

# De Paranda Mensa

(On Setting a Table)

A look at period table settings, and what to look for in setting your own table



Presented by  
K. Braden von Sobernheim, OL, OP, etc.

## Introduction

When I took this class at Pennsic XXXV, I realized how we are doing things wrong, how \*I\* was doing things wrong! For that, I want to thank Bronwyn MacFhionghin who taught me what to look for. Some of what I will say will come as no surprise to you, other things will garner the reaction of "What?!?" I hope you get out of this class what I took away from this class, a better-trained eye to what was really on the table during dinner.

## De Paranda Mensa (On Setting a Table)

One must set a table according to the time of year: in winter, in enclosed and warm places; in summer, in cool and open places. In spring, flowers are arranged in the dining room and on the table; in winter, the air should be redolent with perfumes; in summer, the floor should be strewn with fragrant boughs of trees, of vine, and of willow, which freshen the dining room; in autumn, let the ripe grapes, pears and apples hang from the ceiling. Napkins should be white and the tablecloths spotless, because, if they were otherwise, they would arouse squeamishness and take away the desire to eat. Let a servant scrub the knives and sharpen their edges so that diners will not be delayed by dullness of iron. The rest of the dishes should be scrubbed clean, whether they are earthen or silver, for this meticulous care arouses even a sluggish appetite.

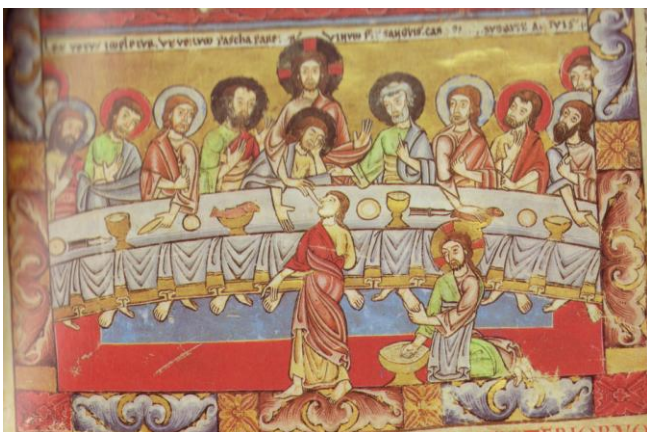
-Bartolomeo Sacchi (Platina) from *De Honesta Voluptate et Valetudine* (On Right Pleasure and Good Health) Book I, section 12.

## Tablecloths

- Predominantly White
- Side tables different colors
- Under layers of tablecloths different colors
- Trim and patterns
  - Various colors, blue to gold
  - Stripes of different colors/patterns
- Drops
  - Clip-on drops on table fronts
  - Similar to modern catering drops
- Weave
  - Evident in several pictures, different weave patterns visible.
- Creases
  - A source of pride in special feasts
- Edge fringe



German c. 1450



English, 1156



French, early 14h c.





Italian, c. 1470



Venice, 1573



Lisbon, mid 14<sup>th</sup> c.

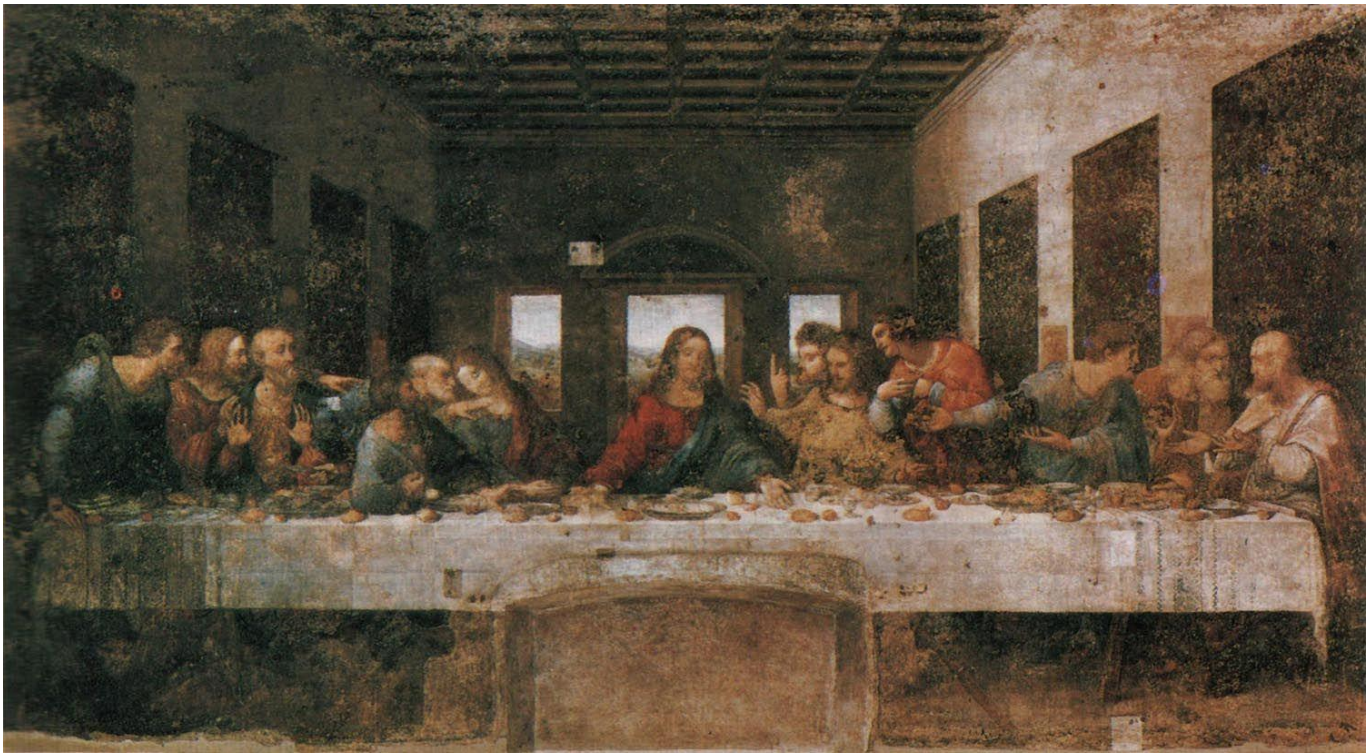


French, 14<sup>th</sup> c.



Flemish, c. 1586





Milan, 1495-98

Napkins

- Look like towels, long enough to be shared by multiple people
- Usually complimentary to the tablecloth
- Used frequently; fingertips used in eating



German, c. 1470



London, 14<sup>th</sup> c.



Italy, 15<sup>th</sup> c.  
(reproduction)



## Ewers, Pitchers, and other liquid transporting devices

Ewer - a vase-shaped pitcher or jug

Pitcher - a container for holding and pouring liquids that usually has a lip or spout and a handle

- Various liquids (wine, juice, ale)
- Metal, ceramic, or glass construction



Venice, early 16<sup>th</sup> c.



Vienna, c. 1565



German c. 1500

## Plates, Bowls, and Serving Platters

- Precious metals (gold, silver), pewter, wood, pottery
- Basic or decorated
  - Heavy decoration for special feasts on display
- Serving platters had covers to keep food warm

English, late 15<sup>th</sup> c.



German, c. 1450



Italian, late 16<sup>th</sup> c.



Italian, 15<sup>th</sup> c.



English, late 13<sup>th</sup> c. (maple)



French, early 14<sup>th</sup> c.



German, 1475-80



Flemish, 1587



Spanish, 13<sup>th</sup> c.



Italian, 1585



Drinking Vessels

- cups, mazers, bowls, mugs, jugs, beakers, stemware (goblets, chalices)
- glass, metal-precious and non-precious, pottery, horn
- open and covered



German, 1550-1600



English, 14<sup>th</sup> c.



14<sup>th</sup> c. Islamic, found in England

Plate 8 Enamelled drinking glasses, OST32 nos 155 and 128 (top), 129 (middle left) and 130 (bottom right), and detail of latter (lower left) - enlarged to various scales, except middle left and lower right reduced



German, 1400-1420



French, 1413



Dutch, late 15<sup>th</sup> c.



Glasses at Cost Plus



Italian, 12<sup>th</sup> c.  
(reproduction)



Venetian, 13<sup>th</sup> c.  
(reproduction)



German, late 15<sup>th</sup> c.



reproduction of same



German, c. 1494



Denmark, c. 800

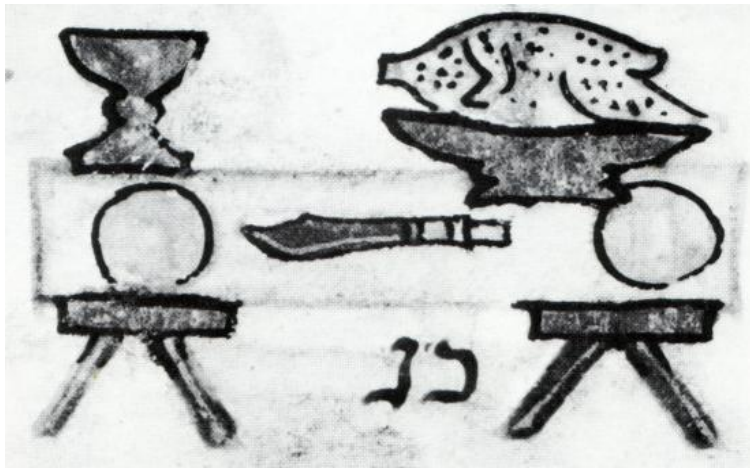
## Utensils

- Spoons
  - Prized possession, not often supplied for the diner
  - Precious metal, semi-precious, wood, horn
  - Fig-shaped bowl is the most common
- Knives
  - Always a personal item
  - Used to serve from larger pieces
  - Tip used to spear food
  - Clean tip used to retrieve salt
  - Variety of shapes/styles
  - Sometimes serrated
- Fingers
  - Kept clean (via napkin)
  - Licking considered poor table manners
- Forks
  - Byzantine Princess introduced the fork as an eating utensil to Venice in the 10<sup>th</sup> c.
  - Limited to serving utensil in northern Europe until the late 16<sup>th</sup> c. (England- 17<sup>th</sup> c.)
  - Commonly used to spear food from the plate and then pluck food from the fork with fingers.
  - Early forks were small, with short straight tines, for spearing and holding food, rather than scooping.

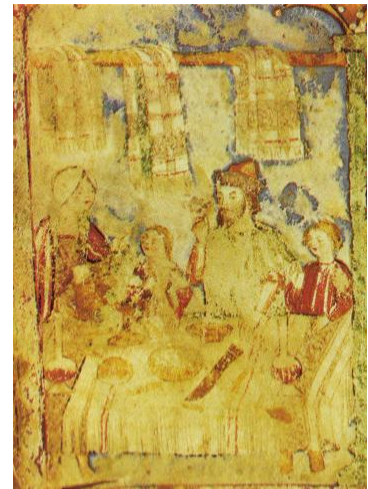




English, 14<sup>th</sup>, c



Spain, c. 1400



Aragon, c. 1400



Vienna, c. 1565



German, 1475-80



Italian, early 16<sup>th</sup> c.



Norman, 11<sup>th</sup> c.



## Bread

- Loaves directly on the table
  - Usually round, occasionally oblong
  - Varying sizes, from dinner roll to large loaf
  - Never torn, always cut
- Bread Trencher
  - Square shape
  - Used to soak up juices from the other food
  - Thrown into stew as thickener after used
  - Sometimes given to the poor
  - New trencher for each course
- Used as a utensil
  - Spoon (sops) for stew
  - Salt holder
  - Utensil cleaner (wipe off knife or spoon on it)

## Trencher plate

- Pottery, wood, precious metal, pewter
- Square
- Place setting, akin to a placemat today; in lieu of costlier dinnerware



Lisbon, mid 14<sup>th</sup> c.



Italian, 1470



## Salt and Salt Cellars

- Salt
  - Precious commodity, came in different levels of quality
  - Finer grind was higher quality
  - Whiter the better
  - Usually only a few ounces available to the whole table
- Salt Cellars
  - Could be highly decorative
  - Variety of materials
  - Salt extracted with the tip of the knife



French, 13<sup>th</sup> c.



French, 15<sup>th</sup> c.

## Nef

European vessel in the form of a medieval ship, often complete with rigging. Started as a drinking vessel, but by the 14<sup>th</sup> c. it was used for salt storage as well as on-table storage of extra napkins, plates, and utensils.



English, 15<sup>th</sup> c.

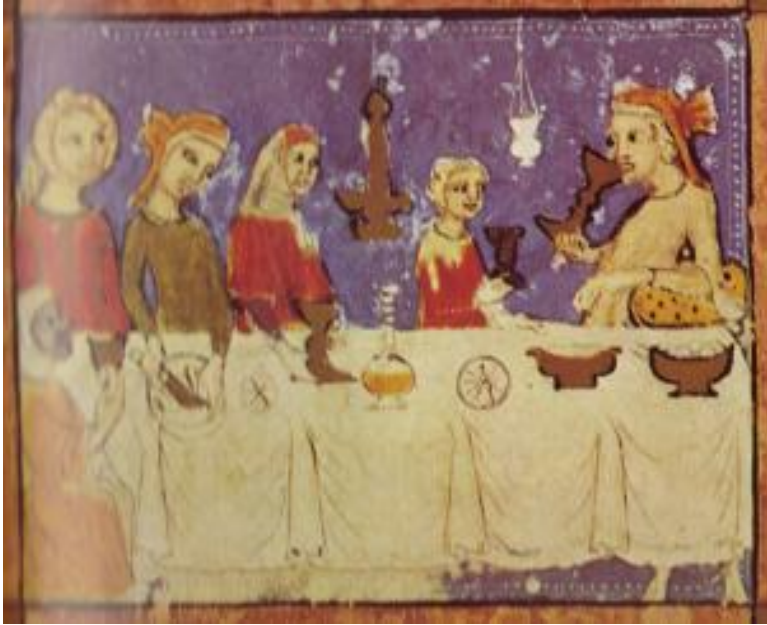


Burgundian, mid 15<sup>th</sup> c.



## Lighting

- Usually not on the table
  - A well lit hall, outside light preferred
  - Individuals holding torches
  - Hanging lamps most common
  - Candles usually on the table for religious purposes



Aragon, 1150



Venice, 1592-94



Flemish, c. 1500



## Miscellany: Tables, Backdrops, Manners, &c.

- Tables
  - Frequently trestle tables, comprising a flat board over a pair of supports
    - Allowed ease in breaking down the feast
    - Ease of storage
  - Benches were common seating to accommodate all, even royalty
  - Individual chairs used for smaller dinner settings
- Backdrops
  - Covered chair backs or short walls to decorate around the feast
  - Wood construction



German, 1475-80



Burgundian, mid 15<sup>th</sup> c.

### Table manners

Being crude at feast isn't period, it's just crude. As taken from *Chastoiement des dames* (*An Admonition to Ladies*), a 13<sup>th</sup> c. treatise that included basic table manners:

- Don't laugh too much at the table
- Don't speak too much at the table
- Don't take the best pieces
- Don't take too large pieces
- Don't take too hot pieces
- Don't dip your food into the salt cellar
- Don't pick your teeth with your knife
- Keep your elbows off the table
- Wipe your mouth before drinking
- Wipe your nose before drinking
- Don't let your nose drip
- Don't blow your nose noisily
- Don't scratch yourself
- Wash any fruit before eating it
- Don't hasten to swallow your bread before the first course is served
- Don't speak or drink with your mouth full
- Don't reach across in front of your neighbour to serve yourself

Hopefully this has inspired more people to truly re-create the period feast, and not the SCA feast. In building this class I have learned more and hope to inspire others to approach dinner at an SCA event as an opportunity to present an authentic meal, from the table up.



## B I B L I O G R A P H Y

- Backhouse, Janet. The Illuminated Page. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.
- Backhouse, Janet. The Illuminated Manuscript. New York: Phaidon Press, 2006.
- Bartlett, Robert, Ed. Medieval Panorama. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001.
- Boger, Ann. Consuming Passions: The Art of Food and Drink. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1983.
- Crinelli Lorenzo, Ed. Treasures from Italy's Great Libraries. New York: Vendome Press, 1997.
- Egan, Geoff. The Medieval Household Daily Living c. 1150-c. 1450. London: Museum of London, 1998.
- Frugoni, Chiara, William McCuaig trans. A Day in a Medieval City. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Hallam, Eilizabeth, Ed. The Plantagenet Encyclopedia. New York: Crescent Books, 1996.
- Holme, Bryan. Princely Feasts and Festivals. New York: Thames & Hudson, 1988.
- The J. Paul Getty Museum Handbook of the Collections. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1997.
- Janson, H.W. and Anthony F. History of Art, Sixth Edition. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001.
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art Europe in the Middle Ages. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987.
- Metzger, Therese and Mendel. Jewish Life in the Middle Ages. Fribourg: Chartwell Books, 1982.
- Milham, Mary Ella ed., Platina On Right Pleasure and Good Health. Tempe: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1998.
- Nowrick, Gwen. Drinking Vessels. Reenactment Goods. 1997. 1 Feb 2008.  
<http://www.historicenterprises.com> (all images used with permission!)
- Rowling, Marjorie. Life in Medieval Times. New York: Perigree Books, 1979.
- Sagas of the Norsemen: Viking and German Myth. Amsterdam: Time-Life Books, 1997.
- Scully, D. Eleanor and Terence Scully. Early French Cookery. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002.
- Wright, Clifford A. A Mediterranean Feast. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1999.