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Empowering Motherhood. Addressing gender preconceptions in Portuguese Late Prehistory

EMPODERAR LA MATERNIDAD. SOBRE LOS PREJUICIOS DE GÉNERO
EN LA PREHISTORIA RECIENTE PORTUGUESA

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Abstract This text addresses motherhood in prehistory. It attempts to contextualise motherhood in a modern, Western context and reviews the challenges of applying the predominant current model to prehistoric contexts. It seeks to understand how a limited view of motherhood, shaped by patriarchal ideology, relegated women to the home and expose the images that emerged from this approach, impacting the construction of lasting and naturalised prejudices. Future research lines will also be presented, focusing particularly on the Portuguese archaeological context, especially the Chalcolithic period in the south of the country, aiming to highlight the importance of extended care strategies in the social dynamics of past communities.

Keywords Motherhood, Late Prehistory, South of Portugal, Care Strategies, Feminist approach.

Resumen Este texto aborda la maternidad en la prehistoria. Trata de contextualizar la maternidad en un contexto moderno y occidental y revisa la imposibilidad de aplicar el modelo actual predominante a la lectura de contextos prehistóricos. Pretende comprender cómo una visión empobrecida de la maternidad, en el contexto de una ideología patriarcal, relegó a las mujeres al hogar, así como exponer las imágenes que surgieron de este enfoque y su impacto en la construcción de prejuicios consolidados y naturalizados. También se presentarán líneas de investigación futura, con especial atención al contexto arqueológico portugués, en particular al Calcolítico del sur del país, con el objetivo de destacar la importancia de las estrategias de cuidado mantenidas en la dinámica social de las comunidades del pasado.

Palabras clave Maternidad, Prehistoria Reciente, sur de Portugal, estrategias de cuidado, enfoque feminista.

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*“We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel,
than about the nature and meaning of motherhood”*
(Rich, 2019 [1976], p. 18)

*“Since they are often interpreted as natural, normal, and inevitable parts
of women’s lives instead of sets of cultural practices, there is little information
available on how motherhood was conceptualised in prehistoric societies.”*
(Rebay-Salisbury et al., 2018, p. 71)

*“We have so naturalised and essentialised motherhood, and all that
it entails, that we have made it invisible in prehistoric societies.”*
(Sánchez Romero, 2022, p. 183, my translation)

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern Western societies commonly understand motherhood as a concept involving pregnancy, childbirth, and the care of newborns and infants in the early stages of life. These inseparable moments of motherhood are culturally understood and socially constructed. In recent decades, the “intensive mothering” model has prevailed in Western societies, where the mother dedicates herself almost exclusively to caring for her children, creating an intense affective involvement with them (e.g. Birns and Hay, 1988; Elliott et al., 2015; Ferreira, 2019; Hays, 1996). Thus, motherhood has been focused on this performance, which holds mothers primarily responsible for the development of their children. This model of motherhood creates, among others challenges, the constraint of managing personal and professional life, something particularly relevant in modern professional archaeology, «*a precarious and itinerant professional activity*» which «*for cultural reasons, mainly affects women*» (Bugalhão, 2013, p. 21, my translation). Illustrating this are studies from the Portuguese Archaeologists’ Union (STARQ), showing that the fertility rate of active female archaeologists is 0.5, lower than that of Portuguese women in general, which was 0.7 in 2014 (Carvalho et al., 2018, p. 110).

A mother’s investment in her children is usually justified by maternal love, a feeling considered natural; however, this was also only added to the notion of motherhood in the 18th century AD (Badinter, 1980, p. 46 *apud* Ferreira, 2019, p. 14). From the Enlightenment onwards, expressions such as “a feminine nature” and “maternal instinct” were considered “natural” for every woman, contributing to women being associated almost exclusively with the maternal function (Fidalgo, 2005, p. 124). As Rich (2019 [1976]) points out, the condition of being a mother defined a woman, and expressions such as “sterile” and “childless” fall into this social category, denying the possibility of other identities. But a man who is not a father does not have a specific name or place in social terms (Rich, 2019 [1976], p. 56). Additionally, in Christian culture, the image of the mother has been strongly associated with the image of Mary, the *Mater Dolorosa*, who sacrifices herself for her child, and this image has deepened since the Middle Ages (Fidalgo, 2005, p. 123). In Christian tradition, God the “father” resists anthropomorphic representation, unlike the “mother”, Mary, who has a human nature.

Feminist studies have approached motherhood from different angles. Simone de Beauvoir read motherhood as an ambiguous position for women (e.g. Sánchez Romero and Cid López, 2018, p. 2), stating that being a mother was an inevitable biological destiny, and, in that sense, choosing not to be a mother could be a form of «*freedom from reproductive slavery*» (Beauvoir, 2011 [1949], p. 171). Adrienne Rich (2019 [1976])

problematized motherhood as a male-controlled institution according to the ideology of the patriarchal model, proposing the use of the concept of mothering to highlight the structures of care inherent in the process of becoming a mother and to give voice to women's reproductive power. Her work was followed by a deepening of maternal studies that sought to bring the multitude of (largely silenced) women's experiences to the fore.

Despite the limited impact of maternal studies in archaeology, there are important studies that do link motherhood and Prehistory. Bolen (1992) has emphasized the gender prejudices in the construction of the category "mother" and discussed the reducing and often misleading link between motherhood and domestic contexts; Sánchez Romero (2006) has problematized and contextualized the practices of motherhood, while others specifically analyzed childbirth during Prehistory (Beausang, 2000; O'Donnell, 2004); Rebay-Salisbury (2017) highlighted the variety of different strategies for being a woman and being a mother (for example during the Bronze Age in Europe). However, an impoverished view of motherhood still underlies traditional archaeological narratives about Prehistory.

Four major problems can be identified as resulting from the impoverished view of motherhood:

1. Anthropomorphic representations with female biological characteristics have been interpreted almost exclusively as depictions of fertility and motherhood (the Mother Goddess). This idea of motherhood frames women in an abstract group linked to processes believed to be natural, and by reducing all women to reproduction, they are deprived of power, agency, and creativity.
2. The interpretation of living spaces belonging to nuclear families, where women spend much of their time. The impoverished view of motherhood relegates women to the intramural spaces of villages because they are tied to childcare, in line with a model of motherhood inferred from the modern Western world. Women remain linked to tradition without intervening in public spaces and in the activities that give identity to the chronological periods (for example, the Chalcolithic with metallurgy, warfare, and the construction of large enclosures all being performed by male bodies).
3. The interpretation of burials through linking certain objects to a particular biological sex. Identifying particular objects in burial contexts allowed the inference of the biological sex of the buried person. Because women have been interpreted through the lens of a "women-at-home" ideology (Gero, 1985), and defined by an impoverished view of motherhood, they could never reach positions of social importance or be socially recognized as individuals in past societies.
4. The impoverished view of motherhood has hindered the study of motherhood in Prehistory. It sees it only as a natural capacity inherent to all women, without the need for more detailed analysis and contextualization of its contingency.

2. THE DISPLAY OF (ARCHAEOLOGICAL) FEMALE BODIES

In museum exhibitions with visual representations of Prehistory, the physicality of women's bodies is still often associated with tasks believed to be timeless and originating in Prehistory (Brito, 2023; Sørensen, 2000; Rechená, 2014; Rueda Galán *et al.*, 2021; González Marcén, 2008). Women are generally represented in a domestic context, reduced to

their role as mothers (Sørensen, 2000, p. 32). They are usually depicted in the shade with their children, carrying out domestic tasks such as grinding cereals and moulding pottery (e.g. Sabugal Museum and Fundão Archaeological Museum, in Portugal), next to the house, inside the village, in the background (Vale, 2019). The impoverished view of motherhood kept women as passive elements in archaeological imagery.

In contrast, prehistoric male figures are characterised by their physical robustness and the performance of creative activities, such as hunting, farming, constructing, and being in charge of activities like metallurgy, warfare, rock art, or even burial rituals (e.g. Diniz, 2006; Gero, 1985; Sørensen, 2000; Vale, 2015b). These activities are often connected with the main features that define the chronological period, whether stonework or metallurgy. These activities also typically take place outside the domestic space or settlement, indicating male aptitude for the public arenas of political decision-making. Men are rarely represented next to newborns and infants or in food production spaces. Men seem not to participate in parenthood, and in this logic, men are depicted as detached bodies that can take risks, move forward, and create, while pregnancy and child-rearing keep women at home. These representations are based on the discourse of traditional archaeology and the patriarchal model. While they portray a particular idea of women, they also create a kind of masculinity. Male bodies are often depicted as stereotypical Western bodies –young and robust. Different ways of being a man are cancelled out, and androcentric discourses have silenced other identities, presupposing hegemonic masculinity (following Almeida, 2003, p. 12). The emphasis on the prehistoric man as white, adult, creative and artist reflects the image of the male archaeologist, the producer of the historical narrative (Diniz, 2006).

Additionally, the images displayed in museums need to be considered in conjunction with other visual references that attempt to disseminate knowledge, bearing in mind the consequences of transmitting information in this way without an interpretative framework or clear strategy of science communication. The prehistoric imaginary is profoundly influenced by illustrations/representations produced in the 19th century AD, at a time when curiosity about origins fuelled various scholars and scientists, such as French physicist and writer Louis Figuier and the engravings he presents in his work *L'Homme Primitif* (Figuier, 1870). One of Figuier's illustrations, "Une famille à l'âge de pierre", depicts a family. The woman is sitting down, breastfeeding a child towards whom she gazes, with her eyes down. At a lower level, two other children are playing, their backs to the viewer. The man, the father, is standing, and his body frames the image. His right arm is raised over the woman, giving her shelter, protection, and boundaries. His gaze does not find his family; it looks far away to the horizon, the public space, and the unknown landscape. Viewing Prehistory as the origin (our origin) gives space and frames the validation of a set of current prejudices. It is urgent to dismantle the historical narrative of sequential time, structured in progressive stages of technological development and social complexity (e.g. Diniz, 2006; González Marcén, 2008). As Hernando has pointed out, «*studying the past is always a political act, in that it serves to legitimise or resist the present of inequality in which we live.*» (Hernando, 2021, p. 346, my translation).

3. FERTILITY AND DOMESTICITY

Fertility has been recurrently used to define women in both the profane and sacred dimensions - mother and goddess (Vale, 2015b). This approach has the main consequence

of creating a homogeneous identity group in which women are characterised by their ability to reproduce. European prehistoric female representations have been interpreted as fertility symbols called Venus (before the introduction of agriculture) and Mother Goddess (for anthropomorphic representations made by farming and herding communities) (after Gjmbutas, 1982). Although reviewed and problematised through the years (e.g. Bailey, 2013; Conkey and Tringham; 1995; Gaydarska, 2021; Santos, 2020), the representations labelled Venus, of which the Venus of Willendorf became the “prototype” (Rebay-Salisbury *et al.*, 2023, p. 313), refer to the female goddess, charged with eroticism, inaccessible, in a quasi-exposure/exhibition of the (beautiful) female body. The Mother Goddess, whose representations are more schematic, often recognisable only by the presence of eye motifs and facial tattoos, is a symbol of fertility, of humankind, and of the earth. To classify is to frame, regulate, and impose order, and this exercise of power and control often extends to religion, which imbues female bodies with a sense of sacredness.

Traditional explanations suggest that motherhood is (or was) seen as a natural trait of women, encompassing pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding as inherent aspects of all female bodies. Over time, in Western societies, this perspective has come to define female identity predominantly through motherhood. Being considered a biological characteristic, motherhood identifies and makes all female bodies equal, and a woman’s identity revolves around her ability to be a mother (as a biological act). Thus, motherhood, without interference from women, has been understood only as reproduction because it is considered a biological characteristic. The woman reproduces without interfering in motherhood itself and without agency. However, motherhood is contingent and historically situated, meaning that the process of pregnancy, childbirth and caring for the newborn has not always been understood in the same way. The cultural and social framework of pregnancy and childbirth support techniques vary depending on the historical context and are associated with different beliefs. Ultimately, motherhood refers to different bodies, bodies that deal with pain differently, bodies that have had multiple pregnancies, bodies that have had multiple miscarriages, bodies that have never been pregnant, and bodies that are constantly changing throughout life (Rueda Galán *et al.*, 2021). It also involves different notions of fertility and infertility, and different structures and agents that determine these concepts and the social, religious, and medical prescriptions associated with being (in)fertile, insofar as this notion is not only determined by biological causes. In this sense, it is not a permanent characteristic in the definition of a human being.

Being seen as a mother in prehistoric times has reduced women to caring for their children, something entirely restricted to the home (after González Marcén *et al.*, 2007; Montón-Subías, 2025; Sánchez Romero, 2007). This image of the woman mother, displayed in museums and academic texts, is based, as mentioned, on an impoverished view of motherhood that strips women of agency and creativity. Furthermore, the activities performed in this space, in the domestic space, the family unit, or within the village, are activities that linger in time and tradition. Women make and use long-lasting objects without creative and productive capacity in the archaeological narrative. The tasks performed by women are confused with the long duration of daily life. Quoting Virginia Woolf, «*Often nothing tangible remains of a woman’s day*» (Woolf, 1966, p. 146). The objects linked to a woman’s day would point to permanence, to stable forms, especially if we look at ceramic assemblages and grinding stones, for example. These tasks, that would have occurred inside or around the house, are also read by traditional

patriarchal archaeology as secondary tasks in human (pre)history (after Conkey and Spector, 1984).

The identification of houses or dwelling units or domestic structures in archaeology is usually dependent on: (i) the recurrence of the form; (ii) the presence of a hearth; (iii) and associated with these two main criteria are additional factors that are more debatable and heavily reliant on interpretation or archaeological imagination, such as the identification of beds and cupboards (Vale, 2015a). The “form” and construction methods of a house are contextual, *e.g.*, they depend on the region and chronological time, but houses are recognisable due to a Western preconception of ‘domesticity’.

Domesticity is an ideology made necessary by capitalism. According to Federici, the emergence of capitalism, at the beginning of the Modern Age, is contemporaneous with a war against women, the witch-hunt, «*aiming at destroying the control that women had exercised over their reproductive function and served to pave the way for the development of a more oppressive patriarchal regime*» (Federici, 2021 [2004], p. 6). The ideology of domesticity was later consolidated with the rise to power of the industrial bourgeoisie in colonial Europe (Hall, 1992; Macedo and Amaral, 2005, p. 43). Montón-Subías also noted the impact of this ideology in the social transformation carried out by the colonization of the Jesuits in Guåhan (Guam), Manislan Mariãnas (Mariana Islands) by the end of the 17th century, pointing out that «*their missional policies addressed quotidian activities, such as cooking, textile manufacturing, child-rearing and socialisation, or care and healing practices*», in the image of European patriarchal ideology (Montón-Subías, 2025, p. 389). The concept of domesticity encompasses what activities are performed, where they take place, and by whom they are carried out within the household, while also implying a division between private space (inside the home) and public space (outside the home). In the private space, daily tasks and traditions are reproduced, often in the shadows or obscurity, whereas the public space is open to innovation and change. The concept of “home” is therefore defined in contrast to the external space, which also serves as the workspace. While inside the home, women perform *tasks*, outside the home, men perform *activities* (Conkey and Spector, 1984, p. 10, *apud* Gero, 1985, p. 344). This separation between the workplace and the home/the domestic appears to be associated with the idea of the bourgeois family, where the separation between men and women’s roles and spaces is seen as natural. «*It is natural for women to be wives and mothers*» (Macedo and Amaral, 2005, p. 43, my translation). Western societies still face what Strathern (1984) called the “denigration of domesticity”, which presupposes that the work performed at home is not a real job and cannot be equivalent to a job performed outside the domestic space, linking women to undervalued work, something also at the root of the feminist movements reclaiming the recognition of domestic labour as unpaid work (Federici, 1975). The notion of the prehistoric home seems to be based on its character of domesticity, which in turn is inherent in the bourgeois family model and the ideology of “women-at-home” (after Gero, 1985).

Questioning the implications of motherhood in Prehistory also implies reviewing the family model that underlies the interpretation of domestic space. The definition of domestic space often implies the nuclear family. At the Côa Museum in Portugal, there is a recreation of a daily scene in the lives of a family during the Upper Palaeolithic. The family consists of a woman, a man, and a child. Father, mother, and child share the same family living space, a hut, and visitors can take a photograph with this Palaeolithic family. Archaeology tends to assume that the biological nuclear family is “natural” and so should have its origins in Prehistory (after Bolen, 1992, p. 52). It is very difficult (or

impossible) to identify the family models in prehistoric times, as they will have changed and acquired different shapes depending on its historical context. Representations of past communities will always be representations of dated interpretations, dependent on the socio-economic, political, and cultural context from which they emanate, observing the archaeological criteria and methods in use at the time. However, it is possible to identify the current underlying prejudices that divide men and women (González Marcén, 2008, p. 97) on which the recognition of the nuclear family model is based in order to question the model in itself. Understanding gender prejudices requires a closer look at past contexts and challenging the interpretation of Prehistory as the origin of idealised images of the (Western) present. In the Portuguese context, the weight of decades of dictatorship (that ended in 1974), which defended a conservative, traditional, and Catholic family model, the nuclear family, consisting of a heterosexual couple and their children, must be referenced. The ideal woman was «*a submissive and obedient woman, dedicated to the home and family*» (Ferreira, 2024, p. 58, my translation) (fig. 1). However, although this was the ideal promoted by the regime, the reality was different, and Portugal recorded the highest percentage of illegitimate children in Europe, and many men and women were not married by the Catholic Church (Ferreira, 2024, p. 42). Also, the ideal of a mother and wife at home «*was only achieved in the wealthier classes and among the urban middle classes, where women's wages were not necessary.*» (Ferreira, 2024, p. 45, my translation). In everyday life, many women did not fit in the conservative regime model, and many worked outside the home, in agriculture, industry and the tertiary sector (Ferreira, 2024, p. 115) (fig. 2).



Figure 1. *Mulheres (Women) I*, 2024. Illustration by Sónia Borges, inspired by Artur Pastor's photographs of Portugal from the 1950s and 1960s.



Figure 2. *Mulheres (Women) III*, 2024. Illustration by Sónia Borges, drawing inspiration from Artur Pastor's photographs of Portugal taken in the 1950s and 1960s.

4. APPROACHING MOTHERHOOD IN LATE PORTUGUESE PREHISTORY

Until recently, the consideration of women as a homogeneous group, described by the categories of fertility and motherhood, did not allow their individualisation and consequently their recognition in the archaeological record (long noticed and denounced, for example, by Arnold, 1991 and Prados, 2010). It also did not allow the study of women, or any human being, through an intersectional approach, silencing other variables such as sexuality. Moreover, it devalued age. The woman-mother is defined almost timelessly (considering the woman's life span). The elements that are taken as the basis for the definition of motherhood in a traditional sense, and which involve pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing, are a specific, time-bound phase which can be experienced and approached in multiple ways (in terms of the individual life span but also, as argued, in terms of historical time). The invisibility of women in the archaeological discourse on past communities was also reflected in the biased identification of biological sex in prehistoric burial contexts. This bias often stems from rigid binary frameworks that assume a direct correlation between biological sex and gendered social roles. In parallel with critical research that problematizes the (almost) exclusive use of the binary model, where biological sex is presumed to align with a fixed gender categorization (e.g. Arnold, 2016), recent archaeological studies employing advanced analytical techniques have revealed more complex gendered dynamics. These studies have identified female-bodied

individuals buried with objects traditionally associated with men, breaking the direct association between activities and biological sex (e.g. Cintas-Peña *et al.*, 2023; Cunha *et al.*, 2018; Díaz-Zorita Bonilla *et al.*, 2024; Haas *et al.*, 2020).

In the Chalcolithic enclosure of Valencina (Seville, Spain), an individual burial of a female body was identified, associated with a collection of finely crafted artefacts made from exotic raw materials like ivory, amber, rock crystal, and ostrich eggshell (dated from c. 2900–2650 BC, Pre-beaker context) (Cintas-Peña *et al.*, 2023). The skeleton was initially interpreted as male (Robles Carrasco and Díaz-Zorita Bonilla, 2013) by means of traditional osteological analysis, although the authors, at the time, pointed out the poor conditions of the bones and preliminary character of the assessment. Recently, amelogenin peptide analyses allowed the identification of this individual as an adult female (Cintas-Peña *et al.*, 2023). According to the authors, this evidence challenges the traditional narrative established for the Iberian Chalcolithic, based on the progressive individualisation of male power and the permanence of women in collective and reproductive tasks (Cintas-Peña *et al.*, 2023, p. 5). This approach is corroborated by other studies, such as that of the necropolis of Panoría (Granada, Spain), dating from the 4th and 3rd millennia BC. The observed sex ratio imbalance, favouring females detected at the Panoría cemetery, was interpreted by the authors as an indicator of a “female-centred social structure” (Díaz-Zorita Bonilla, *et al.*, 2024, p. 10).

Also noteworthy is the case of the individual burial recorded in the enclosure of Bela Vista 5, in Portugal, dated from the end of the 3rd Millennium BC (Beaker context), where a female body was buried with one copper awl and a copper Palmela point, and three ceramic vessels (Cunha *et al.*, 2018). The assemblage of these objects, as interpreted by traditional Portuguese archaeology (and still current in research today), is connected with male activities (the Palmela point) and female tasks (the awl) and deconstructs the division of tasks associated with gender and preconceived associations between objects and gender identity. As the authors stated, «*many of the individuals “sexed” as males for the sole reason of the contents of their funerary contexts in the Iberian Peninsula introduce noise to the analysis of the real association between women and weaponry in Bronze Age societies.*» (Cunha *et al.*, 2018, p. 128).

Both the Valencina and Bela Vista 5 burials question the identification of biological sex and the construction of gender identity based on the funerary remains. However, valuing the identification of women associated with objects that were previously associated with male activities cannot only emphasise that women also carried out the activities connected previously with men, like hunting or war, giving the idea that these activities were the most valuable in the community. As Montón-Subías (2025) has proposed, it is necessary to reconceptualise maintenance activities.

In the case of Late Prehistory in Southern Portugal, burial strategies are predominantly collective, with multiple burials over time (Valera *et al.*, 2019). However, there are records of individual burials and burials with a few individuals, which, even if deposited over a long period, do not disturb the previously buried body (e.g. Baptista, 2014; Pereiro, 2010; Valera, 2021; Valera *et al.*, 2019). The funerary spaces are diverse: megalithic tombs, tholoi, hypogea and pits, but there are also deposits of human bones in the ditches and walls of some 3rd millennium BC enclosures (e.g. Valera *et al.*, 2014; Corga, 2022). In many cases, it is impossible to recognise the universe of inhumed individuals as the reorganisation of bones and the creation of ossuaries have been recorded. However, it has been possible to identify all age groups and adults of both biological sexes. No pattern was recorded regarding the individuals buried and the relationships between individuals (taking

into account age and biological sex), considering traditional osteological analyses (Valera *et al.*, 2019). Although inhumation was the more common practice, during the middle and third quarter of the 3rd millennium BC human remains are also cremated and deposited «*in pits and in open air*» (Valera *et al.*, 2014, p. 42).

The funerary contexts have been interpreted, overall, as practices and architectures «*with a strong capacity for communal aggregation*» (Valera *et al.*, 2014, p. 48). In some burials, individuals from different geographical origins were identified, but there was no differential treatment in death (Díaz-del-Río, 2023, p. 179), and this regularity in the archaeological record has been interpreted as an indicator of a segmented social structure. In addition, there was a parallel movement of collective investment in community architectures like the (ditched and walled) enclosures, with a highly symbolic framework, which would have been built continuously, bringing together different generations over time and would have been used as spaces by and for the community (*e.g.* Díaz-del-Río, 2023 and already discussed in Vale *et al.*, 2023).

This tendency towards collective architecture and burials during the 4th and 3rd millennia BC is crucial for understanding the construction of collective identities and studying past communities' social relations structures. Additionally, to understand the social organisation strategies of these communities, maternity is a decisive factor to consider. Given this context, it is necessary to study in detail the collectively buried individuals and their relationships, on the one hand, and on the other, to look closely at individual burials, which are often located close to collective burial structures and of which they are contemporary. In this sense, two significant lines of inquiry emerge as avenues for future research:

1. To understand extended and cooperative maternity strategies, such as othermothering or community othermothers (after Collins, 2000). Community othermothers, are «*women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities*» (Collins, 2000, p. 178). This approach has to consider the possible relationships between buried individuals, relationships of biological kinship, but also relationships of extended care, taking into account the collective and gregarious nature of burials and enclosure-type architectures. As an example, the archaeological site of Carrapateira 1 (Aljustrel, Beja, Portugal), excavated by Arqueologia & Património Lda. (Baptista, 2014) can be considered. It is a collective burial in a pit-like structure with a sub-circular plan and a diameter of 5.14 metres and a depth of 2.72 metres (fig. 3). This structure corresponds to the primarily burial site, although it was used continuously for some time during which the human bones were reorganised (Baptista, 2014). No funerary goods were associated with the inhumations (Baptista, 2014, p. 28). Despite the absence of archaeological materials related to the burials, ceramics were found that belong to the regional Chalcolithic period (generally 3rd millennium BC). Anthropological analysis, carried out by Zélia Rodrigues (2014), revealed that the skeletal remains recovered belonged to six sub-adults and three adult females, with the estimated age at death for the sub-adults varying between 1 and 10 years (sexual diagnosis inference was based on Acsádi and Nemeskéri, 1970; Saunders, 1989; Wasterlain, 2000; White, 2000; and to estimate the age at death, methods presented in Ferembach *et al.*, 1980; Mays and Cox, 2000; Scheuer and Black, 2000; Ubelaker, 1989; White, 2000, were used; Rodrigues, 2014, p. 42-44). One individual with age at death between 1 and 2 years [1222] and two with ages between 4 and 8, [1227] (fig. 4) and [1235], were identified.

It was only possible to infer that the adults were “relatively young”, with only one of the individuals being between 25 and 30 years old [1224] (Rodrigues, 2014, pp. 57-58). Most of the individuals were deposited in lateral decubitus position, with different orientations. But the individual [1227] (aged between 4 and 8) and the individual [1224] (aged between 25 and 30) were inhumated oriented southeast-northwest, the individual [1229] (adult) with an orientation west-east and individual [1235] (aged between 4 and 8) was oriented east-west. The preliminary anthropological report addresses the hypothesis of consanguineous relationships (in individuals [1229], adult, and [1235], aged between 4 and 8 years old, and in individuals [1229] and [1224], both adults), although with many reservations (Rodrigues, 2014, p. 47). The burial of women with children was also observed in the cemetery of Unterhautzental (Austria) (Rebay-Salisbury *et al.*, 2018). These burials were interpreted as burials of mothers with their children, without the connection necessarily having to be biological –it could have been mainly social. This extensive study of 57 skeletal remains in this context did not reveal that mothers were treated differently at death. No differences were found between women who had given birth and women who might not have. However, the authors state that «*motherhood may have contributed to women’s social status*» during the Bronze Age (Rebay-Salisbury *et al.*, 2018, p. 109).



Figure 3. General view of the burial pit at the archaeological site of Carrapateira 1 (Aljustrel, Beja, Portugal). The skeletal remains exhumed were deposited continuously over time. According to the authors (Rodrigues, 2014), deposition was collective, and inhumation was primary, although there was intense post-depositional handling, which may have included segmentation, removal and reorganisation. Palaeodemographic analysis allowed the recognition of at least nine individuals, six sub-adults and three female adults. Photograph by Lídia Baptista.



Figure 4. Detail of the burial of an individual aged 4–8 years [1227], identified in the burial pit at the archaeological site of Carrapateira 1 (Aljustrel, Beja, Portugal). Photograph by Lídia Baptista.

2. To approach the burials that do not seem to follow the previous logic of collective burials, such as burials in pits, which can reflect care networks and awareness of very particular moments in the life of a community. As an example, not very distant from the previous one, is the Horta do João da Moura 1 (Ferreira do Alentejo, Beja, Portugal) site, a necropolis dated approximately to the 3rd millennium BC, with different funerary contexts, namely, two tholoi (Corga, 2022) and burials in pits with limited archaeological materials associated. One of these burial pits [102] (fig. 5), excavated by ERA Arqueologia in 2009 and 2010 (Pereiro, 2010), revealed a single inhumation which was very much on the surface at the time of its identification, having already been partially moved by construction machinery (conditioning the interpretation of this context). The anthropological study was carried out by a team of anthropologists from ERA Arqueologia, under the responsibility of Ricardo Godinho and Zélia Rodrigues. The osteological study identified the inhumation of one adult female based on standard anthropological analysis (Bruzek, 2002; Buikstra and Ubelaker, 1994; Ferembach *et al.*, 1980; Pereiro, 2010, p. 46), with a fetus in the abdominal cavity, and the skull already in the pelvis [104] (fig. 6). The age at death was 30 or over, and the fetus was at 38 weeks gestation. The inference of age results from the application of an archaeot anatological approach (Baker *et al.*, 2005, pp. 13-24; Duday *et al.*, 1995, p. 67) and, consequently, from the observation of the position of the immature bones in relation to the adult individual –in this case, within the pelvic cavity and apparently already in a cephalic position (Pereiro, 2010). The body was deposited in dorsal decubitus «with the lower limbs

bent over with the bones of the feet just below the region of the pelvis, in a north-west (skull) / south-east (feet) orientation» (Pereiro, 2010, p. 36, my translation). The body was apparently buried without grave goods. The structure would have not been built with the primary intention of receiving an inhumation (Corga, 2022, p. 42). The body was deposited on top of a previous level [108] that contained a horn of an undetermined species and three fragments of mammal fauna (Pereiro, 2010, p. 13). Although the chronology has not been confirmed by absolute dating and the team responsible for the archaeological intervention does not point to any chronological period for this inhumation, prehistoric ceramic fragments coinciding with typologies for the Chalcolithic in the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula were recorded.

Burials with a fetus in utero are rare. Other cases in the Iberian Peninsula, although from a later period, could be found in Argaric sites like El Cerro de las Viñas de Coy, La Almoloya, and La Bastida in Murcia, Spain. In El Cerro de las Viñas de Coy, dated from 1500-1000 BC, a burial of a woman 25-26-years-old with a fetus inside the pelvic cavity at 37-39 weeks of gestation, was identified. The cause of death was dystocic labour (Malgosa *et al.*, 2004). A similar case was identified in La Bastida (Oliart and Rihuete Herrada, 2024, p. 51). In the Argaric site of La Almoloya (1750/1550 BC), a burial of a woman with a fetus, died due to a preterm of obstructed labour (Lull *et al.*, 2015, p. 137). The lack of information on the burial of neonates/fetuses in burials from Late Prehistory may be due to various issues, such as preservation of material remains. Still, it may also be due to the lack of concern that existed until recently to study motherhood and the role of children in past communities, as was shown by the study carried out in the previously mentioned Bronze Age cemetery of Unterhautzental (Austria), which revisited the archaeological record of the excavation that took place in the 80s and 90s of the 20th century, allowing the identification of four individuals not initially recorded, belonging to two fetus/neonates and two children, one aged around three and the other aged between four and six, who shared the burials with other older individuals (Rebay-Salisbury, 2018, pp. 74-75).



Figure 5. General view of burial pit [102] (E-W) at the archaeological site of Horta do João da Moura 1 (Ferreira do Alentejo, Beja, Portugal), showing filling deposits prior to the deposition of the individual burial. Photograph by Tiago do Pereiro.



Figure 6. Inhumation of a female individual with a foetus in the abdominal cavity [104] (SE–NW) at the archaeological site of Horta do João da Moura 1 (Ferreira do Alentejo, Beja, Portugal). Photograph by Tiago do Pereira.

In recent decades, southern Portugal has experienced an exponential increase in empirical data, significantly enhancing our understanding of burial strategies during the 3rd millennium BC (Corga, 2022; Valera and Evangelista, 2024; Valera *et al.*, 2019). Portuguese prehistoric archaeology has traditionally relied on conventional analytical frameworks that often neglect the complexities of gender, motherhood, and care within past societies. Identifying female individuals associated with activities and objects historically attributed to men challenges these long-standing interpretations. However,

there is still a long work to do in addressing the complexity of gender identities or the deep-rooted nature of gender preconceptions in archaeological narratives. Furthermore, key concepts such as motherhood, particularly in relation to alternative models like othermothering, and broader structures of care, central aspects in the understanding of the social networks of past communities, are still missing. Motherhood, as a context-dependent process, is an archaeological matter. To advance this approach, funerary contexts must be reassessed through a contextual archaeological framework supported by a multidisciplinary methodology encompassing bioanthropology, genetics, biology, chemistry, and anatomy, integrating, for example, DNA (mitochondrial), tooth cementum and isotopes analysis, and paleo-pathological assessment, parallel to a project of extensive radiocarbon dating. However, financial constraints continue to limit the development of such research, posing a significant challenge to its progress.

5. COROLLARY

According to Federici (2004), women's destruction of their reproductive role was formally perpetrated by the witch-hunting movement, which began in the 16th century AD, accentuating the oppressive character of the patriarchal regime in the context of the emergence and consolidation of the capitalist model. The impoverished view of motherhood has reductively placed powerless women in the shadows of the home and the invisibility of historical discourse. As some archaeologists have pointed out (e.g. Gaydarska, 2021) prehistoric female representations are much more than the reductive definition of fertility, which has made it impossible to individualise female elements or groups of women. Motherhood is not a natural function for women. Nor was the female gender defined solely by motherhood.

It is necessary to understand motherhood as a culturally mediated and socially constructed process, in order to address the historical processes in which it is situated, and the Chalcolithic archaeological burial sites of Horta do João da Moura 1 and Carrapateira 1 are just the beginning of a study that has yet to be undertaken in the Portuguese context. Because it is possible to address motherhood in Prehistory, it is necessary to continue studying the biological information of human bodies and pay attention to all the evidence, such as the presence of neonates in collective burials. It is urgent to integrate mothering strategies into care strategies that are historically situated, culturally understood, and performed differently depending on the context.

The collective burials suggest communitarian strategies of social cohesion that challenge conventional assumptions about kinship and caregiving in past societies. In particular, sites like Carrapateira 1 —where six non-adults were buried alongside three adults in the same pit— may reflect models of extended motherhood, such as community othermother (after Collins, 2000). This challenges the dominant, modern intensive model of motherhood, which has historically shaped interpretations of past social organisations by marginalising the possibility of communitarian strategies of caring, particularly child-rearing, across different ages and gender roles. Likewise, the burial of a pregnant woman alone may point to forms of care extended to those who died in the liminal state of impending childbirth. The positioning of her legs bent upwards could indicate an intentional focus on the fetus, reinforcing that both mother and unborn child held significant social meaning. Their burial in a separate pit may suggest that pregnancy and childbirth were recognised as defining communal events, meriting

individualised treatment. This, in turn, raises the possibility that pregnant women in some late prehistoric communities would have occupied a transitory, socially distinct status –one that may have influenced their roles and interactions within the broader community. Motherhood is an active participation of both gender identity and collective identity and probably reflected context-specific power dynamics. However, it has not been a stable concept throughout the past, much less so in the long diachrony of (pre) history.

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