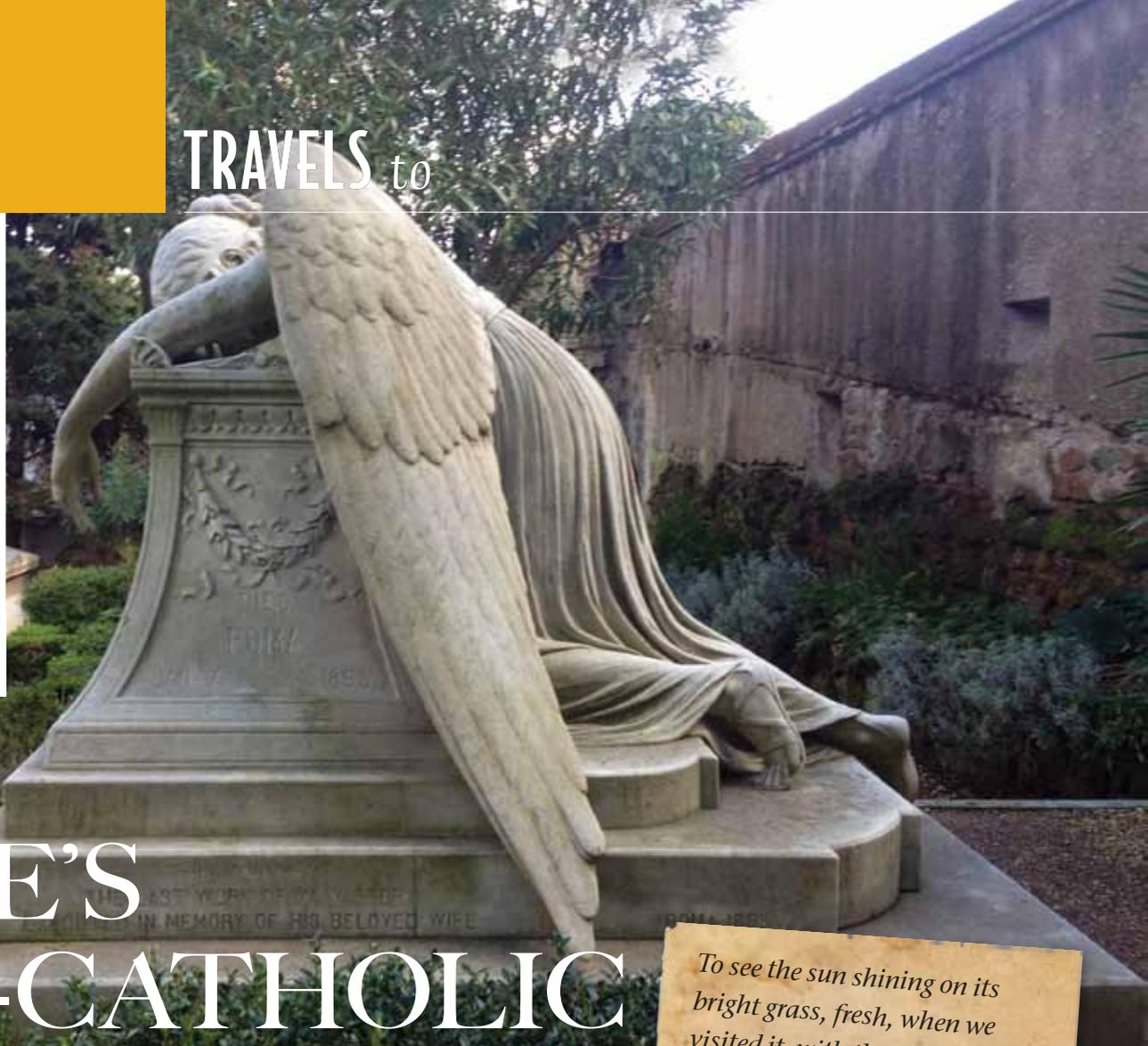




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# ROME'S NON-CATHOLIC CEMETERY

In the shadow of a pyramid, tucked behind the Aurelian walls, and a stone's throw from the huge *amphorae* dump at Testaccio, Rome's non-Catholic cemetery has to be one of the most discreet treasures of Rome. When the burial ground was first selected, it was beyond the periphery of the 18th-century town, close to the San Paolo gate leading to Ostia. In those days, Rome was a small town, straddling the Tiber between the Vatican and what is now the *centro storico* gathered around the Pantheon. Cestius's pyramid lay in open countryside, half an hour's walk away.

When there is so much to see in Rome, why bother with a comparatively modern cemetery, a ten-minute taxi ride from the Colosseum? The answer is simple. First and foremost this park, for that is what it is, is arguably the most beautiful in Rome (which is really saying something). Second, it is dizzily stuffed with monumental archaeology, cared for with a sensibility that, let's say, is not exactly the norm in the rest of Rome. It is best known as the final resting place of the English Romantic poets Keats and Shelley, and their hallowed names have drawn about 4,000 other foreigners, whose biographies are woven into the fabric of modern Rome. In truth, sensitively defended, this is Rupert Brooke's 'far field' for Americans, Britons, Danes, Germans, Swedes, and many more besides who fell in love with the eternal city and made it their home.

It is easy to find, of course. One street into the walled city from the pyramid, the cemetery really comprises two parts: the original field, first used by exiled members of the Stuart court, as well as Grand Tourists, in about 1716, and the larger, ordered ranks of monuments shaded by rows of cypresses and pines in the section made after

1822. The two parts could not be more different. The original field is dotted with graves in no real order, except for the cluster by the far cemetery wall. Otherwise, this lightly shaded ground feels like an English city park, improbably dominated by Cestius's vaunting cenotaph. At present, the pyramid is not at its best: it is partly covered with scaffolding, while zealous conservators attempt to defrock it of the pollution gathered since it was last cleaned for the millennial celebrations of 2000. Between it and the cemetery lies a sunken enclosure, sanctuary to well-fed moggies that languidly patrol the cemetery.

*To see the sun shining on its bright grass, fresh, when we visited it, with the autumnal dews, and hear the whispering of the wind among the leaves of the trees which have overgrown the tomb of Cestius, and the soil which is stirring in the sun-warm earth, to mark the tombs, mostly of women and young people who were buried there, one might, if one were to die, desire the sleep they seem to sleep.*

Percy Bysshe Shelley in a letter to Thomas Love Peacock, 1818



**FAR LEFT** The Angel of Grief in Rome's non-Catholic cemetery.  
**LEFT** The grave of Percy Bysshe Shelley, beside the Aurelian Wall.  
**ABOVE** The graves of the earlier cemetery are sprinkled across the field.



In the far corner lies John Keats. Next to him is his faithful friend, Joseph Severn, who outlived the poet by 58 years. The graves are simple, worthy of an English churchyard. Nearby a plaque bearing a medallion portrait of the poet copied from Benjamin Haydon's life-mask is inscribed with elegiac doggerel by a retired army general, Sir Vincent Eyre. Worthy of a barrow-digging poet, the painful rhyme reminds the visitor of Keats's mythic place in Victorian England:

*Keats! If thy cherished name be 'writ in water'  
 Each drop has fallen from some mourner's cheek;  
 A sacred tribute such as heroes seek,  
 Though oft in vain-for dazzling deeds of slaughter  
 Sleep on! Not honoured less for Epitaph so meek!*

### Prestigious neighbours

Another memento is inscribed on the reverse of the headstone. Emulating the long tributary lists in English museums of the time, here registered are the establishment figures who subscribed to his tomb, among them Longfellow, Millais, and Rossetti.

The 'new cemetery' created by stages after 1822 is jam-packed with rows of tombs. Scarcely an inch is spared, giving the visitor

a dazzling sense of a Rome Who's Who. Extraordinary tombs, simple tombs, mere plaques, and posies of wild flowers are jumbled together. Archaeologists rub shoulders with poets, politicians rub up against architects. The commonality is Classical: ancient chests, sarcophagi, columns, and half-columns are the prevailing language of death. Then, there are sculptures that resonate with archaic Greece and Imperial Rome, tenderly signalling to the living the character of their loss. Several examples of the Roman sarcophagus of Scipio Barbatius, now in the Vatican, are dotted around the graveyard. The most memorable sculpture, though, belongs to the age of the Pre-Raphaelites: William Wetmore Story's 1894 memorial to his wife, the Angel of Grief (see picture opposite), which is in the uppermost part of the cemetery. No less affecting are the unembellished memorials, such as one to the Italian Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, towards the far end of the graveyard. Pause too, close to Shelley's grave, to pay homage to the English actress Belinda Lee, who died in a car crash in California in 1961 following a publicised romance with a Roman prince.

Reflect upon the extraordinary Americans, the Egyptologist philanthropist, David Randall-MacIver – a Monuments Man who long before left Oxford to be a curator at the Penn Museum; the ▶



**LEFT** A plaque commemorating the Romantic poet John Keats.  
**ABOVE** The graves of John Keats and his friend Joseph Severn.  
**RIGHT** The subscribers to Severn's gravestone include the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.



**ABOVE** Amanda Thursfield and Nicholas Stanley-Price stand beside Gramsci's grave.



**CENTRE** The tomb of Thomas Jefferson Page.



**RIGHT** The 'new' cemetery dates from 1822.

architect of New York's gilded age, William Rutherford Mead, one of the celebrity designers of the American Academy of Rome; and an elaborate tomb, still regularly tended with posies, to a Southern gentleman, Thomas Jefferson Page, who sought exile after bitter defeat in the American Civil War.

This is a place stirred by shafts of sun, where the desire to sleep serenely persists nearly two centuries after Shelley commented on the cemetery that was soon to host his own ashes. Reflect, though, before you leave, on how this extraordinary 'park' still operates as an active graveyard. By any archaeological standards, it is a curatorial challenge. Some 4,000 monuments erected over the last 300 years nestle below a copse of tall trees, fighting to reach above the shadow of the Aurelian Wall.

Nevertheless, the cemetery has the hallmark of any counterpart in Denmark, England, or the United States: it is immaculately maintained to a standard that the present Director, Amanda Thursfield, and volunteers like Nicholas Stanley-Price (the author of a marvellous new guide to the cemetery), can rightly take pride. It is administered to national and city regulations, but by a small team, admirably aided by volunteers who answer to an unpaid board of ambassadors.

The trees pose a tough challenge. Before they fall prey to heavy winds or age, and tumble onto graves, they must be monitored and removed. Expensive and complicated though it is to pluck an

aging umbrella pine from the dense serried ranks of tombs, there is no choice but to act. Using a crane that can extend its reach over the Aurelian Wall, the ailing tree must be patiently drawn out, like a bad tooth. Likewise, each tomb, like Cestius's pyramid, has to weather the pollution of this bustling city; each has to be carefully tended and curated for the future. There is an inherent cost, of course, that is not met by revenue from the 20,000 or more visitors each year who seek out this historic oasis. Nevertheless, like the tended grass and the evocatively unkempt wild flowers, there is the pervasive assurance of a sensitive hand at work here. Balancing the books from fees for the plots as well as donations is a real skill. No less skill is required to sustain the serenity of this place, as well as its extraordinary encyclopedic archaeology.

In this cemetery, people matter. Leave it, and, in an instant, cluttered around the great pyramid, you immediately sense the inadequacies of Rome's anachronistic antiquities' service. Better instead, perhaps, to amble 300m towards the artificial *amphora* mound of Testaccio (see *CWA* 64), and take lunch in Flavio al Velavevodetto (Via di Monte Testaccio), a restaurant burrowed into the sherds. The menu is both modern and old: traditional dishes associated with the abattoir that was once here, fashioned to contemporary taste. Like the cemetery, it is a pointer to good management, caressing the senses appropriately in this Eternal City. □



**LEFT** The imposing Pyramid of Cestius, which today (**ABOVE**) is draped in scaffolding as conservators clean off the city's grime.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

Do buy Nicholas Stanley-Price's *The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome: its history, its people, and its survival for 300 years* (Rome, 2014), €18: the proceeds of this marvellous new book go to the upkeep of the cemetery (see [www.cemeteryrome.it](http://www.cemeteryrome.it)).

