An Eighteenth-Century Artist’s Funeral at the Protestant Cemetery in Rome

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The earliest surviving depiction of a funeral at the Protestant Cemetery in Rome (now called the Cimitero Acattolico or Non-Catholic Cemetery) is a drawing in the Swedish National Archives in Stockholm (Fig. 1), illustrating the burial of the Swedish painter Jonas Åkerström, who died of tuberculosis on November 25, 1795. This drawing has been exhibited and published before but deserves to be more widely known. The correspondence associated with the event was written by Francesco Piranesi, son of the famous engraver and antiquarian Giovanni Battista Piranesi and agent of the Swedish Crown at the time. It includes an eyewitness description of the funeral, written by Francesco’s brother Pietro and enclosed in a letter of December 5, 1795, to Gustaf Adolf Reuterholm, a member of Sweden’s Privy Council. The drawing and the description, examined together, provide a rare and vivid depiction of a Protestant funeral in Rome at the end of the eighteenth century, foreshadowing that of the English poet John Keats, also a victim of tuberculosis, in 1821. The documentation also includes a list of names of artists who attended and shed light on Piranesi’s own role in the solemn event.

Jonas Åkerström (1759-1795) was only thirty-six when he died. He had studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Konstakademien) of Sweden and had spent two years in the atelier of Louis-Jean Desprez in Stockholm. He came to Rome in 1788 with a stipend from the Academy and found lodgings in the Strada Orsolini (now Via Vittoria) between the Corso and the Via del Babuino, not far from the Piazza di Spagna. He quickly made friends among the other Swedish artists in Rome, including the architects Gustaf af Sillén and Carl Fredric Sundvall, the painter Johan Carl Holst and the medalist Lars Grandel. One of the first persons Åkerström encountered after his arrival in Rome (July 28, 1788) was an official of the Swedish court, Carl Fredric Fredenheim, then on his second sojourn in Rome. Fredenheim took a special interest in Åkerström, eleven years his junior, and became his first guide to the city. Fredenheim’s activities in Rome ranged from viewing private collections of antiquities to copying the Swedish manuscripts in the Vatican Library to attending the opera at the Teatro Valle, and he often took Åkerström and his friends along. Near the end of 1788, Fredenheim received permission to excavate in the Roman Forum, where he supervised a team of workmen in uncovering part of the Basilica Julia. Through Fredenheim, Åkerström met Francesco Piranesi (1761-1810), the young but well-connected son of Giambattista Piranesi. Francesco Piranesi had served as agent of the Swedish crown since 1783, when King Gustav III traveled to Italy. He was first appointed on February 17, 1783, as an art agent, but in May became the Swedish court’s official representative to the Holy See, assisting with official visits and helping Swedes in difficulty. Piranesi was successful in procuring antiquities, including ancient marbles from his own father’s collection, for the Swedish royal collections.

Fig. 1 Anonymous, Funerale di Gio. Åkerström Pittore Svedese presso la Piramide di Cajo Costio in Roma, 1795. Stockholm, Riksarkivet, reproduced with permission. Fig. 2 Detail of signature from Fig. 1.
Piranesi even proposed a plan for a Swedish academy in Rome, along the lines of the French academy. He performed many services for Gustav during his time in Rome. In 1784, after the King's visit to Naples, Francesco arranged for Gustav and his retinue to stay in the Palazzo Girod (now Torlonia in the Borgo). It was there, on Easter Sunday of 1784, that the first Protestant (Lutheran) mass was performed in Rome, in an improvised chapel, a short distance from the Vatican. On the day after (April 17, 1784), the King was conducted into the Accademia degli Arcadi in the Bosco Parrasio, on the Janiculum Hill, with the name of 'Alexander Christophorus'.

Four years later, with Piranesi's help, Frederenheim donated a portrait of the King to assembly hall of the Accademia degli Arcadi and attended its official presentation during the session of August 17, 1788. In his diary, Frederenheim reported that he had commissioned Francesco Piranesi to make an engraved view of the event, after a preparatory drawing by Åkerström. Frederenheim accompanied Åkerström to the Janiculum on August 27, so that he could begin his drawing. When Frederenheim set off on his return to Sweden in 1790 the drawing was still not finished, so on the way he sent Åkerström 100 scudi romani as advance payment. Åkerström's carefully constructed and finely detailed drawing (Fig. 3) is signed and dated August 1790. The solemn circle of dignitaries around the edge of the outdoor amphitheater, portrayed in the sober light of day, foreshadows a sadder occasion to come, when another circle would form, at night, around the artist himself.

In October 1788, Åkerström went on an excursion with the architects Sillén and Sundvall to the Porta San Paolo and the Pyramid, where they studied and drew the antiquities. They also walked among the gravestones in the Protestant Cemetery. Sillén recorded in his diary that some Englishmen and Germans could be identified by their inscriptions. The death of Gustav III in 1792 altered the political climate in Sweden, affecting the fate of artists as well. One of these was the architect Carl Christopher Gjörwell, the younger (1766-1837), who, like Åkerström, had worked in the atelier of Desprez. In 1794, after the King's building program came to an end, Gjörwell came to Rome and soon made the acquaintance of Åkerström, who took him around the city. After a walk on the Janiculum hill, he wrote to his parents: «I spent an entertaining afternoon with Åkerström, who is amusing». Another member of their circle in the 1790s was the architect Carlo (Charles) Belli (1772-1840), who had originally come from Turin but had made his career in Sweden and Finland. By this time, Åkerström had several Italian friends, including Gaetano Matteo Monti (1776-1847), a sculptor, and Benedetto Mori (act. 1766-1808), an architect and engraver from the Piranesi workshop.

Work in the studios alternated with excursions in and around Rome and with lively evenings spent dining, drinking and conversing together. Some of the conversations must have been political, as Francesco Piranesi and his brother were increasingly involved in the Jacobin cause in Rome. Francesco was also secretly employed by the Swedes to follow the movements in Italy of Gustav Mauritius Armfelt, a suspected traitor to the Swedish crown. This affair involved Mori but not, it seems, Åkerström. Lars Gran del, near the end of his fellowship in Rome, was arrested for pro-Revolutionary sentiments on 4 June 1794 and imprisoned in the Castel Sant'Angelo, where Åkerström and Bassi tried to visit him but were denied permission. On May 25, 1795, Gran del's sentence was commuted to deportation, and he returned to Sweden, without seeing Åkerström again.

Not long after his friend's departure, Åkerström took ill. He came down with a cold and fever in July 1795, when Gjörwell and Bassi were about to set off for northern Italy. They tried to persuade Åkerström to come with them, hoping that a change of air would improve his health, but to no avail, and they set off without him. Åkerström's condition worsened during the fall, as the cough went into his chest. He spent some time in a town outside Rome where the air was purer, but after his return to Rome in October, the weather was cold and rainy, and his condition deteriorated further. He began spitting up blood, a sign of tuberculosis. Over the course of four months, he and his doctors tried various remedies—purging, leeches, Peruvian bark, even Icelandic lichen—but these gave only temporary relief. In his last night, Åkerström lost his ability to speak, went into convulsions and died on the morning of November 25, 1795. Francesco Piranesi and Carlo Bassi were present at his deathbed.

Francesco Piranesi sent several missives to Frederenheim, with copies to Reuterholm, on this sad occasion. The first was an initial report of Åkerström's death, sent on the day itself. «Åkerström [...] died this morning, almost unexpectedly», Piranesi wrote, «his illness not having led one to expect signs of such a sudden death». The funeral took place the following evening, November 26, at 6:30 pm. On November 28, Piranesi wrote in more detail about the funeral, enclosing a proposal for a memorial stone (Fig. 4). On the same day he sent another dispatch, with the drawing and a list of mourners, chiefly artists. On December 5 he wrote again, enclosing a post-mortem report from a local doctor (Pietro Lupi) and the description below, written (in Italian) by his brother Pietro Piranesi. On December 9, Piranesi wrote again, enclosing a poem by the abbé Leonardo Tournefort, one of his secretaries, on the subject of Åkerström's death.

Pietro Piranesi's description may be translated as follows:

**Description of the Funeral of Jonas Åkerström, Swedish Painter**

The sudden death of the celebrated painter Jonas Åkerström was an unexpected and cruel blow. Although it was clear in his last days that he was desperately ill and not responding to treatment, no one thought he would succumb so quickly. His friends, who were with him until the end, provided him all the help that he deserved, expressed a desire to accompany him to Mount Testaccio for the accustomed ceremony for the burial of non-Catholics. After his death at 12 noon on the 25th [November], preparations began for the funeral, and the torch-bearers were selected from all those who had been his closest friends.

**Fig. 3.** Jonas Åkerström, L’Accademia tenuta dagli Arcadi nel loro Bosco Parrasio in Roma, 1790. Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, reproduced with permission, ©Erik Cornelius / The National Museum of Fine Arts
This last paragraph reveals the special difficulties endured by the Protestant minority in Rome when they attempted to bury their dead. The Protestant Cemetery, or the "Luogo ove si sepelliscono i protestanti" as it is called on the Noli map of 1748, was a small patch of land in 1795, with a scattering of tomstones and no protective walls. Nevertheless, it had been in use for over sixty years by the time of Akersström’s death. As Protestants were considered heretics, the threat of harassment during the funeral procession was a real one, and burial of the dead was carried out by night. As the procession from the Stads Orsoli to the Pyramid passed through the city center, Piranesi took special pains to arrange for carriages and for a military escort.

Fernow’s funeral oration bemoaned the loss of a talented artist, cut off at the height of his powers, before he could take his rightful place among the great painters of his fatherland. He praised Akersström’s character, sociability and sensitivity to others as well as his artistic talents. He also invoked the cruelty of death when it strikes a young person and the special poignancy of dying far from home. But there is no reference to God, Christ or the afterlife in Fernow’s text, as Protestants were forbidden by canon law to invoke the prospect of eternal life. Instead he ended with five lines from a lyric poem by the philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, his older contemporary, on the inevitability of death. These lines begin with the image of a torch, first aflame, then extinguished—a common classical image for life and death. One can only imagine the effect of these words on the circle of torchbearers surrounding the grave.

The depiction of a cross on Akersström’s coffin is interesting, as no crosses or other overt references to Christianity were allowed on permanent monuments of the time. The few monuments that existed in 1795 were flat slabs, stele or columns—all based on classical models. Akersström’s coffin would have been hidden inside a carriage (visible in the drawing, on the left) during the funeral procession and was buried at the end of the funeral, so the view of the cross was reserved for the immediate circle of mourners in attendance.

The list of friends, chiefly artists, who attended the funeral is a cross-section of the community of northern Europeans in Rome at the time, as well as Akersström’s and Piranesi’s Italian friends and acquaintances:

Nomi di quegli Artisti, che assistirono al Funerale del Pittore Svizzero Akersström [Names of the Artists who attended the Funeral of the Swiss Painter Akersström]

Cav. Piranesi Ministro di Svezia [Cav. Piranesi, Minister of Sweden = Francesco Piranesi]

Fernor [sic] Predicante - Teleaco, e Pittore [... German preacher and painter = Karl Ludwig Fernow]

Smith Commandeur des Fizeaux Danese [... Danish ship commander = probably Sir William Sidney Smith (1764-1840)]

Baron Browne Danese [... Baron Browne, Danish = Possibly Caspar Wesel-Brown (1754-1840)]

Carstens Pittore Danese [... Danish painter = Aarn Joachim Carstens (1754-1798), from Schleswig, also buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome]

Cabot Pittore Danese [... Danish painter = Johann Herman Cabott (1756-1814)]

Gianelli [sic] Incisore di Medaglie Danese [... Danish engraver of medals = Peter Leonhard Gianelli (1767-1807)]

Bassi Architetto Svizzero [... Swiss architect = Charles Franscois (Carlo Francesco) Bassi (1772-1840)]

Buch [sic] Scultore di Medaglione [sic] [sic] scultore from Medingen = Johann Jürgen Busch (1758-1820), also buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome]

Vogt Pittore di Paesi Olandese [... Dutch landscape painter = probably Hendrik Voogt (1766-1839), also buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome]

Umbert [sic] Pittor di Paesi Olandese [... Dutch landscape painter = David Pierre Humbert de Supervielle (1770-1849)]

Blanchart Pittore Storia Francese [... French history painter = Laurent Blanchart (1762-1819)]

Denn Pittore de Poesi Fiannosco [... Flemish landscape painter = Simon Alexandre-Clement Denis (1755-1812)]

Cattaneo Pittore Storia Milanese [... Milanese history painter = Gaetano Cattaneo (1771-1841)]

Wgby [sic] Pittor di Storia Romana [... Roman history painter = Antonio Vigni (1764-1844)]

Gianelli [sic] Pittor di Storia Milanese [... Milanese history painter = Felice Gianii (1758-1823)]
Lucatelli [Roman sculptor, possibly Gioacchino Lucarelli, also a restorer for Piranesi]  
Piroli [Roman engraver = Tommaso Piroli (ca.1750-1824), who worked for Francesco Piranesi in Rome and, later, Paris]  
Castelli [Roman architect, not yet identified]  
Reinhart [sic] [Prussian landscape painter = Johann Christian Reinhart (1761-1847), also buried in the Protestant Cemetery]

In February 1796, Gjörvell made his own drawing of the event (Fig. 5), in the hope that it would be engraved and used as an illustration for the new periodical Svenska Adressen, of which his father was the editor. This image must have been based on an earlier version or copy of the drawing now in the Stockholm archives, as Gjörvell returned to Rome too late to see the drawing that Francesco Piranesi had sent to Reuterholm. Gjörvell’s picture has a similar composition (omitting the carriage but including more of the surrounding graves) but has little of the spontaneity or pathos of the original. Who made the original drawing? Because the signature was added to the passe-partout by another person and is hard to read (Fig. 2), the drawing is usually cited as anonymous. It is tempting to attribute it to Francesco Piranesi himself, but it is more likely that he asked another artist to record the event, just as he asked his brother to describe it in words. If we read the initial letter as a G, there are two possibilities from list of artists present: Gianelli or Giani, whose names Pietro Piranesi spelled with a double-n (Gianni / Gianelli). Of these, the most likely candidate is Felice Giani (1755-1823), whose drawings often had the spontaneity of wash technique, massing of figures and dramatic contrasts of light and dark seen here. Even without Pietro’s list, we know that Felice Giani was in Rome for part of 1795, living in vico Sant’Isidoro, in the parish of Sant Andrea della Fratte, where he shared lodgings with the Austrian painter Michael Krich and the Bohemian painter Johann Riedel. Giani was only a few months older than Åkerström and, like him, was a painter of historical and mythological subjects. Similarities between the two artists’ work have been noted. Giani was, moreover, a supporter of the Jacobin cause and thus in the same political camp as Francesco and Pietro Piranesi.

Any attempt to use the drawing to locate the exact site of Åkerström’s grave proves frustrating, as it reveals the extent of artistic license employed by the artist. The gravestones depicted to the right of the burial may be those of two German noblemen (von Reitzenstein and Werup), among the most prominent monuments of that time, but the stone on the right has a relief sculpture that looks like that of the tomb of Olgilheim Grote, buried nearby. It is possible that a taller stone once stood next to Grote’s but is no longer there, as we know that the Cemetery was subject to theft and vandalism in its early history. But it is just as likely that the artist exercised artistic license in his placement or depiction of the monuments—just as he made them larger than they are (or were) with respect to the people standing nearby. His view of the Pyramid is depicted from the wrong angle with respect to any of these stones, suggesting that he altered the perspective to suit convention. The choice of a conventional bird’s-eye view, above the circle of figures, also suggests that the drawing was not made during the funeral itself but a day or two later, from memory.

In his letter accompanying the drawing, Piranesi suggested to Reuterholm that he could have it engraved in a vertical format, as a pendant to an earlier engraving that he had sent him two years earlier, depicting the cypresses in the ruins of the Baths of Diocletian. «The effect is pleasing», he wrote, revealing that his grief at his friend’s appreciation for the picturesque quality of the event. Francesco Piranesi’s design for a permanent funeral monument for Jonas Åkerström was motivated
not only by his friendship with the painter and his desire to please his Swedish patrons, but also by a need to emulate his father, Giovanni Battista Piranesi. The elder Piranesi had designed one of the earliest monuments in the Protestant Cemetery, that of James MacDonald, a Scottish member of the Stuart court in exile who died in 1766. With the permission of Pope Clement XIII, MacDonald had been given a Protestant funeral, an event that attracted significant public interest at the time. Giovanna Battista Piranesi erected a simple Roman column with a tabula ansata around it, carrying an inscription on which Piranesi’s name is still visible below MacDonald’s. Francesco’s proposed commemorative service for Äkerström was modeled on the earlier monument and accompanied by a letter that makes his intentions clear: «il enclose the inscriptions», he wrote to Reuther (with a copy to Fredenheim),

that was copied and distributed at the time of the funeral, that I will have incised on my expense an ancien column, as my father did for a friend of his. Please let me know as soon as possible if there is anything you want changed in the inscription, as well as the name[s] of his [Äkerström’s] Benefactors, so that I can have them incised. My brother and Bassi have taken great care to see that all this goes well, and in good order.35

Perhaps Francesco never received an answer to this request, or perhaps he regretted offering to assure the expenses himself, but the column was never erected, and Äkerström’s precise resting place in what is now known as the Parco Antico of the Cemetery remains unknown. By the end of 1796 the political climate in Sweden had changed, as Gustav IV reached his majority, there was a political shake-up and Gustav Adolf Reuterfall fell out of favor. Soon Francesco Piranesi’s fortunes changed as well: he lost his post as Sweden’s representative in 1798. He and his brother Pietro, proponents of the Roman Republic of 1799, fled to Paris after its fall. Francesco Piranesi never achieved the success and esteem in Paris that he had enjoyed in Rome, and he died in poverty in 1810. His final resting place, like Äkerström’s, is an unmarked grave.36

Notes:
1 Riksvägkortet, Stockholm: Kart-och ritningsamlingar, Biografiska, Äkerström, m. form., reproduced with permission of the Archive. The drawing measures 124 x 193 mm and is executed with two shades of ink over traces of pencil, on rag paper with a Vistalet letter watermark (Beawood 7349). The accompanying label is on the original 19th century mount, not on the drawing itself. I am grateful to archivist Claes Tellqvist for his assistance in reconstructing its archival context and for his excellent advice on its interpretation.
lettete / Kommt hinwain. Kein nahender Tod erlebt / Uns, wir
züng an nahem Tode. (Johann Gottfried von Herder, Gesammelte Werke, vierte Auflage, 1807-1811, S. 262, 302. Giani was in Rome in 1675 between two phases of his work for the Papal Larder in Faenza.

Rapp, cit. p. 131.

They are depicted in a 1777 view by Jacques Haddock Larder, now in the Albertina, Vienna (reproduced in The Protestant Cemetery in Rome: the ‘Parte Antica’, by C. Nylund et al., edited by A. Monzù Ippolito and P. Vian (Union Internazionale degli Istituti di Archeologia, Storia e Ebraica dell’Arte in Roma, 1994), plate 16).

It is interesting to compare this drawing with a 1799 print by G. Bautz showing the Gole tomb, and to its left, a deeply cut path leading down to the entrance to the Pyramid—this change of level is not seen in the earlier drawing. Cf. The Protestant Cemetery in Rome: the ‘Parte Antica’, cit., plate 22a.

After a drawing by François Jean Schubert, illustrated in Rapp, cit. p. 271.

Se lo gradisce il dazio, farà un pendent per alto ai capiressi. L’effetto è ben noto. (Rákóczi, Stockton, G.A. Reuteners Samling, vol. 20 (E5139), no. 115). Piranesi added, as an afterthought, a note that is difficult to read: Hanno sbagliato nella cassa del defunto (‘They made a mistake in the coffin of the deceased’). I believe that Rapp misunderstood this sentence (misreading sbagliato for sbagliato) but in either case, I do not know what Piranesi meant.


La suddetto l’iscrizione, che al momento del funerale furono [sic] distribuita in copia, che in furbo incide l’arte spreco sopra una colonna antica, come mio Padre faceva per altra commissione per un suo Amico. Lei mira di vuoi voler

Cfr. Cairns Lumetti, cit., p. 255.

COMPENDIO

La storia della tomba e del defunto di Jean-Étienne avvenne il 25 novembre del 1795 nel Cimitero protestante di Roma. Ciò potrebbe interpretarsi come una dimostrazione della certezza del nome del defunto e del suo amico avvenne. Francesco del 1783 l’agente romano non prese né la Rotonda III di Svezia e rappresentante ufficiale della Svezia presso la Santa Sede, con l’inciso di acquista di armi antichi pregiate per le raccolte resti e conserva gli artisti avvenuti. Dalla sua corrispondenza con i ricercati studiosi si ricava che Francesco propone di eseguire a proprie spese il monumento funebre dell’amico su modello di quello già realizzato nel 1866 da suo padre Giambattista per Mac Donald, membro della corte scozzese degli Stuart in esilio a Roma, così come in una colonna romana con una Tavola anastasi per l’iscrizione.

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