

Call for Papers

Merit, Worth, and Social Advancement in the Early Modern World: Rethinking Meritocracy as a Category of Historical Analysis

University of Hamburg, 7–8 September 2026

Organised by Carolin Gluchowski (Universität Hamburg) and Asger Wienberg (Lund University)

Conceptual Framework

The term **meritocracy** is a modern one. Coined in the twentieth century and shaped by debates about education, social mobility, expertise, and competition, it names a social order in which offices, rewards, and opportunities are supposedly distributed according to individual merit rather than inherited status or privilege. At the same time, the problems to which the term speaks are much older. Long before “meritocracy” existed as a word or political ideal, societies developed languages and practices for identifying, displaying, rewarding, and contesting merit, worth, desert, deservingness, qualification, and fitness for office.

Why the Early Modern Period?

This conference starts from the premise that the **early modern period** is a particularly productive site from which to reconsider these questions. Between roughly **1500 and 1800**, older structures of lineage, privilege, corporate belonging, and inherited rank did not simply disappear, but increasingly interacted with other criteria for advancement: learning, service, confessional discipline, civility, usefulness, competence, performance, and examinable skill. In many spheres of life, claims to social position, office, education, patronage, and recognition had to be formulated, justified, assessed, and made visible in new ways. The early modern world was therefore not “meritocratic” in any straightforward modern sense. Yet it was deeply concerned with the problem of how worth should be recognised, by whom, and according to which criteria.

Questions and Themes

The conference asks what historians gain by using **meritocracy as an analytical category** for the study of the early modern world. Under what conditions does the concept help us identify historical forms of valuation, selection, and advancement? Where does it obscure more than it reveals? How can it be used without collapsing historically specific vocabularies of virtue, honour, service, talent, discipline, or desert

into a single modern framework? And how did claims to merit relate to other principles of stratification such as birth, patronage, wealth, confession, gender, race, and legal status?

We invite proposals that address these questions through close engagement with historical sources and with the conceptual stakes of the topic. We are especially interested in papers that examine how merit and worth were defined, narrated, institutionalised, measured, or challenged in the early modern period. Relevant topics might include the languages of merit, virtue, talent, qualification, and deservingness; practices of recruitment, promotion, exclusion, and reward in courts, churches, schools, universities, convents, guilds, academies, armies, charitable institutions, and bureaucracies; and the documentary forms through which claims to advancement were articulated and evaluated, including petitions, supplications, recommendations, examinations, testimonials, service records, and applications. We also welcome work on the visual, material, and spatial cultures of merit, such as portraits, inscriptions, monuments, honours, ceremonial display, architecture, and other media through which worth was rendered legible and socially effective.

Merit and Inequality

A central aim of the conference is to explore how supposedly universal claims to worth were always shaped by structures of inclusion and exclusion. We are therefore particularly interested in contributions that address the tension between merit and inequality: how access to recognition depended on social origin, gender, confessional belonging, economic resources, or imperial and colonial power; how institutions defined and regulated “deserving” subjects; and how actors navigated, appropriated, or resisted such frameworks. We also welcome papers that trace the interplay between older languages of virtue and service and newer logics of competition, credentials, comparison, and performance.

Chronological and Geographical Scope

While the conference is centered firmly on the **early modern period**, contributions on **medieval antecedents** or **modern afterlives** are welcome where they clearly illuminate early modern formations or trace longer genealogies of merit and social advancement. Comparative and global perspectives are likewise very welcome, especially where they complicate or provincialise familiar European narratives. At the same time, we are not primarily seeking papers that use “meritocracy” simply as a loose synonym for fairness, competition, or qualification without engaging the concept’s historical and analytical specificity.

Format and Participation

The event will bring together approximately 10–12 participants for a two-day workshop-style conference at the University of Hamburg. In addition to standard

papers of 20–25 minutes, the programme may include a limited number of shorter lightning talks for work in progress or conceptual interventions, as well as extended discussion sessions designed to foster exchange across chronological, regional, and disciplinary boundaries. A short excursion in Hamburg may also be included. Selected contributions may be considered for publication in a themed journal issue. Subject to external funding, we expect to be able to cover accommodation and at least part of participants' travel and subsistence costs.

Scholars at all career stages are invited to apply, and early-career researchers are especially encouraged. The working language of the conference will be English.

Submission Details

Please submit a single PDF containing an abstract of **300–400 words** outlining your argument, sources, period, and engagement with meritocracy as an analytical category, along with a short biographical note of no more than **150 words**. Please indicate whether you would prefer to present a full paper or a lightning talk.

Proposals should be sent by **15 April 2026** to
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