On All Soul’s Day, 1811, a law was passed in Spain banning the practice of burials inside church buildings. However, the law was ignored in many cases, and it was some time before the dictates of reason and hygiene prevailed.

A ruling was eventually imposed that led to the rather attractive formula of the ‘Vizcayan’ porticoed cemeteries, so called because their structure is typical of the region. Both beautiful and functional, the formula involves landscaped areas surrounded by porticoes that house tombs covered by plain tile roofs.

Associated with the Church of San Trokaz, the intrinsic quality of the cemetery at Abadiño, in the popular ‘Vizcayan’ style, makes it an interesting contribution to the region’s heritage in its own right.

Basically, the cemetery is a rectangle defined by porticoes of limestone Tuscan-order columns supporting stone entablatures, reinforced by tile-roofed peripheral walls, to which have been added the present-day false plaster ceilings. The tombs, all identical, are packed together at ground level.

This egalitarian approach, with no special spaces reserved for tombs, was also applied to the four galleries. Even the square chapel, centred in the far wall, and taller than the rest of the cemetery, is set back from the gallery.

In this zone of the cemetery, a successful neo-classical version of the triumphal arch tops an entrance aligned with the chapel. The access is set into the splendid ashlar-worked outer wall. Both the wall and the portico entablatures bear funerary inscriptions, powerfully unsettling messages from the dead to the effect that the living should think on this life and that which awaits them in the hereafter.

In architectural terms, the cemetery at Abadiño is essentially mature neo-classical and, for its time, could almost be considered Romantic. Some existing documents show that it was planned and drawn in 1854 by Rafael de Zavala, from Elorrio, a major figure in the architecture of the second quarter of the 19th century. A master mason from Durango, Pedro José Astarbe, made some additions to the project, with excellent results.

There were – and are – other examples of portico cemeteries in Vizcaya, including San Francisco and Mallona, in Bilbao, and Markina-Xemein, Gernika and Elorrio.