

Viking Chests

Lord Ian of Senlac

Few Viking era chests survive intact so we have a poor idea of their range of sizes, woods, or construction. Surviving chests are about evenly divided between trapezoidal and square cross section. They also vary in having flat or rounded tops. I chose the trapezoidal because it looked more Viking to me. Square chests appear everywhere across historical eras and cultures. While Trapezoidal chests survived in specialty niches, such as shipping chests, as late as the settlement of Jamestown, they are a significant part of Viking finds. Having chosen trapezoidal I chose flattop for ease of construction. Similarly I designed it to use standard lumber, serve as a seat, and to be easily moved. Construction can be done at varying levels of complexity and authenticity.

The simplest construction uses a few tools and simple concepts. First cut the lumber to length per the drawings (see accompanying Adobe Acrobat file) for the ends and sides. Fasten the sides together with clamps or finishing nails not completely driven in. This simplifies the next step. Arbitrarily pick which will be the top of the chest and mark in 1 inch from each end. Draw a line from this mark to the bottom outer corner of each end. This forms the angle of your chest. If you like something different, change the angle. I chose this for a combination of aesthetics and minimal waste. Saw away the excess. By sawing the sides together both pieces match evenly, even if you wander away from the line. Mark matching ends to avoid later possible confusion. Repeat this step with the ends.

Now lay out the sides so that the inner sides are uppermost. Mark a line 3 quarters of an inch up from the bottom. Parallel it with a line about 1 inch towards the top from the first line. This marks the channel that the bottom board will fit into so it needs to be the width of the board. The easiest way is to lay one of the boards you are using along the first line and mark along it. Use a saw, or chisels to cut about 3/8 inch deep along both lines. Remove the waste between the lines with more saw cuts or chisel. Test fit the bottom and adjust if needed.

The next step is cutting the ends and sides to form the overlap. This overlap transfers stresses to the ground through the ends. The top of the channel made in the previous step makes one shoulder of the overlap on the sides. Lay the end on the side and again use it to mark the material to be removed. Cut away the waste. Now stand the side up on the end this will show exactly what needs to be removed to match them. Mark and remove. With all 4 pieces cut it is time to start assembly.

At this time decide on the degree of authenticity you want. You may use Rose headed or cut nails. I abuse my chests with up to 60 pounds of chain mail and axes. Therefore I used screws countersunk and covered with pieces of dowel rod. This gives me strength and a more period look. The doweling is glued over the screws, be careful and clean up any excess glue. Left it will not take stain later if you so chose. If you wish, the chest can be completely held

with dowels or trenails. One period chest was held together with metal straps wrapped around the edges and nailed.

With the fastening decided, attach both ends to one side. Measure and cut the bottom. Remember that everything is at an angle so I cut a bit big first. Mark the approximate angle needed at each end and start working towards it. Use whatever tools suit you and stop for regular test fits. While it is time consuming it is worth it. I rushed one of my chests and got a loose fitting bottom. Loaded with 60 pounds it flexed enough one day to pop out. Once the bottom fits the 3 pieces already joined start fitting the last side.

With that done and everything fastened, make the top. Every once in a while the chest is not quite square. No problem, since with a trapezoidal chest the top will be smaller than the original boards. Lay the top board on the chest, mark and cut. The next decision is how to attach the top. My rough chests have cleats on the inside of the top instead of hinges. They keep the top from sliding off but not much more. For the uses I put them to that is enough. You will probably want hinges. Modern ones can be found in a variety of style and looks. You can get fancy strap hinges or cabinet hinges that all most disappear in use. Leather hinges have a long historical record and I would justify them despite no surviving Viking evidence. The hinges found on the Mastermyr tool chest are probably the epitome of authenticity. They can be made several ways. The male half is a long tongue bent into a circle that fits into the hole in the female half. The male can be filed or sawn out. Alternately a piece of rod can be welded to the strap to form it. The female is simply drilled out. Bending is possible cold in either case, but is easier if you can heat the tongue. Having a blacksmith forge will make the process easier. The Vikings seem to have used multiple small nails rather than fewer large ones to attach hinges. If you go to the effort to make hinges then attach them with clenched nails. They are no more than nails bent into a staple on the inside of the chest. They are difficult to accidentally pull out and are the way strakes were fastened on ships for over a thousand years.

Finish the chest as you wish. Natural stains and dull finishes or paints are probably best. If you make multiple chests using the same dimension lumber and sizes you will find they stack on each other. That saves space in the typical crowded SCA house. I have had my chests left out in the rain and had no problem with wet contents. They also dress up the camp while adding seating and storage. Enjoy your chest!