

insiders, *drsetsis* and *nersetsis*, provincials and cosmopolitans. The *chelebis* who lived primarily in Istanbul and had metropolitan breeding as well as wealth, may have looked down on the *hocas*, the provincial Armenian rich, whom they considered *gavaratsis* with money but no breeding. Eventually, however, both groups produced *amiras*. Barsoumian stresses the fact that the word *Amira*, although of Arab origin, is used *exclusively* by Armenian commentators when referring to the elite at issue in this book. Others called them by many terms – *hoca* and *chelebi*, *mahdesi* and *agha* and *bey*, but the Armenians, while using all these terms, chose to speak of a small percentage of this variously-named elite as *amiras*. Barsoumian asks what entitled a small portion of the Armenian rich to be called *amiras*, and then explores their origins. He first shows that over half of the *amira* families came from Akn (the rest from Van, Kesaria and elsewhere). All previous explanations of why the small and otherwise not exceptional region of Akn produced this elite are inadequate. Even as he gives his own explanations, Barsoumian admits that the evidence does not permit a full explanation.⁴ He then defines the constellation of features that constituted the *amiras*.

Wealth, yes, Barsoumian asks, but there were other rich people, some equally rich. What kind of wealth was it that the *amiras* had and how did they use it? He shows that the majority were *sarrafs*, men who used their capital to finance Ottoman notables, *pashas* who purchased the right, from the Sultan's court, to collect the taxes of a particular province. The Armenian financiers had the capital to pay the Court, which always demanded advance payment. They were then closely involved in monitoring the actual process of taxation. Among other activities, they controlled the conversion of peasant taxes paid "in kind" (sheep, wool, leather, cheese, charcoal) to currency. As converters, they took their "cut," their percentage; as loan-holders to the *pashas*, they collected interest. (This could not have endeared them to most people).

Barsoumian knows that not all *amiras* were *sarrafs*. In fact, he gives a detailed and fascinating account of the Armenian "technocrats" and

⁴ The explanations Barsoumian gives point to the accumulation of not just financial capital but also what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has since come to call "cultural capital," a complex pattern of skills, education, culture, connection and practical habits that is characteristic of small elites in many societies.