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RESEARCH ARTICLE 

The wealth of Tunisians in the city of Algiers during the ottoman period in light of archival documents

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Abstract
During the Ottoman period, the city of Algiers experienced a notable influx of Tunisians who settled in the area and developed diverse forms of interaction with local Algerian communities. They actively participated in various economic sectors, which enabled them to accumulate considerable wealth. This study seeks to explore the nature of this wealth as recorded in selected documents preserved in the Algerian National Archives. The assets identified include both tangible properties and financial holdings. The research adopts a historical approach, employing analytical tools to examine and interpret archival data and incorporate it into the central themes of the study. The findings yield several key conclusions, most notably: - Wealth played a crucial role in enabling many Tunisians to achieve elevated social status within Algerian society, thereby granting them access to influential positions within the Ottoman Regency.

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Introduction:

Historical sources on Algeria during the Ottoman period include both official and unofficial records. The Ottoman administration played a key role in documenting the contributions of Tunisians to the economic life of Algiers by recording their daily transactions with various segments of the local population. These interactions were systematically registered in formal documents issued by different administrative bodies. Historians regard such records as among the most valuable sources for reconstructing Algeria's modern history.

Close social and economic ties between the Algerian and Tunisian regencies facilitated the settlement of many Tunisians in Algiers, where they became actively involved in commerce and other economic pursuits. These activities enabled them to accumulate significant wealth, which, in turn, allowed many to attain elevated social status and occupy prominent positions within Algerian society. The wealth they amassed was carefully documented in official records, primarily intended to safeguard public rights and legal entitlements.

This context gives rise to the central research question: What were the main forms of wealth accumulated by Tunisians in the city of Algiers?

1. Study Sample

The study sample comprised nine archival boxes from the Sharia Court records, four boxes from the Baylik Treasury archives (The Baylik Registers were official Ottoman record books consisting of approximately 386 preserved volumes stored in 36 archival boxes. These registers documented a wide range of social, economic, and commercial affairs, including property transactions and legal cases) (Matallah, 2024, p. 129), and two from the Bait al-Mal (Public Treasury), (The Bait al-Māl Records comprised about 64 registers housed in 11 boxes. These records primarily listed the estates of individuals who died without legal heirs, including both movable and immovable assets) (Matallah, 2024, p. 129) all preserved in the Algerian National Archives. Additionally, documents from Collection 3203 at the National Library of Algeria were also consulted.

The table below presents a summary of the archival sources included in the study sample:

Table n° 1 :Summary Of The Archival Sources

Source	Box Numbers
Sharia Court Records	6/1, 6/2, 09/1, 18/1, 20/1, 26/1, 27/1, 33, 74-75
Baylik Treasury Records	20, 22, 23, 33
Bait al-Mal Records	01, 03
Collection 3203 Documents	(unspecified individual file numbers)

the source :prepared by the researcher

2. Land and Agricultural Holdings

A significant number of Tunisians residing in the city of Algiers owned land, acquired through various means such as purchase and inheritance. Among these landowners was 'Ali al-Qafṣī, who inherited an orchard from his father, 'Umar al-Qafṣī, located in the agricultural outskirts of Algiers. The waqf deed related to this orchard explicitly indicates that he benefited from its produce (Shari'a Court Records, File 27/1, Dossier 03, p. 70). Another individual, 'Ali al-Tūnisī, owned a parcel of agricultural land in the Fahs al-'Anāṣir area (National Library of Algeria Records, Collection 3203, p. 21). Likewise, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Ali was recorded as owning a garden within the city (Ibn Abī Ḏiyāf, 2016, p. 146).

Land ownership was not limited to individuals; it could also be held collectively—a practice recognized under Ottoman law in Algeria. For instance, Aḥmad al-Qafṣī co-owned a farm and an additional tract of land, referred to in the document as a *ruq'a*, along with two other individuals, as evidenced by a partnership contract dated mid-Jumādā al-Awwal 1213 AH / 1798 CE (Shari'a Court Records, File 20/1, Dossier 03, p. 27).

Importantly, land ownership was not restricted to men. Archival records confirm that Tunisian women also possessed property. A prominent example is Nafīsa bint al-Ḥājj al-Tūnisī, who owned land on the outskirts of Algiers (Shari'a Court Records, File 9/1, Dossier 2, p. 40).

3. Houses and Residential Properties

The ownership of residential properties by Tunisian individuals in Algiers varied in terms of shareholding. Some owned entire houses, while others held fractional shares—such as one-quarter or one-eighth—or co-owned a property jointly with other individuals (Shari'a Court Records, File 33, Dossier 03, p. 46). For example, Muḥammad al-Tūnisī owned a house which he later sold to a Jewish resident, Hūda ibn al-Dhimmī Hārūn, for twenty-three and a half dinars, paid entirely in Ottoman gold currency (*sultani*). Similarly, Muḥammad al-Ṭāṭahī al-Tūnisī purchased a house from al-Ḥājj Qaddūr al-Mustaghānamī for 540 riyals in the year 1244 AH (Shari'a Court Records, Files 74-75,

Dossier 12, p. 51). Another case is that of 'Umar al-Jarbi, who sold a house located in the Būfāris alley of Algiers to 'Alī Āghā al-Šabāyhiyya for 750 gold dinars (Shari'a Court Records, File 06/02, Dossier 03, p. 1).

'Alī al-Jarbī ibn Muḥammad Bāṣūm also engaged in real estate acquisition, purchasing property from Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf for eighty sultani gold dinars (Shari'a Court Records, File 06/02, Dossier 03, p. 1). In addition, he acquired Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf's share in a house located on Ibn Fāris Alley (Shari'a Court Records, File 6/1, Dossier 03, p. 1). These real estate transactions serve as clear evidence of the wealth amassed by Tunisian individuals in the city of Algiers—particularly given the high value of urban property, which often exceeded the means of the average inhabitant. However, not all property acquisitions were driven by the pursuit of personal wealth. Some individuals purchased property with the intention of dedicating it as *waqf* (charitable endowment). For instance, al-Ḥājj al-Jarbī endowed his house to benefit the poor of the Two Holy Sanctuaries (Mecca and Medina) (Baylik Records Film 19, File 22, p. 137), while 'Alī al-Jarbī dedicated his property to support the poor of Algiers, students, and captives (Baylik Records Film 19, File 22, p. 138).

Ownership of real estate by Tunisian individuals in Algiers was not limited to entire houses; in some cases, they acquired specific parts of a property, such as individual floors. For example, a document from the Baylik archives records that al-Šādiq al-Sharīf al-Qafṣī owned an upper floor valued at twenty-one and a half ryals (Baylik Records Film 19, File 22, p. 158).

Tunisian individuals also frequently co-owned properties with their spouses. In 1177 AH / 1762 CE (Shari'a Court Records, File 06/02, Dossier 03, p. 1), for instance, 'Alī al-Jarbī jointly owned a house on Ibn Fāris Alley in Algiers with his wife, Nafūsa bint Muḥammad Khūja. Likewise, the couple al-Faqīh Aḥmad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Jarbī and Jannāt bint al-Ḥājj Aḥmad ibn Ma'mar co-owned a house located above the Mu'allaq Mosque in the Ḥūma of Kūshat al-Māniṣh (Shari'a Court Records, File 26/1, Dossier 03, p. 8). Such arrangements of joint ownership may have been motivated by a desire—on the part of the wife or her family—to ensure residential security in the event of marital dissolution, whether through divorce or widowhood. Alternatively, they may have been prompted by precautionary concerns over potential abandonment or betrayal by the husband. This sentiment, rooted in a need for stability, continues to resonate in many families even today.

4. Land Ownership

Archival documents confirm that several Tunisian individuals owned land in the city of Algiers. These properties were referred to in the records using terms such as *janna* (garden), *ard* (land), *bustān* (orchard), or *ruq'a* (plot), depending on the nature of the property and the context of the transaction—whether sale, purchase, or inheritance. For instance, 'Umar al-Jarbī owned a garden located outside Bab al-Jadīd, which he sold to 'Alī Khūja, an official responsible for forest resources at Bab al-Jazīrah. The property, described in the deed as a *janna*, was sold for 300 dinars, of which 50 were paid in sultani gold (Shari'a Court Records, File 18/1, Dossier 02, p. 8). Similarly, 'Umar al-Qafṣī held a share in a garden situated on the outskirts of the city (*fahṣ al-madīna*). This (Shari'a Court Records, File 27/1, Dossier 03, p. 70) share later passed to his son, who reclaimed ownership and subsequently endowed the property as a *waqf* in the year 1181 AH / 1766 CE (National Library of Algeria Records, Collection 3203, p. 4).

'Alī al-Tūnisī also owned a farm in the Fahṣ al-'Anāṣir area of Algiers, which he had purchased from Muḥammad al-Injashārī. Upon his death (National Library of Algeria Records, Collection 3203, p. 21), ownership of the land passed to his two sons, Muḥammad and Ḥasan, as well as his two daughters, Āmina and 'Ā'isha (National Library of Algeria Records, Collection 3203, p. 32). Notably, Muḥammad and Ḥasan did not inherit only their father's *janna* (garden); they also owned an adjacent farm in the same Fahṣ al-'Anāṣir area, indicating an expansion of the family's landholdings in the city.

Land partnerships between Tunisians and other individuals were not limited to residential property but extended to agricultural land as well. One recorded example involves Maḥmūd Aḥmad al-Qafṣī, who co-owned land on the outskirts of Algiers with Maḥmūd al-Injashārī al-Qāwūqī. Although the partnership was documented in a notarized contract, neither the exact location of the land nor the intended purpose behind its acquisition was specified in the document (Shari'a Court Records, File 20/1, Dossier 03, p. 27).

5. Shops and Commercial Properties

Records from the Baylik and Bait al-Mal archives, preserved in the Algerian National Archives, (Baylik Records, Film 35, File 33, p. 318) document the ownership and rental of shops (*ḥawānīt*) by Tunisian individuals in the city of Algiers. These commercial spaces were used for various types of trade, whether held in full (Bayt al-Baylik Records Film 16, File 20, p. 111) ownership or leased under rental agreements. Tunisians operated as both temporary and permanent merchants in these establishments. For example, in 1200 AH / 1785 CE, Khalil ibn Muḥammad al-Tūnisī rented a shop—referred to in the document as a *ḥānūt*—to which he relocated at the beginning of Rabi‘ al-Awwal that year (Baylik Records, Film 35, File 33, p. 316). These archival records not only confirm the legal property rights of Tunisian merchants but also illustrate the continuity of commercial activity within families, suggesting that trade was often passed down through generations and maintained through diverse business ventures across different quarters of the city (Bayt al-Mal Records, Film 02, File 03, p. 7).

In 1199 AH / 1786 CE, Muḥammad ibn al-Tūnisī rented a shop that was later endowed by Pasha Muḥammad ibn ‘Uthmān as a *waqf* for charitable purposes (*sabīl al-khayrāt*) (Baylik Records, Film 35, File 33, p. 316). Similarly, al-Hājj al-Tūnisī leased a shop in the Swiqa district near Bab al-Wādī. However, due to his prolonged absence, Baylik authorities repossessed the property in 1215 AH / 1799 CE (Bayt al-Baylik Records Film 16, File 20, p. 111).

The study sample not only identified the types of commercial premises that Tunisians either owned or rented in Algiers but also determined their locations, which were frequently situated near prominent neighborhoods—such as Hūmat al-Jarāba, also known as Sūq al-Jarāba. This market was classified by ‘Abd Allāh al-Shuwayhid as one of the city’s principal centers for foodstuffs and general merchandise (Chouihid, 2012, p. 29). Within this marketplace, the Jarāba community was represented by an appointed official, the *amīn*, who was responsible for collecting annual taxes and serving as an intermediary between merchants and municipal authorities (Shaler, 1982, p. 82).

Tunisian individuals practiced a range of crafts within this commercial environment. Among these was the trade of saddle-making (*ṣinā‘at al-sarājāt*). A notable figure in this craft was ‘Umar al-Murābiṭ al-Qayrawānī, who died in 1222 AH / 1807 CE. He was a skilled saddle-maker in Algiers and had previously served the family of Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī during their period of refuge in Algeria (Ibn Abī Diyāf, 2016, p. 47).

6. Other Forms of Wealth

Estate records preserved in the *Bayt al-Māl* archives document additional categories of property held by Tunisian individuals in the city of Algiers. These include the recorded belongings of Qāsim al-Tūnisī, Muḥammad al-Tūnisī, Husayn al-Tūnisī, and al-Ṭayyib al-Wislātī (Bayt al-Mal Records, Film 01, File 01, pp. 1-2). Their assets primarily consisted of household utensils used for cooking, along with a modest amount of furniture—though the proportion of kitchenware was notably higher. These inventories also included food supplies such as wheat, coffee, couscous, and clarified butter (*sāmū*), reflecting the integration of domestic and subsistence items into their material wealth (Bayt al-Mal Records, Film 01, File 01, p. 2).

7. Monetary Wealth

While the study sample did not yield extensive data regarding the monetary wealth of Tunisian individuals, a few cases were documented. One such case is that of ‘Alī al-Tūnisī, a resident of the Bāhās quarter in Algiers, whose estate was valued at 93 riyals (Bayt al-Mal Records, Film 01, File 01, p. 2). Another example is Muḥammad al-Tūnisī, a tailor, who left behind a respectable sum at the time of his death in 1201 AH / 1785 CE (Bayt al-Mal Records, Film 01, File 01, p. 2). Similarly, the wife of Ḥasan al-Tūnisī—also a tailor—was reported to have left behind a comparable amount upon her death in 1205 AH / 1789 CE (Bayt al-Mal Records, Film 01, File 01, p. 2).

Conclusion

In concluding our study, we summarize our findings as follows:

- The Ottoman administrative documents that recorded the transactions and activities of Tunisian individuals in the city of Algiers are varied in nature. As primary historical sources, they provide invaluable material for scholars investigating the social, economic, and administrative dynamics of Algerian society during the Ottoman era.
- While the wealth accumulated by Tunisians in Algiers may seem modest by contemporary standards, it held considerable significance within its historical context. Whether manifested in tangible assets or monetary forms, this wealth contributed directly to an individual’s social position and influence within the community.

- Wealth played a decisive role in enabling many Tunisians to rise to prominent social statuses in Algerian society. This upward mobility, in turn, facilitated their access to influential administrative and political positions within the Ottoman Regency.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on historical and archival sources preserved in public institutions, including the Algerian National Archives and the National Library of Algeria. All documents consulted are officially accessible records, and no human participants, personal interviews, surveys, or sensitive personal data were involved in the research process. The research was conducted in full compliance with academic integrity principles, respecting the provenance, authenticity, and contextual integrity of archival materials. Proper citation and documentation practices were strictly followed to ensure transparency, verifiability, and scholarly rigor. As the study relies solely on historical documents, ethical approval was not required.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was carried out independently, and no financial, institutional, or personal relationships influenced the research design, data interpretation, or conclusions.

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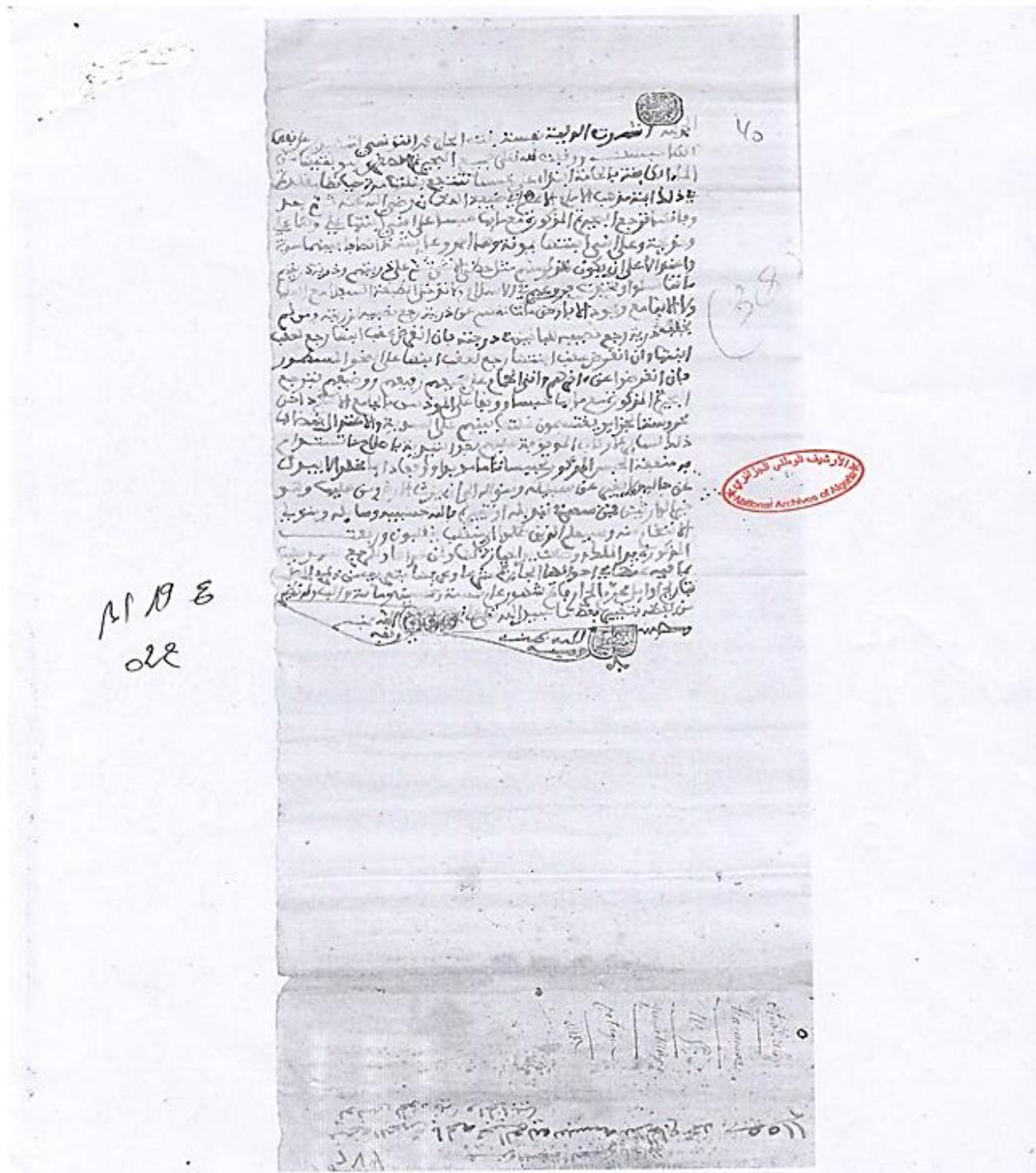
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I.Appendices :

Appendix No. 02: Land Ownership Deed of Mrs. Aisha bint Muhammad al-Tunisi.

National Library of Algeria Records, Collection 3203, Folio 33

Appendix No. 02: Waqf Deed of Mrs. Nafisa bint al-Hajj Muhammad al-Tunisi in al-Hamma – Algiers



Shari'a Court Records, File 19/1, Dossier 02, Folio 40, N.A.R.