Seeing the invisible, speaking of the unspeakable, valuing the invaluable – comparative exploratory study of Tourist activity in two Portuguese cemeteries

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Abstract
This paper compares two Portuguese Romanticist cemeteries, both with great potential for Tourism, but where Tourist activity occurs with different levels of success. Both cemeteries are located in the North of Portugal and share many common characteristics: they were both established in the 19th century, they both have significant historical, artistic and cultural value, they are both located near established tourist attractions, they both are proportional in size to the dimensions of the cities they serve.
However, the Agramonte cemetery in Porto has an established tourist activity, sanctioned and promoted by local administration, whereas the Central Cemetery of Aveiro only gets the occasional visitor.
So what could be the hidden factors for this divergence? By interviewing some of the stakeholders of cemetery tourism in both cities, we seek to point out some characteristics that may contribute for the actual implementation of tourist activity in

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a cemetery. The conclusions reached by this exploratory case study may set the foundations for further, larger scale researches.

**Keywords:** Cemeteries; Portugal; Tourism; Dark Tourism; Tourist valorization.

**Introduction**

This paper offers a comparison of tourist activity in two cemeteries in the center-north part of Portugal: Agramonte in Porto and the Central Cemetery of Aveiro. Whereas the former is an established tourist attraction, the latter is not. This study sought to identify some of the factors that may contribute to that differential.

It does so by first addressing the conceptual framework of death-related tourism, particularly cemetery tourism, within a rhizomatic perspective. Subsequently, it presents the current status of both cemeteries as tourist attractions, and concludes with some considerations on the factors that may influence these situations.

The data for this paper were collected through interviews with key-subjects, both in Porto and in Aveiro, through secondary data, publically available online and in print, and through direct observation and experience of tourist activity in both cemeteries.

Informal, unscripted interviews with municipality employees directly involved with the cemeteries have taken place from 2011 to 2013, at municipal bureaus and the cemeteries in Porto and Aveiro. In Porto, we have interviewed Eng. Arnaldina Riesenberger, superior technician of the Municipal Division of Urban Parks; in Aveiro, Dr. Gabriela Marques, superior technician of the Culture Division, and Mr. Paulo Silva, caretaker in the Central Cemetery.

Secondary data used in this paper are available online, at the municipalities’ websites and at that of Turismo de Portugal, the national tourism organism. These data allowed us to ascertain if and how cemeteries are marketed as tourist attractions and provided official statistics on tourist activity in both cities.

Finally, we drew from our experience as researchers and, cemetery tour guides and frequent visitors to these cemeteries.

**Death-related tourism: a root for concord**

In present day western society, death is often apparently absent from daily life and practices (Ariès, 1988; Giddens, 1991; Stone, 2009b). However, it is also very much present, especially through popular culture, mass media, and Tourism (Stone, 2009b; Durkin, 2003).

The latter are, in fact, the two most powerful mediators of death and suffering in our society (Durkin, 2003). In spite of society’s attempts to take death away from people’s
everyday lives, it is something too powerful to be ignored (Giddens, 1991). The decline (or even disappearance) of traditional public/social mechanisms of dealing with death and suffering in contemporary western society, such as religion, means that individuals are left to face the dread of mortality by themselves – which creates even more dread (Giddens, 1991).

Tourism’s importance as a mediator of death and suffering lies on the fact that it provides safe and socially sanctioned environments where individuals can construct and reflect on their own notions of mortality (Stone, 2009b). Moreover, tourist attractions related to death and suffering are usually places that somehow represent specific moments or circumstances in history of national or supra-national significance, wherein visitors can and do project their own meanings and understandings (Stone, 2013). These attractions are, at the same time, physical places that can be visited, and social spaces both connected and disconnected from all others, where normality is suspended (Foucault, 1967; Stone, 2013). Thus, visitors feel safe to confront that which they can’t in everyday, normal life.

Of course, not all tourist attractions are connected to death and suffering. Dark tourism is the name given to tourist activity in places with a concrete and identifiable relation to death and suffering (Coutinho, 2012). This is not a recent phenomenon, although its academic study only began in the latter half of the 1990s (Sharpley, 2009c). It has since been regarded either as behavioral – i.e., related to tourists’ desire to visit a place because it is connected to death and suffering (see, for example Seaton, 1996) – or as supply-based – i.e., on the characteristics of attractions (see, for example, Stone, 2006).

Although both perspectives are valid, they are reductive towards a decidedly complex phenomenon. We postulate that dark tourism should be understood as the possibility of dealing with and reflecting on death and suffering, provided or facilitated by tourist attractions and/or activities.

Most studies on dark tourism motivation show that the desire for contact with death and suffering is very rarely the main motivation for a visit (see, for example, Niemelä, 2010). At the same time, many tourist attractions with a concrete and identifiable relation to death and suffering do not market themselves as so. Moreover, whether we look at dark tourism from demand or supply’s perspective, the spectrum of attractions that fall under its scope is very broad and encompasses places that seem completely unrelated to each other (see, for example, Stone, 2006). Often, the only thing they have in common is the fact that they are somehow related to death and suffering.

Cemeteries, for example, have a very clear and identifiable relation to death and suffering: they are places built to dispose of and mourn dead people. In that sense,
they are dark tourism attractions. But cemeteries are more than deposits of corpses – they are representative of a time, place and culture. So, in this sense, cemetery tourism is more than just dark tourism. It allows visitors to come in contact with not just death and suffering, but with Art, history, architecture, famous people and their work and lives, interesting, curious, and even funny stories.

Hence, cemetery tourism cannot be described simply as a form of dark tourism, neither can it be stripped of or denied its relation to death and suffering and described simply as cultural or heritage tourism.

In this paper, we advocate a view of tourism, specifically cemetery tourism, as a complex network of factors and relations, of circumstances and practices. In other words, we believe that it should be analyzed as a rhizome.

The concept of a rhizomatic structure was first adapted into Humanities and Social Sciences by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1995). They sought to contradict hierarchical structure such as trees and roots (also derived from Natural Sciences) and see things in their complexity.

A rhizome has certain characteristics. The first two are connection and heterogeneity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995). These mean that any point in a rhizome can and must be connected with any other. In cemetery tourism, the living connect with the dead, with death, art, history, culture, with their own past and present experiences, expectations and values. But all of these elements are, in turn, interconnected and connected to countless others.

The third characteristic of rhizomes is multiplicity. Multiplicity is not opposite to unity, because it has no unit to serve as object; it has neither subject nor object, only dimensions that change nature as they grow in size and connections (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995).

A cemetery is a multiplicity of dimensions (e.g. historical, cultural, individual, touristic) that change nature as they connect. When tourism and cemeteries meet, they become something different: cemetery tourism and cemetery tourist attractions.

The fourth characteristic of rhizomes is a-significant rupture. According to this principle, a rhizome can be ruptured along one of its many segmenting lines, but always comes back to organizations that re-connect and re-stratify the whole (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995).

Cemetery tourism can be ruptured along many lines: tourists, attractions, death, heritage, culture, to name just a few. But each of these independent lines will originate new connections with the others.
The fifth and sixth characteristics of rhizomes are cartography and decalcomania, which state that a rhizome cannot be justified by a structural or generating model (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995). There is no hierarchy, no single point of entry, no theoretical universal structure. Rhizomes are continuously built, re-built, altered, and reversed, according to pragmatic, real experience. They are not universal.

Cemetery tourism can be analyzed from various points of view: one can start by studying its urban planning or architecture, but cannot avoid connections to culture, history and death, to name just a few. At the same time, the network of relations that composes a rhizome for one cemetery and its tourist activity cannot be directly transposed to another: each has its own dimensions that vary and connect in different ways, in different moments in time.

Within this structure, cemetery tourism is not a subtype of any other form of tourism; it is not an alternative to something else. It is something deserving of being put in the middle of a dense and complex structure or inter-connecting, variable elements.

**Agramonte Cemetery: visible, spoken of and valued**

Agramonte cemetery was created in 1855 as a secondary public cemetery, after a second cholera breakout in Porto deemed necessary to find a new space to bury the victims (Câmara Municipal do Porto, 2012). At the time, people preferred private cemeteries, sponsored by catholic brotherhoods and nearer churches and chapels, but they revealed to be inadequate to receive the much needed graves during the epidemic, and thus the municipality had to establish Agramonte as the new, improvised, public cemetery, with a wooden chapel that was only replaced almost 20 years later.

This cemetery has an abundance of late 19th century monuments and vaults, in part due to the fact that some catholic brotherhoods had to establish there their new private sections, which worked as smaller cemeteries within the greater one.

Agramonte cemetery holds the graves of many important Porto citizens, entrepreneurs, artists, noble families and distinct personalities. It also possesses many significant art pieces, particularly from nearby ceramic companies and famous Portuguese sculptors, and graves and vaults designed or decorated by famous Portuguese architects. Some of the most important and interesting monuments are in the private sections.

This cemetery is located near a great traffic hub in Porto – Boavista traffic circle – and is easily accessed by car and public transportation. Casa da Música, one of the most famous tourist sites in Porto, is also next to it (see map below).
The process of establishing this cemetery as a tourist attraction in the eyes of the municipality started in the mid 1980s, through the action of Luiz Oliveira Dias, a city councilman, who led embellishment and restoration works in Porto cemeteries in order to make them friendlier for users and for visitors. It was also under his mandate that the first brochures featuring Porto cemeteries were published. Subsequent councilmen responsible for cemeteries have been less aware of cemetery’s tourist potential, and subsided only when made to see them as cultural sites, instead of morbid ones. Eng. Arnarldina Riesenberger also played an important role in this process; as a municipality superior technician interested in cemeteries, she has proposed and organized many of the events and initiatives that are part of Porto’s annual Cemetery Cultural Cycle (which includes guided tours, exhibitions and concerts).

Agramonte cemetery has had regular guided tours, organized by the municipality, since 2003, at a medium rate of one per year. These have included thematic tours, such as that devoted to photographers, in 2012, and even the first nocturnal tour of a Portuguese cemetery, also in 2012. In addition, there are also private guided tours, organized by local historians and cemetery enthusiasts, done with the municipality’s permission. The number of participants varies on each tour: for example, the thematic photography tour had circa 30 participants, whereas the nocturnal tour had circa 180
(Câmara Municipal do Porto, 2012). These tours are guided by hired guides, usually academics.

In addition, Agramonte cemetery is included in printed tourist brochures, issued by the municipality, that provide information about the city’s historical cemeteries and suggest a cemetery tourism route. Agramonte cemetery is also featured on the website of Porto’s municipality as a heritage site and tourist attraction, with information on its history, location, opening hours, etc. (VisitPorto, s.d.).

Agramonte Cemetery has been part of the Association of Significant Cemeteries of Europe since 2005 and of the European Cemeteries Route since 2011. Nevertheless, it does not benefit from any kind of heritage classification.

There are several academic studies about Porto’s cemeteries, starting in the mid 1990s with Gonçalo Vasconcelos e Sousa’s articles that focused on several aspects connected with Lapa (private cemetery) and Prado do Repouso and Agramonte public cemeteries (see DeGóis, 2014). After his Master’s thesis devoted to Lapa cemetery, in 1997, Francisco Queiroz began his inventory of Romanticist monuments in Porto cemeteries for his Ph.D. thesis, in the early 2000s, and has since produced a vast array of studies on cemeteries and cemetery tourism, some of which feature Agramonte cemetery (see Queiroz, 2011). More recently, there is Alda Bessa’s Master’s Thesis³, focused on tombs in Agramonte Cemetery. The first Tourism thesis focused on a Porto cemetery was Belmira Coutinho’s, in 2012 (see resources), shortly followed by Ana Paula Pega’s Master’s Thesis⁴, this one proposing a tourist route in Porto’s cemeteries.

**Central Cemetery of Aveiro: invisible, unspeakable and undervalued**

The Central Cemetery of Aveiro was created in 1835 by public decree and was installed on what used to be the grounds of the Dominican Convent of Our Lady of Mercy, then already extinct. The first burial in this cemetery took place in 1835, even though the cemetery and its chapel were blessed by the Catholic Church only in 1839 (Queiroz, 2002).

When compared to other romanticist cemeteries in Portugal, such as the Cemetery of Agramonte, the Central Cemetery of Aveiro is noticeably smaller (Queiroz, 2002). This however, seems to be in proportion to the city’s dimension and population – around the time the cemetery was built, Aveiro had a population of less than 11 000. By that time, Porto already surpassed 100 000.

Buried in this cemetery are people important to the city of Aveiro, such as bishops, doctors and governors, but also statesmen, writers, explorers, freedom fighters, of national relevance (see Coutinho & Baptista, forthcoming a). Besides that, it holds

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graves and vaults of artistic relevance, some of them reflecting the city’s Art Noveau influence.

The Central Cemetery of Aveiro is located in the historic center of Aveiro, very near some of its most visited sites, such as the Cathedral, the Central Canal, Rossio (with its Art Noveau buildings), Museum of Aveiro - Saint Joanna, Forum Mall, just to name a few. It is divided into four plots and surrounded by vaults. If it used to have more shrubs and trees, as was the Romanticist ideal, they are long gone (see picture below).

Despite not being a classified heritage site, the cemetery already benefits from a certain kind of protection: it is part of the Special Protection Zone of the Cathedral, which is a Public Interest Heritage site since 1996. According to articles 43rd and 51st of Law Decree no. 309/2009, the content of these special protection zones must be protected, but can be altered if the organism responsible for public heritage in Portugal, IGESPAR, gives permission. This, together with the fact that many tombs have been abandoned – either because the family died out or moved away from the city, makes it so that some of the most important and artistically interesting tombs and vaults are in danger of destruction. Destruction that may occur, if not from lack of care, from the actions of new concessionaires of a burial spot.

Published research about the Central Cemetery of Aveiro is virtually non-existent. Even though we were told that there have been studies done by local historians, we could not find them or references to them neither in public libraries, nor online. The first thesis to mention the Central Cemetery of Aveiro’s heritage and artistic value was
Francisco Queiroz’s Master’s thesis, in 1997. A few years later, the municipality authorized him to do research at the cemetery in 2000, and agreed on the publication of a book with its results, however, that never came to be published. This leads us to believe that there hasn’t been an inventory of monuments and graves or academic studies on its artwork and/or architecture – or, if there have, they are not available. In 2011 (see: resources), Belmira Coutinho suggested a visit itinerary of the Central Cemetery of Aveiro.

According to Dr. Gabriela Marques, the municipality of Aveiro is aware that the cemetery is visited by tourists and includes it in its Art Noveau route. However, this is not done publically on the municipality’s website or printed brochures: so as not to discourage excursions from visiting such a morbid site, this information is only given in the proposals sent to tour organizers and presented as an optional step of the route. The same source informed us that there are very few excursions per year that accept this optional step. This was confirmed by Mr. Paulo Silva, who reported that although there are some excursions that visit the cemetery every year, the majority of visitors are independent and most are foreign.

**Seeing the invisible, speaking of the unspeakable, valuing the invaluable: some influencing factors**

After comparing the evolution of tourist activity in both these cemeteries, it is possible to identify some factors that greatly contribute to their being considered (or not) as tourist attractions, in particular by local public authorities.

The first factor is, unquestionably, the existence and amount of published scientific research about the cemetery. Scientific studies that focus on artistic, historical, or individual aspects of a cemetery seem to be a great catalyst for the awareness of local public authorities of the cemetery’s heritage value and potential as a tourist attraction.

In order to conduct a study in a Portuguese cemetery, local authorities have to be informed and give their permission to the researchers. Although this can sometimes be seen as unnecessary bureaucracy, it also serves to make local authorities aware of the interest that the cemetery raises for the scientific community. Inventories of artworks and architecture can provide municipalities with a notion of the cemetery’s heritage value, but other studies that focus on particular aspects of the cemetery (such as personalities buried there or events that involve them) may confer it new layers of interest. Tourist studies, of course, can play a pivotal role on showing municipalities how the cemetery’s tourist potential can be harnessed and put into practice.

Therefore, the action of the municipality is another very important factor. Although graves and vaults are concessioned property, cemeteries are the municipality’s responsibility. Municipalities have the power to do the alterations that the touristification of a cemetery requires: embellishment works, interpretation and
direction signs, infrastructures (such as public restrooms), etc. Moreover, if the cemetery benefits from any kind of protection, they can also take charge of abandoned monuments and ensure their conservation when a new concession will jeopardize artistic or historic aspects of the tomb.

Municipalities also have the power to issue guides and information for tourists, to include the cemetery in their list of “places to see” in the city or tourist routes, and to organize guided tours and other events in cemeteries — even if national tourism institutions do not recognize the cemetery as a tourist attraction.

However, the action of individuals must also be taken into consideration. This research shows that, in Porto, the progress of cemetery tourism was often boosted by one or other individual in a position of power within the municipality. This raises the question of whether political rivalries can hinder the progress of cemetery tourism, or of how and how much so, in a more pessimistic point of view.

Another factor that cannot be overlooked is economic benefit. Annual fees, sales of burial plots, inhumation and grave transfer fees, represent an important source of income for municipalities. In Aveiro, the price per m² of burial plots is many times higher than anywhere else in the city. Hence, municipalities may not be inclined to give this up for any activity they regard as less profitable, such as tourism. As it has been pointed out earlier in this paper and in Queiroz & Coutinho (2014), charging admission fees to cemetery visitors is virtually impossible: if a cemetery is still in use or recently stopped being so, there is no practicable way to effectively distinguish between mourners/grave carers and tourists. One possible solution for this would be to charge for guided tours only, at specific times, but this can also seem unprofitable for municipalities, as Queiroz & Coutinho (2014) also point out.

The existence of cultural demand factors that may prevent a cemetery from being considered as a tourist attraction can also be argued. In a city that receives mostly Portuguese tourists, as is the case of Aveiro (Turismo de Portugal, 2014a), tourist demand for cemeteries is less than in a city that receives more foreign tourists, such as Porto (Turismo de Portugal, 2014b). It is easier for foreign tourists in Portugal to distance themselves from a cemetery, and regard it as a place of tourist interest - rather than a place to mourn one’s loved ones, than it is for Portuguese tourists (Queiroz, 2005; Coutinho, 2012; Coutinho & Baptista, 2014).

There is a final, but not unimportant factor: the disassociation of cemeteries as tourist attractions from death and suffering. Cemeteries are portrayed as places of history, of heritage, of culture. Places where visitors can appreciate beautiful works of art and learn about important people. But not as places where death is very much present – for what is a cemetery, in essence, if not a place wherein to dispose of and mourn our
dead? Nevertheless, this dissociation of even negation of death seems to be crucial in order to be able to “sell” a cemetery as a tourist attraction to local public authorities.

It is only when a cemetery is effectively separated from death and suffering that it can become a tourist attraction. “Cemetery tourism is cultural tourism; it has nothing to do with death or suffering or dark tourism”. We have encountered this attitude both in researchers and in municipality employees. The fact is that cemeteries are incredible repositories of art and history, but also of dead bodies. Their connection to death and suffering is clear and undeniable. Thus, they provide a privileged, safe and socially sanctioned environment for visitors to confront and reflect on their notions of mortality (Stone, 2009c; Stone, 2011).

All in all, although Agramonte cemetery can be considered a benchmark for cemetery tourism in Portugal, much still needs to be done. The municipality’s efforts to collect information and issue brochures and routes for tourists, to organize different guided tours and events and to have not only one, but two cemeteries be part of the Association of Significant Cemeteries in Europe and be included in the European Cemeteries Route are certainly to be praised. However, interpretation at the site remains poor and the information available for tourists, both online and in printed brochures, is very shallow. Thematic routes – even those done in past tours – are not made available for tourists, which have to admire works of art and architecture without any further context, and can pass by very important or interesting graves (but so artistically impressive) without realizing it.

The Central Cemetery of Aveiro seems to have all necessary requirements to be recognized as a tourist attraction by local public authorities, but little has been done to ensure it is so. Even though the cemetery is visited by many individual tourists, it is not listed by the municipality as one of the city’s points of interest. There is no tourist information about it nor in printed neither in online forms. It is not publically included in any of the tourist routes suggested by the municipality, although its potential value for tourism is not completely unknown.

Because they result from an exploratory study of only two cases, the conclusions reached in this paper do not apply to other cases and situations, but may serve as a guide for other studies, more intensive or extensive. As it has been suggested earlier in this paper, scientific research can play a pivotal role in raising municipal awareness of a cemetery’s tourist value. Hopefully this paper is not only a contribution towards that, but also a call for more research to be done, particularly on smaller, more often overlooked cemeteries.
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