



Fig. 1. The Non-Catholic Cemetery in spring

## MY FAVOURITE SPOT IN ROME

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Imagine a 'site' within the walls of Rome in the shadow of an intact monument two thousand years old; imagine it dense with tall old pines and cypresses and suffused with birdsong; imagine it in spring with a carpet of daisies and violets, with sky-blue wisteria and a Judas-tree scattering its pink blossoms on the path; imagine it as the final destination of many young men visiting Rome as part of their Grand Tour; imagine its associations with numerous poets, architects, sculptors, painters and diplomats; and, finally, imagine it not as a 'site' but as a living place that continues to serve the same function for which it was established. You are imagining the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome.

If many of those visiting this spot today admire its beauty and its peacefulness, sheltered from the worst of Rome's intense traffic, they are not the first to do so. In 1818 the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote to his friend Thomas Love Peacock that it was "the most beautiful and solemn Cemetery" he had ever beheld. Poor Shelley buried his little boy William there the following year. Only three years later his own ashes were entombed there, joining his fellow-Romantic poet John Keats who had succumbed to the tuberculosis that his friends in London hoped would be cured by the Roman climate. The beauty of the place and its association with the two poets made it a venue sought out by visitors to Rome; indeed, there are more 19th-century poems about the graves of

Keats and Shelley than about the graves of all other poets combined. But it would be wrong to think of these as the only attractions for the visitor.

### SIGNIFICANCE: PLACE, ART AND MEMORY

The significance of this beautiful spot lies in an unusual blend of values deriving from its location, its artistic wealth and its role as a burial-ground in perpetuating memory. It is so unusual that even in Rome, with its sensory overload of visual and historical stimulation, it has an appeal that is unique (in the proper sense of that abused word).

Its location derives value from the deep history of Rome while adding to that history for the last 300 years. The site is dominated by the Pyramid (built between 18 and 12 BC) which, significantly, is itself a tomb, the final resting place of Caius Cestius of whom we know little more than the information given in the inscriptions on two faces of the pyramid. Although its contents had been pillaged by looters who entered by tunnelling, the pyramid was restored by Pope Alexander III in 1663. The numerous engravings and vedute devoted to it after that date illustrate its appeal as a monument always considered worthy of active preservation. Abroad too, the fashion for erecting pyramidal burial vaults in the landscape gardens of

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Fig. 2. Early tombs in the shade of the pyramid.

northern Europe must owe more to those on the Grand Tour who had seen this pyramid in Rome than to the few who reached Egypt.

In the 3rd century AD the builders of the new city wall for the Emperor Aurelian incorporated the pyramid in the interests of saving themselves some work. The wall there was still intact in the 18th century and formed the southern boundary of the area that Protestants started to use to bury their dead. Who were these Protestants? Certainly some were young men on the Grand Tour who succumbed to disease, and others, older, who had decided to stay in Rome. But a number of them were members of the English Stuart court in exile. On the Court's arrival in Rome in 1719, Pope Clement XI gave it a modest palazzo in which to live and, it seems, tolerated the burying of its Protestant members in the open meadows facing the Pyramid.

Since those early days the cemetery has become the last resting-place not only of poets, but also of numerous writers, painters, sculptors, archaeologists,

architects and diplomats who ended their days in Rome. It is a place of memory par excellence in a long tradition of European and American artists (in the broad sense), several of whom wrote about or painted it or designed a sculpture that now adorns a tomb. Thus history and art and memory meet in this one place where all faiths and many nationalities are intermixed in post-mortem harmony.

### **SURVIVAL AND CONSERVATION**

How has such an unusual place survived and how is it managed today? This private burial-ground has survived for two principal reasons: the first that it has remained in use for nearly 300 years, and the second that, as a cemetery for foreigners, it has traditionally enjoyed the diplomatic protection of the leading European powers. Perhaps the greatest threat to its integrity arose in the late 19th century when the new Italian republic wished to breach Aurelian's town wall at this point and have a road and tram-line traverse the



Fig. 3. The graves of a young Englishman and (in shadow) of Karl Briullov, Russian painter

old part of the cemetery. The intervention of Queen Victoria and Kaiser Wilhelm II prevented this, but only after a 30m stretch of Roman town wall had been demolished. Since then it has enjoyed protection as a historic site at local (City of Rome), national (cultural property legislation) and international levels (the World Heritage status of the city of Rome).

Survival and legal protection alone are not enough, of course, and in 2005 the World Monuments Fund inscribed the cemetery on its Watch List of the 100 Most Endangered Sites. That same year ICCROM made recommendations about the future management of the cemetery and these have been closely followed. In recent years there have been marked improvements in its financial health, in its services to those holding concessions to tombs, and in the overall state of conservation of the monuments and their garden setting. Since 2011 it has been the venue for fieldwork on the biennial ICCROM-GCI International Stone Conservation course.

Much has changed since Shelley wrote about the cemetery in 1818 and since he and Keats were buried there. But the phrase “the most beautiful cemetery I know” keeps recurring in the comments made by visitors. Equally reassuring is the growing number of Italian visitors: many school and university groups from all over Italy, but also older residents of the zones just outside the cemetery’s walls who confess to visiting for the first time, despite having known of the place all their lives. Cemeteries as sites of memory need not be places of sadness but of joy too. Henry James held this view when describing this same spot in his *Italian Hours* as “a mixture of tears and smiles, of stones and flowers, of mourning cypresses and radiant sky, which gives us the impression of looking back at death from the brighter side of the grave.”

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