

EXCHANGE AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS AS EVIDENCE FOR
SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND DEVELOPING COMPLEXITY
IN PREHISTORIC AND EARLY CHRISTIAN IRELAND

Rebecca L. Swaters

Dr. Lois Huneycutt, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

There exists no economic study of prehistoric Ireland, nor a history focused on the island's early international relations, nor one that studies how its early elites came to power. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining the use of international trade as a mechanism for gaining and maintaining power in prehistoric and early Christian Ireland, and how changing settlement patterns reflects the developing social complexity in Ireland.

The study begins with brief discussions of Irish historiography and theories of state-building, including the use of war, resource scarcity, and other situations of advantage. The author then traces the nature and degree of international trade and foreign contacts Ireland maintained with the outside world between 2500 BCE and the sixth century CE. Changes in trade and foreign contacts were used to infer the relative growth of power held internally by the ruling classes of Ireland who controlled such international relations. This evidence was correlated with environmental circumstances, evidence for warfare, changing settlement patterns, large building projects, and road-building over the same period. Overall, trade was successfully used as a tool for gaining and maintaining power, while at the same time internal defenses, warfare, and building projects reflect the development of a complex social hierarchy. Ultimately, by the end of the sixth century CE, Ireland had developed an island-wide, cohesive social system.