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A History of Jordan

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Introduction

Nestled at the crossroads of ancient civilizations, Jordan's story is one of resilience, adaptation, and remarkable continuity. From its earliest days as a migratory route for prehistoric peoples to its present status as a modern Arab nation, the land now known as Jordan has been a silent witness—and, at times, a pivotal protagonist—in the narratives that have shaped the Middle East and beyond.

The roots of Jordan's history stretch deep into the past, with archaeological traces dating back hundreds of thousands of years. Early inhabitants hunted across its deserts and grasslands, gradually shifting from nomadic hunting and gathering to settled agriculture. These early transformations laid the groundwork for the urban civilizations and powerful kingdoms that would come to flourish in Transjordan during the Bronze and Iron Ages.

Throughout antiquity, Jordan's tribal kingdoms—Ammon, Moab, and Edom—navigated the rise and fall of regional empires, alternately securing independence and succumbing to the tides of conquest. The Nabataeans would later carve the awe-inspiring city of Petra into rose-red cliffs, transforming the region into a vibrant hub for trade and culture. Roman and Byzantine influences brought further urbanization, and the spread of Christianity left its mark in the form of magnificent churches and mosaic art.

The Islamic era swept the region into new imperial networks, and later centuries bore witness to the ambitions of Crusaders, Ayyubids, and Mamluks, each leaving behind enduring monuments and social transformations. Under Ottoman rule, Jordan's fortunes ebbed and flowed, shaped by regional power struggles and global currents, until the shocks of World War I and the Great Arab Revolt realigned the political landscape and set the stage for nationhood.

The creation of Transjordan, and later the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, introduced new challenges and opportunities. The 20th and 21st centuries have seen the country navigate war, mass migrations, diplomatic breakthroughs, and the demands of modernization. From the reign of King Abdullah I to the long stewardship of King Hussein, and into the present under King Abdullah II, Jordan has emerged as a uniquely stable and significant voice in the Arab world.

This book seeks to weave together the many threads of Jordan's fascinating past—its peoples, rulers, and pivotal moments—revealing how its history is inextricably linked both to its geography and to the larger currents of Middle Eastern and world history. As we journey through the epochs, we will see how Jordan's resilience and ability to

adapt have forged a rich cultural and historical tapestry that continues to evolve today.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land of Jordan: Geography and Early Inhabitants

To understand the history of Jordan, one must first appreciate the stage upon which it has unfolded. The geography of this landlocked nation, perched at the northwestern edge of the Arabian Plate, has profoundly shaped the lives of its inhabitants for millennia. Bordered by Syria to the north, Iraq to the northeast, Saudi Arabia to the east and south, and Israel and the West Bank to the west, Jordan occupies a strategically significant position in the Levant. Its relatively modest area of approximately 96,188 square kilometers encompasses a surprising diversity of landscapes, from fertile valleys to arid deserts and rugged highlands.

One of Jordan's most striking natural features is the Jordan Rift Valley, a dramatic geological depression that forms part of the Great Rift Valley of Africa. This valley runs along the country's western flank, marking the border with Israel and the West Bank. The northern section of this rift is the well-known Jordan Valley, a fertile strip watered by the Jordan River, which flows south into the hypersaline Dead Sea. The Dead Sea itself is a geographical marvel, resting at over 407 meters below sea level, making it the lowest point on the Earth's surface. Its intensely salty waters, a result of high evaporation and no outlet, are devoid of most life, giving the sea its rather dramatic name. South of the Dead Sea, the rift continues as the arid Wadi 'Araba, a hot and dry valley characterized by steep, barren mountain sides. This valley gradually rises in elevation before dropping back to sea level at Jordan's only coastal outlet, the Gulf of Aqaba.

Rising steeply from the eastern side of the Jordan Valley is the Mountain Heights Plateau. This highland region extends the length of the western part of the country and is where the majority of Jordan's population centers, including the capital Amman, are located. The elevation here varies considerably, from around 600 to 1,500 meters above sea level. This variation in altitude contributes to different temperature and rainfall patterns across the plateau. The northern part of the plateau enjoys a more Mediterranean climate, while areas further south become progressively drier. Numerous wadis, or riverbeds that may or may not flow with water, cut through this plateau, eventually draining into the Jordan River or the Dead Sea.

To the east of the Mountain Heights Plateau lies the vast Eastern Desert, also known as the Badia region. This arid and semi-arid area constitutes about 75% of Jordan's total landmass and is part of the larger North Arab Desert. Elevations in the Badia generally range between 600 and 900 meters. The climate here is characterized by extreme variations, with scorching daytime temperatures in the summer that can

exceed 40°C and very cold, dry, and windy winter nights. Rainfall is minimal, often less than 50 millimeters annually. Despite its harsh conditions, the Badia is not uniform; it includes volcanic formations in the north, recognizable by black basalt boulders, and undulating limestone plateaus further east. While largely arid, some areas support grassland and limited agriculture.

Jordan's climate is a study in contrasts, ranging from Mediterranean in the west to desert in the east and south. The proximity of the Mediterranean Sea influences the climate in the western highlands, bringing cool, wet winters and hot, dry summers. However, the vast majority of the country experiences an arid or semi-arid desert climate. Rainfall is scarce in the eastern and southern regions, while the western highlands receive more precipitation, particularly during the winter months between December and March. Temperatures also vary significantly depending on the region and season, with hot summers and cooler winters, especially in the highlands. Snow can even occasionally fall in areas like Amman and Petra during the winter.

The geological history of Jordan is as layered and complex as its human history. Situated on the northwestern edge of the Arabian Plate, the country's landscape has been shaped by tectonic activity, particularly the movement of the Arabian Plate away from the African Plate along the Jordan Rift Valley. The oldest rocks in Jordan are the Precambrian crystalline basement rocks, primarily granites, which are exposed in the mountains north of Aqaba and in the Wadi Rum area. These ancient formations, over 570 million years old, provide a glimpse into the deep geological past of the region. Overlying these basement rocks are thick sequences of Paleozoic sandstones and shales, deposited in both marine and continental environments. These sandstones, particularly prominent in Wadi Rum, contribute to the stunning desert scenery with their varied colors and formations.

Later geological periods saw the deposition of limestone and flint, particularly in the interior deserts and highlands, and the formation of basalt flows in the northeast due to volcanic activity. The dramatic Jordan Rift Valley itself is a relatively young feature in geological terms, a result of the ongoing tectonic movements that continue to shape the region. This geological diversity has endowed Jordan with some natural resources, notably significant deposits of phosphates, making the country a major global producer and exporter of this mineral. Other resources include potash, salt, and potentially significant reserves of oil shale and uranium. However, water scarcity remains a significant challenge, with Jordan being one of the most water-poor countries in the world.

This varied and often challenging landscape has nonetheless been home to humans for an extraordinary length of time. Evidence of human activity in Transjordan stretches back to the Paleolithic period, suggesting a deep ancestral connection to this land. Archaeological finds, such as flint and basalt tools like hand-axes, knives, and scraping implements, attest to the presence of early hominins. While architectural

remains from this very early period are absent, and no human skeletons of this age have yet been discovered within Jordan itself, the stone tools provide tangible links to these ancient inhabitants.

Jordan's location within the Levant has made it a crucial corridor for human migration out of Africa. Studies suggest that early human migrants left Africa and passed through the Sinai Peninsula and onwards through what is now Jordan on their way to Eurasia over 80,000 years ago. This migration was likely facilitated by a "well-watered corridor" that existed in the Levant during this period, providing hunter-gatherers with the necessary resources for their journey. Even earlier evidence, potentially dating back 2.5 million years, suggests that archaic humans may have utilized the Zarqa River valley as a route out of Africa much earlier than previously thought. This ongoing research highlights the pivotal role Jordan has played, not just in regional history, but in the broader story of human dispersal across the globe.

Paleolithic sites have been discovered in various parts of Jordan, offering clues about the lives of these early inhabitants. Areas such as the Western Highlands, the Southern Mountain Desert, and the Azraq Basin have yielded significant finds, often associated with ancient lakeshores and what were once grassland savannas during the Pleistocene epoch. The Azraq oasis, in particular, has provided evidence of sophisticated adaptations by early humans living in a wetland environment that later became arid. The discovery of protein residues on stone tools from Azraq, dating back 250,000 years, indicates that these hominins were hunting a variety of animals, including rhinoceroses, wild cattle, and ducks, demonstrating their ability to survive in a demanding habitat long before the emergence of *Homo sapiens*.

The Middle Paleolithic period, roughly spanning from 150,000 to 45,000 years ago, also left its mark on the Jordanian landscape. While many sites from this era have been affected by erosion, some well-preserved locations exist, such as rock shelters in the Wadi al-Hasa and sites in the Azraq Basin and southern Jordan. These sites contain stone tools characterized by the Levantine Mousterian complex, known for its use of the Levallois technology, a sophisticated method of stone knapping. Towards the end of this period, anatomically modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, began to arrive in Jordan.

The Upper Paleolithic period, from about 45,000 to 20,000 years ago, is particularly well-represented in Jordan, with numerous *in situ* sites. These include open-air locations and rock shelters in areas like the Wadi Hisma, Wadi al-Hasa, and the Azraq region. The stone tool technologies from these sites are primarily associated with the Ahmarian tradition, which emphasized the production of blades and bladelets, including small, fine tools known as microliths. These archaeological findings underscore the continuity of human presence in Jordan across vast stretches of time, with successive groups of hominins and early *Homo sapiens* adapting to and utilizing the diverse environments the land offered.

As the Paleolithic era drew to a close, paving the way for the Neolithic revolution, the inhabitants of Jordan were already deeply connected to their land. The foundation for future developments, from the rise of settled villages to the emergence of complex societies, was laid by these early hunter-gatherers and the landscapes they inhabited. The interplay between geography and human activity, so evident in the earliest chapters of Jordan's story, would continue to define its trajectory through the millennia that followed. The wadis, mountains, and deserts that shaped the lives of these first peoples would remain central characters in the unfolding history of this remarkable land.

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