# A History of Portugal

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# Table of Contents

# Introduction

Portugal, perched on the far western edge of the Iberian Peninsula, offers a unique window into the grand sweep of European—and indeed global—history. Its story is inseparable from the restless tides of the Atlantic that shaped its culture, economy, and worldview. From humble prehistoric origins, the land that would become Portugal bore witness to waves of migration, conquest, and transformation—each leaving a distinctive mark upon its landscape and people. The journey from ancient settlements and tribal confederations to a unified nation is woven from threads of resilience, ambition, adversity, and creativity.

Unlike many of its European neighbors, the territory of modern Portugal developed a sense of separate identity early on. The turbulent ages that followed the fall of Rome—when Germanic kings, Moorish conquerors, and Christian warriors clashed for supremacy over Iberia—served as a crucible in which the notion of Portugal as a distinct entity was forged. The medieval counts and kings who fought to secure and maintain independence imbued the nation with a fierce tenacity and a strong sense of destiny.

Arguably, it was out of this spirit that Portugal stepped boldly onto the world stage in the fifteenth century. Driven by curiosity and necessity, the Portuguese spearheaded an age of exploration that would forever alter the course of human history. Their ships charted unknown coasts, linked continents, and gave rise to the first truly global maritime empire. Cities such as Lisbon thrived as centers of commerce, culture, and innovation, while Portuguese and its culture spread from the Amazon to Angola, from Goa to the Far East.

Yet, Portugal’s trajectory was not a simple tale of progress and ascendancy. The gains and glories of empire gave way, all too often, to the burdens of maintaining far-flung possessions, economic overextension, and fierce international rivalry. The coming centuries witnessed foreign domination, loss of territory, natural disasters, revolution, and episodes of profound upheaval. In the face of such challenges, Portugal endured invasions, civil strife, and a long authoritarian regime, only to ultimately reclaim its place as a democratic society in the last decades of the twentieth century.

This book presents a comprehensive account of Portugal’s rich and layered history, tracing its evolution from prehistoric times to the complexities of the present day. It is a story of remarkable endurance and creativity, of a small nation whose influence far exceeded its size. As we journey across the centuries, exploring the rise and fall of dynasties, the clash of cultures, and the forging of modern identities, we reveal the deep currents that continue to shape Portugal’s place in the world.

Ultimately, the history of Portugal is a testament to adaptability and vision—a nation that, by reaching “beyond the seas” and yet always returning to its roots, carved out a singular path through the ever-changing tides of history.

# CHAPTER ONE: Prehistory and the First Peoples of Iberia

The story of Portugal does not begin with kings, or empires, or even with the idea of Portugal itself. It commences in the unfathomable depths of prehistory, on a landmass that would, over millennia, be sculpted by geological forces, climatic shifts, and the persistent activities of early humans. The Iberian Peninsula, a rugged promontory jutting into the Atlantic, has long served as both a cul-de-sac for migrating peoples and a springboard for new interactions, a unique geographical position that profoundly influenced the character of its earliest inhabitants. To understand Portugal, we must first voyage back to a time when the very landscape was an untamed canvas, and humanity was but one of many species struggling for purchase upon it.

The geological youth of parts of the Portuguese coastline, contrasted with ancient massifs inland, created a diverse range of environments, from fertile river valleys to stark, windswept uplands. These varied terrains offered different opportunities and challenges to the first hominins who ventured into this westernmost reach of Eurasia. The dramatic fluctuations of Pleistocene ice ages further reshaped this world, advancing and retreating glaciers altering sea levels, coastlines, and the distribution of flora and fauna. It was against this backdrop of profound environmental change that the earliest chapters of human presence in what is now Portugal were written.

Evidence for the earliest hominin occupation in the Iberian Peninsula is tantalizing, though often fragmentary. While sites like Atapuerca in Spain have yielded remarkable remains of *Homo antecessor* and *Homo heidelbergensis*, dating back over 800,000 years, directly comparable discoveries within modern Portuguese borders for this earliest phase are still emerging. However, tools and fossil remains from sites such as the Gruta da Aroeira in central Portugal, where a significant *Homo heidelbergensis* cranium was discovered, confirm the presence of these archaic humans at least 400,000 years ago. These early inhabitants were skilled toolmakers, crafting Acheulean hand-axes from quartzite and other local stones, instruments vital for butchering animals and processing plant materials.

These early hominins were hunter-gatherers, living in small, mobile groups. Their existence was intimately tied to the movements of large game animals such as deer, horse, and aurochs, and their shelters were often caves and rock overhangs that provided natural protection from the elements and predators. The archaeological record from this Lower Paleolithic period is primarily one of stone tools – silent witnesses to countless generations adapting to the peninsula's changing climes.

Later, the Neanderthals (*Homo neanderthalensis*) became the dominant human species in Iberia, including present-day Portugal, for tens of thousands of years. Sites like Gruta da Oliveira and Gruta da Figueira Brava offer insights into their lives. They were robustly built, well-adapted to the often-harsh conditions of Ice Age Europe. Their Mousterian toolkit was more refined than that of their predecessors, featuring a greater variety of specialized flake tools. Evidence from Figueira Brava, a coastal cave south of Lisbon, suggests Neanderthals exploited marine resources, including shellfish, seals, and fish, challenging earlier notions of their diet being solely focused on large terrestrial mammals. This indicates a sophisticated understanding of their environment and a flexible approach to subsistence.

The Neanderthals were not the brutish, dim-witted creatures of popular caricature. They cared for their sick and injured, buried their dead (though the evidence for ritualistic burial is debated), and possessed a complex understanding of their surroundings. The question of their cognitive abilities, including the potential for symbolic thought, remains a lively area of research. For a long period, the Iberian Peninsula, with its relatively milder climate during glacial periods, may have served as a refuge for Neanderthal populations as conditions worsened further north.

Then, between 45,000 and 40,000 years ago, a new human species arrived in Iberia: *Homo sapiens*, our direct ancestors. Originating in Africa, they spread across Eurasia, eventually reaching its westernmost edge. The nature of the interaction between the incoming *Homo sapiens* and the established Neanderthal populations is a subject of intense study and debate. For several thousand years, the two species coexisted in Iberia. Genetic evidence has shown that interbreeding occurred, leaving a small but detectable Neanderthal signature in the DNA of modern non-African humans.

The reasons for the eventual disappearance of the Neanderthals around 30,000 years ago, with some of their last strongholds possibly being in southern Iberia, are complex. Factors likely included competition for resources with the technologically innovative *Homo sapiens*, susceptibility to new diseases, climatic instability, or a combination of these. What is clear is that by the Upper Paleolithic period, *Homo sapiens* were the sole human inhabitants of the peninsula.

The arrival of *Homo sapiens* ushered in a period of significant cultural and technological innovation. Their toolkit, associated with traditions like the Aurignacian and Gravettian, was more diverse and sophisticated, featuring blade tools, bone and antler implements, and personal ornaments. Perhaps most strikingly, this period witnessed an explosion of artistic expression. While cave paintings are more famously associated with sites in France and Spain (such as Lascaux and Altamira), the Iberian Peninsula, including Portugal, boasts its own extraordinary legacy of Paleolithic art.

The most significant discovery of Paleolithic art in Portugal, and indeed one of the

largest open-air Paleolithic rock art sites in the world, is the Foz Côa Valley in northeastern Portugal. Thousands of engraved drawings of horses, aurochs, ibex, deer, and fish, dating primarily from 22,000 to 10,000 BCE, adorn schist rock faces along the banks of the Côa River. Discovered in the late 1980s and early 1990s during preparations for a hydroelectric dam project (which was subsequently halted to preserve the art), Foz Côa provided revolutionary evidence that Paleolithic art was not confined to deep caves but also existed in open-air settings. The dynamism and skill of these engravings offer a profound glimpse into the symbolic world and aesthetic sensibilities of these ancient peoples. Another important, though older, site is the Escoural Cave in the Alentejo, which contains both engravings and paintings, some possibly dating back to the Middle Paleolithic or early Upper Paleolithic.

The artists of Foz Côa and Escoural lived in a world undergoing dramatic climate shifts as the Last Glacial Maximum (around 20,000 BCE) gave way to a gradual warming. The vast herds of Ice Age megafauna that roamed the steppes and tundras of Europe were a primary focus of their art and, undoubtedly, their subsistence. The Solutrean period (c. 22,000 to 17,000 BCE), particularly well-represented in Iberia, is noted for its exquisitely crafted, thin, leaf-shaped projectile points, a high point of Paleolithic stoneworking technology. Following this, the Magdalenian culture, characterized by sophisticated bone and antler tools, harpoons, and continued artistic production, saw hunter-gatherer societies adapt to the changing post-glacial environments.

As the ice sheets retreated further and temperatures rose around 10,000 BCE, the Paleolithic gave way to the Mesolithic, or Middle Stone Age. This was a period of significant environmental transformation. Sea levels rose, drowning coastal plains and altering river systems. Forests spread across landscapes previously dominated by open steppe and tundra. The large herds of Ice Age megafauna declined or disappeared, forcing human populations to adapt their hunting strategies and broaden their resource base.

In Portugal, the Mesolithic period is particularly well-documented through remarkable shell middens, large mounds of discarded shells, bones, and other refuse accumulated over generations. The most famous of these are located in the estuaries of the Tagus and Sado rivers, notably around Muge (e.g., Cabeço da Amoreira, Cabeço da Arruda) and in the Sado Valley (e.g., Poças de São Bento, Arapouco). These sites, dating from around 8,000 to 5,500 BCE, provide invaluable information about the lives of these last hunter-gatherer-fisher communities.

The sheer volume of shells – primarily cockles, oysters, and mussels – indicates a heavy reliance on marine and estuarine resources. However, faunal remains also show that these groups continued to hunt red deer, wild boar, and smaller mammals, and gathered wild plants. The Mesolithic toolkit adapted to these new ecological niches, with an increase in smaller, more specialized stone tools known as microliths, which could be hafted onto wooden or bone shafts to create composite tools like arrows and

harpoons. Fishing equipment, such as bone fish-hooks and net sinkers, also became more common.

The Muge and Sado shell middens are not just ancient garbage dumps; they were also living sites and burial grounds. Excavations have revealed human skeletons, often buried in flexed positions, sometimes with simple grave goods like perforated shells or ochre. Study of these remains offers insights into the health, diet, and physical characteristics of Mesolithic populations. Isotopic analysis of bones, for example, confirms the significant contribution of marine protein to their diet. These communities appear tohave been semi-sedentary, exploiting the rich resources of the estuaries for extended periods, perhaps seasonally. The concentration of sites suggests a relatively dense population for hunter-gatherer societies, drawn to the bounty of the coastal wetlands.

The Mesolithic represents a successful adaptation to the post-glacial world, a period of transition before the next great wave of change – the arrival of agriculture – fundamentally reshaped human societies. These coastal communities, with their intimate knowledge of tides, seasons, and the diverse life of the estuaries, represent the final flourishing of the purely hunter-gatherer way of life in this part of Iberia.

Around the 6th millennium BCE, the Neolithic Revolution began to ripple across the Iberian Peninsula, bringing with it transformative new technologies and ways of life. Originating in the Near East, agriculture (the cultivation of domesticated cereals like wheat and barley) and animal husbandry (the raising of domesticated animals like sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs) spread westwards, likely via maritime routes along the Mediterranean coast and perhaps also overland. The arrival of these practices in what is now Portugal marked a profound shift from food collection to food production.

The adoption of farming was not an overnight event but a gradual process, with early farming communities coexisting and interacting with indigenous Mesolithic hunter-gatherer groups for some time. Early Neolithic sites in Portugal, such as the Gruta do Caldeirão or Gruta da Furninha, show evidence of domesticated species and the characteristic pottery that accompanied the Neolithic package – simple, often undecorated wares used for cooking and storage. Polished stone axes, necessary for clearing forested land for agriculture, also became common.

The transition to agriculture had far-reaching consequences. It allowed for the support of larger, more sedentary populations. Villages began to form as people settled down to tend their crops and livestock. This new way of life also brought new challenges: increased labor demands, greater susceptibility to crop failure and disease, and, eventually, new forms of social organization and complexity.

One of the most visually striking and enduring legacies of the Neolithic period in Portugal, as in much of Atlantic Europe, is the phenomenon of megalithism – the

construction of monuments using large stones (megaliths). From around the late 5th millennium BCE, communities began to erect impressive structures such as dolmens (chamber tombs, known in Portuguese as *antas*), menhirs (standing stones), and cromlechs (stone circles). The Alentejo region is particularly rich in these monuments, boasting some of the most significant megalithic complexes in Europe.

Dolmens, which served as collective burial chambers, are the most common type of megalithic monument. They typically consist of several upright stones supporting one or more large capstones, forming a chamber that was originally covered by an earthen mound or cairn. The Anta Grande do Zambujeiro, near Évora, is one of the largest such structures in Iberia, with a chamber over 6 meters high, constructed from massive granite slabs. These tombs were used over many generations, accumulating the remains of numerous individuals, often accompanied by grave goods such as pottery, stone tools, and personal adornments. Their construction would have required considerable communal effort, planning, and engineering skill, suggesting a degree of social cohesion and leadership.

Menhirs, single upright stones, sometimes appear in isolation or in alignments. Their exact purpose is debated, but they may have served as territorial markers, astronomical indicators, or objects of ritual significance. The Almendres Cromlech, also near Évora, is one of the most important megalithic sites on the Iberian Peninsula. It consists of an oval arrangement of over ninety granite menhirs, some adorned with schematic engravings. Its alignment suggests an astronomical purpose, possibly related to solar or lunar cycles, indicating a sophisticated understanding of celestial movements. The site was used and modified over a long period, from the Early Neolithic to the Chalcolithic.



The meaning and function of these megalithic monuments are subjects of ongoing research and interpretation. They clearly held profound significance for the Neolithic communities that built them, likely connected to ancestor veneration, land claims, communal identity, and cosmological beliefs. They stand as powerful testaments to the spiritual and social lives of Portugal's first farming societies, their imposing presence in the landscape a reminder of a distant past when human connection to the land and the cosmos was expressed in enduring stone.

The later Neolithic saw the development of more complex pottery styles, sometimes decorated with incised or impressed patterns (e.g., cardial ware, characterized by impressions made with a cockle shell). There is also evidence for increasing interaction and exchange between different regions, suggesting the beginnings of wider social and economic networks. The foundations laid during the Neolithic – agriculture, settled life, and new forms of social organization – would pave the way for further developments in the subsequent Chalcolithic period.

The transition from the Neolithic to the Chalcolithic (or Copper Age) in Portugal,

beginning around the late 4th or early 3rd millennium BCE, was marked by another significant technological innovation: the discovery and use of copper. While stone tools remained prevalent, the ability to smelt and work copper ore into tools, weapons, and ornaments represented a major step in human technological prowess. Early copper objects were often status symbols, but gradually, copper tools like daggers, axes, and awls became more functional.

The Chalcolithic was a period of increasing social complexity and, in some areas, the emergence of hierarchical societies. This is reflected in the appearance of fortified settlements, often strategically located on hilltops. Sites like Vila Nova de São Pedro in the Tagus estuary and Zambujal near Torres Vedras are prime examples of these fortified enclosures. Surrounded by multiple lines of stone walls and bastions, these settlements suggest a need for defense and an organized labor force capable of constructing such impressive fortifications. Within these sites, evidence of specialized craft production, including metallurgy, pottery, and weaving, indicates a more complex division of labor.

The burial record also points to growing social differentiation. While collective megalithic tombs continued to be used in some areas, new burial practices emerged, including individual burials in cists or small tholos (beehive-shaped) tombs, sometimes containing rich grave goods, particularly copper weapons, which may denote the rise of a warrior elite.

A fascinating cultural phenomenon that spread across much of Europe during the Chalcolithic, and which is well-represented in Portugal, is the Bell Beaker culture. Named after its distinctive inverted bell-shaped pottery, often elaborately decorated, the Bell Beaker package also typically included copper daggers, archer’s wrist-guards, and gold ornaments. The precise nature of the Bell Beaker phenomenon – whether it represents the migration of a distinct people, the spread of a new technology and ideology, or a combination of factors – is still debated. However, its widespread adoption in Iberia suggests strong cultural connections across the peninsula and beyond. In Portugal, Bell Beaker pottery and associated artifacts are found in both settlement and funerary contexts, often associated with elite burials.

The Chalcolithic also saw an intensification of trade and exchange networks. Copper ores, though present in Iberia, were not uniformly distributed, necessitating trade. Other exotic materials, such as ivory from Africa and amber from Northern Europe, also appear in Chalcolithic contexts in Portugal, albeit rarely, indicating long-distance connections. This period laid crucial groundwork for the subsequent Bronze Age, setting the stage for further technological advancements, social transformations, and the arrival of new cultural influences, including the Indo-European-speaking peoples who would contribute to the ethnogenesis of groups like the Lusitanians, whose story unfolds in the centuries to come. The deep past, from the first hominin footprints to the dawn of the metal ages, had profoundly shaped the human landscape of western

Iberia, a legacy etched in stone, earth, and the very fabric of its earliest cultures.

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