

Reframing the past: Rewriting narratives of gender in Portuguese industrial archaeology. The case of the Robinson cork factory*

Susana Pacheco¹



© the author

Received: 2/9/2024

Accepted: 7/1/2025

Published: 2/5/2025

Abstract

This paper addresses the underrepresentation of women in Portuguese industrial archaeology through the case of the Robinson cork factory. Traditionally women's roles in industrial environments have been overlooked, influenced, in Portugal, by the conservative mindset of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship, which promoted the idea that women belonged at home. However, despite this ideology, many women worked in industry due to economic necessity. By incorporating different types of sources and materials, and combining them with physical artefacts found at the archaeological site, this study aims to reconstruct the experiences of female workers. It challenges the binary gender narratives prevalent in Portuguese historiography and archaeology, and highlights the complexities of gender roles in industrial contexts. It supports a critical re-examination of historical sources and archaeological evidence to provide a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of women's roles in industrial history.

Keywords: industrial archaeology; gender roles; gender narratives; gender archaeology; subordination

Resum. *Reemmarcar el passat: reescriure les narratives de gènere en l'arqueologia industrial portuguesa. El cas de la fàbrica de suro Robinson*

Aquest article aborda la infrarepresentació de la dona en l'arqueologia industrial portuguesa a través del cas de la fàbrica de suro Robinson. Tradicionalment s'ha fet cas omís del paper de la dona als llocs industrials, influït, a Portugal, per la mentalitat conservadora de la dictadura de l'*Estado Novo*, que promovia la idea que les dones pertanyien a la llar. Tanmateix, malgrat aquesta ideologia, moltes dones van treballar a la indústria per necessitat econòmica. Aquest estudi pretén reconstruir les experiències de les treballadores mitjançant la incorporació de diferents tipus de fonts i materialitat, i la seva combinació amb la cultura material trobada al jaciment arqueològic. Aquest article qüestiona les narratives binàries de gènere predominants

* The author has a grant from Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia to carry out research as part of the doctoral project "The Industrial HER. An archaeological vision of women's lives and stories through photography", reference [2022.14550.BD].

1. CFE-HTC. Universidade Nova de Lisboa. FCT; susanalfsdpacheco@hotmail.com; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5503-8845>

en la historiografia i l'arqueologia portugueses destacant les complexitats dels rols de gènere en contextos industrials. Abona així un reexamen crític de les fonts històriques i les evidències arqueològiques per esbossar un retrat més inclusiu i precís del paper de la dona en la història industrial.

Paraules clau: arqueologia industrial; rols de gènere; narratives de gènere; arqueologia de gènere; subalternització

PACHECO, Susana (2024). "Reframing the past: Rewriting narratives of gender in Portuguese *Industrial Archaeology*. The case of the Robinson cork factory". *Treballs d'Arqueologia*, 27, 93-111. DOI: 10.5565/rev/tda.164

1. Introduction

The Robinson cork factory in the Portuguese town of Portalegre was dedicated exclusively to transforming cork into the most varied products, from bottle stoppers and floats to white and black cork agglomerates, among many other products. It was founded in 1848 by an Englishman, George William Robinson, who was already involved in the cork industry in his home town of Halifax, in England. This was, at least at first, a family business, so when George William Robinson died in 1895, his son, George Wheelhouse Robinson, succeeded him. Following the latter's death in 1932, ownership of the factory passed to a recently created company, *Sociedade Corticeira Robinson Bros. Lda.*, of which his daughter, Ellen Mary Frazer, was still a part. However, for reasons unknown, the heiress of the Robinson family left Portalegre before 1946, the year in which there was a change in the distribution of shares between the company's various shareholders (Ventura, 2007). In that year, the company became entirely Portuguese, and that is how it operated until its definitive closure in 2009. However, the pur-

pose of this article is not to go into the history of this factory in detail, as this has been widely covered elsewhere (Faísca, 2014; Folgado & Custódio, 2018; Palazón Botella, 2014; Parejo Moruno et al., 2013; Ventura, 2007).

Instead, the aim of this article is to focus on the people who worked on industrial sites on a large scale worldwide but who, with a few exceptions, tend to be ignored from the archaeological perspective, namely women (Hardesty, 2010; Hyttinen & Kallio-Seppä, 2022; Taksa, 2020). The Portuguese situation does not differ much from this. From a historiographical perspective, there are a few works that focus mainly on the role of women working on industrial sites (Baptista & Alves, 2020; Mendes, 2017). As for Portuguese industrial archaeology, most studies tend to ignore individuals in general and particularly women. Nonetheless, it is possible to highlight a few exceptions (Cordeiro, 1989; Pacheco, 2023; Pacheco et al., 2023; Sequeira & Casimiro, 2021).

Several arguments have been used to justify this absence in Portuguese archaeology, particularly the lack of archaeological evidence or written sources

(Guimarães, 1986). The conservative and religious mentality that prevailed during the *Estado Novo* dictatorship (1933-1974) argued that women should stay at home and take care of the household and the family (Ferreira, 2024; Vaquinhas & Guimarães, 2011; Wall, 2011). However, even during that period, a significant proportion of the Portuguese female population had to work anyway. Supporting the family was a major concern when wages were so low (Lamas, 2002). One might wonder if these arguments should still be used as an excuse to perpetrate women's historical and archaeological erasure. Women's presence in the industrial sector grew significantly during that period, mostly due to the higher rates of emigration and the Colonial War (1961-1974), so eventually it became difficult for the regime and its propaganda to hide their presence. Instead, the regime took a new approach: when it really became impossible to pretend that women remained at home, it was essential to show that their tasks were light, that they were respected, and that they were given all the necessary conditions to pursue what the dictator and the regime believed should be their major task as women – motherhood (Ferreira, 2024). Nevertheless, the reality was very different to this idealistic version created by the regime (Lamas, 2002). The situation of women in working environments, particularly in industry, was always one of subordination and precariousness. Their wages were also lower than men's (Ferreira, 2024).

However, the regime's propaganda should not continue to dictate historical and archaeological narratives today. Archaeologists should question traditional written sources and should problematise the presence of women in these contexts,

even when facing the absence of artefacts usually associated with women. Thus, through the prism of the Robinson cork factory (Portalegre, Alentejo, Portugal), this paper aims to address the above questions and discuss why the absence of certain artefacts does not necessarily mean that women were not present in these places.

2. Theoretical Framework

Several studies and projects on gender have been published internationally in recent decades, from the perspectives of both historiography and archaeology (for example, Conkey & Spector, 1984; Scott, 1988, 1996; Gilchrist, 1999; Matić & Jensen, 2017; Moen, 2019; Kiddey, 2020; Coltofean-Arizancu et al., 2021; Cobb & Crellin, 2022). Nonetheless, as Marianne Moen noted, “questions of gender still remain on the margins of many archaeological enquiries. Indeed, the very fact that there still exists an archaeology of gender can be seen as symptomatic of this issue” (2019: 207). And if this is true for archaeological contexts in general, for industrial ones these words gain a whole new meaning. Regarding industrial archaeology, the study of women as part of their communities is yet to be discussed on a large scale, whether from a historical or archaeological perspective. There has been little research on the subject (Scott, 1994; Parratt, 1998; Boserup, 2011; Milkman, 2016; Taksá, 2020; Hyttinen & Kallio-Seppä, 2022). This lack of research, as Marika Hyttinen and Titta Kallio-Seppä pointed out, has marginalised this group as members of a community, even if we have evidence of their presence and participation in those communities (2022: 663).

As for the Portuguese situation, a simple, binary opposition model of gender roles has been applied in Portuguese archaeology in many studies, perhaps deriving from the *Estado Novo* mentality already mentioned (Pires, 2024). According to this model, “men are wage-earners, women are homemakers; men are active, women are passive” (Seifert, 1991: 1). For this paper, and to study women’s roles, particularly (but not exclusively) in industrial contexts, it is necessary to deal with gender relations, to understand if those were as binary as many studies suggest.

Gender is a structural principle in our society. It determines our behaviour as individuals. It influences how we see and comprehend the world (Díaz-Andreu, 2005). In industrial environments, gender dictated aspects of a person’s life such as their place in complex hierarchies or how they were seen and treated by others. Other aspects determine how these relationships occur. For instance, gender and age are always connected throughout the life course of individuals, changing expectations, ideologies and perceptions (both self-perceptions and others’ perceptions) (Derevenski, 1997). Given the societal context, all of this was also true of Portuguese industrial environments. The Robinson cork factory was no exception. All these elements have been identified there, as this paper will demonstrate.

3. Methodology

Studying women’s work in Portugal can be an extremely complex task due to the erasure of women from “traditional” sources throughout history. Complex but not impossible.

The Portuguese Constitution of 1933 stripped Portuguese women of numerous rights, establishing in Article 5 that:

Equality before the law involves the right to be appointed to public office, according to ability or services rendered, and the denial of any privilege of birth, nobility, nobiliary title, sex or social condition, except, as regards women, the differences resulting from their nature and the good of the family, and, as regards the burdens or advantages of citizens, those imposed by the diversity of circumstances or the nature of things. (Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, 1933, art. 5)

Given that the Constitution itself discriminated against them, it is not surprising, then, that there are no references to the female population in the documents held in public archives, at least until the end of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship.

Nevertheless, to achieve the objectives of this research, several sources and materials will be analysed in detail and then compared. It is possible to divide these sources into four major categories. One of the written sources used to research this paper was the printed press, namely the newspapers *O Sindicalista*, *O Distrito de Portalegre*, *O Intransigente*, *O Corticeiro* and *A Plebe*. These are either local or labour union newspapers. Obviously, as with any other written source, these have to be carefully analysed and the information they contain needs to be problematised and criticised. Another of the written sources are the *Boletins do Trabalho Industrial* (official documents created by a Portuguese institution called *Direcção Geral do Comércio e Indústria*, which issued statistical data relating to Portuguese indus-

try over several decades), among other bibliographical sources. Pictorial sources also provide a meaningful contribution to this study. Many photographs (in different formats and from different decades) were identified and collected digitally. Some of these photographs were taken by a very famous Portuguese photographer, Mário Novais. He recorded important events and illustrated publications. Also, one of his biggest clients was the totalitarian Portuguese state, governed by António de Oliveira Salazar (whom he photographed very closely) (Oliveira, 2012).

Archaeologists who study contemporary periods, as is the case here, also have another important source at their disposal which is important to consider whenever possible – oral history. These were collected directly (by the author) and indirectly (by other researchers and made available to the public, via publications or video). For this article the testimonies of six women were collected, most of them indirectly. One aspect common to all of them, whether collected directly or indirectly, is that they are part of informal conversations, since in very formal or controlled environments people (particularly women) tend to hold back and not pass on as much information as they do when they feel at ease. Also, for the testimonies collected directly, attention was given to the process of speaking and listening, as elements of a feminist social investigation, which is often not the case. For such an approach to be possible, it was not assumed *a priori* that all women share a single perspective but rather emphasis was placed on the importance of analysing the various positions of women in organised social activities (Devault, 1990).

Finally, the industrial site itself will be carefully analysed. As with other areas

of archaeology, industrial archaeology also involves prospecting the field, or even undertaking archaeological excavation when justified (although as this site has not been refurbished, this was not the case). However, one can wonder if simple inspection is enough to identify the presence of women in an industrial location and to understand what their lives were like. The world of industry has always been associated with men, a world where women were constantly subordinate and often lost their voices. In the case of Portugal, until a few decades ago, a woman would very rarely have taken on a supervisory position; they would almost always have been controlled by men, no matter what tasks they had to fulfil. This meant that they could not express themselves in the same way, including materially. When a factory closes, what is left behind, abandoned, are elements of the material culture of the site, so if women could not express themselves “freely” through objects, it becomes much more difficult for an archaeologist to identify them in a factory after its closure, let alone understand the type of tasks they performed, or what their daily lives were like. While it is accurate that items linked to a female presence occasionally emerge in these situations, they are typically not enough to comprehensively elucidate women’s experiences in a factory or to address all enquiries that archaeologists may pose regarding these matters.

Therefore, in this article, all the available sources (material, written or pictorial, and oral) and the results provided by each of them were combined and compared, to achieve the most complete vision possible of the gender roles in the archaeological site of the Robinson cork factory.

4. Case Study – The Robinson cork factory

4.1. *The Robinson cork factory – In context*

When George William Robinson founded this cork processing factory in Portalegre (Alentejo, Portugal), he brought with him all the knowledge of the English Industrial Revolution and quickly transformed the factory into a leading global cork processor. This move, from England to Portugal, happened when they realised it was significantly more profitable to process the raw material in its place of origin and export the final product, rather than to export the raw material and transform it elsewhere. This was why the Robinson family decided to open a branch of their original company in this small town in the North of Alentejo. During its first decades, the factory was dedicated exclusively to producing cork bottle stoppers, a task mostly performed by women (Ventura, 2007).

Initially, this task was performed manually, using a small knife or specialised equipment. Later, certain equipment was modified for electrical operation, while other equipment remained manual, operated by hand or occasionally by foot. Women had to stand or sit on elevated and uncomfortable stools for the entirety of their shifts, which occasionally exceeded ten hours, according to oral testimonies (Pacheco, 2024). When the factory expanded in the 20th century and started to produce other types of products, such as cork agglomerates, women's work also changed. Many of them were also involved in the production of these new products, taking part in almost every phase of production, from the moment the cork entered the factory until it left,

completely transformed and packed in cardboard boxes, many of which can still be seen on site (Pacheco, 2024).

4.2. *The Robinson cork factory – Documentary sources*

The first source to reference this factory is the Industrial Inquiry of 1881 (Comissão Central Directora do Inquerito Industrial). Besides showing that the production of cork stoppers was mostly performed by women, it also provides a range of other useful information for the study of this factory and for the role of women there. According to this document, cork went through different processes before being turned into stoppers. First, raw cork was steamed, then it was scraped and mechanically cut into strips, from which the stoppers would be made. The manual process was operated by women. They were grouped in different rooms and “instructed and supervised by competent masters”. The mechanical process was carried out by minors. The final step, the manual selection of the stoppers, was also performed by women. This was to check the quality of the product. The factory employed 100 men, 40 boys, 340 women and 180 girls (Comissão Central Directora do Inquerito Industrial, 1881).

This data provides plenty of intriguing details about the women's work in the factory. They made up the majority of the working population. However, they were not trusted to be alone and do their jobs by themselves without being supervised by “competent masters”, i.e. men, as another source shows. This reflects the subordination of women that occurred in Portugal until quite recently.

The other documentary source is the printed press (Ventura, 2012). Contem-

porary newspapers show that the supervisors in the factory were always men. They also reveal an event that occurred in 1911. When one of the supervisors from one of the workshops was discovered having “amorous relations” with one of the women who worked there, the rest of the women who worked in that section started a strike, demanding the supervisor be fired and replaced by a woman. The owner of the factory (George Robinson) refused. After the strike some of these women were fired and the supervisor was replaced by someone else. Nonetheless, the replacement was a man rather than a woman as the female employees had wanted (Ventura, 2012).

In the many newspapers in which this episode is reported (*O Sindicalista*; *O Distrito de Portalegre*; *O Intransigente*; *O Corticeiro*; *A Plebe*), it is never made clear whether this was a consensual relationship or a case of sexual abuse. However, the fear felt by the women (expressed in those documents through interviews with some of them) and their insistence on having the supervisor replaced by a woman lead us to believe that it may be the latter. This episode illustrates both the subordination of the women and the fears they were exposed to daily. It is also indicative of the way women were viewed by men, particularly their bosses. They did not entrust them with positions of power or greater responsibility, as is demonstrated by the actions of the factory’s owner in replacing the man in charge with another man instead of a woman as the employees wanted. Although these newspapers gave subjective accounts, the extensive coverage of the story across numerous local and national publications, often in multiple editions, suggests that it was truly a significant affair.

Apart from this episode, which was widely covered by the printed press, the rest of the written sources about the factory events (mainly press, the aforementioned inquiries and other official documents) are not very enlightening on the role of women in that factory. When they are mentioned, they are usually treated as just numbers (as is the case of the *Boletins do Trabalho Industrial* and the Industrial Inquiries).

In light of this, another source of information becomes useful – photographs (Casimiro et al., 2023; Pacheco et al., 2023). Several photographs are known from the 20th and 21st centuries, with a significant predominance of those from the *Estado Novo* dictatorship. These represent work in the various sections of the factory, namely in the offices, and the agglomerates processing and cork stopper production areas, where men and women are seen working together in the several buildings that constitute the factory unit. There are many elements that make these photographs noteworthy. However, there is one aspect common to all of them. When supervisors are visible, women are never seen fulfilling those roles. Most of the known photographs were taken by a professional photographer who owned a photography studio. Therefore, like most photographers in similar circumstances, he must have been hired – perhaps by the factory owner or some other official – to take those photographs. If that was the case, certainly the photographer would be concerned to please his client. In that scenario, the client would also have specific intentions for those photographs. One was to convey a positive image of the establishment to the outside world (Pacheco, 2024). So it is fair to assume that most of the known

photographs of this factory were staged. Even so, they convey a series of interesting facts about the role of women there, so it is important to consider them.

The final source considered in this article are the oral testimonies. When studying recent times these always become an important resource and one that should be used whenever possible. It is essential to meticulously and critically evaluate sources, as with any other information. When those testimonies are collected indirectly, as is the case with some of the testimonies used in this paper, it is also important to question the circumstances under which they were recorded.

For this particular case, besides the testimonies collected directly by the author, the rest were collected either by Marília Ribeiro, who later compiled them into a book published by the Portalegre Municipality (2018), or by Jorge Murteira, who conducted interviews as part of his documentary *A Ideia Nunca Abala*,² filmed in 2005, just a few years before the factory closed for good, with the aim of preserving the memories of the workers, their relationships with the machines, and their social relationships (inside and outside the factory). The film was intended to feature in the museum that was planned for the site but which never materialised (Murteira, 2012). The documentary also resulted in a publication (Gouveia, 2012) published by the Robinson Foundation, the entity created to protect the factory's heritage and establish its museum. (As the study of this entity falls outside the remit of this article, for more information see, for example, Gouveia, 2007).

4.3. *The Robinson cork factory – The archaeological site*

Today, the Robinson cork factory is a ruin derelict, although not all the buildings have succumbed to the passage of time and the clear lack of conservation. Some have even been given a new life (for example, one of the warehouses was transformed into a car park) or were demolished and replaced by new ones during the last two decades. There is a catering and tourism school in a new building on the site formerly occupied by one of the office buildings. However, entering through the gate at the south entrance reveals that most of the complex is abandoned. Industrial equipment of different types still remains in several buildings, corresponding to the different stages of production, while in other cases, only empty warehouses remain.

From an architectural and archaeological point of view, the buildings that constitute the industrial complex are very different to one another, with various construction techniques and materials in evidence, reflecting the factory's more than century-long period of activity and the different functions of the buildings. Certain structures show their social nature clearly, despite occasional adaptations over time (e.g., locker rooms, canteens and a medical facility). Others focus on the efficiency of various production chains (Rego, 2013). Traces of the people who worked there are also visible in large quantities, spread throughout the several buildings that constitute the factory complex. They include posters and calendars of naked women on the walls or

2. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wI929Csjejk&ab_channel=JorgeMurteira> [Accessed in July 24, 2024].



Figure 1. Traces of workers in the Robinson cork factory (Photograph by the author)

inside lockers, political stickers in the locker rooms, posters of football teams, and several items handwritten by the workers everywhere.³ The clothes and shoes that were left behind are all traditionally male. As a result, when entering

most of the buildings, one is immediately led to believe they were occupied mostly or even exclusively by men (figure 1). However, comparing what remains at the site with other sources shows that the reality was different.

3. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx9UuBb2DSg>> [Accessed in July 24, 2024].

4.4. *The Robinson cork factory – Rewriting narratives of gender*

When studying industrial sites and rewriting the narratives about them so they are more inclusive and do not continue to historically erase the individuals of different genders who worked there, there are two aspects that need to be taken into consideration. These will be addressed in this section. The first is that the absence of artefacts typically associated with one gender does not necessarily mean the total absence of that gender. The second is the individuality of these people, i.e. the individuals of one gender, in this case women, are not a collective body with identical experiences.

In many archaeological studies of industrial sites, people are presented as an emotionless general body whose single purpose was (or should be) production. And this is when they are not just mentioned as numbers (Sequeira, 2023). Furthermore, many discourses ignore individual identities and choose generic words such as “worker(s)” to denominate the people who worked in industrial environments, giving the impression that those people were male. While in Portuguese there is a gender differentiation in the word worker (*trabalhador* in the masculine and *trabalhadora* in the feminine), in many languages this is not the case. Even so, many Portuguese authors still do not make the distinction, and use only the masculine version of the word, or instead use the word *operário*, also without gender distinction (e.g. Cravo, 2014; Folgado, 2014). For society in general, “femininity is often specified, by name or highly explicit conventions around embodiment, whereas masculinity literally ‘goes without saying’” (Taksa, 2020: 203).

In the Portuguese case, perhaps, this comes as a result of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship and the imposed discourses around gender roles. It is essential to rewrite the narratives and finally consider all the individuals present at industrial sites, independently of their gender, age or role. Thus, this section will present a detailed and combined analysis of the various sources and artefacts.

It is important to note that although these are national issues, this article does not intend to discuss them at that level. As this section will argue, these issues vary from factory to factory or even from person to person, so it would not be correct to extrapolate individual experiences, concerns and daily problems to a larger scale than the Robinson cork factory, even though many of these issues could be similar or even identical elsewhere.

Also, given the size of the factory and the large number of buildings with different characteristics and purposes, two cases, from two different buildings (shown in blue in figure 2), will be analysed in detail.

The first building is the cork stopper manufacture. It has a rectangular plan, 18 metres wide by 28 metres long. It has four floors. The interior space is open, without any divisions. Access between floors is via wooden stairs. The flooring of the various floors (except for the basement) is of wooden floorboards. The interior walls are plastered and whitewashed, and feature a significant number of windows, which offer excellent natural light (Rego, 2013).

Except for the basement, which nowadays serves as a storage room for the municipality, the remaining floors are empty (figure 3), without any traces of the work that took place there, or of those who

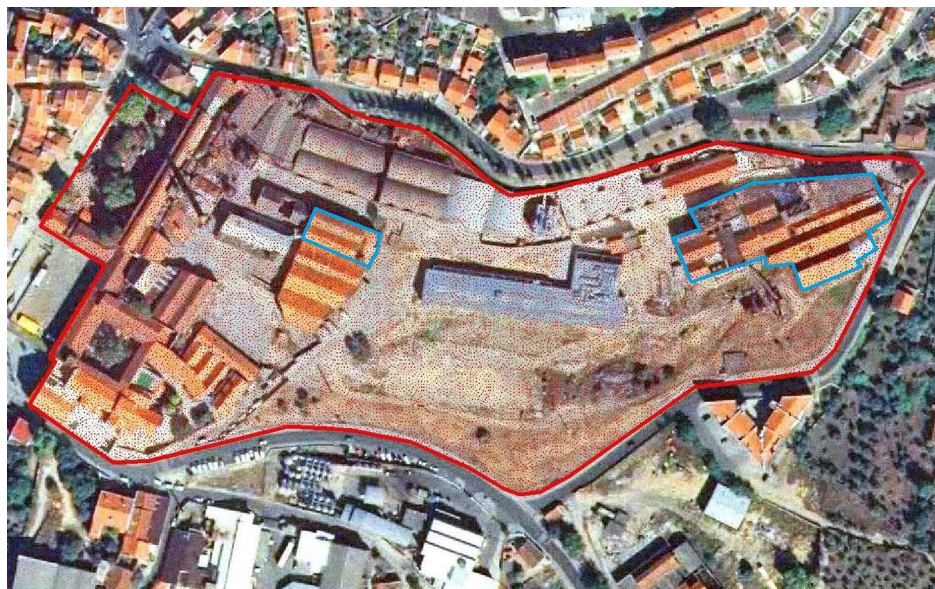


Figure 2. The Robinson cork factory plant (Source: Google Earth; edited by the author)

performed it. Thus, entering this building nowadays can be misleading. It provides almost no information about the activities that once took place there. Fortunately, though, an empty building is not the only means we have to understand the history of this factory and, above all, those who worked there.

In April 1944, Mário Novais was allowed access to that building to photograph it. But rather than the empty building with broken windows letting in the wind and the birds that one encounters today, what he found was a cork factory full of machines and other everyday objects (figure 4). Today, the only sound is the creaking of floorboards, but back then, the voices of the many people who made the cork stoppers could be heard. In contrast to today's bare walls, he would have seen calendars and other papers prominently displayed. He could see

the women and men working in a row, all very focused on their work (although this may have been staged for the camera), while the supervisor (and he himself) watched on intently. He could see the hundreds or thousands of small objects those hands had produced over the previous few days or weeks. Nowadays, the life of the building may have disappeared but the memories and stories remain in the minds of those who worked there, or of those to whom they were passed on.

As well as showing the differences of the site between past and present, this photograph also shows how people worked there. It shows that, although most of the workers in that section were women (as had been the case several decades earlier, when the 1881 Industrial Inquiry was carried out), men also carried out those tasks. But if we look closely, we can see that the man producing cork stop-

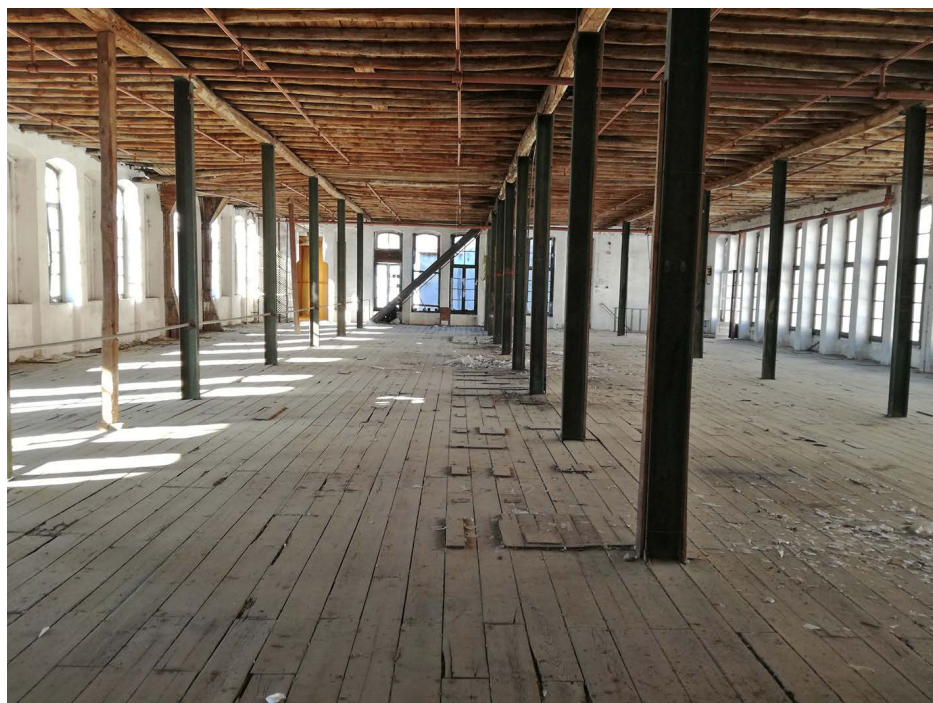


Figure 3. Cork stopper building today (Photograph by the author)

pers in the front row is not the only man in the photograph. On the right stands another man, wearing a shirt and a tie under his jacket, looking down at the women with a serious face, while the women work away to make as many stoppers as possible before their shifts are over. Everything suggests that this man was in charge (Pacheco, 2024). The women's coats and shawls indicate that it was cold inside, but they are all wearing skirts (and if they were wearing tights, they appear to be transparent). In fact, in Portugal at that time, no alternative would have been permitted (Aboim, 2011).

Although everything indicates that we are looking at a staged photograph (a professional photographer given access to

a factory would have to produce a photograph with which the client – usually the factory owner – felt comfortable), it shows that the owner (or the person who hired the photographer) wanted to convey the idea that the women were under male supervision. Conservative Portuguese society considered women inferior and they had fewer rights than men (this was even stated in the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic of 1933). Therefore, it is plausible they considered women should be supervised by men.

While images such as this one show women performing apparently easy tasks, when one listens to their words, this is not necessarily the impression their accounts give. Maria José is one of the



Figure 4. Cork stopper building in 1944. Photograph by Mário Novais (Source: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/biblarde/22669986267/in/album-72157606220845802/>>) [Accessed on August 01, 2024]

women who worked there. She remembers the seven-hour daily shifts. The night shifts were forbidden for women – perhaps they were not favoured by the conservative society. She worked on a machine that sanded the cork stoppers. She says those were routine tasks that made her sleepy. Sometimes she even had to wash her face to stay awake (Ribeiro, 2018: 47). These may seem like simple jobs but their monotony would certainly be exhausting.

The second photograph is of the white agglomerate section, which consists of eight distinct buildings. From an architectural and archaeological point of view, it is far more complex than the previous building (figure 5). The buildings

vary from single-storey structures to three-storey buildings (including the basements). Their roofs are also different. Some have a slab roof (forming terraces on which people can move around), while others have gable roofs with ceramic tiles or metal sheets. There are also numerous metal pipes spread across the roof. Inside, these buildings are also very different from one another, both in construction and in terms of the equipment that can still be found there today. This is not surprising, considering the complexity, duration and diversity of the processes involved in the white agglomerate production chain (Lourenço, 2015). Unlike the previous building, which was empty, when entering this site, one is confronted



Figure 5. White agglomerate centre today (Photograph by the author)

with several traces of the people who once worked there. Posters, magazine cuttings, drawings and words can be found on the walls, machines and lockers. However, these artefacts are traditionally associated with the presence of men in this part of the factory. So an archaeologist who enters this complex nowadays can be misled into believing that only men used to work there.

But just as we can enter these buildings today to record what remains there, in the past photographers (both professional and amateur) went there too to record what they saw. For instance, figure 6 shows that women also worked there, alongside men. The resolution of this photograph is not the best, since it is a photograph of a slide (it only exists in that format, any other original that may have existed in a different format has

been lost or could not be found), which in turn is a photograph of yet another photograph. However, the presence of a woman working with two men, operating the same machine on different sides of it, facing one another, is quite clear. Taken a few decades after the photograph in figure 5, it shows that women were present in this factory from its earlier days until its closure, and at every stage of production, from the moment the raw cork arrived at the factory until it left, transformed into agglomerate mosaics.

This is also confirmed by the documentary *A Ideia Nunca Abala* and by various statements by some of the women who worked there. In fact, in that video, there is a frame in which a group of women are working while, in the background, some posters of naked women are visible on the walls. It is important to keep in



Figure 6. Women and men working together in the Robinson cork factory. Unknown photographer (Source: Arquivo APAI)

mind that industrial places were mostly male-dominated. So it was normal for women not to be able to express themselves as they wanted, or perhaps they simply did not care about the objects surrounding them. Or maybe they even liked it. It could be a combination of all those factors, or none at all. Perhaps each woman would handle the situation differently depending on her own circumstances. When archaeologists enter an abandoned factory, it is important they question the presence of these individuals and not assume that they were not there, just because no evidence of them can be found immediately (Taksa, 2020).

The second aspect of this analysis is that acknowledging the women's presence is not enough to fully understand their roles in this factory. It is also important to study their roles and what their daily lives were like, always keeping in mind that they are individuals, with different identities, and the reality for one of them is not necessarily the same for another (Ribeiro, 2017). Besides, no reality, memory or point of view is more valid than any other; they are just different.

Júlia remembers that her work was tough and heavy. She always worked standing up (Ribeiro, 2018: 38). Maria says that she was always worried about her children, not knowing who would look after them when she went to work (spoken testimony from the documentary *A Ideia Nunca Abala*). There is another woman named Júlia, who says that working in the factory ruined her health (Trindade et al., 2012: 8). A woman named Maria recalls how difficult it was to achieve the daily target (to separate 25kg of cork from wood). If they did not succeed, they would be punished. This meant they would not be allowed to work the next day and consequently, they would not get paid. According to her statement, this task was even more challenging during the summer, as the cork was very dry and lighter (Ribeiro, 2018: 53).

When I met her at the nursing home where she lived, Armanda, who worked in the offices, recalled a completely different experience. She remembered how well she was always treated, how they gave presents to the workers' children for Christmas. How they always looked after her, and how they never deducted her salary when she was ill. The factory owners provided a house for her entire family, including her co-workers, without requiring them to pay rent. But she also remembered that respect for the bosses was always mandatory, otherwise they would be fired (First-person testimony collected in 2018). Délia, who also worked in the factory offices, had a similar experience. When she was told that she had reached retirement age, she had not even realised that so many years had passed. She was sad that she had to leave (Ribeiro, 2018: 59).

5. Conclusion

This case study provides an opportunity to address the broader issues of gender representation and historical narratives in Portuguese industrial archaeology. Throughout this paper, the often-overlooked presence and involvement of women in industrial environments has been highlighted, challenging the traditional historiographical and archaeological narratives which tend to diminish their roles or completely erase them. The evidence from the Robinson cork factory demonstrates that, despite societal norms and restrictive gender roles, women were essential to the industrial workforce. In this particular case, they performed a range of tasks that went from cork stopper production to involvement in cork agglomerate manufacturing or even working in the offices. This study used a methodological approach, combining different sources and materials to show that women were present, that they worked in certain conditions, that the workplace hierarchy was based on gender, and that society at the time had particular views on female workers. Thus, it has been possible to challenge simplistic binary gender narratives that perhaps resulted from the conservative mentality of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship, and that can still be felt in the country today. The study has shown that women's work was not limited to so-called lighter tasks and that they faced harsh and precarious working conditions. These included lower wages and lack of recognition. The study also provides valuable insights into the personal experiences and perceptions of female workers. These contrasted sharply with the sanitised and idealised portrayals that can be found in some

photographs (Monteiro, 2014) and written records (Vaquinhas, 2021). Discrepancies between the different sources reflect societal biases and the need for critical engagement with all types of evidence. This emphasises the importance of considering multiple perspectives, sources and materials when reconstructing historical narratives.

Furthermore, comparing the archaeological site with other sources and materials illustrates the challenges of understanding archaeological locations and how often our interpretations can be distinct from what happened there. In this situation, the absence of traditionally gender-specific material culture cannot necessarily be interpreted as evidence that women were not present there. This article emphasises the importance of always questioning traditional assumptions and of employing a gender-sensitive lens to archaeological research.

Exploring the complex narratives of industrial sites such as this one clearly demonstrates that addressing individual identities is essential. These spaces were not homogeneous entities; they were populated by diverse individuals whose experiences varied significantly. Recognising the multiplicity of these identities allows for a more nuanced understanding of the past. Each person's experience was influenced by intricate factors. These include gender, age and social status, among others, which influenced their roles, perceptions and treatment within the industrial complex. Ignoring this diversity leads to an incomplete and often biased narrative (Carastathis, 2014). Thus, the author believes that archaeology and historiography must endeavour to include these individual stories, acknowledging that each person's reality is unique and valid.

Approaches like this enrich the understanding of the industrial past and ensure that the contributions and struggles of all individuals, particularly from marginalised and subordinate groups, are accurately represented and remembered.

Throughout this article, while focusing on the example of the Robinson cork factory, an attempt has been made to

demonstrate the contributions of women to the Portuguese industrial sector and to call for a re-evaluation of how gender has been and should be represented in historical and archaeological narratives. The lack of evidence or a reliance on biased historical sources can no longer justify the underrepresentation and marginalisation of these individuals.

Bibliographical references

- ABOIM, S. (2011). "Vidas conjugais: do institucionalismo ao elogio da relação". In: ALMEIDA, A. N. (coord.). *História da Vida Privada em Portugal. Os Nossos Dias*. Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores.
- BAPTISTA, V.; ALVES, P. M. (2020). "As mulheres de Xabregas: trabalho, quotidiano e ativismo (do fim do século XIX aos anos 40 do século XX)". In: CABREIRA, P. P. (ed.). *História do Movimento Operário e Conflitos Sociais em Portugal: Atas do IV Congresso História do Trabalho, do Movimento Operário e dos Conflitos Sociais em Portugal e III Conferência do Observatório para as Condições de Trabalho e Vida*. Lisbon: Instituto de História Contemporânea.
- BOSERUP, E. (2011). *Woman's Role in Economic Development*. London: Earthscan.
- CARASTATHIS, A. (2014). "The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory". *Philosophy Compass*, 9 (5), 304-314.
- CASIMIRO, T.; SEQUEIRA, J. L.; SANTOS, J.; PACHECO, S. (2023). "Arqueologia Fora da Lei". *Al-Madan*, 26, 26-30.
- COBB, H.; CRELLIN, R. (2022). "Affirmation and Action: A Posthumanist Feminist Agenda for Archaeology". *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 32 (2), 265-279.
- COLTOFEAN-ARIZANCU, L.; GAYDARSKA, B.; MATIĆ, U. (2021). *Gender stereotypes in archaeology: A short reflection in image and text*. Leiden: Sidestone Press.
- COMISSÃO CENTRAL DIRECTORA DO INQUERITO INDUSTRIAL (1881). *Inquerito Industrial de 1881*. Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional.
- CONKEY, M. W.; SPECTOR, J. D. (1984). "Archaeology and the Study of Gender". *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, 7, 1-38.
- CORDEIRO, J. M. L. (1989). *A Indústria Conserveira em Matosinhos. Exposição de Arqueologia Industrial*. Matosinhos: Câmara Municipal de Matosinhos.
- CRAVO, J. C. (2014). "A Habitação Operária na Amadora. O Caso do Eixo Venda Nova – Porcalhota". In: MONTEIRO, B.; PEREIRA, J. D. (eds.). *De Pé Sobre a Terra. Estudos sobre a Indústria, o Trabalho e o Movimento*. <<http://hdl.handle.net/10362/11192>>
- DEREVENSKI, J. S. (1997). "Age and Gender at the Site of Tiszapolgár-Basatanya, Hungary". *Antiquity*, 71, 875-889.
- DEVAULT, M. L. (1990). "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis". *Social Problems*, 37 (1), 96-116.

- DÍAZ-ANDREU, M. (2005). *Archaeology of Identity. Approaches to gender, age, status, ethnicity and religion*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- FAÍSCA, C. (2014). *Criando os Chaparraís. Dois Séculos de Montado de Sobro no Alentejo*. Lisbon: Apenas Livros.
- FERREIRA, A. S. (2024). *Entre a Tradição e a Modernidade – A Vida Quotidiana no Estado Novo*. Lisbon: Manuscrito.
- FOLGADO, D. (2014). “O Pensamento Arquitectónico Moderno e a Alteração do Espaço de Habitar Operário”. In: MONTEIRO, B.; PEREIRA, J. D. (eds.). *De Pé Sobre a Terra. Estudos sobre a Indústria, o Trabalho e o Movimento*. <<http://hdl.handle.net/10362/11192>>
- FOLGADO, D.; CUSTÓDIO, J. (2018). “A Robinson de Portalegre: Da manufactura à maquinofactura da rolha de cortiça (1840-1881)”. *Revista Chaminés*, 1, 21-29.
- GILCHRIST, R. (1999). *Gender and Archaeology. Contesting the Past*. London: Routledge.
- GOUVEIA, A. C. (ed.) (2007). *Publicações da Fundação Robinson. Para a História da Fundação, 0*. Portalegre: Fundação Robinson.
- (2012). *Publicações da Fundação Robinson. A Ideia Nunca Abala, 22*. Portalegre: Fundação Robinson.
- GUIMARÃES, E. (1986). “A mulher portuguesa na legislação civil”. *Análise Social*, XXII (92-93), 557-577.
- HARDESTY, D. L. (2010). “Gendering Mining Landscapes”. In: BAUGHER, S.; SPENCER-WOOD, S. M. (eds.). *Archaeology and Preservation of Gendered Landscapes*. New York: Springer.
- HYTTINEN, M.; KALLIO-SEPPÄ, T. (2022). “They Were Here Too. Women and Children in Industrial Communities”. In: CASELLA, E. C.; NEVELL, M.; STEYNE, H. (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Industrial Archaeology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- KIDDEY, R. (2020). “I’ll tell you what I want, what I really, really want! Open Archaeology that is Collaborative, Participatory, Public, and Feminist”. *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 53 (1), 23-40.
- LAMAS, M. (2002). *As Mulheres do Meu País*. Lisbon: Editorial Caminho.
- LOURENÇO, R. (2015). “A produção de Parquet na Fábrica Robinson. Da cortiça ao produto acabado”. *Abelterium. Revista Online de Arqueologia e História do Município de Alter do Chão*, II (1), 96-106.
- MATÍĆ, U.; JENSEN, B. (eds.) (2017). *Archaeologies of gender and violence*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- MENDES, V. (ed.) (2017). *As Mulheres e o Trabalho: A Indústria de vestuário no concelho da Moita*. Moita: Câmara Municipal da Moita.
- MILKMAN, R. (2016). *On Gender, Labor, and Inequality*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- MOEN, M. (2019). “Gender and Archaeology: Where Are We Now?”. *Archaeologies*, 15, 206-226.
- MONTEIRO, B. (2014). “Natureza-morta com máquinas. A política de representação do espaço fabril na fotografia industrial nas décadas de 50 e 60 no Porto”. In: MONTEIRO, B.; PEREIRA, J. D. (eds.). *De Pé Sobre a Terra. Estudos sobre a Indústria, o Trabalho e o Movimento*. <<http://hdl.handle.net/10362/11192>>
- MURTEIRA, J. (2012). “Um caminho longo para memória futura”. In: GOUVEIA, A. C. (ed.). *Publicações da Fundação Robinson. A Ideia Nunca Abala, 22*. Portalegre: Fundação Robinson.
- OLIVEIRA, A. (2012). *Fotografar Arquitectura. Da máquina de desenhar à máquina de propaganda, a fotografia como condicionante da percepção*. Unpublished MA thesis.
- PACHECO, S. (2023). “Why do we need gender archaeology when studying factories?”. In: SILVA, S.; MOSCATEL, C.; OLIVEIRA, N.; SOARES, D.; VALÉRIO, B. (eds.). *Trabalho (no) Feminino – Histórias de Mulheres (Séculos XVIII a XX)*. Açores: Letras Lavadas.
- (2024). “Lentes do Passado: Uma Análise Arqueológica das Fotografias das Mulheres da Fábrica Robinson em Portalegre (Portugal)”. *VESTÍGIOS – Revista Latino-Americana de Arqueologia Histórica*, 18(2).

- PACHECO, S.; SANTOS, J.; CASIMIRO, T. (2023). "Personagens Escondidas: à procura das emoções esquecidas das mulheres na indústria portuguesa. Uma análise arqueológica através de novas materialidades". In: ARNAUD, J.; NEVES, C.; MARTINS, A. (eds.) *Actas do IV Congresso da Associação dos Arqueólogos Portugueses*. Lisbon: Associação dos Arqueólogos Portugueses.
- PALAZÓN BOTELLA, M. D. (2014). *Base para un estudio de la evolución productiva de la Fábrica Robinson. De los tapones a los aglomerados*. Unpublished MA thesis.
- PAREJO MORUNO; FAÍSCA, C.; PRECIADO, J. (2013). "Las Orígenes de las actividades corcheras en Extremadura: El corcho Extremeño entre Catalanes e Ingleses". *Revista de Estudios Extremeños*, 1, 461-490.
- PARRATT, C. M. (1998). "Little means or time: working-class women and leisure in late Victorian and Edwardian England". *The International Journal of History of Sport*, 15 (2), 22-53.
- PIRES, G. B. (2024). "Binary or Non-binary? Binary and Non-binary? None? Looking at Gender Expressions in the Egyptian Divine World". In: PALINÇA, N.; MARTINS, A. C. (eds.). *Gender and Change in Archaeology European Studies on the Impact of Gender Research on Archaeology and Wider Society*. Cham: Springer.
- REGO, D. (2013). *Edifícios da Fábrica Robinson de Cortiça. Relatório de Identificação e Caracterização Arquitetónica*. Unpublished.
- RIBEIRO, D. (2017). *O que é lugar de fala?* Belo Horizonte: Letramento.
- RIBEIRO, M. (2018). *Mulheres, Trabalho e Alentejo. Cadernos de Histórias de Vida*. Portalegre: Câmara Municipal de Portalegre.
- SCOTT, J. W. (1988). *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- (1994). "A mulher trabalhadora". In: DUBY, G.; PERROT, M. (eds.). *História das Mulheres no Ocidente. O Século XIX*. Porto: Edições Afrontamento.
- (1996). *Feminism and History. Oxford Readings in Feminism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SEIFERT, D. J. (1991). "Introduction". *Historical Archaeology*, 25 (4), 1-5.
- SEQUEIRA, J. L. (2023). "O Cão, o Guarda e a Fábrica ausências agenciais na arqueologia industrial e ontologias desconfortáveis". *Al-Madan Online*, 26 (2), 118-130.
- SEQUEIRA, J. L.; CASIMIRO, T. (2021). "Humanizing Industrial Archaeology". *Historical Archaeology*, 54 (1), 45-48.
- TAKSA, L. (2020). "'Hidden in plain sight': uncovering the gendered heritage of an industrial landscape". In: DE NARDI, S.; ORANGE, H.; HIGH, S.; KOSKINEN-KOIVISTO, E. (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Memory and Place*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- TRINDADE, A. M. et al. (2012). "Aqueles que na fábrica habitaram". In: GOUVEIA, A. C. (ed.). *Publicações da Fundação Robinson. A Ideia Nunca Abala*, 22. Portalegre: Fundação Robinson.
- VAQUINHAS, I. (2021). "Arquivos do feminino e o feminino nos arquivos: fontes, questões e metodologias (séculos XIX e XX)". In: MOSCATEL, C. et al. (eds.). *O Feminino nos Arquivos: abordagens e problematizações*. Ponta Delgada: Biblioteca Pública e Arquivo Regional de Ponta Delgada.
- VAQUINHAS, I.; GUIMARÃES, M. A. P. (2011). "Economia doméstica e governo do lar. Os saberes domésticos e as funções da dona de casa". In: VAQUINHAS, I. (ed.). *História da Vida Privada em Portugal. A Época Contemporânea*. Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores.
- VENTURA, A. (2007). "Para uma cronologia da Fábrica Robinson (1848-1966)". In: GOUVEIA, A. C. (ed.). *Publicações da Fundação Robinson. Para a História da Fundação*, 0. Portalegre: Fundação Robinson.
- (2012). "Antologia: os conflitos sociais de Portalegre na imprensa (1893-1920)". In: GOUVEIA, A. C. (ed.). *Publicações da Fundação Robinson. Conflitos sociais em Portalegre no tempo dos Robinson*, 23. Portalegre: Fundação Robinson.
- WALL, K. (2011). "A intervenção do Estado: políticas públicas de família". In: ALMEIDA, A. N. (ed.). *História da Vida Privada em Portugal. Os Nossos Dias*. Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores.

