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# The History of The United Arab Emirates

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## Introduction

The United Arab Emirates stands as a striking example of transformation—a nation that has journeyed from humble ancient beginnings to a position of modern eminence on the world stage. Its story is both timeless and timely, stretching back over 125,000 years to the earliest evidence of human presence along its coasts and desert interiors, and culminating in the vibrant, ambitious society that thrives today. The country's rise, marked by resilience, ingenuity, and intercultural exchange, has created a dynamic tapestry woven from many peoples, beliefs, and achievements.

For millennia, the lands now encompassing the seven emirates were home to nomadic tribes, enterprising traders, skillful pearl divers, and ingenious farmers who learned to draw life from arid soil. These early inhabitants developed vast trade networks that linked the Gulf to distant civilizations—from the Indus Valley to ancient Mesopotamia, and later to Rome, Persia, and beyond. The archaeological remains of settlements, tombs, and irrigation systems bear silent testimony to a landscape that was shaped as much by human aspiration as by nature's elements.

With the arrival of Islam in the 7th century, the Emirates region became firmly part of the greater Islamic civilization, contributing to a flourishing era of maritime commerce and spiritual exchange. The bustling medieval ports of Julfar and Dibba connected Arabia to Africa, India, and Southeast Asia, attracting merchants, scholars, and adventurers. Over centuries, the region weathered invasions by the Portuguese and navigated the complex interests of Ottoman and British powers, all while maintaining a unique social and tribal fabric rooted in cooperation and adaptability.

The transition to modern nationhood was neither abrupt nor inevitable. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the Emirates faced hardships from the decline of the pearling industry and the challenges posed by renewed colonial interests. The formation of the United Arab Emirates in 1971 was the result of bold vision, wise leadership, and a profound sense of shared destiny among the emirates. Under the stewardship of figures like Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the federation embarked on a transformative journey—building infrastructure, fostering education and healthcare, and carving out a vibrant role in regional and international affairs.

Today, the UAE is recognized globally for its economic vitality, innovative spirit, and commitment to progress. It stands as a crossroads of East and West, where tradition meets modernity and ambition shapes new horizons. The federation's achievements are evident in its gleaming cities, sustainable initiatives, thriving business hubs, and diverse, cosmopolitan society. Yet, beneath these modern successes lies a profound connection to its past—a legacy of endurance, unity, and vision.

This book, “The History of The United Arab Emirates: The United Arab Emirates from its earliest beginnings to the present day,” invites readers on an expansive journey through time. It seeks to illuminate the complex, inspiring story of a nation and its people; tracing their steps from prehistoric settlements and ancient trade, through eras of empire and federation, to the bold aspirations that shape the UAE in our present era. Through the pages that follow, we explore not only the history of a nation but the ideals, challenges, and dreams that continue to define it.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Land Before History: The UAE's Prehistoric Roots**

Long before towering skyscrapers pierced the desert sky and bustling metropolises hummed with global commerce, the land that would one day become the United Arab Emirates was a vast expanse of shifting sands, ancient coastlines, and resilient life. This prehistoric era, stretching back over 125,000 years, lays the foundational stones of the UAE's narrative, a story etched in rock, bone, and the faint traces of early human wanderings. It's a tale of adaptation, survival, and the slow, deliberate march of human ingenuity in the face of a challenging yet ultimately bountiful environment.

Imagine a time when the Arabian Peninsula was not quite the arid landscape we know today. During certain interglacial periods, increased rainfall transformed parts of the region into a greener, more hospitable environment, creating corridors for early human migration out of Africa. These ancient migrations, though leaving only fragmented evidence, suggest that the region served as a crucial thoroughfare, connecting continents and facilitating the exchange of early hominids and their burgeoning cultures. The very earliest whispers of human presence in the UAE are found in these faint echoes, suggesting a land that has always been a crossroads.

The true beginnings of settled human activity, however, emerge from the mists of the Neolithic period, a pivotal era between 6000 and 3500 BCE. This was a time of profound change globally, marking humanity's shift from solely nomadic hunting and gathering to a more settled existence, characterized by the domestication of animals and the advent of agriculture. In the future UAE, communities of pastoralists and fishermen began to thrive, leaving behind a more tangible record of their lives. These weren't isolated groups; they were part of a wider network of early societies, hinting at a remarkable degree of interconnectedness.

Life for these early Neolithic communities was a constant negotiation with their environment. They were adept hunters, stalking game across the plains, and skilled fishermen, harvesting the rich bounty of the Arabian Gulf. Their diet was supplemented by the rudimentary herding of animals, a crucial step towards food security and a more sedentary lifestyle. Archaeological excavations across the emirates have brought to light the remnants of these resourceful people, offering glimpses into their daily routines, their tools, and even their artistic expressions. It's a subtle but persistent testament to their enduring presence.

One of the most compelling pieces of evidence for these early societies comes from Dalma Island, an archaeological treasure trove where the remains of Bedouin

communities have been unearthed. Here, researchers have found not only the tools of daily life—stone tools and spearheads crafted with precision—but also fragments of Ubaid pottery. This particular type of pottery is a significant find because it originated in Mesopotamia, thousands of miles away. Its presence on Dalma Island is a clear indication of early trade routes and sophisticated cultural links between the Gulf settlements and the powerful Mesopotamian civilizations. It paints a picture of a world far more connected than one might initially imagine for such an ancient time.

Another remarkable site that speaks volumes about the region's prehistoric past is the inland necropolis at Jebel Buhais in Sharjah. This ancient burial ground holds the distinction of being the oldest burial site in the Emirates, with interments dating back to the 5th millennium BCE. The careful arrangement of graves, the artifacts buried alongside the deceased, and the sheer longevity of its use offer invaluable insights into the beliefs, social structures, and funerary practices of these early inhabitants. It's a silent city of the dead, whispering stories of lives lived and traditions honored thousands of years ago.

As the Neolithic period gave way to the Bronze Age, roughly between 3200 and 1300 BCE, the region witnessed further significant cultural developments. This era is broadly categorized into distinct periods: the Hafit, Umm Al Nar, and Wadi Suq. Each period, named after the locations where their defining characteristics were first identified, represents a new chapter in the evolving story of human civilization in the land. This wasn't a sudden leap, but rather a gradual refinement of techniques, social structures, and economic activities, all building upon the foundations laid by their Neolithic predecessors.

The Hafit period, spanning from 3200 to 2600 BCE, marks the early stages of the Bronze Age in the UAE. It takes its name from the distinctive beehive-shaped tombs discovered near Jebel Hafit in Al Ain. These unique structures, often found clustered together, are a testament to the organizational capabilities and belief systems of the people who constructed them. The Hafit period coincided with a booming copper industry, suggesting a dynamic economy and an engagement with regional trade networks. The demand for copper, a vital resource for tools and weapons, likely fueled much of this early economic activity, drawing people to the area.

Beyond the tombs, agricultural settlements in Al Ain during the Hafit period provide further evidence of a developing society. The cultivation of crops like corn and wheat indicates a deeper commitment to settled life and a more sophisticated understanding of irrigation and land management. These early farmers, harnessing the available water resources, were transforming the landscape, albeit on a small scale, to sustain their growing communities. Their efforts represent a significant step towards a more complex, food-producing society, moving beyond mere subsistence.

Following the Hafit period came the Umm Al Nar period, from 2600 to 2000 BCE,

named after the significant discoveries made on Umm Al Nar Island in Abu Dhabi. This era represents a flourishing ancient civilization, leaving behind a wealth of archaeological evidence. The island revealed numerous round tombs, often serving as mass graves, suggesting a communal approach to burial. More strikingly, the ruins of settlements with carefully constructed stone houses and an array of tools point to a well-established and organized society, capable of undertaking considerable architectural and communal endeavors.

The Umm Al Nar people were more than just builders; they were also active participants in ancient trade networks. The region was home to the Magan people, known to the Sumerians—one of the earliest urban civilizations in Mesopotamia—as crucial trading partners. The Magan were particularly renowned for their trade in copper, a highly prized commodity, along with diorite and pearls. Their influence extended far beyond the immediate region, as evidenced by their contact with the Harappan culture of the Indus Valley, Afghanistan, Bactria, and the Levant. This period showcases the UAE's emerging role as a key player in the ancient global economy, connecting disparate cultures through vital exchange.

The final phase of the Bronze Age was the Wadi Suq culture, which lasted from 2000 to 1300 BCE. Key archaeological sites from this period are found in Ras Al Khaimah, specifically Shimal and Seih Al Harf. These sites have unveiled transitional burial practices, indicating a shift in funerary customs from the earlier Umm Al Nar period. Perhaps even more significant is the evidence of domesticated camels and other animals during this time. The introduction of camels, in particular, would have revolutionized transportation and trade across the arid interior, opening up new possibilities for inland settlement and resource exploitation.

The Wadi Suq period also saw an increase in inland settlement, driven in part by the growing importance of date palm cultivation. Dates, a versatile and nutritious crop, would have provided a stable food source and contributed to the ability of communities to thrive away from the coast. This expansion into the interior demonstrates a growing mastery of the desert environment and a broadening of economic activities beyond purely coastal pursuits. The ingenuity of these ancient inhabitants in adapting to and utilizing their surroundings is a testament to their resilience.

As the Bronze Age drew to a close, the Iron Age dawned in the UAE, ushering in a period of significant prosperity and civilization from 1300 to 300 BCE. This era is particularly notable for two transformative introductions: the *falaj* irrigation systems and the first appearance of writing. The *falaj*, an ingenious system of underground channels designed to tap into groundwater, was a revolutionary technological advancement. It allowed for continuous cultivation in the arid climate, transforming previously barren lands into fertile agricultural areas and supporting larger, more permanent settlements.

The *falaj* system was a marvel of ancient engineering, requiring a deep understanding of hydrology and considerable communal effort to construct and maintain. Its impact on the landscape and the lives of the people was profound, enabling a stable agricultural base that could support a growing population and further economic specialization. This innovation underscores the resourcefulness of the Iron Age inhabitants, who not only survived but thrived by bending the environment to their will.

The appearance of writing during the Iron Age also marks a crucial intellectual leap. While the exact forms and extent of this early writing are still being researched, its presence suggests a growing complexity in social organization, administration, and perhaps even literary or religious expression. It signifies a move towards more sophisticated communication and record-keeping, essential components of any advanced civilization. This was a society not just building and farming, but also beginning to articulate and document its world.

Important archaeological sites from the Iron Age include Rumailah and Qarn bint Saud in Al Ain, and Al-Thuqeibah and Umm Safat in Sharjah. These sites provide further evidence of settled communities, advanced craftsmanship, and robust economies. Fortified settlements like those found in Muwaileh and Tell Abraq, in Umm Al Quwain and Sharjah respectively, suggest a need for defense, perhaps indicating inter-community rivalries or the threat of external pressures. These fortifications speak to a period of both advancement and potential conflict, a dynamic common to many emerging civilizations.

Following the three defined Iron Ages, the Hellenistic or Late Pre-Islamic (PIR) Mleiha period emerged, spanning from 300 BCE to 0 CE. Archaeological remnants at the Mleiha Archaeological Centre, dating back to 300 BCE, offer the most complete evidence of human settlement from the post-Iron Age era in the UAE. This period showcases early iron use, building upon the technological advancements of the preceding Iron Age. The findings at Mleiha also strongly link the region to the ancient Near Eastern city of Ed Dur on the UAE's west coast, suggesting continued trade and cultural exchange with wider regional powers.

Prior to the arrival of Islam, the UAE region was a vibrant tapestry of diverse civilizations, notably including the Dilmun and Magan cultures, which maintained extensive trade networks across the Gulf and beyond. These pre-Islamic societies were characterized by a rich array of polytheistic beliefs, where multiple deities were worshipped, reflecting the varied spiritual landscapes of the ancient world. This spiritual diversity was a significant aspect of daily life, with rituals and traditions deeply interwoven into the fabric of their communities.

However, a shift in religious landscape began to emerge in the fourth century, with the

gradual introduction of monotheistic influences, primarily from Judaism and Christianity. These new belief systems, originating from the Levant, slowly made their way into the Arabian Peninsula through trade routes and increased cultural contact. The spread of Christianity, in particular, left tangible marks on the landscape of the future UAE. The earliest Christian site in the UAE is an extensive monastic complex discovered on Sir Bani Yas Island.

This monastic complex on Sir Bani Yas Island dates back to the seventh century CE and is believed to have been Nestorian, a branch of Christianity that flourished in the East. The presence of such a significant religious institution indicates a well-established Christian community in the region prior to the Islamic era. Interestingly, the complex appears to have been peacefully abandoned around 750 CE, suggesting a gradual transition rather than a violent upheaval. The discovery of another pre-Islamic Christian monastery, possibly 1,400 years old, on Siniyah Island in Umm Al Quwain further highlights the widespread presence of early Christianity along the Arabian Gulf shores. These discoveries underscore a period of religious pluralism and cultural exchange that preceded the profound changes brought by the arrival of Islam, setting the stage for the next major chapter in the history of the United Arab Emirates.

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