

FROM CHIEFDOM TO STATE IN EARLY IRELAND

This book tracks the development of social complexity in Ireland from the late prehistoric period into the Middle Ages. Using a range of methods and techniques, particularly data from settlement patterns, D. Blair Gibson demonstrates how Ireland evolved from constellations of chiefdoms into a political entity bearing the characteristics of a rudimentary state. This book argues that Early Medieval Ireland's highly complex political systems should be viewed as amalgams of chiefdoms with democratic procedures for choosing leaders rather than as kingdoms. Gibson explores how these chiefdom confederacies eventually transformed into recognizable states over a period of 1,400 years.

D. Blair Gibson is a professor in the Department of Anthropology at El Camino College and the director of the college's Anthropology Museum. He has published articles in a number of journals, including the *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* and the *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*. He is the editor of two books, *Tribe and Polity in Late Prehistoric Europe* (with Michael Geselowitz) and *Celtic Chieftdom, Celtic State* (with Bettina Arnold).



Oblique aerial photograph of the trivallate cashel of Cahercommaun showing associated field boundary walls and enclosures. Photo: J. K. S. St. Joseph. Copyright reserved. Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photography.

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For David and Owen

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Preface

The Irish chieftains of old established their claims to rule, and the political stature of their polities, through the creation and recitation of genealogies. This project possesses a genealogy as well, and, like the medieval Irish genealogies, it is constructed in part through a retrospection of the past from the standpoint of the living subject, and in part through the conflation of previous genealogies that may not necessarily represent a true blood link to the present but attain such through the manipulation of the remains of the past by those living in the present.

Cahercommaun is a large, ancient settlement site defined by three concentric walls of limestone flags, perched on the edge of a ravine in the Burren region of northern Co. Clare in western Ireland (Figure 1.1). It was excavated by Hugh O'Neill Hencken of the Harvard Peabody Museum over a period of six weeks in the late summer of 1934 with a crew of Irish and American students (including Joseph Raftery, future director of the National Museum of Ireland, and J. O. Brew, future director of the Harvard Peabody Museum) and workmen recruited from the area's farms.

The excavation, one of many undertaken by Hencken in Ireland, proved Cahercommaun to be rich in occupation remains. Cattle bones predominated in the site's inventory. The material remains found were common to the Early Medieval period. The only closely dateable find, a silver brooch, placed at least a part of the site's occupation at around 800 AD (Hencken 1938:2–3, 27–30). Hencken, however, did not stop at the mere description and dating of the settlement. On the evidence of differences in the size, spatial location, and artifactual content of the remains of huts found at the site, he ventured determinations as to the differing social positions of their occupants (*ibid.*:17–20). On the basis of the large size of the site relative to other similar cashel-type homesteads in the area, Hencken determined that Cahercommaun was the center of a chieftain of northern Clare (*ibid.*:1).

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The Cahercommaun excavation was part of the Third Harvard Expedition to Ireland. Taking part in this expedition were a number of distinguished faculty members from Harvard: Halam Movius Jr., who was the first to do a purposeful and detailed examination of the Irish Mesolithic (1942), and Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, who wrote a now-classic ethnography on the small farmer of Clare (1940). Ironically, much like the famed Central Asiatic Expedition of Roy Chapman Andrews to the inner reaches of Mongolia, which had the questionable objective of locating a non-African place of origin for the human race but instead found the first dinosaur eggs, the Harvard expedition was conceived as part of E. A. Hooton's Harvard Irish Survey – a project that had as its goal the development of a system of European racial classification (Hooton 1940; Hooton and Dupertuis 1955). Needless to say, the prodigious results of the work of Hencken, Movius, Arensberg, and Kimball had no tie-in to Hooton's questionable undertakings.

Hencken and Hooton were far from my mind when I first viewed the site in 1980 in the company of a friend from Germany with whom I was attempting to circumnavigate Ireland by hitchhiking. Indeed, I was unaware of the existence of the latter progenitor. My first year as a graduate student in Ireland was behind me, during which time I had read the report of the excavation in the course of preparing for my qualifying exams.

Later, while I was coming to grips with the Irish law texts for my master's thesis, I came in contact with the work in social anthropology of Raymond Firth, Marshall Sahlins, and Timothy Earle. I was awakened not only to the explanatory potential of the chieftdom concept for the material from the earliest period of Irish history, but also to the possibility that social organization viewed from an evolutionary and ecological perspective may constitute a first principle for the explanation of the existence of a myriad of early Irish social institutions and practices. The Irish law texts describe in fairly elaborate detail the structure of Irish society in the eighth and ninth centuries AD down to the smallest social unit, and lay out the rights and privileges of each social class. I was awakened to the potential of matching this explicit emic social structure to its concrete manifestation in the archaeological record. The payoff could work in two directions: the written sources could render the archaeological record coherent and meaningful, and the archaeological record could illustrate those aspects of social organization left unsaid by the texts, providing it with a "real" structure.

Cahercommaun then presented itself to me in a new guise as the plausible center of a chieftdom-type polity. A further factor enhanced the choice of this site as an object of study over other comparably large, excavated

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sites of the Irish Late Iron Age. On the basis of its size and defensive siting, Barry Raftery included Cahercommaun in his discussion of Irish hill-forts of the Early Iron Age (1972:51–53). Identification of Cahercommaun with sites of the hill-fort class would make it a remnant of a type of site that had gone out of vogue in the British Isles (with the exception of Wales) in the century after the birth of Christ.

Hill-forts elsewhere in Europe are obvious and dominating features of the landscape that have long exercised a magnetic influence on archaeological investigators. They are distributed from Portugal to Poland and were built by various peoples from the Bronze Ages through the Early Middle Ages. The archaeological literature of Europe is long on published excavations of hill-forts, but sadly, with only a few exceptions (see Crumley and Marquardt 1987; Palmer 1984), the settlement structure and hence the structure of the societies behind construction of hill-forts have not been examined. Cahercommaun then seemed to offer up the novel possibility of documenting in detail the social structure of a European society at the level of development associated with hill-forts.

This kind of project would not be possible if it were not for the richness and variety of sources available in Ireland to the scholar with an interest in prehistoric lifeways and long-term social processes. Ireland probably has the most complete archaeological record of any European country. The density of obvious sites per square kilometer in this country is perpetually astonishing. And though site destruction is proceeding at an alarming rate in the Burren, as in the rest of the country, in many parts of the Burren it is still possible to encounter intact prehistoric landscapes covering many millennia of activity. This is due to the unsuitability of much of the region for plow agriculture on account of the frequently inclement weather, hilly terrain, and large stretches of exposed bedrock and bog. A by-product of this state of affairs for the field worker is that traces of nearly all past structures can be noted on the ground surface, a phenomenon enhanced by a practice of the local inhabitants throughout prehistory and history simply to abandon past habitations and move on rather than destroying or building over them.

The historical record of Ireland constitutes a resource of immeasurable value that allows the investigator to gaze deeply into the distant past of the country through the eyes of its inhabitants. Gaul fell before Julius Caesar's armies without any of the many complex Gaulish polities having left behind a single text. Similarly, no document remains from any of the British chieftdoms of the pre-Roman period. However, Ireland, which received writing along with the Christian tradition commencing in the

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fourth to sixth centuries AD, enshrined its multifaceted traditions to an amazing extent due to the labors of the men of learning both within and without the Christian tradition.

The Irish historical record is at once socially comprehensive and extensive. The earliest documents of note were composed in the seventh to eighth centuries AD, but sources such as annals, sagas, and saints' lives enshrine earlier oral traditions that probably extend as far back in some instances as the Late Bronze Age. From the corpus of Irish law texts, one can glimpse, often in minute detail, the social structure of eighth-century Ireland and the rights, prerogatives, and situational and invariant obligations and responsibilities of the socially distinct members of the island's chiefdoms. The genealogical materials and the annals allow one to reconstruct the political history of the country and the political and social dynamics of chiefly succession. On account of this immense historical corpus there is probably no other place in the world where chiefdoms can be examined in such great detail.

Taken together, these two records, the historical and the archaeological, make Ireland one of the world's great laboratories for diachronic studies of long-term social processes. This book utilizes both records to arrive at an understanding of the nature and structure of protohistorical Irish chiefdoms in the Burren region of northern Co. Clare. It must be admitted that the inspiration for picking this particular region came initially from the archaeological qualities of this region rather than from a consideration of the historical sources. However, as will later become apparent, due chiefly to the greater length of time that Clare was spared the disruption of foreign hegemony, the historical sources are more plentiful and reflect indigenous Celtic cultural and social institutions more accurately than is the case elsewhere in Ireland.

Acknowledgments

Given that this text stems in part from archaeological fieldwork carried out in northern Co. Clare over a decade and analyses of historic materials that went on in between and for many years after the campaigns in the field had ceased, there are a large number of persons and institutions to which I owe a debt of gratitude.

The program of archaeological research was variously known to its participants and benefactors as the Chieftdoms of County Clare Project, the Cahercommaun Archaeological Research Project, or, more simply, the Cahercommaun Project. The sponsor of this project in its initial stages was Professor George Eogan of the Department of Archaeology of University College, Dublin, Ireland. I would like to thank him for his support and advice. I would also like to express my appreciation to my PhD committee at UCLA, consisting of Timothy Earle, Dwight Read, the late James Hill, Joseph Nagy, and Charles Bennett, for guidance and inspiration in the early stages of this project. Thanks also to the late Peter Danaher, the former Chief Archaeologist of the National Parks and Monuments Branch of the Irish Office of Public Works, for his interest in the project's research program.

The lion's share of the funding for the project in both its 1985 and 1986 field seasons was provided by Earthwatch, and I would like to acknowledge Jane Flaherty of Earthwatch for her patient assistance to the project and to its greenhorn P.I. The project benefited from grants from the Graduate Division of UCLA in 1984 and 1986. The grant of 1986 was conferred by the Department of Anthropology, UCLA, and went to finance radiocarbon analysis. Research grants were also awarded to the Cahercommaun Project by the UCLA Friends of Archaeology. Additional data were gathered in 1990 while the author was a crew chief on Sinéad Ní Ghabhláin's Churches of Kilfenora Project. The author is grateful for the opportunity

Acknowledgments

Dr. Ní Ghabhláin afforded to return to the Burren, and I wish also to thank those participants in her project who volunteered to accompany me on weekend mapping trips. The Cahercommaun Project returned to the field for a final season of survey in 1993, this time generously supported by the late lamented University Research Expeditions Program. I would like to thank Jean Colvin and Anne Forrest for all that they did to make this field season a success. The composition of the final draft of this text was largely enabled by the granting of a single-semester sabbatical by my employer, El Camino College in Torrance, California.

The crew chiefs of the first season's work of the Cahercommaun Project were Keith Johnson, Michael Geselowitz, and Judith Carroll, and they deserve special commendation for working under very trying circumstances. Patrick Jones was the project's botanist. The crew chiefs of the second field season were Kevin McGimpsey, Una MacDowell, Mary Anne Murray, Ellen McCallig, and the late Wade Richards. The crew chiefs for the 1993 season were Maura Smale and my wife Susan Saul. The latter deserves copious praise for tolerating my frequent and prolonged stints of isolation while I wrote and rewrote the text of this book.

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I would like to thank Michael and Filomena Hines and family for the hospitality they showed me when I stayed with them in Carron in 1984. Tomás and Maureen O'Dea were the caretakers of the cottages in Coskeam where we were headquartered during the 1986 season. Many thanks for use of her telephone and for the homemade goat's cheese. In 1993 we used the Corofin Village Hostel, and I would like to thank Jude and Marie

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In working with the medieval documentary sources that shed light on Co. Clare, I would like to acknowledge the invaluable and tireless assistance of Joseph Flahive of University College Cork with Irish texts and Thomas O'Donnell of the University of York for translations of Latin texts. Ultimately, the fault for all errors of translation, and I am sure there are many, lie with me. I would like to thank the then-Assistant Keeper of Antiquities of the National Museum (Dublin), Michael Ryan, for allowing radiocarbon dating to be undertaken on samples of bone from the museum's collection of material from Cahercommaun. Finally, I would like to thank Built Heritage, Northern Ireland Environment Agency, for supplying Figure 3.3, the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland for extending permission to reproduce plates II and VI (Figures 5.1 and 5.5 in this book) from Hugh O'Neill Hencken's Cahercommaun report, the Royal Irish Academy for extending permission to publish figure 2 (Figure 5.2 in this book) from Hull and Comber's excavation report for Caherconnell, and Brian Lacey and the Discovery Programme (Ireland) for supplying the image of Dún Aonghasa.

Notes on Irish Names and Spellings

The reader who is unacquainted with Irish culture, history, and language will no doubt experience some confusion with the Irish names and terms that appear in the body of this work. This study spans three periods in the development of the Irish language, so personal names, names of peoples, and terms are differently rendered in the sources, depending upon their period of origin. This problem is compounded by the fact that personal names in Irish exhibit both nominative and genitive forms, and also by the fact that it wasn't until 1948 that the Irish language was standardized, and so the spelling of words varies greatly between texts, especially in texts of the Middle Ages. To ease some of the confusion, I have included a glossary of personal names later in this section, and a glossary of Irish terms in the back of this volume.

To help the reader keep track of the plethora of historical personages that appear throughout the body of this work, I have assembled a number of genealogies of the leading aristocratic kin groups in an appendix. As the names of individuals of these ramages appear in the text, they are linked to their appearance in a genealogy by a number (e.g., Brian Bóroimhe [6]). This should assist the reader in recognizing a name even where a genitive form or alternate spelling is given.

A NOTE ON THE SPELLING OF NAMES

Given the substantial chronological sweep of this book, it has proven enormously challenging to maintain consistency in the spelling of names of peoples and places, especially given my limited competence in the various stages of development of the Irish language. Starting with Chapter 3, I render the names of composite chieftdoms and chieftdom confederacies in Old Irish. However, throughout the book, place-names are often rendered either in their Anglicized forms or in Modern Irish.

Notes on Irish Names and Spellings

**A GUIDE TO THE MOST COMMON IRISH
 NAMES IN THIS TEXT**

Old Irish	Middle, Modern Irish	Name as frequently rendered in English
—	Brian gen: Briain	Brian
Blat gen: Blait	— gen: Bloid	—
Cass gen: Cais	—	—
Conchobor	Conchobhar, Conchobur gen: Conchobhair	Conor, Connor
Diarmait	Diarmuid, Diarmaid gen: Diarmada	Dermot
Donnchad	Donnchadh gen: Donnchaidh	Donough
Domnall	Domhnall gen: Domhnaill	Donnell, Donall, Donald
Fermac	Fearmac gen: Fearmaic	—
Máel Sechnaill	Maolsheachlainn	Malachy
Mathgamain	Mathghamhain gen: Mathghamhna	Mahon, Mahony
Muirchertach	Muircheartach gen: Muircheartaigh Murchad, Murchadh gen: Murchaidh	Murrough, Murtagh, Murchad
Tadc	Tadg, Tadhg gen. Taidg, Taidhg	Teig, Teigue
Tairdelbach gen: Tairdelbaich	Toirdelbach, Toirdhealbhach gen: Toirdelbaig,	Turlough
Uaithne	Uaithne	Owney
Uí	Ua	Ó

Abbreviations

ACI	<i>Annals of Clonmacnoise</i>
ACon	<i>Annals of Connacht</i>
AFM	<i>Annals of the Four Masters</i>
AI	<i>Annals of Inisfallen</i>
ALII	<i>Ancient Laws and Institutes of Ireland</i>
AU	<i>Annals of Ulster</i>
BB	<i>The Book of Ballymote</i>
BM	<i>The Book of Munster</i>
CGrG	<i>Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh</i>
CGH	<i>Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae</i>
CGSH	<i>Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae</i>
CT	<i>Caitheáim Thoirdealbhaigh</i>
DIL	<i>Dictionary of the Irish Language</i>
IMC	<i>Irish Manuscripts Commission (Books of Survey and Distribution)</i>
JCHAS	<i>Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society</i>
JRSAI	<i>Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland</i>
Lec	<i>The Yellow Book of Lecan</i>
LL	<i>The Book of Leinster</i>
NMAJ	<i>North Munster Antiquarian Journal</i>
PRIA	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy</i>
TRIA	<i>Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy</i>
UJA	<i>Ulster Journal of Archaeology</i>