Changing Places

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Photo by Peter Lindner

Old sundials made of sandstone run a high risk and sometimes it is better to put the original into a museum and replace it by a copy. However, a copy is a copy and we prefer to see the original.

In spring 2004 I happened to get to know about a beautiful polyhedral sundial, about 200 years old, situated in a historical park of a Saxony king's castle in Weesenstein near Dresden.

A Spanish sundial friend had asked me about the exact location of the sundial and as I had planned to visit the famous sundial collection at Mathematisch-Physikalischer Salon in Dresden I promised also to go to this castle and take some new photos of the sundial.

When I prepared my trip I got to know from the curator of Weesenstein castle, that this sundial would no longer be there but would now be in the studio of the sculptor Julius Hempel in Dresden in order to be restored. Please see his homepage: http://www.bildhauer-hempel.de/. I further learned that it would not return to its place in the park afterwards. In 2002 a heavy flood of the river Elbe had

Fixed sundials usually ought to stay at the place for which they are built and intended. Fixed outdoor sundials have to be strong to survive. They have to face all sorts of good or bad weather but also the attacks of awkward customers. As long as sundials are built for walls, they usually are less in danger than those sundials which are built for parks and gardens and public places.

Old sundials built of stone have the chance to get a nice patina. However, after the rain in industrialized countries, often turned into weak acid because of air pollution from the beginning of the past century, the patina often turns into an ugly dark skin and if parts of the stone start to pop off it is time to think about a restoration.

Julius Hempel

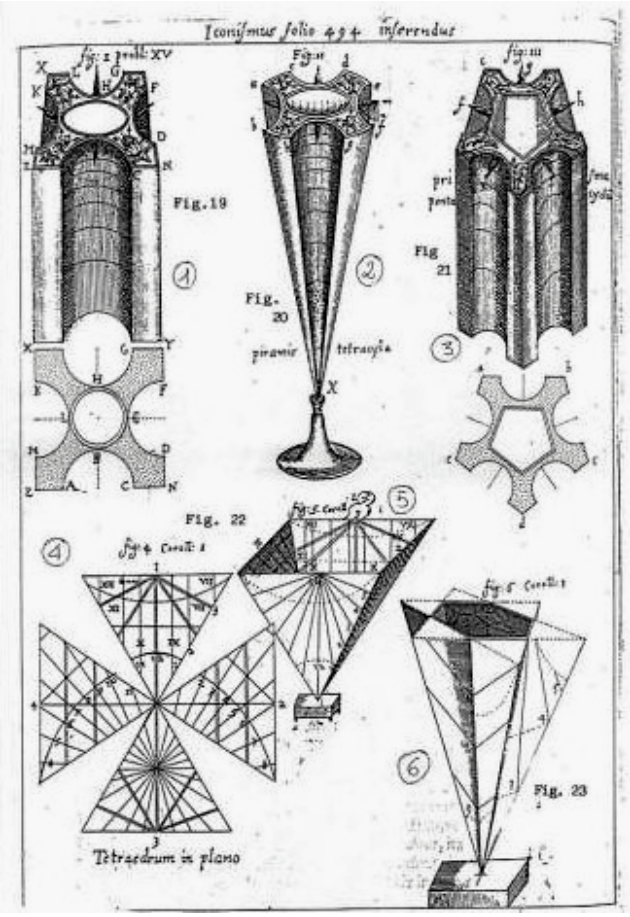
Photo by Julius Hempel

Photo by P. Lindner

destroyed many historical houses and precious collections in Dresden as well as many private houses along the river. Also the little tributaries had suddenly turned into powerful floods and had created heavy damage. So the little Müglitz-river had flooded the historical Weesenstein park and had washed away almost everything. Only the sundial had luckily survived and stayed as steady as a rock. But it was very urgent to restore the many popped off parts.

I also got to know that this sundial was originally not built for this Weesenstein park, but for the park of a nearby manor house, Gut Gamig. After World War II the Soviet troops billeted the estate. A courageous local historian worried very much about the sundial and he tried hard until it was finally removed, restored and no longer brought back to Gut Gamig but to a safer place, the park of Weesenstein castle. So the sundial was saved for the first time in the 20th century. It stayed at its new place for many years and many visitors enjoyed looking at it and comparing the local time shown by it with the time of their wrist watch. Please have a look at the sundial homepage of Peter Lindner, who provides a good number of pictures about this sundial: http://home.arcor.de/katrin.lindner/sonn-uhr/weesenstein/weesenstein.htm.

For more than one hundred years at exactly the place where this sundial had "lived" for about 27 years in "retirement", there had been a stone monument. It had been a present for a former Saxon king on behalf



Dial Construction by A. Kircher

of his golden wedding anniversary. However, such royal references were not politically correct during the communist era of the German Democratic Republic. Therefore the sundial was allowed to stay as a guest. Now, after Germany has been reunited, the curator of Weesenstein and the other officials thought it would be a good chance for a change: The sundial ought to go back to its historically correct place at Gamig manor, several kilometres away, as the Soviets had also returned to Russia and the situation of the ensemble had meanwhile turned into better conditions.

Polyhedral sundials were once quite fashionable and the gnomonists of former centuries created sundials with an incredible large number of sundial faces all around a sundial column or block; these dials were sometimes rather more curious than beautiful. However, if cylindrical sundials were created with a reasonable number of dials – as the sundial from Gamig – the result was a work of great harmony and beauty. The stone does not have to suffer from iron pests as the corners of the dial faces work as shadow-producers. Pater Atanasius Kircher (1601-1680), the German Jesuit edited a giant book in 1646 in Rome, *Ars Magna Lucis Et Umbrae In decem Libros digesta. Quibus Admirandae Lucis Et Umbrae in mundo, atque ade universa natura, vires effectusq. uti nova, ita varia novorum reconditiorumq. speciminum exhibitione, asd varios mortalium usus panduntur*. In this book he carefully described in many pages and illuminated with brilliant copperplate engravings many sorts of polyhedral sundials. These proposals were certainly an important inspiration for gnomonists in the 17th and 18th century.

When I prepared my trip to Dresden, I was both lucky and happy that the curator of Weesenstein castle had quickly arranged also an appointment at the studio of the sculptor Julius Hempel for me. I was able to investigate the "sick" sundial carefully. The impression of serious damage was obvious. If one looks at the images of the sundial before and during the restoration work, one can only come to the conclusion: What a lucky sundial! Now, after it is standing outdoors at its new – old place in Gut Gamig, one wishes such a splendid treatment also to its brothers. In the same area there are two more pretty similar looking sundials and probably also similarly old - one in the churchyard of Fuerstenwalde and the other one in the park of Ahlsdorf castle.


The restored dial - Photo by P. Lindner

Schloss Ahlsdorf by P. Lindner

Fuerstenwalde by P. Lindner

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A Brief Note On The Columbia University Sundial - Fred Sawyer

The sundial pictured on the cover of this issue was a gift to Columbia University (New York) in 1914 by its class of 1885. Its gnomon consisted of a green granite sphere weighing 16 tons. Unfortunately, the gnomon eventually developed cracks and it was removed in 1946. News accounts at the time say that it was destroyed, but in recent years the sphere has been found to lie in a field in Ann Arbor, MI. Attempts to have the gnomon restored or replaced have so far been unsuccessful.

The base of the dial is still intact, complete with the motto *Horam Expecta Veniet* (Await the Hour, It Will Come) and the bronze plates that carried its date lines. Technically speaking, the sundial was in fact a noon marker. As the inaugural pamphlet explained: "the ball casts a great oval shadow upon the base, and it is from the moving edges of this shadow that the time is ascertained…. To use the dial [to determine noon] on any date, as, for instance, May 25, it is merely necessary to wait until the shadow edge cuts the hole marked 25 on the May circular date." For further references and images, see:

http://calendar.columbia.edu/sundial/history.php
http://perso.wanadoo.fr/cadrans.solaires/cadrans/cadran-new-york.html
http://www.geocities.com/roynagl/columbia.htm
http://www.columbiaspectator.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2002/05/07/3cd83876cad42?in_archive=1