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The History of Turkmenistan

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Introduction

Turkmenistan, situated at the heart of Central Asia, is a land with a remarkable and multifaceted history. Its chronicles stretch from the earliest human settlements on the fringes of the great deserts to the bustling metropolises and authoritarian governance of the modern era. Few regions in the world can claim such a diverse amalgamation of influences—from ancient Indo-European and Iranian tribes, to conquering empires, to resurgent Turkic peoples, and ultimately, strong currents of both Islamic tradition and Soviet modernity. The history of Turkmenistan is, above all, a story of resilience, adaptation, and identity formation at one of the world's great crossroads.

Throughout the millennia, Turkmenistan's arid steppes, fertile river valleys, and strategic location have shaped the destiny of its peoples. Early agriculture blossomed here at Djeitun, while nomadic traditions interwove with the stateliness of settled civilizations. The region's history was written not just in grand empires and legendary warriors, but also in the pulse of everyday life along the Silk Road, where oases like Merv and Margiana became hubs of commerce, learning, and spiritual exchange. The very soil of Turkmenistan bears witness to an extraordinary heritage of ancient tools, ruined citadels, and narratives lost and found.

The emergence of the Turkmen as a distinct people only occurred after a dizzying succession of tribal movements, imperial conquests, and periods of both great prosperity and devastating adversity. The arrival of the Oghuz Turks drove a profound cultural transformation, culminating in medieval statehood and the peak of Islamic civilization under the Seljuks. But no sooner had golden ages flourished than they were swept away by tidal invasions—Mongol, Timurid, and others—forcing the Turkmen to adapt anew, whether through flight, resistance, or the forging of new alliances.

Modern Turkmenistan's history is equally dramatic, marked by its contested integration into the Russian Empire and the tempestuous upheavals of the twentieth century. The Soviet era wrought enormous changes: forced collectivization transformed agriculture and social life, repression and purges silenced generations, but new industries, educational systems, and urban centers rose from the deserts. Independence in 1991 marked the beginning of a new era, but also new challenges: from state-led nation-building and the assertion of a tightly controlled political system to the balancing act of maintaining sovereignty in a complex geopolitical region.

Today, Turkmenistan often appears in world headlines less for its rich and varied past than for its rigid authoritarian government, personality cults, and vast reserves of natural gas. Yet beneath the surface, the long arc of Turkmen history reveals a society

that has navigated countless waves of change while preserving a core sense of itself—rooted in tribe, language, tradition, and the fierce independence of its people.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive and accessible account of Turkmenistan's journey from prehistory to the present day. Each chapter traces a chapter in this journey—from early settlements along the Amu Darya, through waves of conquest and migration, to the modern state's contested search for security, identity, and a place in the world. In so doing, it hopes to give the reader not only a chronology, but a deeper sense of the enduring themes, challenges, and triumphs that have defined the land and people of Turkmenistan.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Turkmen Homeland: Geography and Early Human Settlement

To truly understand the history of Turkmenistan, one must first grasp the profound influence of its geography. This land, positioned in the heart of Central Asia, is a study in stark contrasts: vast, arid deserts giving way to fertile river oases, and towering mountain ranges bordering the shimmering expanse of the Caspian Sea. This unique environmental tapestry has not merely provided a backdrop for human endeavors but has actively shaped the migratory patterns, economic activities, and cultural development of its inhabitants for millennia.

Imagine a land where the Karakum Desert, one of the world's largest sand deserts, dominates the landscape, stretching across some 70 percent of the country. Its name, meaning "Black Sands" in Turkic, hints at its formidable nature. This isn't just a barren wasteland; it's a dynamic environment of shifting dunes, salt flats, and occasional oases fed by underground water sources. For early humans, traversing or settling such a region presented immense challenges, pushing them towards areas where water was more readily available. The desert, therefore, acted as both a barrier and a pathway, influencing where communities could thrive and how they connected with the wider world.

However, Turkmenistan is not solely defined by its deserts. The country is blessed with several crucial lifelines, the most significant being the Amu Darya River. This mighty waterway, known in antiquity as the Oxus, forms a substantial portion of Turkmenistan's northeastern border with Uzbekistan. Its fertile floodplains and deltas have historically been cradles of civilization, providing the water essential for agriculture and sustaining dense populations. The river's flow, originating from the Pamir Mountains, has been a constant source of life in an otherwise parched landscape, making the lands along its banks invaluable.

Beyond the Amu Darya, other rivers and oases have played pivotal roles. The Murghab River, for instance, rises in Afghanistan and flows northwest through Turkmenistan, creating the fertile Margiana oasis, an ancient hub of civilization. Similarly, the Tejen River (known as the Hari River in Afghanistan and Iran) forms the Tejen oasis. These isolated pockets of fertility, surrounded by arid lands, became natural magnets for settlement, trade, and cultural exchange, fostering unique micro-civilizations that interacted with the broader regional dynamics. The very existence of such oases explains why human history in Turkmenistan isn't just a story of survival, but also of surprisingly advanced cultural development.

To the south, the Kopet Dag mountain range forms a natural border with Iran, running for approximately 650 kilometers. These mountains, while not as high as some of the world's giants, nevertheless offer cooler climates, seasonal rainfall, and mountain streams that nourish a different kind of ecosystem. They provided refuge, timber, and mineral resources, and their foothills were often preferred sites for early settlements due to more moderate temperatures and greater water availability compared to the scorching plains. The passes through the Kopet Dag also served as important routes for movement and communication, connecting the peoples of the Turkmen plains with the Iranian plateau.

And then there is the Caspian Sea, Turkmenistan's western frontier. As the world's largest inland body of water, it offers a stark contrast to the desert landscape. Although saline, its waters have supported fishing communities and provided maritime trade routes, connecting Turkmenistan to the Caucasus and beyond. The Caspian shore, particularly around the port of Krasnovodsk (modern-day Turkmenbashi), became a strategic entry point for external powers, most notably the Russian Empire in later centuries. For early inhabitants, the sea represented another source of sustenance and a distinct cultural sphere, often intertwined with the nomadic traditions of the surrounding lands.

The interplay of these geographical features—desert, river, mountains, and sea—has made Turkmenistan a quintessential "crossroads" region. It lay at the intersection of various cultural and migratory currents: the pastoral nomads of the Eurasian steppes to the north, the settled agricultural civilizations of Persia to the south, and the developing urban centers along the Silk Road that snaked through its oases. This geographical position meant that Turkmenistan was rarely isolated, constantly absorbing and contributing to the broader tapestry of Central Asian history.

Early human presence in this diverse landscape dates back to the Paleolithic period. Archaeological investigations, though challenging in such a vast and often remote territory, have uncovered evidence of stone tools that attest to ancient hunter-gatherer communities roaming the region. These early inhabitants would have followed game, gathered wild plants, and sought out reliable water sources, making their lives a constant negotiation with the natural environment. Their existence was intrinsically linked to the rhythms of the seasons and the availability of resources in a demanding landscape.

The shift from a nomadic hunter-gatherer existence to more settled agricultural practices marked a profound turning point. The fertile oases along the Amu Darya and other river systems provided ideal conditions for the nascent development of farming. It was in these relatively well-watered pockets that early communities began to cultivate crops and domesticate animals, laying the groundwork for more complex societies. This move towards settled life was not uniform across the entire region, with

nomadic traditions persisting in the more arid zones, but it represented a fundamental change in human interaction with the Turkmen homeland.

One of the most significant early agricultural settlements discovered in Turkmenistan is Djeitun, located near modern-day Ashgabat. Dating back as far as 6,000 BC, Djeitun offers compelling evidence of sophisticated early farming practices in Central Asia. The villagers cultivated barley and wheat, herded goats and sheep, and constructed distinctive mud-brick houses. The existence of such a community at such an early date underscores the region's importance as a cradle for early agriculture and cattle husbandry, suggesting that the "Turkmen Homeland" was not just a recipient of agricultural innovation, but also an innovator in its own right. The discoveries at Djeitun paint a picture of organized community life, where early farmers adapted their techniques to the local environment, transforming the landscape and their way of life.

The emergence of these early agricultural settlements marked the beginning of a long and complex process of human development in Turkmenistan. These communities, though modest by later standards, were the forerunners of the cities and empires that would eventually rise and fall across the land. They learned to harness the limited water resources, cultivate the fertile soils, and build structures that offered protection from the elements. Their resilience and ingenuity in the face of environmental challenges set a precedent for future generations, demonstrating the enduring human capacity to adapt and thrive even in seemingly harsh conditions.

The natural environment of Turkmenistan also fostered specific types of cultural development. The open steppes and deserts were ideal for the emergence of nomadic and semi-nomadic cultures centered around horse-breeding and pastoralism. Even as agricultural settlements grew, the nomadic way of life remained a powerful force, contributing to a distinctive blend of settled and mobile traditions that would characterize the region for centuries. The close relationship between humans, horses, and the vast open spaces became a defining feature of many early groups, impacting their social structures, their art, and their military prowess.

Therefore, as we delve deeper into the history of Turkmenistan, it is crucial to remember the land itself. The mountains and deserts, the rivers and the sea, the fertile oases and the endless steppes—all have played an active role in shaping the human story here. They dictated where people settled, how they lived, what they ate, and how they interacted with their neighbors. This geographical legacy is woven into the very fabric of Turkmen identity, a constant presence that has influenced every migration, every conquest, and every cultural fusion that has unfolded on this extraordinary stage. The early human presence, from Paleolithic wanderers to the first farmers of Djeitun, laid the foundational stones of this remarkable narrative, demonstrating an early and profound connection between the people and their unique homeland.

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