

In discussing the historiography and sources on this subject, it should be stated first that there is no single study or monograph dealing with the *Amira* class, either in Armenian or in a Western language. As might be expected, the best sources on the topic are in Armenian. However, even the archival material in Armenian is meager. The correspondence of Armenian Catholic missionary monks of the Mekhitarist Congregation, who worked in Istanbul and maintained communications with their headquarters in Venice, was quite thoroughly examined, but it contained very little that bears directly on the *Amiras*. The archives at the Armenian patriarchate of Istanbul, now being classified and arranged, consist mostly of records of meetings of various councils. A potential source of new materials that remains unexamined is the holdings of the Madenataran (Mashtots Institute of Ancien Manuscripts) in Erevan, Soviet Armenia. These collections of manuscripts, correspondence and miscellaneous personal papers of various Armenians, might contain data pertinent to the topic, but since these holdings list no personal documents belonging to the *Amiras* themselves, it is doubtful that they will reveal any startling material. It must be recalled that the *Amiras* were financiers and privileged government employees; their precarious position, the condition of the time and the discretion common to bankers everywhere discouraged record-keeping of a personal nature. Thus the primary materials available to the researcher are scant. Much of what is known about them is to be found in reports and commentaries penned by onlookers, men who were admiring or envious outsiders.

On the other hand, colophons, an important primary source for earlier Armenian history, are non-existent, since the custom had disappeared by the second half of the eighteenth century due to the spread of printed books. Fortunately, epigraphic materials partially make up for the loss of colophons. Since the end of the nineteenth century and especially after 1920, numerous volumes of provincial history have been published by Armenian compatriotic organizations as well as individuals intent upon commemorating a vanished way of life; some of these preserve epigraphs from tombstones and public monuments which are invaluable for the study of the origins (or the philanthropic activity) of the *amiras*. Such epigraphic collections are incomplete and fragmentary, reflecting the narrow range of their compilers'