



The Peculiar Pyramid of Gaius Cestius

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

When planning travel today, the requisite digital search will effortlessly call up a list of the most “happening places.” Had the Internet existed in the eighteenth century, Rome would have undoubtedly topped the list. Abounding with aristocrats, antiquarians, and artists, the Eternal City was a must-see for those seeking romantic revery among the ruins on the famed “Grand Tour.” For Grand Tourists with deep pockets, acquiring a genuine antiquity to decorate the villa back home was *de rigueur*. Those on more modest budgets may well have gone home with a portfolio of Piranesi’s *Vedute* (“views”).

Twenty-year old Giovanni Battista Piranesi had first come to Rome to work as a draftsman for the Venetian ambassador to Pope Benedict XIV.

This led to the artist’s celebrated series of prints illustrating the city’s most revered monuments. Though likely aggrandized in various ways, the *Vedute* are nonetheless meticulously detailed records, particularly for those monuments now lost.

Among the ruins memorialized by Piranesi was the curious pyramid of Gaius Cestius. Many reflected on it after their visits, including Percy Bysshe Shelley and Thomas Hardy. The latter seemed confused by it, quipping “who was Cestius, and what is he to me?” Luckily, excavations in the 1660s under Pope Alexander VII uncovered the dedicatory inscription, which answered Hardy’s questions (was he not listening to his tour guide?). Gaius Cestius Epulo (d. ca. 12–15 BCE) was a Roman VIP with a series of imposing titles, including *Praetor* (judicial officer), *Tribunus Plebis* (an official who protected the interests of common people), and *Septemvir* (one of seven men who arranged feasts at games and religious occasions). His remarkable resumé aside, we are still left wondering why Cestius chose a pyramid for his tomb. Did he have a connection to Egypt?

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Giovanni Battista Piranesi (Italian, 1720–1778)

Veduta del Sepolcro di Cajo Cestio (View of the Tomb of Gaius Cestius), 1755

Etching and engraving on paper
Museum Purchase (2005.1)



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Today, it is reported that nearly 15 million tourists annually visit the blazing Giza plateau and stand in sweaty awe before three pharaonic tombs known as *the* Pyramids. Those tourists might be surprised to discover that Egypt is home to over 125 pyramids, and that if their Nile cruises continued beyond Egypt's southern border, they would find even more pyramids in the country of Sudan. A select group of Romans had first-hand experience with those pyramids, and scholars suggest one of them may have been Gaius Cestius.

In 23 BCE, four years after becoming emperor of the Romans, Augustus faced trouble in his province of Egypt. The ancient kingdom of Kush (modern Sudan) began raids on Egypt's southern border, daring to carry off images of the young emperor. Augustus' governor of Egypt, Gaius Petronius, quickly dispatched 10,000 infantry from Alexandria to quash the meddlesome Kushites. This event took Romans further into Africa than they would ever be again, and exposed them to the unusual pyramids built by the Kushites in their capital of Meroë. The sides of these pyramids are steeper in slope than the Giza pyramids, and rise to a sharper point at the apex. If Cestius was in the Roman campaign in Kush, he may have wanted to memorialize this event in his tomb, one that closely resembles a Kushite pyramid.

The final resting place of Gaius Cestius still stands today in the city of Rome, near the Protestant cemetery. At a height of 121.4 feet (97.1 feet square at the base), it is impossible to miss. Constructed of brick-faced concrete, the pyramid retains its white marble cladding. The dedicatory inscription was carved into two sides (east and west) so that it would be optimally visible in antiquity. An additional inscription, below the dedication on the east flank, provides more details, including the fact that Cestius specified the pyramid's construction in his will. The interior burial chamber was once frescoed but the plaster is in poor condition today. Nearly 300 years after Cestius was laid to rest in his pyramid, the emperor Aurelian built new walls for the expanded city and incorporated the forgotten tomb as a formidable bastion. A section of the Aurelian Wall still abuts the pyramid today. ■



The ancient Kushite pyramids of Sudan.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nubian_pyramids



Aerial view of the pyramid of Cestius today.
<https://colosseumrometickets.com/pyramid-of-cestius/>