Aveiro’s Central Cemetery: between life and death

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Dark Tourism or Thanatotourism – from the greek thanatos, meaning death – is a wide phenomenon that encompasses many different types of attractions, which in turn are sought by people with many different motivations (Sharpley, 2009, Queiroz, n.d.). However, Dark Tourism should not be seen merely as the attraction or desire to visit places connected with death.

The study of Dark Tourism has only recently captivated the academic community (Sharpley, 2009). Despite this fact, Sharpley (2009) states that there are contrasting perspectives of analysis: one can either consider that Dark Tourism has to do only with the characteristics of the attractions, on a supply-based perspective; or, on the other hand, we can consider dark Tourism as a phenomenon of tourism consumption behavior (demand-oriented perspective).

Nevertheless, one of the few points of agreement for those who attempt to create a theoretical background for Dark Tourism is that (in all its manifestations) it associates a place, attraction, or tourist experience to death, calamity or suffering (Sharpley, 2009). In accordance, Stone (2006a, quoted by Sharpley, 2009, p.10), defines Dark Tourism as “the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre” – which is the definition we have chosen to use for the purposes of this paper.

Although it may be true that most people associate cemeteries with death and mourning, it is also true that there is a growing number of people to whom they offer a source of fascination or interest (Queiroz, n.d., Sharpley, 2009). Either as a part of the Dark Tourism theme or not, the search for visits to cemeteries is increasing (Sharpley, 2009, and Scott, 2010).

Cemetery-based tourism can be a manifestation of Dark Tourism and, as such, is steadily increasing (Sharpley, 2009, and Scott, 2010). According to Scott (2010), this is partly due to “the move of the Gothic from the periphery to the mainstream of popular culture”.

Nevertheless, as Scott (2010) and Queiroz (2007) state, not every one of those who visit a cemetery can qualify as a dark tourist. According to Scott (2010), many of those who visit a cemetery do it because they want to know more of the history of a place or to admire the sculptural and architectural pieces in the cemetery.

Where else can one find such a high concentration of local and/or global history and stories? Take as an example the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, where one can visit the graves of such different people as Frédéric Chopin, Oscar Wilde, Sarah Bernhardt, Marcel Marceau, Auguste Compte, and of course Jim Morrisson (Cimitière du Père Lachaise, 2003). Moreover, as anyone who has ever visited the Père Lachaise cemetery will say, some cemeteries are also showcases of Art, Architecture, and the attitude of the time towards death (Queiroz, n.d.).
The dark tourist, however, is interested in the tombs’ symbolic elements, and seeks the imagined presence of death - thus getting from the visit to a cemetery “a sensational or emotional pleasure, rooted in Romantic or Gothic art and literature” (Scott, 2010).

Both kinds of visitors will fulfill their needs at the Portuguese Romanticist cemeteries. These are qualified by Queiroz (n.d.) as true museums of History and Art, at the same time representing the Romanticist attitude towards death: “the preservation of one’s memory and the celebration of death as an allegory of loss and melancholy” (Queiroz, n.d.).

The history of cemeteries in Portugal is relatively recent, being that the first real cemeteries date back to the Romanticist Era (Queiroz, n.d.). Prior to that, most of the people were buried in churches or “adros”, as it was believed that the proximity to the church altar or holy relics increased the chances of salvation (Queiroz, n.d.).

The first law that dictated the mandatory creation of cemeteries in this country dates back to 1835, and was passed by the Liberalist government that then took charge (Queiroz, n.d.). This law forced every major village to have one proper cemetery away from houses, duly consecrated and surrounded by walls (Queiroz, n.d.).

Both this law and the one that followed it, in 1844, had very limited success: in 1875 every major village already had a cemetery, but in the beginning of the 20th century the first cemeteries were still being created in some rural areas of the country.

However, there are some examples of Romanticist cemeteries of great beauty and touristic potential in the country (Queiroz, n.d.). Such is the case of Aveiro’s Central Cemetery. Is is not one of the biggest or richest Romanticist cemeteries in Portugal, but given its relative size and its location within the city, we believe that it should be marketed as one of the city’s attractions.

Aveiro’s Central Cemetery was created after the already mentioned law of 1835. It received its first burial in that same year: Francisco de Almeida, a carpenter whose family was not glad with the interment site and had graves opened at two churches before being forced to comply with the law (Cristo and Gaspar, 2009). This is somewhat understandable, given that it wasn’t until 1839 that this cemetery was consecrated and its chapel built (Cristo and Gaspar, 2009).

Our aim is to create an itinerary within this cemetery that offers an outlook on the life of the city since the second half of the 18th century. We plan to accomplish this using as a starting point the graves of outstanding individuals, and graves that for some reason are outstanding on their own – some of these are used to tell a little about the historic and social atmosphere in Portugal and in Aveiro in the time they date to. A lighter, almost entertaining component is not forgotten, with the inclusion of curiosities and symbol interpretation.

In order to understand the positioning of the tour we are attempting to create within the broader spheres of Dark Tourism and Cemetery Tourism, we had to first understand those concepts, through the not so many papers and books published on these subjects. Also, several visits to Aveiro’s Central Cemetery were necessary in order to create this itinerary. In one of those visits we were joined by a local historian - Monsenhor João Gaspar – whose knowledge of the city’s history and of many of the people buried at the cemetery was central for our subsequent research. The consult of the cemetery’s register
books, available at Aveiro’s South Cemetery, was of course indispensable, as were the numerous books and websites on local and world history we had to look up.

The suggested tour is planned to last 45 minutes to 1 hour and is not suited for groups bigger that 10 people – this is due to the narrowness of the cemetery paths. This tour can be done every day of the week, according to the cemetery’s opening hours, but the promoter must be careful as to make sure that there are no funerals to be held at the time of the tour. It is our opinion that this tour should be free of charge, at least while the flux of visitors is considered to be low by local authorities.

The main points of interest of this tour (that is still being devised) are: the tombs of famous Aveiro natives such as José Estêvão, Homem Christo and Mário Sacramento; the tombs of other not so famous natives like Mendes Leite, who wrote the addendum to the “Carta Constitucional” that abolished the death penalty for political crimes; mysterious graves such as the one that looks like a stone coffin and for which there are no records on the cemetery books; the monument in honor of the “Mártires da Liberdade” (the martyrs of liberty), which holds the heads of the 6 men from Aveiro that were executed for their role in the revolutionary movement against Absolutism; and of course some funerary monuments that are particularly interesting due to their architectural style and/ or its richness in symbols.

REFERENCES


Queiroz (n.d.) Cemeteries in Portugal (19th century) – An historical and artistic approach. URL: http://www.queirozportela.com/cemeto.htm , last access: 30/01/2011

