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Foreigners only! The cemetery for non-Catholics in Rome

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ABSTRACT

For 300 years there has been a cemetery in Rome designated for non-Catholic foreigners who died there. The religious, artistic and historic significance of Rome goes far towards explaining why it has attracted so many foreign visitors, most of whom can be assigned to one of four broad categories. Protestants and (Russian) Orthodox predominated among early burials but today there are more than 40 nationalities and all the major faiths of the world represented there. It is suggested that a nostalgia for the homeland was found more often among earlier visitors to the cemetery, who lamented the fate of dying in a foreign land, than among those who had decided to stay. Finally, the tradition of monumental sculpture in the Non-Catholic Cemetery, while modest compared with Catholic funerary sculpture, benefited from the presence in the city of the many foreign sculptors who had set up their own workshops there.

KEYWORDS: Rome, non-Catholic, cemetery, Protestant, foreigner, sculpture, memorials

“A silent congregation from all over the world.”

W.W.Nevin, *Vignettes of travel* [1880]

“This is Rome’s permanent foreign colony.”

Elizabeth Bowen. *A Time in Rome* (1960)

For three hundred years the city of Rome has had a cemetery designated specifically for the use of foreigners who died there (Stanley-Price 2014). It has served those foreigners who, because they were not of the Roman Catholic faith, could not be buried in the consecrated ground of Catholic churches and cemeteries. Protestant

and Orthodox (mainly Russian) burials predominated in earlier decades. Nowadays, it contains the graves of people of more than forty different nationalities belonging to most of the major faiths of the world - or to none at all. More than 5000 people have been buried there and it continues to be an active cemetery today. Why has there been such a demand for a burial-ground for foreigners in Rome? And how does it differ from cemeteries for Catholics in the same city?

The demand for burial in Rome by foreigners

Rome has always attracted foreign visitors for well-known reasons: as the seat of the Papacy and thus a destination for pilgrims; as a venue for theological study and training for the Church; as a centre for the study of the ancient Roman world, and of Early Christian and Renaissance art; as a posting for diplomatic representatives, accredited to the Holy See and, since 1870, to the government of Italy; and, especially, as the Eternal City to which artists, writers and poets have always been attracted, inspired by the history, art and architecture and the light of that particular environment.

Of those who made that visit, some never returned home but died in or near the city. For many of those who were not Catholic, the burial-ground designated for foreigners was their final resting-place. Essentially, those who are buried there fall into one of the following categories:

(a) Foreigners who visited Italy with the intention of soon returning home.

In this category fall those young men who undertook a Grand Tour of Europe; the numerous artists who wished to benefit from what Rome offered before returning home to practice; and the diplomats and other officials who were posted for a limited term to the city. But this category includes many of those (the poet John Keats is an example) who came to Rome for health reasons in the hope that the Italian climate would be beneficial for a cure.

(b) foreigners who settled in Rome long-term.

Many of the artists who planned to spend a year or two in fact stayed on, perhaps not even making a conscious decision to do so, and eventually ended their days there. Others who stayed long-term were those who had married local residents, either Italian or foreign, or who earned their living as, for instance, doctors, bankers or innkeepers serving other foreigners.

(c) foreigners who visited or moved to Rome in later life.

Also buried in the Cemetery are many who spent only their later years in the city, for example military officials and missionaries who settled in Rome after serving in other countries; diplomats who served and then retired there rather than returning home; and elderly people who came hoping to benefit from a change of climate.

(d) foreigners born in Rome.

As time passed and as the foreign colony grew, especially after Rome became the capital of Italy, there were second- and third-generation children born to foreigners who came to be considered Italian (the painter Enrico Coleman is an example).

The foreigner's intention to visit briefly or to stay long-term was, of course, always subject to fate determining otherwise. A number of foreigners who were buried in the Cemetery died young from an accident, such as a drowning at sea, an overturned carriage or car, or a fall from a horse. But much the commonest cause of premature death was illness. Infant mortality was high and death in childbirth quite common. The devastating outbreaks of cholera in the 19th century were infrequent, but the risk of catching malaria in Rome was an annual preoccupation every summer. Nor was the climate of Rome necessarily beneficial for those many tuberculosis patients who arrived (as did John Keats) during the winter season. Surprisingly, the city has a higher average annual rainfall than London and the winter climate can be humid for months. Several of those who knew the city questioned its benefits for tuberculosis sufferers (e.g. Burgess 1852). The English writer George Gissing (1927, 364) wrote from Rome to his sister Ellen on January 23, 1898: "Italy is a splendid country for the young and strong. For invalids it offers little comfort and many dangers; to send Keats to Rome was the height of folly."

Dying in a foreign country

When a non-Catholic foreigner died in Rome, there were limited options as to how to proceed. The corpse of the deceased could be shipped back to his or her country. This was a common practice in the case of nobility during the 18th century and one that was also favoured by adherents of the Orthodox creeds. During the 19th century, the families of American Protestants dying in Rome often preferred this solution. Before the cemetery for Protestants was created in Rome in 1716, some bodies were transported to the older English cemetery in Livorno (known to the English as Leghorn). During the 18th century, and earlier, such decisions usually had to be taken by travelling companions or compatriots living in Rome, since many young men (and most of them were men) were unaccompanied by families. By the time that news of their deaths had reached their families at home, decisions had already had to be made about how to proceed.

Despite their taking place far from home, several of the funerals and burials in the late 18th and early 19th centuries are described in published accounts. The evidence of epitaphs on tombstones and of travel accounts written by their companions in Rome fills in what might otherwise have been a large lacuna (Stanley-Price, in press). As burials continued and more and more foreigners' gravestones were erected, later visitors could not help but comment on the sadness of dying in a foreign land. J.C.Eustace (1815, 393) who visited in 1802 wrote: "None but foreigners excluded by their religion from the cemeteries of the country, are deposited here, and of these foreigners, several were English. The far greater part had been cut off in their prime, by unexpected disease or by fatal accident. What a scene for a traveller far remote from home and liable to similar disasters!"

When Eustace visited, there were only a dozen gravestones in the cemetery (there had been other burials that lacked a stone marker). A century later, when the cemetery was much more extensive, the Finnish poet Emil Zilliacus (1924) had similar thoughts: "Near the Pyramid, in the open, wind-swept part of the Cemetery where Keats was interred, there sparkle the red anemones in the large meadow around the sarcophagi and at the columns of the funerary monuments under the tall, airy pines. English and Germans and Nordics, in this small, tranquil oasis they sleep that sleep which in the Greek epigrams is defined as so difficult and so bitter: the sleep in a foreign land."

Many other visitors echoed such sad reflections on the fate of dying away from home. But for others, this was precisely the spot where they themselves eventually wished to lie. Goethe, visiting the Cemetery during his tour of Italy in 1786-88, imagined himself being buried there. The young German writer, Wilhelm Waiblinger, wrote in his poem *German artist in Rome, Elegy*: "O Tiber, allow me soon / A grave near you by the Pyramid!" Within months he had died of tuberculosis at the age of 25 and was indeed buried there. A few years earlier, Anna Jameson (1826, 171) wrote: "The tombs lie around in a small space "amicably close", like brothers in exile, and as I gazed, I felt a kindred feeling with all; for I too am a wanderer, a stranger, and a heretic; and it is probable that my place of rest may be among them. Be it so! For methinks this earth could not afford a more lovely, a more tranquil, or more sacred spot."

Visitors to the Cemetery appear to have been more affected by a feeling of nostalgia for home than were those who died in Rome. At least, very few grave epitaphs refer to the misfortune of dying outside one's native country. On the gravestone of the Irishman Thomas Knox Armstrong (died in 1840) appear the words "This monument was erected by his widow bereaved in a foreign land...". Devereux Cockburn (died in 1850) had been born in "far off Britain". Sophia Howard from Baltimore (died in 1862) shares a grave with the infant Jessie Howard Tyson "In a foreign country...". Marie Reno died in 1915 "far away from her home and her

beloved family in New York, USA". But these are the few exceptions that prove the rule. Distance from the home-land rarely features in gravestone epitaphs, almost as if burial in Rome was sufficient compensation for being on/in foreign soil.

Sculpture and monuments

The anomaly of being a burial-ground for non-Catholic foreigners in a strongly Catholic country helps to explain the physical appearance of the Cemetery. Since its inauguration, the cemetery has been known under different names: "The Protestant Cemetery" was the commonest but "The cemetery of the heretics" was among the others in earlier days. The risk of provoking anti-heretic feeling was not the only reason why the cemetery for foreigners maintained a low profile: it was originally located on public land directly in front of the Pyramid of Caius Cestius. Romans had to make their way through the tombs of these "heretics" in order to have access to the ancient pyramid, a monument of considerable significance to them. In fact, it was the Protestants' erecting stone memorials (and planting trees) on the burial-ground that led to complaints to the Papal authorities and the opening in 1822 of a new cemetery on adjacent land, slightly removed from the Pyramid.

In addition to its sensitive location at the Pyramid, the Protestant cemetery was subject to restrictions on how the dead could be commemorated. For 50 years after its establishment, no stone monuments were erected. Once gravestones were tolerated (from 1765), the Papal authorities required that their epitaphs make no reference to the possibility of a resurrection or an after-life (*nulla salus extra ecclesiam*) (although a number of epitaphs that do so can be found among the graves) (Stanley-Price 2014, 54-56). These limitations did not prevent a modest tradition to develop for erecting monuments and associated sculptures (Huemer 2012).

It might be assumed that the distance from the home-country of the deceased would have discouraged commissions for other than the simplest designs for grave markers. But Rome not only enjoyed a rich and long tradition of marble-carving but many of its local practitioners were those foreign sculptors who had settled in Rome partly for that reason. As members of the resident foreign colony, moreover, they often knew the deceased personally. As a result, the Cemetery can boast a number of memorials designed by foreign sculptors who enjoyed good reputations in their native countries but who had long ago settled in Rome. When any one of them in due course eventually died there, either one of their own works was installed on the grave, or one of their sculptor friends would contribute a portrait medallion or other design. To give only a few examples: Bertel Thorvaldsen's portrait-medallion for the grave of August Goethe; John Gibson's headstone

and portrait-medallion for his fellow-sculptor Richard Wyatt; and Artur Volkmann's sculptural reliefs for the monuments to his friends Hans von Marées and Karl von Pidoll, he and Volkmann both having been students of von Marées (Stanley-Price 2014, 59-60).

That said, the sculptural wealth of the Non-Catholic Cemetery does not begin to compare with the astonishing tradition of Italian memorial sculpture to be found, especially, in central and northern Italy (Berresford 2004). In the 1880s special sections for Protestants (the *Reparto Evangelico*) and for Jews were opened in Rome's municipal cemetery at Campo Verano, where the exuberant styles of Catholic memorials were fully on view. But, in line with Protestant dogma, the scale of memorials at the Protestant (non-Catholic) Cemetery remained modest, and the freestanding family mausolea typical of Catholic cemeteries are almost completely lacking. Nor has it followed the Catholic tradition, which in Italy goes back to at least the 1880s, of installing a photograph of the deceased on the grave. From the mid-19th century, as in Protestant cemeteries elsewhere, many graves were marked simply with a freestanding cross: usually the standard Christian cross, often placed on a stepped base, but also the Celtic cross and the Orthodox cross with its variants.

Quite a few Catholic visitors who come today to this cemetery for foreigners express astonishment at seeing crosses atop its graves. In this respect and many others, the Non-Catholic Cemetery for Foreigners in Rome, with its burials of multiple nations and faiths intermingled together, has an important educational role to play in addition to being a place of surpassing peace and beauty.

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For a database of burials and more information about the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome see

www.cemeteryrome.it