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A History of Georgia

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Introduction

Georgia, a nation shaped by mountains, rivers, and its strategic position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, possesses an extraordinary historical narrative that stands out on the world stage. Its lands have been inhabited for nearly two million years, bearing silent witness to the earliest footsteps of humankind outside Africa. Over millennia, waves of change—cultural, political, and religious—have swept across this region, transforming its people while forging a distinctive identity that endures to this day.

The story of Georgia is woven with threads from both East and West, from mythic kingdoms immortalized in Greek legend to legendary battles that determined the region's fate. From the ancient Colchis, famed as the destination of the Argonauts, to the vibrant emergence of the Kingdom of Iberia, Georgia's early history is marked by constant adaptation and resilience in the face of foreign domination and shifting empires. Each incursion—from Persians and Hellenists to Romans—left indelible marks while expanding Georgia's role as a cultural and commercial crossroads.

With the advent of Christianity, Georgia embraced a faith that would profoundly shape its national consciousness and orient its destiny between the great powers of the region. The steadfastness of its people during the formation of the unified Georgian state set the stage for a remarkable Golden Age, characterized by literary brilliance, architectural grandeur, and the territorial expansion under iconic rulers like King David IV and Queen Tamar. These centuries of flourishing were not, however, immune to the tides of invasion. Mongols, Turks, Persians, and later Russians would all stake their claims on Georgian soil, leading to long periods of struggle, fragmentation, and adaptation.

Modern history in Georgia is a testament to endurance and pursuit of sovereignty. The aspirations of 1918, with a fleeting moment of independence, were quickly overshadowed by Soviet repression and decades of dramatic political, social, and cultural transformation under communist rule. Yet, in the closing years of the twentieth century, Georgians once again asserted their right to self-determination, ultimately achieving independence amid turmoil, civil conflict, and the redrawing of regional boundaries.

Contemporary Georgia continues to grapple with the consequences of its tumultuous past—internal conflicts, territorial disputes, and the ongoing challenge of balancing tradition with modern ambitions. Its people's commitment to democracy, reform, and a Western trajectory in recent decades has placed the country at the heart of key regional and international debates. At the same time, cultural revival, renewed

Orthodox faith, and enduring traditions continue to play a central role in public life.

This book explores the compelling history of Georgia across twenty-five chapters, tracing the evolution of a nation from its earliest days to the present. Through ancient legends and modern revolutions, persistent struggles for identity and independence, and the endurance of spirit in the face of adversity, Georgia's story emerges—a testament to the remarkable human will to endure, adapt, and thrive.

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CHAPTER ONE: Early Human Settlement and Prehistoric Georgia

The story of Georgia begins not with kings and castles, but with the very dawn of human existence, extending back through epochs so vast they dwarf the familiar timelines of written history. Long before the names Colchis or Iberia resonated across the ancient world, the rugged landscapes of the Caucasus region were trodden by feet that were perhaps among the first to venture out of Africa. This corner of Eurasia, nestled between formidable mountain ranges and fertile lowlands, served as a crucial corridor and, remarkably, a place of early settlement for our ancient ancestors.

Evidence uncovered in Georgia provides a stunning glimpse into this distant past. At a site called Dmanisi, situated south of modern-day Tbilisi, paleontologists and archaeologists have unearthed fossil remains and stone tools that have fundamentally reshaped our understanding of early human migration. These remarkable finds date back approximately 1.8 million years, pushing back the timeline for hominin dispersal from Africa into Eurasia by several hundred thousand years compared to earlier theories.

The Dmanisi hominins, sometimes referred to as *Homo georgicus*, represent one of the earliest known groups of humans to have left the African continent. Their remains and artifacts offer a tantalizing window into the lives of these hardy pioneers. They were relatively small-brained compared to later human species, suggesting that large cranial capacity was not a prerequisite for successful migration and adaptation to new environments outside of Africa. The discovery site itself, nestled on a plateau above two river gorges, likely provided a favorable location with access to water and resources.

Excavations at Dmanisi have yielded multiple skulls, jawbones, and postcranial skeletons, representing individuals of different ages and sexes. These findings have allowed scientists to study variations within this early hominin population and speculate about their social structures and behaviours. The stone tools found alongside the fossils are relatively simple, belonging to the Oldowan tradition, characterized by basic choppers and flakes, indicating a technology level suited for butchering carcasses and processing plant materials.

The presence of animal fossils, including large carnivores and herbivores, suggests that the Dmanisi hominins shared their environment with formidable creatures. Their survival likely depended on scavenging, hunting smaller prey, and exploiting available plant resources. The long journey out of Africa and the successful establishment of a

presence in the Caucasus required ingenuity, resilience, and adaptability in the face of new challenges posed by a different climate and ecosystem.

Moving forward tens of thousands of years, evidence of later Stone Age inhabitants continues to populate the archaeological record across Georgia. Sites dating from the Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic periods show a continued human presence, adapting to changing climatic conditions, including glacial cycles. These later populations, including *Homo sapiens*, developed more sophisticated tool technologies and subsistence strategies, spreading across the varied landscapes of the region.

The transition from the Paleolithic hunter-gatherer lifestyle to settled agricultural communities marks a profound shift in human history, and Georgia played a significant role in this global transformation. The Neolithic period, often referred to as the "New Stone Age," began in the territory of modern-day Georgia between 6000 and 5000 BC. This era saw the domestication of plants and animals, leading to the development of permanent or semi-permanent settlements and a fundamental change in human interaction with the environment.

Archaeological sites from this period, such as the extensive settlements of the Shulaveri-Shomu culture primarily found in eastern Georgia and Azerbaijan, reveal the characteristics of these early farming communities. These people lived in circular, mud-brick houses, often clustered together, indicating the emergence of structured villages. Their economy was based on cultivating crops like wheat and barley and raising domesticated animals such as cattle, sheep, and goats.

The development of pottery was another hallmark of the Neolithic, providing vessels for storage, cooking, and transport. The distinct pottery styles of the Shulaveri-Shomu culture, along with their tools and architecture, offer insights into their daily lives and cultural practices. This shift to agriculture allowed for population growth and the development of more complex social structures than were possible in mobile hunter-gatherer societies.

Crucially, the region also became an early center for the development and use of metals, marking the transition into the Chalcolithic (Copper Age) and subsequently the Bronze Age. Metallurgy emerged in Georgia surprisingly early, associated with the Shulaveri-Shomu culture itself, perhaps as early as the 6th millennium BC. While initially limited, the knowledge and practice of working with copper and later bronze spread and intensified.

By the 4th millennium BC, the use of metals became much more widespread across eastern Georgia and the wider Transcaucasian region. This period saw the rise of cultures like the Kura-Araxes culture, named after the two major rivers in the region, which flourished from roughly 3400 BC to 2000 BC. This culture is notable for its extensive settlements, sophisticated pottery, distinctive metalworking, and broad

influence across the Near East.

The mastery of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, was a technological leap that had profound implications for society. Bronze tools and weapons were stronger and more durable than those made of stone or copper, leading to advancements in agriculture, warfare, and craftsmanship. The availability of metal resources in the Caucasus region facilitated this development, positioning Georgia as an important node in early metal trade networks.

Archaeological finds from the Bronze Age in Georgia are rich and diverse. They include impressive burial mounds (kurgans), intricate metalwork such as weapons, tools, jewelry, and ceremonial objects, and evidence of burgeoning trade and contact with neighboring regions. The quality and artistry of some Bronze Age artifacts found in Georgia suggest the presence of skilled artisans and a society capable of supporting specialized crafts.

These prehistoric developments laid the essential groundwork for the later emergence of organized societies and political entities in Georgia. The established settlements, agricultural surplus, metallurgical expertise, and developing social complexity created the conditions necessary for the formation of larger tribal groups and, eventually, the kingdoms that would appear on the stage of recorded history. The deep roots of Georgian history are firmly planted in the soil of these ancient communities, whose innovations and resilience shaped the very foundations of the future nation.

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