

A Burning Question: Reimagining Portugal's Journey Towards Cremation

Rafaela Ferraz^{1,a}

¹| Independent Researcher, Portugal

^a| scontact@rafaelaferraz.com

Abstract. Portugal only legalized cremation in 1911, but this funerary practice had long been a topic of discussion. As far back as the mid-19th century, Portuguese intellectuals had been contemplating cremation as a clean, efficient, and dignified alternative to both public cemeteries and church burial—the latter of which had been the dominant practice for centuries. In the struggle between the age-old practice of burial and the emerging practice of cremation, the former emerged victorious. But what if cremation had become the dominant funerary practice as early as the 19th century? By examining the evolution of burial and cremation through a cultural and religious lens, this paper investigates how a shift from burial to cremation could have influenced different elements of Portuguese society, from the specific dynamics of cemetery usage and mourning practices to the broader effects on the environment and the economy.

Keywords: Cemeteries; Cremation; Portugal; Death practices; Funerals; Dark tourism; Alternative history

1. Introduction

The 'Funerary practices are an essential part of a country's culture. While death transcends territories, borders, and nationalities, the practices that surround it can be as unique as each country, community, family, or individual. The concept of death practices encompasses all sorts of rituals that begin once a person is identified as deceased (e.g. body preparation, wakes, funerals) and may extend indefinitely into the future (e.g. requiem masses, grave decoration and maintenance). In the middle of the spectrum, between the extremes, lie the practices associated with the disposal or disposition of the body, which in Portugal are burial and cremation.

Although it may seem plausible to consider the choice between burial and cremation to be a purely individual decision, affecting only the deceased and their loved ones, the opposite is true: the choice between burial and cremation has long been influenced by cultural and religious customs, and it itself has repercussions across time and space. In Portugal, where public cemeteries have been normalized since the 19th century, the landscape bears witness to this dynamic: in every small community, there is a cemetery, and in every cemetery, there are individual graves and family mausoleums, most of which bear witness to various forms of mourning and memorialization. There are economies supported by the ubiquity of public cemeteries—from stonemasons to coffin manufacturers to flower arrangers. In some cemeteries, which are considered particularly relevant from a historical, architectural, or artistic point of view, there is even a degree of tourist potential that has come to be explored in recent years.

There is potential for funerary practice to shape communities, not only at the local but also the national level. In order to explore the extent of this potential, this article will delve into a hypothetical scenario: what if cremation had become the dominant funerary practice in Portugal, starting in the 19th century?

To explore this hypothesis, we will begin with a brief overview of the history of burial and cremation in Portugal. We will trace the history of these practices from their onset in the country and gain a better understanding of the cultural and religious dynamics that shaped their development. Once we have established a firm foundation, we will begin to construct a hypothetical scenario where cremation, rather than burial, is the dominant funerary practice in Portugal. Through this exercise, we will explore how a seemingly small shift could have influenced different elements of Portuguese society, from the specific dynamics of cemetery usage and mourning practices to the broader effects on the environment, the economy, and the tourism industry.

2. A brief history of burial in public cemeteries

The history of public cemeteries in Portugal begins in the 19th century, specifically in the 1830s. Up until this point, burials had been predominantly conducted inside churches or in the *adro*, an area surrounding the church that served multiple communal purposes, from marketplace to burial ground. Due to its multifunctional nature, the *adro* could not accommodate tombstones and funerary monuments, a key difference that distinguished it from the public cemeteries that would come to replace it.

Burial in churches and *adros* was socially stratified: wealthier members of the community were buried inside the church, in near proximity to the altars, while the rest of the community was buried in the remaining space. When the church ran out of burial space, the *adro* served as an alternative [1]. These practices were not unique to Portugal: for centuries, church burial was the norm in European Catholic countries, a physical demonstration of the strong bond between funerary practices and the Church.



Figure 1: Medieval necropolis of Moreira de Rei, with anthropomorphic graves visible in the adro, or churchyard. Source: Rafaela Ferraz

The practice of church burial began to garner criticism in the 18th century, in Portugal and elsewhere, as scientific knowledge gained traction and public health concerns began to influence discussions surrounding funerary practices. The idea that decomposing bodies released noxious miasmas capable of spreading disease gained popularity among intellectuals of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In turn, this led to the idea that minimizing contact between the living and the dead was essential for public health, and that dead bodies should be buried at a suitable distance from the community—close enough to remain a part of it, but not so close that they could do significant harm to public health.

In Portugal, these ideas were first written into law in the 1830s, in a legislative effort spurred by the urgency of two mortality crises: the cholera epidemic of 1833 and the Liberal Wars of 1832-1834 [1].

On June 18, 1833, the Portuguese government issued a Portaria prohibiting burials inside churches in Lisbon. Public burial grounds were soon established at Prazeres and Alto de São João—these would later become the first municipal cemeteries in Lisbon [2]. On September 21, 1835, a decree expanded this prohibition nationwide, mandating the construction of new public cemeteries to replace both the traditional adros and the temporary burial grounds used during the war [3].

The 1835 decree proved innovative on two accounts. First, it physically separated cemeteries from churches by relocating them to the outskirts of communities, mirroring a shift in administrative control from the Catholic Church to the state. It is worth pointing out, however, that cemeteries retained their consecrated status: they were religious sites, albeit managed by secular authorities. Second, the 1835 decree advocated for burial in individual graves, creating opportunities for ornamentation and memorialization which had been discouraged or downright forbidden in the adro, due to its multifunctional nature. From this point onward, burial practices would grow closely linked to principles of individualization and memorialization.

Porto, the second largest city in Portugal, opened its first public cemetery, Prado do Repouso, in 1839, followed by Agramonte in 1855. Along with the first two public cemeteries in Lisbon, Prazeres and Alto de São João, these cemeteries are now considered to be valuable historical landmarks [1].

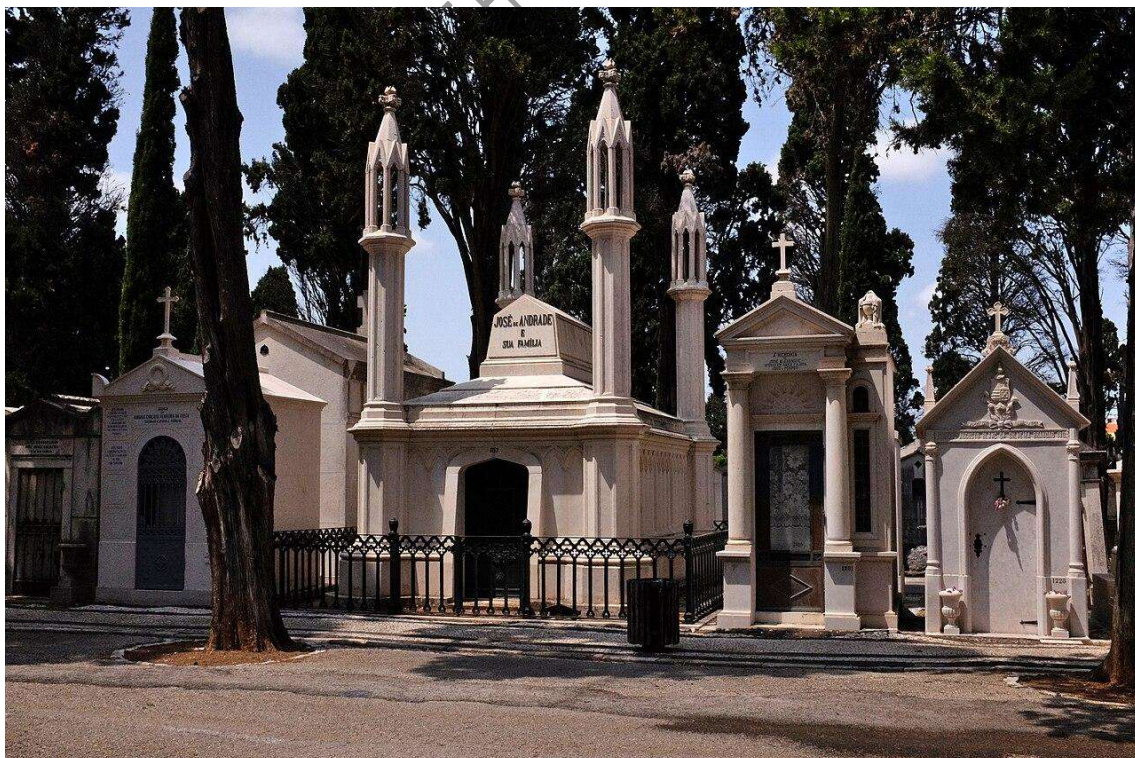


Figure 2: A view of the Prazeres cemetery, Lisbon. 19th century cemeteries may be seen as valuable repositories of architecture, sculpture, and decorative arts. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lisbon_Cemit%C3%A9rio_de_Prazeres_\(53093264416\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lisbon_Cemit%C3%A9rio_de_Prazeres_(53093264416).jpg)

Outside Lisbon and Porto, there was strong public resistance to the enactment of the 1835 decree [3]. Protests were common through the following decades, and many fed on unresolved social tensions left behind by the Liberal Wars—as the new public cemeteries were seen as symbols of the new liberal regime. The Maria da Fonte Revolution (Revolução da Maria da Fonte), in 1846, is the best-known of these popular protests. It proved challenging to establish public cemeteries in rural Portugal, and it was not until the mid-1870s that they became commonplace. The negative attitudes displayed by many communities towards the new public cemeteries in late 19th century Portugal highlight the disconnect between lawmakers and the public in the matter of death practices: while lawmakers issued new and innovative laws based on emerging public health principles, the public perceived an attack on their established religious practices [4]. Despite their tumultuous history, public cemeteries were fully consolidated by 1911, with the adoption of the Constitution of the First Republic, which secularized public cemeteries and solidified their function as public spaces accessible to all individuals, regardless of social class or religious affiliation.

In just over a century, the traditional Portuguese burial ground had successfully evolved from the Catholic adro to the secular public cemetery, still in use today.

3. A brief(er) history of cremation

In contemporary Portugal, cremation is legally regarded as an equivalent practice to burial—in urban areas such as Lisbon and Porto, it accounts for half of all funerals [5]. However, despite its equivalent legal status and relative popularity among urban populations, it is worth noting that cremation is a newer funerary practice. In contrast to public cemeteries, which introduced changes in the 19th century while maintaining a degree of cultural continuity with burial in the adros, cremation was only introduced in Portugal in the 20th century, in a significant break from earlier customs.

The debate surrounding the legalization of cremation in Portugal emerged in the second half of the 19th century, influenced by ongoing pro-cremation discussions across Europe. In 1857, the Marquis de Sousa Holstein (son of the Duke of Palmela), published an article in the magazine *O Instituto* advocating for cremation. According to the author, cremation could be a viable alternative not only to burial in churches and adros—which lawmakers were attempting to phase out at the time—but also to burial in the new public cemeteries, which could be just as inadequate [6, 4, 7]. In 1876, during discussions about a potential expansion of the Prazeres cemetery, the Marquis spoke once again in favor of cremation. Doctors such as Bernardino Passos also published dissertations about cremation, lending further credibility to the subject [4, 8].

Cremation was presented as a hygienic and practical alternative that could not only reduce financial costs associated with the expansion of public cemeteries, but also limit the spread of disease—arguments which echoed the public health considerations that had previously justified the prohibition of burial in churches and adros. Although support for cremation was also motivated by secularist beliefs—because it was a funerary practice that did not enjoy the support of the Catholic Church—, these were mostly downplayed during this period [4]. It's also worth noting that, while the pro-cremation debate was taking place among the intelligentsia of the period, much of the country was still transitioning away from the practice of church burial and towards the use of the new public cemeteries.

Despite a lack of widespread popular support, cremation was legalized in the *Código de Registo Civil* of 1911. Because of its association with scientific advancement, public health awareness, and a more secular worldview, its legalization was firmly in line with the progressive spirit of the First Republic [4]. Nonetheless, burial remained the standard funerary practice: those opting for cremation would have to overcome a series of bureaucratic obstacles, with each request for cremation needing individual assessment before approval.

Cremation was legalized in 1911 without there being any infrastructure in place to support it: the construction of the first crematory in Portugal, at the Alto de São João cemetery in Lisboa, wasn't completed until 1925 [5]. The crematory performed 22 cremations until it closed down in 1936, and it remained closed until 1985 [5, 7].

Between 1985 and 1995, there were no other crematoria in the country; as a result, all cremations took place at Alto de São João. The second crematory in Portugal was built in Porto, in 1995, at Prado do Repouso cemetery. As was the case in Alto de São João, many of those initially cremated at Prado do Repouso were foreigners [7].

In 1998, the publication of Decree-Law 411/98 brought an important change: it recognized burial and cremation as legally equivalent practices, eliminating the need for case-by-case assessments for those opting for cremation. By then, the Catholic Church had also changed its stance on cremation: in a document issued in 1963, the Church had reiterated its preference for burial but conceded that Catholics could opt for cremation, as long as that decision was not driven by anti-Christian motives [9].

The construction of crematoria in Portugal gained momentum at the turn of the 21st century, and cremation began to outpace burial in some regions. Cremation rates have also been growing, and numbers reported in the press indicated an 18.78% cremation rate in 2019 [10]. Cremation in Portugal remains mostly an urban phenomenon: in Lisbon and Porto, the two largest cities in Portugal, cremation rates are over twice the national rate; in 2011, cremation accounted for 51.3% of all funerals in the city of Lisbon, and 47% of all funerals in the city of Porto [5].

4. What if?

Having briefly reviewed the history of contemporary funerary practices in Portugal, we are now prepared to engage in speculation: what if cremation had been legalized much earlier than it was? As established in the aforementioned historical context, burial in public cemeteries emerged as an alternative to burial in churches and adros, maintaining continuity with these earlier practices. Although the practice shifted slightly to emphasize individualization and memorialization—two aspects which were not necessarily present in the churches and adros—its essence remained the same. Initially, public cemeteries maintained their consecrated status, only becoming truly secular in 1911. The evolution from the adro to the public cemetery as we know it today was gradual, yet it still faced significant popular resistance.

Cremation, on the other hand, was legalized in 1911 without any prior continuity with existing practices—essentially, it was introduced without context to a population that was not ready to adopt it. For its proponents, a minority, it represented a true paradigm shift, being cleaner, more hygienic, and more secular than the previous practices of burial in churches, adros, and even public cemeteries.

With these fundamental differences in mind, we can now explore a hypothetical scenario in which cremation was legalized in the 19th century. For the purposes of this exercise, we will assume the date of 1860, 25 years after the 1835 decree forbidding burials inside churches, and a mere 3 years after Holstein's 1857 argument in favor of cremation.

4.1. Cremation legalized in the 1860s

Considering the historical context, it is likely that legalizing cremation in the 19th century would not have led to any major changes. Although cremation was legalized in 1911, it took approximately 15 years for the first crematory in the country to be built (1925) and another 70 years for the second one to follow (1995). This timeline is only one of many aspects that demonstrates—as indeed scholars like Fernando Catroga argue [4]—that the practice of cremation failed to take root among the Portuguese public even once it had been legalized. Had it been legalized earlier, there is no reason to believe it would have benefited from greater support.

At this point, it is worth taking a deeper look at the work of Marquis de Sousa Holstein, who first proposed the adoption of cremation in 1857, and again in 1876. In his initial article, published in 1857, the author observed that many rural communities in Portugal had yet to build their public cemeteries, so burial continued to take place in the churches and adros. As an alternative, he proposed the creation of crematoria to dispose of the bodies. He argued that this practice would not be incompatible with the respect owed to the dead: there would be a chapel next to the crematory for funerary ceremonies, and the veneration of the dead could be prolonged at home, where families could keep the ashes of the deceased if they so chose. While the author acknowledged that his proposal would be met with reluctance, he hoped it would dissipate once the public realized that cremation was not incompatible with religious belief [4].

His hope was, of course, greatly misplaced. The Portuguese population, deeply Catholic, remained strongly attached to traditional practices such as church burials, and viewed both public cemeteries and cremation as undesirable concepts. Accordingly, we can speculate that, if cremation had been legalized in the 1860s, its process of normalization and consolidation would not have been much different from what we witnessed in the 20th century.

Before we abandon this exercise, however, it may be worth considering it from another angle. Knowing that the legalization of cremation in 19th century Portugal as we know it wouldn't have impacted funerary practice, let us ask instead: what conditions would have been necessary for this legalization to lead to significant social and cultural change?

Based on our understanding of the primary obstacles to the adoption of new funerary practices in 19th century Portugal—specifically, a lack of continuity with previous customs and a perceived incompatibility with religious Catholic belief—it is likely that only a profound secularization of society could have supported the legalization of cremation during this period. If the intellectual elites of the period supported cremation not only for its secular nature but also for its hygienic and practical qualities, it is possible to extrapolate that a more secular society, with fewer ties to the Catholic Church, could have recognized the same advantages in the practice. However, it is quite difficult to imagine a version of 19th century Portugal that would have been sufficiently secular to make this possible—especially considering that even today, in the 21st century, many Portuguese citizens who do not identify as practicing Catholics continue to opt for Catholic funerals [1]. Despite a decline in everyday religiosity, it can be reasonably argued that the Portuguese continue to rely on the Catholic Church for funerary practices.

4.2. *Cremation endorsed by the Catholic Church*

On its own, the legalization of cremation would not have had a major impact on Portuguese funeral practice. We identified the perceived incompatibility between cremation and Catholic belief as one of the main obstacles to the adoption of this new funeral practice. It may be worth examining how this obstacle could have grown more significant in the years following our experiment—specifically from 1886, when “the Vatican declared cremation incompatible with the teachings of the Church” [9].

The 1886 ban came as a response to the formation of pro-cremation societies frequented by Freemasons and others of “dubious faith”, whom the Church accused of reviving “the pagan custom of cremation” [11]. The defense of cremation was, at the time, seen as deliberately anti-Catholic and anti-clerical, even though men like Holstein perceived no such incompatibility in their defense of cremation. Either way, advocates for cremation recognized the Catholic opposition to the practice as a major obstacle [11].

Could we perhaps envision a scenario where the Church changed its stance, endorsing cremation rather than imposing a ban in 1886? What conditions would have been necessary for such an endorsement? To fully explore this question would require more space than this article permits, as the opposition to cremation was also wrapped in fundamental aspects of Catholic belief, particularly the resurrection of the body. As the Bishop of Lincoln stated in 1874, “one of the very first fruits of its adoption would be to undermine the faith of mankind in the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, and so bring about a most disastrous social revolution” [12]. Even in 1963, when the Church lifted the ban, it explicitly clarified that cremation did not prevent the final resurrection of the body [9], indicating that the Church continued to struggle with the perceived contradiction between cremation and resurrection well into the 20th century.

It’s an unlikely scenario, but had the Church not banned (or indeed, even endorsed) cremation in 1886, following Portugal’s hypothetical nationwide legalization of cremation in 1860, the country could have entered a period that permitted a choice of burial or cremation sanctioned by both the Church and state—precisely the vision that men like Holstein advocated for.

4.3. *Cremation mandated in the 1860s*

So far, we have examined two scenarios: one contingent on the Portuguese state legalizing cremation in the 1860s, and the other contingent on the Catholic Church changing its stance on cremation, which would have invalidated the 1886 ban. Both approaches were insufficient to produce significant social or cultural change. Thus, it can be theorized that the only way to bring about such change in this time period would be to make cremation mandatory over burial—whether in churches, adros, or public cemeteries—, thereby overriding the cultural forces that had long shaped the preference for burial in Portuguese funeral practice.

This third scenario will examine the following question: what if, after a failed experiment with the public cemetery, a concept implemented in the 1830s that lacked the support of many local communities, Portugal had decided to make cremation compulsory in the 1860s?

4.3.1. *Public acceptance*

This scenario differs from its predecessors in the sense that it does not merely provide access to cremation—it makes it mandatory, replacing existing burial traditions. The first major consequence of such a decision would likely be public resistance. Just as the prohibition of church burials elicited strong public resistance and uprisings, such as the Maria da Fonte Revolution of 1846, it is likely that the mandatory adoption of cremation would have provoked a similar reaction.

It is important to consider that this resistance, more visible in rural communities, would not necessarily reflect an attachment to institutionalized Catholic doctrine, but rather to a shared spiritual practice—and therefore a shared philosophy regarding the position of the dead in the community. As we have discussed, the shift from adros to public cemeteries had moved the dead away from the center of the community and changed the concept of death itself, which had become less intertwined with the daily life of the community, more individualized, and increasingly segregated in its own designated realm.

Depending on how cremation was imposed in the 1860s, it could bolster the forces of individualization and segregation created by the shift to the public cemetery, or work to reverse them. For instance, a law requiring families to cremate their dead and retain the ashes in the home—a practice the Marquis de Sousa Holstein explored in his 1857 article—could reintroduce the dead into daily life. Holstein argued that keeping ashes in the home would “undoubtedly exert a beneficial influence upon the morality of its inhabitants” [6]. By integrating the ashes of the dead into the family home and transforming them into a moralizing presence, this practice could help carve out a new place for the dead—individualized, but certainly not segregated. If, on the other hand, the law required families to cremate their dead and bury the ashes in a designated area adjacent to the crematory—another idea discussed by Holstein—the outcome would still resemble a public cemetery, where the dead remained physically separated from the living, occupying a distinct space within the community.

4.3.2. Cemetery usage

If Portugal had made cremation mandatory in the 1860s, it is likely that the cemetery as we know it today would have undergone significant changes—primarily shifting from a site where bodies were buried to a site where ashes were either scattered, buried, or stored.

We assume that analogues to cemeteries would still exist for several reasons. First, we are following the direction presented by the Marquis de Sousa Holstein in 1857, who envisioned the crematory as a “funerary center”, a space intended not just for cremation but also for hosting funeral ceremonies. According to Portuguese law, specifically Decree-Law 109/2010, a “funerary center” is a “building intended exclusively for the integrated provision of funeral services, which may include the temporary conservation and preparation of corpses, the celebration of funeral ceremonies and the cremation of remains which have not yet been buried or which have been exhumed” [13]. The Marquis de Sousa Holstein did not use this term, nor could he have imagined that it would one day appear in Portuguese legislation, but his vision for the ideal crematory was not far off. As modern funerary centers are often placed within or bordering public cemeteries, so could the 1860s Portuguese crematory occupy the place of the public cemetery.

Second, we assume that cemeteries would still exist because a cultural preference for cremation—or, indeed, a nationwide mandate that excludes other funerary practices, as per our current scenario—does not necessarily eliminate the need for cemeteries. Cemeteries, as we have seen, perform roles of memorialization of the dead, which could still be performed even if cremation were the only funerary practice available. In Japan, for instance, where the cremation rate is nearly 100%, cemeteries retain a significant social role. Indeed, cremation is viewed as an efficient way to gather the remains of multiple people in a single location—the family tomb—which is typically more compact than a family mausoleum [14].

We have seen how Holstein imagined multiple possibilities for the disposition of the ashes, including keeping them in the home or burying them in a designated space adjacent to the crematory. For those fortunate enough to possess a private chapel, he also offered the possibility of building a family columbarium for the ashes of deceased. There, each urn could be decorated with a sculpted bust of the individual whose ashes were stored within. This would ensure that sculptors who had previously worked in cemeteries, decorating tombstones and mausoleums, could still find employment [7]—an idea we will revisit shortly. As for those who lacked private chapels, but possessed some financial means, we might propose a third option: they could choose to build family columbaria in the space formerly known as the “public cemetery”. A home for the dead, in a sense, separate from the home of the living.

Having thus established that cemeteries would continue to exist, it is worth exploring how their landscape might have changed. Practices associated with the burial of ashes would not only diminish the scale of the funerary monuments found in cemeteries—since cinerary urns take up a lot less space than coffins—, but also reduce the space they occupy. This would significantly decrease the physical footprint of cemeteries, potentially releasing valuable urban real estate for alternative uses.



Figure 3: Garden of remembrance, or Serenarium, in the Agramonte cemetery, Porto. Source: Rafaela Ferraz

In addition to the practices suggested by Holstein—of either burying ashes or storing them in family columbaria, other options could also be available. Communal receptacles for pouring ashes, designated areas for scattering or burying ashes (often referred to as gardens of remembrance or rose gardens), and communal columbaria (private niches where cinerary urns can be stored, either for a rental period, or in perpetuity) are all common features in contemporary Portuguese cemeteries, and could have found a place in our hypothetical scenario.

4.3.3. *Mourning practices*

Having established that the widespread adoption of cremation would not necessarily eliminate the need for cemeteries but would significantly alter their appearance, it is worth looking into the impact of this transformation on mourning practices.

Two primary avenues of speculation emerge: first, considering the reduction in the scale of funerary monuments, there would be fewer opportunities for elaborate memorialization. The grand funerary sculptures of the 19th century, commissioned by the wealthier classes to decorate tombstones and family mausoleums, would hardly be compatible with the small scale of a niche in a columbarium.

This is already visible today, in sections of cemeteries dedicated to the burial and storage of cinerary urns: decoration and monumentation are greatly compromised by the small physical footprint of ashes compared to full body burials.

Figure 4: Columbarium at Père-Lachaise Cemetery, in Paris, France. The size of each individual niche, barely taller than a votive candle, demonstrates how cremation can “downsize” memorialization and reduce the space available for decoration and mementos from families. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:P%C3%A8re-Lachaise_-_Division_87_-_Columbarium_3975-4088.jpg

The second avenue of speculation has to do with the possibility that families could choose to either scatter the ashes, in the cemetery or elsewhere, or store them in the home. If these methods of ash disposition became commonplace, mourning would, in effect, be decentralized, no longer confined to the church, the *adro*, or the public cemetery. If the dead resided in a variety of locations—the family home, the private chapel, the columbaria—which would be the primary site associated with memorialization practices? Would the focus shift to the home, where the presence of the ashes might exert a moralizing influence, as Holstein suggested? Or would it remain in communal spaces, like crematory-adjacent burial sites and public cemeteries, preserving a sense of collective mourning? This process could be particularly evident on established days of mourning, such as November 1st, All Saints’ Day (*Dia de Todos-os-Santos*), when individual mourning practices become communal by virtue of occurring in the same location—currently the public cemetery.

We are not speculating on the differences that could arise in wakes and funerals—funerary practices taking place prior to the cremation itself—for a simple reason: neither did the Marquis de Sousa Holstein find it essential to eliminate funerals in his 1857 proposal, nor is the funeral dependent on the chosen method of body disposition. Today, in Portugal, where both burial and cremation are legally equivalent, we observe no significant differences in this regard: wakes and funerals are standard practice regardless of whether individuals opt for burial or cremation. There is no reason to believe that this would change in the hypothetical scenario currently under consideration.

4.3.4. *Environment*

Different funerary practices have varying environmental impacts, primarily at the local level. Burial is often linked to issues such as excessive land use, soil and groundwater contamination, and the buildup of materials in cemeteries, including synthetic fibers from clothing and coffin linings, varnished woods from coffins, and metal fixtures such as handles and other types of coffin hardware. While cremation avoids many of the adverse environmental effects of burial, such as extensive land use and the burial of large quantities of extraneous materials, it is not without its own environmental consequences. There are growing concerns regarding the fossil fuels necessary to fuel crematoria and the emissions they release, including CO₂, harmful gases, and particulate matter. There are also concerns associated with cremating bodies treated with radiation therapy or those containing mercury-based dental fillings and medical devices such as pacemakers. Finally, it is important to consider the potential impact of scattering ashes on local ecosystems [15, 16, 17].

There is no doubt that a nationwide, mandated shift from burial to cremation would alter the environmental impact of funerary practices. However, it is challenging to predict the extent of this shift, as the environmental impact of funerary practices is currently understudied in Portugal [18]. Without a clear understanding of the current impact, it is difficult to speculate about the changes that could occur in this hypothetical scenario.

We may hope, however, that earlier adoption of cremation could have resulted in more rigorous regulation than is currently in place. In present-day Portugal, cremation is broadly governed by Decree-Law 411/98, but the technical operation of crematories remains largely unregulated, raising environmental concerns [18]. Additionally, there is no specific legislation regarding the removal of medical devices, such as pacemakers. Due to the risk of explosion during cremation, the removal of pacemakers has become common practice over the years [18], but the lack of formal regulation remains a concern.

4.3.5. *Economy*

There is no doubt that a paradigm shift from burial to cremation would have economic implications. The Catholic Church experienced this firsthand in the 1830s, when cemetery administration shifted to public entities, who then started to collect the burial fees that individuals had previously paid to the Church. The Marquis de Sousa Holstein himself foresaw that a shift to cremation would affect the business of stone artisans, who would no longer be able to work on sculpting tombstones and mausoleums [7].

Building on these precedents, we can speculate on other impacts that could result from a shift from burial to cremation. Public entities would certainly face a loss of revenue, particularly if the public opted to scatter ashes outside the cemetery or store them in the home, thus eliminating the need to pay for a plot in the cemetery or a niche in a columbarium. The impact would be significant, as public cemeteries represent a large source of revenue for municipalities and civil parishes (Câmaras Municipais and Juntas de Freguesia) [1].

This loss could be offset if public entities were to provide cremation services themselves, through public crematoria, but it's equally possible that this function could be fulfilled by private crematoria—or shared, as, indeed, it is today.

A transition from burial to cremation would also have an impact on industries involved in funerary memorialization, such as tombstone manufacturing, sculpture, and even flower arranging. Similarly, coffin manufacturers would be affected—but they would certainly be able to pivot towards producing cinerary urns.

4.3.6. *Culture and tourism*

In recent years, the historical and heritage value of Portuguese cemeteries has been increasingly recognized. Cemeteries in Portugal, specifically those built in the 19th century, may be seen as repositories of various forms of art, from architecture and sculpture to decorative arts in materials such as stone, metal, tile, terracotta, faience, stucco, and stained glass, among others [1]. These cemeteries have come to be valued as cultural landmarks and often serve as venues for cultural activities such as art classes and art exhibits, guided tours and dramatized tours, concerts, photography scavenger hunts, and more [1, 19, 20]. Today, cemetery tourism is a relatively normalized form of tourism that fits into the broader category of dark tourism [21]. It is worth examining the implications that a shift from burial to cremation could have on this dynamic.

The hypothetical scenario we have been considering, which prioritizes cremation—thereby reducing the scale of funerary monuments and decentralizing the location of ashes, potentially allowing them to be scattered, buried, or stored anywhere, including in private homes—, could certainly diminish the artistic, architectural, symbolic, and heritage value which we have come to associate with cemeteries.

The case of the National Pantheon (Panteão Nacional), housed in the Church of Santa Engrácia, in Lisbon, since 1966, provides a compelling example worth examining. The Panteão memorializes illustrious Portuguese figures through two primary methods: by transferring their remains from their original resting places to this site (e.g. the writer João de Almeida Garrett, originally buried in the Prazeres cemetery), or by installing cenotaphs that commemorate individuals without the physical presence of their mortal remains (e.g. the poet Luís Vaz de Camões, whose “official” tomb is in the Jerónimos Monastery).

How would this model of memorialization work in the hypothetical scenario we are developing, where cremation is the primary funerary practice? A few options emerge: perhaps memorialization with cenotaphs would be the ideal choice, allowing the public to honor the individual without necessarily establishing a connection to their mortal remains; alternatively, perhaps it could be possible to maintain a version of the current practice, and simply bury the ashes of these illustrious Portuguese figures in the Panteão.

4.4. *Cremation mandated in the 1860s, but not for all*

As we look upon the case of the Panteão Nacional, we may wonder whether it would be possible to entertain a final hypothetical scenario, where cremation was made mandatory for the general population, but illustrious figures could be buried in an esteemed location like the Panteão. Such a scenario would echo the stratified burial practices seen inside churches until the 19th century, when wealthier classes were buried in proximity to the altars, while the rest of the community was buried in the remaining space.

To say that such a system would reinforce social hierarchies is an understatement. Mandating cremation for the general population while reserving burial for those deemed worthy of that honor could be seen as a deeply symbolic practice: it diminishes the physical presence of the “ordinary” dead, ensures they occupy less space in the public space, and reduces the possibilities for memorialization. In contrast, it perpetuates the names and stories of the elites by enshrining their bodies in prestigious spaces. We might wonder about the possibility of social mobility for the dead—could an average individual whose contributions were only recognized after death be granted a place for his cremated remains within the Panteão? Or, conversely, could an illustrious figure whose status has waned be evicted from the Panteão? Could they then be subjected to the standardizing process of cremation, the “nauseating human rotisserie” [22], as it was dubbed in 1886?

Extreme as this scenario may sound, it is worth considering whether it wouldn't simply be formalizing the social inequalities that already exist implicitly within death practices.

5. Conclusion

Beginning with a brief overview of the history of burial and cremation in Portugal, this article focused on a hypothetical scenario: what if cremation had become the dominant funerary practice in the 19th century? We believed the decision to favor cremation over burial would have had impacts at multiple levels of Portuguese society, but, having analyzed the social and religious context of the time, we concluded that the Portuguese public was unlikely to have made that decision: the deeply Catholic Portuguese population remained strongly attached to traditional burial practices well into the late 19th century and did not, for the most part, support cremation. In order to stretch the potential of this exercise, we experimented with a more radical scenario, assuming that cremation had been made mandatory over burial.

By examining this idea further, we were able to explore some possible implications: that cemeteries would have become smaller and less decorated, and that mourning practices would have been decentralized, particularly in cases where families decided to scatter or store the ashes of the deceased at home. At the environmental level, we established that burial and cremation have different environmental impacts, but we were unable to understand how cremation as a dominant practice would have impacted the Portuguese territory—since the current impact of burial as a dominant practice remains largely understudied. At the economic level, we briefly explored the impact that the downsizing of cemeteries would have on the revenue of public entities, which often rely on the fees originating from public cemeteries as a source of revenue. Additionally, we considered a few professions likely to be impacted by a shift from burial to cremation. Finally, we addressed the impact that this shift could have had on cemetery tourism, a practice that has been normalized in recent years.

That we have had to experiment with multiple hypothetical scenarios until we found one that would allow us to explore the implications of cremation as the dominant funerary practice in Portugal highlights the limitations of discussing funeral practice as a purely legal matter. As the adoption of public cemeteries in the 19th century revealed a disconnect between lawmakers and the public in the matter of death practices, so did our exercise: legalizing a funeral practice does not guarantee its widespread acceptance or success. The adro, the cemetery, and indeed the crematory are not merely vessels for the implementation of legal norms—they are culturally significant sites where societies come to terms with death, often by mirroring the dynamics of the world of the living.

Consider, for instance, the socially stratified burial practices in the churches and adros. The transition to public cemeteries of the 1830s could have offered a chance for greater uniformity—and yet, the opposite happened. As different types of grave typologies and funerary monuments were codified in the law, they allowed society to perpetuate its social hierarchies in these new spaces. Temporary graves, to be dug up after a handful of years, contrasted with their perpetual neighbors; individual burial sites stood apart from family tombs; mass-produced monuments coexisted with bespoke mausoleums. Death, often thought of as the Great Equalizer—thanks in no small part to allegories such as the late medieval *Danse Macabre*—, could not erase the inequalities experienced by the living. The rich and the poor could share the cemetery, indeed, but their coexistence would be deeply structured.

Today, the Portuguese have the choice between burial and cremation. These two forms of disposition then unfold into a wide array of practices that, for the most part, coexist within a fully consolidated public cemetery. Walking through an urban cemetery, we may see a matriarch sweeping the floor of a pristine family tomb, a widower standing quietly by a temporary grave, a family sitting on a pew by the garden of remembrance, a young man perching atop a ladder next to the communal columbarium, decorating a niche. As a space for both personal and collective mourning, the cemetery has grown increasingly diverse.

The true challenge lies, perhaps, in ensuring that this diversity reflects meaningful and authentic choices, rather than a lack of resources or financial means. As we set out to examine hypothetical scenarios surrounding the dominance of cremation, this was the challenge we encountered: how do legal, cultural, and socioeconomic factors intersect in the realm of the dead? Our discussion of hypotheticals may serve as a reminder that efforts to regulate funeral practice must engage with these factors, or risk producing only superficial change.

Likewise, our discussion may shed light on dynamics that are already at work in Portugal today. As cremation rates have been steadily increasing since the late 20th century, it is worth examining how practices associated with cremation, like scattering ashes, may render the dead invisible. We may ask ourselves how this invisibility can be compensated for through alternative forms of memorialization, suitable for those who lack traditional graves to anchor their names and stories to the landscape of the public cemetery.

6. Invited Lecturers f2f Session Insights

This paper was presented at the Third International Conference of ‘What if?…’ World History (WhatIf’23) on November 22, 2023, as part of an Invited Lecturers f2f Session. In line with previous f2f Sessions, which aimed to facilitate dialogue between two authors specializing in different fields, this session included a presentation on speculative biology by Rogério Ribeiro, and was moderated by Sofia Sousa.

In the intersection between speculative biology and death studies, there was an opportunity to discuss concepts such as transhumanism, the intellectual movement that advocates for the enhancement of human capabilities, including efforts to mitigate aging and mortality.

The audience also attempted to bridge these topics by asking how the advanced, non-human species of the future might come to conceptualize funerary practices. While a definitive answer was not found, this question offers a compelling path for future “What If” exploration: as we begin to recognize that funerary practices are not unique to humans and that a few animal species have been observed exhibiting behaviors that seem to suggest an awareness of mortality [23], how might we conceptualize the funerary practices of yet unknown species?

The discussion of this paper focused primarily on the historical role of graves and funerary monuments as symbols of individuality and economic power, as the wealthier classes have traditionally been able to construct funerary monuments that stand the test of time and, therefore, perpetuate their names and stories into the future. The generalization or, in extreme, the compulsory implementation of cremation, a practice less associated with individual memorialization, could disrupt this paradigm. The discussion addressed a fork in the road: would this change be beneficial by promoting greater equality, or would it lead to further erasure of the names and stories of marginalized individuals, as fewer and fewer individuals would be memorialized?

The discussion concluded with a question regarding the Portuguese people's attachment to traditional funerary practices, which has been at the root of popular uprisings in the past—notably, the Maria da Fonte Revolution of 1846—and whether it could be at the root of popular uprisings in the future. The discussion that followed examined recent compulsory changes to funerary practices in Portugal, specifically those implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted both the number of attendees at wakes and funerals and the conditions under which these rites could be performed. While these mandatory changes were not met with significant pushback, anecdotal evidence from media reports suggests they were negatively perceived by the population, who felt they undermined the social and emotional aspects of the traditional funerary practices [24, 25].

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Ana da Silveira Moura for the invitation to participate in the Third International Conference of 'What if?...! World History (WhatIf'23) as an Invited Lecturer, and for her guidance throughout the entire process. Sincere thanks are also extended to Invited Lecturer Rogério Ribeiro, who greatly enriched this session with a captivating presentation on speculative biology, and to Sofia Sousa, whose insightful moderation was invaluable to the session. Additional thanks go to the team at the Library of the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Porto (FCUP), for creating such a welcoming environment at this gracious host institution.

References

- [1] Ferreira, R. F., Miranda, A. J. A., & Queiroz, F. (2022). *Death and Funeral Practices in Portugal*. Routledge.
- [2] Queiroz, F. (2002). *Os Cemitérios do Porto e a arte funerária oitocentista em Portugal: Consolidação da vivência romântica na perpetuação da memória* [Ph.D. Dissertation in Art History]. Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto.
- [3] Queiroz, F., & Rugg, J. (2003). The development of cemeteries in Portugal. *Mortality*, 8(2), 113–128.
- [4] Catroga, F. (1999). *O céu da memória: Cemitério romântico e o culto cívico dos mortos*. Edições Minerva.
- [5] Xisto, B. O. de O. (2012). “Assunto encerrado”? *Atitudes contemporâneas perante a morte e a cremação em Lisboa* [Master Thesis in Social and Cultural Anthropology]. Universidade de Lisboa.
- [6] Holstein, S. (1857). Inconvenientes dos cemitérios: Sua substituição pela ustão dos cadáveres. *O Instituto: Jornal Científico e Litterario*, 5, 175–176.
- [7] Queiroz, F. (2005). Portugal. In *Encyclopedia of Cremation*. Ashgate.
- [8] Passos, B. P. A. (1878). *Um capítulo de hygiene: A incineração dos cadáveres*. Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade do Porto. <https://repositorio-aberto.up.pt/handle/10216/16649>

- [9] Knight, F. (2017). Cremation and Christianity: English Anglican and Roman Catholic attitudes to cremation since 1885. *Mortality*.
- [10] Salvador, J. M. (2020, June 13). O adeus ao corpo. Como a cremação está a conquistar os portugueses. *Expresso*. <https://expresso.pt/sociedade/2020-06-13-O-adeus-ao-corpo.-Como-a-cremacao-esta-a-conquistar-os-portugueses/>
- [11] Cooke, S. (1991). Death, body and soul: The cremation debate in New South Wales, 1863–1925. *Australian Historical Studies*, 24(97), 323–339.
- [12] Jupp, P. C. (2006). *From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [13] *Decreto-Lei n.º 109/2010, de 14 de Outubro—Estabelece o regime de acesso e de exercício da actividade funerária*. (2010).
- [14] Bernstein, A. (2000). Fire and Earth: The Forging of Modern Cremation in Meiji Japan. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 27(3/4), 297–334.
- [15] Franco, D. SP., Georgin, J., Campo, L. A. V., Mayoral, M. A., Goenaga, J. O., Fruto, C. M., Neckel, A., Oliveira, M. L., & Ramos, C. G. (2022). The environmental pollution caused by cemeteries and cremations: A review. *Chemosphere*, 307.
- [16] Slominski, E. M. (2023). Life of the death system: Shifting regimes, evolving practices, and the rise of eco-funerals. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 19(1).
- [17] Smith, T. O., Gitsham, P., Donell, S. T., Rose, D., & Hing, C. B. (2012). The potential dangers of medical devices with current cremation practices. *European Geriatric Medicine*, 3(2), 97–102.
- [18] Ferreira, A. R. F. (2016). *Body Disposal in Portugal: Current Practices and Potential Adoption of Alkaline Hydrolysis and Natural Burial as Sustainable Alternatives* [Master Thesis in Forensic Medicine]. Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas Abel Salazar da Universidade do Porto.
- [19] Monteiro, G., Gonçalves, S., & Mesquita, S. (2021). *Interior & Exterior: Como criar uma experiência completa numa visita ao cemitério Flores de Pedra/ Flowers of Stone*. XXII Encuentro Iberoamericano de Valoración y Gestión de Cementerios Patrimoniales: Los cementerios como museos a cielo abierto, Catamarca.
- [20] Sousa, M., Rebelo, F., Noriega, P., & Vilar, E. (2021). Creating Cultural Experiences in a Cemetery: A Storyboard for a VR User Interaction. *Advances in Design and Digital Communication II*, 19.
- [21] Coutinho, B. M. dos S. G. (2012). *Há morte nas catacumbas?: Um estudo sobre turismo negro* [Master Thesis in Tourism Management and Planning]. Departamento de Economia, Gestão e Engenharia Industrial da Universidade de Aveiro.

- [22] Malone, H. (2014). Secularisation, anticlericalism and cremation within Italian cemeteries of the nineteenth century. *Modern Italy*, 19(4), 385–403.
- [23] Goldman, J. G. (2012, September 19). Death rituals in the animal kingdom. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20120919-respect-the-dead>
- [24] Marques, A. C. (2020, April 6). Reportagem. Os funerais sem despedida e sem abraços. *Observador*. <https://observador.pt/especiais/reportagem-os-funerais-sem-despedida-e-sem-abracos/>
- [25] Agência Lusa. (2020, April 7). Covid-19: Agora, as pessoas são sepultadas «quase como indigentes». *Sábado*. <https://www.sabado.pt/portugal/detalhe/covid-19-agora-as-pessoas-sao-sepultadas-quase-como-indigentes>

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT HYPOTHESIS HISTORIA PERIODICA