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Despite their tiny numbers, the nobility are central to our understanding of early modern European society. Well into the nineteenth century, they controlled a large share of Europe's wealth and dominated its politics. As a result they had a disproportionate effect on the entire society's economic and cultural life. In fact, the nobles of Europe offer an excellent vantage point for understanding the interplay of tradition and innovation in early modern society. This book provides a comprehensive history of the European nobility between the Renaissance and the French Revolution. Designed to introduce students and non-specialists to the subject, it explains the principal themes and problems in an authoritative and accessible manner. Professor Dewald surveys the changing numbers, self-perceptions, wealth, and political power of the European nobles, and explores their changing modes of life. Arguing against conventional views, he maintains that the nobles adapted effectively to the profound changes that marked society and culture at this time. He also argues that this group evolved in essentially the same ways throughout Europe; although different countries had different numbers of nobles and accorded them different privileges, nobles everywhere faced similar problems and responded to them in similar ways.

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[More information](#)

For Emma, Nicolas, and Elise

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Introduction: The European nobilities as an historical problem	1
1 Nature and numbers	15
Race and status: the biology of social mobility	16
Processes of mobility	19
Numbers	22
Privileges	28
An ideology under attack: criticism of the nobility	33
The rise of the administrative nobilities	36
Rich and poor nobles	40
The urbanization of the nobility	48
Alternative models of gentility	51
2 Wealth, privilege, and the encounter with change	60
Hierarchies of wealth	62
Land and lordship	65
Patterns of change	69
Establishing the domain	76
Administering the estate	82
The country house	89
Alternative forms of wealth	93
Serving the state	97
Spending	98
3 Nobles and politics	108
Regional communities	110
The regional community and political change	115
Revolution at the center: kings, administrators, subjects	118
The court	122
Ideals and realities	127
The problem of rebellion	134
The absolutist compromise	140

Cambridge University Press
0521415128 - The European Nobility, 1400-1800
Jonathan Dewald
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

x	Contents	
4	Lives and cultures	149
	A cultural revolution?	151
	Cultural patronage and cultural production	157
	The psychology of privacy	163
	The family and the self	168
	The problem of religion	176
	The impact of Enlightenment	183
	Conclusion: Toward a new society: the French Revolution and beyond	188
	<i>Suggestions for further reading</i>	202
	<i>Index</i>	207

Illustrations

Map: Europe in 1500	page xviii–xix
1 Elegance in the provinces: two nobles of Lorraine, ca. 1620 (Jacques Callot, <i>The Nobility of Lorraine</i> , National Gallery of Art, Washington, the Rudolf L. Baumfeld Collection, no. B-27,903 and B-27,904)	30–31
2 The nobility of the robe: a French official, ca. 1540 (Jean Clouet, <i>Guillaum Budé</i> , The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Maria DeWitt Jesup Fund, 1946, no. 46.68)	39
3 The ideal of simplicity: Mary, duchess of Richmond, ca. 1765 (Joshua Reynolds, <i>Mary, Duchess of Richmond</i> , held by The Trustees of the Goodwood Collection)	53
4 The rise of consumerism: a Parisian shop, ca. 1640 (Abraham Bosse, <i>La Galerie du Palais</i> , The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1922, 22.67.16)	100
5 The court: Nancy, ca. 1625 (Jacques Callot, <i>Parterre du Palais de Nancy</i> , National Gallery of Art, Washington; Rudolf L. Baumfeld Collection, no. B-27,908)	130
6 A French courtier, ca. 1570 (Monogrammist LAM, <i>Portrait of a Courtier in White</i> , The Metropolitan Museum of New York, The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931, no. 32.100.119)	131
7 A new ideal of warfare: the Spanish army, ca. 1635 (Jacques Callot, <i>The Review</i> , National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rudolf L. Baumfeld Collection, no. B-27,928)	142

Preface

The book that follows examines a complex group, during a long and tumultuous period in its history. As in all historical writing, making sense of this complexity and tumult has required choices; the book addresses some tasks and neglects others. One task that I have not undertaken here is that of comprehensive survey of the early modern nobilities.¹ The book does not summarize the large body of legislation that early modern states devoted to the nobles, nor does it systematically narrate the principal events in which they participated; indeed, given their prominence in early modern life, such a narration would amount mainly to retelling the political history of the period. Much that seems picturesque about the nobles, that makes them “other” to our sensibilities, has also been left out of this account. There is almost nothing here about armor, tournaments, coats of arms, pageantry, chivalric gallantry; duelling and jousts appear only briefly.

Rather than survey, narrative, or picturesque detail, I offer here an interpretive essay, directed to understanding the most important ways in which this mass of people evolved during the centuries between the late Middle Ages and the French Revolution. Readers will encounter important events and striking facts, many of which I hope will seem picturesque – but events and facts are offered mainly to illustrate interpretation, rather than as ends in themselves. Those who need more systematic overviews of events, legislation, and chivalric practice may turn to several excellent studies.²

¹ A note on terminology. In English usage, the distinction between “nobility” and “aristocracy” is delicate and often ignored. Thus the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes nobles as “belonging to that class in the community which has a titular pre-eminence over the others” – and aristocracy as “a ruling body of nobles, an oligarchy,” or “the collective body of those who form a privileged class with regard to the government of the country; the nobles.” In what follows I have usually followed the sense of this distinction, using the term nobles to refer to the entire order, aristocracy to refer to its most powerful members. But like the *OED* I view the terms as covering overlapping realities.

² These include recent works by M. L. Bush, *Noble Privilege* (New York, 1983) and *Rich Noble, Poor Noble* (Manchester, 1988); and the forthcoming book by Samuel Clark.

Interpretation of the sort presented here poses obvious risks, for no historian could command the historical literature that concerns the nobles across western and central Europe. Certainly I do not claim to, and I have not even attempted to extend the analysis eastward, to Poland, Russia, and the Balkans. Risks have seemed worth taking, however, because historians' understanding of the European nobles has changed significantly in recent years. Longstanding verities have collapsed, creating a need for new assessments of what the nobles were and how they changed.

The problem of change itself holds the central place in this process of reinterpretation. Until fairly recently, historians organized their understanding of the nobility's early modern history around ideas of crisis and transition. Conservative historians saw the period as marking the decline of a once-cohesive "aristocratic world," a world ordered by bonds between respected leaders and rustic followers, a world little touched by marketplace calculations.³ Marxist historical writing took a surprisingly similar line. Economic change (it was argued) necessarily rearranged society's ruling groups: in the early modern period, this meant the rise of merchants, industrialists, and commercially minded landowners, who could respond adequately to the market economy's increasing range. Yet a third group, historians writing in the tradition of Weberian sociology, likewise emphasized transition, albeit of a somewhat different order: these historians spoke of change from the "ferocity, childishness, and lack of self-control" (the terms used by the greatest exponent of this view) that had prevailed from Homeric times until about 1600, to the relative self-control required in modern life.⁴ This "civilizing process"⁵ resulted partly from the needs of a new economy, partly from the development of the modern state, partly from new forms of religion and culture. All required that individuals repress their anarchic impulses, if they hoped to retain positions of power and responsibility. For conservatives, Marxists and Weberians alike, the ruling classes had in some sense to grow up, had to be modernized so as to cope with modernity's complex apparatus of production and rule.

A new approach to the nobles' history must start from the fact that "crisis" and "transition" now seem inadequate terms for describing the nobles' experiences in these years. Specialists have discovered that in many regions of Europe they were a startlingly resilient group, which

³ See the summary of this view in Rudolf Endres, ed., *Adel in der Frühneuzeit: Ein regionaler Vergleich* (Cologne, 1991), ix–xi.

⁴ Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford, 1965), 223.

⁵ The term is that of Norbert Elias: *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, 2 vols. (New York, 1978).

maintained wealth and power through apparently cataclysmic social changes. This book underlines other important continuities in their lives. The movement of commoners into the nobility was frequent in the late Middle Ages, and so was contemporary awareness of it. The group's economic practices early acquired a highly rational quality, in some ways indistinguishable from those of capitalist entrepreneurs. Even criticism of the nobility had a long history: there may never have been a time when nobility represented an unchallenged ideal in European society.

Continuity in such matters does not mean that nothing in the nobles' situation changed during the early modern period. On the contrary, the nobles' continued hold on power and wealth required constant adaptation, often of surprising kinds. Hence this book's main task is to sort out what changed in the nobles' situation and what remained constant. In many domains, I argue here, this sorting-out reveals surprises. The book seeks to show the unexpected ways in which change and continuity might combine in the life of a ruling group.

If the problem of continuity forms the book's organizing focus, three additional arguments recur throughout and require clear statement at the beginning. First, I argue here for a fundamental similarity in the nobles' experiences across Europe, at least to the regions of eastern Germany and Bohemia. Similarity had its limits. Different societies had differing numbers of nobles and accorded them different privileges. Yet across Europe the nobles confronted similar economic, political, and cultural problems, and they responded to them in basically similar ways. In a study of this scope, such resemblances can only be suggested (rather than proven) through the presentation of parallel examples, drawn from diverse regions of western and central Europe. Readers may find that a disproportionate number of these examples come from France. To some extent this imbalance reflects my own scholarly interest in France, but it also reflects important realities of early modern history. Especially where the nobility were concerned, France was not simply one society among many. It was by far the largest European state, and it provided a series of models that other countries emulated, in matters ranging from politics to culture. Comparisons of the sort presented here, I believe, suggest the power of this process of emulation in some domains; in others, comparison suggests the degree to which all of Europe experienced common economic and cultural currents.

A second argument concerns the starting-point for the changes that the book explores, the society of the late Middle Ages. I believe that historians have misread some of the changes of the early modern period because they have tended to view late medieval Europe as a traditional society, dominated by a combination of Homeric ferocity and reverence

for the past. The problems of change in the early modern period acquire a different appearance if we note other aspects of the period. Late medieval society was never so stable as to allow its members to view past practice as an adequate guide to the present; nor were the nobles so coherent a group that they could view themselves as an unchallenged ruling elite. At the same time, late medieval nobles were expected to command a complicated culture and to reason carefully about their political choices. We cannot view the early modern period as a “modernization” of the nobilities, because in many ways they were already “modern” in 1400.

Hence the book’s third theme, that of drawing together in a unified description the most fundamental changes that the nobles underwent in the early modern period. The nobles survived the changes of the early modern period (I argue here) by progressively shedding their order’s weakest members. In the late Middle Ages, poor nobles were numerous. Society offered them an honorable place, usually as dependants of the rich, with whom they shared the experiences and culture of warfare. Over the early modern period, this assemblage of rich and poor nobles fell apart. Money became increasingly necessary to lead a life that contemporaries would recognize as suitable to noble status. By their very existence poor nobles had come to symbolize contradictions within the social order. They were now a subject for uneasy laughter, and, unable to keep up their status, they tended to drop out of the order altogether. As a result, over the early modern period nobles became less numerous and on average richer – because poverty increasingly precluded access to the attainments and entertainments that life within the nobility now required.

One way of describing this process is to say that the nobles became a coherent social class during the early modern period. Such a formulation does not accord with Marxist readings of social class, for nobles’ relations to the means of production became more varied rather than more similar as the period advanced. Late medieval nobles relied for most of their income on landownership; their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century successors held a wide array of investments, and some had given up landowning entirely. According to a less exact understanding of what class means, however, we can usefully speak of a process of class formation. In a basic sense, the European nobles became more like one another as the early modern period advanced. The diversity of their incomes and modes of life diminished. They came to share a larger number of experiences and expectations.

A final preliminary remark. Any effort at sympathetic analysis of a ruling group risks misreading as rehabilitation or endorsement. The risk is especially great for studies of the European nobilities, whose influence

on our own culture remains so powerful, and for studies (such as this one) that emphasize the complexity of the group's culture and choices. It should be evident in what follows that I also view the nobles as a violent and exploitative ruling group, whose prosperity depended heavily on the coercion of others. Early modern aristocratic society did not offer rule by the best, at least in terms that most of us can find appropriate.⁶ Yet for a book such as this, denunciation of the group's failings seems especially inappropriate. It limits our capacity to understand the inner logic of the group's thoughts and actions. Worse, it encourages smugness about the virtues of our own world. We have our virtues, but they are perhaps weakest in the matters of social inequality and power that this study explores.

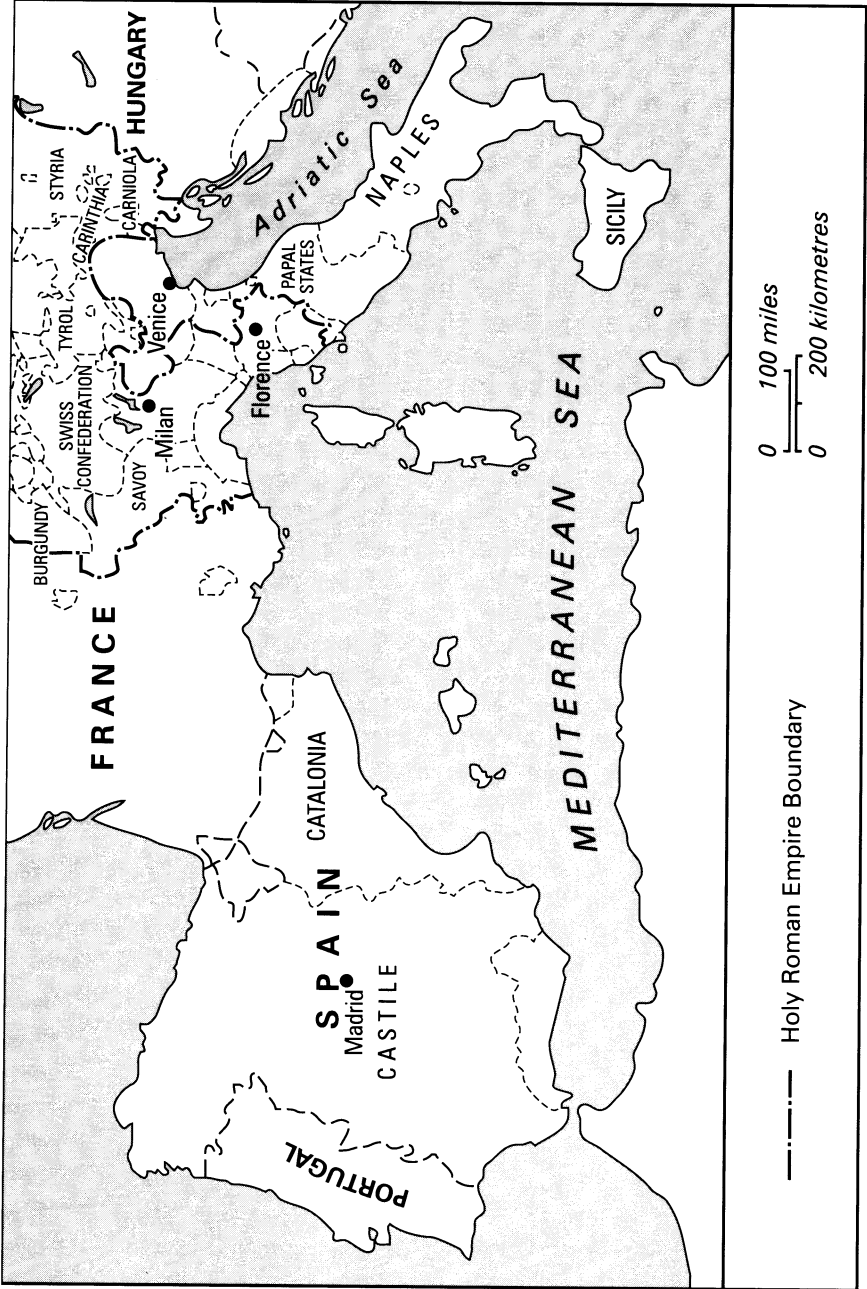
William Beik first proposed that I write this book, and he has since supplied both encouragement and careful criticism. I am also indebted to his fellow series editors for their suggestions and corrections. Charles Stinger read the entire manuscript with characteristic care, insight, and graciousness. The project has been greatly helped by the material support I have received from the Dean of Social Sciences at SUNY Buffalo and from the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton; a year's residence in that idyllic setting allowed me to rethink and deepen many of the book's arguments.

Most of all I am indebted to Liana Vardi, for the encouragement, criticism, and knowledge that she has brought to this project. She introduced me to many of the questions and materials discussed here, suggested alternative interpretations, and corrected errors. Despite our disagreements on some specific issues, this has been a collaborative project from the beginning – and as a result it has been a pleasure as well.

⁶ In Greek, "aristocracy" means literally "the government of a state by its best citizens" (in the words of the *OED*).

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Europe in 1500