

Envoyé le :15 -05- 2024

Révisé le :28-05-2024

Accepté le : 30- 05-2024

Houses of Minting Coins in Algeria During the Ottoman Period: A Historical and Archaeological Study

Maisons de Frappe de Monnaies en Algérie pendant la période ottomane : Une étude historique et archéologique

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Abstract:

In the Islamic domain, the coinage production was overseen by an institution known as Dar al-Sikka. The Ottoman Empire, known for its decentralized approach, facilitated the establishment of numerous mints across its territories. Initially, in Ottoman Algeria, coin minting was confined to the Zayyanid Mint in Tlemcen. Eventually, the minting operations ceased in Tlemcen and were relocated to Algiers. Following the onset of French colonization, a new mint was established in Constantine during the reign of Ahmed Bey.

This study endeavours to elucidate the role of minting in these pivotal Algerian cities during the Ottoman era, focusing particularly on their architectural setups. Our methodology includes a detailed examination of the minting facilities, a historical analysis of each city that hosted these mints, and a study of the types of coins minted, with reference to samples preserved in national museums. Additionally, we investigate the architectural planning involved in these mints. It was observed that the main minting operations in the Algerian province were strategically linked to the cities' commercial, administrative, and geographic significance, especially regarding their proximity to precious metal resources, which was notably true for Tlemcen, Algiers, and Constantine.

Keywords : Dar al-Sikka ; Tlemcen ; Algiers ; Constantine ; Architecture.

Résumé:

Dans le domaine islamique, la production de monnaie était supervisée par une institution connue sous le nom de Dar al-Sikka. L'Empire ottoman, connu pour son approche décentralisée, a facilité l'établissement de nombreuses monnaies à travers ses territoires. Initialement, en Algérie ottomane, la frappe des monnaies était confinée à la Monnaie Zayyanide à Tlemcen. Finalement, les opérations de frappe ont cessé à Tlemcen et ont été déplacées à Alger. Suite au début de la colonisation française, une nouvelle monnaie a été établie à Constantine pendant le règne d'Ahmed Bey.

Cette étude s'efforce d'élucider le rôle de la frappe de monnaies dans ces villes algériennes clés pendant l'ère ottomane, en se concentrant particulièrement sur leurs configurations architecturales. Notre méthodologie comprend un examen détaillé des installations de frappe, une analyse historique de chaque ville ayant accueilli ces monnaies, et une étude des types de monnaies frappées, avec référence à des échantillons conservés dans des musées nationaux. De plus, nous investiguons la planification architecturale impliquée dans ces monnaies. Il a été observé que les principales opérations de frappe dans la province algérienne étaient stratégiquement liées à l'importance commerciale, administrative et géographique des villes, notamment en ce qui concerne leur proximité avec les ressources en métaux précieux, ce qui était notamment vrai pour Tlemcen, Alger et Constantine.

Mots clefs : Dar al-Sikka ; Tlemcen ; Alger ; Constantine ; Architecture.

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Introduction:

During the expansive rule of the Ottoman Empire, Algeria was a focal point for the establishment of mints directed by the edicts of the Sublime Porte in Istanbul. The reigning Ottoman Sultan was particularly focused on the uniformity of minting styles, especially concerning the gold coinage across the vast Ottoman territories. The diverse coinage included gold, silver, and copper coins, each distinguished by its denomination, weight, and fineness. Given Algeria's status as an Ottoman province, the establishment of mints was a natural progression.

This study raises several inquiries: Which cities within the Algerian province were selected by the Ottoman state for establishing mints ? Were these minting facilities confined solely to major urban centers ? What architectural patterns were employed in constructing these mints, both within the broader Ottoman framework and specifically within Algeria ? How were operations organized within the minting halls ? Through a historical and analytical lens, this study seeks to unravel the intricacies of the minting houses in Algeria during the Ottoman period and to discuss the architectural strategies employed therein.

1. The Monetary System in the Ottoman Provinces of North Africa (Algeria, Tunisia, Tripoli) :

The minting houses in Algeria, Tunisia, and Tripolitania relied on the internal flow of gold and the inflow from the south for the production of gold coins. The coins minted there continued to bear the name of the Ottoman Sultan until the 13th century AH/19th century CE (Pamuk, Financial History: 205-206).

1.1 The Monetary System in Algeria :

The monetary system of Ottoman Algeria was based on what was prevalent in Istanbul. This system consisted of three main types of circulating coins in terms of metal: gold coins, silver coins, and copper coins, each with its own denominations and multiples. The gold coins were of two types: the Dinar, which came in the Zayani style in terms of form and content, differing only in the appearance of partial inscriptions referring to the Sultans of the Ottoman State, expressing a formal allegiance; and the Sultani or Fındık Altın, which weighed between 3.25 and 3.5 grams, and was called the "Algerian Sequin" by the Europeans (Rezgui, 2010-2011: 39-42; Laarej, 2011: 68, 69). Due to its value and gold content, the Sultani was not widely circulated, as it was worth more than its counterpart in Constantinople. However, thanks to the commercial relations of the Algerian Regency and its proximity to the gold of the Sahara, it soon became one of the main centers for the production of the Sultani (Saidouni, 1975 : 193, 194).

As for the silver coins, they were the basic medium of exchange in the Algerian monetary system, and they were of a high degree of purity, represented by the Real Boughou

and its fractions (double Boughou and double Mazouna), while copper coins were also minted, called the Mazouna (Rezgui, 2011: 40-42; Laarej, 2011: 68, 69).

1.2 The Monetary System in Tunisia :

The Tunisian monetary system was based on Ottoman currencies minted in Istanbul, represented by the Sultanı and the Qirsh and its fractions, until the year 1140 AH / 1727 CE, when Tunisian coins bearing the name of the Ottoman Sultan began to be minted at the Tunisian mint, including the Sultanı and its fractions, also known as the "Zar Mahbub". However, the issuance was limited, possibly due to the scarcity of gold.

The Ottomans also maintained the local Tunisian currencies, such as the square silver coins known as the "Naşrī", which had been minted since the Hafsīd era, and remained the main currency used by Tunisians in their daily transactions. This currency was known among European merchants as the "Asper". They also minted the real known as the "Piastre", while the copper coinage was known as the Fals or the "Burb" (Sebag, 1990: 258-262).

1.3 The Monetary System in Tripoli :

At the beginning of the 10th Hijri century/16th century AD, Tripoli was a link in the trade movement with the entrances of Africa, and it was the headquarters of the Saharan caravans coming from Sudan laden with spices, gold, and the slave trade. In 958 AH/1551 AD, it became a province under the Ottoman state, and in 964 AH/1556 AD, it minted gold coins in the name of the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. During the reign of Sultan Selim II (974 AH-982 AH/1566-1574 AD), it minted gold coins to the same standards as those minted in other parts of the Ottoman Empire.

As for the silver coinage, it was characterized by its diversity and lack of stability on a particular type, including the square Nasri, the Madini, the Egyptian Para, and the Kharubah, in addition to minting a copper coin (al-Tamimi : 80) (Oglu, 2000: 218).

Through the exposure to the monetary system of the provinces of Algeria, Tunisia, and Tripoli, we conclude that: Algerian currency was vital and widely circulated, guaranteed in markets and trade, and was minted in considerable quantities in both gold and silver, and its weight was reasonable, which was not available, for example, in the two neighboring countries of Tunisia and Tripoli, as the two countries did not mint any gold currency during the 18th century and the early 19th century.

2. Mint Centers in Algeria During the Ottoman Era :

2.1 Dar al-Sikka Tlemcen :

a. A historical overview of the city of Tlemcen :

Located approximately 600 kilometers west of Algiers, Tlemcen is a coastal city of paramount importance, historically serving as the capital of the Zayyanid state since 633 AH (1235 AD). Renowned for its strategic position at the crossroads of significant trade routes, Tlemcen not only monitored the lucrative gold and ivory routes traversing the Sahara from the Sudanese territories but also managed caravans arriving from the ports governed by the Zayyanids, thus serving as a critical gateway to Morocco. It was described by Hassan al-Wazzan as follows :

«All crafts and trades in Tlemcen are organized across various squares and alleys. The populace of Tlemcen is categorized into four distinct classes: artisans, traders, students, and soldiers. Traders are noted for their fairness and exceptional sincerity, diligently caring for their city. Artisans, robust and joyful, relish in the pleasures of life » (al-Wazzan, Description of Africa : 19-21).

b. mint :

During the Zayyanid era, Tlemcen hosted a mint that continued its operations until the early 17th century. In the nascent Ottoman period, under the governance of the Pashas from 926 to 996 AH (1519-1588 AD), two distinct styles of coins were produced: the initial style persisted in the late Zayyanid form and content until the city was overtaken by the Ottomans in 1554 AD, while the subsequent style aligned with Ottoman standards, albeit retaining the Zayyanid form.

Towards the latter days of the Zayyanid dominion, Tlemcen saw a waning of its political and economic vigor, precipitating a depreciation of the Zayyanid currency. In this era of decline, the sovereigns of Banu Zayyan opted to mint coins bearing the name of the illustrious Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (926-974 AH/1520-1566 AD), specifically during the tenure of Sultan Abi Muhammad Abdullah II (934-947 AH/1528-1535 AD), and Sultan Abi Abdullah Muhammad VIII (947-950 AH/1540-1543 AD).

These coins featured the name and titles of the Banu Zayyan ruler prominently on the obverse, with the revered name of the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent inscribed on the reverse, as noted by El-Nabrawi in his seminal work (2000: 326).

Subsequently, the Banu Zayyan state was formally integrated into the Algerian province in 962 AH/1554 AD, a transition that brought about significant modifications in the content of the Zayyanid coins. The traditional basmala and blessings were omitted, replaced by laudatory titles and invocations dedicated to the Ottoman Sultan. Additionally, the coins

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now prominently displayed the mint city's name, 'Tlemcen,' along with the minting date in both letters and numbers, occasionally specifying the fineness.

This transformation is vividly documented in the dinars of Sultans Selim II and Murad III, as detailed by Driyas (1987-1988: 118). An account in 'Ghazawat Oruj and Khair al-Din' captures this period, stating :

«...My lord Abdullah was proclaimed Sultan over the populace of Tlemcen, and they conferred upon him the royal robe under the stipulation that the coinage and sermons exalt the name of our lord Sultan Selim Khan, and that he shall abstain from involvement in these matters » (Unknown, Ghazawat Oruj : 42).

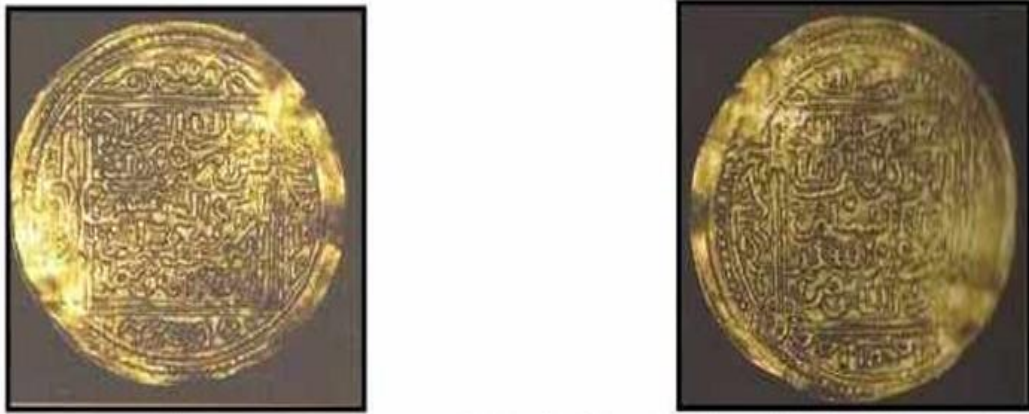


Plate 1: A Zayyanid Dinar minted in Tlemcen during the reign of Abi Muhammad Abdullah (from Abdul Majid Al-Kharigi and Nayef Al-Shar'an)



Plate 2 : Algerian Sultanate coin in the Zayyanid style minted during the reign of Sultan Selim II (from Abdul Majid Al-Kharigi and Nayef Al-Shar'an).

Haydo's writings on Dar al-Sikka elucidate the presence of two pivotal mints in the Algerian province during the Ottoman era; one in Algiers, specializing in the minting of the sultani and the aqche, and the other in Tlemcen, responsible for producing the quarter and the golden Zayyanid coins, which circulated extensively across the Algerian regions, reaching as far as the borders of Biskra, the Sahara lands, the neighboring territories of Sudan, and eastward to Tunisia (F, 1871). It is recorded that the mint in Tlemcen ceased its operations in the early 17th century AD (Driyas, 1988 : 38).

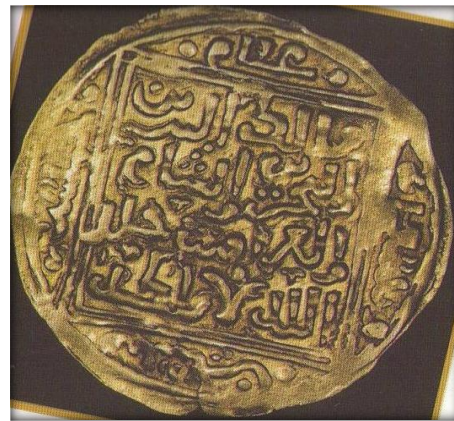


Plate 3 : golden Zayyanid coin minted during the reign of Sultan Murad III (from Abdul Majid Al-Kharigi and Nayef Al-Shar'an).

2.2 Dar al-Sikka Algiers :

- A historical overview of the city of Algiers :

Nestled on the seashore, strategically positioned between Ifriqiya and Morocco, lies Algiers, approximately four days from Bejaia. Historically known as the Islands of the Banu Mazghanna, Algiers is not only the eponymous heart of the Algerian kingdom but also the central hub of governmental and military prowess.

Situated at coordinates 36 degrees and 30 minutes north latitude and 12 degrees and 20 minutes longitude, the Arabs and Turks referred to it as 'Jazair al-Gharb' or the Western Islands, a name stemming from the small islands that once lay before the city, now the foundations of maritime fortifications (Cuoq, 1983 : 107).

Described by Al-Tamagrouti in the 10th century AH/16th century AD :

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«Upon our entry into Algiers on the eighth of Dhu al-Qa'dah, it was a bastion of prosperity, teeming with bustling markets. Its leaders, described as brave, influential, and astute at sea, consistently overpowered the Christians in their territories.

They were esteemed higher than the leaders of Constantinople, and their lands surpassed all in Ifriqiya in population, wealth of trade and moral fiber, boasting more accessible markets and superior goods and commodities. It was even dubbed 'Little Istanbul » (Al-Tamagrouti, Al-Nafha Al-Miskiyya : 139-140).

- mint:

After more than a century, a new and entirely independent coinage style emerged, distinct from the Zayyanid style, this was the purely Ottoman style. In this style, the names, weights, minting centers, and script contents of the coins were changed, reflecting the Algerian rulers' allegiance to the Sublime Porte (Laaraj, 2011: 76-75).

Following the Ottoman navy's control over the city of Algiers and the installation of Khair al-Din Pasha as its ruler in 1520 AD, Algeria became an Ottoman province with the right to mint its own currency, provided it bore the name of the Ottoman Sultan. As noted in the book 'Ghazawat Oruj and Khair al-Din :

«...It appeared to me that we should rely on Allah the Almighty for the protection of this city, and we should extend our hand in obedience to our great Sultan, Sultan Selim, may Allah support him, who will provide us with money, men, and all the equipment needed for jihad. This can only be achieved by dedicating the sermons to him and minting coins in his name » (Unknown, Ghazawat Oruj : 41, 42).

This statement is corroborated by what Ibn Abi al-Dhiyaf mentioned :

«...It is advisable that we join our hands with Islamic power and depend on it for the protection of this city, which can only be achieved through his allegiance and by entering into obedience to him, which includes praying for him in the sermons at the pulpits and minting coins in his name to enjoy the shade of his protection...

They acquiesced to this and were pleased with it, and they proclaimed prayers for him at the pulpits, wrote to the Sultanate about it, and sent coins minted in his name from Algeria » (Ibn Abi al-Dhiyaf, Ithaaf Ahl al-Zaman : 11).

The mint in Algiers was situated in a small building near the Palace of Jnina (Lower Casbah). During this period, specifically in the year 1033 AH/1623 AD, the city of Algiers experienced a vibrant craft activity, as evidenced by the variety, craftsmanship, and organization of its crafts, which encompassed forty professions including approximately three thousand traders, eighty blacksmiths, and eighty coin makers.

The prevalence of coin makers can be attributed to the Algerian province's need for currency, which led to a diversity in production and variance in coin weights. Despite the local Algerian mines being poor in precious metals, the mint had no choice but to import significant quantities of these metals from Europe and the western Sudan regions to meet the demand for these mineral resources.

The Dar al-Sikka also aimed to purchase gold and silver ingots from goldsmiths and some locals who acquired them through sea plunder or trade. Often, the provincial rulers had to release sufficient amounts of gold and silver from the treasury to meet the mint's needs or to pay for some imported materials by one of the beyliks (Saidouni, 1975 : 193-194).

The Palace of Jnina remained the seat of governance until the year 1817 AD, when Ali Khodja Pasha moved to the Casbah, and under the command of Dey Hussein Pasha, the mint was relocated to a more secure site chosen by Ali Khodja. The treasurer of the mint moved there, while the old mint appointed a deputy to monitor the balance and standard of the locals' craftsmanship (Al-Zahar, Memoirs of Ahmed Al-Sharif Al-Zahar).

This mint was equipped with everything needed, from molds to special furnaces for metal smelting and coin whitening by fire. Its workshops employed twenty-four workers under the supervision of the mint's treasurer, who was assisted by three officials. The bey closely monitored the minting process, determined the quantity of metals used, and oversaw the weights of various coins made from gold, silver, bronze, and copper (Mahrez : (s.a): 184).

The coins minted in Algiers were generally silver and copper, struck during the reigns of Sultan Mustafa III (1171 AH/1757 AD), Abdul Hamid (1187-1203 AH/1774-1789 AD), Selim III (1203 AH/1789 AD), Mahmud, Mustafa IV (1222-1223 AH/1807-1808 AD), and Mahmud II (1223-1255 AH/1808-1839 AD), featuring the name 'Algiers' according to the following styles (see Plate 3) :



Plate 3: The name of Dar al-Sikka Algiers (Researcher's work)

2.3 Dar al-Sikka Constantine:

a. A historical overview of the city of Constantine:

The city of Constantine is geographically located at 7.35 degrees east longitude and 36.25 degrees north latitude. It is situated approximately 621 to 740 meters above sea level and lies in the eastern region of Algeria, central to its province, and is about 245 kilometers away from the Algerian-Tunisian eastern border.

The entry of the Ottomans into the city of Constantine is believed to have occurred around the year 923 AH/1517 AD, according to Vaysette (Vaysette, 1867 : 277). However, this date is not confirmed by historians, as it is historically established that the Ottomans took control of the city following the incident at Wadi al-Qottin between Mila and Constantine. It is evident that they had been present since the year 941 AH/1535 AD (Al-Antari, *Forgotten Farida*: 11).

b. mint:

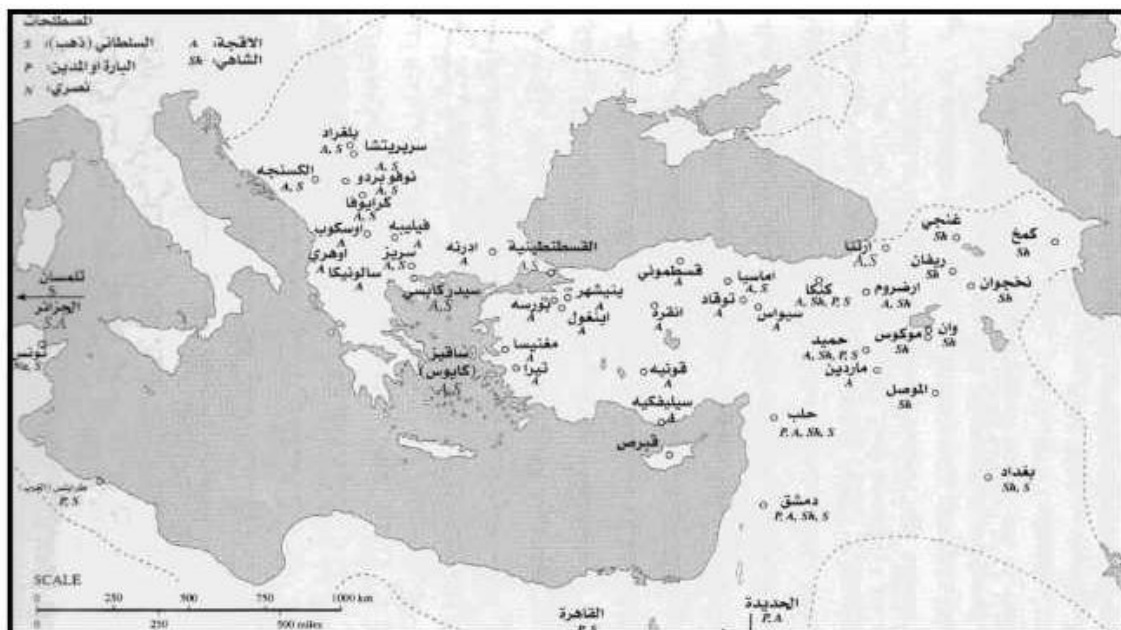
In 1830 AD, following the French colonial occupation of Algeria, a new mint was established in Constantine, the capital of the eastern beylik. The coins minted here retained the Ottoman style prevalent at the time, bearing the name and title of the Ottoman Sultan on the obverse and the date and place of minting on the reverse. These coins were minted from the year 1830 AD until 1837 AD (Temimi, 1978: 72 ; Candia, 1941: 168, 171).

It is worth mentioning that during the reign of Hajj Ahmad Bey, the commercial side saw significant development between the capital of the beylik, Tunisia, and the Sahara. This inevitably led to coin minting, which served as a testament to the economic and political independence of the beylik. During this period, the bey utilized the gold from the Sahara and the silver mine in Mount Sidi Rghis on the borders of the Harakta, where he commissioned German immigrants to extract silver (Temimi, 1978 : 72).

Modern sources and studies do not specify the exact location of the mint in Constantine. It is likely that it was part of the palace's facilities, considering the proximity of the Algiers mint to the Dey's palace, which was considered an important administrative facility. Examples of the silver and copper coins bearing the name 'Dar al-Sikka "Constantine"' are preserved in the National Public Museum of Cirta and the Museum of Ancient Archaeology in Algiers (Fahima, 2010–2011: 112-113).



Plate 4: Ottoman-Style Coins Minted in Constantine



Map 1: Ottoman mints producing silver and gold coins in the late sixteenth century (from Shawkat Bamok)

3. Architectural Planning of Minting Facilities in Algeria:

There are no specific studies on the architectural planning of Islamic mints in general, and Algerian ones in particular, except for some references. Dr. Abdel Rahman Zaki provides a description of the Egyptian mint during the reign of Muhammad Ali as being rectangular with an open courtyard surrounded by adjoining rooms roofed with domes constructed from brick, with skylights used for lighting and ventilation, which also served as chimneys for the steam generated during the manufacturing process. An oval-shaped room built of stone is situated in the middle of this courtyard (Zaki, (s.a) : 73).

Regarding the architectural planning of Algerian mints during the Ottoman presence, only a brief description of the treasury at the Palace of Jnina has reached us (Saidouni, 1975 : 23). Venture de Paradis notes that it consisted of vaulted halls located below ground level. A main entrance led to a large courtyard where diwan meetings were held. The location of these corridors was to the right of the entrance, with wooden benches at the door where guards would sit leaning against the walls (Paradis, 2022 : 141).

The treasurer was the only one allowed into the treasury, and the key to the treasury was kept by the Dey. At sunrise each day, the palace gates would open and the Dey would hand over the key to the treasurer in the presence of the Diwan members in the pavilion of the house.

When the large inner door was opened, everyone would enter, and the treasury would remain open until midday. However, on Fridays and Tuesdays, the treasury would not open. The treasurer appointed two officials from the people of Algiers, known as the Saa'iji, to count the money entering or leaving the treasury (Paradis, 2022 : 141).

As for the mint in the Casbah, it consisted of poorly lit corridors and arcades. The entrance had an inscription above it stating «Victory from Allah and an imminent conquest, O Opener of doors, open for us the best door, the door of Heaven» (Saidouni, 1975: 23). Dr. Ali Khalasi mentions that the treasury of the Casbah was composed of five quadrilateral halls, two of which ran from east to west (the first containing the main entrance and the second reserved for the treasurer), while the other three halls ran from north to south, separated by an internal wall with a door in each (Khalasi, 2007: 197).

This layout was as follows:

- **Main Entrance :**

Equipped with large locks and an iron grille, made of thick oak wood covered with iron plates, making breaching the treasury difficult. This door was locked with three keys, one held by the Dey, another by the treasurer, and the third by the mint's overseer. Above this entrance was a marble plaque inscribed in an Eastern calligraphic script reading: « *Victory*

from Allah and an imminent conquest, glad tidings to the believers, O Opener of doors, open for us the best of doors. »

- **First Hall :**

Rectangular in shape, entered through the main entrance, measuring 17.18 m², roofed with wooden pegs.

- **Second Hall :**

Similar in layout to the first hall, with an area of 14.81 m², featuring a door on the western wall leading to the three western halls.

- **Third Hall :**

Occupying an area of 14.96 m², unlike the previous two halls, it was roofed with a vault.

- **Fourth Hall :**

Following the same layout as the previous room, measuring 13.49 m².

- **Fifth Hall :**

The largest, measuring 21.30 m² (Khalasi, 2007 : 206).

Conclusion:

From the extensive analysis provided, it is evident that the Ottoman administration strategically established numerous mints across their expansive territories, with the placement of these mints significantly influenced by the regional importance of the cities in which they were located. Factors such as commercial vitality, administrative significance, and proximity to valuable mineral resources like gold and silver mines critically dictated these locations. This was particularly true for the cities of Tlemcen, Algiers, and Constantine, which were central to the minting operations in the Algerian province under Ottoman rule.

Despite the insights gained, the narrative of minting operations in Algeria during the Ottoman era, as well as earlier Islamic periods, remains a fertile ground for further scholarly exploration. Deeper, more focused studies are required to fully uncover the complexities and nuances of this significant aspect of North African economic history.

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