The task of the Capetians did not stop short at establishing their sovereignty and subjecting the fiefs and lordships of France to their authority. To make their work permanent they had to enlist the services of reliable administrators, capable of holding all their territories together, for without a strong and efficient administration their political achievement would have been ephemeral. To produce their administrative system they employed the methods which had stood them in good stead in other fields of activity, neither working to a preconceived plan nor creating new institutions, but instead adapting and developing what already existed. Institutions which appeared to endanger the monarchy were shorn of their power and significance; and any new institution, springing from novel exigencies, had to prove its value before the monarchy would confer any kind of definitive status on it.

The attitude of the Capetians towards change, though sensible, was probably unconscious. They resembled their contemporaries in their respect for tradition, and refrained from violent suppression and bold innovation alike. Their original ideal was to govern like Charlemagne, and, later, like St. Louis: not that they preserved any clear memory of how their forerunners had governed. The great rulers of the past stood for a vague ideal of good government which embodied the personal conceptions of kingship entertained by each succeeding king and his entourage. When the Capetians brought about developments in existing institutions of government, they did so on the pretext of restoring them to their original state. The administrative machinery they had inherited from their predecessors was retained, though it acquired new characteristics. Officials kept their old titles; but their characters changed.
When Hugh Capet came to the throne the remnants of Carolingian administration were preserved as a matter of course. To all outward appearances there was no change. Government by the Palace went on, and the great officers of state retained their functions. But Carolingian administration no longer served any practical purpose, for the effect of the king’s actions was more or less limited to the royal domain and he was confined to the role of a feudal magnate. Public administration was almost the direct antithesis of feudalism, and there was little place for it in a society held together by feudal ties. A genuine administrative system did not grow up until feudalism began to decay.

The cadres of Carolingian administration which the Capetians preserved had small significance — scarcely any in relation to the kingdom as a whole, for the great Carolingian officers of state had become powerful feudal barons and their example had been followed by the less important functionaries. The regalian rights had been usurped by these men, or allowed to fall into their clutches. The regular administration of royal justice was a thing of the past, there were no royal revenues, and the king could hardly muster his own army without baronial consent. He still surrounded himself with great office-bearers, but their functions were now in practice almost exclusively confined to the royal household and royal domain, outside which their authority was all but nominal.

During the first two centuries of Capetian rule the king could only secure the means of royal action by summoning to court his great barons, the men with whom true power lay, and appealing for their support. Without it he was, as sovereign, powerless; but it was by no means always withheld, and even when not unanimous it could be useful. Baronial support gave Robert the Pious the means necessary to bring to a successful conclusion his stubborn and protracted campaigns to win control of Burgundy.¹ But the goodwill of the barons was only forthcoming for royal policy when the latter did not clash with their particularist interests.

The only administrative machinery apparently in existence

¹ See pp. 101-2.