

Aristocracy (class)

The **aristocracy** is a social class that a particular society considers its highest order. In many states, the aristocracy included the upper class of people (*aristocrats*) with hereditary rank and titles. In some—such as ancient Greece, Rome and India—aristocratic status came from belonging to a military caste, although it has also been common, notably in African societies, for aristocrats to belong to priestly dynasties. Aristocratic status can involve feudal or legal privileges.^[1] They are usually below only the monarch of a country or nation in its social hierarchy. In modern European societies, the aristocracy has often coincided with the nobility, a specific class that arose in the Middle Ages, but the term "aristocracy" is sometimes also applied to other elites, and is used as a more generic term when describing earlier and non-European societies.



French aristocrats, c. 1774



A castle, the symbol of the rule of aristocracy in medieval Europe (Krásna Hôrka in Slovakia).

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Etymology

The term *aristocracy* derives from the Greek ἀριστοκρατία (*aristokratia* from ἄριστος (*aristos*) "excellent," and κράτος (*kratos*) "power."^[2] In most cases, aristocratic titles were and are hereditary

The term "*aristokratia*" was first used in Athens with reference to young citizens (the men of the ruling class) who led armies at the front line. Due to martial bravery being highly regarded as a virtue in ancient Greece, it was assumed that the armies were being led by "the best." This virtue was called *arete* (ἀρετή). Etymologically, as the word developed, it also produced a more political term: *aristoi* (ἄριστοι). The term aristocracy is a compound word stemming from the singular of aristoi, *aristos* (ἄριστος), and the Greek word for power, *kratos* (κράτος).

From the ancient Greeks, the term passed to the European Middle Ages for a similar *hereditary class* of military leaders, often referred to as the nobility. As in Greece, this was a class of privileged men and women whose familial connections to the regional armies allowed them to present themselves as the most "noble" or "best" of society

Europe

Historically, the status and privileges of the aristocracy in Europe were below royalty and above all non-aristocrats.

The French Revolution attacked aristocrats as people who had achieved their status by having been born in a wealthy family rather than by merit, and this was considered unjust. In the United Kingdom and other European countries, such as Spain and Denmark, in which hereditary titles are still recognised, *aristocrat* still refers to the descendant of one of approximately 7,000 families with hereditary titles, many still in possession of considerable wealth.

United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, members of the highest echelon of the aristocracy, the hereditary peers were, until 1999, members of the House of Lords—the upper house of the legislature, the Parliament of the United Kingdom. In 1999, most ceased to be members. However, the Duke of Norfolk, who always serves as Earl Marshal, the hereditary peer who serves as Lord Great Chamberlain (currently the Marquess of Cholmondeley), and a further 90 Representative Hereditary Peers elected by the Hereditary Peers retained membership. Since 1958, non-hereditary "life peers" have been created, who are automatically members of the House of Lords for life with the right to be known by their title. For example, John Gummer became (The Rt Hon.) Lord Deben.

However, life peers are not considered part of the aristocracy, nor are knights, unless born into an aristocratic or landed gentry family. Examples include James Douglas-Hamilton, Baron Selkirk of Douglas and Sir Winston Churchill—all born into aristocratic families. Besides the hereditary peers, the gentry (consisting of baronets, Scottish barons, lairds, esquires, gentlemen, and any other untitled landowning armigerous families) are also considered part of the aristocracy. Unlike the Continental untitled nobility, British untitled families that belong to the gentry have no legal recognition of their aristocratic position.



Coat of arms of Révay family in the Kingdom of Hungary

India

Indian imported titles

Under the rule of the Mughal Empire, the titles for those under a king were borrowed from Persia. These titles of landed aristocracy include jagirdar, thikanadar, talukdar, and zamindar.

Many landholding families either held legal or administrative offices, and were sometimes considered the Indian version of the Nobility of the Robe. The princes appointed officers, such as *dewan* and other state level ministers, to run their administrations, who were considered members of the regional nobility. Most of these officers were either relatives of the princes who appointed them, or were themselves substantial landlords under the sovereignty of the Princely States, and most held hereditary titles. Sometimes, educated men belonging to the British Imperial Services were also appointed to the high offices of the Princely States, but their positions were not hereditary and they were seen as career bureaucrats rather than noblemen by their employers.

Today, aristocratic titles like Taluqdar, Rai, Rao, Roy, Chaudhary, Sardar, Zaildar, Jagirdar, Tarafdar, Thakur, Nair, Madampi are still used in the Indian Subcontinent.

Nigeria

Deriving mostly from the pre-colonial states of the region that would become known as Nigeria, the legally recognised titles of the Nigerian aristocracy range from *king* to the ubiquitous *chief*. They give their bearers no political authority in theory, but in practice allow them to serve as immensely powerful patrons of the country's political leaders due to their control of popular opinion within its various tribes. Along with those of their titled relatives and courtiers, they also serve as the guiding forces behind Nigerian cultural and religious ceremonies.

Titles such as Oba, Amanyanaboh, Mai, Obong, Sarki, Attah, and Obi are used by the dynastic heads, while *prince* and *princess* are either used in their English forms or in their native ones by the dynasts of their houses. Their privy counsellors, meanwhile, tend to be called either *chiefs* or *elders* depending on what their monarchs are themselves called, with chiefs serving under a ruler who is called a king and elders serving under one called a chief.



Nawab Sir Khwaja Salimullah
zamindar of Dhaka.

China

The nobility of China was an important feature of the traditional social and political organization of Imperial China. While the concepts of hereditary sovereign and peerage titles and noble families were featured as early as the semi-mythical early historical period, a settled system of nobility was established from the Zhou dynasty. In the subsequent millennia, this system was largely maintained in form, with some changes and additions, although the content constantly evolved. The last well-developed system of noble titles was established under the Qing dynasty.

See also

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| ▪ <u>Honorifics</u> | ▪ <u>Royal and noble ranks</u> | ▪ <u>Titles</u> (honorary) |
| ▪ <u>Monarchy</u> | ▪ <u>Styles</u> (manner of address) | ▪ <u>Social capital</u> |
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| ▪ <u>Abaza family</u> | ▪ <u>Titles</u> | ▪ <u>Honour</u> |
| ▪ <u>Old money</u> | ▪ <u>Titles</u> (false) | ▪ <u>Moral responsibility</u> |

References

1. *The aristocrats: a portrait of Britain's nobility and their way of life today* by Roy Perrott, (London 1968), page5-10
2. *The Oxford Companion to British History* John Cannon (Editor), Oxford University Press 1997, ISBN 978-0-19-866176-4

External links

- Fake Titles
- Heraldica: European Noble, PrincelyRoyal, and Imperial Titles

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