

TO SERVE HIGH TABLE

From Baroness Lady Genievieve de'Charbonneau*

To serve high table was an honor in the Middle Ages. It was a chance to show that you were a cultured and civilized person.

At many high tables, the major domo (often a Knight) was the director of the feast and presentations. They were responsible for the announcement, presentation and service of the feast. They also were responsible for the organization of the feast table, feast wear and proper placement of the nobility and guests in accordance to their status.

Pages and Squires served the lower tables. Younger knights and senior pages were granted the honor of serving the royal high table (as a sign of their respect, humility and servitude to their king).

Upon announcement of the feast, everyone assumed their places and waited until their majesties entered. Upon the seating of his or her majesties; everyone else was free to sit.

After everyone was settled there was a trumpet flourish. This signaled the servers to report to the major domo.

The first order of business was the ritual washing of the hands with rose water and dried with a costly fine linen towel. For royal high table two senior pages accompanied the major domo, while a page and a squire attended the lower tables.

Their majesties were the first to be attended. The major domo poured warmed rose water over their hands into an awaiting basin held by a kneeling page. The second page waited in attendance with the towel. This was repeated for all the guests at high table. This also would be repeated at the end of the feast.

The dishes of the feast were often paraded around with much ceremony and before being formally presented to their majesties. The major domo announced the dishes as they were presented.

After the presentation the dishes were carved and served. Often, there would be at least two servers in constant attendance. One was in charge of keeping the goblets filled (and sometimes doubled as the wine/poison tester) and the other for actual carving and serving. These attendants were chosen as a mark of their accomplishments in the gentlemanly arts. Both were responsible for clearing away of the dishes and dinner debris.

In period, dinner often was served in bread trenchers (two day old bread loaves that were hollowed out). The generous monarch/noble always took more than he desired to eat and placed it in his trencher. Sometimes, he shared his plate with a noble as a sign of their favor. So, too other nobles shared their trenchers or plates with their companion.

At the end of the feast the hands were again washed before other forms of entertainment continued. Then, the remaining trenchers were cleared away and distributed to the poor waiting at the gates for this often-needed largesse.

For Society feasts, some of these rituals add to the overall atmosphere by having the feast properly served. Depending on the character of the group involved, different approaches may work better than other.