

internal cohesion or lack of it. Knowledge of such basic facts is fundamental to the understanding and proper evaluation of the dual role of the class. Extant works have hardly probed beneath the surface of *amiras*' motivations and mentality. Most writers, including those who are critical, have viewed *amiras* and their activities from one vantage point or another. *Amiras* have to be placed in their own time and social environment. Our understanding and assessment of their role would be greatly enhanced by a juxtaposition of their roles with those of similarly privileged classes in the Greek and Jewish *millets*, *i.e.* the *sarrafs* and other wealthy men connected with Ottoman high officialdom. However, such an effort would be more fruitful in a separate study, for it would necessitate an equal understanding and treatment of all three classes, a task beyond the limits of this work, which is concerned solely with the *amira* class.

Even today, the word *amira* evokes the image of a wealthy individual among Armenians. Wealth was a *sine qua non* for membership in this class, and the *amiras* rarely ceased to strive for more of it. Yet there was, in the words of a historian who has explored the life of a German-Jewish financier, both "ambiguity and uncertainty" in that accumulation of wealth.<sup>46</sup> Its status was such as to arouse anxiety as well as envy among powerful Turks, ranging all the way to the Sultan; any historian can imagine the attendant dangers. In particular, the wealth of the *amiras* could arouse anxiety because it was accumulated in a state that was primarily agricultural and semi-feudal; in such states, the accumulation of capital invites reprisal. The successes of the *amiras* were, for this reason, as elusive as they are striking.

This dissertation represents an attempt to trace the rise and fall of this elite group, the *amiras*, who were the ruling class of the Armenian *millet* in the Ottoman Empire for nearly a century, from approximately 1750 to 1860. I shall use descriptive, narrative and analytical approaches in order to chart the changes in the fortunes of this class and to demonstrate how the needs of the Ottoman Empire led to the consolidation of its power within the Armenian *millet*, just as, a century later, the changing needs of the Ottoman state combined with internal pressures generated from within the matrix of the

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<sup>46</sup> Fritz Stern, *Gold and Iron; Bismarck, Bleichröder, and the Building of the German Empire* (New York, 1977), p. 5.