CHAPTER FOUR

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE KING’S ADMINISTRATIVE APPARATUS

During the High Middle Ages the Norwegian crown built up a centralized local administration in Norway and the tributary lands. We shall now look more closely at how this work proceeded in the tributary lands, what it comprised, and what consequences it had for the original governing mechanisms. Did the king’s men and the royal governing institutions oust the existing governing bodies and the men who had so long ruled the tributary lands? Was the establishment of a royal administrative apparatus a distinct breach with the original arrangements, or did outside rule allow scope in the establishment phase to retain some elements of the older system? Another central question concerns the time of the establishment and whether it was synchronized with the expansion of a royal administrative apparatus and a public judicial system in Norway. By ascertaining this, we can perhaps obtain an answer to the question whether the establishment of a royal administrative apparatus in the tributary lands was just a result of the establishment of direct royal lordship, or if we should see it in association with development elsewhere in the realm. First of all, however, we must take a closer look at the officials and institutions that were to attend to the king’s interests.

The shrieval organization

The sheriff’s tasks and role

We have already seen that there were royal sheriffs (sýslumenn) in the Faroes, Orkney, and Shetland from the end of the twelfth century. A hundred years later the sheriffs had become the core of the king’s local administration. In Norway there were roughly 350,000–400,000 inhabitants distributed in some fifty more or less firmly demarcated districts. Each county (fylki) usually consisted of two sheriffdoms (ON sýslur, sg. sýsla), and one sheriffdom could also be divided between two or more sheriffs.¹

¹ For general information about the establishment of the sheriffs, the institution and its organization in the High Middle Ages, see e.g. Per Sveaas Andersen, “Sysselmann”,
The sheriff was primarily a royal official. He was appointed by the king and he exerted royal authority over a defined area. The word *sýsla* was used both about the official’s office or sheriffdom and about his district, which was also referred to as a *lén* (fief). The fief was usually held on account, with the sheriff administering it on behalf of the king and representing the king’s interests.

The sheriff’s role can be compared with that of the *ármaðr*, the king’s local representative in the Early Middle Ages. However, his social position can best be compared to the *lendir menn* or royal vassals of the same period. The *lendir menn* had long been among the king’s chief vassals, and had *veizla* (*beneficium*) from the king. Men holding the dignity of *lendir maðr* tended to be sheriffs in the thirteenth century, but like any sheriffs, they held their district as an office. In Norwegian medieval research, it has commonly been assumed that the sheriffs were put in charge of districts where they did not have any private power base, unlike the *lendir menn* of the twelfth century, whose local power base was actually crucial for the king. However, there are no studies of this phenomenon, apart from what has emerged from studies of individual counties and parts of Norway. The sheriffdom was not to be hereditary either, although we see a clear tendency for both the sheriffdom and the dignity of *lendir maðr* to be inherited from the end of the thirteenth century. Moreover, in 1308 King Hákon promised that sheriffs who had acquitted themselves well would be allowed to keep their districts as long as they lived, and that their sons would be given the districts after them. In cases where the sheriffs also had a private power base in their district, they acquired a position closely resembling that of royal vassals in the twelfth century.

The sheriff had many tasks. He was the authority in charge of policing, prosecution, and executing matters on behalf of the king. He arranged local assemblies and selected representatives to the regional lawthing from the judicial districts belonging to his district, and he was responsible for the least popular side of the royal presence—collecting the king’s revenue. This included claiming the king’s share of fines and confiscations and the fixed revenue, such as the king’s regular revenue,