# A History of Mauritania

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# Introduction

Mauritania, straddling the intersection of the Arab Maghreb and the vast expanse of sub-Saharan West Africa, stands as a land shaped by deserts, migrations, empires, and encounters. From the earliest prehistoric settlements along ancient river valleys and rocky plateaus to the modern mineral-rich state navigating a world of shifting alliances and internal challenges, Mauritania's history is a tapestry woven of diverse strands. This book, *A History of Mauritania*, seeks to unravel that tapestry, tracing the story of a region and a people whose boundaries and identities have shifted time and again through the centuries.

To understand Mauritania is to appreciate the puzzle of its geography and the diversity of its peoples. A bridge between continents and cultures, Mauritania's story begins deep in the Paleolithic past, with archaeological traces of hunter-gatherers, and moves through ancient agricultural societies molded by climatic changes in the Sahara. The arrival of Berber and later Arab migrants layered new languages, beliefs, and customs upon the intricate fabric of indigenous societies. The emergence of powerful Islamic movements like the Almoravids not only transformed local beliefs but also connected Mauritania to a broader world extending from sub-Saharan Africa to the shores of the Iberian Peninsula.

Over the centuries, the land now known as Mauritania has been both target and crossroads of movements—movements of goods, peoples, and ideas. The relentless push of the Sahara desert shaped migrations southward, while the allure of gold and the flow of Islamic scholarship brought the region into the orbit of empires to the south and north. In time, the Arabization of Moorish society would become a defining feature, although distinct sub-Saharan African communities persisted along the river valleys, and the challenge of integrating these diverse identities into a single state endures today.

The colonial era brought sweeping changes, as French conquest and administration imposed new political, educational, and economic systems. The legacy of this period—marked by both resistance and adaptation—left indelible marks on Mauritanian society. The quest for independence ignited not only dreams of self-determination but also dilemmas of national identity, as Mauritania navigated between African and Arab worlds, grappling with its multiethnic heritage, social hierarchies, and the enduring wounds of slavery.

Post-colonial Mauritania has been a nation of contradictions: periods of authoritarian rule interrupted by democratic experiments, economic promise shadowed by poverty, and outward stability punctuated by coups and contested transitions. Efforts at reform

have confronted resistance from tradition; the struggle to transcend deeply rooted divisions continues, even as the country embarks on new ventures in mineral and natural gas extraction and finds its place in an interconnected global order.

This book is intended as a comprehensive chronicle for readers seeking to understand Mauritania’s past and its ongoing transformation. In the chapters that follow, we explore the milestones of Mauritania’s evolution, from remote prehistory to the contemporary era, highlighting the pivotal events, cultures, and individuals that have shaped the nation's remarkable journey.

# CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Peoples of Mauritania: Geography and Early Inhabitants

Mauritania is a land of stark contrasts, a place where the vast, unforgiving Sahara Desert meets the Atlantic Ocean, and where the cultures of the Arab Maghreb blend with those of sub-Saharan Africa. This geographical position has profoundly shaped the nation's history, acting as both a bridge and a barrier for the movement of peoples, ideas, and goods. Covering over one million square kilometers, Mauritania is one of Africa's larger countries, yet much of its territory is consumed by the ever-expanding desert.

The landscape is predominantly flat, characterized by immense arid plains punctuated by occasional ridges and dramatic clifflike outcroppings. A prominent feature is a series of scarps that run southwest to northeast, effectively dividing the central part of the country. These geological formations give rise to sandstone plateaus, the most notable being the Adrar Plateau in the north, which reaches elevations of around 500 meters. Isolated peaks, known as "guelbs" for smaller ones and "kedias" for larger ones, pierce the sky above the plateaus, often holding valuable mineral deposits. The most famous of these is Guelb er Richat, a striking circular geological formation in the north-central region, and Kediet ej Jill, the country's highest point at 915 meters, located near the city of Zouîrât and known for its iron ore.

West of the plateaus, stretching towards the Atlantic coast, are alternating areas of flat, clayey plains called "regs" and vast seas of sand dunes known as "ergs." These dunes, particularly in the north, can be highly mobile, constantly shifted by the prevailing winds. The northeastern part of the country is dominated by the barren El Djouf, an immense region of large sand dunes that seamlessly merges into the wider Sahara Desert.

Mauritania's climate is predominantly hot, dry, and dusty, typical of a desert environment. However, there are some regional variations. The country is generally divided into four ecological zones: the Saharan Zone, the Sahelian Zone, the Senegal River Valley, and the Coastal Zone. The Saharan Zone, covering the northern two-thirds of the country, receives very little rainfall, often less than 100 millimeters annually. Temperatures here can be extreme, with significant diurnal variations. The prevailing wind in this zone is the Harmattan, a hot, dry, and often dust-laden wind that blows from the Sahara, frequently causing sandstorms.

South of the Saharan Zone lies the Sahelian Zone, an east-west belt characterized by decreasing rainfall as one moves northward. This zone supports steppe and savanna

grasslands, historically important for nomadic pastoralism. Rainfall here is more substantial than in the Sahara, ranging from 10 to 25 inches annually, and the rainy season, or "hivernage," typically lasts from July to September or October. The Sahelian zone is crucial for both farming and herding, and delays in the rainy season can lead to significant losses and population movements.

The Senegal River Valley in the far south is the most fertile and well-watered region, characterized by rich alluvial soils. This area receives the highest amount of rainfall, averaging 500 to 600 millimeters annually, and supports settled agriculture. The presence of the Senegal River makes this zone a vital area for sustenance and settlement, offering a stark contrast to the arid lands to the north.

Finally, the Coastal Zone, a narrow strip along the Atlantic, benefits from the moderating influence of oceanic trade winds and the Canary Current, resulting in a more temperate and humid climate than the interior. Despite the humidity, this zone receives less than 25 millimeters of precipitation annually. The capital city, Nouakchott, is located in this zone.

The history of human habitation in Mauritania stretches back to the Paleolithic era. Archaeological evidence, including Acheulean tools from the Lower Paleolithic, has been found in the north, indicating early human presence in the region. These early inhabitants were likely hunter-gatherers, adapting to the changing environmental conditions of the ancient Sahara. As the climate fluctuated over millennia, so too did the patterns of human settlement and activity.

During the Neolithic period, roughly from 6000 to 2000 BCE, the Sahara was significantly wetter than it is today, supporting diverse ecosystems and human populations. Archaeological sites from this era are particularly prominent along the Atlantic coast and in the Tichitt region. The Tichitt culture, centered around the sandstone cliffs of southeastern Mauritania, is well-known for its numerous Neolithic settlements built with dry stone walls. These sites, some dating back as far as 4000 years ago, provide evidence of settled life, including herding of livestock like cattle, sheep, and goats, as well as hunting, fishing, and the cultivation of millet. The people of the Tichitt culture are thought to be ancestors of the Soninke people, who would later play a significant role in the region's history through the Ghana Empire.

The Neolithic period also saw the development of a copper industry in Mauritania towards its end. The presence of copper mining and refining dating back to the first millennium BCE points to a level of technological sophistication among the inhabitants of this time. These early cultures demonstrate that the region was not merely a transit zone but a place where settled communities developed, utilizing the available resources and adapting to the prevailing environmental conditions.

Among the early inhabitants of the area were the Bafour people. Possibly a Mande

ethnic group, the Bafour were among the first in the Sahara to adopt a primarily agricultural lifestyle, shifting away from purely nomadic ways. They engaged in farming, livestock herding, fishing, and hunting. However, as the Sahara began its gradual process of desiccation, transforming once-habitable lands into arid desert, the Bafour, along with other groups, were compelled to migrate southward in search of more favorable conditions and reliable water sources. This southward movement of peoples in response to environmental change was a recurring theme in the early history of the region.

The rock art found in various parts of Mauritania, particularly on the Adrar and Tagant plateaus and in the Tichitt-Walata area, offers valuable insights into the lives and environment of these early inhabitants. These ancient engravings and paintings depict a variety of scenes, including large wild animals, cattle, hunting activities, and later, horses and camels. While difficult to date precisely, the changes in subject matter in the rock art can provide a relative chronology, reflecting shifts in the environment, domesticated animals, and human activities over thousands of years.

The earliest layers of rock art, showing wild fauna and cattle, likely correspond to a period when the Sahara was greener and supported larger animal populations and early pastoralism. The later depictions of horses and camels suggest the arrival of new peoples and the development of new forms of transportation and livelihoods, marking a transition in the region's history. The presence of Libyco-Berber script in some rock art also indicates early forms of writing and cultural exchange.

The interaction between these early inhabitants and their environment laid the foundation for the diverse cultural landscape that would later characterize Mauritania. The Sahara, while a formidable barrier, also contained oases and resource-rich areas that supported human life and facilitated connections. The coastal areas and the Senegal River Valley offered different ecological niches, allowing for varied lifestyles and economic activities, from fishing and settled agriculture to nomadic pastoralism.

The history of Mauritania is thus deeply intertwined with its geography and the movements of its earliest peoples. The arid plains, the life-giving river, and the vast desert have all played a role in shaping the human story in this part of Northwest Africa. The legacy of these early inhabitants, their adaptations to the environment, and their cultural expressions in the form of rock art and archaeological remains provide a glimpse into the deep past of a land that would become a crossroads of civilizations.

*This is a sample preview. Purchase the book to read the full content.*

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