

HISTORY OF THE MINT OF PORTO

Porto is a city located on the borders of the river Douro. It has always been a very important city in Portugal for being a city with lots of trade.

In the Middle Ages it was divided in two: the higher part and the lower part. On the higher part the ruler was the bishop and every monument belonging to the Church were located there: the Cathedral and the Bishop Palace.

On the lower part, by the river the trade part developed naturally. And it was also here that the Customs (14th century) and the Mint were built. This was the location of the services of the King.

Thus we find a city divided between the royal and the ecclesiastic power, and this was a very real division because there have been enormous conflicts between the two powers in the 13th and 14th century.

The strength of the royal power was visible in the buildings we find in this part of the city in the 14th century.

Here settled as mentioned:

- * the Customs
- * the Mint
- * the Stock Exchange
- * the Houses where the Mint officials lived
- * the notaries
- * the Houses of the Mint Master and the Treasurer
- * the courthouse

The Mint was so important that its officers and coiners had a privileged professional and social status. They were so privileged that they lived in a special block.

We know a lot about the Mint at that time, including the names of many officers and coiners. Some of the best-known families had surnames such as: Resende, Souto, Eiras, Resende, Aveledas, Caminha, etc.

The position of Mint Master was very honourable and they were always appointed by the king. This was an hereditary position, many times passing from father to son. This is what happened to Pêro Vaz de Caminha.

People working at the Mint had not only a high social status, but were also very learned and had to be very reliable.

The Mint was located very close to the Customs and one of its doors was placed in line with the Customs, so that the precious metals could enter directly from the Customs to the Mint

The Customs was composed of a building where the central patio separated two towers. On the back there was the Mint.

Also here the workshops and offices would lead to a central patio. All the minting process would develop here.

The first notice we have about the Mint of Porto dates from 1370, it is a document by D. Fernando where the king grants privileges to the Mint officers. King D. João I in 1391 later confirms this royal order or rule.

From this document we may understand very well the organisation of the interior of the Mint. The coining process required a large quantity of highly skilled personnel. In 1498 there were 16 officers and 104 coiners in Porto. Always supervised by the Master of Scale, the Coin Scribes and the Treasurer would melt the metals, produce the ingus or narrow stripes, hammer the metal sheets, cut and whiten the metal disks, open the coin dies and finally minted the coins. Always controlled and supervised. Whenever an operation would start everything was entered into the books and all the metal was weighed.

Safety, vigilance and quality control were absolutely indispensable.

This process and proceedings are not exclusive to the Mint of Porto. They are the same in every Mint in Portugal and in other European countries.

Why were coins mint?

Mainly to pay expenses arising from the needs originated by the war.

Where did the metals come from?

During the big 16th century, or better, between 1480 and 1620:

- Gold

Main stocking sources:

- Western coast of Africa - S. Jorge da Mina
- Eastern coast of Africa (Monomotapa) – Sofala and Quiloa
- Island of Samatra (Indonesia) – Malaca

- Silver and Copper

- Until 1540 – Germany , Hungary and Bohemia
- After 1540: Indias of Castille

Minting processes

The Mint of Porto issued coins in two phases:

- The first period between 1369 and 1590.
- The second from 1688 to 1721.

During the first period the minting process was exclusively manual.

During the second period, the process develops from manual to mechanic.

Mechanisation:

New technology appears in the 17th century. The minting process changes from manual to mechanic. This means that the former process, where the hammer was used to strike the metal thus defining the thickness of the coin, is abandoned.

In 1678, the new technology – mechanisation – settled. At that time, the narrow stripes started being introduced in a machine that presses them, causing the thickness to be automatically defined.

Mechanisation leads to deep changes, both in the process of minting and in the organisation of the interior of the Mints. Lisbon and Porto adopted the mechanisation.

The Mint of Porto reopens in 1688 and starts using the new technology that also includes machines to produce the milled edges.

The updating of the minting process is originated not only by the large quantities of gold that came from Brazil at that time, but also because it is a process that occurs at the same time in other European Mints.

In 1721, D. João V transfers the Mint of Lisbon to a new building and centralises there all issuance of coins.

As a consequence of this centralisation, the Mint of Porto is forever closed.