Sovereignty is one of the central organizing concepts of political theory and historical periodization, and has been one of the most important ways in which power has been articulated and mediated from antiquity to the present. This graduate-level seminar introduces students to the various questions and debates about sovereignty by approaching this concept and its historical development through the prism of world history. While we live in a world of nation states, this course will examine how, for the most of human history, sovereignty has manifested itself in a variety of forms: empires, kingdoms, city-states, tribal confederations, religious institutions, and trans-regional communities. One of the primary aims of this course is to historicize the emergence and universalization of the nation-state, while placing it within the larger context of other forms of authority, social and political organization, ideas of sovereignty, and practices of power across the globe throughout history, with a particular emphasis upon the pre-modern era. The history of sovereignty will be approached through both its articulation and theorization in political thought, and through a close examination of the practice of kingship, empire and governance. This comparative and interdisciplinary approach to the question of sovereignty and empire—which covers a range of historical and geographic contexts, ranging from the ancient Near East to the Roman world, the medieval Mediterranean, West Africa, pre-modern Central Asia, and early modern Europe to the global empires of the 19th and 20th centuries—enables us to trace the historical development of the concept of sovereignty while recognizing the relationship between political thought and larger intellectual, social and political transformations in world history.

Readings will include both secondary scholarship and primary sources. Specific topics to be covered include the definitions and meanings of empire, kingship, and sovereignty; the different forms of government in the pre-modern world; the emergence, consolidation and decline of empires of conquest/expansion, trade, and settlement; borderlands and frontiers; trans-regional networks and communities; persecution and toleration of minorities; the relationship between sovereign power and notions of subjecthood and citizenship; the political culture of states and empires; as well as modern historical developments, including colonialism, internationalism and globalization, and their impact on notions of sovereignty. HIS MA/PhD and MAT Social Studies students register for HIS 516.