

# Alstahaug in Helgeland, Norway – the Priesthood as the Upper Class of the North-European Coast AD 1200–1750

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*North Atlantic coast; priesthood; material culture as signs of rank; household; power*

## Abstract

Through archaeological and written sources about household, trade and power I have investigated how and why the priesthood at Alstahaug presented themselves as members of the upper class on the North-European coast. I have also investigated whether there is a tradition in the way that the upper class presents itself. The meanings of the different source types are stressed.

## Context – Background

The Church has been a tool in making North-Norway part of today's Norway. In the Old Norse sagas we hear about landlords who christened themselves as a sign of obedience to the king. These landlords, such as the one living on the large estate Tjøtta, built churches on their own estates (Berglund 1995; 1997; 1998). However, many of these landlords fought against King Olav Haraldsson in the battle at Stiklestad in 1030. This battle is a symbol of the formation of Norway into an united kingdom and of the christening of Norway. After his death King Olav was canonised as Saint Olav. The north of Norway, however, was not so firmly tied to the rest of Norway in the following centuries, but the king had interest in the rich resources of the north such as fish, cod liver oil, furs and walrus tusks. In Nordland the codfish trade was of great importance. To control the north of Norway, I believe the king and the Church built new churches around AD 1200 on neutral ground that did not belong to the old families who had been in opposition to the king. The borders of the inner parts of the north of Scandinavia were

however not ratified until several centuries later (Berglund 1995; 1997; 1998).

Alstahaug is such a church that, according to my studies, was established by the king and his Church around AD 1200. It became a centre in perhaps the richest parish in the north of Norway, situated just below the Arctic Circle. Already in 1321 written sources tell of a priest, sira Sigurd, from Alstahaug who was in Lofoten, the centre for cod fishing in Norway. Sira Sigurd must have been there to collect taxes from the fishermen.

Alstahaug is well known in Norway because Petter Dass was rector there from 1689 until his death in 1709. Petter Dass is the most important baroque-poet in Norway. In addition to psalms and other religious poetry he pictured the life of the people in his poetry. His most famous work is called "Nordlands Trompet", (The Trumpet of Nordland County) a description of people and nature in North-Norway in verse. There are many myths surrounding Petter Dass. The son of Petter Dass, Anders Dass, followed his father as priest of Alstahaug. When Anders Dass died, his property had to be divided among his children. Documents listing his possessions at the time they were divided among his heirs are preserved and show that Anders Dass had assembled enormous wealth on earth. Some of his fortune came from his wife's wealthy Angell-family in Trondheim.

## Archaeological excavations at Alstahaug

My excavations of the parsonage grounds close to the church of Alstahaug have shown that there have been houses here since the church



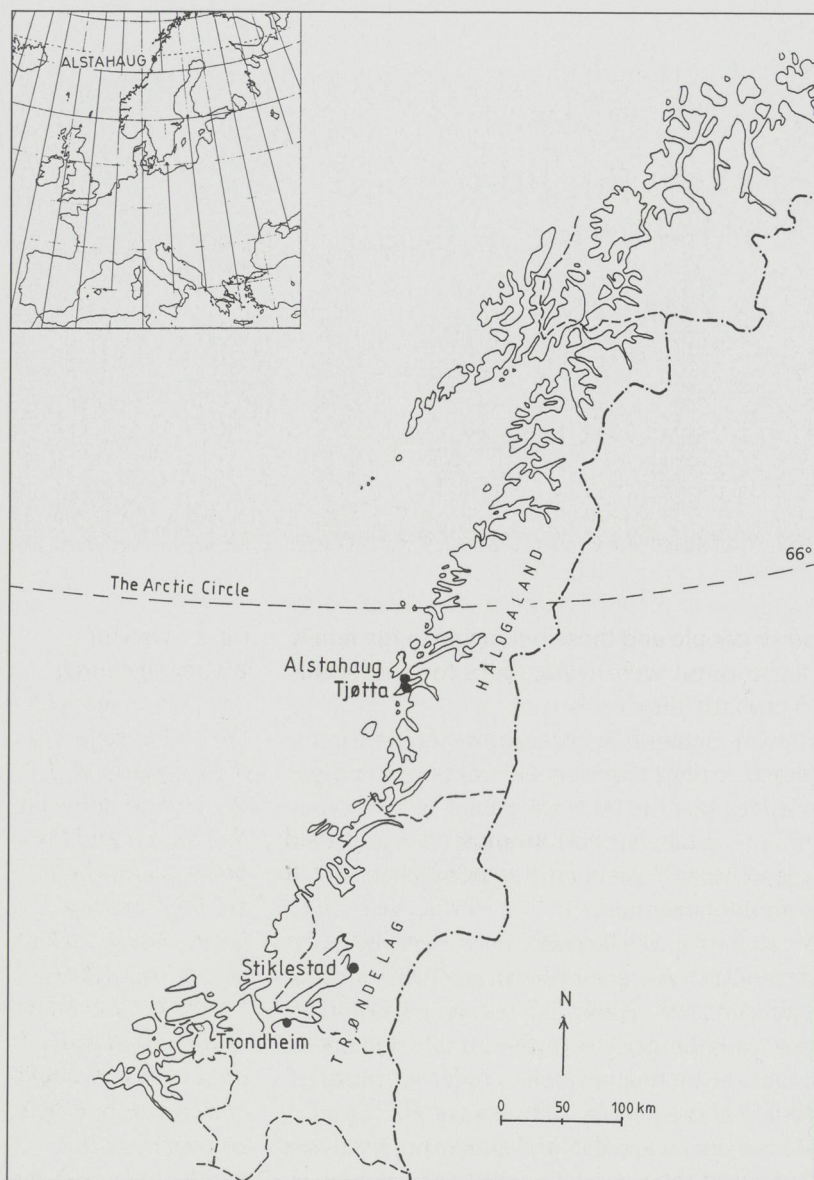


Fig. 1: Alstahaug church and parsonage south of the Arctic Circle.

was built around AD 1200. The Romanesque church is built of soapstone from quarries not far from the church. Beneath the floor of the church a total of 64 graves have been excavated (Christie 1973; Holck 1969; 1974).

I am currently studying the material from the excavations in the court grounds of the parsonage and under the floor of the church to examine how the priesthood in Alstahaug used material culture both to identify and demarcate itself in relation to other people. For me, why they would have done this is also important. I am also examining certain written sources connected with Alstahaug parsonage and church to examine what they tell about the same things in order to be able to compare statements from these two types of sources with each other. Before I go further, I will dis-

cuss what some philosophers say about objects as symbols of meaning.

## Philosophers views on the meanings of objects

I will start with Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) who looks at objects as phenomena and distinguishes between phenomenon and “Ding an sich”. His point of view has roots in the philosophers of the Enlightenment as John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume. However, Kant stressed the importance of sensing even more than they did. Kant says we look at objects as phenomenon and not as they really are. Our ideas do not conform to the object. It is the object that conforms to our ideas (Kant 1956 [1781]).

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) looked at himself as the only true heir to Kant, but he thought Kant was wrong when he said that sensing just teaches us phenomenon, not how they really are. Schopenhauer said we could find the “Ding an sich” in ourselves as our will. (Schopenhauer 1995 [1819])

At first Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) was of the opinion that the language was an image of reality (Wittgenstein 1996 [1922]). He tried to set up limits for language in the same way as Kant set up limits for what could be sensed. Later on Wittgenstein ceased to ask for the nature of the language and abandoned the theory of language as image of reality.

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) was the founder of the phenomenology. This school (Husserl 1995 ([1913])) has its basis in sensing and it tries to teach us not only to look for the outer things but also for the inner life and the streams of beings. It wants to describe what we see when we consciously meet things. One then has to remove all preconceived points of view, theories, doctrines and dogmas. It is typical for phenomenologists to say: “Man muss zu den Sachen selbst vorstossen”. Husserl thought truth was absolute.

Semiotics is close to phenomenology at the same time as the differences are basic. Semiotics was developed in philology (Saussure [1916]) in the beginning of the 20th century by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) with a background in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. Others like Charles S. Peirce, Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes have developed semiotics further and it



is now used not only in interpretation of language but also, among other things, of material culture and behaviour. The basis of semiotics is that all things are signs and that these signs can be sensed and they have meaning. To be able to interpret the signs, one must have an idea of how different signs have different meanings. Signs are linked together in underlying structures that can be interpreted. It is interpretation by the receiver of the signs that is important, not how the one sending the signs wants them interpreted.

## How to use these philosophers in my work

The objectivistic attitude of phenomenologists to reality contradicts the attitude of the philosophers of the Enlightenment and their successors. They were of the opinion that the world is created through our sensing of it. My basis to investigate how the material remnants the priesthood has left could give us a picture of their status is rather more semiotic than phenomenological, since I think it is our sensing of the material that gives it status. I believe it necessary to have a prior opinion of what signs mean in order to be able to interpret status. Without that, I do not think it possible to interpret anything as status giving.

So in the same way as language can be seen as symbols with a certain meaning, so too may objects be seen. According to semiotics, the meaning may be different from what the creator intended. A weakness of semiotics is that it cares not for the context of signs. For example, it does not account for what in one context marks high rank but in another does not.

## How the priesthood of Alstahaug presented rank by means of their household

What encompassed the household of the priesthood must be discussed. In the Catholic period priests were not allowed to marry but had to live in celibacy. Now it is very unclear if the regulations about celibacy had any validity in Scandinavia, especially so far north as Alstahaug. At any rate, there must have been some sort of household at Alstahaug in the Catholic period too. From the Reformation in 1537 priests were allowed to marry. On a parsonage



other people and those belonging to the family of the priest were living there too, especially maids and farm workers.

How the signs of the household should be interpreted is dependent on the context. The signs of status that the material culture of the household at Alstahaug sent out must be interpreted in another way than if the same signs were sent out in, for example, the Rhineland. We have to remember that interpretation is dependent on the context. A jug of stoneware sends out other signs concerning rank in Cologne or Amsterdam than in Alstahaug. Nevertheless it is possible to compare the relative rank in different areas.

Here it is just possible to give a couple of examples of the ways the priesthood of Alstahaug presented their rank through their household, whether the priest had a family or not. I am using here both archaeological and written sources, but I start with the archaeological ones.

## The material culture of the household

### 1. The organising of the houses

There were many bones from domesticated animals particularly cows, sheep and goats in the culture layers of the farm mound in the parsonage yard of Alstahaug. However, we did not find anything that showed that the animal sheds were in the parsonage yard. In recent times, housing for domesticated animals has been situated some hundred meters away from the church and the parsonage yard. It was obvious-

*Fig. 2: View of Alstahaug church and parsonage with the archipelago in the background. In the ground between the church and the priest's farm there are thick culture layers dating back to around AD 1200 from the same time as the oldest part of the church was built in Romanesque style. Excavations are conducted under the floor around 1970 in connection with restoration of the church (photo: Arne B. Johansen).*



Fig. 3: Stoneware and earthenware like the kitchen maid uses here had another meaning in Holland than in Alstahaug. Painting: Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.



ly important for the priesthood not to be associated with the dirty work among the animals. It also seems that the tools used in agriculture were stored outside the parsonage yard. The priesthood thereby signalled its distance to the practise of this type of dirty work. It was obviously important to distinguish between the priesthood and the work with the domesticated animals and the fields. Such a distinction is not shown on the common farms in this area.

## 2. Domestic work

To be able to offer ones guests tasty and expensive food and drink gave high status for the host just as it does today. Food should be served on nice dishes and drinks should be poured from beautiful and expensive jugs and decanters. I think it is very fitting to use food and what was needed to cook and serve it when studying the signals material culture sends out about rank.

## 3. Food

The many bones of fish, cattle, sheep and goat show that the priesthood through this type of food did not signalise higher rank than that of their neighbours. Cattle and sheep or goats seem to have been of the same importance in contradiction to the situation in the towns where cattle dominated. Fish seems to be a more important food from the 17th century than it had previously been. It is only from the 17th century onwards, that game seems to be

of any importance on Alstahaug, and then mostly as more luxurious food like willow grouse. This could be interpreted to mean that it was important for the priesthood to signalise that their food consisted of domesticated animals in addition to fish, in contradiction to people who mostly had hunting as their living. Only when game was considered luxurious would it be interesting for the priesthood to have it on their table.

## 4. Storing, cooking, serving and table-laying

Pottery and stoneware were to some extent in use for storing, cooking, serving and table laying during the Middle Ages at Alstahaug. All are imported, mostly from the Rhineland. In excavations on other farms in the area pottery and stoneware from the Middle Ages are more rare – they actually occur only on the big estates. It was obviously a signal of rank to be able to pour drinks from a jug of pottery or stoneware instead of using one made of wood. Only from the 17th century onwards were pots and pans of pottery in common use for cooking and frying in Alstahaug as well as in other rural coastal areas of Norway. Earlier, pots of soapstone and probably also of wood were the most usual for cooking and plates of slate for baking of bread. There were many pieces of such pots and plates of stone in the culture layers, especially from the 13th and 14th centuries. Conditions at Alstahaug were not conducive to preserving wood through the centuries in the well-drained earth.

From the 17th century onwards, more and various forms of pottery tableware were in use on Alstahaug, not just earthenware and stoneware but also tin-glazed wares, majolica and from the 18th century, porcelain. The dishes are often highly decorated imports from Germany, especially from the areas of the Weser and Werra rivers. The stoneware jugs originate mostly from the Rhineland but the plates of white ware originate from England. The porcelain consists mostly of teacups from China. The tableware used by the priesthood in Alstahaug seems to tie them to a European standard. The ordinary farmers could not afford such tableware.

Pieces of table-glasses occurred since the 17th century. A few pieces could be older. Some of them are fine glassware with gilding, threads, ribbons and knots. It is from the same time that tablespoons and table-knives of metal occur.



It was obviously important for the priesthood to have European drinking habits such as drinking imported wine from table-glasses and tea from Chinese porcelain.

## Poetry and documents concerning the household

### 1. 'Nordlands Trompet' on food

Petter Dass tells in 'Nordlands Trompet' about the household of the priest. Here he demonstrates that he knows European eating habits while at the same time saying that he wants to serve local food for his guests. He does not want to serve luxurious food from abroad like French soup, turtles, pheasants, turkeys, olives, cucumbers, melons, capers, candied peels, pumpkins and different exotic spices. It is, however, obvious that it is important for him to tell that he knows such food.

The local food he wants to serve, for example, is coalfish, butter, thin wafer crispbread, gridle cakes, different milk products, sausages, ham, herring, turnips and pancakes with eggs. The drink he says he wants to serve is *blande*, a mix of water and serum of milk. He contrasts that with measureless drinking, implicit of alcoholic beverages he does not want to serve. The archaeological excavations revealed, in contrast to what Petter Dass tells us, that drinking alcoholic beverages was not unknown in the parsonage at any time. The Norwegian Law of King Christian V of April 16, 1687 states that the wife and the children of the priest had to dress simply as suitable for their rank and without luxury. The same should be the standard for food and drink. Concerning clothes, lead seals from the Continent and England appeared in the culture layers in the parsonage yard. They show that the priest had more luxurious clothes than people had on other farms in the area. It was obviously important for Petter Dass to appear simpler in his habits than he was.

### 2. Document for the distribution of the inheritance from Anders Dass on rank and cultural capital

Anders Dass was the son and only heir of Petter Dass and also the successor of his father as priest at Alstahaug. The document for the distribution of the inheritance from Anders Dass



consists of around 270 pages in foliant. In this document all types of goods are written down. It is obvious that Anders Dass, like Petter Dass before him, was one of the big owners of farms in North-Norway, but we will here concentrate on rank and cultural capital of the household.

#### *The equipment of the household*

The document for the distribution of the inheritance tells about all sorts of household goods. It is obvious that it was important to mark equipment with the initials of the owners, especially equipment that signalled rank such as dishes, plates, beakers, and spoons of silver and gold. The initials are written down in the document. Fine textiles like linen tablecloths and napkins always had initials, as did some of the more simple textiles. Initials give a remarkable opportunity to study inheritance and marriage strategies since the equipment with initials was obviously handed down to new generations. I have tried to interpret many of the initials. Of the initials on the objects of gold and silver, there were as many from the family of Anders Dass as from the family of his wife, Rebekka Angell. Initials tell us about marriage strategies if we interpret such on objects of gold and silver as signs of rank.

The document for the distribution of the inheritance after Anders Dass fits badly with what Petter Dass himself tells in his poetry of his rank and his fortune. The initials on the household goods of his son show that much of it was inherited from Petter Dass. It was obviously not only his son who had assembled wealth on earth.

Fig. 4: Perhaps it was a table with exotic fruits like this Petter Dass did not want to serve his guests? Painting: Floris van Dijk (1575-1651), Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.



### *The library*

In the Document for the distribution of the inheritance there are more than 1000 book titles. The books are written in many languages and tie the priesthood to the learned upper classes in Europe. The library contained not only theological literature, but also secular literature like history, philology and classic literature. In their time Anders Dass and his father must have been the most book-learned men in North-Norway.

### For whom did they present themselves and why?

For whom did the Alstahaug priesthood present their rank and why was it necessary to present it as such? First I have to say a little about the society on the coast of Nordland.

In the coastal area of Nordland many people combined agriculture and livestock with fishing; not only fishing near the home but also commercial fishing like the priest at Alstahaug participated in. The priest was also a significant landowner and he controlled a lot of farms. In the archipelago people were fishermen and in the mountain areas there were hunters and reindeer herds. On the coast there were also other large landowners and representatives for the state such as the priest.

As a representative of the state it was important to show high rank above the other representatives. It was also important to show the other farmers that the priest had higher rank to obtain respect for the Church. Petter Dass tells us strange things about the Saami people living in the mountains. He experienced the cultural distance between himself and them as immense, so I do not think he had any need to demarcate against them. It was important to

show people that the priest could not only afford expensive goods and food, but also had a high cultural capital that signalled distance. Why was it so important to signal high rank and high cultural capital? In addition to creating communal spirit he also wanted more respect for the services of God for reasons I think were more materialistic. He needed distance and demarcation from the people he was superior to as a significant landowner and tradesman. It was necessary to signal the right rank to maintain this distinction. On the other hand, it was necessary to signal fellowship with other people that, like him, were large landowners and representatives of the state. Investigations show that there are long traditions to signalise such fellowship among the upper class on the coast of Nordland. It is easy to understand that household goods, easily recognisable for visitors, marked social status. Even if nobody from the outside visited the private rooms of the parsonage, it was important to signal to themselves that the priesthood was upheld and was another sort of people than the ordinary people outside, as well as the servants. Therefore they had other habits at table than ordinary people, they did not eat the same food and, in any case, it was served in a different way. By maintaining their cultural capital by, for example, marriage and by maintaining their habits to signal high rank, the children of the priesthood maintained their rank. They had no problems taking up studies in Europe and they could behave like their fellows there. When they came home they were even more distinguished from the people in the area they came from and this gave them possibilities to maintain the power in a new generation. It was thus important for the priesthood at Alstahaug to have fellowship with people in the towns and in other coastal areas in Central and northern Europe.



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