

## Chapter I

### THE PREDECESSORS

The *amiras* became the leaders of the Armenian *millet*, and especially of the Armenian community of Istanbul, in the second half of the eighteenth century. Long before that, the lay leadership of the *millet* had developed, both in Istanbul and in the provinces, into a loosely-knit but recognizable elite, about which relatively little is known. Any study of the *amiras* must begin with these predecessors, and, in turn, a study of them requires an understanding of the honorific nomenclature used. The titles used overwhelmingly were *hoca* (or *khodja*) and *çelebi* (or *tchelepi*).

These present problems of etymological derivation, semantic confusion, and occasionally loose application to figures of varying prominence. In threading his way through the thicket of nomenclature, the historian must keep in mind the fact that these titles were not all derived from the same language or *milieu*, were not originally applied for the same reasons, and did not receive the same kinds of recognition.

Beginning with the mid-seventeenth century, the titles *hoca* and *çelebi* were used contemporaneously. The first term is of Persian origin,<sup>1</sup> while the second appears to be Turkish. Of the many meanings that *hoca* had in Persian, Ottoman Turkish had retained several, and had added others. The word was, at various times, a synonym for *efendi* (“gentleman”), *aga* (“lord, master”), and *katip* (“secretary, scribe, writer”); it was also used to mean merchant.<sup>2</sup> The turcologist Siruni adds other meanings: “witch, juggler, turbaned, healer, popular story teller.”<sup>3</sup> In modern Turkish *hoca* came to mean lay teacher as well as Muslim teacher (*hodja*).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an etymological, as well as historical, examination of the word *hoca*, see *Islam Ansiklopedisi*, s.v. “Hace,” by **M. Fuad Köprülü**, and “Hoca,” by **W. Ivanow**.

<sup>2</sup> *Türk Ansiklopedisi*, s.v. “Hace.” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1st ed., s.v. “Khodja,” by **A. Yusuf Ali**. The latter limits itself to the definition and study of “the name of a community of dissenting Muslims, mainly to be found in the Pundjab...”

<sup>3</sup> **Siruni**, *Polis*, 1: 477. Siruni’s contention that the word was spelled differently when used to designate non-Muslims is based upon one instance, and therefore, at best, is tenuous.

<sup>4</sup> *New Redhouse Turkish-English Dictionary* (1974), s. v. “Hoca.”