

### Chapter III

## THE ROLE OF AMIRAS IN THE *OTTOMAN STATE*

It is commonly asserted that *amiras* held managerial or supervisory positions in any state institutions and established close connections with the palace, the central administration and Turkish officialdom. Their presence was strongly felt in two spheres of the economic life of the empire: finance and industry. A detailed consideration of the evidence on their infiltration into these spheres consequently seems both warranted and useful.

As has been established, the relatively rich Armenian would enter into the profession of *sarraf*, the Ottoman designation for banker or money-lender, after amassing a working capital in Istanbul or the provinces. The great majority of *amiras* practiced this profession. (See appendix for details.) Although there were some Jewish and Greek *sarrafs*, the privilege to practice the trade, *sarraflık*, was granted with overwhelming frequency to Armenians. Western and Armenian contemporary accounts lend support to the assertion that the profession was dominated by the Armenians.<sup>1</sup> The nineteenth century court-historian, vak'anüvis Ahmed Cevdet, names two prominent Armenian *sarrafs* and implies that the others too were predominantly drawn from the same ethnic group.<sup>2</sup> However, any Ottoman

---

<sup>1</sup> Among many Armenian sources the following are cited: **A. Ketchian**, *Akn*, p. 61; A. Berberian, *Patmutiun*, p. 19 passim; **Gabriel Ayvazovski**, *Patmutium Osmanean Petutean* [History of the Ottoman State], 2 vols. (Venice, 1841), 2:35; **H. Injidjian**, *Ashkharhagrutium Tchorits Masants Ashkharhi* [Universal Geography], 5 vols. (Venice, 1801-1806), 5:121. Among Western sources: **Ubicini**, *Lettres*, 2:315; **MacFarlane**, *Constantinople*, 1:112; Urquhart, *Turkey*, pp. 108-112; **A. Du Velay**, *Essai sur l'Histoire Financière de la Turquie* (Paris, 1903), pp. 47, 53; **Adoiphus Slade**, *Records of Travels in Turkey, Greece* (Philadelphia, 1833; reprint ed., London, 1854), p. 434.

An eyewitness observed: "All the pashas in the interior are obliged to have their bankers, and these for the most part are Armenians from Constantinople." ABCFM, Mission to the Armenians, Constantinople, vol. 1 (1838-1844), no. 144.

<sup>2</sup> **Ahmet Cevdet**, *Tarih-i Cevdet*, 12 vols. (Istanbul, 1871-1880), 1:159-163, 11:45-46; Armenian trans., **A. KH. Safrastian**, *Turkakan Aghbiurnere Hayastani, Hayeri ev Andrkovkasi Mius*