CHAPTER ONE

Theoretical Considerations

Reduced to its bare essentials, this work is a study of human social organization, or the manifold ways in which humans structure their relationships (see Gibson and Geselowitz 1988:15). Over the course of the last century, two perspectives have evolved on the analysis of social organization. The older tradition, with roots in British functionalism and structural-functionalism, is interested in the modalities by which humans group themselves in varying contexts (e.g., family, extended family, hamlet, lineage, clan) and the reasons for these groupings. By contrast, the interactionist perspective, best exemplified by the work of Fredrick Barth, concerns itself with the dynamic qualities of human relationships and the ways in which roles and groupings are negotiated.

While an interactionist perspective has considerable merit, the dynamic qualities of social structures and the arcs of individual careers are difficult to resolve with the ethnohistorical and archaeological source materials of Early Medieval Ireland. However, even though this case study utilizes the formal analytical categories of social organization developed by the functionalist anthropologists, it is ultimately concerned with social dynamics of people living in groups and, more specifically, with whether or not these groups change in their configurations and why.

In recent decades, some archaeologists have taken up the topic of the stability of chiefdoms – their propensity to either collapse or evolve into primitive states (Anderson 1994; Anderson, Cleaveland, and Stahle 1995; Bogucki 1999: chap. 7; Carneiro 1981; Earle 1987; Flannery 1995, 1999; Kirch 1984; Kristiansen 1982, 1991; Milner 1990; Scarry 1996; Wright 1984). The chiefdoms of America, Africa, and Polynesia that were observed by Europeans in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries lacked written histories. As these societies came in contact with the industrial nation-states of Europe and the United States, they were exposed to new technologies,

new diseases, and both military and economic pressure. They exhibited a variety of responses ranging from collapse to rapid expansion and to absorption into colonial empires.

Ireland provides a stark contrast to the experiences of non-Western chiefdoms. The intelligentsia of Early Medieval Irish society attained literacy several centuries before the onset of foreign invasions. And when Ireland was attacked by Vikings beginning in the eighth century, and invaded by Anglo-Normans in the twelfth century, large swaths of the island managed to remain somewhat aloof from the direct impact of these incursions. Until the sixteenth century Gaelic polities endured outside the areas usurped by foreigners for towns and estates. Thus, one is enabled to study changes in the organization of Irish society over a period of almost 1,000 years through both historical records and archaeological remains.

This very long span of documentation allows the researcher to form solid judgments about the structure of Irish chiefdoms, how the organization of these chiefdoms was sustained, and whether or not these political systems were stable. The question of the stability of chiefdoms leads naturally to the larger issue of the evolutionary potential of these systems. In an earlier publication, I proposed that a state emerged in Munster in the twelfth century AD (Gibson 1995). This study will examine the inevitability of this development – whether the state of Muirchertach Uí Briain was the product of autochthonous forces or was promoted by external stimuli. This examination of historical Irish social organization is thus motivated by an overarching interest in human social evolution.

There are a number of competing paradigms within the social sciences that are expressly evolutionary, including Marxist, structural Marxist, cultural ecological, cultural materialist, selectionist, political economist, and so forth. This study is an outgrowth of the substantivist model of cultural evolution (Gibson and Geselowitz 1988). The substantivist model, in its latest avatar, is an amalgam of the cultural ecology and multilineal evolutionism of the anthropologist Julian Steward (1979) and the substantivist approach of the economic historian Karl Polanyi (1971) to the study of economic systems. Social organization occupied a position of primary importance in the approaches of both scholars to the study of human behavior. Polanyi's work propounded the primacy of behavior in its "instituted" form in the analysis of economic behavior (ibid.). By instituted behavior, Polanyi meant social institutions as they were held to dictate the individual economic values and actions of the social actors. Social institutions are considered to be integrated forms of human behavior and can be diverse in form – examples include the practices surrounding chieftaincy,

honor-price, clientship, periodic markets, gift exchanges between elites, or even raiding (Polanyi 1971:249–250). They constitute any instance in which humans are brought together in a predictable set of relationships,[1] corresponding to roles for purposes of social (including economic) action.

Julian Steward devised a body of theory that sought to explain the social structure and economic behavior of a group by reference to the group's specific ecological adaptation and its achieved level of social complexity. These two bulwarks of his thought system have become distilled into the school of cultural ecology on the one hand, and the evolutionary heuristic tool of levels of sociocultural integration on the other. This latter construct bears an isomorphic relationship to Polanyi's "forms of integration" concept (1971:250) to which Polanyi attributed a determinative role with respect to configuring a society's economic institutions. In Steward's thinking, levels of sociocultural integration constituted a methodology for the study of social evolution, and indeed were directly comparable to taxonomic practice in biology (1979:51). He defined them simply as "organizational types" (ibid.) in a continuum of cultural development that proceeded, following his explication by example in *Theory of Culture Change*, from simple to complex.[2]

Over the latter part of the twentieth century, refinements to Steward's original levels of sociocultural integration have been advanced by influential evolutionary anthropologists such as Elman Service, Marshall Sahlins, Allen Johnson, and Timothy Earle (Johnson and Earle 1987; Sahlins 1963; Service 1971, 1975). While both evolutionary anthropology and cultural ecology have lost favor within mainstream anthropology, the products of these schools, not surprisingly, were taken up with great enthusiasm by archaeologists in America and, to a lesser extent, in the United Kingdom. However, criticism has also been leveled by archaeologists at the employment of evolutionary stages on grounds ranging from a perception that they divert attention from the dynamic qualities of social change to charges that levels of sociocultural integration may function as value-laden labels that could be used to deprive indigenous groups of their rights (Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Kehoe 2004). But as Kent Flannery has recently countered, the stages of sociocultural integration are a part of a *methodology* for the study of social evolution, not a description of evolution itself (Flannery 1995; see also Marcus and Feinman 1998:5). Biologists do not waste time repudiating the tools of taxonomy, and anthropologists should not waste time on analogous efforts either.

In the present context, a level of sociocultural integration describes the maximal social entity within which members acknowledge a common

allegiance and organize their roles in correspondence to the organizational dictates of the unit. It does not refer to social subunits within a larger polity or to larger social units of sporadic occurrence.

Different levels of sociocultural integration are distinguishable through qualitative structural dichotomies (Gibson 2004). For instance, big-man societies are marked by a segmentary structure of lineages and entrepreneurial leadership, while chiefdoms are characterized by lineages linked together by genealogical relationships into a broader social construct. These lineages are further arrayed in a hierarchy reflecting putative kin relationships between their founding ancestors with respect to the ancestor of the principal line (Sahlins 1958:140–142). The office of leadership is permanent, with succession often constrained to a single sept. As we shall see in Chapter 9, however, succession to office within the complex chiefdoms of Ireland was more open-ended than it was in precontact Polynesia.

Within the bounds of a level of sociocultural integration, there is an appreciable amount of variation with respect to organizational complexity. Ranking societies by the dimensions of spatial extent or population size (scale) does not yield consistent results across cultures; a large number of case studies amply demonstrate that societies of similar organizational complexity may vary greatly in these dimensions due to differences in yields between subsistence technologies and the distribution of productive resources (Gibson 1988, 1995, 2004, 2008b). It is, therefore, more beneficial to compare societies by reference to their organizational complexity (Carneiro 1981:47–48; Earle 1987:288–289; Gibson 2004). Distinctions of scale in this work thus refer to the number of hierarchical levels of authority within a polity. These are the number of superimposed political units within a polity headed by an individual of authority, such as a lineage leader, subchieftain, or paramount chieftain (see Carneiro 1981:46; Drennan 1987; Feinman and Neitzel 1984:47–48; Flannery 1998; Gibson 1982:75–82, Fig. 5; Gibson and Geselowitz 1988:18; Johnson 1978:10; Upham 1987).[3] These levels of authority within a polity are of course synonymous with the number of nested social units within a polity, as will become clearer as this examination proceeds.[4]

The social formations and institutions that characterize different levels of sociocultural integration give rise to specific cultural institutions. These are belief systems and associated rituals practiced commonly by the members of a social unit that serve to objectify and justify the social order and reinforce or regulate social behavior. Cultural institutions, in effect, fulfill a multitude of roles in the framework of social analysis offered here. In

a primary sense, they serve to define the level of sociocultural integration by the fact of their presence or absence. For instance, the chiefdom level of sociocultural integration is partially defined by the existence of the office of chieftain and by the presence of many corollary institutions such as inauguration rituals, promulgation of aristocratic genealogies, and ancestor veneration (Sahlins 1958:140–142). Social and cultural institutions are thus corollary indices of the level of social complexity of any given social group.

Though there are organizational features that are universal to chiefdoms, certain institutions reflect the economic-ecological posture of the group. For instance, centralized storage is a universal characteristic of the palace economies of early agrarian states, and clientship is a social institution specific to the agropastoralist chiefdoms and states of Africa and northern Europe (Buxton 1963; Gibson 1988; Patterson 1981; Webster 1990). The institution of centralized storage reflects the physical suitability of cereal crops for long-term storage under varied climatic conditions. A secondary consideration is the fact that early agrarian states tended to arise in areas whose topography presented minimal obstacles to bulk transport or was even conducive to it (e.g., plains, river valleys). The association between clientship and agropastoralism is an outgrowth of many factors specific to a pastoralist economy, including a pattern of dispersed settlement, the risks associated with cattle raising (e.g., disease, human and animal predators), the relatively slow growth rates of cattle herds and consequent length of time necessary for herd replacement in the case of calamity, and the need for protection (Gibson 1988; Webster 1990).

Of significance to the archaeologist are those institutions, cultural and social, that generate highly survivable material correlates in the archaeological record. In Ireland, chieftainship leaves its material imprint in varied forms: inauguration mounds, ostentatious brooches, and sizable homesteads. These archaeological expressions of leadership are supplemented in Ireland by further diagnostic survivals in the historical record, such as the genealogies and descriptions of chiefdom social structure contained in the legal texts. Since, in Ireland, both archaeological and written resources are so abundant for the Early Middle Ages, the deficiencies in the archaeological record can be filled out by historical information, and the biases and deficiencies of the historical record can be checked against archaeological remains. These factors make Ireland a provident laboratory for the social analysis of the past.

Paramount to the various institutions of a society is the glue that binds them together into a coherent system: the social structure. The social

structure is here conceptualized as the totality of relationships between individuals that channel social action. Of course, these relationships vary from those that are situational and sporadic to those that are permanent and incessant, and, in complex societies, social relationships are multifaceted and hierarchical. In the substantivist framework of analysis, the relationships of import are those that order individuals and institutions and enhance the predictability of the outcomes of social interactions. These relationships fall within two overlapping categories with respect to the traditions of social science research: kinship and political systems.

Systems of kinship bring individuals together into social units defined by linkages of descent and marriage. The quantity and quality of these linkages vary greatly between groups and across cultures, and can be extended to include an entire polity of several hundred individuals. The political system differs from the kinship system only insofar as linkages between individuals are contractual – roles are vested with varying degrees of power and may possess the additional dimension of leadership over a group. These intertwined systems provide the structural principles that order roles and institutions, and social scientists have ascribed to them a primary place in explanations of social evolution.

THE CHIEFDOM LEVEL OF SOCIOCULTURAL INTEGRATION

Raymond Firth provided the first extensive descriptions of the social organization and economics of chiefdoms in two now-classic works: *The Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Maori* (1929) and *We, the Tikopia* (1936), though the term "chiefdom" was first coined by Kalervo Oberg in his survey of the social organization of the lowland indigenous peoples of Central and South America (Carneiro 1981:38; Oberg 1955). In the decades since these early works, usage of this term to describe societies of intermediate social complexity has spread to additional cultural regions, and the examination of societies attributable to this class has intensified (see Carneiro 1981; Earle 1987; Feinman and Neitzel 1984 for reviews).

Service defined chiefdoms as redistributional societies with a central agency of coordination (1971:34). Sahlins detailed the organization of Polynesian chiefdoms through the enumeration of an entire checklist of social traits (1958:4–9), though he viewed ramage social structure as the chief organizing principle (ibid.:139–151). More recently, Earle (1978:3, 1987:279) and Carneiro (1981:45) have come to represent chiefdoms simply as social entities comprising multiple communities under the leadership

of a chief, though to be fair to these authors, they go on to present the social attributes of these polities.

It is crucial to return to Steward's practice of prioritizing the features that define a sociocultural level of integration. However, I deviate here from his practice of basing these diagnostics upon core features related to subsistence activities, as these are certain to vary from one ecological setting to another. What has come out of cross-cultural comparisons since his initial work is the understanding that the higher levels of sociocultural integration, from segmentary systems on up, possess a suite of characteristics that do not vary across different ecological settings in the same way that the social organization of hunter-gatherers and primitive horticulturalists does. These characteristics lie in the realm of social organization.

All chiefdoms, irrespective of their specific ecological adaptations, exhibit the ramage social structure described by Gifford for Tonga (1929) and Firth for the Tikopia (1963:299–329; see also Sahlins 1958: chap. 8). This fact is important, as it establishes a universal core definition for chiefdoms and predicates a structure that sets out the characteristics of other dependent institutions. The ramage system of Polynesia consisted of ambipatrilineal lineages bound together into a single structure through a belief in descent from a common original ancestor. The concept of social ranking is implicit in this system, as lineages within the most inclusive ramage are ranked through genealogical proximity to the original line of descent. Hence, as cadet lineages branch off of the main line of descent, and as further branching takes place off of these lineages, the ranking of individuals within these cadet lineages becomes correspondingly lower.

This description of the ramage system is as applicable to Ireland as it is to Polynesia (Patterson 1994:26). I have found the ramage concept to have greater utility in the Irish context than the rival terms "conical clan" (Kirchoff 1955) and "status lineage" (Goldman 1970:chap. 20). Since chiefdoms are composed of lineages of comparable structure that are conjoined and hierarchically arranged, a ramage can be taken to describe either the entire assemblage of related lineages or any of its constituent subunits. The other terms do not lend themselves to such ease of manipulation.

In Ireland there were in all likelihood three hierarchically ordered social levels to the ramage concept. In describing these levels, I adapt to the Irish situation the terminology that Raymond Kelly utilized in his study of the social organization of the Nuer of Sudan (R. Kelly 1985:169). The maximal ramage refers to all genealogically related lineages that maintain some degree of political cohesion. In Ireland, this is manifested in a number of ways, among the most obvious being a patronymic identifying the apical

ancestor (e.g., Uí Lochlainn [descendants of Lochlaind]). The name of the leading ramage is, of course, not often the same as the name of the chiefdom, which in most cases either refers to the dominant ramage at an earlier stage of its existence or to a formerly dominant people of the territory. A second manifestation of the political cohesion of a maximal ramage is the ramage's control of a territory with clearly established boundaries. This quality of a maximal ramage eliminates the blurring caused by the ancient practice of extending group patronymics to ratify the membership of a chiefdom confederacy, such as the *Connachta* (descendants of Conn) or the *Éoganachta*, (descendants of Éogan). This practice led to a number of maximal ramages that bore the same patronym, albeit with a geographical qualifier (e.g., *Éoganacht Locha Léin*), but that controlled noncontiguous territories.

Next in social inclusiveness is the major ramage, termed *sliocht* in the Medieval period Irish sources and *derbfine* (true family) in the earlier (seventh to eighth century AD) legal texts, and often translated into English as "section" (Gibson 1995). This was a single aristocratic lineage within those that together composed a maximal lineage. From an analysis of the social constitution of the sixteenth-century O'Lochlainn chiefdom in the Burren, it seems that the section was a corporate landholding unit and maintained a distinctive political identity, manifested by a principal residence that I have termed the "section capital" (Gibson 1995, 2000). Some intermediate ramages probably had their origins in the progeny of the former chieftains of a chiefdom.

The legal text *D'fodlaib cineoil tuaithi* (On the divisions of the lineage in the chiefdom) establishes the existence of a sublineage within the *derbfine* called the *gelfine* (white or bright kindred) (Charles-Edwards 1993:55; F. Kelly 1988; McLeod 2000). The color symbolism may refer to that segment of the *derbfine* out of which future leaders emerged by virtue of proximity to the principal line of descent.[5] One may also surmise on the basis of the five households that were said to make up this grouping that the term indicates the lineage leader and his adult male offspring. This hypothesis is supported by a rule that seems to preclude claims on the property of the *gelfine* by more distant kinsmen (Charles-Edwards 1993:515). The legal texts are clear, however, that the *derbfine*, not the *gelfine*, was the true corporate group (Ó Cróinín 1995:143).

The major ramage or section was a subdivision of the maximal lineage. It in turn presided over lineages of free commoners. By analogy with African chiefdoms and segmentary societies, one may surmise that section territories were also populated by nonaristocratic lineages that did not share the

patronym of the leading ramage (Buxton 1963; Evans-Pritchard 1969:212). Those lineages unrelated to the maximal ramage may have even constituted the majority of the population of an Irish chiefdom. As the ethnohistorical legal texts that have come down to us were composed under aristocratic patronage, the social structure of the nonaristocratic sector of the population is not clearly discernible. Archaeological evidence, to be discussed later, will enable the first steps toward filling this gap.

Settlement evidence allows us to discern the existence of an even smaller, spatially distinct, though certainly not autonomous, social unit: the single household. Individual farms and farmers form the basis of discussion in legal texts dealing with relations between neighbors (*Bretha Comaithchesa*) and inheritance (Charles-Edwards 1993:47; F. Kelly 2000:413), though the social constitution of a household is not detailed. The settlement evidence to be detailed in the present study indicates only limited residential autonomy for what may be presumed to have been extended families or kindreds.

In addition to ramage social structure, there are a number of social and cultural institutions that one may expect to encounter in any chiefdom. Naturally, the most important social institution is the office of chieftain. This office exists independently of the current holder – that is, it is conceived as something to be filled or occupied after the last occupant's demise (Johnson and Earle 1987:220).

The chiefly office is consistently invested with several cultural institutions relevant to the chief's roles as leader, adjudicator, source of largess, and sacred personage. The chief was considered to be an intermediary between the supernatural realm and the natural world. One inevitably finds among societies of the chiefdom level that the ancestors of the chiefly lineage are religiously venerated (Firth 1963; MacAnany 1995; Sahlins 1958:142). In Ireland, medieval ancestor veneration has left varied traces. In the textual realm the deeds of ancestors were the focus of the mythic cycles, most prominent in this regard being the Historical Cycle. These myths served to apotheosize a maximal ramage's founding ancestor. Select monuments on the landscape, such as standing stones inscribed with a dedication in the ogam script, served as constant reminders to the citizens of a chiefdom of the significance of chiefly ancestors. Important walled settlements often bear the names of individuals, and we can presume these place-names refer to the settlements' putative founders (e.g., *Cathair Commáin* [The Dwelling Place of Commáin]). Some inauguration mounds, such as Carn Mhic-Táil (The Mound of Mac-Tál), were held to be the final resting place of ancestors. Taking an oath of office

while standing on top of the burial place of an ancestor was seen as the ultimate test of the legitimacy of a chieftain-elect, as it was thought that the ancestor could signal immediately if the presumptive ruler were illegitimate. Ancestor veneration extended from the preservation of the relics of famous ecclesiastics associated with the various ramages and their display in times of crisis to the invocation of an ancestor's name at the commencement of battle. Ancestor veneration was the principal source of legitimacy for the chiefly ramage and provided a key element for forging a common identity among a chiefdom's membership.

A natural adjunct in a society in which social position and political relationships were contingent upon the relations between ancestors was the keeping of genealogies. Numerous genealogical texts, containing the names of thousands of chieftains, survive from medieval Ireland (O'Brien 1976; Ó Cróinín 1995:63). This corpus of material was produced by genealogical specialists, who are likewise typically encountered in chiefdom societies.

In chiefdoms, generosity is axiomatic to the definition of social status (Firth 1929:118, 288–289, 1965:219–222, 230; Goldman 1970:18–19; Sahlins 1958:xi, 3–4). This cultural institution is a corollary to the chief's role in the mode of economic circulation that is typically associated with the political economy of chiefdoms – that is, redistribution. Questions were raised in the 1970s and 1980s as to whether redistribution at the chiefdom level is indeed really redistributive in nature (see Carneiro 1981:58–63; Earle 1978; Peebles and Kus 1977; Rosman and Rubel 1978). A recurrent critique of the redistributive model was that not much actually reverts to the producer; the bulk of the revenue to the chiefly household stops with this institution (Carneiro 1981:60–63; Earle 1978:180–185; Peebles and Kus 1977). Beyond the percentage taken to support the chief's household, most goods are converted into prestige items or used to attract followers.

The problem with this debate is that it is unfocused with respect to the level of sociocultural integration.[6] In his earliest writings, Firth was clear that even the chieftain of the simplest polity enjoys unequal access to the means of production (1963:333–342), and that wealth accumulation by a chief is important to establishing and expanding his status (1929:118–121). To stereotype the institution of redistribution as a simple quid pro quo circulation of goods is simply missing the point.

The problem is not one of factual error, but of incomplete characterization. A redistributive economy *is* a political economy (see Johnson and Earle 1987:15, 208; Sahlins 1972:139–140). If Polanyi committed any sin