

COOKING WITH VIKINGS

July 29, 2016 Steve Ashby Day of Archaeology
2016, Finds, UK, Viking Artefacts, diet, food, Identity, medieval, Portable Antiquities Scheme, pottery, Viking



At the

Hearth with Helga (Maude Hirst)

I'm a Viking-Age archaeologist, interested in the everyday lives of people in early-medieval England, Scotland, and Scandinavia, which I try to understand through looking at their artefacts. I am most well-known for my work on what might seem an odd choice of artefact: Viking hair combs (I've already written [elsewhere](#) about why these are important, so I won't bore you with that again here). I'm also interested in metalwork, particularly what we can say from the evidence recovered by metal detectorists (this builds on my previous life as a Finds Liaison Officer with the [Portable Antiquities Scheme](#); if you don't know about the PAS, do check it out). But most recently, I have started up a project that uses scientific analysis of pottery to learn about how people stored, prepared, cooked, and ate food in different parts of Viking-Age England.

We're midway through the students' summer vacation now, and the pressure is on to really get things moving. Today has been a combination of work on my [Melting Pot](#) project, and on a community-led project we are involved with at [Torpe Manor](#), Cambridgeshire. I'll talk here about Melting Pot.

This project involves the collection of large quantities of pottery from sites across England (and Denmark). So far, we have arranged to study material from the famous excavations at Coppergate (on which the [Jorvik Viking Centre](#) is based) and the more recent excavations at Hungate in the same city.

We'll also be looking at the amazing material from Flaxengate in Lincoln, and the stunning sequences from beneath the [City of London](#). In addition, we're looking at collections from rural sites in [Yorkshire](#) and [Lincolnshire](#), and are particularly excited about the largely unexplored potential of the town of Newark in Notts.

For each of these collections, we will be looking at the range of pottery produced, and evidence for the way in which it was used. This means carefully examining the exterior for signs of charring: was the pot hung over a fire, or did it sit in the coals?

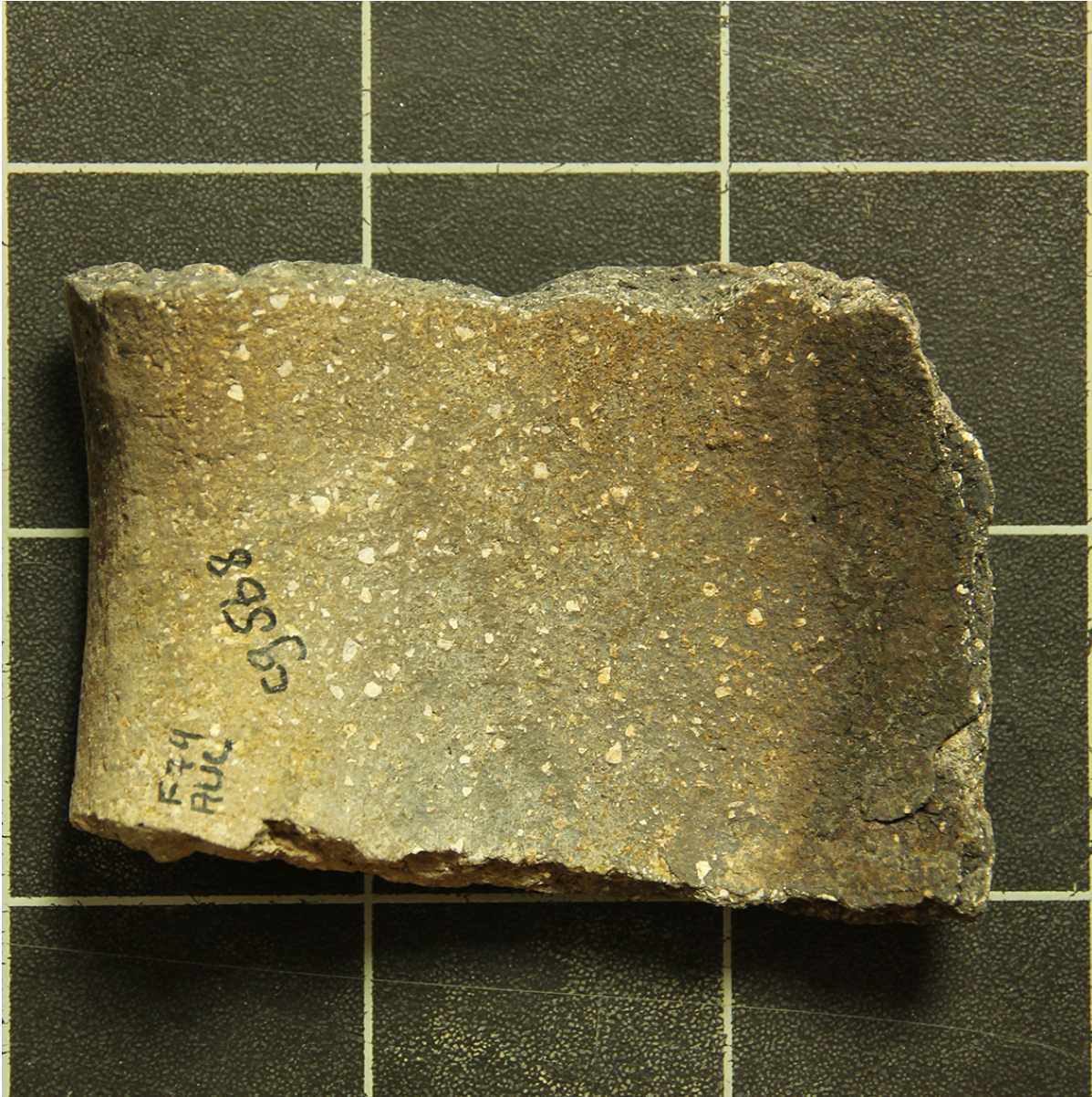


Cooking Pot

from Flaxengate, Lincoln, showing charred spots on exterior.

We'll also be checking interior surfaces for evidence of chemical abrasion, which might indicate that the pots were used in fermentation or similar processes. The insides of the pots also frequently preserve evidence of cooking; burnt food crusts can be examined under the microscope, in order to identify any

vegetable or cereal matter that might remain. My assistant, [Anita Radini](#), has an excellent eye for this. Internal scorching patterns can also tell us about how the pot was used: was food boiled hard, simmered, or even cooked dry? If we look carefully enough, we can answer this kind of question.



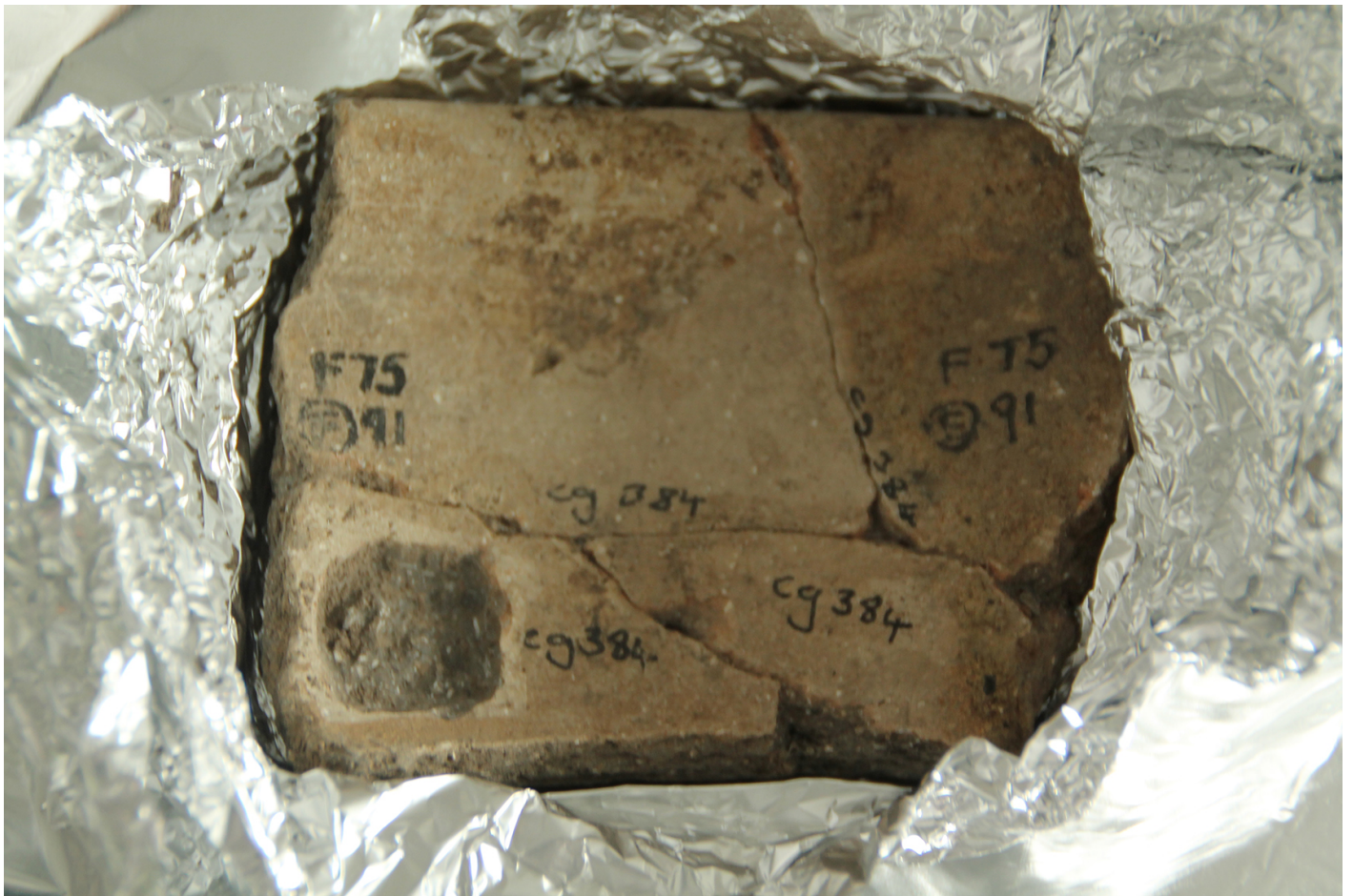
Another
Cooking Pot from Flaxengate, Lincoln, this time showing line of internal carbonisation from food sticking to edges.

To help, we'll be doing some 3D models of good examples, so that sooting, residue, and wear patterns can be clearly seen. Colleagues at the British Museum have done some great work on this, using volunteers: [here](#)), but I'd like to try it with more 'mundane' artefacts. One of my jobs for today is to find some good candidates for this process – this looks like a good one:



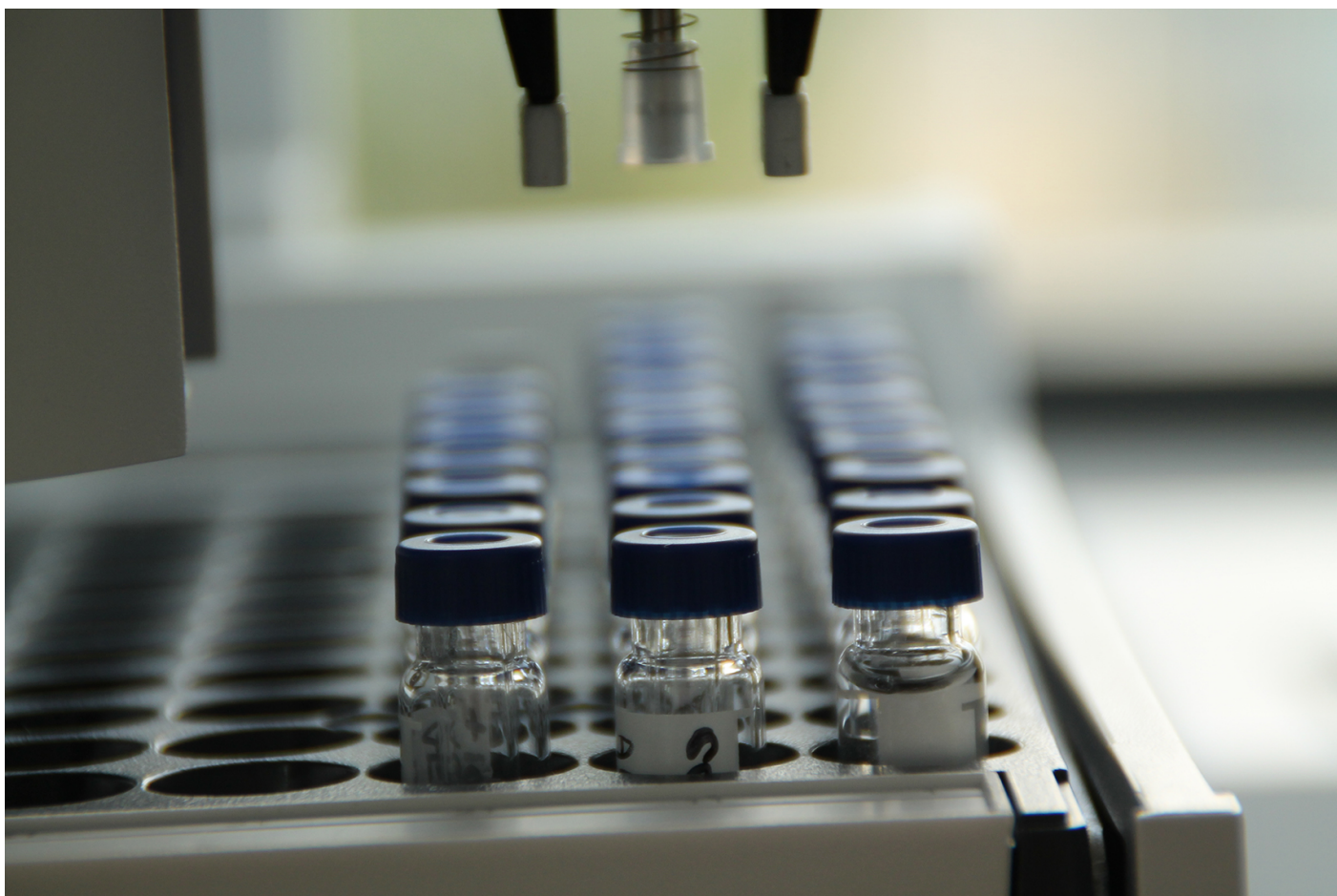
Handle from a large pitcher (Torksey ware) from Newark

But that's only the beginning. Anita is currently in the middle of a programme of sample preparation, which involves carefully drilling into the pottery to remove a powder that we can chemically analyse. We do this through York's state-of-the-art [BioArCh](#) facility, run by my co-investigator, [Prof Oliver Craig](#).



Sampled sherd from Flaxengate, Lincoln. I seem to be working on Flaxengate a lot today!

This will allow us to identify any fatty residues that have soaked into the pot, but which are usually invisible to the naked eye. The process is described in this short [video](#).



Extracted samples ready for gas chromatography: the first phase of analysis.

Together, our approach will enable us to say whether particular types of pot (e.g. small cooking pots, larger cooking pots, pitchers, bowls, or dishes) are being used in consistent ways.

Can we see patterning in the way different sorts of pot are used in food processing, or in the foods stored, cooked or served in them? Do people cook in the same way in rural and urban contexts? What about coastal sites: do they have a different cuisine to that which we see further inland? How do the traditionally Scandinavian parts of England (the North and East) differ from the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ South? How does any of this compare against what we see at towns and farmsteads in Denmark? And is there evidence of change over time? The idea is to get the first really high-resolution look at cooking and eating practices across 9th- to 11th-century England. We’ll be feeding the information back to our project partners, who include the [Jorvik Viking Centre](#) and [the Collection, Lincoln](#), and hope we can help them by providing new stories to develop the visitor experience.

We’ll also be organising a number of events in 2017, including during the York Viking Festival and Festival of Archaeology, at which you can come along and eat like a viking!

You can find out more about Melting Pot at www.meltingpot.site, or follow us on Twitter [@FoodAD1000](#).

You can check out my other Viking research at www.ashbysteve.wix.com/vikings/ [@grungeviking](#)



Arts & Humanities
Research Council