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A History of Riyadh

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Introduction

Riyadh, the vibrant heart of modern Saudi Arabia, is a city whose history mirrors the rise and transformation of an entire nation. Once little more than an oasis amidst the stark expanse of the Najd plateau, Riyadh has developed through centuries of change—political upheaval, remarkable unification, and rapid modernization—into one of the Middle East’s most significant metropolises. Its name, meaning “the gardens,” is a nod to its origins as a fertile haven sheltering early inhabitants from the surrounding desert.

The story of Riyadh begins in antiquity, long before it assumed its current role as the national capital. The earliest known human presence in the region stretches back tens of thousands of years, with archaeological evidence attesting to the enduring significance of this landscape. Ancient settlements such as Hajr formed the nucleus of what would much later become modern Riyadh. From its central position in Al-Yamamah, Hajr and its successors witnessed tribal migrations, political contestation, and moments of flourishing culture that shaped the center of the Arabian Peninsula.

Over time, wave upon wave of rulers and governments left their marks on the city. The arrival of Islam, the prominence of tribes like the Banu Hanifa, and the conquest of the region by external powers set the stage for both prosperity and decline. The city’s fate, ever intertwined with regional politics, took dramatic turns through the age of the First and Second Saudi States. The Wahhabi reform movement and the rise of the Al Saud dynasty would catalyze sweeping changes, transforming Riyadh from a fragmented collection of settlements into a powerful focal point of national aspiration.

The twentieth century introduced new chapters of astonishing transformation. The daring recapture of Riyadh by Abdulaziz ibn Saud in 1902 signaled the emergence of a new era. With the unification of the kingdom and the discovery of oil, Riyadh rapidly expanded from its humble walled beginnings to become the administrative, economic, and cultural powerhouse it is today. Through waves of urban development and dramatic demographic shifts, the city grew in size and stature, redefining its skyline and identity in the process.

Yet, despite relentless modernization, Riyadh has not forgotten its past. The city’s historical landscapes, from the ancient Masmak Fortress and the remnants of early neighborhoods to the restored sites of Diriyah, continue to link its present with a storied heritage. Contemporary Riyadh is a dynamic, multicultural city that balances ambition and tradition, a place where ancient history and visionary planning meet at the crossroads of the Arab world.

This book presents a comprehensive history of Riyadh, tracing its journey from ancient oasis to global metropolis. Through twenty-five chapters, it explores how geography, politics, culture, and ambition have repeatedly shaped and reshaped the city. By understanding Riyadh's past, readers gain critical insight not only into the evolution of a city but also into the ongoing story of Saudi Arabia itself.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and its Earliest Settlers

The story of Riyadh begins not with walls and towers, nor with named rulers and their decrees, but with the land itself—a subtle indentation in the vast, undulating expanse of the Arabian Peninsula known as the Najd. This central plateau, a harsh but not entirely inhospitable realm, has cradled human life for eons, its ancient rocks and shifting sands bearing silent witness to the earliest chapters of human endeavor. To understand Riyadh, one must first appreciate the stage upon which its history would eventually unfold, a landscape defined by aridity, punctuated by life-giving oases, and shaped by the slow, inexorable forces of geology and climate.

Najd, meaning "highland" or "plateau," stretches across the heart of Arabia, a great elevated shield of Precambrian rock, overlaid in places by later sedimentary layers. It is a region of stark beauty, characterized by wide gravel plains, rocky outcrops (known locally as *jibals*), and the ever-present an-Nafud desert, whose reddish sands frequently encroach upon its western and northern fringes. Riyadh itself is situated on the eastern part of this plateau, in a district historically referred to as Al-Yamamah. Here, the land, though predominantly arid, possesses a peculiar geomorphology that has proven crucial to its long history of settlement: a network of wadis, or dry riverbeds.

These wadis, most notably the extensive Wadi Hanifa system, are the lifelines of the Najd. Forged by ancient rivers during wetter climatic periods, they now serve as channels for fleeting flash floods after rare rainfalls, and more importantly, as conduits for underground aquifers. Along their banks, and in the depressions where their waters might gather or seep close to the surface, the desert reluctantly yields to pockets of fertility. It is in such locations, these natural "gardens" – or *riyadh* in the plural – that human settlement has always clung, small islands of green in a sea of ochre and brown.

The specific location that would eventually become Riyadh lies at a confluence of several such wadis, including the historically significant Wadi Al-Witr (later known as Al-Batha) and tributaries of the Wadi Hanifa. This topographical advantage meant a greater concentration of accessible groundwater, a more reliable source of life than many surrounding areas could offer. The soil in these wadi beds, enriched by millennia of occasional flooding and sediment deposition, was more amenable to cultivation, a promise of sustenance in an otherwise challenging environment.

Over the vast timescales of prehistory, the climate of the Arabian Peninsula was not static. It fluctuated dramatically, experiencing periods of significantly greater rainfall, known as "Green Arabia" phases. During these pluvial periods, which coincided with

interglacial cycles in more temperate latitudes, the deserts retreated, and grasslands, savannas, and even woodlands expanded across much of the peninsula. Lakes formed in depressions, and rivers flowed more consistently through the wadis. These greener epochs transformed Arabia from a formidable barrier into a potential corridor for human and animal migration between Africa and Asia, and equally, a more habitable zone for sustained settlement.

It is against this backdrop of profound environmental change that the earliest human presence in the vicinity of Riyadh must be understood. Archaeological investigations, particularly those whose findings are curated and studied at institutions like the National Museum of Riyadh, have unearthed compelling evidence of hominin activity stretching back into the deep recesses of the Paleolithic, or Old Stone Age. Astonishingly, some lithic artifacts – stone tools – recovered from various sites across the Arabian Peninsula, including the central regions, have been dated to as far back as a quarter of a million years.

These ancient toolmakers, likely early human species such as *Homo erectus* or archaic *Homo sapiens*, would have roamed a Najd vastly different from that of today. They were hunter-gatherers, their lives intricately tied to the migratory patterns of game animals – gazelles, oryx, wild asses, and perhaps even species now long extinct from the region – and the seasonal availability of edible plants. The wadis, even during less arid phases, would have been focal points, offering not just water but also attracting the fauna they hunted and the vegetation they gathered.

Further evidence points to continued, if perhaps intermittent, human occupation. Discoveries of more refined stone tool assemblages suggest inhabitation around thirty thousand years ago, a period when anatomically modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, were well-established across the globe. These finds often consist of scatters of stone tools, remnants of ancient campsites, perhaps temporary stopping places along migratory routes or seasonal hunting grounds. The exact nature of their settlements remains elusive, buried by time and sand, but the message of the stones is clear: central Arabia was not an empty quarter.

The ingenuity of these early peoples is remarkable. They developed sophisticated knapping techniques to produce sharp-edged flakes, hand-axes, scrapers, and spear points from available raw materials like chert, quartzite, and flint. These tools were essential for butchering animals, processing hides, woodworking, and defending against predators. Survival in the Najd demanded an intimate knowledge of the landscape, an understanding of animal behavior, and the ability to locate and manage the most precious resource of all: water.

Imagine these early inhabitants, small bands moving through a landscape that, while perhaps greener than today, still posed considerable challenges. They would have sought shelter in rock overhangs or constructed simple, temporary shelters from

branches and hides. Their daily existence was a constant negotiation with the environment, a testament to human adaptability and resilience. The wadis near present-day Riyadh, with their promise of water and life, would have been particularly attractive locales, revisited time and again, leaving faint but detectable traces for archaeologists to uncover millennia later.

As the Paleolithic gave way to the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, new cultural and technological developments began to spread across the Near East. While the timeline and specifics of these transitions in central Arabia are still being pieced together, it is likely that hunting and gathering remained the dominant subsistence strategy for a very long time. The extreme aridity that reasserted itself after the last major "Green Arabia" phase, roughly 6,000 years ago, would have intensified the reliance on oases and wadi systems.

This re-aridification presented a formidable challenge, likely leading to population contractions in less favorable areas and a greater concentration of human activity around permanent water sources. It may have also spurred early forms of water management, perhaps rudimentary well-digging or the protection of natural seeps. The shift towards a more sedentary lifestyle, a hallmark of the Neolithic revolution elsewhere, would have been a slow and geographically uneven process in Arabia, heavily dependent on the local availability of water to support any form of incipient cultivation or animal husbandry.

The archaeological record for the immediate prehistory leading up to the first named settlements is still being actively researched. However, the enduring geographical advantages of the Riyadh area – its relatively fertile wadi systems fed by underground aquifers – ensured that it would remain a locus of human activity. Even if permanent villages were slow to appear, the area was undoubtedly known and utilized by nomadic pastoralist groups who traversed the Najd, following ancient routes dictated by the availability of water and pasture for their livestock.

These early pastoralists, whose cultures are hinted at through rock art found in other parts of Arabia, would have possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of the desert's secrets. They knew where to find hidden wells, how to interpret the subtle signs of impending rain, and which plants were safe for their animals to graze. Their connection to the land was profound, built upon generations of experience passed down through oral tradition. The area around Wadi Hanifa would have been a crucial node in their seasonal movements.

The very soil upon which Riyadh now stands is thus imbued with an immense antiquity. Long before the first mud-brick walls were raised, before the first date palms were systematically cultivated in organized groves, this land was home. It was a landscape that tested its inhabitants but also provided for them, shaping their cultures, their technologies, and their understanding of the world. The deep stone

foundations of the plateau, the winding courses of the wadis, and the hidden reservoirs of ancient water beneath the desert sands are the true primordial elements of Riyadh's story.

The term "garden" or "gardens" – *rawḍah* or *riyadh* – which would eventually give the future city its name, speaks volumes about the perception of such fertile patches in an arid land. They were not just places of sustenance but also of respite, havens of green that broke the monotony of the desert. This inherent fertility, this promise of life, was the magnet that drew people to this specific spot on the Najd plateau, time and time again, across countless generations.

The physical environment did more than just sustain life; it also channeled it. The pathways of the wadis often became natural routes for travel and trade, connecting disparate communities. Control over, or access to, prime oasis locations like those around Wadi Hanifa would have been a source of influence, perhaps even conflict, among early groups, long before the rise of more complex political entities. The seeds of future urbanism lay in these geographically favored nexuses of water, fertility, and strategic location.

While the lives of these earliest settlers remain largely shrouded in the mists of prehistory, their legacy is etched into the land itself. The stone tools they left behind are not mere artifacts; they are echoes of human ingenuity and perseverance. The long-term patterns of settlement, dictated by the availability of water, demonstrate a continuity of human adaptation that stretches from the Paleolithic to the threshold of recorded history. The land was, and in many ways remains, the primary determinant of life in this part of the world.

The challenges of archaeological work in a desert environment are considerable. Shifting sands can obscure sites for millennia, only to reveal them fleetingly, while other evidence may be lost to erosion or later human activity. Yet, each new discovery adds another piece to the puzzle, gradually illuminating the deep prehistoric roots of settlement in the heart of Arabia. What is clear is that the region around Riyadh was not a void, but a landscape actively inhabited and shaped by human hands for far longer than previously imagined.

These first inhabitants, whose names are lost to time and whose stories can only be inferred from the silent testimony of stones and sediments, laid the unacknowledged groundwork for all that was to follow. They were the pioneers, the first to recognize the life-giving potential of this particular conjunction of land and water. Their struggles and successes, played out over countless generations, consecrated this ground as a place of human significance.

And so, the stage was set. The land, with its underlying geological structure, its network of wadis, its hidden aquifers, and its cyclical climatic shifts, provided both the

opportunities and the constraints for human settlement. The earliest peoples, armed with their stone tools and their deep understanding of the natural world, demonstrated the enduring human capacity to adapt and thrive even in demanding environments. Their ancient presence consecrated the future site of Riyadh as a viable, indeed desirable, place to live, long before the first chronicles would speak its name or the names of the cities that preceded it. The deep past always informs the present, and in Riyadh, that past is exceptionally deep indeed.

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