

Take a break: traces of social behaviour in Portuguese factory toilets

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Abstract: This paper discusses various aspects of backdoor and wall messages found in toilets in Portugal. The examples presented were collected in abandoned industrial sites, and they reflect the workers' education and social background. They also pose a provocation and a challenge as to how the archaeology of industrial ruins can deal with the ethereal and the ephemeral – often these human traces are the first victims of oblivion.

Introduction

Merda, cagalhão, cócó, cagar, defecar, fezes, mijar, xixi, mijo, among others, are considered bad words in Portuguese and their translation, which will appear in this paper, have been asterisked. Given that they relate to intestinal and bowel movements, they are not generally used in certain social circles. However, there are places where these words are certainly to be found: in toilets. Going to the toilet is that moment of freedom and relief that everyone takes, in their minds, in their language, in their needs, at various points during the day, and which most of us consider a private moment, where we can maybe take something to read (nowadays we take our phones, as the moment is perfect to catch up on social media). However, there are spaces where these moments necessarily have to be brief, such as our workplaces. Imagine what it takes to conquer these moments in an industrial environment, with all the noise and disturbances, especially if one has to go in haste. In these places, going to the toilet was a ritual of relaxation, of both spirit and sphincter. The problem was that one could not take a newspaper or a book (in working hours you had to show that you were not taking your time, because the clock was ticking). Before the 21st century there were no phones, so how did one put the temporary isolation, and the flow of endorphins released along with one's droppings, to good use? Customarily, an industrial worker, prepared for any contingency, took his marker pen from his overalls pocket, and set free the poet within by writing on the door and the surrounding walls! In this way, whether anonymously or otherwise, one had a means for releasing one's eloquence, anger, humour, stupidity and hate.

These toilet writings have been noted by some scholars and have even been given a name: *latrinalia*, a term which was coined by Alan Dundes in 1996 to refer to writings done by people on the walls and doors of toilets (Dundes, 2019). The practice has even been defined as a linguistic landscape (Amevuvor and Hafer, 2019). While the topic is not new in sociology, linguistics, anthropology, and even archaeology, these studies are mostly associated with public spaces where everyone can enter and write. Leaving aside gender restrictions (until recently in Portugal all public toilets were demarcated as male or female), toilets in bus and train stations and shopping areas are accessible to everyone. In contrast, our paper focuses on places of limited access, factories where only the workers could enter. We also know exactly what type of work was done in these places and the social backgrounds of the people there. This theme is usually defined by linguistics and psychology as graffiti in bathrooms (Marquez *et al.*, 2018) and a type of folklore – specifically “Toilet Folklore” (Cengiz and Cengiz, 2017). Sims and Stephens (2005) define folklore as a means of communication in informal groups created by shared practices and expressions of individuals that integrate themselves into the same group. This makes us consider whether we can talk about a factory-based folklore, or just random messages. If *latrinalia* do constitute Toilet Folklore, an archaeological

interpretation of this concept can be made using evidence retrieved from Portuguese industrial spaces. We considered it important to record and study these written displays as evidence of social manifestations of the recent past, and to give them a social reading.

Most studies engaging with *latrinalia* have been and continue to be carried out in North and South America. The lack of research on this subject in Europe is identified by Cengiz and Cengiz (2017) as due to persistent conservatism and resistance in European academia. Although we only found one study of toilet wall messages in European spaces (Chaves and Casimiro, 2023), the study of contemporary graffiti is already being undertaken by European archaeologists (Graves-Brown and Schofield, 2011). This chapter aims to discuss multiple aspects of backdoor and wall messages inside abandoned industrial site privies. These were found while surveying for evidence of the workers' personal marks and are just fragments of a much wider story. These manifestations are part of a wider project in the analysis of workers' manifestations in Portuguese industrial spaces (Sequeira, 2023). In this sense, we know a few things about these people. We know what they did for a living, we know that such writings mostly occurred in the last years of factory work, and we are aware of their social and economic basis (Lima, 1977; Faria, 2001; Milheiro, 2013).

The examples presented in this chapter were collected in 20th-century Portuguese industrial sites and reflect the workers' education and social background. Most of the messages carry offensive meanings, political thoughts, accusations against the unions, misogyny, or racism. In addition, they pose a provocation and challenge to how the archaeology of industrial heritage in ruins can deal with the ethereal and the ephemeral – often these human traces are the first to suffer erasure. They are frequently removed every time a wall is painted, or a door is cleaned, and we only find those relating to the final years in the lives of the factories concerned.

Two case studies will provide these multitudes of means of expression. The first is an abandoned industrial shipyard located near Lisbon, in Almada, known as Lisnave (operational 1967- 2000) [Fig. 1]. This was a pivotal site for post-revolutionary developments concerning politics, political parties' agendas, and fierce union clashes. The toilets and related facilities are filled with writings on the walls and doors, some remarkably long and imaginative. The second is a power station, the Central Termoelectrica de Sines (operational 1985-2021) [Fig. 2], located on the south-west coast of Portugal, which ceased all functions owing to international restrictions and European directives on coal consumption. Unlike the first case study, this was not a political arena, but as a place where most of the staff had rigorously scheduled work shifts, this industrial power plant showed similar procedures regarding workers' privy moments. The purpose of the study is to consider what kind of personal ideas were in the minds of workers, most of them male, when sitting or squatting on a toilet in these workplaces, using that time and space for their reflections.

Context

Lisnave's industrial shipyard was inaugurated in 1967, coincidentally in the same year that the Six-Day War between a coalition of Arab states and Israel shocked the world. The subsequent closure of the Suez Canal in Egypt, which connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, set the perfect location for Lisnave as a mandatory stop for the maintenance and supply of merchant ships that came from the South Atlantic Ocean alternative route. Lisnave is located opposite Lisbon, near a town called Almada on the other side of the Tagus River, with perfect access to the Atlantic waters. Between 1967 and 1975, many of the commercial sea routes included a temporary stop in this gigantic shipyard, with an attractive city like Lisbon right next to it. In 2000 the shipyard was decommissioned (Bandeira, 2022) ceasing all work. This abrupt closing may raise the question: with such a strategic location for ships heading for northern Europe, what went wrong? Well, to give a very simple answer: two major events.

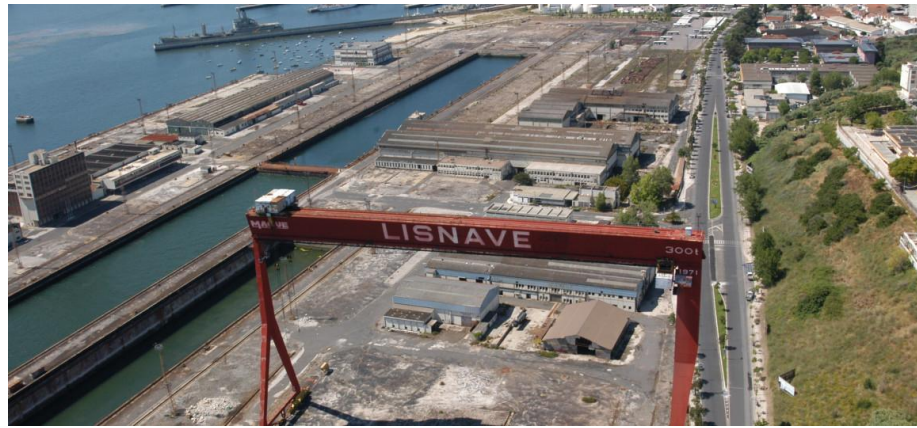


Fig. 1: Aerial view of the Lisnave shipyard

First, the Portuguese dictatorship of Salazar-Caetano (1933-1974) was showing signs of weariness, with an overseas war between Portugal and three African former colonies, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique, that had been fighting for their independence since 1961. The Portuguese population was fed up with the permanent state of fear, repression, and poverty, and fully supported a military uprising on 25 April 1974. The autocratic state that ensured sustainability and some privileges to the elite that commanded the shipyard's management, was overthrown, and the sociopolitical frame completely changed. Struggles arose between unions against temporary governments, political parties were formed, and unions competed with other unions, creating such social boiling and effervescence that the shipyard went through large periods of lay-offs, until its collapse.

The second reason was purely economic: the Suez Canal was re-opened in 1975, which made Lisbon an unnecessary stop when travelling through the Mediterranean. Despite this change in maritime circulation dynamics, Lisnave was able to survive until the turn of the century.

Thousands of workers called it their working place during its 33 years of activity, leaving their marks all over what now became an abandoned complex. Owing to the political struggles that marked the place, countless back-of-door messages and wall scribbles reveal an inclination for verbal attacks expressing right-wing and left-wing party biases and fanaticisms. Drawings are part of the picture, depicting sexual innuendo, jokes, and rhymes, many of the latter in incredibly bad taste. Although this paper only focuses on the messages written in toilet cubicles or related to bowel and bladder movements, there are hundreds of other messages written on the walls of this industrial compound.

To the south, and our next case study: the Sines electrical power plant, near the city of Sines. Although it was an important industrial complex for the region and a great deal of the Portuguese territory, the workers' lives in this power plant were not as agitated as in Lisnave. The Sines power plant was built between 1979 and 1989, but part of the complex was already working in 1985. It imported mineral coal to transform it into electricity, which would then be injected into the country's energy grid. It worked non-stop until it was decommissioned in 2021, due to European Union directives on fossil fuels. During this closing process we had the opportunity to be inside the complex for one day, and we found some fine examples of *latrinalia* in strategic spots.

Generally, in Portugal, daily working hours have always been a central topic in discussions between employers and unions. Depending on the industrial areas and activities of each sector, hours spent at the workplace have always been a kind of prison for the worker. In the Portuguese industrial work environment, going to the privy means that you are going to just take a piss, or you are going to evacuate, which implies a more



Fig. 2: Aerial view of the Sines power plant

time-consuming ritual and procedure, before, during, and after the act. A room must be available, acceptably clean or at least not in a mess, and toilet paper must be available. The common slang for the act of intestinal evacuation in Portuguese is *cagar*, which relates etymologically to the Latin word *cacare*; a rather onomatopoeic word, if you consider that the first two syllables are very similar to the squeezing sound made in the act.

In jobs where time can be managed regarding task completion, device repairing, or the creation of a solution, the break for that cigarette or the pause for a sandwich or a coffee can be moments with or without any mandated timing. But when you work in a repetitive job, the trip to the loo tends to be particularly regular and synchronised with (and within) working hours. One derives major benefits from this: killing time, and saving home toilet paper (which is expensive, especially when one has teenagers back home). In our out-of-work hours, or back home, some of us take little time on the toilet throne, but others of us like to take our time to meditate, ponder issues, consider life options, think about philosophical questions, read the newspaper etc. It is not easy to carry any type of literature to the privy. The place is not a study room or a library! It is a very complicated balance between mental pause, bowel congestion and labour responsibility. The boss may be lurking; colleagues might be checking the clock and taking mental notes for further use.

Nevertheless, factory workers can carry certain objects in their pockets that allow distractions. Some of these are:

1. Pocket-knife. This is almost an identity statement for Portuguese factory workers. With only one single blade, it is much more versatile than the Swiss Army Knife. The Portuguese pocket-knife could be used as a spoon, as pliers, as a corkscrew, a nail file, nail cleaner, toothpick, amongst many other uses that dwell dangerously at the limits of the imagination. It can also, of course, be used as a knife, and as a capsule opener.
2. Pack of cigarettes. The quintessential time killer – but factory workers tend not to mix two pleasures. One can pause for a cigarette at any other time.
3. The cell phone, of course. However, this mandatory device is a very recent addition to people's lives. Some of the archaeological contexts we are going to discuss offer a much earlier chronology. Back in those days, the closest thing to a cell phone was a walkie-talkie.

4. The marker pen, usually for working purposes. Depending on the nature of one's work, the marker pen could be used for calculations, marks on materials and products, messages on whiteboards, and of course messages on the back of toilet doors. This object is the principal implement for the writings that we are discussing.



Fig. 3: A graffito from the Lisnave shipyard

The poet in every pooper

The first group of writings come from Lisnave, the second from Sines. For this paper, we have copied the message in Portuguese and have tried to translate it into English. Very offensive words have been asterisked. However, we should point out that many of the things written in Portuguese have linguistic nuances that are sometimes not possible to translate into English, so we must apologise for any loss in translation meaning. For example, in Lisnave 5 [Fig. 3], to call someone a *nabo* (turnip) in Portuguese is to call someone stupid, while *nabiça* (green turnip) is to call someone young and without life experience. In example Lisnave 10 there is a reference to figs, which are one of the best-known fruits in the Algarve. This example is signed by *marafado*, a name used in the Algarve for mischievous people. Toxic masculinity is seen in at least in two examples: In Lisnave 6 someone calls himself *picha grossa* (thick d*ck), creating the idea that the size of a penis enhances personal characteristics [Example 6]. In Lisnave 11 there is a reference to a cheated husband when the union members are going to have sex with someone's wife.

Table 1: Graffiti samples from the Lisnave shipyard

| | Portuguese | English translation [where possible] |
|--|---|--|
| | Clube de paneiragem I ♥ Sporting Clube de Portugal | F*g**ts' club I love Sporting Club of Portugal |
| | Chupa fumo; PSD Traidores; Não pises a erva FUMÁ | Suck Smoke; PSD traitors Do not step on the weed, smoke it |
| | Abaixo os burocratas social-fascistas do C.G.T. UDP Viva a emancipação ideológica da classe operária IRA | Down with the social-fascist bureaucrats From the C.G.T. UDP [unions] Up with the ideological emancipation of the proletariat IRA [Irish Republican Army?? What is this doing here??] |
| | Sporting Clube Portugal (Campeão 99-2000) O preto (Sabry) é que vos estragou a merda da festa Fifi Godinho mecanica 卐7 | Sporting Club Portugal Champion 99-2000 The n****r (Sabry) ruined your shitty party Fifi Godinho mechanics (a swastika) |
| | Honestos cagadores uma coisa vos vou dizer a C.G.T.P. está para os trabalhadores como a U.G.T. está para * foder – as vossas mulheres – Os trabalhadores conscientes à C.G.T.P. pertencem são grandes valentes (como os amarelos) que grandes lutas vencem que nunca deixaram de querer até a U.G.T. aparecer para os começar a foder – vossa mulhere – À U.G.T. pertencem os cabrões vacas e paneleiros, à mesa são uns lambões e no futebol(?) uns caneleiros na política vendilhões vindidos por 30 dinheiros Ò seu porco, porcalhão porque apagas tu com o rabo o que eu escrevo com a mão? – nabo, nabiça abre a boca que eu dou a piça | Honest crappers I gotta tell you something The C.G.T.P. [a union] goes for workers as U.G.T. [another union] goes for f*****g – your wives – The enlightened workers belonging to the C.G.T.P. are great and brave (like the yellows) who win great fights who never stop wanting until U.G.T shows up and starts f*****g – your wives – To U.G.T. the scumbags belong cows and f*g**ts at the table they are greedy at politics they are money changers sold by 30 pieces of silver You pig, you swine why do you erase with your back what I am writing with my hand? – turnip, turnip green open your mouth, I'll give you my d**k |
| | Convite Voluntário [sic] Amigos e amigas esta voz vou dizer: vão pró caralhão | Voluntary Invitation Boys and girls this voice I am going to tell go f**k yourselves |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| | <p>nota: não rima mas é verdade</p> <p>Enquanto na parede estão a escrever eu em vossas casas suas mulheres estou a foder ah.ah.ah! Ass: o picha grossa</p> | <p>note: it doesn't rhyme but it's true</p> <p>while you are writing on the wall me in your homes I'm f*****g your wives ha.ha.ha! signed: thick d**k</p> |
| | <p>U.G.T = a ladrões e filhos da puta e cabrões</p> | <p>U.G.T. = to thieves and sons of b*****s and scumbags</p> |
| | <p>Viva o Sporting abaixo o Benfica merda</p> | <p>Up with Sporting Down with Benfica s**t</p> |
| | <p>Os chibos, bufos, empreiteiros, engraxadores tambem levam um pontapé no cú.</p> <p>Pergunta o que é um alentejano com uma telha na cabeça?? Resposta: É uma casa de repouso ass: chispe de porco</p> <p>O Samora Machel queria: ser branco só trabalhar uma vez na vida e estar no melhor lugar do mundo, só havia uma hipótese!! ser penço higienico assassinado: – carilho</p> | <p>Squealers, whistleblowers contractors, shoeblackers also get their a***s kicked</p> <p>Question what is an Alentejano [a person from the south of Portugal] with a roof tile on his head?? Answer: It's a nursing home signed: pork chisel</p> <p>Samora Machel (a Mozambican political leader) wanted: to be white to work only once in a lifetime and to be in the best place in the world there was only one chance to be a sanitary towel signed: – carilho</p> |
| | <p>Da última vez que fui ao cú a 1 algarvio fiquei com a picha esfolada das grainhas dos figos assassinado: marafado</p> <p>Se: se quiser ver livre da sua mulher, e do amante carregue no botão de baixo ☹ avariado por excesso de uso</p> | <p>The last time I f****d an Algarvio [a person from the Algarve] in the a*s my c**k got skinned because of the figs seeds signed: marafado</p> <p>If: you want to get rid of your wife and her lover push the button below ☹ Damaged by excessive use</p> |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | | |
| | <p>A U.G.T. porcalhota faz-me lembrar: uma animal que come bolota um animal que sabe mamar</p> <p>e vão à cona à tua mulher</p> <p>salazar</p> | <p>The U.G.T. female hog reminds me of an animal that eats acorns an animal that knows how to suck</p> <p>and they are going to f**k your wife's c**t</p> <p>salazar</p> |

A journey through the world of industrial poetry, when in bowel relief mode, is it not? The content of the messages, broadly speaking, presents some sort of unleashed anger, a gratuitous verbal violence that comes with the freedom to write them. Portugal had to endure a dictatorship where the state had disguised spies throughout society, and factories were no exceptions. Free speech was so repressed by this State Surveillance and Defence Police (commonly known in Portugal as PIDE) that it is not surprising that a place like Lisnave still has these kinds of written outcries.

Table 2: Graffiti samples from the Sines power station

| | Portuguese | English translation [where possible] |
|--|--|--|
| | <p>Não á gosto como o bom cagar quem escreveu isto não soube escrever lembrou-se do cagar e não se lembrou do foder</p> | <p>There is nothing better than a good crap the guy who wrote this could not write well remembered to take a crap and did not remember to f**k</p> |
| | <p>Aqui estou cagando para você nem escrever sabes burro cagai [pro SCP] cagai [pro FCP] cagai merda aos molhos cagai tanto ou tão pouco que vieram as lagrimas aos olhos jps. Hrq</p> | <p>Here I am taking a crap for you you can't even write you ass crap [for SCP] [Sporting Club of Portugal] crap [for FCP] [Football Club of Porto] crap tons of s**t crap so much or so little that tears came to the eyes</p> |
| | FCP = gatunos | FCP = thieves |
| | <p>SLB Campeão GDS 2.17 #salgrosso 75'20 NN Aki ate te cagas todo para ti sim para ti que leste istu ANS!2021 2022</p> | <p>SLB [Sport Lisbon and Benfica] champion GDS 2.17 #thicksalt 75'20 Here you crap all over yourself for you yes, you that read this ANS! 2021 2022</p> |
| | SLB | SLB |
| | NN | NN [a group of football supporters of Benfica] |

The majority of workers in these factories had not spent much time in school, and therefore spelling and grammar errors were frequent. A very interesting example comes from Sines 1. Someone wrote a sentence with a grammatical error, and someone else replied calling him an ass for writing badly, but also misspelling some words themselves.

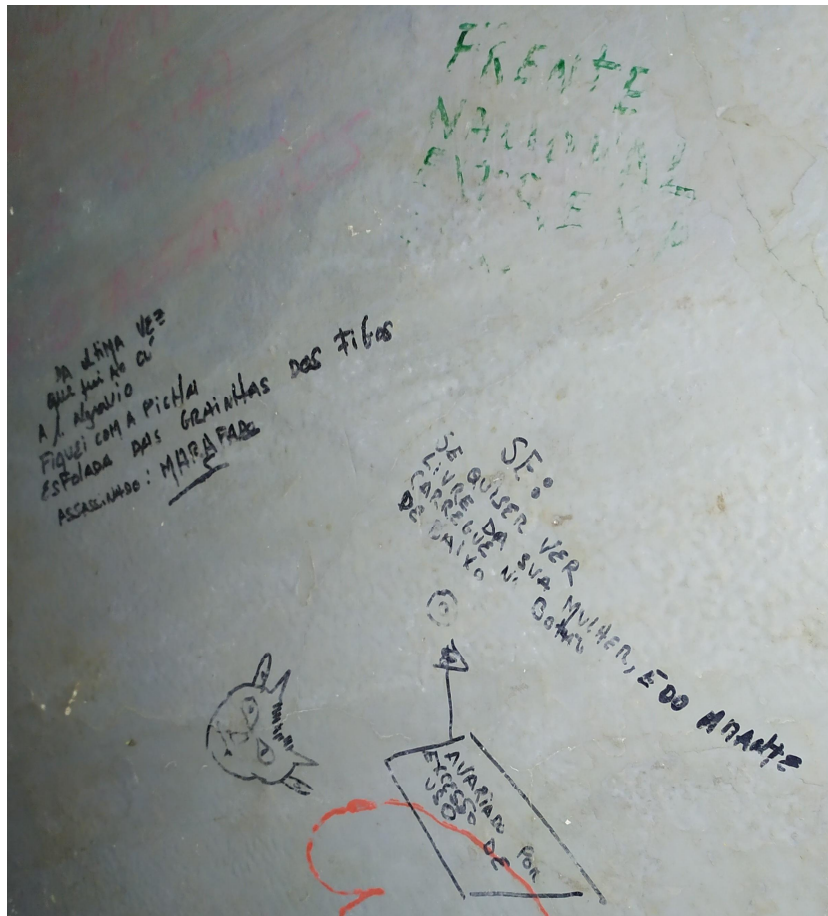


Fig. 4: A graffito from the Lisnave shipyard.

There is a great difference between what we could recover from these two industrial sites, concerning literary production behind the privy door. While in Lisnave we could feel the political engagement of some comments, in the Sines power plant we felt that this kind of practice was somewhat loose and carefree, not to mention that the first site has much more evidence than the latter.

We will never know how many messages had been erased in both places: we could only record the palimpsest that remained on walls and the backs of doors. But looking at the evidence that prevailed, we can conclude that while politics and union struggles were more prominent in Lisnave, sports such as football were more evident in the Sines power plant.

Although this paper is about toilets and toilet writings, there is one interesting piece of evidence that we registered at the Lisnave shipyard and could not ignore. Toilets were located inside the buildings, and going to the toilet sometimes took a few minutes, and some people may have considered it unnecessary. It seems that many of the workers did not always take the time to search for proper places to relieve themselves and chose hidden corners to do it. Other workers may have found this undesirable, and in at least three cases there are messages on the walls of the working space where one can read: *É PROIBIDO MIJAR AQUI* [it is forbidden to piss here]. This seems to indicate frequent behaviours.

Conclusion

A few years ago there was a children's TV series called "Dinosaur Train". In one of the episodes, the little dinosaurs sang a song called "Everyone [or every dinosaur] poops", teaching children the importance of bowel movements. In Portugal, this is not a subject that people usually talk about, and it is considered one of the most private actions one can engage in. However, those little dinosaurs were right – going to the toilet is a universal action. Whether you are going at home or during your work time, or whether you need to stop the car in the middle of a highway, every person does it, and they usually do it alone. This means that it is your isolated time, when you can express all your doubts, fears, and passions. Thus the toilet writings we are discussing here do not reflect the action itself but the social and political environment in which the workers in these industries lived, a moment where one could write anything, since no one would ever discover it. In Lisnave there are several political messages in the factory, and thus the toilet also reflects the political environment lived there. As for Sines, the workers had different concerns: sports, and mocking others' lower level of writing, were their major entertainment. These messages are representations of social and cultural behaviours that people could indulge in while alone, writing stuff that no one would ever discover they wrote.

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Last updated: 24.x.2024