

THE CLOCK IN THE BELFRY OF THE PARISH CHURCH AT QRENDI

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From the earliest of times in human civilization, man has always been enchanted when he observed the phenomena of the cycles of the seasons and the reality of time, the natural transition from day to night, the artificial division of the day into hours that indicate the course of time, and the demarcation of the calendar into weeks, months and years. Gradually, the ancient civilizations of Babylon, Egypt, Persia, India, Greece and Rome felt the need to find a means how they could plan their life and their work. This resulted in the invention of water clocks and later on of solar clocks which could show these peoples the passing of time from day to night.

The Megalithic Temples on our islands, among which we find Hagar Qim and Mnajdra, are clear evidence that in prehistoric times the study of astronomy and its connection with the natural process of time was well developed. These temples were not only a cult symbol, but they also served as a calendar that marked the times for sowing and harvesting, as well as the religious and cultural activities of the community that lived in their environs. Indeed, if we look closely at these megalithic structures we will immediately realize that they are nothing but clocks carved in huge and high boulders.



Years passed before man learned how to keep time in a better way by using more advanced methods like the mechanical clock that worked by a system of wheels that moved and turned in a synchronised way. It is thought that such a clock was first produced in Italy in the thirteenth century. Later on, in 1641, Galileo Galilei developed a mechanical clock that worked by means of a pendulum that moved by the natural force of gravity.

By the time that the Knights of the Order of St John came to Malta, the production of the mechanical clock had advanced quite steadily. This might explain the fact that at this time the mechanical clock had become quite popular in Malta too.

Two blacksmiths who became popular for their prowess in the trade of clockmakers were Pietro Tanti and his son Gio. Antonio, who lived and worked in the first half of the eighteenth century. Pietro Tanti, born in 1692 at Zebbug, married Maria Grima after the death of his first wife. From his second marriage were born three children, among whom Joannes Antonnius who was born in 1731. When he grew up he followed in his father's footsteps and became a clockmaker. Not only, because in 1766 he succeeded in becoming a partner in Marco Morelli's foundry that produced bells. Gio. Antonio Tanti died in 1817.

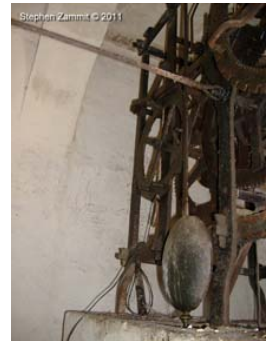
Between 1735 and 1749 Pietro Tanti produced various clocks, among which those for the churches at Zejtun, Balzan and Siggiewi. Together with his son Gio. Antonio, Pietro also produced the clocks for the Zebbug and Zabbar Churches. When Pietro grew old and stopped working, church procurators commissioned his son Gio. Antonio, with the work of clocks. The sum of 300 'skud' was usually paid for clocks produced by the Tanti family and which marked the quarter of the hour and the hour. It was also the custom to pay a small amount of earnest money when the clock was ordered and the rest of the sum was paid on completion of the work when the clock was put in place in the belfry.



Gio. Antonio Tanti succeeded in acquiring the fame of a prime clockmaker so much so that many church procurators commissioned him with the production of clocks for their churches. Archived documents show that Gio. Antonio Tanti produced clocks for ten churches among which that of the Parish Church of Qrendi. The other works included the clock of the Mdina Cathedral, the clock found in the Archbishop's Palace at Mdina, the clocks in the belfries of the Capuchin Church in Floriana, and of the Parish Churches at Mqabba, Naxxar, Birkirkara, Tarxien, Cospicua, Lija and Ghaxaq.

Therefore, we can conclude that at the time when the belfry clock for the Qrendi church was commissioned there was a popular trend that church belfries should house an iron mechanical clock. This is evidenced by the great number of clocks that were produced by a number of Maltese clockmakers at this particular period.

The contract for the production of an iron clock for the belfry of the Parish Church at Qrendi was signed by Gio. Antonio Tanti and the church procurator, the Rev. Celestiono Camilleri on the 2nd December 1756 (Not. D.G. Bonavita, R 62/43, ff. 208-209). The clock cost 300 'skud' and had to be placed in the church belfry up to six months after the signing of the contract. In the contract we find details about the measurements the works on the clock had to follow. These measurements indicate that the clock had to be specifically manufactured for the Qrendi church. The iron framework of the clock had to measure four and a quarter hand breadths in height, four and a half hand breadths in length and two hand breadths in breadth. It had to include the hammers, the chains, and pendulums all of which had to be made of iron. With regards to the cost, besides the earnest money, the rest had to be paid up to six months after the clock was to be placed in the church belfry where it was to strike the hour and the quarter of the hour according to Roman style.



According to the contract, besides the agreements already mentioned, clockmaker Tanti was also bound to:

- 1) paint the clock face and to provide the ropes of the pendulums and the wood in the belfry on which the hammers that struck the bells had to be placed;
- 2) manufacture the wheels on the lathe and produce bronze axis for the wheels according to the craft;
- 3) build the wheel that counted the hours in such a way that it tolled eleven times at quarter to noon and quarter to midnight;
- 4) provide a minute hand on the clock face, if the circumference of the latter permitted, besides the hour hand;
- 5) place the clock in the belfry from where it could toll along with the bells in the said belfry, according to the wishes of the procurator, and that it would have a rope long enough for a twenty-six hour period.



For two hundred and fifty-five years, the clock in the belfry of the Qrendi Parish Church, served as a point of reference for the parish community to regulate its time during day and night. Now that it is being restored to us in a much better condition, let us augur that it would continue to accompany us on our journey towards that aim for which we were born; an aim we all have to live and die for – eternal life. With its regular tolling the clock will remind us that we do not have any time to waste “for we know not the day nor the hour when the Son of God will come.” (Mathew 25:13).

Compiled from the book by John Debono. Art and Artisans in St. John's and other Churches in the Maltese Islands ca 1600-1800, Gutenberg Press, Malta 2005