

An Introduction to Viking Age Storage Containers

The form of any vessel will vary depending on its intended use for storage, cooking, eating or serving with, this article will focus on Viking period vessels we can use to store food.

In a time before electric refrigeration or even ice boxes keeping food fresh would have been a major problem even in winter. Where possible perishables would have been prepared as needed and used quickly, and the majority of food was preserved in some manner such as salting, pickling, smoking or drying. Some foods such as root vegetables can be stored over winter by being buried, an Icelandic dish called Hakarl is made by burying a Greenland shark in the sand and allowing it to ferment. Early Celts are known to have stored grain in bell shaped pits, the germination of the outer layer using up the available oxygen and allowing the grain to be kept for years. Once baked unleavened bread will keep much longer than modern breads.

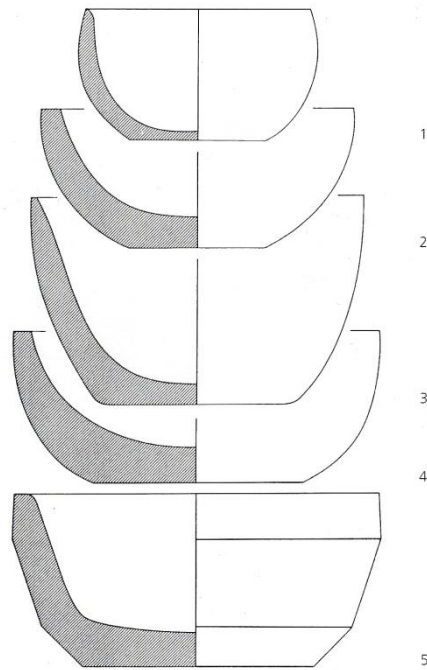
The farmhouse at Stöng had a room for food storage with large wooden vats partially sunk into the earth to keep the contents cool. Large stones were set into the rafters for additional insulation. Food could also be smoked in the rafters, out houses specially for storing dried fish are commonly mentioned in the sagas.



A large storage vat from Hedeby.

Wooden Containers

Wooden bowls and plates are common in the Viking age, obviously some of these are for serving or eating food on, but some are quite large and deep and would be usable for storing food in. There is a very large lathe turned Iron Age bowl with a lid from Glastonbury lake village.



Deep Lathe turned bowls from Hedeby.

Chests could also be used to store large amounts of food, a large Iron bound chest at Oseberg was found to be full of apples.

Coopered vessels such as barrels and buckets are best used for storing liquids but could be used for dry goods and were common in various sizes.. Large coopered vessels were used in houses probably to store dairy such as whey, skyr, butter or milk. A Norman example from Pevensey castle may have been used for pickling.



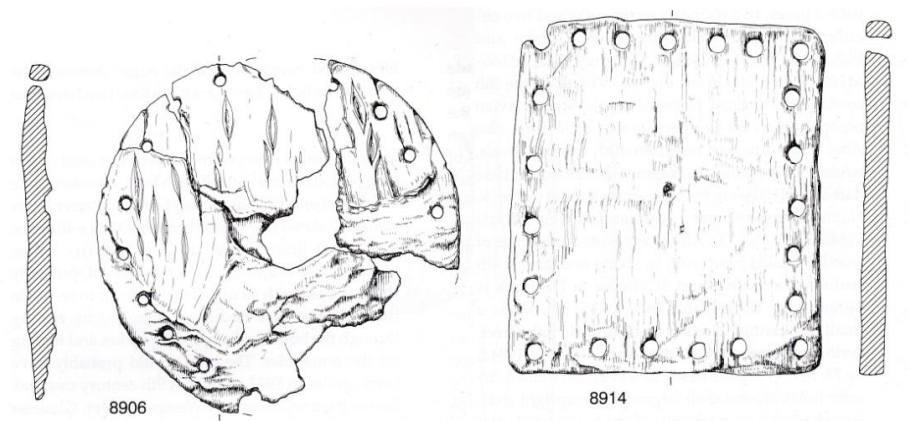
Various sized buckets from the Oseberg burial.

Bentwood boxes were found in York and Hedeby and seem to have been quite common. These were made from a thin wooden lath bent around a solid base and sewn in place. With a lid in place are quite airtight.



Bentwood box from Hedeby.

If the material doesn't need to be immediately stored in an airtight manner baskets could be used, with or without a lid or covering.



Basket bases from York.

Ceramic Containers

Ceramic pots and jars were common. Some were imported as a sealed storage vessel for imports such as wine. Soapstone was more common in Norway due to the lack of clay, though most of these I am familiar with are cooking vessels rather than for storage.

Pots and jars were commonly ceramic, various types are found across the Viking world both imported and locally made. Not all pottery was glazed and some medieval glazing was poor or patchy. An unglazed vessel will still hold liquid but it will seep through in a matter of hours, and the vessel will take on the flavours or smell of what is being stored, limiting its uses.



Ceramic jars from York.

Other Containers

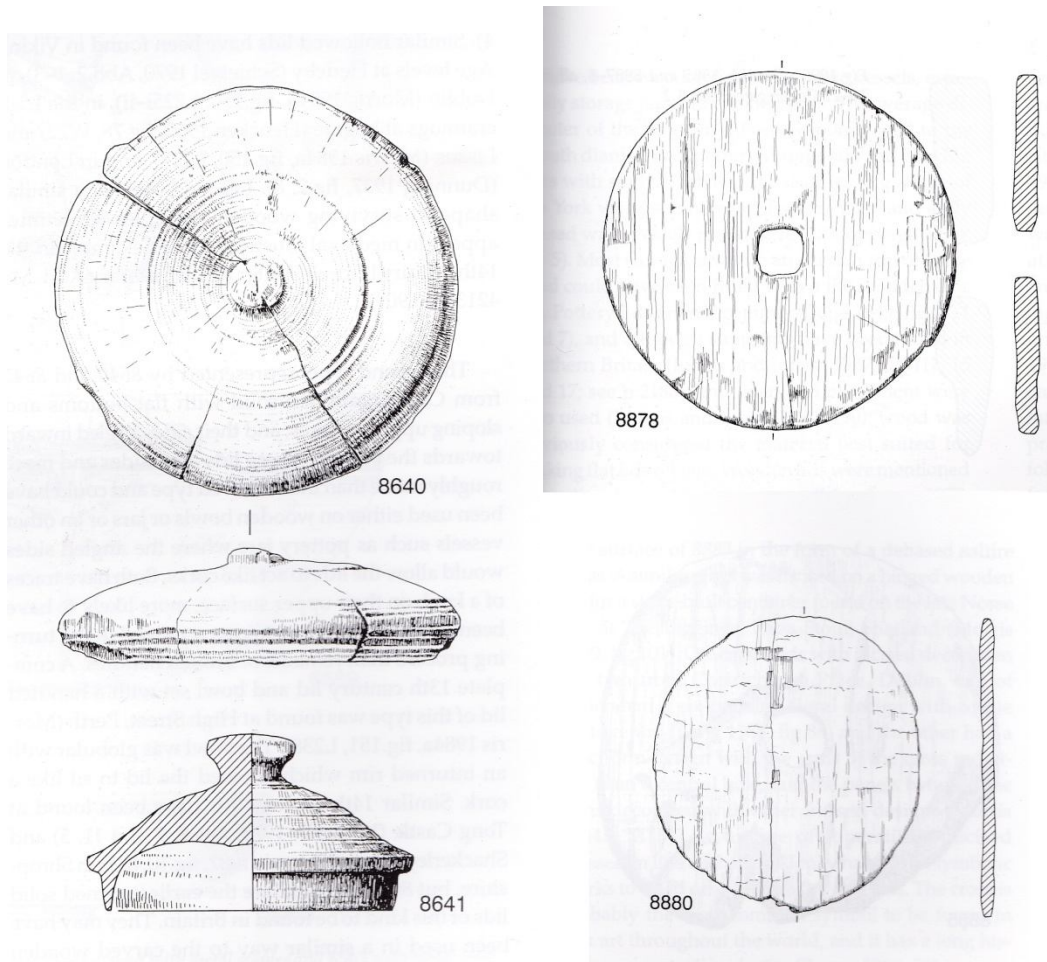
Metal dishes existed, as did various vessels made from animal products such as horn drinking vessels or leather buckets and costrels. A Saxon costrel from Winchester is made from ceramic in the form of a leather bottle.



A ceramic costrel from Winchester showing the form of leather examples.

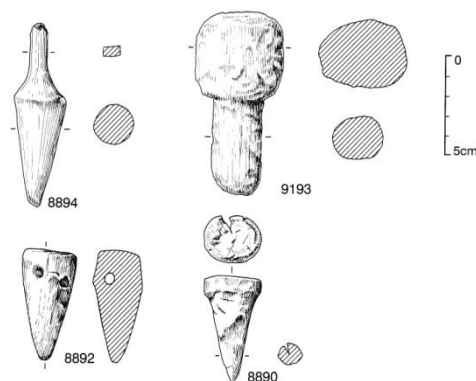
Lids and Sealing

Wooden lids were found at York similar to examples across Europe, both simple wooden discs and lathe turned fitted lids with some sort of step for the lip of the jar. Other wooden lids for cauldrons, butter churns and coopered vessels are also known. Small lathe turned wooden containers with lids are also known from the wreck of the Mary Rose.



Turned lids and pot lids from York.

Wooden bungs could also be used as stoppers in jars, as could rolled leather. Though known in the Mediterranean there is no evidence for cork bark stoppers in Northern Europe.



Wooden stoppers from York.



A coopered vessel with a lockable lid found in the Oseberg Burial.

Some other period methods of ensuring an airtight seal could be a dough, grease or wax used around a lid to seal out air and lock in the lid. Food may have been stored or preserved in Oil or clarified butter . In period some containers were “sealed” with a blessing or cross inscribed on the lid, but this is not likely to meet modern food standards.

Items such as jugs could be covered with a piece of linen soaked in beeswax to cover the top. These would be moulded over the opening, and possibly tied in place to make a reasonably secure lid, or used to wrap food such as cheese.

A Short Bibliography

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-*Wood and woodworking in Anglo-Scandinavian and Medieval York*, 2000. Carole A Morris.

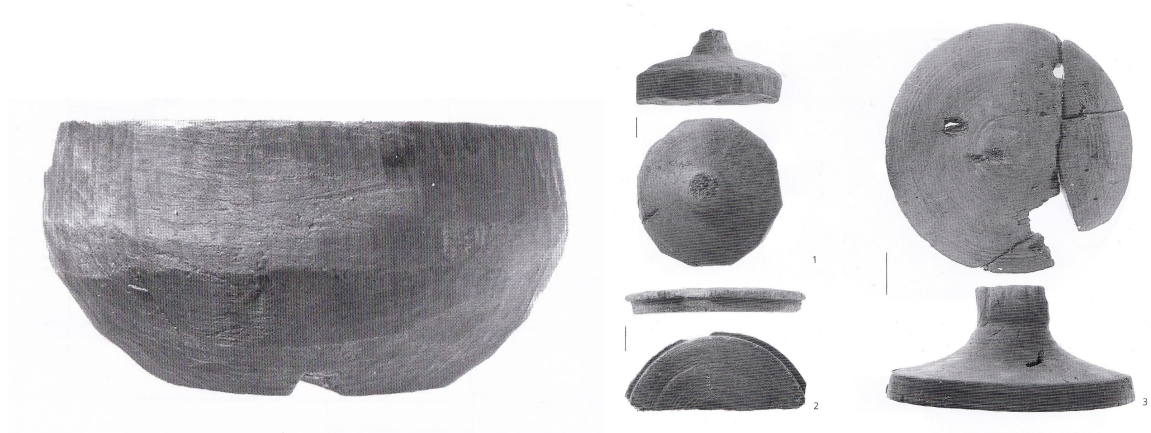
-*Die Holzfunde Von Haithabu*, 2006. Florian Westphal.

-*The Mead Hall*, 2003. Steven Pollington.

-*Anglo-Saxon Food & Drink*, 2006. Ann Hagen.

Appendix Images of originals and reconstructions.

Wooden Containers

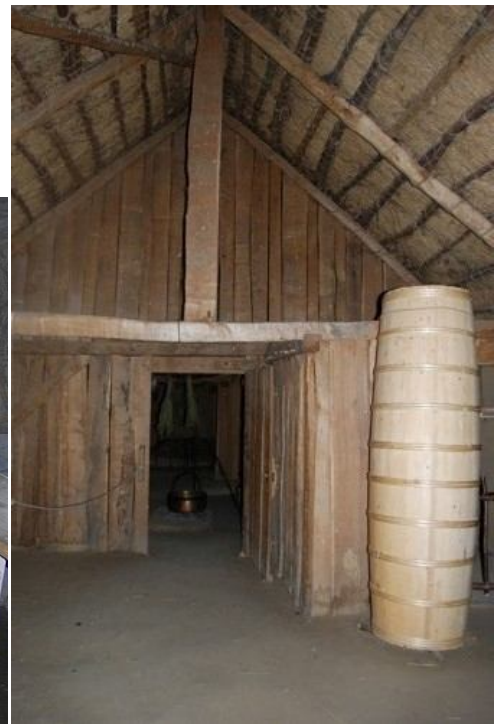


A wooden bowl and wooden lids from Hedeby.

Coopered Vessels



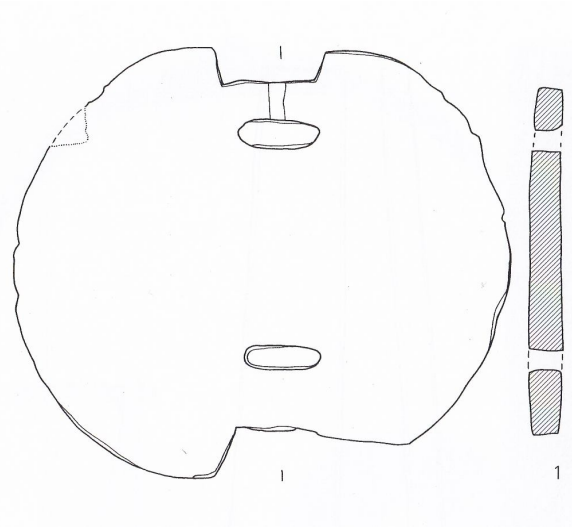
Reconstructed storage vats from stong (photo G.walker).



Reconstructed vat from Hedeby.

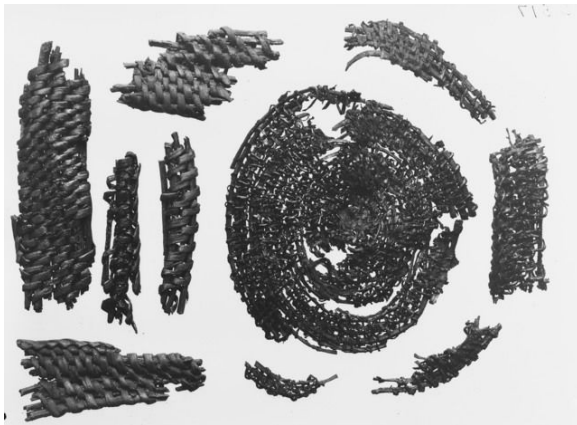


Bucket from vestfold Norway.



A lid from a Stave vessel in Hedeby.

Woven Containers



Basketwork from the Oseberg burial.

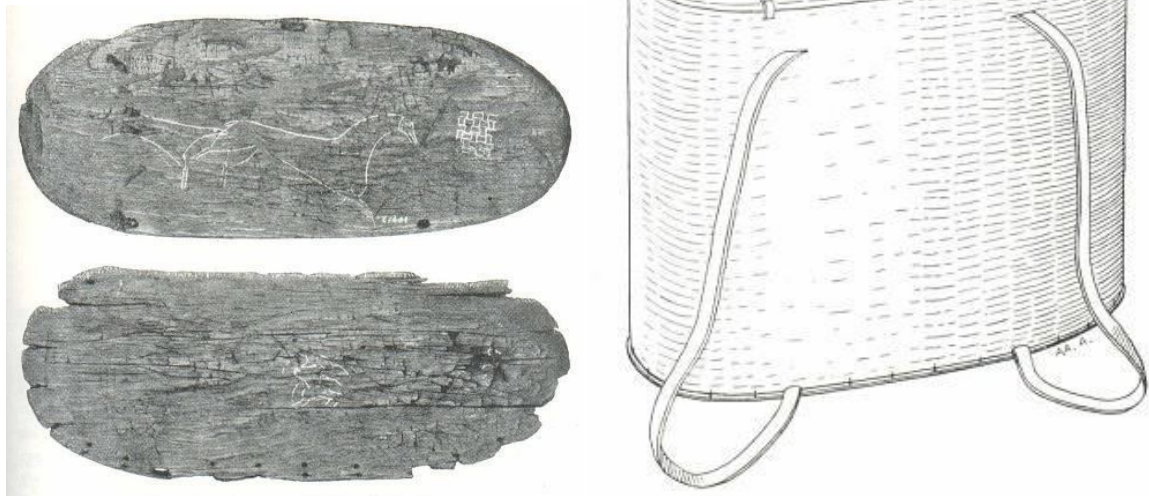


Basketwoven container from Lund.

Other Wood Products

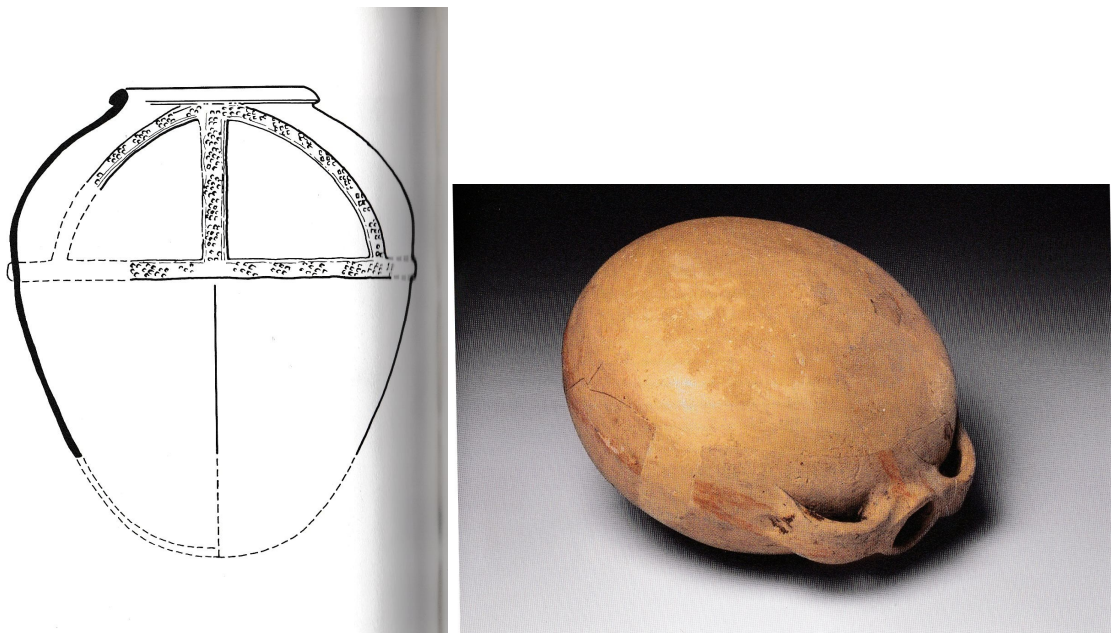


An American Indian birchbark container from Newfoundland and a traditional reconstructed birch bark container (source Wikipedia).

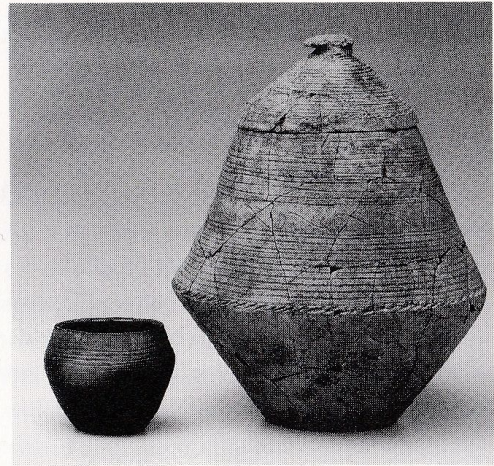


The backpack pieces and reconstruction from the Gokstad ship.

Ceramic Containers

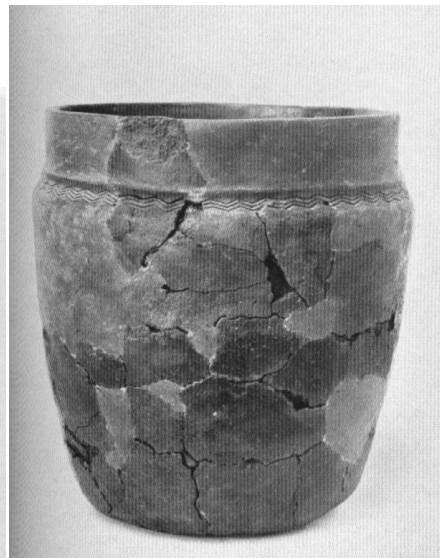


Reconstructed Badorf ware wine pitcher from York and a Costrel from Dorestad.



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Ceramics from the Bornholm museum. (photo D.Catchpoole) and a 11thcentury Slavic style container with lid from Lund.



Ceramic jars from Birka.

Other Containers



A Metal bowl in the Oslo Museum and a metal box from Birka.