



Sons of Norway  
**HERITAGE PROGRAMS**



## MiniPresentation**5**

**VIKING CUSTOMS**

# Viking Customs

**Uninvited and highly unwelcome as the Vikings** might have been when they went a-calling to England, France and other European countries, the hospitality shown friends and strangers when at home in Norway is quite another story. On special occasions, invitations were sent out well in advance to permit the host and hostess and their guests to be well prepared. The house was cleaned as never before, pots and pans polished, shields and tapestries hung in the main room. Guests were welcomed at the door by the hosting couple, but if they were to be particularly honored or had come a long way across the mountains, they were already met down the road. They did not have any Emily Post to look to, but age-old runic writings prescribed: “When a guest arrives, chilled to the very knees from his journey, he needs fire, food and dry clothes.”

In the great hall the guests were seated according to rank and prominence. The host might even yield his intricately-carved high seat if the special guests rated such an honor. Although men and women usually ate separately, on occasions like these they all dined together. Slaves or hired help normally did the serving, but there was no stigma attached to manual labor, and sometimes even the wife and daughters of a rich host took part in the serving. Because fingers served as forks, basins of water and towels were passed around before and after the meal. Knives were short and pointed, usually brought along by the guests. Spoons were of wood, horn, bone, bronze, brass, silver or gold, the latter ones not exactly “made in Norway,” but brought home as a kind of souvenir from successful raids abroad. As for the menu, the most common vegetables were cabbage, onions, beans and angelica, a kind of parsley. The most common fish was herring, and meat could be mutton, lamb, beef, pork or game birds. Sweetening was done with honey, and as seasoning they used a so-called “black salt”, which came from evaporated sea water. Melted butter was the usual sauce for fish. There were plenty of various cheeses and apples, the only domesticated fruit, and also various berries and nuts.

**Ale and mead were the common beverages**, with some French wine added, if the host had any left from his latest—shall I say “shopping spree”—in Normandy. All had fancy drinking horns, carved with mythological scenes or runic magic words, with metal-bound edgings of silver or gold, enamel and precious stones. Toasts were exchanged, which included promises to perform a certain deed. King Harald Fair-hair pledged he would unite Norway into one kingdom in a toast, and he did. Other toasts followed, to every single god in Valhalla. As the toasts were quite numerous, the festive mood increased accordingly. When the meal was finished, the tables were dismantled and stacked away, while open lamps with floating wicks helped light the big room.

**Entertainment consisted of saga-telling**, impromptu poems by poets, music by a fiddler and sing-alongs. Fortune-tellers and jugglers would round out the evening. Gifts were presented to the most prominent guests, usually at departing time. An old proverb stated: “Gifts always look for return.” The most expensive gifts consisted of ships, oxen, horses, white bear skins and large amounts of white wool.

As there were no hotels or inns at that time, households were obliged to shelter and entertain wayfarers. Uninvited strangers called out when approaching, and most were welcomed into the house because hospitality was a prime virtue. The guest houses were opened, but the strangers were not to pay for quarters and food. It was, however, considered impolite to stay for more than three days. Later, by order of the King, public shelters were erected as early-day versions of hotels.

Modern-day Norwegians are more welcome on their travels than their Viking ancestors. But one thing remains the same—they still give a hearty *velkommen* to their guests.