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The History of Georgia

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Introduction

Situated at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, Georgia is a land shaped by millennia of movement, settlement, and encounter. With its snow-capped peaks, lush valleys, and Black Sea coastline, the country's dramatic landscapes have long offered both sanctuary and a channel for the currents of history. For thousands of years, Georgia has served as a strategic gateway—inviting passage, trade, and, at times, invasion. This unique geography has forged a remarkable story of survival, cultural synthesis, and national identity that continues to define Georgia today.

The history of Georgia is at once ancient and intensely dynamic. Archaeological discoveries at Dmanisi suggest that humans lived here nearly 1.8 million years ago, a remarkable testament to the country's foundational place in the broader narrative of mankind. These earliest chapters set the stage for a long succession of civilizations, from the first Neolithic farmers and metalworkers to tribal confederacies that left their mark in myth and legend. Georgia's ancient kingdoms, like Colchis and Iberia, emerged at the intersection of empires and became subjects of both Greek epic and practical statecraft.

Central to Georgia's story is its resilience in the face of relentless external pressure. Romans, Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, and Russians all left indelible marks on the fabric of Georgian society, demanding from its people both resistance and adaptability. Critical events—such as the adoption of Christianity in the fourth century, the flowering of a Golden Age under Queen Tamar, or the hard-fought struggles against imperial subjugation—testify to a persistent drive for cohesion and sovereignty. At each seeming nadir, Georgia managed to reinvent itself, blending external influences with enduring local traditions.

Modern Georgian identity was indelibly shaped by centuries of occupation and the subsequent Soviet period, during which time the nation oscillated between autonomy and subjugation. Resistance to assimilation—whether expressed through rebellion, literature, or religious renewal—became a through line in the modern era. The tumultuous years after the Soviet Union's collapse were marked by civil war, secessionist conflicts, and the painful challenges of state-building in a rapidly changing world.

Today, Georgia stands at another crossroads: striving to realize its European aspirations while grappling with the unresolved legacies of territorial loss and regional instability. It is a nation marked by the dynamism and artistry of its people, with an ever-evolving sense of itself shaped by both ancient roots and modern ambitions.

This book seeks to illuminate the full arc of Georgia's history, from its prehistoric beginnings to the present day. By tracing the succession of peoples, polities, and powers that have called this land home, and by attending to the cultural, spiritual, and political forces that have shaped Georgian life, we aim to reveal a story at once unique and deeply connected to the broader currents of world history.

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CHAPTER ONE: From Dmanisi to the Dawn of Civilization: Prehistoric Georgia

Long before kingdoms rose and fell, and before the very concept of "Georgia" took shape, this rugged and fertile land in the Caucasus was a stage for some of the earliest acts in the human drama. It was here, amidst the ancient landscapes, that hominids, our ancient ancestors, first set foot, leaving behind tantalizing clues to their presence nearly two million years ago. This deep past, stretching back to the dawn of humanity, forms the bedrock of Georgia's story, a testament to its enduring role as a crossroads of continents and cultures.

The story begins in Dmanisi, a small town in southern Georgia, where an extraordinary discovery reshaped our understanding of early human migration. Excavations at Dmanisi unearthed fossilized remains of hominids dating back approximately 1.8 million years, making them the oldest undisputed human ancestors found outside of Africa. These ancient travelers, often referred to as *Homo georgicus*, were not mere wanderers; their presence here suggests that Georgia was a crucial gateway, a vital stop on the long and arduous journey of hominids migrating from their African cradle to the vast, uncharted territories of Europe and Asia.

Imagine these early humans, perhaps not so different from us in their fundamental needs and ingenuity, navigating a world far wilder and less predictable than our own. They hunted, gathered, and likely fashioned rudimentary tools from stone, their lives a constant negotiation with the elements and the formidable fauna of the Pleistocene era. The Dmanisi findings include not only skulls and other skeletal fragments, but also a wealth of stone tools and animal bones, offering a vivid snapshot of their daily existence and their remarkable adaptability. The presence of these early hominids in Georgia underscores the region's pivotal geographical position, serving as a natural corridor between continents.

As millennia turned into eons, the climate shifted, and ice ages ebbed and flowed, shaping the landscape and influencing the movements of both humans and animals. The Paleolithic era, a vast expanse of time characterized by the use of stone tools, saw successive waves of human populations occupying various caves and shelters across Georgia. These hunter-gatherers left behind evidence of their presence in numerous archaeological sites, demonstrating a persistent human connection to this land. Their lives were dictated by the rhythms of nature, their survival dependent on their ability to adapt to changing environments and to master the skills of hunting and foraging.

With the retreat of the last glacial period, around 10,000 BCE, a new chapter

began—the Mesolithic era. This transitional period saw continued hunting and gathering, but also the development of more refined tools and a greater understanding of local resources. As the ice receded, new forests grew, and diverse ecosystems flourished, offering different challenges and opportunities for the human inhabitants of Georgia. The Mesolithic people were likely highly skilled in exploiting these varied environments, utilizing a wider range of plant and animal resources as they slowly moved towards a more settled way of life.

However, it was the arrival of the Neolithic period, roughly between 6000 and 5000 BCE, that truly marked a profound transformation in human existence within Georgia. This era witnessed a revolutionary shift from nomadic hunting and gathering to settled agriculture and animal husbandry. It was during this time that the earliest known agricultural settlements began to emerge, signaling the dawn of a new way of life that would lay the foundations for future civilizations. The very concept of permanent dwelling, of cultivating the land, and of domesticating animals, fundamentally altered the trajectory of human development in the region.

This agricultural revolution was not a sudden event, but rather a gradual process of innovation and adaptation. Early farmers in Georgia began to cultivate crops such as wheat and barley, transforming wild grains into domesticated staples. Alongside this, the domestication of animals like sheep, goats, and cattle provided a more reliable source of food, milk, and materials. This shift towards a food-producing economy allowed for the growth of larger and more stable communities, laying the groundwork for the complex societies that would eventually define ancient Georgia.

The archaeological record from this period reveals the distinct characteristics of the Shulaveri-Shomu culture, one of the earliest Neolithic cultures in the South Caucasus. These settlements were typically characterized by circular mud-brick buildings, suggesting a communal and organized approach to dwelling. The material culture of the Shulaveri-Shomu people included distinctive pottery, evidence of advanced craftsmanship, and a sophisticated understanding of ceramic production. Their tools, often made of obsidian, a volcanic glass readily available in the region, showcase their skill in working with natural resources.

The use of obsidian for tools not only speaks to the ingenuity of the Shulaveri-Shomu culture but also hints at early trade networks. Obsidian, prized for its sharp edges, would have been a valuable commodity, suggesting that these early communities were not entirely isolated but engaged in some form of exchange with neighboring groups. This interconnectedness, even in its nascent stages, foreshadows Georgia's future role as a vital link in regional and international trade routes. The presence of these finely crafted obsidian tools demonstrates a level of technological sophistication beyond mere subsistence.

The emergence of settled agricultural communities also brought about new social

structures. While the precise nature of these early societies remains a subject of ongoing archaeological research, it is likely that communal living fostered a degree of social organization and perhaps even early forms of leadership. The transition from transient hunter-gatherer bands to more permanent villages would have necessitated new ways of organizing labor, distributing resources, and resolving conflicts, all crucial steps in the evolution of complex human societies.

Beyond agriculture and settlement, the Neolithic period also saw the nascent stirrings of metallurgy in Georgia. While widespread metalworking would come later, the earliest evidence of metal processing in the region dates back to the 6th millennium BCE, making Georgia one of the earliest centers of metallurgy in the world. This pioneering engagement with metal, initially copper, marked another significant technological leap, demonstrating an early understanding of material properties and transformative processes. The ability to extract and shape metals was a powerful innovation, destined to reshape human civilization.

As the 4th millennium BCE approached, metallurgy became more prevalent, moving beyond simple copper artifacts to more complex metal objects. This increasing sophistication in metalworking signaled the slow but steady arrival of the Eneolithic and early Bronze Age, eras that would further revolutionize toolmaking, warfare, and social structures. The mastery of metal, with its inherent strength and durability, offered advantages that stone tools simply could not match, paving the way for further technological advancements and societal complexity.

Thus, the prehistoric era in Georgia, from the earliest human footsteps at Dmanisi to the flourishing Neolithic cultures and the dawn of metallurgy, laid the essential groundwork for everything that followed. It was a period of profound innovation and adaptation, where humans learned to harness their environment, cultivate the land, and transform raw materials into tools and objects of increasing sophistication. This long and intricate prehistory, deeply rooted in the Caucasus landscape, prepared the stage for the emergence of the first distinct Georgian tribal unions and the eventual formation of early state entities, marking the transition from prehistory to the documented annals of a rich and vibrant history. The spirit of ingenuity and resilience evident in these earliest inhabitants would echo through the millennia, becoming a defining characteristic of the Georgian people.

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