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A History of Johannesburg

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Introduction

Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city and its economic powerhouse, was born in a frenzy of fortune-seeking and built upon dreams as alluring as the gold hidden beneath its hills. Its story is unlike that of any other African metropolis—a city that sprang almost overnight from the grasslands of the highveld, drawing people from every walk of life to its promise of opportunity and modernity. The journey from dusty mining camp to cosmopolitan giant is a tale punctuated by boom and bust, by monumental struggles over resources, rights, and identity, and by an enduring quest for belonging in a city forged in flux.

This book aims to offer a comprehensive account of Johannesburg's history, anchored in the dramatic events and everyday experiences that shaped it. While the narrative begins with its famous gold rush origins in the late nineteenth century, it stretches back further to the ancient landscapes and pre-colonial societies that called the Witwatersrand home. The arrival of fortune seekers and the subsequent emergence of one of the world's great mining metropolises set the stage for a city defined as much by its rapid growth and economic dynamism as by its tensions and divides.

Johannesburg's history has always been inseparable from the broader South African context—a crucible in which the forces of colonialism, industrialisation, and apartheid collided. The processes that shaped the city—land expropriation, forced migration, racial segregation, and resistance—were both local and national in character, producing a uniquely South African urban environment. From the early days of Randlords and mineworkers, through the city's explosive expansion, and into the apartheid era's grim machinery of control, Johannesburg has mirrored the country's deepest ambitions and contradictions.

Yet, beneath the stark headlines of struggle and division, the people of Johannesburg have created a vibrant, complex urban life. For over a century, this city has stood as a beacon of creativity and resilience, a magnet not only for wealth and capital but for artists, musicians, activists, and dreamers. Its shifting skylines, markets, theatres, and neighbourhoods have been cradles of culture, contestation, and change—symbolising both the cruelty and the hope of the South African project.

As the city entered the post-apartheid era, the promises of inclusion and renewal were matched by persistent legacies of inequality, poverty, and spatial injustice. While major urban initiatives and regeneration projects have sought to knit the city together, Johannesburg remains a place of both energetic renewal and ongoing challenge. This book traces how the city has navigated its past—celebrating achievements, confronting the wounds that still scar it, and debating the kind of future it hopes to

build.

By weaving together social, political, and cultural histories, this work endeavours to present Johannesburg not just as a place of monumental events, but as a living, breathing city—one defined by countless ordinary and extraordinary lives. It is a testament to the ongoing transformation of a city that, despite everything, remains irrepressibly alive.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land Before the City: Pre-Colonial Peoples and Landscapes

Long before the world knew of Johannesburg, before the scramble for gold tore open the earth, the land that would become this sprawling metropolis was a vast, undulating expanse of highveld grassland. This was a landscape shaped by millennia of geological forces, fire, and the slow passage of life. Situated on the southern slope of the Witwatersrand ridge, itself an ancient geological feature stretching for kilometres across the plateau, the area experienced a climate of extremes – scorching summers punctuated by dramatic thunderstorms and bracingly cold, dry winters. The dominant feature was grass, endless savannah that stretched to the horizon, broken only by occasional rocky outcrops, meandering streams, and clusters of acacia trees in sheltered kloofs.

This was not, however, an empty land merely awaiting the arrival of modern humans. For hundreds of thousands of years, perhaps even millions, this region formed part of the cradle of humanity. The broader area of what is now Gauteng province, encompassing the future site of Johannesburg, is proximal to the "Cradle of Humankind," a UNESCO World Heritage Site renowned for its rich fossil bearing caves documenting the early evolution of hominids. While the specific ridge where gold was found might not have housed Australopithecus, the deep history of human presence on this plateau stretches back into the mists of time, far beyond written records or colonial memory.

Evidence found across the highveld indicates that Stone Age hunter-gatherer groups inhabited the region for millennia. These early peoples, ancestral to the San or Bushmen, were intimately connected with the rhythms of the natural world. They moved across the landscape seasonally, following game – herds of wildebeest, blesbok, and other antelope that grazed the rich grasses – and harvesting edible plants, roots, and insects. Their tools were crafted from stone, bone, and wood, perfectly adapted to their nomadic lifestyle. They lived in small, mobile bands, their shelters temporary, their impact on the vast environment minimal yet in tune with its cycles.

Imagine them, tiny figures silhouetted against the immense African sky, navigating the plains, their knowledge of the land encyclopaedic. They understood the subtle signs of weather change, the hidden sources of water, the behaviour of every animal. Their lives were a continuous dance with the environment, a testament to human resilience and adaptability in a challenging landscape. Archaeological finds, though perhaps sparser directly on the later city site than in surrounding areas, hint at their

presence: scatters of stone tools, evidence of ancient hearths, and rock art in sheltered locations further afield, depicting their world and beliefs.

Centuries passed, and gradually, different peoples began to move into the highveld. Around 2,000 years ago, Bantu-speaking groups, originating from further north in Africa, began to migrate southward, bringing with them new technologies and ways of life. These were Iron Age farmers and herders. Unlike the nomadic San, they lived in more settled communities, cultivating crops like sorghum and millet and, crucially, herding cattle, sheep, and goats. Their arrival marked a fundamental shift in the human-environment relationship in the region.

The Sotho-Tswana peoples were among those who eventually settled in the area of the future Witwatersrand. They established villages, often strategically located near water sources and on defensible hillsides. Their homes were typically circular huts with thatched roofs, arranged around a central cattle kraal, reflecting the importance of livestock in their culture and economy. Cattle were not just a source of food and materials but were central to social status, wealth, and cultural practices.

The Iron Age settlers brought the ability to work metal, particularly iron. They smelted iron ore, found in various parts of the highveld, to create tools like hoes and axe heads, which facilitated farming and clearing land. They also crafted weapons. This technology allowed for more intensive land use than had been possible for the hunter-gatherers, though their farming practices were still relatively extensive, often involving shifting cultivation where fields were moved periodically to allow the soil to recover.

Life in these Sotho-Tswana communities was structured around kinship, tribal leadership, and seasonal agricultural cycles. The rhythm of their year was dictated by planting, tending crops, harvesting, and managing livestock. While generally settled, they were not entirely static. Villages might move over generations as soil fertility declined or in response to conflict or environmental changes. Their presence began to leave a more tangible mark on the landscape – the remains of stone walls from settlements and cattle enclosures, pottery fragments, and iron slag from smelting sites, archaeological traces that offer glimpses into their past lives.

The highveld landscape itself presented unique challenges and opportunities for these communities. The vast grasslands provided ample grazing for cattle, but the scarcity of trees for building and fuel in some areas required adaptation. The cold, dry winters could be harsh, necessitating sturdy shelters and careful management of resources. Water, while available from streams and rivers, could be seasonal, particularly on the ridges, making location choices critical for settlement sustainability.

Interactions between the incoming Sotho-Tswana groups and the indigenous San were complex and varied. Sometimes, relations were peaceful, involving trade or

coexistence. At other times, competition for resources, particularly land and water, led to conflict. The arrival of larger, more settled agriculturalist populations with superior iron technology inevitably led to the displacement or absorption of many San groups from the prime agricultural and grazing lands.

Over centuries, various Sotho-Tswana chiefdoms and communities inhabited the highveld. They developed distinct cultural practices, languages (part of the larger Sotho-Tswana language group), and social structures. While the Witwatersrand ridge itself, with its rocky nature and limited perennial water sources on the crest, might not have been the most densely populated area, the surrounding plains and valleys certainly were home to scattered homesteads and villages.

The late 18th and early 19th centuries brought significant upheaval to Southern Africa, a period often referred to as the Mfecane or Difaqane. This era of widespread warfare, migration, and social restructuring, triggered by various factors including the rise of the Zulu kingdom under Shaka, had ripple effects across the highveld. While the direct impact on the immediate Witwatersrand ridge area might have been less severe than in other regions, it led to population movements, the formation of new political entities, and periods of instability that affected the communities living there. Some areas were depopulated, while others saw the arrival of groups seeking refuge or asserting dominance.

By the mid-19th century, the picture of human habitation on the highveld, including the future site of Johannesburg, was one of scattered Sotho-Tswana communities living alongside the remnants of older populations, navigating a landscape that had been home to humans for an immense sweep of time. Their lives were tied to the land through agriculture, herding, and deep cultural traditions. They had adapted to the rhythms of the highveld, understanding its seasons, its resources, and its challenges.

The land itself, the geological formation known as the Witwatersrand, was patiently waiting. It had been formed over two billion years ago when massive sedimentary deposits were laid down in an inland sea. Over eons, these sediments were compressed, faulted, and uplifted, creating the east-west trending ridge. Within these ancient layers lay minerals, including traces of gold, deposited by primeval rivers. For the pre-colonial inhabitants, these rocks were simply part of the landscape – stones for building kraals, materials for tools, earth for pottery. They had no inkling of the immense wealth contained within the conglomerate rock of the Main Reef, nor of the seismic shift that its discovery would unleash upon their world. Their lives were lived on the surface, in harmony with the visible resources of the highveld, blissfully unaware of the glittering treasure buried deep beneath their feet, a treasure that would soon transform their ancestral lands beyond recognition and birth a city that would dominate the continent.

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