

The Mystery of San Marco's Noon Mark

The column of S. Alipio lies at the far NW end of the façade of St Mark's Basilica in Venice.



Although little known and certainly rarely observed, by the multitudes of visitors to this famous place, this column actually supports a noon mark of considerable age.

In 1493, the Serenissima asked Gian Paolo Ranieri di Reggio Emilia for a new clock in order to replace the one, called S. Alipio's, that since 1384 had been situated on the façade of the Basilica.

Then, on November 3rd 1495, when the clock was almost ready, the Senate, in accordance with the Procuratori di S. Marco, decided to place it at the entrance of the Mercerie and that a new suitable building should be erected for that occasion. The construction that we still see today was completed in two years and decorated by a huge bell and two bronze giants. In 1500 the Senate and the Procuratori di S. Marco decided to erect new edifices on both sides of the tower; and these were concluded in 1506.

In 1755 eight columns were added, in the seventeenth century manner, to reinforce the pillars at the ground level and support the two lateral edifices.

The Clock Tower, enriched by the splendour of its materials, is one of the most important links between the Piazza and the rest of the city as well as a religious and civil symbol.

All this of course required the means to set the clock. That was achieved by the Noon Mark.

The mystery is that we do not know for sure whether the noon mark that we see today is the one installed to regulate S. Alepio's 1384 clock or the new one we see today that operated from 1497—or both!

Whatever, the mark we see today is worn, the gnomon droops and is rusted but the details and engraving of the column are still visible and (with only a little inaccuracy) it still marks Solar Noon today.

Fixed out from the column is a leaf shaped gnomon with a central hole and the rusted remains make three other 'holes' on either side.

Of course this particular Noon Mark was used before concepts of Time Zones had been developed and even before 'accurate' clocks began to be made from 1650 onwards. It must therefore have been used simply to set the clock(s) to Solar Noon.

Even with all its wear, corrosion and lack of restoration it is fun to see just how 'accurate' we would judge it today.

A photograph of the time of the moment of Solar Noon was made at the point shown in the second figure.

Corrections were then made of the reading on the internal clock of the digital camera. The difference from UK time, the daily drift of the camera clock since the photograph had been taken were all considered and the adjustment for Italian time, the longitudinal distance from Venice and the equation of time were all applied. At the end of this the ancient and damaged Noon Mark was found to be showing solar noon only 12m 40 seconds fast!



Not at all bad for something that might possibly have been marking Solar Noon for the best part of 628 years.

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