



Research Article

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Female Microhistorical Archaeology

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Abstract: Microhistory is a part of historical research that focuses on the behaviours, practices, and perceptions of individuals and small communities, locating them in social, economic, and cultural frameworks. Although archaeology has already focused on similar attempts, microarchaeology seldom takes a female perspective. This article aims to discuss how microhistory can be used in historical archaeology, engendering past narratives, those which are usually so difficult to find from historical documents and archaeological sites, and introducing the concept of the *ego-artefact*, the artefacts we know to have belonged to specific people and which are almost biographical. By doing this analysis, we are individually reconstructing past narratives while including these stories in macronarratives.

Keywords: microhistorical archaeology, women's social roles, ego-artefacts

1 Introduction

In one of the most cited publications discussing the interdisciplinary intersection of archaeology and microhistory, Charles Orser concludes by writing: “archaeology and microhistory are perfectly and uniquely suited to interpreting the enigmas of life” (Orser, 2016, p. 181). In this article, I want to start where Orser ended and debate that the relationship between archaeology and microhistory should not stop at the interpretation of the different enigmas of life. They can be used not only to debate those macro- and micronarratives but also to promote theoretical debate about gender discussions, such as inequality and non-binary roles, in historical archaeology.

The attempt to connect microhistory to the archaeology of gender studies may be bold since I may be accused of losing the big picture of the real contribution gender studies have made to addressing social phenomena as a whole when women's social importance was diminished. However, I believe that the personal stories and the lives of women in the specific places I am going to discuss do precisely the opposite. They reveal how women endured in a society ruled by men, creating individual forms of resistance, reconsidering the conventional assumed binary gender model of social organisation where women tended to have specific roles that anonymised them (Scott, 2021); and they reveal that gender identity was a crucial point of social organisation. A recent paper led by Bisserka Gaydarska, although discussing the Neolithic and Bronze Age, summarises the differences genders can have in the archaeological record, speculating on why it is so difficult to recognise men and women and why a binary tendency “in clothing and jewelry, in roles and division of labour, in places and spaces, in bodily postures, in technical tools and process,” among other aspects, is assumed by many authors, despite constant attempts to avoid it (Gaydarska et al., 2023, p. 4). A female microhistorical archaeology may help us not to “uncritically accept deeply embedded gendered assumptions (for example, that

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women have always been confined to a narrow domestic sphere of activity because they are tied to childcare or maintenance activities in general), ruling out the ability of archaeological data to produce new understandings” (Brumfiel & Robin, 2008, p. 7; Montón-Subías, 2010; Pyburn, 2004).

When looking for the most important microhistorical approaches which marked the way that researchers look into the past, seldom, if ever, were these observed from a feminine perspective (Ginzburg, 1980; Levi, 1991). Even in European historical archaeology, where the connection to history presents itself as a solid relation, the use of microhistorical accounts is rarely connected to archaeology and even more rarely to gender archaeology studies (Boozer, 2010; Hupperetz, 2010; Kaeser, 2008; Ashkenazi et al. (2021)). The reason behind this absence may be related to the fact that combining archaeological information where women are recognised with tales about their personal lives is indeed rare, and telling personal stories, particularly of women who defied gender normative roles, may enable recognition of the gender discrimination that these women’s society imposed on them (Wilkie, 2003).

My attempt to discuss female microhistorical archaeology does not, in any sense, procure to ignore all the work developed by historians and archaeologists considering the roles of individual women or groups of women both from historical, osteological, and archaeological perspectives combining written sources with archaeological artefacts or even human remains (Dempsey, 2021; Radini et al., 2019; Swallow, 2019; Wilkie, 2003). What this article adds to this discussion about women’s studies in archaeology is a microhistorical theoretical framework in association with historical archaeology, since none of the authors dealing with individuals, although discussing individuals, has ever considered these as microhistorical narratives or at least recognised them as such, even though they deal with small scale events.

The microhistories I use in this study to defend the existence of a female microhistorical archaeology were discovered mostly through my studies on the world distribution of Portuguese ceramics. I have been lucky enough to be able to study not only the global importance of material culture circulation, trade, and consumption but also how they impact on the most individual level. In this research, I have crossed paths with different women, some with better-known stories than others, depending on the amount of available information. In some cases, although “archaeologists tend to consider the local before the global ego-documents (first-person sources/life writing)” (Magnússon, 2016, p. 192), it was possible to combine both approaches to reconstruct narratives which, originating from the single act of using artefacts, can explore ways of female resistance. Sometimes the stories of these women were not obtained through ego-documents, but through what I would like to name, drawing on Magnússon’s designation, “ego-artefacts”: objects that were used by the individual and reflect their personalities, objects that contain biographical references, and through which we can reconstruct past individual lives. Sometimes these “ego-artefacts” have names or initials written on them and sometimes they do not and become biographical objects because we know the names of their users such as the hairpins used by Gundrada de Warenne (Dempsey, 2021).

I do not wish, however, to ignore the metanarratives that framed these lives, since these are fundamental when we talk about female microhistorical archaeology. When seeing the resistance of these women, we need to understand what they were resisting to, and how their lives were manipulated by different power structures. Either by assuming traditional male activities or by organising their lives in female religious communities, these women resisted and endured in a male-dominated society. Magnússon (2003) has already argued that metanarratives were fundamental frameworks for understanding micronarratives since they provided the means and references for understanding the singular context. In the micronarratives, I approach in this article these macrostructures may be the colony, religious expectations, and the convents, among many other structures framing these lives. For Charles Orser (2016, p. 178), the large structures are what he calls “the metaproceses” of modernity, which he identifies as “colonialism, capitalism, Eurocentrism, and racialization (...) very real sociohistorical processes with major ramifications for the recent history of the human family.” Many more can be added to these, especially if the narratives focus on female characters in a male-dominated world. Although I agree with Orser when he posits the need to acknowledge that “social networks exist on vertical as well as horizontal planes,” I would like to take a moment to reflect on his statement that acknowledging that is “our first step to moving beyond the micro-level” (Orser, 2016, p. 180). Why should we want to go beyond the micro-level? Is it so important that these personal narratives are included in a broader narrative? Magnússon (2016, p. 183) has already stressed how dangerous it can be in historical analysis when

macronarratives become dominant and overshadow the microanalysis: Achieving harmony and balance between the two poles is extremely difficult; almost inevitably the larger context wins out over the smaller. It is the grand narrative that determines both the research questions and the conclusions from the research.

In historical archaeology, due to the large dimensions of all the relations occurring in a globalised world, we tend always to analyse the impact of metaproceses on individual relations, almost forgetting personal feelings, emotions, and decisions.

One central question needs to be addressed before I start to tell their stories. Specifically, how does the use of a microhistory theoretical framework change when studying these lives, especially at a time when historical archaeology already uses written documents as fundamental sources (Wilkie, 2006)? First, it generalises and equalises the relationship between history and archaeology in an interdisciplinary approach, where it is essential to have both disciplines involved (Ribeiro, 2019), questioning if it is even possible to do historical archaeology without written sources. Second, it brings the individual into discussion as an actor in a wide global narrative, the narrative that is usually told in historical archaeology when it conceptualises aspects such as globalisation, giving people individual perspectives. This singularisation of behaviours (Magnússon, 2003) allows archaeologists to deal with human agents in such a way that their feelings and emotions can be observed in the archaeological record. Third, it permits us to discuss how these women found different forms of resisting and/or manipulating the system, singular stories that could have been the stories of many other women whose names archaeologists rarely discover but whose objects, the ego-artefacts they called their own, they can find and discuss.

2 Gendered Archaeological Microhistories

The tales I am going to tell refer to women (a gender they themselves assumed) who lived under different conditions. The three tales refer to the seventeenth century, although others, earlier and later, could have been included. We always know their names and some of the most important aspects of their lives. Although some cultural and social aspects vary according to region and cultural background, in Early Modern Europe and/or European colonies certain behaviours were expected of women. Holly Hartman, when discussing gender in colonial America, claims that these behaviours “kept women in certain boundaries. Women had no defined legal identity as an individual. Women grew to resent being repressed socially and legally with the constant law changes restricting the liberties permitted to their gender” (Hartman, 2009, p. 1). These conditions would only be surpassed when there was no male presence in their lives, and they could be the leaders of their households. A woman in the seventeenth century was expected to be a good wife, honourable, faithful, dedicated, devoted to God, family, and household (Ulrich, 1991). In certain colonial settlements, however, women seem to have enjoyed a certain degree of independence, even if always subjugated by men (Carr & Walsh, 1977). The condition which gave rise to that independence, as will be noted in the following narratives, was usually the passing of their husbands, in one particular case a divorce, or the absence of a male structure.

2.1 Running a Fishery

In 1663, James Yonge sailed to Newfoundland as a surgeon on board a ship. During his many months there he visited several parts of the colony, engaging with its inhabitants and activities. In his diary he wrote that he would “forbear to describe the harbours because the maps I shall draw of them will do that sufficient” (Poynter, 1963, p. 56), presenting a map of part of the coast of Newfoundland. What is most extraordinary about this territorial representation is that he does not register any plantation owner’s name, except for one. In Ferryland he wrote on his map Lady Kirke, referring to Sara Kirke, one of the most prominent inhabitants of the Avalon Peninsula at that time.

We do not know if James Yonge ever met Sarah Kirke, but she must have been an extraordinary woman in a time when extraordinary women were seldom recognised. The few things we know about Sarah Kirke reveal a remarkable character. She arrived in Ferryland in 1638 together with her husband, Sir David, and around 100

settlers, replacing Lord Calvert who had moved south to found Saint Mary City. A royal charter granted the Kirke family a legal right to explore and impose taxes on all non-English ships that explored Newfoundland waters (Matthews, 1975, pp. 104–111). The decision to base their home in Ferryland may well have been due to the site having the necessary land and harbour infrastructures to settle if one wanted to control the colony. “The extant dwellings, stone quay, waterfront storehouse, and fisheries infrastructure allowed Sir David to implement his plans without having to invest large amounts of money or time” (Gaulton & Casimiro, 2014, p. 6). In the decade after the Kirke family settled, the settlement enjoyed significant economic growth, which reflected archaeologically in the material culture and features discovered in the twentieth century (Gaulton & Tuck, 2003). But, in the early 1650s, there was a turn in events. In 1651, Sir David, an assumed royalist, was forced to return to London, summoned by the Commonwealth to report on his activities in Newfoundland. He never returned from his voyage and died in prison in 1654. There is more to his story but in Sara’s story, she and her four sons remained at Ferryland, and in 1660, she wrote to King Charles II asking to extend her husband’s rights to explore Newfoundland to her older son George (Pope, 1993, p. 91). This request never received a reply, and although she agreed to pay rent to Lord Baltimore (the colony’s governor) (Pope, 1993, pp. 92–93), she assumed the direction of Ferryland’s Pool plantation destinies. Lady Sara decided never to remarry nor return to England and continued to rule her own life. News from 1673 mentions that the people with the highest economic impact in Ferryland were Sara Kirke, her sons George, Philip, David, and Jarvis, and, although we do not know much about her, Sara’s sister Lady Frances Hopkins (Pope, 1993, pp. 110–111). These two women were successful business owners during the 1670s in a male-dominated fishing industry. “In 1675, for example, Lady Kirke employed 25 men and owned five boats whereas her sister had 15 and 3, respectively” (Gaulton & Casimiro, 2014, p. 6). Lady Sara died some years later and her property passed to her sons (Pope, 1993, p. 188). Several seasons of excavations at the site unearthed the house where Sara lived and the house where her sons later dwelt. Historically speaking there is not that much we know about Sara, but archaeology permitted us to know her better.

In 2010, I visited Newfoundland for the first time with the purpose of comprehending the enormous amounts of Portuguese faience found at Ferryland (Gaulton & Tuck, 2003) and the direct relation it had with Portugal (Casimiro, 2016). At that time, I discovered that Lady Sara was using a personalised set of Portuguese faience marked with her initials S.K., together with huge amounts of other objects produced in many parts of the world (Figure 1). These ego-artefacts were found in association with a stone-framed building, close to the water, where it is believed that Sarah Kirke lived and from where she could control the harbour (Gaulton, 2006). The S.K. bowls, like other objects within the house, did not present any wear marks, which indicates that these were likely to be identity objects that she perhaps either displayed or used on special occasions.

If documents permit reconstruction of the events of Sara’s life, archaeology permits us to enhance our knowledge of her daily activities. We know she had economic capacity for acquiring goods that were exotic and exquisite, but she also had “custom-made” ceramics with her initials. We suspect that her sister, another prominent woman in Ferryland, also did the same, due to the recovery of a bowl with an H. at the bottom.



Figure 1: One of the S.K. bowls found in Sara Kirke’s house (photo by T. M. Casimiro) – courtesy Colony of Avalon.

These objects not only marked ownership of their things and their home but also their identification in the house later occupied by her sons, reusing or keeping these objects as heirlooms, reveals that they were a reflection of her own identity (Gaulton & Casimiro, 2014). She ate from the English plates, where she may have had peas and beans, and pork, since those bones were found on site and we know they were sent as cargo to Newfoundland (Bain & Prévost, 2010; Casimiro, 2013; Guiry, Noël, Tourigny, & Grimes, 2012). Misha Ewen posited that this consumer characteristic of Sara Kirke's personality reflected a "desire to self-fashion an English cosmopolitan identity and thus strengthen her family's status at the imperial frontier" (Ewen, 2021, p. 24). While this may be so, it is my belief that this consumption of objects was far more than the desire of a woman to belong to an imperial macrostructure. She had the choice of remarrying, she had the choice to return to England after 1660, but she decided to stay in a freezing land, where she could control her own destiny. Sara's outstanding ceramic collection may have reflected an aesthetic concept of globalisation but was only appreciated by a few. Maybe James Yonge actually entered her house and saw the Portuguese red wares on the same shelves as the English, Dutch, and Portuguese tin glaze and the Chinese porcelain, but it did not impress him enough to write anything about it. Sara and her family lived in a house where they could use and appreciate ceramics produced in many parts of the world, where they enjoyed commodities whose consumption was possible owing to a globalised world. They drank coffee sweetened with sugar, smoked tobacco, and ate oranges, all from Chinese, English, Dutch, and Portuguese cups, plates, and pipes (Gaulton, 2006).

Sara's micronarrative demonstrates how archaeology can add to the knowledge of a woman who fought structures by refusing to return to England and living a comfortable life among her peers. Documental information tells us who she and her family were but not how they lived their daily lives and the things they used. Her story contributed to the general understanding of how a woman could defy the rules established for women in colonial settings.

2.2 Pledging for a Divorce

The story of Katherine Nany Naylor is better known (Cook, 1998). Katherine was born in 1630 in England to Reverend John Wheelwright and Marie Storey. In late 1631, after her mother died, her father remarried to Mary Hutchinson. In 1635, Katherine and her family moved to Boston, Massachusetts. After a series of events related to trials and accusations, the family moved to Exeter in what is today New Hampshire, and later to Maine, only to return to New Hampshire a few years later. Here, Katherine met her first husband, Robert Nany, also born in England. They got married sometime between 1645 and 1653 and moved to Boston, where they "purchased land, a dwelling house, and a wharf along Ann Street on the north side of Boston Harbor," prospering as a merchant family (Cook, 1998, p. 16). She had eight children with her first husband, although only two reached adulthood. Robert died in 1663, leaving his property to Katherine. Two or three years after becoming a widow, Katherine married Edward Naylor, also an Englishman, with whom she conceived two children who survived. Edward was an abusive husband and in 1671 Katherine petitioned against him to the Supreme Court, accusing him of violence against everyone in their household, trying to poison her, and adultery by impregnating one of the house servants. Katherine was allowed to divorce her husband and continued to live in the property with her four children. She never remarried and died of old age in 1716. Katherine lived in a Puritan community. The fact that her husband threatened her children and her own safety meant it was probably widely assumed that she was a failure as a wife (Cook, 1998).

Sometime during her final years in her Boston house (she moved to Charlestown in 1700) a privy started to be filled with household waste. Consequently, during the 1992 excavation, it was possible to infer several things about the house where Katherine lived with her family. Although we know a lot about Katherine's life, if it were not for archaeology we would never know what kind of food her family ate at that time, what clothing they used, what tableware they ate from, and even that her home floor had to be replaced at some point after 1660, with new wood planks (Bain, 1998). Archaeological discoveries reveal it was a wealthy household which probably imported food, ceramics, and glass from several European countries, including the Portuguese objects I study, but also South American ceramics from Mexico and expensive silk clothes (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A Portuguese faience box found in Katherine Naylor's privy (photo by T. M. Casimiro) – courtesy City of Boston Archaeology.

There was no lack of food in the house, with the discovery of considerable amounts of wheat, barley, oats, and rye (Kelso, 1998), plums, cherries, peaches, pumpkins, grapes, olives, pears and apples, hawthorns, brambles, elderberries, blueberries, huckleberries, and strawberries. Food was eaten seasoned, with the discovery of pepper grains and coriander, but also walnuts and hickories. Other plants included lambsquarters, pokeweeds, mustard, and wild carrots, among others (Dudek et al., 1998). The animal bones found in the privy also suggest that the family consumed beef (domestic cow), lamb (sheep/goat), and pork (domestic pig), as well as wild mammals, wild birds, domestic birds, and a small amount of fish (Brown & Bowen, 1998).

However, the state of conservation of the privy's residues also permitted recognition of the existence of parasites that would have lived in the household inhabitants' intestines, revealing that life may not have been that comfortable (Driscoll, 1995). Inside the privy large quantities of shoes and silk garments were also found, something which was only allowed for those whose estates were valued above £200 and which, considering the material culture found, was clearly the case in Katherine's household (Ordoñez & Walters, 1998). Archaeology thus permitted deeper knowledge of her daily activities and her personal life.

In the excavation of Katherine's privy, there was no object where her name was engraved; however, all the other objects were from the personal use of her household. She could have worn one of those shoes and those fine silk adornments could have been part of her dress. If not for her it was most likely one of her children or maids. This does not make these artefacts less biographical since they are fundamental in understanding the daily habits of this family and how they differed from or confirmed a colonial lifestyle.

2.3 Resisting the Rules

The excavation of Portuguese female religious houses, especially those occupied during the seventeenth century, reveals the existence of hundreds of ego-artefacts in the shape of plates with the names and initials of the women who inhabited those convents and monasteries. These religious houses are spread across the country, such as – to name a few that have been excavated in recent decades – the Santana Convent in Lisbon (Gomes et al., 2013), the Jesus Convent in Setúbal (Almeida, 2012), the Santana Convent in Leiria (Trindade, 2013), the Aracoelli Convent in Alcácer do Sal (Parreira, 2020), the Francesinhas Convent in Lisbon, and the Santa Clara a Velha monastery in Coimbra, among many others. These religious houses, within which dozens of nuns lived their daily lives, reveal a different life from that expected from them. For the purpose of this article, I am going to refer just to two of those religious houses: the Santa a Clara a Velha (Coimbra) and the Nossa Senhora de Aracoelli (Alcácer do Sal).

The monastery of Santa Clara a Velha is located on the southern bank of the Mondego River in Coimbra and is directly associated with one of Portugal's most famous queens, Isabel of Aragon, wife of King Dinis. The history of this site has a direct connection with the Mondego River: from its early years, the site was constantly flooded by the river owing to the silting process (Côrte-Real, Santos, Mourão, & Macedo, 2002, p. 24). This rough

relationship resulted in severe damage to the building and a tough life for the nuns, and the river's unpredictable behaviour was fundamental to the life, evolution, and fate of the site. After the extinction of the first monastery in 1311, which had been founded in 1286, Queen Isabel of Aragon paid for the construction of the new building. This was built in the same place and its purpose was to house a community of Saint Claire nuns. During the centuries it was occupied, there are several references to floods and the attempts made to address them, such as the elevation of the monastery's ground floor, an endeavour that can be observed in the archaeological record. The deterioration of living conditions ultimately led to the abandonment of the site. In 1677, the nuns moved to a new monastery located uphill and far from the river's direct influence. The lower part of the monastery was covered by garbage and mud until 1995, when the excavation started (Côrte-Real et al., 2002). The excavation led to the recovery of a huge range of artefacts representing the daily lives of the nuns. Ceramics were, as expected, the most abundant category of material culture, but the archaeologists also found glass, and several small items related to religious and personal activities (Casimiro, Silva, & Leal, 2023; Leal & Ferreira, 2018; Leal & Santos, 2022).

Among the thousands of ceramic objects identified, there are plates and bowls with the names of the nuns that lived in the convent. These objects present wear marks at the bottom and on the rim, revealing, contrary to what was noticed about the S.K. bowls owned by Sara Kirke, that these were objects used for everyday activities. These plates belonged to Elena Baptista, Francisca Moura, Maria da Encarnação, Soror Mariana de Cristo, Ascensão, and Marinha, among many others (Figure 3).

Some of these without the woman's name on the front of the plate have the family name on the reverse, also working as an identification mark. Family was one of the most important social structures in Early Modern Portugal (Hespanha, 1993) and these objects may have been donated by relatives and used as distinctive marks inside the monastery (Figure 4).

The convent of Nossa Senhora de Aracoelli was founded above the ruins of one of the headquarters of the Saint James order in Alcácer do Sal. In the sixteenth century, Rui Salema and Dona Catarina Sotto Mayor Salema (husband and wife) asked that the old buildings inside the medieval castle be given to them, with the intention of building a female Franciscan convent commanded by the St. Clare's order (Parreira, 2020). In 1561, authorisation for the construction of the convent was granted so 33 nuns would call this religious house their new home. Not much is known about the history of the convent in the seventeenth century; however, in 1792, the Mother Superior wrote to the Queen informing her that only 13 religious women lived in the convent and asking for permission to accept another 12 nuns. In 1834, the general extinction of all religious orders in Portugal regulated that female convents could not accept any more nuns and would have to close after the last nun perished. In the case of Nossa Senhora de Aracoeli, this happened in 1874 with the death of Soror Maria da Conceição de São José (Parreira, 2020). In the early 1990s, a project for the recovery of the castle and convent promoted the excavation of the convent area, where, besides the architectural features, thousands of objects were recovered. Although the majority of these are yet to be studied, a large portion of the Portuguese tin glaze wares have been analysed. Contrary to Santa Clara, plates with the names of nuns are rare and it was only possible to identify the names of Abbess Trindade, Teresa Anunciada, and Elisia da Gloria. However, a considerable number of these objects were marked by the nuns with their own initials, or some personal



Figure 3: Portuguese faience plate with the female name “MARINHA” found in Santa Clara a Velha (photo by R. Silva) – courtesy Santa Clara a Velha Museum.



Figure 4: Portuguese faience bowl with the family name “MASEDO” (photo by J. L. Sequeira) – courtesy Santa Clara a Velha Museum.

mark such as crosses and squares (Parreira, Sousa, & Fragoso, 2020) (Figure 5). These marks are frequently found in Portuguese tin glaze ware objects; however, this convent was the first time where this practice was observed almost as a generalised behaviour for distinguishing objects within what we could consider a collective household. These ego-artefacts tell us that the nuns were not eating from any given plate or bowl but were careful enough to mark their plates and not share food.

The majority of women who lived in Portuguese convents did not enrol owing to their call but owing to family obligations. When an advantageous marriage was not possible the convent or monastery was the most plausible option. The archaeological record reveals that these women, although separated from society, were not living the lives a nun was supposed to live – the material culture and food remains found in convents reveal a wealthy lifestyle, comparable or even superior to what was found in palaces (Santos, Casimiro, &



Figure 5: Marked ceramics used by the nuns in Nossa Senhora de Aracoelli convent (photo by C. Parreira) – courtesy Alcácer do Sal Municipality.

Castro, 2023). Almost all these convents yield several objects with the names of the nuns depicted on them, demonstrating that they were private objects, used by specific women, personal items that own their own narrative. It takes a substantial effort – sometimes in vain – to discover who these women were, as they are otherwise historically unattested. Thus far, it has not been possible to know anything about their lives before they enrolled in the convent.

There are even some historians who claim that these women obtained an elevated degree of freedom when compared with non-religious women: for example, since they did not suffer the pressures of marriage or the sexuality men imposed upon them, many of them developed sexual manifestations with their female convent cohabitants (Braga, 2008; Silva, 2019). We do not know where these women were born, how old they were, or the names of their relatives. We know their names because they were written on plates used for their service in the religious house where they lived, along with other archaeological evidence, namely zooarchaeological analysis which could tell us that women in Santa a Clara named Marinha, Maria da Encarnação, or Elena Baptista, who lived there between 1660 and 1677, ate dishes made of lamb and a lot of chicken eggs from plates originating as far away as China (Casimiro, Silva, & Leal, 2023; Moreno-García & Detry, 2010).

The archaeology and historical analyses of female convents and monasteries are yet taking their first steps in Portugal (Gomes, 2012); however, this is probably one of the best examples not only to discuss female microhistorical archaeology but also the relationship between written and archaeological documentary evidence related to these religious houses. There is not one single example of which I am aware that we do not have historical accounts about their foundation and patronage or the order all these religious houses, and the people who lived in them, obeyed to. Thinking in terms of macrostructures these are of fundamental importance to reconstruct the micronarratives of the women who dwelt there, thus we can, at least for the historical archaeology of religious houses sustain that it would be complicated, to do the archaeology analysis of these spaces without the historical analysis.

3 Conclusion

Microhistorical studies focus mostly on male narratives, these being more available in a society where the social organisation was mostly made by men, a society in which it was almost admirable that a woman remained anonymous, demonstrating that she had never caused any kind of “trouble” which led to her name being memorised (Ulrich, 1991). Finding female micronarratives is thus a difficult task in a world built to erase their stories, but “microhistory places heuristic value upon anomalies and idiosyncrasies that are found in the documentary record” (Riva & Mira, 2022, p. 5), and some women defied that erased status by becoming independent, fierce, or unmarried. By defying these rules, they embraced a change in their identity, making them unique (Cook, 1998; Wilkie, 2003).

Microhistory approaches build individual narratives inserted into macronarratives. These start with the discovery of one document, one piece of evidence of an individual (or group) who is framed in social, cultural, or economic structures, always attempting to reach the meta-narratives starting from the individual tales. In archaeology, we can work both ways, from micro to macro and from macro to micro. This type of top-down vs bottom-up theory is not new in archaeology, although in microhistorical archaeology it is yet to be considered (Lucas, 2015).

While Sara Kirke and Katherine Nany Naylor’s stories demonstrate how an individual, and thus a micro-narrative, was inserted into or resisted the macrostructures of a certain time, when studying the female religious orders and convents/monasteries (the macrostructures) we find out about the names and the actions of the people who lived there, starting in a bigger framework and ending with the individual. Archaeology is sometimes “a unique opportunity to positively identify women’s agency in assembling collections” (Ewen, 2021, p. 30).

The story of these women is no longer about the big events in life (marriage/widowhood/divorce/convent enrollment) but about the little things in their daily lives: their pots, and pans, the plates they ate from, the bugs that affected their intestines. Building this micro–macro/macro–micro approach feels even more intense

when applied to female agents. Social structures told them to be modest, shy, and anonymous. By leading the future of the Ferryland plantation, by petitioning for a divorce, and by refusing to live a life of reclusion and poverty, these women confronted the established rules and fought against the macrostructures. This is why a female microhistorical archaeology feels fundamental in the theoretical debate about personal narratives while including them in structural frameworks. This is not just about the lives of certain individuals or the pots they used, it is about recognising that there were women who were capable enough to defy normative mega-narratives.

These tales are not all balanced in terms of the information retrieved from historical documents and archaeology. It may seem that archaeology only complements what we know about Sara Kirke and Katherine Naylor and the nuns living in those Portuguese convents. However, that complement is fundamental. Archaeology demonstrates things that we were not expecting, things that are not on the documents such as the pride of owning your own personal set of plates, a Puritan using silk, and women refusing to be anonymous.

In many historical accounts, we know people's names and some events, but even if we have probate inventories, we are almost never aware of the objects they used or the food they ate. The objects they used, as discovered in archaeological excavations, permit us to connect them with their personal stories, creating new narratives about the extraordinary events in the lives of these female characters.

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