



Fig. 4: A modern permanent grave with an expensive marble tombstone.

even taken out in order to be able to meet the new funeral requirements.

In order to establish the exact costs of a burial, I enquired with the local undertaker, Mr. Encarnação (25.11.93). In his firm (*Agência Funerária*) prices are between 36 and 90 Contos (183 and 457 ECU). The large price differential stems from differences in funeral presentation. Real flowers, for example, tend to be expensive, as in particular do bouquets on top of the coffins (*co-roas*). Burials with artificial flowers, however, do also occur.

Numerous costs arise for funerals: taxes (*sisá*) for the grave, to the amount of 1,599 to 3,000 Escudos (8 to 15 ECU) depending on size; a patch of earth (*talão*) costs approximately 30 Contos (152 ECU) per square metre in property value including confirmation of purchase (*escritura*). The price of the gravestone varies from cemetery to cemetery: urban ones tend to be more expensive than those in small outlying localities. In addition, the position of the gravestone in the cemetery influences the

price; towards the "main street" graves are more expensive. The length of "stay" is a decisive factor as far as price is concerned: permanent graves are incomparably more expensive than the traditional five-year graves.

The church service and laying out in the mortuary hall (*câmara ardente* or *casa mortuária*) at 2,500 Escudos (13 ECU), including a religious ceremony carried out by the priest, also makes a significant difference; the sum amounts to 3,000 Escudos (15 ECU) if mass takes place before the burial. Further costs arise in respect of coffins (there are many varying quality ranges) and transport to church, and from there to the cemetery. When it is necessary for the deceased to be brought over from a hospital in Lisbon – which is frequently the case – this is also reflected in higher prices. A further charge is made for dealing with all administrative formalities (*documentação*). The standard price for a burial can thus greatly vary and tends to be between 46 and 90 Contos (233 and 457 ECU).²⁰ The social insurance (*Segurança Social*) pays a lump sum of around 29 Contos (147 ECU) towards the burial. On top of this financial assistance, a supplementary pension payment is made at a standard rate. An extra 100 Contos (507 ECU) are required for a marble tombstone (Fig. 4).

The profit margin for the undertaker Encarnação is satisfactory. Approximately 300 people die each year in the region for whose burial he enjoys a monopoly as the only undertaker.²¹ Anyone can become an undertaker in Portugal; in order to set up a business one is merely required to have oneself registered at the inland revenue office; one needs little more than a telephone and business can already get under way. A debate is currently being held in Portugal as to the quality standards of these firms. Upon mention of this issue, Mr Encarnação immediately points to the professional standards of his own business.²² It is important for him to make clear that everyone is treated equally in his firm, poor and rich alike: "A low-cost burial is just as

20 The minimum pay in Portugal in 1993 was 45 Contos (228 ECU) per month. This is the same wage as that earned, for example, by a full-time agricultural worker.

21 Mr Encarnação says that of these 300 persons, approximately 50 die as a result of suicides and accidents.

22 In the regional capital of Beja there were constant confrontations between competing undertaker firms. A number of firms were proven to have paid bonuses to hospital employees when the latter called them on a preferential basis. The local newspaper cited the affair as an instance of "corruption, illegal actions, courtroom trials, death threats ..." (*Diário do Alentejo*, 18.7.1997).