Privilege, its uses and abuses, is an inescapable part of history and our world today. This seminar will examine elites in premodern Europe, from the end of Antiquity to the Enlightenment, from the villas of ancient Rome to the palace of Versailles, and the long history of privilege in European society. We will trace the development of a coherent, interconnected aristocracy that spanned the European continent. We will discuss the centrality and dominating position elites occupied in the political, cultural, religious, and economic life of the era – and the systemic reasons for that centrality. We will study the evolving gender roles, family structures, and social dynamics which undergird the power of aristocratic elites and discover how they adapted in the face of changing beliefs and cultural values, technology and exploration, pandemics, and rebellions. We will work through the religious and philosophical theories of social stratification which supported aristocracy and perpetuated social inequalities between the elite and those laboring below them. Finally, we will analyze the always present, but rising, chorus of dissident voices challenging the status and privilege European elites enjoyed.

During the course of this seminar you will write a 25-30-page junior paper, based on original research, on a selected topic in the history of premodern European elites. That paper will:

a) Ask a good historical question.

b) Be based on primary sources.

c) Explain how its interpretation connects to previous work by other historians.

d) Offer a persuasive thesis of its own.

e) Be a polished piece of writing.

This is, of course, a lot to achieve in a semester, and the pace is unavoidably intense. We will proceed through a close examination of published works in the field that are models for us as researchers and writers. In addition, the course is structured around a series of small, building block assignments that will help you write your final paper. A willingness to hit the ground running, to attend all course meetings, and to participate in and help foster a mutually supportive environment are all essential.