

From Islands to Oceans. Gendered Strategies of Kinship and Patrimony Among Portuguese Women in Canary Islands (16th–17th Centuries)

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From Islands to Oceans

Gendered Strategies of Kinship and Patrimony Among Portuguese Women in Canary Islands (16th–17th Centuries)

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ABSTRACT

This article reassesses the presence and agency of Portuguese women in Tenerife during the Iberian Union (1580–1640) through a prosopographic reading of notarial, inquisitorial and ecclesiastical documentation. Drawing on life-course approaches, the study examines the legal and documentary moments through which Portuguese women became visible, situating their agency within the transitions that structured early modern family and mobility trajectories. Rather than attempting to reconstruct the Portuguese population as a whole, the study focuses on a small but analytically rich set of women whose actions — recorded in powers of attorney, wills, debt claims and trans-archipelagic property transactions — make it possible to observe gendered strategies of mobility, representation and patrimonial management. By integrating a life-course perspective with insights from Atlantic history and nesology, the analysis identifies three recurrent patterns: the central role of women in the transmission of property across islands; the heightened legal visibility associated with widowhood and the absence of male proxies; and the participation of certain households, particularly those linked to the Azores, in macro-Atlantic circuits of craft, labour and migration. Comparisons by origin (Madeira, the Azores, continental Portugal) and civil status further clarify how women adapted a shared repertoire of strategies to different legal and familial contexts. The findings show that Portuguese women were not marginal actors but key architects of archipelagic continuity, transforming the constraints of insular life into forms of resilience that shaped kinship, identity and mobility across the early modern Atlantic.

Keywords: Portuguese women, Notarial records, Atlantic mobility, Patrimonial transmission, Kinship networks, Nesology, Gendered legal agency, Canary Islands

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1 INTRODUCTION

During the Iberian Union (1580–1640), the consolidation of the Atlantic world unfolded through transoceanic networks that linked European, African, and American territories under a shared imperial framework. Within this context, the Canary Islands — and particularly the island of Tenerife — emerged as a strategic node, both geographically and socially, capable of integrating migratory flows, commercial circuits, and transnational dynamics.

Historiography has increasingly addressed the role of foreign communities in shaping insular societies, with particular attention to the Portuguese, whose presence in the archipelago has been examined through demographic, legal, and economic lenses. Yet within this group, women have remained on the margins of historical narratives, obscured by documentation that privileged male agency and by interpretative models that have perpetuated their omission.

This study seeks to recover the historical footprint of Portuguese women who migrated to Tenerife during the early modern period. It does so through a methodological approach that combines the analysis of primary sources — notarial protocols, inquisitorial records, and insular chronicles — with theoretical frameworks drawn from gender history and Atlantic studies. The aim is not merely to quantify their presence, but to reconstruct their trajectories, identify their forms of agency, and position them as active subjects in the articulation of family, economic, and legal networks within a frontier society in flux.

Adopting a life-course perspective, the analysis focuses on the specific moments in which Portuguese women entered the documentary record — such as marriage, widowhood, migration, and inheritance — highlighting how legal agency was articulated through these key transitions.

By adopting a life-course perspective, the study examines the specific moments in which women became visible in the documentary record — widowhood, marriage, migration, inheritance, and other key transitions — showing how legal agency was articulated through the turning points and disruptions that structured their trajectories across the Iberian Atlantic.

Tenerife was selected as the focal point of analysis for two interrelated reasons. First, the island's notarial documentation is exceptionally well preserved, allowing for a longitudinal and systematic approach to the social processes recorded. Second, during the Iberian Union, Tenerife stood out as the most internationally connected territory in the archipelago, making it a privileged site for observing migratory dynamics and strategies of integration within the Atlantic world.

The study is based on a systematic sampling of notarial documentation preserved in the main notarial offices of La Laguna and Garachico between 1575 and 1650. Rather than analysing the entire corpus of more than 40,000 surviving deeds, the research combines chronological "core years" with complete series from selected notaries. This approach allows the identification of Portuguese individuals — particularly women — whose actions entered the public record in exceptional circumstances such as widowhood, litigation or the management of transatlantic property. The aim is therefore not to provide aggregate quantitative data, but to reconstruct individual trajectories and compare them through a prosopographic lens.

In response to this, the study adopts an inclusive reading of the sources — one that does not simply "add" women to the existing narrative, but offers an alternative reading of the historical processes in which they participated. Particular attention is paid to deeds that reveal female agency: powers of attorney, wills, commercial contracts, and marriage strategies that illuminate transatlantic networks and integration dynamics. The study also examines mechanisms of legal representation, forms of rootedness, and practices of patrimonial transmission deployed by these women in the insular space.

This approach aligns with the most innovative currents in Atlantic history, transnational historiography, and, notably, nesology — the study of island societies through their internal dynamics and their relationship with the maritime environment. Nesology offers a lens through which to observe how Portuguese women, in their dual condition as foreigners and migrants, negotiated their inclusion within an insular community shaped by mobility, porous boundaries, and the ongoing reconfiguration of identities. In this regard, the study contributes to a more inclusive and nuanced historiography that acknowledges the centrality of women in migratory processes, in the construction of transatlantic ties, and in the shaping of frontier societies.

2 METHODS: READING FEMALE AGENCY IN A FRAGMENTARY ARCHIVE

The analysis presented in this article is based on a systematic examination of notarial documentation preserved in the island of Tenerife between 1575 and 1650. Rather than attempting to process the entire surviving corpus — more than 40,000 deeds scattered across multiple notarial offices — the study relies on a carefully constructed sample that allows for both chronological breadth and close qualitative reading. Two complementary criteria informed this sample: on the one hand, a selection of core years offering dense and representative documentation, and on the other, the complete consecutive series preserved in the principal notarial offices of La Laguna and Garachico, centres that concentrated political activity, commercial exchange, and the everyday legal business of the island. This combination of chronological and spatial sampling provides a balanced framework for identifying Portuguese individuals, especially women, whose appearance in the notarial record was conditioned by the legal and social norms of the period. This sampling strategy seeks to balance representativity with analytical depth, in line with the methodological expectations of life-course research, privileging those cases whose documentary appearance corresponds to identifiable life transitions such as marriage, widowhood, mobility or inheritance.

Because notarial instruments depend on self-identification and scribal practice, the attribution of Portuguese origin follows a conservative approach. Only individuals explicitly described as Portuguese or associated with identifiable Portuguese localities — whether in continental Portugal, Madeira, or the Azores — are included. This restriction ensures methodological rigour and avoids the distortions produced by Castilianised surnames, homonymy, or ambiguous geographical references. Such caution is particularly necessary in the case of women, whose presence in the sources is never proportional to their demographic weight. Their documentary visibility stems from exceptional circumstances: widowhood, the absence of a male representative, the administration of inherited property, the need to designate legal agents across the archipelagos, or conflicts involving debts, marriage agreements, and transatlantic possessions. The study therefore treats notarial documentation not as a mirror of female participation in public life, but as evidence of specific moments in which women were compelled — or enabled — to act within the legal sphere.

Given the reduced number of Portuguese women recovered through this archival strategy, the research adopts a prosopographic and biographical approach. Each woman is examined individually, yet always in relation to the broader set of cases, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns of mobility, family strategy, legal representation, and economic participation. For every case, information was gathered on origin, marital and legal status, kinship networks, types of documents in which the woman appears, references to mobility between islands or between archipelagos, and the nature of the property or obligations recorded. Cross-referencing with inquisitorial material, ecclesiastical documentation, and contemporary chronicles provides further support for establishing identities, clarifying life trajectories, and detecting connections that are not always visible in the notarial record alone. These complementary sources, although shaped by their own institutional logics, offer invaluable insight into family structures, transatlantic circulations, and social positioning.

The methodological approach adopted here therefore recognises both the potential and the limits of the documentation. Notarial sources are rich in detail but highly selective, shaped by formulaic language and determined by legal thresholds that governed who could appear and under what circumstances. For this reason, the study refrains from drawing quantitative conclusions about the overall presence of Portuguese women on the island. Instead, it uses the fragmentary but significant traces left by these women to reconstruct individual life paths and to illuminate, through comparison, the strategies through which they navigated a frontier society marked by mobility, economic interdependence, and shifting Atlantic connections. In doing so, the methodology aligns with current developments in gendered Atlantic history and life-course studies, privileging an interpretive framework that foregrounds agency where the archive renders it only intermittently visible.

3 HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE ATLANTIC LIFE-COURSE: PORTUGUESE WOMEN IN THE CANARY ISLANDS

The Portuguese contribution to the population of the Canary Islands, especially after the integration of the islands within the kingdom of Castile, has been a widely debated topic in historiography. Rosa Olivera (1968–1970, p. 39), at the end of the 1960s, for the first time stated the quantitative significance of the Portuguese contingent which formed part of the repopulation of certain areas of the island of Tenerife, particularly in the north-western districts of Icod and Daute. From the registers of notaries consulted,¹ she concluded that the number of Portuguese in these areas was not less than 80% of the total population.

A decade later, several studies were conducted which gave rise to different and even opposing positions regarding the evolution of the relative weight of the Portuguese community in comparison with other immigrant groups which settled in the Canary Islands. Firstly, Fernández-Armesto (1982, p. 45), using research based on the notarial documentation of the islands of Tenerife and La Palma, and Aznar Vallejo, who through analysing the dates of the *repartimiento*² and the letters containing wills,³ emphasised the numerical importance of the new settlers of Portuguese origin, even more than the Castilians themselves. In contrast, Charles Verlinden (1987, p. 14) was suspicious of these statistics and advocated a much more nuanced integration within the new island society. For this historian, although the initial purpose of these early settlers was to populate the territory, not all of them remained. In short, this researcher suggests a transitory presence in the Archipelago of these Portuguese, generally new Christians, on their way to other parts of America such as Caracas or Potosí.

On the presence of Portuguese women in the Canary Islands after the islands were added to the Crown of Castile, there is only the reference provided by the historian Bello León (1998, p. 202) in his research on foreigners in the repartimientos of the Canary Islands. In particular, it refers to the settlement of a Portuguese couple in the village of Tacoronte. Almorza Hidalgo (2018, p. 21) points out that "female emigration to America is an exceptional case among transatlantic emigrations and was the first event in which European women took part". However, it should be remembered that a migratory process from Europe to the Atlantic had already been underway since the beginning of the 15th century, with the Iberian expansion on the African coast and mainly in the Atlantic archipelagos. Moreover, as Bello León's study shows, in the case of the islands in question, this European emigration at the beginning of the Atlantic expansion was not only of Castilian origin.

While earlier studies, such as those by Rosa Olivera and Bello León, focused on the demographic and legal presence of Portuguese settlers in the Canary Islands through repartimientos and land distribution records following the conquest, the transition to the period of the *Ancien Régime* marked a shift in both the nature of migration and the composition of island society. To address this new reality, historiography adopted a different approach, one that moved beyond institutional frameworks and demographic quantification to explore the social dynamics, integration strategies, and everyday experiences of minority groups. This change in perspective, grounded in the systematic analysis of notarial and inquisitorial documentation, enabled the recovery of Portuguese women as historical subjects and revealed their role in shaping the insular world through kinship, commerce, and cultural transmission.

Moving on to the *Ancien Régime* period, although studies on foreigners in the Archipelago proliferated during the 1990s, they were mainly confined to the so-called Eastern Islands (Gran Canaria, Lanzarote and Fuerteventura). The work of Lobo Cabrera (1987) and Torres Santana (1993, 1997) established a

1 She does not indicate which deeds she consulted, but simply states that they cover these records from 1513 until the end of the 16th century.

2 "Of the 1,017 original data subjects on the island of Tenerife, there are fewer than 150 whose origin is explicitly determined and of these 68 are Canary Islanders and 48 are Portuguese, with this distinction being significant, while only three are Andalusians, a lower number than Biscayans and the same as the French". Aznar Vallejo (1983, p. 194).

3 "More information is provided by an indirect, but highly reliable source, namely the content of letters containing wills. Of the 135 examples examined, 80 indicate the origin of the testator [...] The breakdown of the 80 known examples is as follows: 32 Portuguese of various origins, 19 Guanches, 7 Castilians, 7 Extremadurians, 6 Andalusians, 2 Canary Islanders, 2 Genoese, 2 Galicians, 1 Fuerteventuran, 1 Genoese and 1 Prieto". Aznar Vallejo (1983, p. 194).

line of research in the Islands aimed at reconstructing the composition of its island society using as an analytical method population statistics and the quantification of mainly notarial and, to a lesser extent, ecclesiastical, records. As such, although women were not the primary object of research in these publications, the methodology employed by these two historians has enabled us to recover the agency of Portuguese women in the primary sources they used.

Certainly, the number of Portuguese women found in the documentation is tiny. Nevertheless, the data is significant. These enable us to understand the migratory model of which these women formed part and the characteristics of the roots of these foreigners. Firstly, although the proportion of Portuguese women referred to in the sources varies according to the host island — between 4.4% and 16.6% — it is possible to state that these emigrants were a minority compared to the men who also emigrated from the same nation. Moreover, it has been possible to reconstruct the migratory movements from the place of origin to the destination population — especially from the Portuguese islands to Gran Canaria, Lanzarote and Fuerteventura —, the reorganisation of the family structure during this migration to the Canary Islands and the level of roots established by these emigrants based on the legal status they acquired.

Torres Santana (1993, p. 652) infers that these scarce references to women are due, in the first place, to the fact that this was an emigration pattern consisting mainly of males and that, therefore, the presence of women is scarce. This type of transoceanic mobility proved to be a pattern in the organisation of the migratory process carried out by the Portuguese community in terms of Castilian territory, certainly island and Indian areas. In the same vein, the historian Sullón Barreto (2016, p. 270) indicates the profile of the Portuguese women who migrated to Lima. She points out that, quantitatively speaking, they represented a small number of the Portuguese in the *Ciudad de los Reyes*, as a consequence of a migration process which was essentially individual and masculine.

Another factor to take into consideration in order to understand female representativeness is the almost complete absence of women appearing before notaries and, as such, they would have had few opportunities of becoming an active individual capable of ratifying decisions that directly involved them. Torres Santana mentions that they only appeared before a notary in cases where no other person could act on their behalf and mentions, by way of example, a testamentary deed for an estate issued by an Azorean widow.

Moreover, this caution must also extend to onomastic identification and to the limits of inferring "origin" on the basis of names and surnames. In the Canarian context, homonymy, Castilianisation, and the intermittent manner in which provenance is recorded render quantitative reconstruction particularly fragile: in Tenerife it is frequently documented that several individuals share exactly the same name and surname, and that even a single person may appear with or without an explicit national label. For this reason, any quantitative reconstruction requires conservative criteria — such as counting only cases with explicit statements of origin or unequivocal contextual markers — and keeping demographic inferences "in quarantine" (Bello León, 2002, pp. 176–177).

This problem is not unique to the Canary Islands but forms part of a broader Iberian framework in which historical practices of naming and surname transmission were variable and, above all, gendered. The isonymy studies conducted by Román Busto and colleagues, based on parish records from Olivenza under Portuguese sovereignty (1750–1801), demonstrate two findings of particular relevance for the present methodological discussion: the frequent absence of recorded surnames for women, and the instability of surname attribution and transmission across generations. These patterns lead the authors to advocate prudent strategies that privilege only the most consistently transmitted paternal identifiers (Román Busto et al., 2007, pp. 46–59).

Consequently, as has been argued for a cis-Atlantic analysis of Tenerife, the identification of Portuguese men and women must rely primarily on explicit statements of provenance and on a close examination of the "documentary ecology" — the types of deeds and the legal circumstances that trigger appearance in the record — while avoiding automatic deductions based on Castilianised surnames or nominal coincidences (Álvarez Santos, 2019, pp. 22–23).

These statistical approximations in relation to the foreign — and especially Portuguese — presence in the Eastern Canary Islands were the subject of a more extensive study by Brito González (2002). His

research, based on a study of the island's notarial documentation, shows that individuals of Portuguese origin on the island of Gran Canaria during the 17th century made up almost 36% of foreigners. This preponderance was even higher in Lanzarote, where Lusitanians accounted for 70%.⁴ The study also indicates that most of them were confined to the period of the joining of the Portuguese Crown with the Spanish Monarchy, between 1618 and 1640. This data offers a glimpse of the significance of this community in the shaping of island society in the Canary Islands. Moreover, this analysis at the local level can be seen in the light of other studies on American territory that demonstrate the agency of certain exogenous groups in the process of identity construction in frontier areas.⁵

Although Brito González did not carry out an analysis of the presence of foreign women in the Islands, it is possible to extract quantitative data on Portuguese women in the Eastern Canary Islands from the list of the names of "foreigners" that he provides in the appendix to his publication. Firstly, among the notarial registers he consulted, he found 12 foreigners who were women on the island of Gran Canaria, half of whom were Portuguese. On the island of Lanzarote there were 15 women who were foreigners, all of them Portuguese.⁶ Secondly, the data provided by the historian also allows us to learn where these emigrants — mostly islanders — came from, and to study their process of putting down roots and becoming integrated in the Eastern Islands. Finally, these figures confirm that Portuguese emigration to the Castilian Atlantic was mostly male. In Gran Canaria, women represented only 1.95% of the Portuguese community on the island, while this percentage was slightly higher in Lanzarote at 3.79%. These figures are similar to the data obtained for other Atlantic areas, both islands and the American mainland. Therefore, as will be detailed below, the percentage of Portuguese women on Tenerife was 1.68% for the 1575–1650 period. In Lima, this figure for the entire 17th century reached 4.85% (Sullón Barreto, 2016, p. 269). These figures, though varying slightly, reflect a broader pattern of male-dominated migration and the marginal statistical visibility of women in official records.

While these figures offer a statistical overview of gendered migration patterns, they do not fully capture the lived experiences or social roles of Portuguese women in the archipelago. To address this gap, it is necessary to turn to qualitative sources which reveal the presence, agency, and integration of these women in island society.

A parallel historiographical development in the Azores is particularly useful for understanding the shift towards qualitative and connective sources. As Bello León has noted in his assessment of the field, scholarship on Portugal–Canary relations has long oscillated between juridical-political "rivalry" frameworks, studies of cultural and linguistic transfer, analyses of mercantile mobility (merchants, carriers, pilots), and lineage-based microhistories; precisely for this reason, the turn towards methodologies anchored in notarial documentation and network reconstruction did not emerge *ex nihilo*, but as a response to the limitations inherent in exclusively quantitative approaches (Bello León, 2003, pp. 738–739).

In this respect, Maria Olímpia da Rocha Gil was a pioneer in the systematic exploitation of 16th- and 17th-century *notarial cartórios* in the Azorean archives. Combining micro-analysis with an explicitly Atlantic perspective, she demonstrated how juridical and economic instruments — such as *procurações* (powers of attorney), freight contracts, maritime insurance and credit arrangements — allow the reconstruction of circuits linking the Azores, Madeira, the Canaries and Iberian ports, and capture the movement of people, goods and obligations (Gil, 1982, pp. 349–350). This micro-to-macro strategy provides a direct methodological analogue to the prosopographic reading adopted here for the documentary traces of Portuguese women in Tenerife, whose agency becomes visible in notarial acts, legal representation and the circulation of patrimonial assets (Álvarez Santos, 2019, pp. 22–23).

Likewise, the synthesis offered by Matos, Meneses and Leite in the *História dos Açores* conceptualises the archipelago as a nodal space structured by inter-island complementarities and by the continuous circulation of people, commodities and capital, thus providing a robust contextual framework for

4 In absolute terms, there were 307 Portuguese who went to Gran Canaria and 395 to Lanzarote (Brito González, 2002, p. 46).

5 On the presence and integration of the Portuguese community in Spanish America, see the works of Drumond Braga (1995), Ceballos (2008) and Serrano Mangas (1997, 2001).

6 This figure is high when compared to other studies for America. Sullón Barreto (2016, p. 269), based on her study of Peruvian notarial documentation, noted eight Portuguese women in Lima between 1600 and 1680. In other words, the island of Gran Canaria almost equalled the figure for the *Capital de los Reyes* while Lanzarote had almost double the number of Portuguese women.

understanding insular mobility within the northeastern Atlantic (Matos, Meneses & Leite, 2008). Building on this, Gil's analysis of late-17th-century port traffic in Ponta Delgada offers empirical confirmation of the operational interdependence between the Azores, Madeira and the Canary Islands: Canarian routes appear as channels for the circulation and re-export of textiles to the Azores, while Azorean products — including flax and tow — supplied Canarian demands, revealing a regional system embedded within broader mercantile currents (Gil, 1990, pp. 883–885).

Consequently, this literature helps anchor the insular provenance of a significant sector of Portuguese migration and clarifies the recurrent appearance of Azorean-Canarian connections in Tenerife's notarial documentation, particularly in relation to family networks, powers of legal representation and the trans-archipelagic circulation of property (Álvarez Santos, 2019, pp. 7–10).

Together with notarial records, inquisitorial documents have been the main source of information for tracing the influence of Portuguese women in the Canary Islands. In this respect, the work of Anaya Hernández and Fajardo Spínola (1990) on relations between the Atlantic archipelagos based on this documentation has brought other female emigrants settled in the Canary Islands to light, in this case those from the Portuguese islands. Of the 26 accusations or trials in the 16th and 17th centuries against those who came from Madeira and the Azores studied in this work, more than 80% were women.⁷ Two thirds of them were present during the period of the joining of the Portuguese Crown with the Spanish Monarchy and more than half of them were accused and imprisoned in Lanzarote (Anaya Hernández & Fajardo Spínola, 1990, p. 851). Firstly, it can be inferred from this data that the agency of Portuguese women in Canary Island society was just as significant and active as that of men, and even greater in some areas. Secondly, it is possible to note the importance of the island of Lanzarote acting as a link between the island and the Portuguese environment at the height of Portuguese-Canary Island relations. These women also played a fundamental role in consolidating transatlantic social ties from a frontier territory.

The study carried out by Francisco Fajardo Spínola (2005) on the victims of the Inquisition in the Canary Islands is worth mentioning for data on Portuguese women in the Canary Islands. The list of individuals presented in this work includes a total of 90 Portuguese between 1580 and 1640, of whom 12 were women. All of them were present between 1581 and 1629, which shows the constant presence and active character of this group at least until the Dutch occupation of Brazil and the loss of the main consumer market for Canary Island wines.

It has been pointed out that none of these studies focused on women as their object of study. They appear as one more quantitative element and their history moved around that of men. At best, these women are represented in the tables and annexes of these papers. The data cannot be compared to the mark left by men. It would be fruitless to compare the number of notarial deeds of both sexes because women, especially foreign women, hardly ever executed deeds as a percentage of the total number of deeds. However, the references they left behind have enabled them to have their agency in Canary Island society recovered. These references attest to the emigration of Portuguese women and their tangible presence in the archipelago, evidenced through legal acts, familial roles and social participation.

4 KINSHIP ACROSS BORDERS: PORTUGUESE WOMEN AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF TRANSATLANTIC FAMILY NETWORKS

Almorza Hidalgo (2018, p. 22) points out that, in the migratory process, the family was an adaptable structure that allowed changes to be made to facilitate settlement. In this sense, kinship networks were essential to solve the problems that could be faced by migrants. This case study reveals that Portuguese women played an active role within the family unit and in the Portuguese community itself, as evidenced by their participation in legal transactions, kinship strategies and the management of transatlantic ties. In the migratory process, women rebuilt unity through family reunification and expanded community ties through marriages. They were also the ones who maintained these family

⁷ Specifically, 23 women came from Madeira and 3 from the Azores.

ties. They formed a key element of Portuguese settlement and establishment, as the wives married to Portuguese men sometimes held powers of attorney from their husbands to act on their behalf while the latter were away from Tenerife. On other occasions, it was they who granted powers of attorney to other individuals, generally relatives, to collect inheritances or sell property in Portugal.

It should also be noted that, although most of them arrived on the island during the period of the Iberian Union — especially during the first quarter of the 17th century — a significant number — 4 of the 10 — had settled years before the joining of the Portuguese Crown with the Spanish Monarchy as a result of the traditional ties between the two Atlantic areas. If this data is joined with the figures provided by Fajardo Spínola from the inquisitorial processes, it can be seen that, although hardly recognisable in the sources, the presence and inclusion of Portuguese women within Canary Island society had been continuous and constant since the conquest and exploitation of the Islands. Consequently, Portuguese women were not marginal figures in the early European occupation of the archipelago, but rather indispensable agents in its social organisation, as demonstrated by their presence in wills, powers of attorney and family networks.

If the information from notarial deeds is compared with other sources, there is little information on their legal status and family ties. Some kind of relationship is only known for 58 Portuguese individuals, which is less than 10% of the sample analysed. Out of these just over 50 Portuguese, 13 were married men compared to three women who are referred to as spouses. In particular, the wills of three women from Portugal were discovered. Two of them were single and the other married, with her husband being in Cape Verde.⁸

This last deed in fact referred to the last will of Blanca Rodríguez, a native of the region of Porto and resident in Garachico, and enables us to observe the level of inclusion of these foreigners within island society. In addition to indicating that a shoemaker and a miller in the area where she settled owed her a certain sum of *reales*, she sent a *dobla* of her goods to the Misericordia brotherhood, of which she stated she was a member, and asked that her body be buried in the monastery of San Francisco de Garachico.⁹ These patterns expressed in her will indicate that this woman was an active member of the host community, both economically and socially.

These wills, signed by Portuguese residents, offer direct insight into the establishment of parental relationships across the circum-Atlantic space, revealing the mechanisms through which families maintained cohesion and property across distances. The testators included sailors and farmers, but mainly individuals involved in trade. From the information available to this study, it is understood that her possible death on the island was not foreseen. The wills of these individuals passing through did not denote laying down roots, or the desire to be settled on the island. They all mentioned the fact that their family — wife and children — lived in Portugal and that they had a house there. They even ordered their debts to be collected in Portugal.

Of particular note was the case of the last wills of the Portuguese islanders. As regards those from the Azores and Madeira who made their wills and whose professions are known, they were all farmers. Perhaps this is why a higher level of integration can be detected. Furthermore, two of them were married to women from Tenerife¹⁰ and the wife of a third was located in the Azores. In the latter case, at the time of his will he was settled in Tenerife and she in Saõ Miguel and named their children, a man and a woman, as their heirs.¹¹

Before turning to individual cases, it is important to situate these documentary traces within the broader chronology and geography of Portuguese migration to Tenerife. The notarial record reveals that women's presence in the island did not begin with the Iberian Union but formed part of longer

8 The figures are similar when comparing the data with that obtained by Almorza Hidalgo (2018, p. 166). For the city of Lima, 5% of the wills granted during the 17th century belonged to women. In the Indian sphere, most of these testatrices were widows or were married, although in a similar proportion to single women (Almorza Hidalgo, 2018, p. 269).

9 AHPST (Archivo Histórico Provincial de Santa Cruz de Tenerife), legajo 2066, fol. 338.

10 Rodrigo Luis, a farmer from the Algarve, asked his executors for his body to be buried in the church of the Blessed San Juan de Güímar, in the same grave where his wife, Ana Gómez, had been buried. It is worth noting how various Portuguese widowers decide to be buried in the grave of their wives; AHPST, legajo 1512, fol. 290v.

11 AHPST, legajo 1342, fol. 116.

historical continuities linking the Canaries with Madeira and the Azores since the late 15th century. A significant fraction of the women identified had settled on the island well before 1580, while others arrived during the first decades of the 17th century, reflecting both longstanding maritime ties and the intensified mobility of the Union period. These patterns underscore that the women who later appear in powers of attorney, wills and debt claims were not isolated actors but members of family networks already embedded in multi-archipelagic circuits. Understanding this background is essential for interpreting the micro-episodes that follow, where agency emerges not as an exception but as a product of long-distance kinship infrastructures. In adopting a prosopographic approach, the analysis systematically compares the life-events through which women entered the record — marriage, widowhood, migration, inheritance and legal delegation — allowing patterns of agency to be reconstructed across cases and situated within their broader life-course trajectories.

Seen from close range, these dynamics are best appreciated through a continuous sequence of biographical episodes that reveal not only when and how women entered the legal sphere, but also what they achieved there and how their decisions travelled between islands. In 1588, a woman from Tenerife whose lineage led back to Madeira empowered her husband to collect and administer the rents of an estate inherited from her parents and grandparents on that island.¹² By delegating collection while retaining female title, the deed channelled Portuguese patrimony into the Canarian legal sphere and turned the wife into a hinge between lineages dispersed across Macaronesia — a pattern in which female origin supplied property rights and male mobility supplied execution. The instrument's precision also shows how household economies could be legally configured to operate on both sides of the water without losing unity, a necessary condition in a world where kin and capital moved at different speeds. From a nesological perspective, the power of attorney operates as a "bridge document" that compresses maritime distance into enforceable agency, making the island archive a technology of connectivity rather than isolation.

A similar formula reappears in 1604, when another woman authorised her absent husband — then in Madeira — to sell inherited assets there. The spouse who remained in Tenerife could still orchestrate the disposal of property abroad through clauses that transferred agency while preserving control over purpose and beneficiaries.¹³ What the document preserves is not a mere administrative detail, but a way of stabilising the patrimony of a conjugal unit whose centre of gravity straddled two archipelagos; the notarial instrument effectively allowed decisions anchored in the woman's lineage to travel and to be enforced where needed, knitting households that were both mobile and rooted. By bringing the wife's rights to the forefront and the husband's movement into focus, the deed makes visible the calculus by which families coordinated absence and presence across jurisdictional lines. Gender history here clarifies that the household's legal elasticity depended on female title: property moved because women remained the stable point around which mobility was organised.

Family reunification itself could be written into the deed. In 1604, a resident of Terceira received from her husband, a silk merchant established in Tenerife, a power of attorney to collect debts on his behalf, with an extraordinary clause ordering that she be brought to Tenerife under his guardianship.¹⁴ The clause shows how gendered authority and mobility were co-written: reunion is not narrated after the fact but scripted through legal language that anticipates a life-course transition. The formula binds a private migratory project to a public instrument: it recognises in practice the wife's capacity to act in matters of debt and collection while preparing her relocation to the island, and it anticipates the legal tasks she may have to undertake once present. That a mercantile household incorporated this clause suggests the extent to which economic integration and kin regrouping marched together, with the woman's movement and the husband's claims configured as complementary fronts of the same strategy.

In 1603, a Madeiran woman received from her husband — resident in Tenerife and working as a middleman in the vineyards of Tacoronte — full powers to sell or lease the conjugal vineyard and a house in Calheta.¹⁵ An Atlantic-history lens makes visible that viticulture is not merely local production: it is a multi-sited household economy sustained by delegated female management across archipelagos. The document acknowledges her ability to administer the couple's key productive asset while specifying properties abroad, making clear that the household economy could be spatially split yet legally unified

12 AHPST, legajo 1512, fol. 657.

13 AHPST, legajo 1357, fol. 98.

14 AHPST, legajo 1528, fol. 199.

15 AHPST, legajo 1527, fol. 49.

under female management. In the context of a wine economy oriented toward Atlantic markets, the choice to empower the wife to decide on leases or sales was more than domestic accounting: it gave operational continuity to an asset base that generated income in one island while underwriting obligations in another, and it registered the wife in the chain of decisions that linked viticulture to circulation.

If powers of attorney reveal how property travelled, wills show how belonging was performed locally. The notarial record also preserves women's voices in the solemn register of last wills and testaments. A woman born in the Porto region and resident in Garachico itemised debts owed to her by a shoemaker and a miller, declared herself a member of the Misericordia, and chose burial in the monastery of San Francisco de Garachico.¹⁶ Credits receivable, confraternal membership and funeral preferences thus reveal economic participation, institutional belonging and a stable sense of place. The will functions as a social cartography: it situates the testatrix within circuits of trust and obligation; it names the institutions where she was recognised; and it specifies the space where her body would rest, quite literally inserting her into the physical fabric of the town. The presence of confraternities and mendicant houses is not incidental; for women, those nodes were as much instruments of social anchoring as they were mirrors where belonging could be publicly read.

Widowhood frequently became legal leverage. A widow of Tenerife empowered an agent to recover in Lisbon money and *doblas* left by her deceased husband, converting distant patrimony into liquid resources usable on the island.¹⁷ Gender history explains the timing of visibility: widowhood opens a legal window in which women appear as creditors and decision-makers precisely because the usual male proxy is absent. The deed positions a widowed woman as a cross-border creditor and demonstrates procedural literacy and a willingness to litigate or delegate according to the geography of the estate. Rather than a posture of withdrawal, widowhood here becomes a mode of action: the woman detects the location of value, chooses an appropriate representative, and sets in motion the recovery of assets that were entangled in metropolitan accounts. In a frontier society where liquidity could be the difference between survival and decline, the capacity to translate a remote claim into present cash was a form of agency with immediate material effects.

In 1603, another widow in Icod granted a power of attorney to a traveller bound for Santiago de Cabo Verde so that he might collect hides, wine, sugar or slaves left by or owed to her late husband there.¹⁸ Atlantic history turns this notarial act into a map of Afro-Iberian circulation, revealing how women could trigger long-distance recovery of value from circuits that joined islands, Africa and commodity frontiers. The record opens the Afro-Atlantic: viticulture and sugar link the Canaries and Cabo Verde; hides and slaves anchor the case in Luso-African circuits; and a widow animates the legal machinery needed to retrieve value across jurisdictions. That a single sentence can hold together wine, sugar, hides and enslaved persons says much about the connective tissue of the early modern Atlantic; that it is a woman who activates the deed to reach into that economy says even more about the distribution of practical knowledge within households that traded and travelled. A widow's hand, here, is the hand that converts a spouse's death into the legal reassembly of goods scattered across sea lanes.

Beyond the archipelagos, the same family logics extend into Atlantic labour markets and craft networks. Maternal guardianship also structured agency. A widow and lawful administrator of the goods of five underage children appointed a Portuguese resident of Tenerife to intervene in her children's lawsuits and to manage the inheritance due from their paternal grandparents in Portugal.¹⁹ Life-course analysis is operational here: guardianship formalises the mother as the manager of intergenerational rights, turning care into a juridical strategy across borders. Within a single act, guardianship, litigation and collection were organised, with the mother as central manager of a lineage that straddled Portugal and Tenerife. The deed does not merely assign tasks; it distributes trust, names the person who will speak for the children before courts, and cements the mother's role as architect of transborder continuity. In a legal order that recognised minors as subjects in need of representation, mothers appear as the strategists who secured their future by knitting together the family's claims on both sides of the water.

Couples likewise protected women's inheritances at a distance. In 1576, a Portuguese couple resident in Los Silos authorised a trusted neighbour to recover in Madeira the real estate that had been

16 AHPST, legajo 2066, fol. 338.

17 AHPST, legajo 916, s/f.

18 AHPST, legajo 684, fol. 154v.

19 AHPST, legajo 2066, fol. 323v.

bequeathed to the wife and to sell it in her name.²⁰ Nesology sharpens the mechanism: trust is local, but property is archipelagic; proxies are the social technology that connects the two scales. Female entitlement, conjugal cooperation and inter-island pragmatism converge in a proxy empowered to act in a Portuguese venue. The choice of agent — local, known, presumably reliable — speaks to the ways in which communities with long ties to Portugal built everyday mechanisms to move papers and property. What the deed records is a coordinated mechanism of trust, with the wife's entitlement as premise, the husband's signature as reinforcement, and the neighbour's journey as execution.

Normative pluralism appears explicitly in 1618, when a woman and her husband empowered her son from a previous marriage to sell and exchange houses she still owned in Terceira, stating that half belonged to her and half to her son "according to the law of Portugal".²¹ This is a micro-case of legal pluralism: the island notarial record preserves how families navigated multiple normative orders, with women articulating the terms of transmission. Female property rights survived remarriage and intergenerational transmission was articulated by a woman who negotiated between legal orders. The phrase "according to the law of Portugal" is not a rhetorical flourish: it is the way a family living in Tenerife insists on the normative framework that governs the division of an asset in Terceira, and the way a notarial deed on the island records, with fidelity, a legal reality at a distance. In those words, one hears the echo of jurists and scribes; one also hears the everyday competence of lay actors who knew which law applied where.

Agency could also originate from Portugal toward the islands. A resident of Tavira granted a power of attorney to collect assets from the estate of her husband, deceased in Gran Canaria, confirming that Portuguese women could be forceful litigants from the metropolitan side and that transinsular claims moved in both directions.²² The direction of the claim shows the Atlantic as a two-way legal field, where women in the metropole also used delegated agency to reach insular estates. The case complements the more familiar flow of Canarian claims into Portuguese territories: it shows that women in Portugal were attentive to the deaths, wills and debts that concerned their households in the islands, and that they mobilised agents to make those concerns effective. In practical terms, it reveals how the "border" was more frequently a seam than a barrier, and how women stitched it.

Taken together, the preceding cases reveal patterns that extend beyond individual circumstances and point toward broader logics of female agency in the archipelagic and Atlantic context.

Beyond the notarial offices, inquisitorial traces illuminate how marriage, guild affiliation and mobility linked the Azores, Garachico and extra-European destinations. An Azorean cooper who settled in Garachico married the daughter of a fellow countryman and left for Asunción in 1600; later, two sons became official coopers and departed for Angola and Buenos Aires.²³ Here the Atlantic frame explains scale: guild reproduction and marital alliance turn Garachico into a hinge-node from which households project labour and craft identities into tri-continental routes. Through wives and daughters as hinges of insertion, craft skills and circulations by sea, these households forged professional networks that spanned three continents, and women's kin made those trajectories viable. Read as a life-course, the sequence clarifies that marital alliances embedded families into local guilds, that the craft itself supplied portable identity and livelihood, and that daughters and wives were the pivotal elements that enabled these kin-guild networks to operate effectively both locally and overseas.

Together, these episodes clarify that Portuguese women acted at crucial junctures of patrimonial transfer, debt enforcement, guardianship and marital reorganisation, often across waters and jurisdictions. Their agency was patterned — conjugal delegation anchored in female title, widowhood leveraged into collection, maternal guardianship weaponised as litigation — and unfolded along the Atlantic routes that connected Madeira, the Azores and Portugal with the Canaries, Africa, and the Americas. More importantly, they show that documentary "exception" (a will, a power of attorney, a clause about custody) is not a marginal note but the moment in which hidden labour becomes visible: women appear not because they were absent from everyday life, but because extraordinary circumstances compelled the law to name them, and in naming them it recorded the work they did.

20 AHPST, legajo 1221, no fol.

21 AHPST, legajo 1536, fol. 296v.

22 AHPST, legajo 2302, fol. 444.

23 AMC (Archivo el Museo Canario), Inquisición, XLIV-13.

In each case, the island archive does not merely record events; it produces visibility at the intersection of mobility, gendered legal regimes and Atlantic circulation. To move from individual lives to comparative analysis, one can observe three recurrent logics that cut across the cases. First, the logic of transinsular transmission, in which female title and kinship made possible the circulation of assets between archipelagos, with husbands' mobility and proxies' journeys supplying execution. Second, the logic of widowhood and representation, where death opened legal pathways that women learned to use, often with striking geographic reach. Third, the logic of macro-Atlantic mobility, in which marriages, guilds and cargoes propelled households into Africa or America, and in which women's kin sustained the continuity of names, craft and credit. These logics do not exclude each other; they overlap and reinforce one another, and they show that the Atlantic was not merely a set of routes but a family machine that women helped to operate. Seen against this background, the following section turns to migratory movements, regroupings and strategies of settlement, evaluating how the patterns detected in individual cases scale up into the broader dynamics of kinship and integration in Tenerife during the Iberian Union.

Taken together, these kin-based practices demonstrate that Portuguese women occupied a central position in the architecture of cross-archipelagic sociability. Their interventions reveal how domestic authority, legal delegation and the circulation of memory operated simultaneously at different scales: within the household, across extended kin networks and along Atlantic routes. By stabilising patrimonial ties, transmitting intergenerational rights and ensuring the continuity of obligations and claims, these women acted as nodal points through which family strategies were adapted to the opportunities and risks of mobility. Their roles varied according to origin — Azorean, Madeiran or continental Portuguese — and according to marital status, yet across these differences a shared pattern emerges: women served as the connective tissue that held together families stretched across multiple islands, transforming distance into manageable social space.

Analysing the migratory movements of the Portuguese families who decided to settle and put down roots in the Canary Islands, it can be observed that women accompanied the family unit. This mobility model was characterised by the arrival of a family group that would stay together. However, the particular feature of this model lies in the fact that in some cases the spouses moved after the husband's initial migratory process. The latter first had to consolidate their roots. That is to say, after their arrival and settlement on the Islands, they had to define their position within the host family community, establish and strengthen bonds of trust with the local population and ensure the establishment of socio-economic links between the Island and their place of origin. Once this form of integration had been assured, as well their livelihood and their participation in local and international networks, the husbands would be in a position to summon their wives for family regroupings in the islands, as can be seen in the 1635 Bachelorhood file of the Azorean Francisco González. He had arrived on the island of Tenerife at a young age, in the company of his uncles, who raised him and looked after him for more than 10 years. As for informants, a compatriot of Francisco's claimed that he had brothers and first cousins on the Island. In this respect, Pedro González, the suitor's first cousin, testified that he himself had come in the company of his wife because "he had sent for her". Similarly, Juan González, Francisco's second cousin, mentioned that he had arrived with "a debt of his own and accompanying Pedro González's wife".²⁴

A further example of this model of regrouping the family unit can be found in the proceedings introduced by the *visitador* (visiting judge) of the island of Tenerife and La Palma in 1576 against the Portuguese individual Alonso Ponteado, resident in the Canary Islands and native of Lagos. The public official told the Portuguese individual to leave for Portugal, where his wife lived, or, on the contrary, to bring her to the island. Given this situation, he conferred a power of attorney on the chaplain of Gran Canaria and a procurator of the Court of the Canary Islands to act before the judicial authorities and thus allow his wife and children to travel from Lagos without the need for him to go and fetch them, as he could not go for "fear of being disturbed by the Law".²⁵

Powers of attorney are another source of information for analysing the level of settledness and naturalisation of a sizeable proportion of the Portuguese community. Forty-seven such deeds were found in which its members claimed property and inheritance from relatives in their regions of origin. The Portuguese women who settled on the island conferred their power of attorney on those people,

24 AHDSCLL (Archivo Histórico Diocesano de San Cristóbal de La Laguna), *Informaciones de Solterías y Viudedades* (Information on Single Women and Widows), 1635, legajo 1.

25 AHPST, legajo 446, fol. 295.

always men, who were close to them, and who were passing through the Canary Islands and on their way to the grantor's place of origin, thus enabling the flow of the family network. They also instigated socio-economic relations, as it was these, through such powers, which granted the ability to sell or lease property obtained by inheritance, and even to interfere in possible family disputes.

Thus it is understood that women formed an essential link between the Portuguese community established in different areas of the Atlantic. Those transmitting this common heritage were mainly wives or widows of the family patriarch, but daughters and sisters were also disseminators of the legacy from that lineage. As an example of this, there was the power of attorney granted in 1614 by a Madeiran living in Tenerife to Brother Fernando de San Gregorio of the Dominican Order, and his priory of the convent of Santa María de la Real de Candelaria, so that he could receive and collect income from part of a vineyard that he and his daughters had in Madeira, which was in his name and that of his daughters Beatriz Tejera and Juana Tejera, as well as that of his deceased wife Clara Rodríguez.

The usual formula for the transfer of family property involved the joint granting of powers of attorney by the two partners, even if this property came from the wife's lineage. This was the case of the power of attorney granted in 1623 by Isabel Fonte, together with her husband Luis de Sanmartín de Estrada and her sister Tomasina Fonte, to her son Luis de Sanmartín Fonte, a clergyman, so that in Portugal he could sell and collect all the assets left by Antonio Borges, father of the aforementioned Isabel and Tomasina.²⁶

Unlike other deeds considered, in which the mark of women is practically non-existent, in this type of document women have a certain visibility. This is probably due to the fact that women were longer lived than men, and therefore there were more widows. In line with Torres Santana's argument, in any case, in this type of notarial register, the mark left by women and, above all, their actions, increases and becomes more visible when there is the exceptional circumstance of there being no man to represent them. Nevertheless, these exceptional scenarios enabled certain Portuguese women to be found who, from other sources, we would still be unaware of. In this respect, it is understandable why it was women who took the initiative and presented themselves to the notary for the first time independently and alone for this type of deed requesting family property. As such, widows appeared who claimed their husband's property.

It was more common to claim the assets of deceased parents, as well as to register the interest of these Portuguese on the Island regarding inheritances or rights in Portugal. The individuals who were given such powers were usually close relatives, neighbours of the same town, merchants and sailors, or even clergymen.²⁷ In the same way, through analysing this documentation, women showed that they were an element linking cross-border family relations as well as sustaining them after the disappearance of the patriarch. As such, in 1587, a merchant from Porto and resident in Garachico presented a deed for a power of attorney granted by his mother, Catalina López, as his guardian and curator, to collect a certain amount of ducats on the island of Tenerife which were owed to her deceased husband.²⁸

Building on this notion of memory-work, these women also acted as custodians of family memory and identity, bridging generational and geographic divides within the Portuguese diaspora. The women were the link between the different members of the family, settled on both sides of the Portuguese-Spanish border. They looked after the family's assets and were in turn disseminators of the family legacy and, in the final instance, that of an identity. Portuguese women were the link between the place of origin and the new home, between the outsider and the local, between the old and the new generations. In short, the women were in charge of maintaining and transmitting the memory of the family in a territory that was foreign and distant from their original home.

In this sense, women functioned not only as managers of property but as custodians of genealogical continuity. Their signatures, delegations and testamentary instructions anchored dispersed relatives to shared points of reference — names, houses, parcels of land, debts owed or credits held — which allowed kin groups stretched across islands to retain coherence over time. The archival emergence of mothers, widows and daughters in moments of legal necessity thus reveals a deeper social role: they safeguarded the threads of memory that connected branches of the same lineage divided between Portugal, Madeira, the Azores and Tenerife. Far from being accessories to male mobility, they were the integrating force that rendered those mobilities intelligible, coherent and transmissible.

26 AHPST, legajo 1540, fol. 228.

27 AHPST, legajo 1532, fol. 271.

28 AHPST, legajo 1436, fol. 83v.

Finally, as the following agreement shows, these type of powers of attorney expressed in the notarial documentation enable us to reconstruct genealogies and cross-border parental links involving the Portuguese who settled in the Canary Islands alongside their relatives dispersed throughout the Portuguese kingdom:

Gaspar Moreno and Jerónima, his wife, residents of Tenerife and settled in Laguna. Gaspar Moreno, son of Gonzalo Yáñez and Violante Morena, daughter of Juan Moreno, all deceased and from the island of Graciosa and residents in the town of Santa Cruz, on the cape that goes to Caleta, one of the islands of the Azores, also called the islands of Abajo. In the inheritance from his parents, Melchor Diez Miranda, resident of the said island and located in Tenerife, gave a power of attorney to collect and sell the goods of Gonzalo Yáñez and Violante Morena, along with all his brothers they could then divide the estate (among the three heirs).²⁹

On the other hand, emigration to the Canary Islands by these Portuguese did not necessarily imply an interest in being accepted by society or a commitment to temporary stability or roots. Although it predates our chronological scope of study, the study identified a dowry letter from 1567 in which the parents of the bride and groom were both Portuguese, with Antonio González settling in the port of Santa Cruz and Juan de Paiva in Porto. Among the clauses of the marriage agreement, it was established that, although Antonio González granted his son-in-law some land to sow, this concession was for only during the period that his daughter's husband was on the island.³⁰

The Iberian Union led to the triggering of a Hispanic universe, in which transnational and cross-border parental ties were formed. On the one hand, Portuguese women on the island connected their family networks with the Portuguese environment. On the other hand, Portuguese women residing in Portugal also organised family ties within the Iberian Atlantic.

Seen in their full breadth, these trajectories reveal that Portuguese women occupied strategic positions within a multi-layered Atlantic kinship system. Through acts of delegation, inheritance, guardianship and mobility, they sustained the coherence of families dispersed across Madeira, the Azores, mainland Portugal and Tenerife. Their documentary visibility may be episodic, but the patterns that emerge — of patrimonial stewardship, legal adaptability and the maintenance of genealogical and emotional ties — demonstrate a consistent repertoire of gendered strategies that shaped both household economies and wider circuits of circulation. These insights prepare the ground for the concluding reflections that follow, which draw together the comparative logics identified in the micro-cases and assess the broader implications of women's agency for understanding insular society during the Iberian Union.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The reconstruction of Portuguese women's trajectories in Tenerife during the Iberian Union shows that their presence, though fragmentarily registered, reveals consistent patterns of action across different legal, familial and geographic contexts. Their limited numerical visibility in the notarial and inquisitorial record must not be interpreted as absence, but rather as the consequence of a documentary culture that systematically obscured female agency except in moments of legal disruption — widowhood, the absence of male representatives, the management of inherited property, or the need to delegate authority across spatial distance. What the archive preserves, therefore, are not extraordinary women but extraordinary moments in which the routine labour of women — holding assets together, maintaining kinship continuity, enforcing obligations — became visible to the notary's pen.

At the micro-scale, three recurrent strategies emerge from the cases examined. First, women acted as nodal points in the transinsular transmission of patrimony, especially those linked to Madeira and the Azores, whose powers of attorney and inheritance arrangements made property circulate between archipelagos while stabilising kin groups across maritime space. The notarial deed, in this sense, functioned as a "bridge document" that translated physical separation into enforceable agency. Second, widowhood opened a window of exceptional legal visibility, allowing women — particularly those connected to continental Portuguese towns and mercantile circuits — to act as creditors, litigants and

29 AHPST, legajo 1171, fol. 147.

30 AHPST, legajo 1221, no fol.

estate managers. Death suspended the default structure of male representation, and in that suspension women activated wider circuits of recovery, litigation, and patrimonial consolidation. Third, certain Azorean-connected households reveal macro-Atlantic mobility, projecting craft identities and kin-guild alliances into Africa and America. In these trajectories, women ensured continuity: their kinship positions secured apprenticeships, validated alliances and transmitted obligations across generations.

Differences by origin sharpen this comparative analysis. Women from Madeira most frequently appear organising the circulation of landed assets and long-distance property management; Azorean women emerge in contexts where mobility, guild reproduction and extra-European circulation intersect; and continental Portuguese women more often surface in cases anchored in debt enforcement, credit claims and metropolitan linkages. Differences by civil status also prove decisive. Married women acted primarily through delegated authority that maintained multi-sited conjugal economies; widows entered the record with broader authority, mobilising resources and asserting rights in ways that linked them to metropolitan, African or Atlantic markets; the few single women documented show how inheritance and guardianship created moments of autonomous agency in an otherwise restrictive legal landscape. Across these contrasts, a shared repertoire becomes visible: women navigated constraints with strategies that adapted to their origin, their household composition, and the legal circumstances that triggered their appearance.

These findings prompt a re-reading of the notarial archive itself. Rather than treating it as a masculine arena in which women occasionally intruded, this study shows that notarial documentation was one of the principal stages where women acted, decided and left durable traces. A nesological and Atlantic lens reveals the island not as a peripheral space, but as a node where mobility, kinship and legal delegation were continuously recalibrated. Women, as mediators between territories, custodians of family memory, and managers of trans-archipelagic ties, were essential to the reproduction of social life in a frontier society shaped by maritime circulation.

In bringing these patterned forms of agency into focus, the article shows that Portuguese women were not marginal presences but central architects of archipelagic continuity: through their management of property, memory and kinship, they transformed the constraints of insular life into strategies of resilience that bound together families dispersed across oceans, leaving an imprint on the Atlantic world far deeper and more enduring than the fragmentary record initially suggests.

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