

San Marino: How the oldest republic remained independent.

We hebben het in een eerder artikel al gehad over de Republiek der Zeven Verenigde Nederlanden, de succesvolste republiek van de 16e en 17e eeuw. Maar ruim dertien eeuwen eerder ontstond er al een republiek in Europa — een republiek die vandaag de dag nog steeds bestaat.

Toch hebben de meeste mensen er nauwelijks van gehoord. Dat komt waarschijnlijk doordat deze republiek zich bevindt in een piepkleine staat met slechts ongeveer 30.000 inwoners: San Marino. Een land dat daarnaast ook bekendstaat als een van de zwakste voetballanden ter wereld.

Maar achter dit kleine land schuilt een enorme geschiedenis.

Hoe is San Marino ontstaan? Hoe kan het dat deze ministaat al eeuwenlang onafhankelijk is gebleven terwijl complete rijken verdwenen? En waarom werd San Marino nooit opgenomen in Italië, ondanks dat het volledig door Italië omringd wordt?

In dit artikel gaan we dieper in op deze bijzondere geschiedenis.



Flag San Marino. Source:

[wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_San_Marino)



The founding of San Marino

San Marino, officially the Repubblica di San Marino, is an enclave of just 61 km² in the eastern part of the Apennines and is completely surrounded by Italy.

The origins of this unique republic date all the way back to the end of the 3rd century AD. According to legend, a Christian stonemason named Marinus fled the island of Rab (then known as Arbe), which was part of the Roman Empire at the time.

Marinus is said to have fled because of the persecution of Christians under Emperor Diocletian. This emperor sought to restore the traditional Roman faith and viewed Christians as a threat to the stability of the empire. As a result, many Christians were persecuted, imprisoned, or executed.

Since Marinus himself was a Christian, he fled before he could be sentenced. He eventually settled on Mount Titano, where the state of San Marino would later be founded.

It was not until decades later, in 380 AD, that Emperor Theodosius I officially made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. But at the time Marinus fled, Christians were being targeted by the Romans.





Marinus from Rimini (born in Arbe). Source: wikipedia.org

Marinus eventually fled to the remote Apennines, where he settled on Mount Titano. On this mountain, he founded a small Christian community and a monastery where believers could practice their faith without fear.

Due to its remote and naturally defensible location, this community gradually grew into an independent state. According to tradition, San Marino was officially proclaimed on September 3, 301—which is why it considers itself the oldest surviving republic in the world.

However, this did not mean that other powers immediately recognized the republic. It was not until 1291 that Pope Nicholas IV officially recognized San Marino's independence.

Marinus's influence is still visible everywhere in San Marino today. He is regarded as the "Giver of Freedom" and has become the country's national symbol. San Marino's founding day, September 3, remains a national holiday, and Marinus is depicted on various San Marino euro coins.

The Order of Saint Marinus has also existed since 1860; it is an honor bestowed upon citizens who have made an exceptional contribution to San Marino's society.

Later, Marinus was canonized by the Christian Church and given the title of Saint Marinus, the patron saint of the republic.





Location of San Marino on the European map. Source: Vecteezy.com

Protection

Although Marinus had managed to establish his own state centuries earlier, it is remarkable that San Marino still exists as an independent nation today.

A key reason for this was the country's unique position within Europe. San Marino was originally founded as a refuge for Christians and, as a result, developed a strong symbolic bond with the Christian world over the centuries and, later, with the Papal States as well.

Even during the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, San Marino managed to remain independent. When Napoleon conquered large parts of Italy in the late 18th century, he had a remarkable amount of respect for San Marino because of its republican history. After all, France itself had just abolished the monarchy during the French Revolution.

In 1797, Napoleon officially recognized San Marino's independence and even offered to expand the republic's territory. However, San Marino's



leaders rejected this offer for fear of losing their neutrality and independence.

After Napoleon's fall, San Marino's independence was once again recognized by several European states at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

San Marino also managed to remain independent during the Risorgimento—the unification of Italy in the 19th century. This was partly due to the protection and respect it received from the Papal States, but also because San Marino had virtually no strategic or economic value. Moreover, the state was difficult to reach, nestled in the hills of the Apennines.

For the Italians, invading and annexing San Marino was simply more trouble than it was worth.



Risorgimento, the unification of Italy in the 19th century. Source: wikipedia.org

While the Papal States offered San Marino protection, the republic was granted increasing autonomy to govern itself. Under the leadership of politicians such as Domenico Fattori, San Marino gradually developed a stronger domestic government.

Nevertheless, the republic remained cautious. Because San Marino was completely surrounded by what would become Italy, the country had to constantly take into account political developments on the Italian peninsula.

During the Risorgimento—the unification of Italy—another figure played a key role in San Marino's survival: Giuseppe Garibaldi.



In 1849, Garibaldi fled to San Marino with his followers after his revolutionary struggle against Austria and other Italian rulers had failed. The republic offered him protection and helped him escape safely.

Garibaldi never forgot this help. When he later became one of the key figures behind Italian unification, he ensured that San Marino was allowed to retain its independence.

As a result, despite the formation of a unified Italy, San Marino continued to exist as an independent republic.

In the capital, San Marino, there is still a monument today honouring Garibaldi.



Giuseppe Garibaldi. Source: wikipedia.org

Official independence

In 1897, an important treaty was signed in Florence between Italy and San Marino under the leadership of the aforementioned Domenico Fattori.

This treaty further strengthened the friendly ties between the two states. Italy had already recognized San Marino as an independent state in 1862, but the agreements of 1897 further solidified the republic's position



and sovereignty. It was also stipulated that San Marino could count on Italy's support in times of need.

Despite its small size, San Marino managed to remain independent for virtually its entire history. The country was actually occupied only once: during World War II by Nazi Germany.

The occupation, however, was relatively short-lived. In 1944, British troops entered San Marino during their advance through Italy. The republic was heavily bombed, partly because it was believed that German troops had entrenched themselves there. Shortly thereafter, the Germans were driven out and San Marino was liberated by the Allies.

Conclusion

Of all the European countries I've discussed so far, San Marino is perhaps my favorite. The story of this small republic is almost absurd.

San Marino is considered the oldest surviving republic in the world; in 1600, it officially adopted one of the oldest constitutions still in force today; and it was also one of the first countries to introduce free healthcare. Today, the country even has more cars than residents, one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe, and—unlike many other countries—virtually no national debt but rather a budget surplus. And even though San Marino is not a member of the European Union, it still uses the euro.

The emergence and continued existence of San Marino actually feel like a historical miracle. Over the centuries, larger states such as Italy could have annexed the territory without much difficulty. Yet that almost never happened. Respect for the centuries-old republic, the country's religious origins, and San Marino's diplomatic neutrality ensured time and again that the country remained independent.

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