CHAPTER FOUR

COLONIZATION, CONTACTS, AND CHANGE
1200–1550

4.1 Introduction

During most of the Iron Age and Early Middle Ages, the settlement borders between the Sámi and neighboring people seem to have been relatively stable. This territorial balance can be seen as both a condition for and a reflection of the reciprocity and cooperation, which to that point had characterized the relationship between the ethnic groups. Even though changed political and religious conditions from the end of the Viking Age offered a more strained and asymmetrical relationship, the settlement borders were still essentially observed. During the High and Late Middle Ages, however, the territorial balance was upset at the same time as the relations between the Sámi and the surrounding peoples changed.

This new situation was due to changes on several levels. First, a direct colonization of Sámi land took place with neighboring groups settling permanently in previous Sámi areas and introducing their own economy and administration. Secondly, the Sámi area became far more integrated into economic and political networks controlled by powers outside of northern Fennoscandia. A third factor that influenced ethnic relationships was Christianity’s steadily stronger hold on non-Sámi communities. The consequence was not only the loss of the important cognitive and ritual ties to the Sámi that had existed earlier in the neighboring groups’ pre-Christian religion, but also that Christianization and church building became an important strategy in the struggles to gain political control over Sámi areas. These three factors, colonization, integration, and Christianization, did not take place at the same time and they were subject to significant regional variation. From the Late Middle Ages, however, they constituted a new set of interacting conditions that most Sámi in one way or another had to relate to.

In this chapter, we will look more closely at how Sámi societies mastered these new conditions. We will focus on which responses, adaptations, and strategies were implemented on the Sámi side, both to meet these new demands and to utilize the possibilities the new situation created. First, however, we must shed light on how the social and ethnic
landscape of northern Fennoscandia changed under these new political and economic conditions.

4.2 Hegemony—Tribute—Colonization

As we have seen, the Sámi had intimate economic, social, and religious contacts with surrounding peoples throughout the Iron Age and the Early Middle Ages. Although this relationship could involve asymmetrical features, such as the use of military superiority in some contexts to put pressure on the Sámi, practical exchanges often had a complementary and equal character. The Sámi were supplied with necessary goods or culturally valuable products in exchange for equally valuable wilderness products, such as fur. Over time, mutual dependency developed and we have suggested that this was also reinforced through social and religious ties. Maintaining good relations with the Norwegian elite as well as with the Baltic peoples in Finland and northwest Russia was of great importance to the Sámi.

Until the Early Middle Ages, the exchange of goods and the negotiation of social relations with the Sámi were managed by relatively autonomous local elites. During the Middle Ages, these local elites lost much of their independence and power in favor of state or proto-state authorities located outside the local field of ethnic interaction. Two central catchwords that illuminate these states’ power strategies are hegemony and (collection of) tribute. These indicate the means by which the Scandinavian kingdoms and the proto-state Slavic principalities to the east tried to integrate the Sámi and their resource areas into their own spheres of influence. This development must be seen in connection with basic changes in the trade systems of northern Europe and northwest Russia, where, in particular, the Hanseatic trade network came to have great influence on the directions that the fur trade would take.

In addition, direct colonization of what had previously been Sámi areas occurred. In part, this colonization was brought about by purely economic incentives and partly by political motives. Economic and political incentives as a rule operated in tandem and were often supported by religious means and religious rhetoric. Before we take a closer look at how the Sámi related to colonization and the new economic and political reality, we will discuss the main features of state expansion as it transpired in different ways in the west, south, and east.