

while others are mentioned by their names only. If we accept colophons as a reliable criterion in assessing the use of the title, then we have to accept the fact that the number of *hocas* was small in the fifteenth century, and that use of the title became widespread by the first quarter of the seventeenth century. It is hard to tell why this came about. It may be that there were more prosperous individuals who successfully aspired to leadership; it may also be the case that as the title became more coveted, it was applied more frequently to honor all sorts of people who might have been excluded earlier, when the informal standards of the community were more stringent; such a devaluation of titles and an increase in their frequency of use is not unknown in the West, though the increased occurrence of *hoca* never reached the proportions known in the West (one need only look at once-scarce honorifics such as “Madame”).

Finally, it is worth noting that the title *hoca* is rather rarely applied in the fifteenth and sixteenth century documents to individuals living in Istanbul. This cannot, in itself, be taken to indicate that the title was in fact in rare use in the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Compared to provincial areas such as Van and Khizan, Istanbul produced very few colophons, and so the scarcity of the sample might distort any conclusions we might be tempted to draw.

Neither the colophons nor historical accounts give any clues about the social origins of *hocas*. The Soviet Armenian historian Hagop Anasian, whose study of *hocas* is the most elaborate and penetrating to date, considers them “the offsprings of the old Armenian feudal nobility.”⁹ Such a claim is not fully borne out by the historical evidence.

Hocas played a prominent role in the financial activities of the Ottoman government, while in the Armenian *millet* they took control of national life. A well-known Armenian scholar evaluates their role in the following way:

starting in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, *hocas* were known as influential landowners, as rebuilders and benefactors of churches and monasteries, and as individuals who commissioned the copying of manuscripts. Taking control of [Armenian] civic life, they were often celebrated as ‘guardians

⁹ Anasian, *Azatagrakan Sharjumnern*, p. 60.