

# Rebuilding the Birgu Clock Tower



From Dr S. Mercieca Ph.D

The Malta Historical Society fully endorses the current proposal to rebuild the historic clock tower that once graced the main square of Birgu. Such a project would heal yet another architectural scar, the result of the heavy bombardments Malta endured on many of her historic towns during the Second World War.

Even though such an initiative may now appear as belated and perhaps, to a few individuals, as anachronistic since the restoration of this tower would be taking place after more than 60 years, the Malta Historical Society strongly believes it is a valid project.

It is precisely because so many decades have passed that the Malta Historical Society insists that the government should not waste any more time but go ahead and give its blessing to such an important initiative which would contribute to regaining a significant landmark that was part of Birgu's past architectural glory.

Such a project is in line with similar ones already

implemented in other parts of Europe where restoration of cultural heritage has been systematic and sustained. The harbour city of Saint Maló in France was completely razed to the ground during the Second World War, but thanks to the positive and foresighted cultural policy, it was reconstructed as it was prior to being bombed, thus giving back to the French people a historic city to cherish for posterity. Malta too has undertaken similar projects albeit on a smaller scale.

Today, no one doubts the historic validity and aesthetic beauty of Senglea Point dominated by its majestic *Gardjola*. However, there are very few people who can remember that this gem of architectural heritage was severely damaged during the last war, since the *Gardjola* was completely destroyed and had to be rebuilt after the end of hostilities. So, why was a similar initiative not taken with Birgu's clock tower?

The clock tower has its historic significance. Like the harbour city of Pisa, Birgu was a city of towers. It was dominated by a number of elongated buildings consisting of church steeples and secular edifices. However, many of these towers have been lost. Two of Birgu's most important landmarks were the clock tower and the belfry of the church of the Annunciation. Reconstructing the Birgu Clock Tower would help the city re-acquire some of its lost skyline.

Furthermore, for Malta, this tower represented the introduction of modern work precepts that are associated with the emergence of modern cities in Renaissance Italy. Life in this enclosed urban area, as had happened in the emerging towns and cities of 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy, started being regulated by the mechanics of a clock placed on a secular edifice.

The Malta Historical Society urges the government and the authorities concerned, as well as all those who have Malta's historical heritage at heart, to work hand in hand to rebuild this historic tower by also ensuring that the surviving artefacts from the old clock tower (wherever possible) are used and incorporated in the restored structure. However, the Malta Historical Society wants to stress that the Birgu Clock Tower should be rebuilt in the same place and have exactly the same proportions it had prior to the Second World War. Any changes, even the smallest modification, to the original plan would make the rebuilding of this tower a fake exercise.

One hopes that Malta too will soon witness, as is happening in other historic cities such as Valmontone in Lazio, Italy, its demolition day, where edifices built in great haste after the war are pulled down and replaced by replicas of the original buildings destroyed.

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