

False Coinage in the Sixteenth Century Ottoman Empire

العملات المزيفة في الدولة العثمانية أثناء القرن السادس عشر

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ملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل طبيعة صنّاع العملات المزيفة الذين كانوا يعملون في الدولة العثمانية بمساعدة سجلات المراسيم الصادرة من الديوان الإمبراطوري في النصف الثاني من القرن السادس عشر؛ وبالأخص فترتي حكم سليمان القانوني وسليم الثاني. وقد تم القبض على شبكة كبيرة للعملات المزيفة في الإمبراطورية ومعاقبتها من قبل السلطات. يلقي تحليل المستندات المتعلقة بتزييف العملات الضوء على طبيعة هذه الجرائم والجوانب الاجتماعية لها.

Despite the severe penal laws there was an extended net of false coinage in the sixteenth century Ottoman Empire. The makers of false coins, who were operating not only in the urban but also in the rural nets, were also involved in other series of crimes and this turned out to be a social phenomenon in the Ottoman society. Although severe penalties were reserved for those who worked in these nets, extenuating circumstances (like minting coins outside the borders of the Ottoman Empire and bringing them in) were taken into consideration. This paper aims to analyze the nature of these outlaws with the help of the registers of outgoing decrees of Imperial Diwan (*Mühimme Defterleri*) belonging to the second half of the sixteenth century, in this case mainly the reigns of Suleiman the Magnificent and Selim II.

Before passing onto the social analysis of this geographically extended crime, we shall give a very brief information about the coins in circulation in this epoch. Starting with the first quarter of the 16th century, a trimetalism monetary system was put into use in the Ottoman Empire: golden, silver and copper coins.¹ Golden sikkes were used by the citizens of the empire belonging to upper social and

economic classes like merchants and bureaucrats as a means of exchange, unit of account and making wealth. Silver *akçes*, which were the backbone of the Ottoman monetary system were majorly used as a means of exchange, and the copper coins served in lesser matters and exchanges.²

Foreign coins also circulated within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. As the Ottoman *akçe* was of a higher carat, it was always preferred and illegally trafficked to foreign territories.³ The state took precautions to supervise the circulation of coins within the Empire as the outlaws in this realm never gave up. Especially during the periods of crises, some cunning citizens illegally made heavy coins by melting *yeğni akçes* (light *akçes*) and tried to export them.

When the documents of numismatic importance in the Ottoman Archives are altogether analyzed, the major consequence that will be drawn is the neatness and interest of the State in controlling and preventing these common illegal acts of counterfeit. Likewise, the severity of the punishments apparently demonstrate the Sultan's will to manipulate this problematic issue and bring it to an end. The harsh and the severe nature of the punishments go hand in hand with the

attention and the care that the sultan shows in the matters of arrests. The regulations in these issues are of a considerable interest.

As mentioned above, *Mühimme defterleri* (registers of important events) are one of the major sources concerning the false coinage in the Ottoman Empire. The registers belonging to the second half of the sixteenth century reveal the noteworthy details about the individual and collective act of false coinage within the borders of the sultan's empire. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the age of Suleiman that has traditionally been considered an age of splendor sealed with victories, Pax-Ottomana, was also witness to different types and categories of crimes like all reigns and sultanates. The sultanate of Selim II, less bright successor of Suleiman was not an exception either.

The main conclusion that can possibly be drawn from a general analysis of the mentioned documents is that counterfeit was mainly practiced in the periferies of the Empire, especially in the Balkan territories far from the imperial center, which means also far from the government's grip. The excess of silver in the Balkan provinces seems to be the major reason for this geographical preference. Likewise, counterfeit was witnessed in the the south-east territories of the Empire close to Anatolia which was the border with the territories of the Safavids. The reason was obvious as well: Distance from the center.

The Sultan was well aware that the further the mints were constructed from the center, the more difficult it would be to maintain them under the state control. The counterfeit acts were accumulated in the remotest parts of the empire. In a *hüküm* (imperial decree) dated 10 July 1572, the sultan refuses the idea of building a mint in Modak claiming that 'even the mints in Istanbul and Edirne were difficult to keep under control, so it would be impossible to keep under control a mint constructed in such a remote

place'. The following document, dated 27 March 1573, reveals interesting information about the places of false coinage. According to this imperial letter of the sultan, makers of false coins no more practiced this in their own houses, but preferred remote and isolated places like mountains and very steep points. This made it impossible for the authorities to prove their crimes.⁴

As to the control and inspection of the mints within the borders of the Empire, there is a notable number of documents in which the details of the nature of the supervision of coinage are given. The common issues declared in these documents show how frequently the sultan ordered the authorities to 'inspect the mints'. The way he suggests is an unexpected visit to these mints.⁵

A general look upon these registers will lead to the point that the counterfeit practiced in this period was quite varied. We shall see the different examples of manufacturing of false coins in the examples to follow.

Maybe the most detailed one is the imperial letter of Suleiman sent in 1565 addressed to the bey and the *kadıs* of the *sancak* of Alacahisar.⁶ The fact that a copy of the same letter was posted to the beys and the *kadıs* of Semendire, Skopje, Köstendil, Thessalonica, Siroz, İzvornik, Vidin and Sofia reveals the extension of this illegal act. The irritated tone of the Sultan is clear. He makes known how 'bazı kallablar' (some makers of false coins) appeared and minted coins of copper and lead, and majority of the *akçes* that ended up in Hazine-i Amire (the imperial treasury) were discovered to be false. Süleyman ordered that these makers of false coins were 'secretly chased' 'hufyeten yoklanıp' and brought to the authorities. His diligence in the matter is outstanding. He ordered to the bey and the *kadıs* of Alacahisar that these *kalpazans* (makers of false coins) were chained and the false coins that they minted were sealed. He also complains that when the mentioned makers of

false coins were arrested, they asked to the authorities to 'prove' their crimes. As there was no proof, they were set free. In this case, the sultan came up with two options: Either they would not let these criminals commit this crime within the borders of the empire, or they would arrest them with all the instruments of false coinage and would not let anyone guard and protect them. The *kadis* were obliged by the Sultan to 'pay attention and diligence to discover and prove their crime, register them and send them to the Sublime Porte. The controlling of the false coinage was one of the major duties and responsibilities of the *kadi*. He orders them to take 'hüsn-ü tedbir' (good precautions) to immobilize these mischief-makers and corrupters. His following words draw attention to the significance of the matter, at least according to the sultan: 'If any false coins are to circulate in your provinces or are to be submitted to my Sublime Porte, your excuses will never be accepted. In this case, not only your official duties will be brought to an end, but also you will be subject to various reprimands and punishments. On the other hand, he underlines that 'bi-günah' (innocent) citizens should not be subject to any injustice and torture.

On the 22nd of the same month, the sultan sent another letter to the bey of Alacahisar and the *kadis* of the nearby towns and villages.⁷ At first glance, the context looks quite repetitive, yet, the second half of the letter brings to light a significant social aspect. It is seen through the words of the sultan that some citizens secretly left false *akçes* and golden coins in the houses of the people for whom they felt hatred, as a means of revenge and they told the authorities that these people possessed these illegal coins. The Sultan, as a justice-deliverer was well aware of the shortcomings of the justice system and he persistently warned the *kadis* to whom he addressed that these innocent people should not be arrested though the false coins were discovered in their own houses

unless the Muslims bore witnesses to their 'goodness' (innocence). The rest of the letter has a similar context with the previous one. This time, in addition to the provinces of Rumeli, Alexandria appeared in the list of provinces to which a copy of the letter had to be sent to its *kadi*.

The *mühimme* registers give another interesting example from the extended act of false coinage during the reign of Selim II.⁸ According to one document, the *sahib-i ayar* (the official in charge of the control of the carat of the precious metal in the mint) of the Canca mine in Gümüşhane, from which valuable metals were mined and operated either as custody or as land tenure from time to time, was said to mint false *akçes*. After an inspection, it was brought to daylight that a certain Mustafa from the town of Erzurum was caught with Canka *akçes*, *sultânî altun*, *pâre* and *şâhî sikkes* as well as instruments of false coinage. When he was asked to confess, he also gave the names of his two other accomplices, one of whom was the *Kullar Ağası* of Hasan Kalesi. After the confiscation of all false coins and devices which were found in his dwelling and the transfer of all these to the Sublime Porte, his title as 'Ağa' was taken back and he was officially substituted by a certain Mehmet. The case is noteworthy when analysed as a social case. One wonders why any one gives away his accomplice before the authorities? The answer is to be found in the psychology more than in law. He must probably have psychologically felt safe to share his crime, hoping to diminish the punishment as it could now be considered a collective act.

A *mühimme* register dated 15 August 1567 which is the imperial letter of Selim II addressed to the *kadi* of Balyabadra shows a similar social case and reveals how two Jews named Şemoyıl Same and Avraham Bembole come to the 'Meclis-i şer' and confess that another Jew called Kufle has uttered exactly these words: 'I have a hundred thousand false

akçes.⁹ Selim's imperial order is the imprisonment of the Jew. The denunciation is a very repetitive theme in these similar documents. Likewise Jews appear in these documents as often as the gypsies. A letter of the Sultan addressed to the *kadı* of Bursa sealed on the same month offers us another interesting case of false coinage.⁹ This time a Jewish banker called Avraham was accused of collecting silver and golden coins from the citizens and giving them false *akçes* in return.

When *sahib-i ayar* is concerned, we shall mention another case of false coinage that was registered in the second half of the 16th century. In the year 1564, when the majority of the golden and silver coins which were minted in the mint of Skopje were proved to be false, the *sahib-i ayar* of the mint was sent to the Sublime Porte to be punished. In 1565, under the supervision of the *sahib-i ayar* of the mint in Belgrad *akçes* of low carats were minted. In the same way, he was summoned to the Porte under military control.¹⁰

There is a notable number of cases of the abuse of official posts, as was the case with *sahib-i ayars*. A document dated 10 March 1568 shows how the *kadı* of Alâiye was arrested after an inspection made in his house where a mold of false coins with 48 spaces and some silver coins were found.¹¹ The punishment that he had to bear was the amputation of one of his hands, according to the Shariah (Islamic Law).

Another interesting characteristic of these registers is the way they shed a light on the social profile of the Ottoman citizens who are indulged in this kind of illegal affairs. In this respect, the imperial letter sent to the *kadıs* of all towns of Rumeli is a noteworthy example. The letter reveals how a *sipahi* called Mustafa complained before the authorities that the gypsies mounted horses (though they were not legally allowed to do so), killed men and committed theft and false coinage.¹² According to witnesses, these gypsies wandered in Memâlik-i Mahrûse with 'âlât-ı harb' (literally devices of war, guns) and they

cheated the 'kurâ halkı' (the public) with false *akçes* and they took their 'rızk'. The sultan ordered the *kadıs* of Rumeli to collaborate in the act of finding these gypsies and arresting them.

Gypsies often appear in these documents as false coin producers. In a register dated 2 March 1566 a goldsmith gypsy called Mustafa was given away by a certain Yuvanoğlu Vuk.¹³ In another register, it is made known that a gypsy called Hayrettin Reis, interestingly enough bearing the same name with the admiral of the Sultan who died in 1546, was arrested and died immediately after the act and his tools were brought to the Ottoman capital city.¹⁴

An imperial letter sealed in 1568 and addressed to the bey of Hersek and the *kadı* of İmoçka shows how a *zimmi* (Christian or Jew) whose name is not mentioned in the document was expelled from the Christian territories and came to settle in a port called Makarska in the town of Premorye and collaborated with the authorities of the port in illegal acts.¹⁵ He was claimed to bring false *akçe* and *kuruş* from dar-ul harb (outside the borders of the Ottoman Empire where war was considered just) and distributed it within the Ottoman territories. He was also accused of selling animals and wood to the "küffar" (infidels). The Sultan's order was to imprison him. He was told to be from 'Ehl-i fesad' (*i.e.* corrupt).

An imperial letter dated 9 February 1568 sheds light on the similar activities of false coinage.¹⁶ In the town of Zağra Eskisi, a village called Danişmendler a certain Evhad Danişmend and his accomplice Aksak Danişmend, obviously his close relative, disappeared and they left behind the tools that they used for false coinage. The sultan's order to the *kadıs* of Filibe and Zağra Eskisi to find the mentioned tools, the 'sûret-i sicil' and the clothes of these makers of false coins is noteworthy.

Even a more interesting case was that of a certain Halil bin Hacı Fakih. As it was obviously seen from

his name, he was a son of a pilgrim. He was informed to the Porte for usurping public's money (*akçes*) by bringing suits against them with false witnesses. To give an example, he claimed to a certain Hâcî Mehmed 'I lent you a hundred golden *sikke*', and Hâcî Mehmed was unable to prove his innocence. Apart from this interesting case of usurping money, when his house was inspected, devices of false coinage were found. (*akça sikkesi ve çekük ü körük*). The case is interesting not only for the creative way that this Halil found for making money thanks to false witnesses, but also his social prestige that he possessed through his father's title as Pilgrim. This, once more, shows us that the false coinage at this era was not reserved for the marginal classes and was practiced by an extended number of social classes.

The *hüküm* dated 21 November 1573 offers a noteworthy case for those who are interested in gender studies. In this imperial letter addressed to the bey of Tırhala and *kadı* of Fener, the sultan orders the amputation of the hands of two women who were proved to have been manufacturing false coins. Interestingly enough, their accomplice, who was a *zimmi* called Parski was ordered to be executed.¹⁷ The other accomplices were to be punished as galley slaves.

There is also a group of letters concerning the banning of the transfer of silver, copper and other precious metals especially to the east of the Empire, confines with the Safavid lands. In a *hüküm* (1565) to the Beylerbeyi of Erzurum sealed by the sultan, it is revealed that some merchants were informed to have transferred copper and 'similar (metals)' to the Iranian territories. The sultan prohibits the transfer similar metals from the Ottoman territories to foreign countries.¹⁸ Likewise, in a letter sent in the same year to the Beylerbeyi of San'a, he prohibited the transfer of silver to India and told him to control such events.¹⁹

Another example to the practice of false coinage in the remotest periferies of the Empire is a *hüküm*

dated 23 May 1576 in which the sultan addresses the Bey of Yemen and orders him to pay a special attention to prevent the minting of *akçe* with lower carats than the official one.²⁰ In another document of the year 1573, it is registered how the *sahib-i ayar* of the mint of Tripoli was imprisoned as he minted coins of the carat which was previously used.²¹

Apart from the types of punishment cited above like the capital punishment, working as a galley slave, amputation of a hand and dismissal, we should mention two more. Makers of false coins were sometimes punished with exile and *kalebentlik*, which was more severe than exile and meant exile prisoned in a castle.²² There were times when makers of false coins were subject to public humiliation, which was also reserved for the false witnesses.²³

Let us close our article with an interesting document dated 21 January 1577. The document in question is the sultan's imperial letter addressed to the *kadı* of Niğbolu. He informs him that a *zimmi* called İstani submitted a petition in which he relates how he was told in a divine revelation through his dream the place of a buried treasure and how he got to this treasure by the help of a friend caled Gypsy Memi (a *şesteçi*: player of *şeşte*, a six-stringed lute) . Memi minted *kuruşes* with what they found in the treasure, and did not give his share to İstani, after which he had to declare this to the authorities.²⁴

Notes:

- 1 E. Erdem, 'Osmanlı para sistemi ve taşış politikası: Dönemsel bir analiz', *Bankacılar Dergisi* 56 (İstanbul, 2006), 13
- 2 Erdem, *Bankacılar Dergisi* 56, 13.
- 3 Erdem, *Bankacılar Dergisi* 56, 13.
- 4 C. Ender, *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Osmanlı Arşivi'ndeki nümismatik ile ilgili belgeler kataloğu: Türk Nümismatik Derneği Yayınları* (İstanbul, 1996), 5.
- 5 Devlet, *Osmanlı Arşivi'ndeki nümismatik*, 6.
- 6 6 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri, (972/1564–1565), Y. Sarianny, *T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı* (Ankara, 1995), 94-95.

- 7 Sarianny, *T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü*, 297-298.
- 8 12 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri, (978-979/ 1570-1572), Sarianny, *T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü*, 134.
- 9 12 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri, (978-979/1570-1572), Sarianny, *T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü*, 243.
- 10 Ender, *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Osmanlı*, 2.
- 11 Ender, *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Osmanlı*, 3.
- 12 7 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri, (975-976/1567-1569), Sarianny, *T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü*, 110.
- 13 Ender, *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Osmanlı*, 2.
- 14 Ender, *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Osmanlı*, 2.
- 15 7 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri, Devlet Arşivleri, *Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı*, 226.
- 16 Sarianny, *T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü*, 403.
- 17 Ender, *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Osmanlı*, 5.
- 18 Ender, *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Osmanlı*, 3.
- 19 Ender, *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Osmanlı*, 3.
- 20 Ender, *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Osmanlı*, 3.
- 21 Ender, *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Osmanlı*, 4.
- 22 Abdullah Acehan, 'Osmanlı Devleti'nin sürgün politikası ve sürgün yerleri', *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* (1/5, 2008), 16.
- 23 'Ü.Ty. 1807, Vrk. 6/a; Molla Hüsrev II/74 vd.; Udeh, I/702-705, cit. Ahmet Akgündüz, 'Osmanlı Devleti'nde fırıncılar yakıldı mı?'
- 24 Ender, *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Osmanlı*, 7.