The friars’ experience of communal life gradually grew more complex over the first 150 years of their Order’s history, not so much because of abrupt intrusions by outside forces such as economic instability, war, and plague, but because the demands the men put upon their own corporation’s operative institutions did not remain static. Expectations changed, and the impelling and retardant forces of the institutions, when pressed, opened up to status-seeking and permitted abuses of electoral procedure. In making this argument I have avoided treating internal change as a smooth and linear process obviously apparent to all participants, and I have definitely eschewed pointing only to wholesome outcomes. Another strand in the reticulation of Dominican daily life and its administration involves changes in the relationship of provincials and provincial chapters to the priors who shepherded local convents. In this chapter we will find that conventual priors in the fourteenth-century Province of Aragon, being caught up in the momentum of developments, lost much of the autonomous control that their predecessors formerly exercised over local communities.

The argument has several threads, which we can productively, if too simplistically, put in order before they work themselves into a tangle. First and most apparent, able performance of the priors’ office was key to the advancement of the Order’s mission at the local level. Because of this centrality, general and provincial chapters routinely addressed many of their notices and advisories directly to priors, referring to them as the prelates (prelatus) or presidents (presidentes) of their local communities. Until the middle of the fourteenth century provincial chapter acts show little evidence that provincial priors saw conventual priors as subordinates in a modern sense but rather as partners in a subsidiary role, with authority constituted on the basis of the office holder’s intellectual status and moral capabilities, those characteristics that potentially set him apart as a discerning judge and issuer of pious counsels. In time the priorate became a carefully circumscribed office increasingly subordinated to provincial administration. As convents grew in size, with more men and a broader range of educational
of offerings in each, with greater financial needs and the interests of benefactors pressing, the prior’s office grew more difficult.

Concurrent with these contributions to the growing difficulty of the priors’ office was the perception shared by provincials and some conventual priors that many rank-and-file friars acted in ways ill-fitting their organization’s definition of proper conduct. The delicts of some friars contributed to the general difficulties of the priorate by increasing the time and energies given over to personnel management. They also increased pressure upon provincials and their provincial chapters to intervene into local affairs. By the 1340s provincials held local priors responsible for the full range of disciplinary problems that local convents witnessed, regardless of the apparent fact that, in the context of the friars’ mobility and the large scale of the organization, the procedural tools available to each prior within his community for personnel management did not suffice. Ultimately, tackling indiscipline inside convents meant redrawing lines of authority, confirming notions of superior-subordinate relations, and reducing the discretionary powers of local decision-makers. I’ll posit this more boldly (putting aside momentarily a number of caveats and exceptions): by the middle of the fourteenth century events and actors conspired to remake the prior’s office into a middle management position in a hierarchical bureaucracy.

I begin by reviewing the few notices about priors in previous scholarship, remarking especially upon the limitations of the evidence usually mustered and the fragility of the image thence drawn. I then turn back to the provincial acts, which have much to offer toward a more detailed portrait of office and office holder. Conventual priors held the principal positions of prelacy in Dominican convents, although what prelacy meant and what powers it entailed changed over time. The acts confirm that the pressures upon priors could be intense, that these pressures intensified as the organization matured, and that among the Order’s major offices the priorate was the one least able to resist the redefinition and redistribution of administrative power that occurred in a period of difficult change.

**The Prior and Priorate**

Humbert of Romans offered a description of the role of the Dominican prior in his *Instructiones de officiis ordinis*, written at some point after