

# An Ottoman Bureaucrat's Luxury Purchases: The 1898 Invoice of Hasan Tahsin Pasha

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## Context

This document is housed in the Ottoman State Archives under the classification *Yıldız Esās Evrākı*, catalogued as Y..EE.. / 53/94. It contains two invoices and a summary that records the debt of the first secretary of the imperial chamber (*mābeyn bāş kātibi*) to the imperial court jeweler (*sarāy kıyumcısı*). The document consists of three pages: the first invoice details the borrowed sum, the second records the purchase of jewelry and goods, and the final page presents the overall financial statements, summarizing the total amounts from both invoices. It is dated 26 *Receb* 1316 in the Hijri calendar, corresponding to 10 December 1898 in the Gregorian calendar. My analysis focuses on the second page of this document, which is particularly intriguing as it offers a glimpse into the luxury consumption habits of a high-ranking Ottoman bureaucrat.

The invoice mentions two important figures. The first one is, as indicated by the title at the top of the page, the court jeweler Haronaçi, a well-known and all-powerful<sup>1</sup> Jewish businessman and a prominent figure in Istanbul's high society.<sup>2</sup> He and his son, Jak *Efendi*, obtained this position at the court because Armenians were no longer considered trustworthy following the Armenian uprisings in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> A strict policy against Armenians was adopted, and they were excluded from various government contracts and key economic positions. The chief court jeweler, a role traditionally held by Armenians, was among the affected positions.<sup>4</sup> From crafting opulent insignias<sup>5</sup> for the Ottoman state to supplying European luxury goods to the local market, Haronaçi played a key role in the consumption networks of the empire's high-society.

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<sup>1</sup> Edhem Eldem, *Pride and Privilege: A History of Ottoman Orders, Medals and Decorations* (Istanbul: Ottoman Bank Archives and Research Centre, 2004), 337.

<sup>2</sup> Son Posta, February 6, 1936, 4, [https://www.gastearsivi.com/gazete/son\\_posta/1936-02-06/4](https://www.gastearsivi.com/gazete/son_posta/1936-02-06/4) (accessed March 5, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Tahsin Paşa, Sultan II. Abdülhamid ve Yıldız Hatıraları, ed. Hamdi Akyol (Istanbul: Kapı Yayınları, 2021), 256.

<sup>4</sup> Tahsin Paşa, Sultan II. Abdülhamid ve Yıldız Hatıraları, ed. Hamdi Akyol (Istanbul: Kapı Yayınları, 2021), 178 – 179; Edhem Eldem, *Pride and Privilege: A History of Ottoman Orders, Medals and Decorations* (Istanbul: Ottoman Bank Archives and Research Centre, 2004), 337.

<sup>5</sup> There are numerous documents in the Ottoman State Archives referring to his insignia work. For example: BOA. İ.DH. 1359/49; BOA. İ.DH. 1360/47; BOA. İ.DH. 1370/26.

The other figure referred in this invoice is an unnamed debtor, identified only by his title the first secretary of the imperial chamber. Given that Hasan Tahsin Pasha<sup>6</sup> occupied this prestigious position between 1894 and 1908, it is evident that he was the debtor who acquired various luxury goods from Haronaçi, the court jeweler. It is not clear whether these purchases were made for the Imperial Chamber or for Tahsin Pasha himself. However, considering the nature of the items – such as personal adornments, a status-symbol piano, and a luxurious writing set – I think that these were personal acquisitions, likely intended for use in his various residences.<sup>7</sup> Beyond the issue of personal debt, two of the items mentioned in the invoice – a silver candelabrum and a large Sèvres vase – were donated to the exhibition for the children of martyrs (*evlād-ı şühedā sergisi*). According to the exhibition catalogue<sup>8</sup>, they were recorded under Tahsin Pasha's name, further supporting the argument that these purchases were personal. This donation highlights how luxury goods functioned not only as symbols of personal prestige but also as political instruments, repurposed for public displays of piety, generosity,<sup>9</sup> and loyalty to the state. Although it is difficult to determine whether this act was voluntary or an expected courtly duty, Tahsin Pasha demonstrated his allegiance to the sultan by making strategic use of the fluidity of luxury goods. Their ability to shift between personal possessions, political offerings, and public displays of loyalty made them powerful instruments in the Ottoman court.

The list features a wide variety of items, yet one of the most striking aspects of the document is the sheer diversity and opulence of the purchases. It includes jeweled accessories such as a ruby ring, a diamond and pearl brooch, and a Parisian-style gold belt – items that may have been intended for a family member, perhaps his wife. High-

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<sup>6</sup> On November 26, 1894, he was appointed to the position with a salary of 24,000 kurus. Naim Ürkmez ve Uğur Akbulut, "Sultan II. Abdülhamid'in Başkâtibi Tahsin Paşa," *Belleten*, cilt 86, sayı 306 (Ağustos 2022): 647 – 648.

<sup>7</sup> Naim Ürkmez ve Uğur Akbulut, "Sultan II. Abdülhamid'in Başkâtibi Tahsin Paşa," *Belleten*, cilt 86, sayı 306 (Ağustos 2022): 658–660

<sup>8</sup> Muḥārebe-i Ahīre Evlād-ı Şühedā' ve Ma'lūlîn-i 'Askeriyye Sergisi (Nuremberg: Fritz Schneller ve Şürekası Matbaası), Catalogue number 36 and 41, <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/125030>.

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these topics, see Nadir Özbek, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Sosyal Devlet: Siyaset, İktidar ve Meşruiyet (1876–1914)*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016).

end European imports, including a *Sèvres* vase and a piano from Berlin, also appear on the list. In addition, the document records functional luxury items like a silver-plated tray and a London-style silver tray, as well as personalized writing sets with trays. Considering that his salary was 24,000 *guruş*, these expenditures appear remarkably high. Contemporary accounts underscore his affluence and elevated social standing, further evidenced by the opulent residences and exclusive privileges bestowed upon him by Sultan Abdülhamid during his time in imperial office.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the last Ottoman court historian, Abdurrahman Şeref Bey, stated that Tahsin Pasha left the palace in debt due to poor financial management and his family's extravagance.<sup>11</sup> These substantial expenditures suggest either the presence of additional perks or support from the Sultan, and a level of consumption that exceeded the norms of typical bureaucratic life. Lastly, the presence of both Ottoman-crafted and European-imported items in the invoice reflects that Tahsin Pasha favored a hybrid aesthetic, blending traditional Ottoman craftsmanship with European goods associated with refinement and prestige. His selection reveals both a cultivated personal taste and an active engagement in curating his material world.

## Transcription

*zāt-ı ḥazret-i şehriyāriniñ ser kuyumcısı haronaçi*

<i>mābeyn-i ḥümāyūn-ı mülūkāne bāş kātibi ‘atūfetlü beg efendimiz ḥazretleriniñ mübāya ‘a buyurdukları eşyā ḥesābı</i>	<i>lira-yı ‘osmānī ‘aded</i>	
<i>iki ‘aded yazu takımı ma ‘a tebsi fermān-ı sāmīleri üzre beheri on beşer liradan</i>	30	
<i>altun tesbīḥ kāmçısı</i>	1	50
<i>muraşşa ‘halḳalı yāḳūt yüzük bedeli</i>	25	
<i>gümüş şam ‘dān [çift?] h[?] fī bedeli evlād-ı şühedā</i>		
<i>sergisine ihdā buyurılan 1 2380 95 5640</i>	56	40
<i>londra-kārī gümüş kebīr tebsi 1895 115 5448</i>	54	48

<sup>10</sup> Naim Ürkmez ve Uğur Akbulut, “Sultan II. Abdülhamid’in Başkâtibi Tahsin Paşa,” *Belleten*, cilt 86, sayı 306 (Ağustos 2022): 658–660, 656–657, 672.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 655.

sevr vazo kebîr [çift?] evlād-ı şühedā sergisine ihdā buyurulan 1	45	
eski ma 'den mā'î çiçeklik [çift?] 1	27	
müzāyededden mübāya 'a olunarak taqdīm kılınan gümüş kaplama müdevver tebsi	25	
nezd-i sāmīlerinde bulunan muraşşa ' ve altun paris-kārī kemer	720	
	984	38
berlinden mübāya 'a olunan bir 'aded piyano ma 'a meşārif ingiliz lirası 'aded piyano 60 maşrafı 12 72	79	20
paris-kārī [?] 72 frank 'aded 650	28	
bir 'aded na 'l resminde elmaslı incüli broş mark 'aded 600	33 1124	58

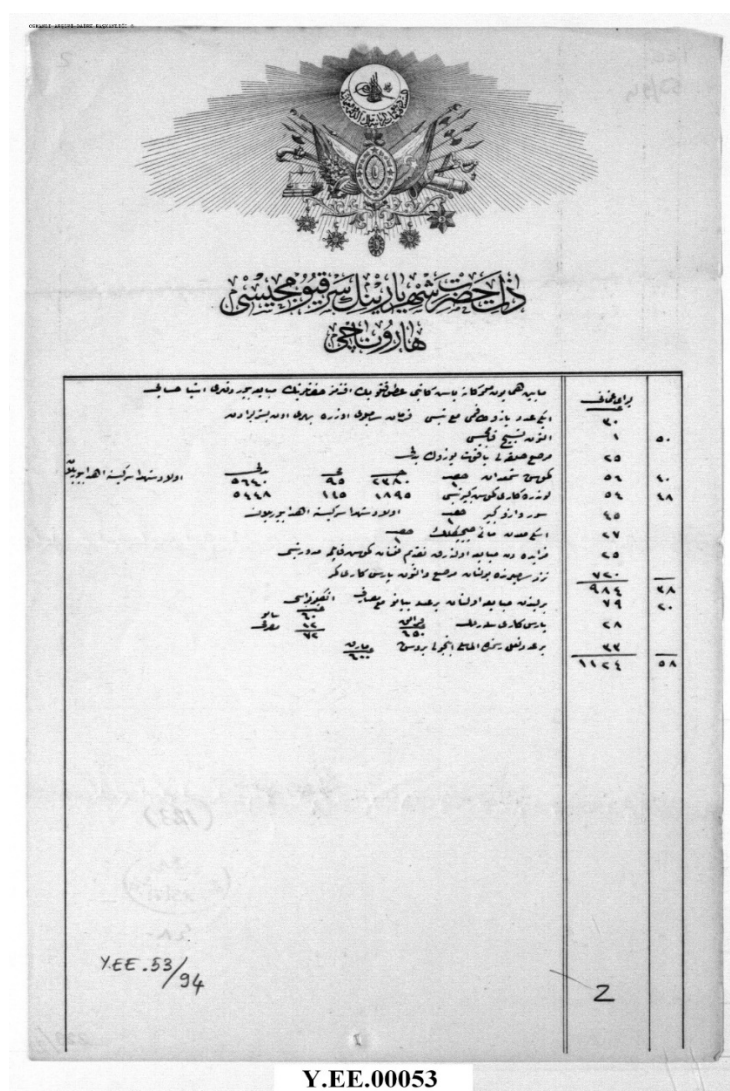
## Translation

Haronaçi, the Imperial Court Jeweler to His Majesty

The invoice of goods purchased by the first secretary of the imperial chamber, the benevolent and esteemed <i>beg efendi</i>	Ottoman lira unit	
In accordance with his supreme decree, two writing sets with the trays at a price of fifteen <i>liras</i> each	30	
Golden prayer bead whip	1	50
Cost of the ruby ring with an inlaid bezel	25	
Silver candelabrum [pair?] h[?] price cost donated to the 1 2380 95 5640 exhibition for the children of martyrs	56	40
Large silver tray in the London style	54	48
Large Sèvres vase [pair?] donated to the exhibition for the 1 children of martyrs	45	
Antique metal blue flowerpot [pair?] 1	27	
The silver-plated round tray purchased at an auction and presented	25	
The jeweled and gold Parisian belt in his supreme possession	720	

A piano purchased from Berlin, with expenses included	English <i>lira</i> unit	984 79	38 20
Parisian [?]	piano 60 expense 12 72 Franc unit	28	
A horseshoe-shaped brooch with diamonds and pearls	650 Mark unit 600	33 1124	58

## Facsimile



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