

A SHIP CALLED PRIDE

We should be proud of and rediscover Cottonera's maritime identity, Simon Mercieca says.

The Three Cities have had a chequered history in which ship repair has written a prominent chapter. Has it always been an easy rapport?

The word 'chequered' means that the history of ship repair in Malta has been marked by fluctuations of fortune.

Without a doubt, an island cannot survive without some form of shipbuilding and repair activities and these must have been with us for at least the past 1,000 years.

The first clear references to an arsenal in Malta for ship building and repair goes back to the 14th century. It was situated next to Fort St Angelo. The stone shed survived World War II but was recently pulled down to make space for a block of flats. Most probably, this arsenal remained in use until Valletta was built in 1566. When the knights built Valletta, they wanted to transfer the arsenal to this new city. The project failed and instead, a new arsenal was built in Birgu where today the Maritime Museum is situated.

In the meantime, private individuals also started to engage in boat building and repair. These boatyards were mostly concentrated in the French Creek area, which is the part of Senglea where the modern docks are situated.

The golden age of Maltese shipbuilding was at the turn of the 19th century. Beautiful barks and schooners were built at our private docks. However, the arrival of the British was marked by the introduction of modern technology and the concept of a drydocks was adopted after having been experimented with success in Turkey. The first dock in Malta was built in Cospicua, amid great resistance from the residents. Indeed the British had no interest to support local shipbuilding. But that is another story.

What more can you tell me about the history of the people in the area?

The formation of our harbour cities was conditioned by the history of the sea. Historically, the idea that Vittoriosa was the first city to be built in the area is now being challenged. Thierry Duggan, who teaches Medieval History at Antalya University, convincingly argues that the first habitat was situated where Cospicua is today – Vittoriosa then became an extension or the suburb of this city. In fact, some of the most important parts of medieval Vittoriosa, the Contrada

Sancta Margherita, are to be found in present day Cospicua. Even the vernacular place-name 'Bormla' could be Arabic and could have the same origins as the name 'Palermo'.

Undoubtedly, the fortune of these towns is linked to the sea and to the many seafarers who settled here from all over the Mediterranean. After seafaring, the most important activity for the people here was that of working in the dock. These activities became part and parcel of the identity of the locality until recently.

Economically ship repair and its ancillary industries have contributed heavily to the area and the people. Does it still have economic importance today?

It is a great pity that the ties of these towns with ship repairing have now been severed. The fortune of Cottonera lies with the sea. Both seafaring and ship repair have practically disappeared from Cottonera. However, I am relieved to note that ship repairing has returned to the area and for the first time in approximately 150 years, this has become a commercially viable industry.

The problem today is that most of the workers are not necessarily from the area. Modern means of transportation make it no longer necessary for those wishing to work at the dockyards to have to settle in Cottonera or its suburbs. Indeed places like Paola, Fgura and Kalkara were offshoots of Cottonera, and they developed to offer adequate residential space for thousands of dockyard workers. Gradually, Cottonera is losing a feature, which was part and parcel of its identity for the last thousand years.

In the past, some of Malta's leading tradesmen operated within the ship repair business. Is this still the case?

Dār-aṣ-ṣinā 'a (Maltese: dar is-sengħa) is the Arabic word for dockyard, from where the English word 'arsenal' derives and this was more than factual. The arsenal and later on the dockyards were the mother of all the Maltese crafts and trades. Malta's leading craftsmen worked there. This was not only because they were paid well, but also because the shipyards were the place where craftsmen could master their skills and show their prowess.

The dockyard was also a source of social pride. Leading 19th century artists such as Salvu Psaila and Antonio Chircop started their carriers at the shipyard. Unfortunately, this is

no longer the case today. The strong cultural traditions that we come across in Cottonera today are the residue of this seafaring identity that still lingers on.

Does the survival of the business help keep the trade alive?

Unfortunately, until the shipyards were taken over by Antonio Palumbo, their future was bleak in all senses. Perhaps the current operator is still suffering from the bad name that these docks started to acquire in the Maltese collective mentality, which ended up affecting negatively the people living in this area. It is extremely difficult to reverse this perception. More needs to be done in this area for a true rebirth. I strongly believe that the shipyards still have a place in Cottonera and as a nation we need to see them become once again as a hub of modern craftsmanship.

Are the people who had family members connected to ship repair proud of their association?

Yes, they are. In fact, I am one of them. My paternal grandfather started his career as a riveter, which at the time was a highly specialised skill, enabling iron plates to be joined in such a way as not to allow any water penetration. This trade was extremely important in particular before welding was invented. Any of the older generation of Cottonera and those living close by will tell you that working at the Admiralty Dockyard were prestigious and brought pride to all the family.

Even education in Cottonera revolved round the dockyards. The Freres, as the brothers of De La Salle were known, opened their school in Cospicua simply because of the dockyards in order to prepare students for the dockyard's competitive entrance examination.

Life of the Three Cities revolved around the dockyards. This explains why the dockyards made the people of the area proud. That sense of pride is still there and the most vociferous voices against the dockyard today come mostly from individuals who do not hail from the locality but from foreigners, who have no ties or contacts and whose only interest is that of property speculation. This goes beyond the ethos for which these localities were created. But regrettably these voices form part of Cottonera's chequered history.