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# The History of Mauritania

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Earliest Footprints: Prehistoric Mauritania and the Archaeological Record
- **Chapter 2** The First Settlers: Hunter-Gatherers and the Changing Sahara
- **Chapter 3** The Neolithic Revolution: Rock Art, Pastoralism, and Early Communities
- **Chapter 4** Megaliths and Mysteries: Stone Circles, Tumuli, and Ancient Societies
- **Chapter 5** Climate and Human Adaptation: Mauritania's Shifting Environments
- **Chapter 6** Early Trade Networks: The Rise of Pastoral Nomadism
- **Chapter 7** The Camel and the Caravan: Transforming the Sahara
- **Chapter 8** The Birth of Trade: Mauritania's Role in Trans-Saharan Exchange
- **Chapter 9** The Influence of the Ghana Empire: Crossroads of Power
- **Chapter 10** Early Urban Centers: Founding and Flourishing of Sahelian Towns
- **Chapter 11** The Almoravid Movement: Origins and Religious Reform
- **Chapter 12** Conquest and Expansion: Mauritania and the Almoravid Empire
- **Chapter 13** The Spread of Islam: Religious and Cultural Transformation
- **Chapter 14** Intellectual Centers: Chinguetti, Ouadane, Tichitt, and Oualata
- **Chapter 15** Tribal Dynamics: The Rise of Berber and Arab Confederations
- **Chapter 16** The Beni Hassan and Hassaniya: Arabization of a Region
- **Chapter 17** Contact with Europe: Gum Arabic, Slavery, and Coastal Trade
- **Chapter 18** The French Conquest: Colonial Ambitions and Resistance
- **Chapter 19** Colonial Rule: Administration, Change, and Social Impact
- **Chapter 20** The Road to Independence: Nationalism and New Beginnings
- **Chapter 21** Nation-Building: The Early Republic and Moktar Ould Daddah
- **Chapter 22** War and Upheaval: The Western Sahara Conflict
- **Chapter 23** Coups and Change: Military Rule and Political Instability
- **Chapter 24** Toward Democracy: Civilian Rule and Modern Reforms
- **Chapter 25** Mauritania Today: Challenges, Opportunities, and the Path Forward

## Introduction

Mauritania, a land where the arid sands of the Sahara meet the sweeping winds of the Atlantic, stands at the heart of northwest Africa as a crossroads of civilization, commerce, and culture. Its story is rooted deeply in the annals of human history, stretching back over a million years to the first tentative steps of early hominids upon its soil. Through the ages, this region has witnessed cycles of migration, adaptation, and transformation, shaped by both the harsh environment and the inventive spirit of its people.

From the earliest hunter-gatherers who traversed Mauritania's ancient savannas, to the Neolithic artists who adorned rock walls with vibrant depictions of daily life, the country's prehistoric legacy is both rich and enigmatic. The enduring mystery of the stone circles and tumuli scattered across the landscape offers tantalizing glimpses into complex societies long vanished, challenging modern archaeologists to piece together their secrets. The shifting climate, which has alternately rendered Mauritania lush and barren, spurred dynamic responses from its inhabitants, fostering both resilience and ingenuity.

The strategic position of Mauritania made it a linchpin in the major trans-Saharan trade networks that linked the Mediterranean to sub-Saharan Africa. The introduction of the camel transformed the vast desert from an insurmountable barrier into a conduit for gold, salt, ideas, and influence. The region became both a participant in and beneficiary of empires and kingdoms, such as Ghana, that shaped the destiny of West Africa. The rise of the Almoravids—fueled by religious fervor and martial prowess—propelled Mauritania onto a broader stage, leaving indelible marks on its religious and cultural fabric, as well as its political evolution.

Mauritania's history is also a narrative of complex interactions among diverse peoples—Berber, Arab, and sub-Saharan African—whose mingling produced unique social structures and enduring traditions. The ebb and flow of power among tribes, the process of Arabization, and the gradual spread of Islam all contributed to a society marked by both tension and synthesis. Centuries of external encounters, first with European traders and then with French colonizers, heralded new forms of change and disruption, culminating in a hard-fought journey toward independence in the 20th century.

The modern era has introduced fresh challenges and opportunities. Struggles for national unity, political stability, and social justice have come to the fore, driven by the legacies of colonialism, the pressures of a global economy, and the enduring complexities of ethnicity, class, and language. Yet, Mauritania remains a land of

remarkable continuity as well as change—a place where ancient cities like Chinguetti and Ouadane testify to brilliant intellectual and religious traditions, and where contemporary society aspires to move beyond its historic burdens while honoring a distinctive heritage.

In this book, we chart the sweeping arc of Mauritania's past, from its prehistoric beginnings to the shifting realities of the present day. We seek to illuminate the forces and figures that have defined its identity, confront the difficult questions of power and belonging, and celebrate the courage of a people whose story is still unfolding. Through a careful exploration of archaeology, oral history, and written sources, this volume presents Mauritania's history in all its complexity—a testament to the enduring human capacity for adaptation, creativity, and hope.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Earliest Footprints: Prehistoric Mauritania and the Archaeological Record

Long before the camel caravans traversed its vast stretches, and millennia before written histories began to record the rise and fall of empires, Mauritania was a land where the story of humanity's journey unfolded in subtle whispers across ancient landscapes. This is where we begin our exploration, by peering into the mists of time to uncover the earliest footprints left by our distant ancestors on this extraordinary terrain. The archaeological record, though often fragmented and challenging to interpret, offers tantalizing glimpses into a prehistory that is as rich and dynamic as the shifting sands themselves.

The earliest chapter of human habitation in Mauritania stretches back to the Lower Paleolithic period, an astonishing era that commenced some 3.3 million years ago and concluded around 300,000 years ago. This immense span witnessed the emergence of early hominids who, with simple yet revolutionary stone tools, began to shape their environment and, in turn, their own destiny. While direct skeletal remains are scarce, archaeologists have unearthed a wealth of stone tools and artifacts that serve as silent witnesses to their presence.

These ancient tools, crafted with care and purpose, speak volumes about the ingenuity of these early inhabitants. They were, in essence, the very first multi-tools, serving a variety of functions from butchering game to processing plant materials. Their discovery across Mauritania hints at a widespread presence of these hunter-gatherers, who adapted to a Saharan environment that was far from the hyper-arid desert we know today.

Indeed, the Sahara was not always the vast, unforgiving expanse that characterizes much of Mauritania. Climate fluctuations, driven by long-term astronomical cycles, transformed parts of this region into more hospitable savannas. During these "Green Sahara" periods, increased rainfall supported a diverse array of flora and fauna, creating environments that would have been attractive to early human settlements. These were not merely transient visits; these periods allowed for sustained occupation and the development of distinct cultural practices.

One of the most remarkable archaeological features in Mauritania is the Richat Structure, often dubbed the "Eye of the Sahara" due to its striking appearance from space. This massive, circular geological formation, about 40 kilometers in diameter, was once thought to be a meteorite impact crater. However, scientists now understand it to be a deeply eroded geological dome, formed by uplifted sedimentary

rock and sculpted over millions of years by wind and water. Within its intricate rings, archaeologists have found ancient stone tools, some dating back an incredible two million years, associated with species like *Homo erectus* and *Homo heidelbergensis*.

The presence of Acheulean and pre-Acheulean tools within the Richat Structure indicates that this visually stunning landmark was not only a geological marvel but also a significant locus of early human activity. These tools are hallmarks of the Lower Paleolithic, reflecting the technological advancements of hominins who were honing their skills in crafting more sophisticated implements. Imagine these early humans, perhaps gazing at the concentric circles of the Eye, much as astronauts do today, but with a primal curiosity for survival and sustenance.

As we move forward in time, the archaeological record continues to unfold, revealing shifts in human behavior and environmental adaptation. The Middle Paleolithic period, which followed the Lower Paleolithic, saw the emergence of more refined stone tool technologies, including the Levallois technique, which allowed for greater control over flake shape and size. While the specifics of this period in Mauritania are still being uncovered, the general pattern across North Africa suggests a continued human presence, with populations adapting to fluctuating climatic conditions.

The transition into the Late Stone Age and the Neolithic period brought about truly transformative changes. Around 8,000 to 3,000 BCE, as the climate once again became more favorable, the Sahara experienced a resurgence of green, attracting new waves of settlers and fostering significant cultural innovations. This was a time of momentous shifts, moving away from purely hunter-gatherer lifestyles towards a more settled existence rooted in pastoralism and early agriculture.

The Adrar and Tagant regions, with their rugged plateaus and natural rock shelters, became canvases for the artistic expressions of these ancient peoples. Rock art, in the form of engravings and paintings, offers invaluable insights into their daily lives, beliefs, and interactions with their environment. These masterpieces depict scenes of hunting, cattle herding, and even ritualistic practices, providing a vivid window into a vibrant prehistoric society that thrived in areas that are now remarkably arid.

In the Adrar region alone, there are around thirty known rock art sites, though comprehensive study has been limited, suggesting many more await discovery. Engraved rock art tends to dominate along the northern edges of the Adrar massif, with significant sites such as El Beyyed and El Ghallaouiya. Rarer, but equally compelling, are the paintings of cattle found at El Ghallaouiya and Amogjar, hinting at the importance of livestock in their culture.

The Tagant plateau, while less extensively studied than Adrar, also boasts numerous painting sites, featuring scenes of horses and riders, as seen at Agneitir Dalma and Tinchmart. The Tichitt-Walata ridge, an archaeologically rich area often associated

with the wider Tagant region, is particularly noteworthy for its Neolithic settlements and abundant engravings and paintings. These artistic expressions are not merely decorative; they are narratives etched in stone, telling tales of survival, prosperity, and spiritual connection to the land.

The Neolithic period in Mauritania also saw the emergence of more organized communities, particularly evident in the Tichitt-Walata region. This area is considered one of the most ancient archaeological sites in Western Africa, home to over 500 stone settlements dating back as far as 2000 BCE. These communities, often referred to as the Tichitt Tradition or Tichitt culture, were pioneers in agropastoralism, combining the herding of livestock with the cultivation of crops like millet.

The architectural technology employed by these inhabitants was remarkable: they built their villages with large cut stones, linking pathways to settlements in circular forms. The Dhar Tichitt region, in particular, was inhabited by pastoralists and farmers between 2000 BCE and 300 BCE, adapting to a climate that was once much more temperate than today. Here, the transition from a purely hunter-gatherer existence to a pastoralist pattern of life, driven by changing climate, is evident.

These early settlements were not simply haphazard groupings of dwellings. They often consisted of multiple drystone compounds, containing houses and granaries, sometimes even laid out with rudimentary "street" plans. Large livestock enclosures were built near some sites, and around others, substantial common stone walls, suggesting a degree of communal organization and cooperation for the benefit of the entire community.

Beyond the practicalities of daily life, the Neolithic inhabitants of Mauritania also left behind enigmatic megalithic structures – stone circles and tumuli. These monumental constructions, scattered across various parts of the country, point to societies with complex social and religious structures. While their exact purpose remains a subject of ongoing archaeological debate, they likely served as burial sites, astronomical observatories, or ceremonial grounds. The sheer effort involved in their construction suggests a communal endeavor and a shared understanding of spiritual or cosmological significance.

The Tichitt culture, for example, is associated with numerous funerary monuments, with almost 10,000 such structures identified across the area, though not evenly distributed. These tumuli and stone circles further underscore the sophisticated social structures that developed among Saharan herders, laying the groundwork for more complex hierarchies in later African settlements.

The archaeological record of prehistoric Mauritania, therefore, is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of early human populations. From the simple stone tools of the Lower Paleolithic to the intricate rock art and monumental structures of the

Neolithic, each artifact and site tells a part of a much larger story. This story is one of constant interaction with a dynamic environment, of innovation in the face of change, and of the enduring human drive to build, create, and leave an indelible mark on the landscape. As we delve deeper into Mauritania's past, these earliest footprints provide the essential foundation upon which all subsequent history is built.

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