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A History of Algeria

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Introduction

Algeria stands as a monumental crossroads in the story of North Africa. Straddling the Mediterranean seaboard and reaching deep into the heart of the Sahara, Algeria's vast landscapes encapsulate a wealth of historical experience that stretches back over a million years. The territory has been home to human communities since the earliest days of prehistory, and their stories—written in stone tools, rock art, and ancient mounds—form the deep foundations of Algerian identity. Over time, the indigenous Berber peoples, or Imazighen, became the stewards of this land, shaping its cultures, social structures, and worldviews in the shadow of mountains, deserts, and fertile plains.

The country's strategic position ensured that it was seldom isolated. From the earliest Phoenician traders and mighty Carthaginian merchants who landed on its coasts to the armies of Rome and later waves of Byzantines and Vandals, Algeria never ceased to be a zone of encounter and contest. Over centuries, the region became a crucible where African, Mediterranean, and Near Eastern civilizations met, clashed, and ultimately intertwined. The arrival of Islam in the seventh century was another profound turning point, bringing new faith, political structures, and cultural syntheses that would reverberate across the Maghreb and define Algeria's place in the larger Islamic world.

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Medieval Algeria witnessed the rise and fall of dynasties. Its fragmented territories and local polities—Rustamids, Fatimids, Zirids, Hammadids, Almoravids, Almohads, and Zayyanids—each left indelible marks on the land and its people. Cities flourished as centers of learning, trade, and diplomacy, even as waves of migration and conquest wrought new challenges. The Ottoman era, commencing in the sixteenth century, brought yet another cultural matrix. Algiers became a hub of maritime activity, both defensive and predatory, as corsairs dominated the western Mediterranean and forged complex relationships with European powers.

French colonial conquest in the nineteenth century would change Algeria's trajectory with unprecedented force and violence. Over 130 years of French rule redrew the map of society, land ownership, language, and identity. The indigenous majority faced dispossession, marginalization, and repression under a harsh regime of modern colonialism. These conditions sowed the seeds of an enduring resistance, culminating in the epic Algerian War of Independence—a conflict whose brutality, ambitions, and aftermath would have profound repercussions not only for Algeria, but for the global decolonization movement.

Since gaining its independence in 1962, Algeria has navigated a complicated path

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through nation-building, modernization, internal conflict, and changing global realities. Its postcolonial rulers inherited an array of challenges: constructing a unified identity out of linguistic, ethnic, and regional diversity; steering economic development; managing the legacies of violence; and finding a place in the families of nations. The turbulence of the “Black Decade” civil war and the subsequent search for reconciliation and renewal continue to shape Algeria’s future.

This book offers a journey through Algeria’s rich and sometimes tumultuous history—from the first hominins lingering by North African lakes to twenty-first-century protestors reimagining their nation’s future. It seeks to explore not only the landmarks of dynasties, wars, and rulers, but also the intricate cultural patterns, resilient societies, and enduring beliefs that have allowed Algeria to survive and reinvent itself across the ages. Whether ancient or modern, Algeria’s history is one of resilience, reinvention, and a persistent quest for dignity and self-determination.

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CHAPTER ONE: Prehistoric Algeria: The Earliest Inhabitants

Long before Algeria was a nation, even before it was a notion in the minds of men, the vast territories that now define its borders were stirring with the earliest chapters of human existence. Imagine a landscape both familiar and alien: the Mediterranean coast, perhaps greener and wilder; the Atlas Mountains, formidable as ever; and a Sahara Desert that, at various times, bloomed with life, a far cry from the hyper-arid expanse we know today. It was upon this ancient stage, for over a million years, that the first acts of Algeria's human story unfolded, chronicled not in texts but in scattered stones, enigmatic art, and the silent testimony of bones.

Our journey into Algeria's deepest past begins not with a subtle whisper but with a rather resounding archaeological declaration. In the high plateaus of Sétif, at a site named Aïn Hanech, discoveries have pushed back the timeline of human presence in North Africa quite dramatically. Here, alongside the remains of ancient elephants, horses, and saber-toothed cats, researchers unearthed stone tools – crude choppers, polyhedrons, and spheroids – and animal bones bearing distinct cut marks, evidence of butchery. These artifacts, found in geological layers dated to between 1.9 and an astonishing 2.4 million years ago, suggest that early hominins, our distant ancestors, were roaming and resourceful inhabitants of this region.

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The implications of Aïn Hanech are profound. It places hominins in the Mediterranean fringe of North Africa far earlier than previous estimates, contemporary with some of the oldest known hominin sites in East Africa, the long-presumed sole cradle of humankind. While the exact species of these toolmakers remains a subject of ongoing research – perhaps an early form of *Homo habilis* or a similar archaic human – their toolkit, classified under the Oldowan tradition, speaks to their ingenuity. These were not just passive residents; they were actively engaging with their environment, processing animal carcasses for sustenance and demonstrating a foundational level of technological skill.

The landscape these early Algerians inhabited would have been a mosaic of grasslands and wooded areas, supporting a rich megafauna. The presence of water, indicated by the ancient river systems near Aïn Hanech, was crucial. These hominins were likely opportunistic scavengers and perhaps occasional hunters, their lives intricately tied to the rhythms of nature and the movements of the animal herds that sustained them. Their legacy is sparse, a faint trail of stone and bone, yet it marks the very beginning of the human odyssey in Algeria.

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As millennia unfurled, bringing with them slow but inexorable changes in climate and environment, so too did the hominins and their cultures evolve. The Lower Paleolithic, the era of Aïn Hanech, eventually gave way to the Middle Paleolithic, a period characterized by more sophisticated tool-making techniques and, significantly, the emergence of early *Homo sapiens*. In Algeria, and across North Africa, this era is most famously represented by the Aterian civilization, flourishing roughly between 145,000 and 30,000 years ago.

The Aterian toolmakers left behind a distinctive calling card: finely crafted stone points with a characteristic tang, or stem, at the base. This innovation was likely designed for hafting – attaching the point to a spear or handle – making for more effective hunting weapons. These Aterian points, along with scrapers, knives, and other specialized tools, have been found across a vast area from the Atlantic coast to the western Egyptian desert, and deep into the Sahara, suggesting a widespread and adaptable culture. The Aterians were skilled hunters, tackling antelopes, gazelles, and even larger prey.

What makes the Aterian culture particularly fascinating is its association with anatomically modern humans, *Homo sapiens*. Skeletons found at sites like Jebel Irhoud in Morocco, dating to a similar period, show features consistent with early members of our own species. This means the Aterians were not just technologically innovative but also part of the broader narrative of human origins and dispersal. They were us, or at least, very close relatives, navigating a world that was often challenging.

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The Aterian period coincided with significant climatic fluctuations, including phases where the Sahara became more humid and vegetated – the so-called "Green Sahara" episodes. This allowed Aterian groups to penetrate deep into what is now desert, exploiting resources and leaving their tools as evidence of their passage. Some intriguing discoveries from Aterian sites include pierced seashells, often covered in ochre, found hundreds of kilometers from the coast. These are interpreted as beads, some of the earliest evidence of personal ornamentation and symbolic behavior in the world, hinting at developing social complexities and an abstract, aesthetic sense.

Following the Aterian, as the climate generally shifted towards drier conditions around 30,000 years ago, the archaeological record enters the Late Paleolithic and then the Epipaleolithic. This was a transitional phase, and in northwestern Africa, one of the most prominent cultures to emerge was the Iberomaurusian, also known as the Oranian. Flourishing from approximately 20,000 to 10,000 years ago, the Iberomaurusians predominantly occupied coastal regions and near-coastal rock shelters from Morocco through Algeria to Tunisia.

The Iberomaurusians were hunter-gatherers well-adapted to the Mediterranean environment. Their toolkit was characterized by the production of numerous small,

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sharp stone bladelets, which could be used for various cutting tasks or set into bone or wooden handles to create composite tools. They hunted wild cattle, Barbary sheep, and gazelles, and also exploited marine resources, as evidenced by shell middens found near some coastal sites. Life was likely lived in small, mobile bands, following the availability of game and plant resources.

An interesting aspect of Iberomaurusian culture is their dental morphology. Studies of skeletal remains have shown a particular pattern of incisor tooth removal, a practice that might have had ritualistic or social significance. Their burial practices were also relatively consistent, often interring their dead in rock shelters or caves, sometimes in a contracted, flexed position. These practices suggest shared cultural norms across the Iberomaurusian range.

The Iberomaurusian people, like the Aterians before them, were anatomically modern humans. Genetic studies on ancient Iberomaurusian remains have begun to shed light on their affinities, suggesting complex population dynamics in North Africa, with connections both to earlier North African populations and potentially to groups from the Near East or Europe, though the picture is still emerging from the mists of time. Their presence laid a crucial layer in the peopling of Algeria, preceding the next major cultural fluorescence.

As the last Ice Age waned and the global climate warmed around 10,000 years ago, a new and vibrant culture emerged, primarily in the inland steppes and high plateaus of Algeria and Tunisia: the Capsian. Named after the Roman town of Capsa (modern-day Gafsa in Tunisia), the Capsian culture, lasting from roughly 10,000 to 6,000 years ago, represents a fascinating adaptation of sophisticated hunter-gatherer-fishers in a post-glacial world.

One of the most distinctive features of Capsian sites is the presence of enormous mounds of snail shells, known as *escargotières*. These are not your average garden snail piles; some mounds are vast, covering hundreds of square meters and reaching several meters in height, testifying to a rather dedicated, if perhaps monotonous, dietary preference for land snails. While snails were clearly a staple, the Capsians also hunted wild animals like aurochs, hartebeest, and gazelle, and gathered wild plants. Their culinary adventurousness, or lack thereof, remains a subject of light-hearted archaeological debate.

The Capsian toolkit was rich and varied, featuring an abundance of microlithic tools – small, geometric stone segments like triangles, trapezes, and crescents – used to arm arrows or form parts of composite tools. They also produced larger tools, bone implements, and pottery in later phases. Personal adornment was clearly important: the Capsians crafted beads from ostrich eggshells, teeth, and stones. They also engraved intricate designs on ostrich eggshells, some of which may have served as containers.

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Capsian art wasn't limited to small items. At some sites, rock shelters bear engravings and paintings, a precursor to the more famous Saharan art. These depictions often feature animals and geometric patterns, offering glimpses into their worldview. Burial practices among the Capsians were diverse, sometimes involving the use of ochre and grave goods, suggesting evolving spiritual beliefs and social differentiation. The Capsians represent a period of significant cultural development, a flourishing of creativity and adaptation in the early Holocene. They were not farmers initially, but their settled lifestyle, evidenced by the large shell mounds, set the stage for the eventual adoption of agriculture and herding.

The transition to a food-producing economy – the Neolithic revolution – was a gradual process in Algeria, as it was elsewhere. The Capsians themselves, in their later phases (sometimes termed "Neolithic of Capsian Tradition"), began to adopt pottery and, eventually, domesticated animals, primarily sheep and goats, which likely diffused from the Near East via Egypt. The introduction of herding marked a significant shift in subsistence strategies, allowing for a more stable food supply and potentially supporting larger populations.

Meanwhile, in the Sahara, which was experiencing one of its "Green Sahara" phases with more abundant rainfall, lakes, and rivers, different Neolithic traditions developed. Here, cattle pastoralism became particularly important. The people of the Sahara during this period were adept at managing herds in a landscape that, while greener than today, still presented challenges. They also engaged in fishing in the Saharan lakes and rivers, and continued to hunt the diverse wildlife that populated the region.

The development of pottery was a key Neolithic innovation, allowing for better storage and cooking of food. Early Algerian pottery was often decorated with impressed or incised patterns. Grinding stones, used for processing wild grains and later, domesticated cereals, also become more common in the archaeological record. While full-scale agriculture likely arrived later and was perhaps more prominent in certain fertile zones, the Neolithic laid the groundwork for settled village life and the profound social and economic changes that accompanied it.

No discussion of prehistoric Algeria can be complete without marveling at the extraordinary rock art of the Tassili n'Ajjer, a vast plateau in the Algerian Sahara. This UNESCO World Heritage site holds one of the most important concentrations of prehistoric art in the world, with thousands of engravings and paintings adorning rock shelters and cliffs. These artworks provide a vivid, unparalleled chronicle of the changing environment and human life in the Sahara over millennia, from around 10,000 BCE to the early centuries CE.

The art is typically classified into several periods, each with its distinct style and subject matter. The earliest, the "Large Wild Fauna" or "Bubalus" period (c.

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10,000–6,000 BCE), features magnificent engravings of now-extinct Saharan wildlife like the giant buffalo (*Bubalus antiquus*), elephants, rhinoceroses, and giraffes, depicted with remarkable naturalism. These images evoke a Sahara teeming with life, a hunter’s paradise. The human figures from this period are often hunters, armed with bows and clubs.

Following this, the "Round Head" period (c. 8,000–6,000 BCE, partly overlapping with the Bubalus) presents a more enigmatic and symbolic style. Paintings, rather than engravings, dominate. Human figures are often large, with distinctive round heads, sometimes adorned with elaborate headdresses or masks. These scenes can be ethereal and surreal, depicting what appear to be ritualistic activities, masked dancers, or mythological beings. The meaning of Round Head art remains debated, but it clearly points to a rich spiritual and ceremonial life.

As the climate began to dry, the "Pastoral" period (c. 5,500–2,000 BCE) emerged, reflecting the growing importance of domesticated cattle. The art from this era is filled with scenes of herding, cattle camps, and daily life. The cattle are often depicted with great care, sometimes with decorated horns or elaborate markings, suggesting their economic and possibly symbolic value. Human figures are more naturalistic, engaged in activities like milking, hunting, and dancing. This art provides a beautiful window into the lives of Saharan pastoralists.

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Later periods include the "Horse" period, marking the introduction of the horse into the Sahara (from around 1,500 BCE), often shown with chariots, suggesting new forms of warfare and transport. Finally, the "Camel" period (from the last few centuries BCE onwards) reflects the increasing desiccation of the Sahara and the camel's crucial role in trans-Saharan trade and nomadic life, a role it continues to play. The artistic styles become more schematic and symbolic in these later phases.

The artists of Tassili n'Ajjer and other Saharan sites like the Hoggar Mountains used natural pigments – ochres for reds, yellows, and browns; kaolin for white; charcoal for black – ground and mixed with binders. They painted on sheltered rock surfaces, creating an outdoor gallery that has miraculously survived for millennia, though it is now under threat from natural erosion and human impact. These artworks are not just pretty pictures; they are invaluable historical documents, illustrating ecological change, technological innovation, spiritual beliefs, and the daily concerns of the people who lived in the Sahara when it was a very different place.

The question of who these prehistoric peoples were, and what became of them, naturally arises. While the archaeological record primarily speaks of cultures and lifestyles, it is widely accepted that the indigenous peoples of North Africa, the Berbers (or Imazighen, "free men," as they call themselves), are the descendants of these ancient inhabitants. The deep roots of Berber languages and culture are believed to extend far back into North African prehistory, predating the arrival of Phoenicians,

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Romans, Vandals, Arabs, or French.

There isn't a single "moment" when prehistoric hunter-gatherers or early farmers "became" Berbers. Rather, it was a long, continuous process of cultural and linguistic development *in situ*. The Capsians, the Saharan pastoralists, and other Neolithic groups likely represent various ancestral strands that contributed to the later Berber populations. This continuity is supported by craniometric studies of skeletal remains and, increasingly, by genetic research, which traces a significant ancestral component in modern North Africans back to these Epipaleolithic and Neolithic populations.

The very term "Berber" is an exonym, derived from the Greek "barbaroi" (barbarians) and later Latin "barbarus," used by Romans to describe peoples outside their cultural or linguistic sphere. The Imazighen themselves have various names for their distinct groups (Kabyle, Chaoui, Tuareg, etc.) but share a common linguistic family (Tamazight) and many cultural traits. Their emergence as distinct ethno-linguistic groups was a product of millennia of adaptation to diverse North African environments, from the Mediterranean coast and Atlas Mountains to the Saharan oases. Chapter Two will delve more deeply into the specific cultures and histories of these indigenous peoples. For now, it is crucial to recognize their prehistoric pedigree, their unbroken link to the land of Algeria stretching back thousands of years.

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The final phases of Algerian prehistory, often termed protohistory, saw the gradual introduction of metalworking. The Chalcolithic (Copper Age) and subsequent Bronze Age are less distinctly defined in Algeria compared to regions like the Near East or Europe, and the transition was likely slow and uneven. Knowledge of copper and then bronze metallurgy probably diffused from the eastern Mediterranean or through Saharan connections. This period also saw the development of more complex social structures and fortified settlements in some areas, as populations grew and competition for resources potentially increased.

Rock art continued in some regions, and megalithic traditions, such as the construction of stone tombs and monuments, also appear, though their exact chronology and cultural affiliations are still being researched. These proto-historic societies, increasingly interconnected through nascent trade networks, were developing the social and economic foundations that would characterize the region on the eve of recorded history. They were the people who would soon encounter seafaring traders from the east, an encounter that would bring North Africa, and specifically the lands that would become Algeria, into the orbit of the wider Mediterranean world, ushering in a new era of interaction, challenge, and transformation. The stage was set for the arrival of the Phoenicians, the rise of Carthage, and the subsequent chapters of a long and complex history.

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