CHAPTER SIX

THE NORWEGIAN REALM AND THE PERSONAL UNION WITH SWEDEN, 1320–1350

The establishment of a personal union between Norway and Sweden in 1319 marks the start of a new era in Norwegian historiography. It was the first step towards a Scandinavian union. In the picture of decline that is painted by Norwegian historians, two elements are important for our study. One is the political turn of Norway towards the east, the other is the claim that the Norwegian medieval state dissolved. Whereas Norway in the High Middle Ages had been an Atlantic realm, in the Late Middle Ages it was absorbed into a common Scandinavian political world that was oriented towards the Baltic Sea and the German states. The Norwegian state is said to have decayed at the end of the fourteenth century. The government of Norway and Sweden, however, was not coordinated after 1319, and the changes we can demonstrate in the government of the kingdom of Norway until 1350 were a continuation of processes that were in motion during the reign of Håkon V Magnusson.¹

We shall now examine how the relationship between the Norwegian kingdom and the tributary lands developed after the establishment of the Norwegian-Swedish personal union. I have elected to terminate the study at 1350, the next major watershed in Norwegian historiography. The consequences of the Black Death for the government of the tributary lands is a topic that we shall consider in the next chapter.

Because we lack sources on the government of Shetland and the Faroes from this period, the study has to be confined to Orkney and Iceland.

Orkney

Earl Magnus Jonsson probably died some time early in the 1320s. He left an under-age heir who was dead in 1330 when the earldom was

inherited by the Scot Malise, earl of Strathearn. 2 Was it still the king’s officials who managed the king’s interests in Orkney, or were they left in the care of the earl?

As we have seen, there seems to have been only one sheriff in Orkney when the agreement of 1312 was drawn up. In 1321, on the other hand, King Robert I of Scotland turned to the Norwegian king’s “ballivi” or sheriffs—in the plural—in Orkney. The king wanted to find out whether it was the king of Norway or the sheriffs themselves who had permitted one of his enemies to stay in the islands even after King Robert’s bailiff in Caithness had demanded that he be handed over. The king also wanted to know whether his subjects had been subjected to attack in Orkney, and if so whether it had happened on the king’s order or on the sheriffs’ own initiative. 3 Since King Robert refers to Orkney as one “balliam” or sheriffdom, it seems as if two men shared the district in 1321. We also find sheriffdoms being divided in other parts of the realm in this period. 4

It was no doubt the sheriffs who were King Magnus’s representatives in the earldom in 1321, and it felt natural for King Robert to address them. It is perfectly possible that Earl Magnus was dead in 1321, and that this explains the sheriffs’ presence in the earldom. It is nevertheless clear from King Robert’s letter that his bailiff in Caithness had previously applied to the sheriffs in Orkney. Earl Magnus was alive in the autumn of 1319, when he and his wife were witnesses to an agreement between the local bishop and visiting inspectors from the archbishop. 5 The approach by the Scottish king’s bailiff to the sheriffs in Orkney had probably been sent a while before King Robert was informed about the problems. It therefore cannot be ruled out that Earl Magnus was still alive when the Orkney sheriffs were first approached from Scotland. The tasks mentioned in King Robert’s letter, moreover, were part of the sheriff’s sphere of responsibility, and

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3 DN V 68. The king calls the sheriffdom “balliam vestram Orchadie”, thus one district. See ch. 5 for the discussion of Latin designations on royal officials in Orkney.
4 E.g. in Iceland (IA, p. 353 (1345)).
5 DN IX 85 [1320]. In the letter the events in Orkney are said to have taken place in the autumn of 1319. According to Crawford, following J. Anderson (ed.) in The Orkneyinga Saga, transl. J. A. Hjaltalin and G. Goudie, Edinburgh 1873, p. lv, Robert I’s letter is the proof that Earl Magnus was dead in 1321 (Crawford 1971, p. 23). See ch. 5, Orkney, “Domini Magni comitis Orcadie”, on the uncertainty regarding this letter.