What does it mean to do history from the middle? Historians often argue about top-down and bottom-up historical narratives. But what happens when we turn our eyes to hum-drum middling level bureaucrats? This course will investigate the figure of the humble Italian notary in medieval and Renaissance culture, oft overlooked but once found, found everywhere. A thirteenth-century Italian notary would likely draw up your agreement with your washerwoman, transcribe your deposition before the inquisition, dispense legal advice, develop a religious rationale for freeing the slaves, quote you some Cicero and some Ovid, write your will, and strong-arm you into fulfilling your civic duties.

Over the last three decades, the Italian notary has undergone his own kind of renaissance in Italian studies. Not only his omnipresence but his exceptional political, literary and religious importance have come to be better understood. Scholars have also become more alert to the kinds of informants that notaries can be. For example, our knowledge of the cultural influence of Dante’s poetry changed when we began to look at the scribblings that medieval Italian notaries left in the margins of their notebooks.

This course will investigate the pivotal role that notaries played in humanism, developments in political theology, the political life of the guilds, and the writing and linguistic culture of medieval and Renaissance Italy generally. Primary sources will take center stage, but we will also pose a historiographical challenge: what are the changing ways we have used notarial writings, why have we used them in these ways, and how can we further push the limits of this source?

Course will be in English. Readings will be in English and Italian. Latin reading skills appreciated but not required.

Requirements: active participation, one oral presentation, bi-weekly book reviews, final paper

Week I: What to Do with Notaries: Literature, Social History, Intellectual History, Anthropology, and Microhistory
Week 2: Out of the Chancellery: Origins and a Paleographical Excursion
Week 3: Literacy and Textual Communities
Week 4: Role of Notary in Italian Society: Guild Politics and Family Life
Week 5: The Law Courts and Italian Exceptionalism
Week 6: Notaries and the Church
Week 7: Manus Publica and Public Trust
Week 8: Poetry I: Dante (and others) in the Margins
Week 9: Poetry II: Brunetto Latini, Lovato Lovati, Albertino Mussato
Week 10: Politics I: Scripting Political Change: Men of Letters and Political Theology
Week 11: Politics II: Notarial Arts and the Civic Life: The Case of Albertano da Brescia
Week 12: Whence Humanism: The Great Debate
Week 13: Politics III: Heroic Chancellors from Brunetto Latini to Leonardo Bruni
Week 14: Forgery and White Collar Crime: Civic Regulatory Committees and Lorenzo Valla
Week 15: Project Presentations