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## **Vienna and Versailles. Materials For Further Comparison and Some Conclusions**

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### **Résumé de l'article**

The following text provides materials about the courts in Vienna and Paris/Versailles that can be used as a basis for further comparison. The results have earlier been published in 'Vienna and Versailles. The Courts of Europe's Dynastic Rivals', Cambridge 2003, in most cases without the tables and overviews, or the spreadsheets with financial data. Brief statements offer background for the materials presented, and connect them to a more general discussion of nobles at court.

#### *I. Introduction*

If we want to reappraise the historiography of early modern European nobilities we need to include the princely court. In the traditional decline-and-fall model of noble power, the court had a vital role to play. The idea that the Sun King had assembled the grands in Versailles to keep them from mischief was already present among contemporaries who had witnessed the turbulent decades halfway through the seventeenth century. The memoirs of the duc de Saint-Simon, circulating in various forms in the eighteenth century, and frequently edited in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, gave this notion a tragic quality. Nobles at Versailles not only had had to accept the rise of bourgeois administrators, they saw their king desecrate the noblest blood of France by forcing it into alliances with offspring of his adultery as well as with ministers' dynasties from the lowest of origins - says Saint-Simon. In contrast to Saint-Simon's apocalyptic vision, courts can with some justification be seen as lasting bulwarks of noble power from the sixteenth into the nineteenth century. Saint-Simon's Versailles-based image, however, seems to have won out in modern historiography, largely due to the work of Norbert Elias. Elias skilfully brought together various strands of nineteenth-century liberal and étatist historiography in a model that held sway until the 1990's. He pictured the court as a gilded cage, a magnificent environment for magnates that formerly had held power, but were now forced into a fainéant existence. Elias went beyond earlier historiography in precision and persuasion, yet noble loss of power remained an absolutely necessary starting point for the *Teufelszirkel* of various mechanisms unfolding in his model. As soon as we take distance from his primary assumption, the necessary sequences of his model lose their inevitability ; the model itself loses its persuasive charm.

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