rock from which, according to legend, San Vito, as a youth, embarked for Rome, where he died a martyr. It seems that the work was inspired by a certain John Grifeo, companion of Count Roger and founder of the Graffeos, patricians of Mazara.

The Church of the Madonna del Paradiso

Convent and Church of the Madonna del Paradiso (Our Lady of Heaven) was erected in 1515. Almost three centuries later church planning was resumed and expansion carried out. The temple houses a painting of the Holy Mother by Sebastiano Conca, to which a long tradition ascribes miraculous interventions. Several times before and in the presence of authoritative witnesses, the figure was seen moving her eyes. The inscription: 'oculos tuos converts to nos', (turn and look upon us with your merciful eyes). The most recent evidence of the miracle occurred in 1981. The Madonna del Paradiso is the patron saint of the diocese and co-patron saint of the city of Mazara del Vallo. The coronation was decreed by the Vatican in 1803.

Page 8

The church has a single nave and the precious painting is set in a marble frame supported by two angels in the high apse. The four surrounding paintings were carried out in the 1950's by the master, Giambecchina.

Page 9