

# They say good hosts make bad guests

by Sabine Eiche

*Richmond News*, December 5, 2012, p.21

A friend's claim that good hosts make bad guests, and vice versa, left me feeling skeptical. I started to watch for signs of this pattern. To my surprise, more often than not it proved to be true – which made me wonder about the origins of the words host and guest. It turns out to be a complex story.

Two Latin words are involved in this investigation – “hospes” and “hostis.” Both originally signified stranger or foreigner. By the time of Cicero, “hospes” had acquired the meaning of guest, and “hostis” had come to mean a public enemy (it's the source of our word hostile; a private foe was known as “nimicus,” from which we derive inimical).

Our English word guest doesn't come from “hospes,” but instead is related to the German “Gast,” from an Indo-European root shared by the Latin “hostis,” stranger, enemy. One theory to account for such a seeming contradiction (guest = stranger, enemy) is that the Romans regarded the stranger as an enemy, whereas the Germans held the stranger to be a welcome and privileged person, a view confirmed by the ancient Roman author Tacitus in his work “Germania.”

The word host (or hostess), a person who entertains a guest, has been traced to both “hospes” and “hostis.” In German, the word for host is “Gastgeber,” literally a giver to guests. The Italian “ospite” means guest as well as host and derives from “hospes.”

There are many more words in English that can be traced back to “hospes” and “hostis.” Hospitality comes from the Latin “hospitalitas,” which

grew out of “hospes.” Hospice, hospital, hostel, hostelry are from the same family, denoting various lodgings. Hospital and hospice originally described places where pilgrims and travelers were lodged and entertained. Hospice referred particularly to the house of the monks of St. Bernard in the Alps.

Hosteler, or hostler, was once the word for an innkeeper, though hostler (now more commonly written ostler) came to mean the person who tended the horses at an inn. Historically, an innkeeper was also called a host, which, however, has nothing to do with the Latin for innkeeper – “caupo.” That word is at the root of two obsolete English verbs: cauponate and cauponize, both current in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, meaning to sell liquor or victuals.

When we use host to mean a large group or crowd, we are using it in the sense of “hostis.” “Hostem facere” was a medieval Latin term meaning to perform military service, in which “hostis” referred to military service. That sense of “hostis” eventually came to mean the whole army, and thence any multitude of people.

Related to “hostis” is “hostia,” signifying victim or sacrifice, which is the source of the word host denoting the wafer used in celebrating the Mass.

Although I’ve had to conclude that the explanation for good host = bad guest is more likely to be found in psychology than etymology, tracing the history of the words has made me aware of how crucial it must have been for people in ancient times to develop a keen sense of who’s who and what’s what – if they wanted to survive.