



SLAVE MARKET MUSEUM

Lagos, Portugal

37.1005844, -8.6733674



Image by Arjuna Keshvani-Ham, courtesy of the author

Executive Summary

Hiding in plain sight in Lagos' central square lies the *Antigo Mercado de Escravos*, the Old Slave Market, which hosts a unique museum. The building is situated in the square—formerly a beach—where enslaved people would once have been bought and sold, along with other goods such as ivory and Malagueta pepper transported back from the west coast of Africa. Today, the museum acknowledges the city's unsettling past as Europe's first port to which enslaved people from West Africa were deported. The museum has been the subject of increasing controversy over the past few years, particularly in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. However, such incidents of contestation remain largely undocumented. This case probes the efficacy of the museum's engagement with its subject matter and questions the decision-making processes surrounding its managerial history and recent restoration.

Introduction

The Slave Market Museum, located in *Antigo Mercado de Escravos*, the area which used to host the Old Slave Market in Lagos, Portugal, is the country's first monument acknowledging its history with slavery. It arguably represents a key turning point in Portuguese public discourse. Contestation has arisen around the monument in recent years given its presentation of the complex history of Lagos and the trade of enslaved people, as well as from its spatial locus in the city. Furthermore, the museum's attempt to address Portugal's historic involvement with slavery has to be understood in contrast to the public bodies' treatment of an excavated burial site for enslaved Africans just 550m away.

Background

Unearthing History

Lagos, Portugal served as the starting point of departure and return destination, for what some historians, consider the first slave raiding expedition to West Africa.¹ It was here, that Prince Henry (1394-1460), introduced the sale of enslaved African people in 1444.² Little is known about the living conditions on board the ships that brought the enslaved people to Lagos from the west coast of Africa in 1444, nor those who were sold in Lagos between 1443-1512: however, we do know that many either died soon after leaving the ships, and were subsequently dumped in mass graves outside of the city walls.³ Others were baptised and eventually integrated – at least, to some extent – into Portuguese society, though they often maintained the low status reserved for the enslaved.⁴ Over the centuries, people of African heritage were to become an integral part of the landscape of the town, and the rest of the country.

By 1486 however, the epicentre of the trade was slowly shifting to Lisbon, who in 1512 would be designated by the Portuguese Crown as the only Portuguese Port too which enslaved people could be shipped from West Africa.⁵ From the early fifteenth to the sixteenth century, Portugal held a 'monopoly position' in Africa carrying on an 'exclusive trade in gold, ivory and slaves.'⁶ By the early seventeenth century, Portugal was responsible for deporting an estimated 3000 to 4000 people

¹ Hakim Adi, "Africa and the Transatlantic Slave Trade," *BBC History*, Last updated October 5, 2012; Joaquim Romero Magalhães, "Africans, Indians, and Slavery in Portugal," *Portuguese Studies* 13 (1997): 143.

² Ibid.

³ Wall text, *Antigo Mercado de Escravos*, Lagos, Portugal.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 76-77.

per annum.⁷ Thus, early modern Portugal had significant ties to the Atlantic slave trade, a period during which an estimated 11 million African people were transported against their will. Contemporary Portugal has done little to engage with or confront this involvement.

In 2009, a parking lot construction project in *Valle da Gafaria* (Leper Valley), a site just outside the original walls of the city of Lagos, uncovered two burial sites. One of these was an urban waste dump found to contain 158 bodies dating back to the 15th century.⁸ Several factors led researchers to believe that these skeletons belonged to enslaved Africans: the bodies had been thrown into the grave haphazardly, in disregard of Christian burial traditions. Furthermore, several objects suggesting that the bodies were those of enslaved people – including a rare amulet, a replica of which is on display in the Slave Market Museum itself – were found *inter alia*. A conclusion was reached after the application of morphological analysis: the bodies belonged to men, women and children inhumed in a variety of positions, some of whom had been buried with their hands and arms shackled. These bodies were a significant discovery in the field of forensic anthropology, with researchers noting in 2016 that '[n]ot only are there few cemeteries of enslaved people in the world, but until now, Lagos is the only sample to be discovered and studied in the Old World.'⁹ Moreover, Elizabeth A. Spentst notes that the discovery of these bodies also catalysed the development of the Slave Market Museum, 'Portugal's first monument acknowledging its history of enslavement.'¹⁰

An article in *Portugal Resident* indicates that the museum opened in November 2010.¹¹ To put this development in context, in 2009, historian Gert Oostindie cited Portugal as one of only two European countries to largely ignore their historical involvement in the slave trade, the other one being Spain.¹² In the same paper, Oostindie shares an anecdote from an unspecified time during which he visited Lagos. At the time, he observed that the museum's building was marked with a small sign saying '*mercado de escravos*' (slave market), but otherwise served as a 'non-descript art gallery with no relation whatsoever to the slave trade.'¹³ This, Spentst notes, is the 'earliest reference to Lagos' commemoration of slavery before the 2009 excavation.'¹⁴

In some ways, the museum's name is misleading. Although it might be called the Slave Market

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kristina Killgrove, "Archaeologists Find Bound Bodies of Enslaved Africans in Portuguese Trash Dump," *Forbes*, March 22, 2019.

⁹ Sofia N. Wasterlain, Maria J. Neves and Maria T. Ferreira, "Dental Modifications in a Skeletal Sample of Enslaved Africans Found at Lagos (Portugal)," *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* 26, no.4 (2016): 630.

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Spentst, "*The Value of Cultural Heritage: Portugal's Memory of Slavery*," *Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation Contested Histories Project*, March 7, 2020 [unpublished], 2.

¹¹ Portugal Resident, "Museum Opening Hours," *Portugal Resident*, January 7, 2011.

¹² Gert Oostindie, "Public Memories of the Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery in Contemporary Europe," *European Review* 17, No. 3 & 4 (2009): 613.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Elizabeth A. Spentst, "*The Value of Cultural Heritage: Portugal's Memory of Slavery*," *Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation Contested Histories Project*, March 7, 2020 [unpublished], 2.

Museum, throughout its history there never was a market of any sort within the building itself. It is, however, located at the site where, researchers have deduced, the first large-scale sale of African enslaved people in Lagos must have taken place during the fifteenth century.¹⁵ At the time Lagos was the military capital of the Algarve, and like so many others in the area, the building, which later came to be known simply as *Mercado de Escravos* (Slave Market), had a military function: it was built in the 17th century to house the office of the city's royal overseer, and operated in the town from at least 1658.¹⁶ From 1755 onwards, the customs house was harboured within the building's upper floor.¹⁷

The museum is situated at the edge of what is now a square, the *Praça do Infante D. Henrique*, named after Prince Henry, who is widely considered the main organiser of Portuguese explorations in the 15th century. He is also commonly in the modern era, referred to with the epithet; Prince Henry 'the Navigator,' (*Infante Dom Henrique, o Navegador*) for his central role in organising Navigations. However, it should be noted that the use of the 'Navigator' was only popularised in the 1800's and was not used during his lifetime. The square, in the period served as a market space, before the construction of the modern harbour and fortified wall, this area would have been a beach. It was commonplace in Portugal, during this time that areas near the waterfront, would often be constructed, in tandem with the development of market spaces.¹⁸

During the first half of the 20th century under the António de Oliveira Salazar dictatorship (1932-1974), projects were ongoing throughout Portugal which aimed to restructure Portugal's customs houses. However, in the case of Lagos's custom house building, inspectors came to the conclusion that the facades of the building should not in any way be modified.¹⁹ In fact, rather than remodeling completely the customs house, it was instead decided that the building should be classified as a *Monumento Histórico* (Historic Monument) due to the fact that it marked the site where enslaved people were first sold in Lagos. It thus constituted, in the eyes of the regime, an important monument celebrating Portugal's *Século de Ouro* (Golden Age), the period in which Portugal rose in prominence as a colonial power – a success premised, among other things, on finance generated from the slave trade. In light of this, it becomes clear that the building's function has been utterly transformed: where it was once preserved as a monument to slavery, it now functions as a museum which seeks to explore and critically engage with Portugal's historic involvement in the trade. Whether the museum's engagement with its subject matter is sufficient remains up for discussion.

¹⁵ Município de Lagos, *Lagos and the Slave Route*, Lagos: Município de Lagos, 2015. Exhibition Guidebook. ; Dr. Elena Morán, *Interview 1*, Interview by Arjuna Keshvani-Ham and Rohan Bhatia, August, 2021, trans. Rohan Bhatia.

¹⁶ Município de Lagos, *Lagos and the Slave Route*, Lagos: Município de Lagos, 2015. Exhibition Guidebook. 9.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., 9

According to Lagos's municipal council, the decision to create the museum in this particular building was a direct consequence of the 2009 excavation. For the museum's curators, it was designed to have two primary functions. The first of these is outlined in the detailed guide available to purchase upon admission: its diverse exhibits 'enable visitors to travel back in time and imagine Lagos at the end of the Middle Ages and during the early Modern Age. The itinerary focuses on the theme of the first generations of Africans brought to this port as slaves.'²⁰ In other words, the museum functions to narrate Lagos' historic involvement with the slave trade. However, in an interview, Dr. Elena Morán, senior Archeologist on the Lagos City Council, emphasised that the museum's function isn't simply to tell the history of the past.²¹ The curators designed the visitor's journey through the exhibition to end at a 'space for reflection,' in which visitors might be induced to remember that slavery is 'an issue that still exists today,' one that 'cannot be extinguish[ed] or erase[d].' Thus the museum becomes not just a space for understanding, but a 'forum for discussion.'²²

Nonetheless, drawing on Tripadvisor reviews from the museum's early days, Spenst notes a generally negative consensus as to the museum's curation.²³ For instance, a review dated March 15, 2013, dubs the Museum a 'waste of a good space' and a 'very poorly put together museum, which you will be in and out of [in] seconds.'²⁴ Since then, however, there are suggestions that the Museum has made significant improvements. For instance, a 2014 ordinance signed by Jorge Barreto Xavier, then Minister of State for Culture, classifies the market as a monument of public interest based on its historical and cultural value.²⁵ In December 2018, the museum was awarded the honorary title of 'International Centre for Living Memory of Human Dignity' by the Portuguese institution, *Observatório Internacional dos Direitos Humanos* (OIDH), or International Human Rights Observatory.²⁶ Tripadvisor indicates that the museum closed in 2015 and opened a year later on June 6, 2016 after renovations.²⁷

Today, the building houses two exhibition floors. The exhibits, designed to be interactive, are housed in great black obelisks. Upon entry to the ground floor, the first thing that catches one's eye is the life-sized straw sculpture of King Rei Amador, who started a slave revolt on the island of São Tomé in 1595, next to a bench where enslaved people once waited to be sold.²⁸ On the left side is a map of

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Dr. Elena Moran, *Interview 1*, Interview by Arjuna Keshvani-Ham and Rohan Bhatia, August, 2021, trans. Rohan Bhatia.

²² Ibid.

²³ Elizabeth A. Spenst, "The Value of Cultural Heritage: Portugal's Memory of Slavery," *Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation Contested Histories Project*, March 7, 2020 [unpublished], 4.

²⁴ BossyFlossy, "Waste of a Good Space," Tripadvisor. March 15, 2013. Accessed May 13, 2018.

²⁵ Ordinance No. 177/2014, signed 20 February 2014, published in *Diário da República* 2nd series, No. 44, March 4, 2014.

²⁶ *Sul Informação*, "Mercado de Escravos distinguido pelo Observatório Internacional dos Direitos Humanos," *Sul Informação*, December 16, 2018.

²⁷ Elizabeth A. Spenst, "The Value of Cultural Heritage: Portugal's Memory of Slavery," *Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation Contested Histories Project*, March 7, 2020 [unpublished], 8.

²⁸ Russell Contreras, "Correction: Travel-Portugal-Black History Month-Lagos," AP News, February 8, 2019.

the old town inset into the wall showing the structure of the 16th century walls and fortifications, detailing the locations of particular points of interest. This includes the location of the *Antigo Cais* (Old Docks), and the *Vale da Gafaria* (Valley of Lepers), the site of the 2009 excavation. There are also multiple interactive videos simulating what the Lagos of the 15th century might have looked like.

The second floor delves deeper into the excavation. It shows reproductions of numerous artefacts that were discovered in close proximity to the skeletons dug up during the excavation, including an amulet that supposedly belonged to a mixed-race child, and an ivory spoon which would have been made in Africa, sold to a Portuguese merchant and brought back to sell on the European market. Many of the exhibits on this floor demonstrate the ways in which enslaved people were gradually integrated into Portuguese society. For example, one display shows a manuscript from 1671, a reproduction of a notarial seal of freedom granted to a child called Maria. Presumably this was a child of an enslaved woman and fathered by a white Portuguese man. Another shows a registration of the burial expenses for 'a slave of Francisco de Sousa called Maria' and of 'a black man of Joao Afonso'.²⁹ These documents demonstrate the progressive integration of the Afro community into Lagos and Portugal more broadly.

History of the Contestation

Over the years, there has been significant controversy surrounding the museum. Documentation of these incidents, however, is limited or non-existent. Most of the information pertaining to these conflicts has been gathered through interviews with the museum's staff and the Lagos's municipal council. It is also worth noting possible points of contention which might arise in the future if the museum is deemed to engage inadequately with Portugal's historic ties to slavery.

Criticism Inside the Academic Circles

Three groups which might contest this monument are identifiable: the people of Lagos, the academic community, and the museum's general visitors. According to the municipal council, the community of Lagos 'welcomed' the arrival of the museum. Furthermore, the council claims that it remained uncontested in academic circles, receiving interest from a diverse range of fields but never receiving negative criticism.

Nonetheless, it is possible to find strong examples of criticism from historians who have studied the museum. Spentst argues that the museum continues to downplay Portugal's role in the slave trade whilst packaging the museum as a cultural attraction:

Instead of analyzing the role of slavery in Portugal's history and its afterlife in Portugal today, the

²⁹ Object Label, *Antigo Mercado de Escravos*, Lagos, Portugal.

museum narrates a carefully worded story in past tense and passive voice to hold slavery and its afterlife firmly in the past. The museum barely mentions its connection to the nearby enslaved burial ground, and instead prominently displays its relationship [to] the UNESCO Slave Route Project.³⁰

It is not strictly true that the museum 'barely mentions' its connection to the Vale da Gafaria excavation – in fact, a large number of the exhibits on the second floor deal with it directly. Furthermore, the museum does not appear to market itself as a cultural, money-making attraction – if this is its intention, it certainly fails. The museum is difficult to find, hardly the hallmark of a money-making attraction. Ticket prices are very low, set at maximum three euros a head. Entry is also free for photographers and filmmakers entering with an educational purpose. The council and curators are open, engaging, accommodating, and very keen to give up their time for interviews and discussion. Spentst is certainly right in pointing out, however, that the museum fails to explore the legacy of slavery in Portugal today: there are no exhibits that deal with or make reference to the Afro-community still integral to the Portuguese landscape, who live there today and call the country their home. There can be no doubt that the museum has a curatorial problem – many of the descriptions in the guide and on the museum's wall are quite poorly or insensitively translated. For example, at one point the guidebook refers to 'negro and mixed-blood women.'³¹ The source of problems such as these is unclear. But if future criticism aimed at the museum is to be avoided, very obvious issues like these will need to be swiftly resolved.

#BlackLivesMatter

It appears that the criticism levied at the museum has come primarily from its visitors, and particularly those visitors of Afro-heritage. One such instance of contestation emerged after visitors – particularly those of Afro-heritage – complained to museum staff about a skeleton on display in the museum. This was one of the skeletons dug up in the 2009 excavation, displayed in the museum until the renovations took place in 2016 and the exhibit was removed. More recently, increasingly heated incidents of contestation have emerged in the wake of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The most prominent of these occurred on August 13, 2020, when one of the museum's external facades

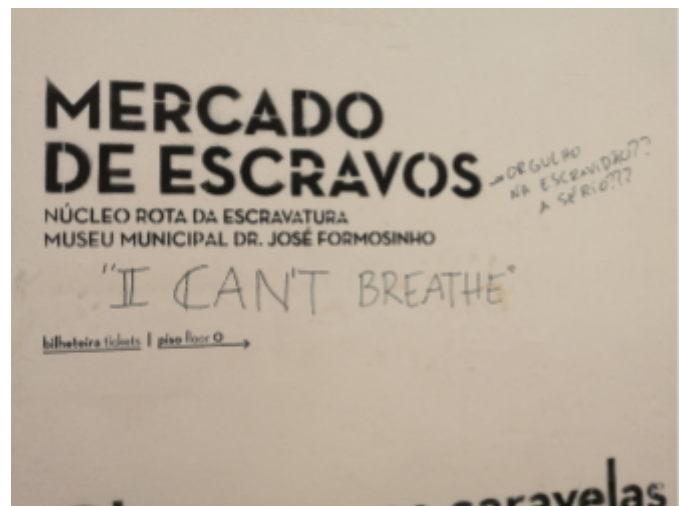


Figure 1: 'Photo of Museum Defacement' Image by Edgar Duarte Gomes.

³⁰ Elizabeth A. Spentst, "The Value of Cultural Heritage: Portugal's Memory of Slavery," *Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation Contested Histories Project*, March 7, 2020 [unpublished], 7.

³¹ Município de Lagos, *Lagos and the Slave Route*, Lagos: Município de Lagos, 2015. Exhibition Guidebook, 17.

was defaced with a line of graffiti, stating: 'I CAN'T BREATHE'. I can't breathe – the last words of unarmed police victim Eric Garner who was choked to death by a NYPD officer in 2014 – have become familiar in recent years as a slogan of the Black Lives Matter movement. To the right of the museum's name inscribed on the wall are the words 'ORGULHO NA ESCRAVIDÃO?? A SERIO???' which translates to 'ARE YOU PROUD OF SLAVERY?? REALLY???'

The words were effaced shortly after, and the story remains unreported in the media. It is unclear what precisely the words relate to – whether to the human remains previously on display, since removed – or to some other element of the museum's design and curation.

Abandoned Ambitions

A brief history of the Museum's development reveals two related projects that could have been fruitful but seem to have been abandoned. A report from 2012 indicates that officials planned for the Museum to have two locations – the Museum's current site, and the ground floor of the parking lot where the original excavation took place. Moreover, the parking lot project was to be accompanied by a visitor center featuring historical and archaeological information open to the public. Instead, there is no record of a visitor center ever opening. In 2015, the Lagos government moved forward with the planned construction of a mini-golf course just outside the parking lot space where the bones were discovered. This decision was met with some contestation – Spensat notes that Isabel de Castro Henriques, the former Portuguese representative on UNESCO's Slave Route Project and Scientific Coordinator for the Slave Market Museum from 2014-2016, publicly voiced her disagreement with the mini-golf project.

Inconsistent Engagement

Although there appears to be little public contestation surrounding the existence of the mini golf course today, historian Ana Lucia Araujo notes an uncomfortable juxtaposition between the golf course and the burial site:

[f]eaturing fountains and bridges, the scenic park is decorated with colourful sculptures by artist Karl Heinz Stock (who is identified as white), representing female bodies joyfully dancing over one of the oldest European sites where the remains of enslaved Africans associated with the Atlantic slave trade were discovered.³²

There remains to this day absolutely no visible sign, let alone a memorial, that the excavation ever took place here. According to Dr. Elena Morán, plans to construct a memorial of some sort had been considered at the time of the excavation, but fell through – though the reasons for this remain unclear.³³ Such plans to honour the museum's catalyst seem to have been insensitively replaced by a

³² Araujo, Ana L. Araujo, "Afterword: Ghosts of Slavery." *International Review of Social History* 65, no. S28 (2020), 234.

³³ Interview 2, Dr. Elena Moran, *Interview 2*, Arjuna Keshvani-Ham, Rohan Bhatia, August, 2021, trans. Rohan Bhatia.

tourist attraction. Spenst takes this point a step further, arguing that ‘Portugal’s mismanagement of the enslaved burial ground in Lagos shows that deliberate devaluing centres economic interests instead of social ones.’³⁴

Furthermore, it is not clear that many of the original criticisms of the museum have been properly addressed. The museum is still largely unsigned and difficult to find, even though it is located in one of the town’s main squares, it further as of 2021, does not have an official website. The spatial proximity of the monument to a large statue commemorating Prince Henry presents a rather disturbing juxtaposition, since he was the man who first introduced the slave trade to Lagos. If the museum is difficult to find, the statue certainly isn’t. Looming its shadow across Lagos’s eponymous central square (*Praça do Infante D. Henrique*), the statue seems a paradoxical bedfellow to the city’s sole tribute to its unsettling past.



Figure 2: 'Statue of Henry the Navigator'. Image by Arjuna Keshvani-Ham, courtesy of the author

Indeed, across Lagos more generally monuments commemorating figures who were fundamental to the introduction and continuation of the slave trade in Portugal are difficult to miss. Situated next to the old city gate is a statue of Gil Eanes, another 15th century navigator born in Lagos. Numerous restaurants in the old town take their namesake from explorers, including *Restaurante dom Henrique*, *Cafe Gil Eanes* and *Navegador*. There are also a number of streets named after Lagos’s navigators, such as *Rua Lançarote de Freitas (Navegador)*, which memorialises the leader of two extensive slaving raids on the West Coast of Africa between 1444 and 1446.

³⁴Elizabeth A. Spenst, “The Value of Cultural Heritage: Portugal’s Memory of Slavery,” *Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation Contested Histories Project*, March 7, 2020 [unpublished], 7.

However, these unsettling juxtapositions are not the result simply of a lack of thought on the part of Lagos's council but rather due to the city's complex history. The statue of Prince Henry, along with many other statues commemorating the town's maritime successes, were erected during the Salazar dictatorship, a far-right regime strongly modeled on Fascist Italy under Mussolini and the country's longest ever dictatorship (1932-1974). The residents of Lagos, and the face of the city itself, were subject to enormous violence during the period. As part of a nationalistic identity-building project, the dictatorship ordered that all buildings, including the houses of Lagos's residents, be razed to the ground if they blocked the city's wall from view. It was during this period that these statues were erected. Dr. Elena Morán opposes these statues being taken down, since they offer the people of Lagos a reminder that this regime happened, that their people suffered.³⁵ To take them down, she argues, would be to erase this history, and to undermine the hardship undergone by the people.

Potential Resolutions

There are many obvious ways in which the situation in Lagos could be ameliorated. One obvious approach would be to erect a memorial to commemorate the lives of the enslaved buried at *Vale da Gafaria*. According to Dr. Elena Morán, there are plans for such a monument to be built in the coming year.

There have always been plans, but economic circumstances have meant that they have dragged on. But I hope that next year, a clearer project can be defined, and that the construction of this memorial will swiftly be completed.... Furthermore, the matter of the memorial is one that everyone agrees on. The people of Lagos want the memorial; the politicians of Lagos want a memorial. As such, there is no one saying that it shouldn't be built, or even a voice against it.³⁶

She is of the opinion, however, that a monument be built in the near future, one situated not near the excavation site itself but in the Praça do Infante D. Henrique, near the Slave Market Museum, so that it is more easily accessible to a wider audience:

I think the memorial has to be in the square where the slaves were sold... Putting it there is also a way of counterpointing the image of [Prince] Henry which stands there, who was the leader of all these enterprises...³⁷

The clear question, which the interviewer raises, is who precisely would be designated the task of the monument's construction. In response, Dr. Morán states that, although there are people who believe that the memorial should be done by an individual of African heritage, the council are 'ultimately...not focussed on who the author will be.' This seems odd – in light of the fact that the

³⁵ Interview 2, Dr. Elena Morán, *Interview 2*, Arjuna Keshvani-Ham, Rohan Bhatia, August, 2021, trans. Rohan Bhatia. (PDF 25)

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

memorial should – at least, in part – function to give voice to those whose story has been, quite literally, buried.

Tackling the museum itself is a different issue: the problems here are primarily curatorial. Although many excellent and carefully thought through decisions have gone into the museum's design, many of the resources already created are completely unpublicised and thus very difficult to access, especially for an international audience. For example, there is an interactive exhibition guide which can be activated through the visitor's mobile device, which gives further information about each artefact on display. However, museum visitors are not informed about this technology upon entry to the museum, and there is no signposting on the exhibits themselves. Furthermore, many of the exhibits are interactive, activated when a visitor moves past the exhibit. These interactive features generally appear to be dysfunctional, or simply switched off.

However, positive developments are currently underway. For the past four years, the Municipal Museum in Lagos has been under renovation, with plans to open its doors in October 2021. Perhaps the opening of another, larger museum will provide visitors with the historical context needed to grapple more easily with the contents of the Slave Museum, and its perceived incongruencies.

Decision-Making Processes

A recount of how the Slave Market Museum's location was secured suggests that key decision-makers were – at least initially – driven by reasons other than a desire to confront Portugal's historic ties to the slave trade. In 2009, the building where the Slave Market Museum is now located was managed by the Messe Militar de Lagos.³⁸ The Lagos City Council's request for the ground floor was initially denied because the property was being used by the Army for its permanent activities.³⁹ It seems that the use of the building was subsequently secured through an appeal by the then-Mayor of Lagos Júlio Barroso to President Aníbal Cavaco Silva, asking the latter to intervene.⁴⁰ Barroso based his appeal on several factors, including Lagos's historical connection to the Discoveries, a broader project to restore the entire *Praça do Infante D. Henrique*, and the Slave Market's status as a significant tourist attraction.⁴¹ The spread of these factors lends weight to Spent's contention above – that decisions concerning the Museum have consistently prioritized economic values over social ones.

Members of Lagos's municipal council shed more light on the decision to build the museum, and reinforce the claim that the decisions came from authorities with more power than the city council.

³⁸ Barlavento, "Exército não quer Mercado de Escravos de Lagos na rota da UNESCO," Barlavento, June 16, 2009.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Dr. Elena Moran states that the reaction of the people in Lagos to the 2009 excavation was ‘one of shock,’ and that the decision to erect the museum was a direct consequence of these discoveries. The entire process was very quick: soon after the excavation, it was announced by the municipal council that the case was under investigation and the decision to create a museum in commemoration was made. She states that the erection of the museum was ‘necessary,’ and that it was important for the ‘empirical proof’ of Lagos’s involvement in the trade to be made public.

The people of Lagos were expecting it and welcomed it because it was part of the history of Lagos... from the experience of talking to other people, we know that in many places the history of slavery is concealed. It seems to be a subject that cannot be discussed; it seems to look bad and they try to hide it away. In Lagos, they do not try to hide it... it is the reality. It is the history we have, isn't it? We have to tell it, don't we?

Speaking on behalf of the Municipal Council of Lagos, she states that slavery ‘was something facilitated by the city,’ and that ‘we, at the council of Lagos, felt that we had this obligation to the people.’

The decision-making processes behind the renovations also remain somewhat unclear. As mentioned previously, Spent notes that a human skeleton was on display in 2014 and was removed during the 2016 renovations. According to one representative of the council, the presence of the skeleton was upsetting to a number of visitors of Afro-heritage, who were uncomfortable at having the bones of an enslaved person on public display. A decision was made in direct consequence of these complaints to have the skeleton removed.

Three observations may be made about the decision-making dynamics. First, the bulk of decision-making seems to have been made by public figures, organizations and members of Lagos’s municipal council and museum team, rather than through grassroots initiatives. Furthermore, it seems that no people of Afro-heritage or Afro members of the community of Lagos were confronted regarding any of the decisions. This might explain many of the museum’s apparent incongruencies, even insensitivities. Second, a limiting factor in the decision-making process appears to be economic. This has been emphasised by the council as one of the key reasons the *Valle da Gafaria* excavation is yet to be memorialised. Indeed, Spent persuasively argues that decision-making processes in relation to the museum consistently prioritized economic values over social ones. Precisely which bodies have the power to make these decisions is unclear – it certainly does not appear to be in the hands of those involved in the curation, direction and day-to-day running of the museum itself. Third, the decision-making processes have not been documented in a way that is easily accessible. There is definitely scope for clearer documentation – e.g. on a website dedicated to the Museum. This is particularly crucial in relation to profoundly sensitive material such as human remains.

Summary and Conclusions

In conclusion, the Slave Market Museum represents an encouraging turning point in Portuguese memory culture, to the extent that it is the first memorialisation of the country's historic involvement in the slave trade. However, in recent years – particularly in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement – the monument has become contested. It is not unlikely that further contestation will occur if certain developments are not made in the near future, particularly surrounding the un-memorialised mass grave 550m away from the site of the museum.

Furthermore, the question of whether the museum adequately engages with its complex subject matter is up for debate. For instance, the fact that the museum is directly juxtaposed with a statue of Prince Henry, a juxtaposition which has not been critically reflected on in the curatorial process, raises the question of whether this engagement could be improved. Additionally, the fact that the building's function has been transformed from a space celebrating slavery to one which engages critically *with* slavery, has not been made at all clear. Criticisms have also been raised that the exhibits tend to eschew more uncomfortable truths surrounding Lagos's specific role in the slave trade and the afterlife of slavery in the city, and in Portugal more broadly. Finally, the largely top-down and opaque decision-making processes which surround the Museum suggest procedural improvements that can be adopted: decision-makers might seek to engage with marginalized stakeholders in order to gain their perspective.

Research contributed by Arjuna Keshvani-Ham and Celine Ng

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Figures

- Arjuna Keshvani-Ham. "Slave Market Museum." Courtesy of the author. (Cover Image)
- Arjuna Keshvani-Ham. "Hendy D. Navigator." Courtesy of the author. (Figure 2)

About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter- ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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