

Traditional Hammam (Bathhouse) in Algeria during the Ottoman Era: Hammam al-Bey Mustafa Bouchlaghem in Oran as a Model

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Abstract:

The city of Oran contains a number of historical landmarks from the Ottoman era that have withstood significant changes, particularly during the colonial period. Among these are the hammams (Bathhouses), which remain in use today. The study of traditional hammams (Bathhouses) in Algeria during the Ottoman period is a key aspect of understanding our Islamic architectural heritage. This article investigates Hammam al-Bey Mustafa Bouchlaghem in Oran as an archaeological case, presenting it as an architectural and functional example of Islamic design. The research focuses on the hammam's external appearance, internal layout, and principal construction techniques. It also explores the strong connection between such establishments and public services, as well as their functional and religious roles. The study ultimately aims to define the main features of Ottoman hammams (Bathhouses) in Algeria.

Keywords: Hammam (Bathhouse), Oran, al-Barida, Ottoman, al-Dafi'a, Bouchlaghem.

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INTRODUCTION

The hammam (Bathhouse) in Algeria during the Ottoman period is considered one of the significant landmarks of cultural heritage, serving as a place for enjoyment, bathing, and healing. It is distinguished by a unique architectural design that combines art with exceptional and distinctive architecture. Great attention was given to its interior form, reflecting an artistic architectural value. It stands as one of the most important architectural facilities that shaped the urban fabric of Islamic cities in general, and Algerian cities in particular, due to its enduring social, health, and cultural role over centuries. Among the most prominent hammams (Bathhouses) built during the Ottoman era in Oran is Hammam al-Bey Mustafa al-Masrati, which is regarded as one of the key examples of hammams (Bathhouses) from the Ottoman period and has preserved much of its original architecture, embodying the importance of such spaces in daily life during the Ottoman era .

The problem addressed is: What are the architectural and artistic specificities that distinguish Hammam al-Bey Mustafa al-Masrati? And what are the functional and social roles of this historical monument ?

The objectives of this research paper are to study and analyze the architectural features of Hammam al-Bey, highlight its historical and social value, identify the characteristics of Ottoman architecture, contribute to practical documentation and the preservation of our tangible heritage, and attempt to present the elements of (Bathhouse) hammam architecture .

As for the adopted methodology, we relied on the descriptive-analytical approach through field study of the monument, by drawing all its architectural elements and analyzing its architectural and decorative components, as well as the historical approach, through which we trace the historical context of the city of Oran and address the figure of al-Bey Mustafa al-Masrati by researching major books and archival documents .

In the article, we addressed the geographical and historical context of the city of Oran, discussed the figure of al-Bey Mustafa al-

Masrati, provided a descriptive study of the hammam (Bathhouse) with plans and illustrations of its main architectural elements, and concluded the article with a summary of the main findings.

1. The Geographical and Historical Context of Oran:

1.1 Geographical Context:

Location of the City:

The city of Oran is located in western Algeria, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea to the north. It lies between latitudes 35 and 42 degrees, and longitudes 30 and 38 degrees west, at an elevation of 109 meters above sea level. The city takes a shape close to a triangle, with its base on the sea (Piesse, 1862, p. 164). It enjoys a Mediterranean climate characterized by mild, rainy winters and hot, dry summers, with high humidity throughout the year. Its strategic location has provided it with commercial advantages, as it was a meeting point for many tribes coming from Tlemcen, Mascara, and even from deep within the Sahara (Lespès, 1938, p. 21).

Ibn Khallikan, in his biography of Abu Abdullah al-Wahrani, described it as: "A small city on the Roman sea coast in the central Maghreb, built by the Maghrawa kings" (Mukhtar, 2003, p. 45)

Oran overlooks the sea to the north with a long, winding coastline stretching from the mouth of the Macta River in the east to beyond the Andalusian complex in the west, and it oversees two important bays: Arzew Bay to the east and Oran and Mers el-Kebir Bays to the west) (Bouaziz, 2009, p. 19).

It was built on the slope of Mount Murdjadjo, which rises about 580 meters above sea level. The area is dominated by limestone rocks from the Quaternary geological period, and the region also consists of schist and marble, which were used in construction throughout Oran's history.

Regarding water resources, Oran has long relied on the waters of the Rhi River, which was a direct reason for the city's establishment and location. The city was regularly supplied with water, with many fountains and basins built to benefit from the river's water through underground channels. Many researchers have agreed on the quality and clarity of this river's water. The city also included other smaller

rivers outside its walls, such as Ain Rouina and the White River, though no trace of them remains today, as they were all filled in during the French colonial period.

The vegetation belongs to the Mediterranean environment in the highlands, such as pine, juniper, and oak trees, in addition to fruit trees like citrus, pomegranate, and banana. Grasses and herbs also grow in the area.

1.2. Historical Context:

Origin of the Name:

There are many interpretations regarding the word "Oran." The most common is that it is the dual form of the Arabic word "wahr," meaning "lion." However, according to Ibn Manzur, "wahr" does not mean lion, nor is this meaning found in major reference books. Some suggest that Oran was named due to the abundance of lions in the area, meaning "the two lion cubs." According to one account, Andalusian sailors founded the city in 902 AD.

There is debate about the origin of the city's name. Some believe "Oran" means "lions" in the Tuareg language, while others think the name is derived from a water spring flowing between the Table Plateau and Mount Haidour, which was called "Wahran." In the Zenata language, it means "fox," and it is said that when they began digging its foundations, they found a fox and named the town "Oran." Despite these differences, many researchers lean toward the common view that "Oran" means "the two lions."

Many historians, including Ibn Hawqal (Hawqal., 1967, p. 78), al-Bakri, and al-Idrisi, have mentioned it. Al-Bakri described it as: "A fortified city with flowing water and gardens, and it has a mosque" (Al-Bakri, n.d. n.d., p. 70).

History of the City of Oran:

According to the book "Al-Istibsar" (Anonymous "Al-Istibsar", 1986, p. 133) it was founded by a group of Andalusians in agreement with neighboring Berber tribes, who settled with them. The purpose of its establishment was economic, and it was an extension of the Umayyad state in Andalusia.

Oran was initially under Umayyad rule but did not enjoy long-term stability, becoming a center of conflict and instability, contested by the Umayyads in Andalusia and the Fatimids, who sought control over cities in the central Maghreb, including Oran. It was subsequently ruled by the Fatimids, Almoravids, Almohads, and Marinids, until it fell under Spanish occupation for nearly three centuries, in two periods: the first from 915 AH to 1119 AH, and the second from 1144 AH to 1206 AH. The Ottoman rule of the city, led by al-Bey Mustafa al-Masrati, occurred between these two periods.

The Spanish turned Oran into a military garrison, heavily fortified with about twenty towers, and it was liberated in 1792 by the Ottomans, who ruled it for 63 years in two phases. The first phase was when al-Bey Mustafa al-Masrati liberated it in 1119 AH and made it the capital of the Western Beylik instead of Mascara. (Al-Zayyani, 1979, p. 162) People came from all directions to settle there, leading to a flourishing of trade. The second phase of Ottoman rule began with its liberation in 1206 AH by al-Bey Muhammad al-Kabir, who made Oran the capital of the Beylik instead of Mascara. His rule was marked by security and stability, and he made efforts to repair and rebuild the city after its devastation, bringing in residents from Mazouna, Mascara, Mostaganem, Medea, Tlemcen, and other places (De Retailer, 1841, p. 387). He also allowed Spanish civilians, especially craftsmen and artisans, to reside in the city, guaranteeing them assistance and protection (Lapène, 1831, p. 7), and brought in Jews from neighboring cities such as Nedrouma and Tlemcen to stimulate trade (Lapène, 1831, p. 8). After the death of al-Bey Muhammad al-Kabir in 1213 AH, a succession of beys ruled the city.

Bey Othman bin Muhammad assumed power in 1213 AH immediately after the death of his father, Bey Muhammad al-Kabir (Muslim bin Abdul Qadir al-Wahrani, p. 65). During his rule, a plague epidemic struck Oran, claiming many lives, and locusts appeared, devastating crops and fruits (Muslim bin Abdul Qadir al-Wahrani, p. 69).

He was succeeded by Bey Mustafa al-Ajami al-Manzali, known for his weakness, cowardice, and incapacity. During his reign,

a major battle occurred between him and the Darqawi in the Fartasa region, between Wadi Mina and Wadi al-Abd ('Awda., n.d., p. 305), in which the Bey's army was defeated and his scribe, Ahmad bin Hattal al-Tilimsani, was killed in 1219 AH. Fearing the Darqawi, the Bey ordered the gates of Oran closed, forbade people from leaving, and directed his cannons at them (Mercier, 1868, p. 463) The residents revolted against him, and he was deposed due to the unrest and his inability to confront the Darqawi (al-Zayyani, 1979, p. 211).

Bey Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Othman al-Muqallash, the younger brother of Bey Othman bin Muhammad al-Kabir and his companion in exile in Blida, ruled in 1220 AH after the dismissal of Bey Mustafa al-Ajami. He was known for his courage and good governance despite his young age of 18. He assumed leadership of the Beylik in a dire situation, with the Darqawi besieging Oran from all sides and the population suffering greatly. He reopened the city's five gates after they had been closed for six months and lifted the siege imposed by the Darqawi and his followers on Oran (Lapène, 1831, p. 12), managing to pursue and defeat him in many encounters. After his death, Bey Mustafa al-Ajami was appointed for a second time in 1222 AH, but his rule lasted only nine months, after which he was appointed treasurer in Algiers (al-Zayyani, 1979, p. 225). He was succeeded by Bey Muhammad bin Othman, who ruled for nearly five years before being arrested for defying the Pasha's order to join the army. He was besieged in the Red Tower in Oran and killed by Agha Omar, the Pasha's envoy to Oran.

Afterwards, Bey Qara Bagli took over in mid-1228 AH, known for his knowledge and sound judgment. Oran experienced several calamities during his rule, such as famines and locust infestations that ruined crops. He was succeeded by Bey Hassan bin Musa al-Bahi, known for his sound judgment. During his time, the Muhammad al-Tijani revolt broke out, which he managed to suppress at its outset. Some sources state that once he consolidated power, his conduct deteriorated and his character changed (al-Zayyani, n.d., p. 238). Bey Hassan remained in power until the French invasion, surrendering the city without a fight. With the departure of the last Beys of Oran to

Alexandria and then to Mecca, where he died, the Ottoman rule of Oran, which lasted a total of 63 years, came to an end.

French occupation forces entered Oran without significant resistance, requesting Bey Hassan to surrender the city. On January 4, 1831, the French entered the city, while he and his family and close Turkish associates left Oran on a private ship bound for Algiers (Ibn awda, nd., p. 89).

2. Definition of the Hammam (Bathhouse):

2.1 .Linguistically:

It is a place for bathing, derived from “ham,” meaning heat. It is said: “the water became hot,” and “hamim” means hot water, while “istihmam” means bathing with it. “Hamim” also refers to sweat, and thus any place where one bathes with any water is called a hammam; the plural is hammamat (Manzur, 1994, p. 157).

It is also defined as a house prepared for bathing with hot water (al-‘Arabiyyah, 2004, p. 181).

In Mu’jam Maqayis al-Lugha, it is stated that “ham” denotes heat, from which “hammam” is derived, meaning a place with heat for bathing (Ibn Faris, 1979, p. 72).

It is also mentioned that “hammam” comes from “ham,” meaning heat; “hamima” is hot water, “hamim” is sweat, and “istahamma” means a man sweated, which led to the term “hammamat” (Nuwar, 2000, p. 51).

2.2 .Terminologically:

In archaeological terminology, the hammam (Bathhouse) is a type of civil establishment designated for bathing and bodily cleanliness, frequented by people for bathing, and is of two types: public and private. These are places designated for washing, within rooms specially equipped to serve bathers (Maysun, 2012, p. 128). They contain halls with different functions, operating within a specific thermal system, serving a health function by focusing on personal hygiene and the use of hot water, and a religious function, as the existence of the hammam (Bathhouse) is linked to the rules of purification and ablution in Islam. In Algeria, the hammam (Bathhouse) developed significantly during the Ottoman period,

becoming a landmark that embodies local architectural art through its decorations and layout, and a social institution. The hammam (Bathhouse) is considered in the Islamic environment an important architectural element and a space closely connected to social and religious systems, playing a role in achieving purification before prayer and serving as a center where people meet and exchange news, in addition to its association with health and treatment through the use of steam and heat (Qahtan, 2017, pp. 228–229).

Historically, the hammam (Bathhouse) in the Islamic world became a public facility with a distinctive architectural character, relying in its internal design on halls with graduated temperatures: the cold hall, the warm hall, and the hot hall, in addition to other spaces meeting the health and social needs of individuals (Bourkaï, 1989, pp. 45–50). The hammam (Bathhouse) is considered one of the most important architectural landmarks in Algeria, embodying the characteristics of Islamic art, and has spread notably in various old Algerian cities, such as Constantine and Oran (Marçais, 1964, pp. 90–93).

3. Hammam al-Bey Mustafa al-Masrati:

3.1 .Location of the Hammam (Bathhouse):

Hammams (Bathhouses) were divided into two types: private hammams, found in the homes of the wealthy and used exclusively by the household, and public hammams for the general population, often built near mosques. The hammam (Bathhouse) under study is a public hammam, notable for its large size.

The city of Oran preserves three examples of Ottoman hammams: one attached to the palace of Bey Mustafa al-Masrati, which is the subject of this study; the second attached to the palace of Bey Muhammad al-Kabir; and the third is a public hammam. (Bathhouse)

Hammam al-Bey Mustafa al-Masrati is located in the northeastern part of the old city, beside the left bank of Wadi al-Rahi, which passes through the old city, precisely adjacent to the Kasbah and the Sidi al-Houari district. The hammam (Bathhouse) is part of the traditional urban fabric, taking advantage of its proximity to the most

vital resource—water. This was common in the planning of cities and hammams (Bathhouses), which were usually built near rivers to ensure easy access to water, demonstrating the intelligent adaptation of architecture to the city's natural conditions. This contributed to the continuity of this monument as one of the architectural landmarks of Oran. The bathhouse is situated approximately five meters below ground level, having been constructed beneath the floor level of the surrounding buildings. Access is gained via a descending staircase. To the west, it is bordered by buildings dating back to the French occupation period and by the Grand Mosque of Mohamed Ben Othman. To the south, it is surrounded by the offices of the Sidi El Houari Health Association, which, since the early 1990s, has held a license to use the spaces surrounding the Hammam of Bey Boushlaghem as its main headquarters, as part of a project aimed at reviving this historical monument.

Indeed, the adjacent buildings have been converted into a space that combines heritage and cultural activities, serving as an administrative headquarters and a venue for workshops on traditional crafts, awareness campaigns on health and environmental cleanliness, and various activities concerned with the protection of the architectural heritage of the Sidi El Houari district. The association's headquarters were sealed by local authorities in September 2022 due to administrative and legal disputes. To the north, there are annexes of the former French military hospital. Today, only the southern façade remains visible (Figure 1).

Figure N° 1. The southern façade of the Hammam of Bey Mustapha Boushlaghem



Source: Provided by the researcher

3.2 Builder and Founder of the Bathhouse:

There are two foundational inscriptions referenced by numerous sources, indicating that the builder of this bathhouse was Bey Mustapha Al-Masrati, the first of the beys to govern Oran during the period between 1708 and 1732. No sources specify the exact year of construction. He is Mustapha bin Youssef bin Mohamed bin Ishaq Al-Masrati, known as Boushlaghem (Ibn awda, n.d., p. 274) then Al-Houari. He served as Bey of Mazouna and Tlemcen, where he succeeded in unifying the Western Regency in 1098 AH / 1686 CE. He then transferred the seat of the Beylik from Mazouna and Tlemcen to the citadel, and subsequently to Mascara, which was chosen for its strategic location between Mazouna and Tlemcen. Upon besieging Oran, after receiving support from Mohamed Bekdash in 1705/1710 (Al-Jama'i, 2003, p. 50), he succeeded in capturing Oran on 26 Shawwal 1119 AH / 20 January 1708, transferring the seat of the Beylik from Mascara to Oran (Al-Jaza'iri, 1981, p. 253).

Bey Mustapha Al-Masrati, known as Boushlaghem, is considered one of the prominent figures who ruled the city of Oran during the Ottoman period and played a significant role in reclaiming and fortifying the city after the end of Spanish occupation. As for his nickname, it is likely related to his physical appearance, a common phenomenon in Algerian society, where nicknames were often derived from appearance or reputation. The era of Bey Mustapha Al-Masrati was marked by efforts to reinforce stability in Oran, particularly by fortifying it against external threats such as the Spanish.

After the Spanish took control of Oran in 1732, Bey Mustapha Boushlaghem moved to Mostaganem, where he transferred the seat of the Beylik and remained until his death in 1734, where a mausoleum was built for him in Al-Matmar (Al-Zayyani, 1979, p. 193). (Figure 2)

Figure N° 2. A drawing of the mausoleum of Bey Mustapha Boushlaghem, 1840



Source: Oran.patrimoine page

The Bey constructed numerous landmarks such as palaces, bathhouses, and mosques, but his most significant achievements are those in Oran, which he made the capital of the Western Beylik and where he resided for nearly a quarter of a century, including this bathhouse, the subject of the present study.

4. Field Study of the Bathhouse:

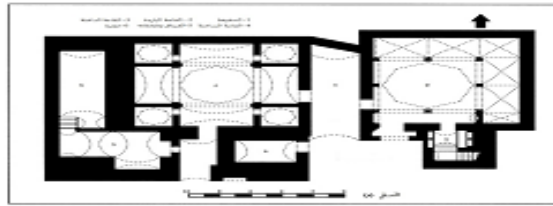
4.1 Exterior Description:

The bathhouse is located amidst buildings dating back to the colonial period. From the outside, it appears as a low architectural mass compared to the surrounding structures. A group of domes rises above the roof—these are the domes of the cold and hot halls—along with chimneys and openings for ventilation. The bathhouse is bordered to the south by a wall approximately 0.80 meters high. The façade of the bathhouse appears dilapidated and indistinct due to alterations made during the French occupation, including the addition of entrances and openings, particularly on the southern façade.

4.2 Interior Description:

Entry to the bathhouse is through the original main entrance located in the southeastern corner of the building. This entrance is connected to a staircase paved with limestone, consisting of eight steps descending downward. At the base, there is a rectangular vestibule measuring 3.30 meters in length and 3 meters in width, with a height of about 3.80 meters. On the right side of the vestibule, there is a stone bench for sitting, half a meter high and paved with dressed limestone, flanked by two arches. The ceiling is barrel-shaped with a rectangular opening for lighting. On the northern side of the bathhouse, there is an entrance leading to the cold hall.

Figure N° 3. A drawing of the mausoleum of Bey Mustapha Boushlaghem, 1840



Source: Ali Boutchicha

From the plan (Figure 3), it is observed that the bathhouse features indirect and angled entrances, so that one enters a rectangular vestibule with stone benches for sitting and waiting. The role of the vestibule (Figure 4) and the angled corridor was of great importance, as it shielded bathers from the view of passersby, prevented the passage of drafts harmful to health, and helped maintain the bathhouse's temperature (Muhammad, 2001, p. 295).

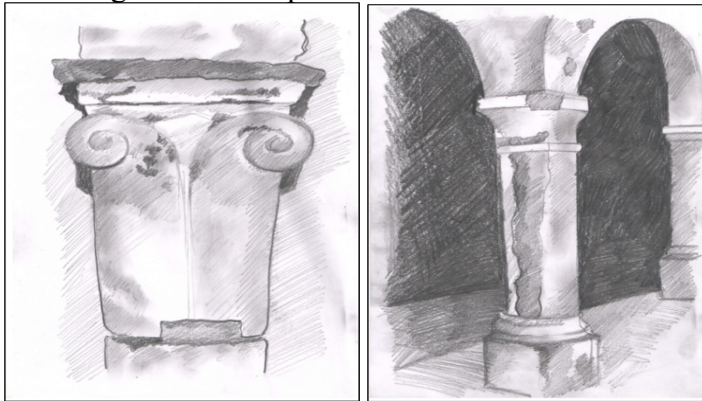
Figure N° 4. Vestibule of the Hammam of Bey Mustapha Al-Masrati



Source: Provided by the researcher

The bathhouse consists of three halls or rooms. First, the cold hall: it is nearly square in shape, with an area of approximately 100 square meters. At its center is a square courtyard with sides of 6 meters, surrounded on the northeast and south sides by three arcaded galleries, while the west side consists of a solid arcade. The arcades are supported by two pointed arches resting on massive cylindrical limestone columns (Figure 5).

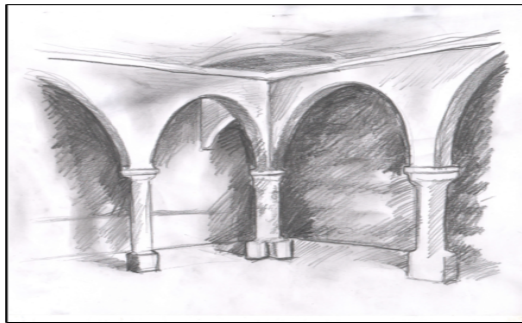
Figure N° 5. Capital of a vestibule column



Source: Provided by the researcher

Above the courtyard rises an octagonal dome with a diameter of 6 meters and a height of 7 meters, with rectangular openings in its sides for lighting, each topped by a circular arch. The galleries are covered with barrel vaults, and their floors are paved with stone slabs of varying sizes (Figure 6).

Figure N° 6. The cold room of the bathhouse

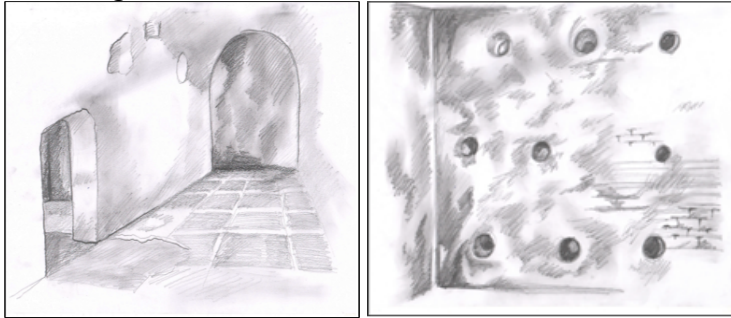


Source: Provided by the researcher

As for the warm hall: it is accessed through an entrance 2 meters high, located in the southwestern corner of the cold hall. Parallel to the western side of the cold hall is the warm hall, which is rectangular but irregular in shape, measuring approximately 11 meters by 3 meters, with a height reaching 3.5 meters. Its ceiling is barrel-vaulted, with openings for lighting, and there are niches for placing items such as

candles and lamps. The floor is paved with stone slabs of varying sizes, similar to the cold hall. It appears that this hall underwent many changes during the period of French colonial occupation (Figure 7).

Figure N° 7. The warm hall of the bathhouse



Source: Provided by the researcher

As for the hot hall, it also extends parallel to the warm hall, taking on a square shape. At its center is a square courtyard surrounded by spacious semi-circular arcaded galleries, supported by slightly projecting engaged piers from the walls. In each of the four corners of the room, there are four small chambers, likely intended as private alcoves, each surmounted by an octagonal dome with corner pendentives. The height of these domes exceeds 2 meters, with openings in their sides. Above the central courtyard rises an octagonal dome, similar to that of the cold hall, with a diameter of 4.5 meters and a height of more than 5 meters, featuring openings for lighting (Figure 7).

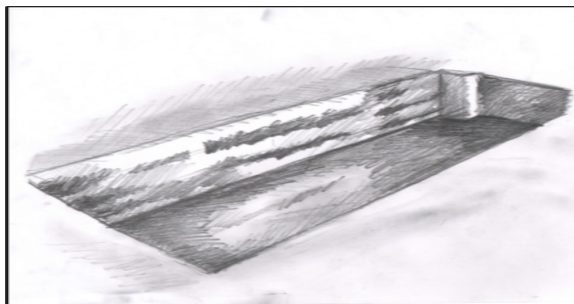
Figure N° 8. The dome from above the roof



Source: Provided by the researcher

As for the furnace (furnaf), it is located on the western side of the bathhouse, precisely behind the hot hall. This architectural element, known in Ottoman Islamic bathhouses as the “house of fire,” is set at a lower level than the rest of the bathhouse rooms. Its location adjacent to the hot room is intended to supply it with heat, which is distributed through channels within the walls and beneath the floor of the hot room to ensure warmth throughout the chambers. The furnace has a completely independent entrance, separate from the main entrance of the bathhouse, and ends with a chimney to vent the smoke produced by combustion. Access to the furnace of the Hammam of Bey Mustapha is through an irregularly shaped chamber. The furnace itself, which runs parallel to the hot room on its northern side, supplies it with both hot water and heat via dedicated channels. Entry is through a doorway 1.20 meters wide and 1.95 meters high. The furnace chamber is rectangular, measuring 11 meters in length, 3 meters in width, and 2.85 meters in height, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. It is set about 1.30 meters below the main level, and its walls contain niches for candles or lamps, as well as a passage for smoke extraction (Figure 9).

Figure N° 9. Smoke extraction passage in one of the chambers



Source: Provided by the researcher

The Hammam of Mustapha Al-Masrati is characterized by silent façades devoid of ornamentation and openings, except for the main façade, which contains the principal entrance.

Conclusion:

From this study, we conclude that the Hammam of the Bey possesses the architectural elements known and widespread in Algerian bathhouses during the Ottoman era, such as the three rooms—cold, hot, and warm—as well as the presence of a storeroom, furnace, and water cistern. We also observed the use of vaults, the presence of a fountain in the center of the cold room, the use of various ceramic tiles in the bathhouse spaces, and the existence of lighting openings.

The most distinctive feature of the Hammam of Bey Mustapha Al-Masrati is its construction below the ground level of the surrounding buildings, and it is classified among the public bathhouses notable for their large size compared to private baths.

Field data also confirm that the Hammam of Bey Mustapha Boushlaghem represents a clear model of Ottoman bathhouses in Algeria in terms of layout, building materials, and decoration. However, its preservation requires a carefully planned restoration strategy to integrate this architectural heritage into a developmental vision for the city of Oran.

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