

14. THE CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA DELLE ANIME DEL PURGATORIO AD ARCO

Right in the middle of the Decumanus Maggiore, the unmistakeable, majestic form of the Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco rises above the chaos of everyday life.

The church was built in 1616 by a group of **noblemen** who decided to found the **Congrega di Purgatorio ad Arco**, a humanitarian organisation to help the poor, the sick and women in trouble. **Cosimo Fanzago** was the official builder, but, in reality, the end product is the result of the work of a group of famous sculptors. The addition of the term “of the Arch” to the name indicates that the church was built near a medieval tower with a big arch, which was knocked down at the beginning of XVI century by the Viceroy **Don Pedro de Toledo**.

A gate marks the entrance to the church and there are **two bronze skulls and two crossed tibias**, and this pattern is repeated on the splendid baroque facade. The **mortuary symbols** on the façade, with the saints, flowers and lighted candles, warn us that there is something sinister and disturbing, though extremely fascinating waiting for us inside.

In the **hypogeum** we can see graves dug into the ground as well as *scaravattoli*, which are small boxes of wood containing human remains which are, for the most part, anonymous.

Although there are lots of bodies down here, one niche stands out because **the skull is covered in a bridal veil and the head laid on a white cushion**. There are also lots of flowers, pictures of saints, photographs of different people, and the many votive offerings from the mass of devotees who pray to **Lucia**, a girl who died at the age of sixteen and about whom legends abound.

Some say that Lucia died of a broken heart when her father refused to let her marry the man she so desperately loved, and the veil she was never able to wear now covers her head. Another later version, suggests that Lucia was the only daughter of **Domenico d'Amore principe di Ruffano**, who died of tuberculosis in 1789 just after marrying the marquis Giacomo Santomango. According to the legend, her father had her buried in the cemetery at Purgatorio ad Arco because he was a devotee of the souls there.

The Ecclesiastical courts sanctioned a ban on the **worship of anonymous human remains** in the 1960s. This did not prevent the cult continuing until 1980 when the earthquake led to the closure of the church and its underground cemetery. Both were re-opened in 1992 after substantial restoration work.