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The History of Romania

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Introduction

The story of Romania is one of remarkable resilience, rich cultural synthesis, and enduring identity. From the misty depths of prehistory to the dynamic landscape of the present day, the land at the crossroads of Central and Eastern Europe has been home to diverse peoples, civilizations, and traditions. Exploring the history of Romania means journeying through epochs of conflict, creativity, adaptation, and renewal—a tapestry woven from the threads of Dacians, Romans, medieval lords, Ottoman pashas, revolutionaries, and modern leaders.

Geography has played a cardinal role in shaping Romania's destiny. Bounded by the Carpathian Mountains, nourished by the Danube River, and watching over the shores of the Black Sea, the territory that is now Romania has long attracted conquerors and immigrants alike. Throughout millennia, this landscape has witnessed migrations, empires, and state-building that left indelible marks on the nation's language, religion, and sense of self.

Romania's path to statehood was neither straightforward nor uncontested. The medieval principalities of Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania developed distinct yet intertwined identities, often caught between the ambitions of neighboring powers—the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburgs, and the Russian Tsars. The long struggle for autonomy and unity culminated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, propelled by the tide of nationalism and shaped by dramatic wars and shifting borders.

In the modern era, Romania's experiences echoed the broader currents of European and global history, from royal courts to revolutions, from the devastation of world wars to the authoritarian shadow of communism. The overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989 marked a watershed, ushering in decades of transformation, complexity, and the ongoing search for democracy, prosperity, and European integration.

This book traces Romania's story, from its origins in prehistoric cultures to its present challenges and aspirations as a member of the European Union. Along the way, it delves into the country's dynamic cultural life, the mosaic of its minorities, and the enduring question of Romanian identity. Through the lens of history, we seek to understand how the past continues to shape Romania today and how its people—again and again—have reimagined their place in the world.

CHAPTER ONE: The Dawn of Civilization: Prehistoric Romania

Long before recorded history etched its narratives into clay tablets and papyrus scrolls, the lands that now constitute Romania were a vibrant stage for the unfolding drama of human existence. From the chilly epochs of the Paleolithic to the foundational shifts of the Iron Age, this region, nestled amidst the Carpathians and nourished by the Danube, witnessed the incremental, yet profound, advancements that shaped early human societies. The story of prehistoric Romania is a testament to resilience, innovation, and the enduring human spirit in the face of a wild and untamed world.

Our journey into Romania's deep past begins in the Paleolithic era, a time stretching back hundreds of thousands of years. While no human skeletal remains from the Lower Paleolithic have yet surfaced in the region, tantalizing glimpses of Middle Paleolithic life have been found, such as phalanges unearthed in the Bordu Mare Cave in Hunedoara County. These humble bone fragments are echoes of early human presence, hinting at lives lived in caves and temporary shelters, guided by the rhythms of hunting and gathering.

The Upper Paleolithic period offers a clearer picture, with discoveries like a skull capsule from Cioclovina Cave, displaying features of *Homo sapiens sapiens* and dated to this period. Flint tools characteristic of the Aurignacian culture were found alongside these remains, suggesting a connection to Central European developments. Other sites in Banat, like Tincova, Coșava, and Românești-Dumbrăvița, have also yielded flint tools, further emphasizing the ties between this region and the broader European Paleolithic landscape.

Indeed, the "Cave with Bones" (Peștera cu Oase) in Caraș-Severin County holds particular significance, revealing some of the oldest modern human remains in Europe, dating back approximately 40,000 years. These ancient inhabitants left behind not just bones, but also early cave paintings, such as those found in Coliboaia Cave in the Apuseni Mountains, dating back around 35,000 years, and footprints from approximately 36,000 years ago at Ciuc Izbuclu. These discoveries paint a vivid, if faint, portrait of the earliest artistic expressions and daily movements of humanity in this corner of the continent.

As the last Ice Age waned, giving way to a warmer, more hospitable climate, the Mesolithic era dawned. This transitional period saw communities adapting to new environments, with a shift in hunting strategies and the development of more refined

tools. While less dramatic than the preceding Paleolithic or the subsequent Neolithic, the Mesolithic was a crucial bridge, laying the groundwork for the revolutionary changes to come.

The true transformation arrived with the Neolithic period, starting around 6600 BC in Romania. This epoch marked a profound shift from a nomadic hunter-gatherer existence to settled agricultural communities. It wasn't an indigenous invention, but rather the result of migrations from the south Balkan Peninsula, bringing with them the innovations of plant cultivation and animal husbandry. These early farmers set up their dwellings on meadows, terraces, and hills, wherever the land proved fertile and inviting.

One of the most prominent Early Neolithic cultures in Transylvania was the Starčevo-Criș culture, which spread into the region around 6000 BC. These communities primarily raised cattle and sheep/goats, supplementing their diet with sporadic hunting and gathering. Their settlements, often initially embedded dwellings and later ground-level huts, tell a story of increasing permanence and organization.

The Neolithic period in Romania also gave rise to remarkable artistic and technological advancements. The Hamangia culture, flourishing around 5000 BC in the Dobrogea region along the Black Sea, is renowned for its exceptional clay figures, including the iconic "Thinker" and "Sitting Woman." These artifacts, unearthed from a necropolis near Cernavoda, offer a poignant glimpse into the spiritual and artistic sensibilities of these ancient people.

Further to the northeast, the Cucuteni-Trypillian culture, often simply called Cucuteni culture in Romania, emerged as one of the earliest and most expansive European civilizations. From approximately 4800 to 3000 BC, this culture spanned a vast area from the Carpathian Mountains into Moldova and Ukraine, covering over 35,000 square kilometers. Cucuteni settlements were often remarkably large, some housing over a thousand structures, indicating a sophisticated level of social organization. These communities, centered around rivers like the Prut, Dniester, and Siret, were known for their elaborate painted pottery and complex societal structures. Intriguingly, Cucuteni settlements were completely incinerated every 80 years or so, a practice whose purpose remains a subject of academic debate, possibly linked to religious beliefs.

As the Neolithic transitioned into the Chalcolithic, or Copper Age, around 3800-3700 BC, the use of metal began to appear, albeit initially alongside stone tools. Transylvania, with its rich mineral resources, saw the early development of metallurgy, with copper used for needles and fishing hooks, and gold for hammered decorations. The Petrești culture, for instance, is noted for its distinctive pottery adorned with rhombus, square, and spiral patterns in red and brown.

The Bronze Age, commencing around 3500 BC, marked a significant leap in technology and societal complexity. This period saw the widespread adoption of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, which allowed for the creation of more durable tools and weapons. The economy diversified, with livestock rearing (sheep, goats, pigs, and large cattle for transportation and food) becoming central. The Wietenberg culture, for example, is recognized for its artistic output, with intricate clay statuettes and ornaments.

Archaeological discoveries from the Bronze Age in Romania continue to astound. Recently, a metal detectorist in Cluj County unearthed a treasure hoard of 121 gold artifacts, including a unique spiral ring and 116 small, incised links believed to be earrings, dating back to approximately 1400-1200 BCE. Such finds underscore the advanced craftsmanship and the value placed on precious metals during this era. Other significant Bronze Age discoveries include those at the Urlati archaeological site, where over 40 burial sites, some containing jewelry and clay utensils, are being unearthed.

The close of the Bronze Age and the dawn of the Iron Age, roughly around 800-700 BC, brought another wave of cultural and technological change. Iron, a more abundant and harder metal than bronze, gradually replaced it as the primary material for tools and weaponry. This period is particularly significant as it witnessed the emergence of the people who would come to be known as the Dacians, the ancestors of modern Romanians.

The origins of the Dacians are a subject of ongoing scholarly discussion, but they are generally considered a subgroup of the Thracians, an Indo-European people inhabiting the cultural region of Dacia, near the Carpathian Mountains and west of the Black Sea. During the Iron Age, Dacian civilization began to develop its distinct characteristics, laying the groundwork for the powerful kingdoms that would emerge in the centuries to follow. Early Dacian settlements were often strategically located near rivers and on hills, sometimes fortified with forts that likely served as centers for a warrior elite.

The prehistoric period, then, was not merely a prelude to recorded history, but a dynamic era of profound developments that shaped the very bedrock of Romanian identity. From the earliest nomadic hunters to the settled agriculturalists, from the creators of intricate pottery and gold artifacts to the proto-Dacian communities forging a new metal, the people of prehistoric Romania laid the foundations for a civilization that would endure for millennia. Their legacy is etched into the landscape, waiting to be discovered, a silent testament to the ingenuity and perseverance of humankind.

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