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A History of Belgium

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Prehistoric Belgium: The Earliest Inhabitants
- **Chapter 2** Celtic and Roman Belgium: The Age of the Belgae and Gallia Belgica
- **Chapter 3** The Decline of Rome and the Coming of the Franks
- **Chapter 4** Merovingians and Carolingians: The Birth of Medieval Belgium
- **Chapter 5** Feudal Lords and the Rise of Flanders and Brabant
- **Chapter 6** Flemish Cities: Commerce, Industry, and Urban Revolt
- **Chapter 7** The County of Flanders in European Affairs
- **Chapter 8** The Burgundian Netherlands: Art, Wealth, and Centralization
- **Chapter 9** The Habsburg Inheritance: Charles V and the Seventeen Provinces
- **Chapter 10** Religious Upheaval: Reformation, Revolt, and the Spanish Netherlands
- **Chapter 11** Warfare, Decline, and Cultural Flourishing in the 17th Century
- **Chapter 12** From Spanish to Austrian Rule: The Austrian Netherlands
- **Chapter 13** Enlightenment and Revolution: The Brabant Revolution and French Annexation
- **Chapter 14** Napoleonic Rule and the Seeds of Belgian Identity
- **Chapter 15** The Congress of Vienna and the United Kingdom of the Netherlands
- **Chapter 16** The Belgian Revolution: Independence and Constitution
- **Chapter 17** Nation-Building and Political Strife in the New Kingdom
- **Chapter 18** Industrialization: Prosperity and Social Change
- **Chapter 19** Colonialism and Controversy: Belgium in Central Africa
- **Chapter 20** The Linguistic Divide: Flemings and Walloons
- **Chapter 21** Belgium and the World Wars: Occupation, Resistance, and Recovery
- **Chapter 22** Postwar Transformation: Royal Questions and European Integration
- **Chapter 23** Decolonization: The End of Empire
- **Chapter 24** Federalism, Identity, and Modern Challenges
- **Chapter 25** Belgium Today: Society, Politics, and the Future

Introduction

Belgium's history is a story of complexity and resilience, of a land shaped by waves of migration, empire, rebellion, and cultural flowering at the heart of Europe. Despite its modest size, Belgium has played a disproportionately large role in European history, often finding itself at the crossroads of political, economic, and cultural currents that would define the continent. Its strategic location—sandwiched between powerful neighbors and traversed by crucial trade routes—made it equally a target for conquest and a vibrant melting pot of peoples and ideas.

From the earliest days of human settlement, the lands that became Belgium have seen the ebb and flow of cultures: from Paleolithic hunter-gatherers and Neolithic farmers, to the Celtic tribes famously described by Julius Caesar, and the transformative impact of Roman rule. The collapse of Roman authority ushered in centuries of shifting allegiances and new beginnings, with the Frankish dynasties laying the foundations for medieval society. It was during these centuries that many of the linguistic and cultural identities that still characterize Belgium today began to form.

The Middle Ages brought not only feudal fragmentation, but also remarkable economic and artistic vitality, especially in the urban centers of Flanders and Brabant. Here, merchants, artisans, and burghers crafted one of Europe's most urbanized societies and contributed to flourishing intellectual and artistic traditions. Yet, these golden ages were repeatedly threatened by war, political intrigue, and intensifying conflicts over language, religion, and regional autonomy.

Belgium's later history is marked by cycles of domination—by Spain, Austria, France, and the Netherlands—followed by revolution and independence in the nineteenth century. Its industrial revolution was among the earliest on the continent, transforming the Belgian landscape and accelerating social change but also increasing class tensions and political strife. Meanwhile, the acquisition and brutal exploitation of the Congo under King Leopold II ushered in a controversial chapter with repercussions that still echo today.

Twentieth-century Belgium weathered two world wars, with its neutrality twice violated and its territory twice occupied, at great human and material cost. Post-war recovery brought not only economic renewal, but also complex challenges of governance, as linguistic and cultural divisions deepened even as Belgium emerged as a core member of European and international institutions. Ongoing debates over identity, federalism, and integration with Europe continue to shape Belgian society well into the twenty-first century.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive account of Belgium's remarkable journey from prehistoric times to the present. Through a focus on both broad currents and local particularities, on economic, political, and cultural themes, it aims to illuminate how Belgium's past has shaped its present—the enduring tensions and extraordinary achievements of a nation at the heart of Europe.

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CHAPTER ONE: Prehistoric Belgium: The Earliest Inhabitants

Before the Celts, before the Romans, before even the concept of 'Belgium' flickered into existence, the land we now know lay silent under vast sheets of ice or teemed with the life of a much wilder world. The story of this territory doesn't begin with kings or battles, but with the slow grind of glaciers, the shifting course of rivers, and the first tentative footsteps of hominids navigating a harsh, ever-changing landscape. To understand Belgium's deep past is to peel back layers of geological time, revealing an environment vastly different from the gentle plains and rolling hills of today.

The earliest evidence of human presence in the area stretches back hundreds of thousands of years, into the depths of the Paleolithic, or Old Stone Age. This was a time before agriculture, before permanent settlements, when small bands of hunter-gatherers roamed the land, following migrating herds and harvesting wild plants. These weren't necessarily *Homo sapiens* as we know them today; for much of this period, the inhabitants were likely earlier human species, including the famous Neanderthals.

Archaeological sites across Belgium have yielded crucial clues about these early inhabitants. Caves and rock shelters along river valleys, particularly in Wallonia, served as temporary homes. Sites like Engis and Spy have provided significant remains of Neanderthals, offering insights into their physical characteristics, their tool-making abilities, and possibly even aspects of their social structure and burial practices, challenging earlier simplistic views of them as merely primitive brutes.

Life in the Paleolithic was dictated by the rhythms of the ice ages. During glacial maximums, vast ice sheets covered much of northern Europe, making the region a cold, sparsely vegetated tundra or periglacial desert. Survival depended on resilience, intimate knowledge of the environment, and sophisticated hunting techniques to bring down large game like mammoths, woolly rhinoceroses, and reindeer. Simple stone tools, like handaxes, were essential for butchering animals, processing hides, and working wood.

As the climate warmed during interglacial periods, the landscape transformed. Forests of pine and later deciduous trees spread across the land, rivers flowed more freely, and different animal species migrated into the region. Human populations adapted to these changes, developing new tools and hunting strategies suited to forested environments. This long, slow process of adaptation and technological refinement defines the Lower and Middle Paleolithic periods.

The Upper Paleolithic, beginning around 40,000 years ago, marked a significant shift, coinciding with the arrival and dominance of anatomically modern humans, *Homo sapiens*. These new arrivals brought with them more sophisticated tool technologies, including blade tools, bone needles, and projectile points. Evidence suggests more complex social structures, symbolic thought, and artistic expression, although well-known examples like cave paintings are less abundant in Belgium compared to regions like France or Spain.

Sites like Maisières-Canal near Mons provide glimpses into these early *Homo sapiens* camps. They were highly mobile, but their technology allowed them to exploit resources more efficiently. They carved bone and antler, indicating a new level of craftsmanship and possibly artistic expression. Their ability to create tailored clothing, using bone needles, would have been crucial for surviving the lingering cold periods.

The end of the last Ice Age, the Younger Dryas cold snap notwithstanding, brought about the Holocene epoch, a period of warmer, more stable climate starting around 10,000 BCE. This transition marked the beginning of the Mesolithic period, or Middle Stone Age. As the glaciers retreated further north, the vast open tundras were replaced by dense forests. The megafauna of the ice age disappeared or migrated, forcing humans to adapt their hunting strategies.

Mesolithic people in the Belgian region focused on smaller game, such as deer and wild boar, using bows and arrows with microlithic points – tiny, geometrically shaped stone tools that could be hafted onto shafts. Fishing became more important, with evidence of fish traps and bone fishing hooks found near rivers and lakes. Foraging for plant foods, nuts, and berries also played a larger role in their diet as the forests matured.

This period saw continued technological innovation, but also a potentially less nomadic lifestyle compared to their Paleolithic ancestors. While still moving with the seasons and resources, Mesolithic groups may have established more semi-permanent base camps, especially in areas rich in diverse resources. The population density was likely still very low, with small, independent bands interacting only occasionally.

The most profound transformation in prehistory arrived with the Neolithic period, the New Stone Age, beginning in the region around 5000 BCE. This was the dawn of agriculture. The concept of cultivating crops, primarily cereals like wheat and barley, and domesticating animals, such as cattle, sheep, and pigs, spread from the Middle East through southeastern Europe. This wasn't a sudden revolution, but a gradual process of adoption and adaptation.

The arrival of agriculture fundamentally changed human society. For the first time, people could produce their own food, leading to more sedentary lifestyles and the

establishment of permanent villages. The Linear Pottery culture (Linearbandkeramik) is the earliest clear evidence of this transition in regions bordering modern Belgium, with settlements characterized by distinctive longhouses and pottery decorated with linear incisions.

Neolithic farmers cleared forests to create fields, transforming the landscape in unprecedented ways. They developed new tools suited for farming, such as polished stone axes for felling trees and stone sickles for harvesting grain. The need to store surpluses led to the development of pottery for storage and cooking. Life in Neolithic villages was more communal and likely more complex than the small bands of hunter-gatherers.

As the Neolithic progressed, different cultural groups emerged, distinguished by their pottery styles, burial practices, and settlement patterns. The Michelsberg culture, for instance, is known for its hilltop enclosures, possibly serving defensive or communal purposes. Burial practices shifted from individual burials to collective tombs, such as passage graves or gallery graves, suggesting changes in social structure and the concept of community and ancestry.

The adoption of agriculture brought benefits – a more stable food supply and the ability to support larger populations – but also new challenges. Dependence on crops made communities vulnerable to drought or disease. Living in closer proximity facilitated the spread of illnesses. Social hierarchies likely became more pronounced, as some individuals or families accumulated greater wealth or status.

Following the Neolithic, the region entered the Bronze Age, beginning around 2500 BCE. The knowledge of smelting copper and tin to create bronze, a stronger and more durable metal than copper alone, arrived through trade networks connecting the area to other parts of Europe. Bronze technology initially coexisted with stone tools, which remained essential for many tasks.

Bronze was used to create tools, weapons, and ornaments. Axes, knives, swords, and spearheads became more effective. The production of bronze was a complex process requiring specialized knowledge and access to raw materials, indicating the emergence of skilled craftsmen and longer-distance trade networks to acquire copper and tin ores, which were not locally abundant.

Bronze Age societies were likely more hierarchical than those of the Neolithic. The control of metal resources and production could confer power and status. Evidence from burial mounds and hoards of metal objects suggests social differentiation and potential signs of wealth accumulation or ritual practices involving valuable items. Burial rites became more varied, including both inhumation and cremation.

Defensive structures, such as ramparts and ditches around settlements, suggest

increasing conflict, possibly over land, resources, or trade routes. The landscape continued to be shaped by human activity, with further forest clearing and the development of trackways connecting settlements.

The Iron Age followed the Bronze Age, beginning in this region around 800 BCE. Iron ore was more widely available than copper or tin, making metal tools and weapons more accessible to a larger portion of the population. Ironworking technology developed, allowing for the mass production of sturdy tools like ploughshares, which further enhanced agricultural productivity.

The Iron Age saw the development of larger, more complex tribal structures. Settlements often grew in size and sophistication, sometimes becoming fortified hilltop sites (oppida) that served as centers of population, trade, and possibly political power. Society was likely organized into distinct groups or tribes, vying for influence and territory.

Trade networks expanded, connecting the region to distant parts of Europe. Goods like pottery, salt, and metals were exchanged. This increased connectivity also meant exposure to new ideas and cultural influences, including artistic styles and religious practices. Evidence from burial sites, such as richly furnished graves, provides insights into the material culture and social organization of these Iron Age communities.

As the Iron Age progressed, the tribes inhabiting the area became known to the wider world through the writings of Greek and later Roman authors. By the final centuries BCE, the region was populated by various groups often broadly classified as Celtic or Celtiberian, part of the wider La Tène culture that dominated much of Western and Central Europe. Among these were the tribes that the Romans would come to call the Belgae, located in the northern parts of Gaul, a name that would much, much later echo in the name of a modern nation. Their appearance and eventual confrontation with a rising Mediterranean power would mark the close of this long, complex prehistoric era and usher in a new age, setting the stage for the historical narrative that follows.

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