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# A History of Montenegro

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## Introduction

Montenegro, though one of Europe's smallest countries, has a history of remarkable depth and complexity. Perched on the rugged Adriatic coast and nestled amidst imposing mountains, its story is one of persistence and survival. Over millennia, this land has been shaped by waves of migrations and conquests, by the rise and fall of empires, and by the unyielding determination of its people to carve out and preserve their own distinct identity. The contours of Montenegrin history are marked by formidable challenges—military, cultural, and political—and by the creativity and adaptability of the societies that have called these mountains and valleys home.

Long before the modern state emerged, the area was home to the Illyrians, who established rich tribal traditions and became a bridge between inland and coastal civilizations. Roman conquest brought urbanization, roads, and a new administrative order, but also consigned Montenegro to a position at the empire's periphery, a borderland subject to the tides of invasion and shifting imperial fortunes. The collapse of Roman power set the stage for the arrival of Slavic tribes, who would lay the foundations for new principalities and, eventually, for the birth of a Montenegrin state.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the region weathered cycles of fragmentation and consolidation, as dynasties rose and fell against the backdrop of Byzantine, Venetian, Ottoman, and Serbian ambitions. The rocky landscape served as both refuge and defense, fostering a culture of fierce independence and communal solidarity. The establishment of the Prince-Bishopric forged a unique theocratic polity, uniting spiritual and temporal leadership in the face of relentless pressure from external powers. Figures such as Petar II Petrović-Njegoš emerged not only as political leaders but also as thinkers and poets whose works still echo deeply within Montenegrin society.

Modern Montenegro's trajectory has been marked by periods of dramatic transformation. The shift from a theocratic state to a secular principality, its recognition as a kingdom, and the trials of occupation and annexation all tested—and ultimately solidified—the Montenegrin national character. The tumultuous twentieth century brought both loss and renewal: two world wars, incorporation into Yugoslavia, and the re-emergence of Montenegrin identity in the era of socialist restructuring and, finally, independence.

Today, Montenegro stands as a testament to endurance and revitalization. Navigating the challenges of post-socialist transition, integration into international institutions, and the balancing of tradition with modernity, it continues to draw on the lessons of a millennia-long journey. This book aims to trace the contours of that journey, exploring

the cultural, political, and social forces that have defined Montenegro and situating its story within the tapestry of European and Balkan history.

By uncovering the interplay of geography, power, and identity, “A History of Montenegro” invites readers to appreciate not only the unique struggles and achievements of this Adriatic nation, but also its contributions to the broader story of resilience and nationhood in Southeastern Europe.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Land and People: Geography and Early Inhabitants

Montenegro, a name that conjures images of dramatic, dark mountains, is a country where geography has always played a starring role in shaping human history. Tucked away on the southeastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, this small Balkan nation is a place of striking contrasts: a rugged, often unforgiving interior gives way abruptly to a stunning coastline. The very name, *Crna Gora* in Montenegrin, or "Black Mountain," is thought to have been bestowed by Venetian merchants, likely in reference to the dark, forested slopes of Mount Lovćen and the surrounding peaks that dramatically descend towards the Bay of Kotor. This imposing natural barrier has historically provided both protection and isolation.

The country's terrain is remarkably diverse for its relatively small size, approximately 13,810 square kilometers (5,332 square miles). It can broadly be divided into three geographical zones: the coastal region, a central plain, and the high mountains. The Adriatic coastline stretches for nearly 300 kilometers (183 miles), featuring not only sandy beaches in the south near Ulcinj but also steep cliffs plunging into the sea further north, particularly around the spectacular, fjord-like Bay of Kotor. The Bay of Kotor, a submerged river canyon, is a prominent feature, ringed by mountains that can reach up to 1,000 meters (3,281 feet) in height, adding to its dramatic beauty.

Moving inland, the narrow coastal plain quickly gives way to a karst region, a landscape characterized by porous limestone, sinkholes, and underground caves. This area, while beautiful, is often arid at higher elevations, typically around 1,000 meters (3,281 feet) above sea level, though some parts soar to 1,800 meters (5,906 feet). The karst topography presents challenges for agriculture and settlement, influencing the distribution and lifestyle of its inhabitants throughout history.

Further inland lies the Zeta River valley and the Zeta Plain, a more fertile alluvial lowland near the capital, Podgorica. This plain, along with the Bjelopavlići plain, constitutes Montenegro's most significant low-lying areas and has historically been crucial for settlement and farming, in contrast to the challenging karst. These plains are now the most densely populated parts of the country.

Dominating the majority of Montenegro's territory are the high mountains, part of the vast Dinaric Alps system that runs through the western Balkans. These mountains boast some of the most rugged terrain in Europe, with many peaks exceeding 2,000 meters (6,562 feet). Bobotov Kuk in the Durmitor range, reaching 2,523 meters (8,278 feet), is among the highest peaks. The mountainous north is also home to deep river

canyons, including the Tara River Canyon, one of the deepest in Europe, carving dramatic gorges through the landscape.

The climate of Montenegro is as varied as its topography. The coastal region enjoys a Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters, influenced by the Adriatic Sea. Summers along the coast see average temperatures reaching 30°C, while winters are milder, averaging between 5°C and 10°C. However, cold winds, like the "bura," can occasionally bring sharp drops in temperature.

Moving inland, the climate transitions to a more continental one, with colder winters and greater temperature variations between seasons. The mountainous areas experience an alpine climate, characterized by cold, snowy winters and cooler summers. Precipitation levels also vary dramatically across the country, with some mountainous areas near the coast, like Mount Orjen, receiving exceptionally high amounts of rainfall, holding European records for annual precipitation.

This diverse geographical setting, with its challenging mountains, fertile lowlands, and strategic coastline, has profoundly influenced the patterns of human settlement and the course of history in Montenegro. The rugged terrain provided natural defenses, fostering a degree of isolation and the development of resilient, independent communities, while the coastal areas and river valleys offered opportunities for trade, agriculture, and interaction with neighboring cultures.

Long before written records began to detail the political machinations of Balkan states, the land that is now Montenegro was inhabited by early humans. Archaeological evidence points to a deep prehistoric past in the region. Sites such as Crvena Stijena, or "Red Rock Cave," near Nikšić in western Montenegro, provide compelling evidence of human presence dating back remarkably far in time.

Crvena Stijena is considered one of the most significant Paleolithic sites in Southeastern Europe, boasting a deep sequence of archaeological layers that span from the Middle Paleolithic through the Bronze Age. Within these layers, archaeologists have unearthed stone artifacts that are estimated to be as old as 180,000 years, offering a glimpse into the lives of some of the earliest inhabitants of this territory. This suggests a long and continuous, albeit perhaps sparse, human occupation of the region throughout prehistory.

Other prehistoric finds, such as drawings in a cave in the village of Lipci near Risan, depict scenes like deer hunting and further attest to the presence of early communities in different parts of what would become Montenegro. These early peoples, living in rock shelters and likely following a semi-nomadic lifestyle tied to hunting and gathering, adapted to the diverse environments offered by the Montenegrin landscape. The evidence suggests that by the 4th millennium BC, small settlements existed and engaged in activities like agriculture, pottery, and copper

smelting, indicating developing levels of social organization and technology.

As millennia passed and the Bronze and Iron Ages arrived, the region saw the emergence of more complex societies. It is during the Early Bronze Age (2000-1500 BC) and Early Iron Age (1000-500 BC) that archaeological findings begin to reveal the presence of the Illyrians in the territory of modern Montenegro. The Illyrians were a group of Indo-European-speaking tribes who inhabited the western Balkans. While their precise origins and language remain subjects of scholarly debate, they are widely considered the principal inhabitants of the area before the arrival of the Slavs.

The Illyrians were not a single unified entity but rather a collection of distinct tribes, each with its own territory, customs, and leadership. They settled predominantly in the area of the Dinaric Alps, which naturally included much of present-day Montenegro. Their way of life was often characterized by pastoralism in the mountainous interior, where they were known as hardy highlanders and shepherds. They practiced burial in large mounds on hilltops, a common archaeological feature associated with Illyrian cultures, such as the Glasinac-Mati culture which encompassed parts of Montenegro.

Along the coast and near major rivers and lakes, some Illyrian tribes also developed maritime skills. Those living by the sea gradually became known as skilled sailors and, at times, rather notorious pirates who would raid ships in the Adriatic. This coastal presence and activity brought them into contact and often conflict with Greek colonists and later, the rising power of Rome.

Several Illyrian tribes are specifically associated with the territory of modern Montenegro. Among the most prominent were the Ardiaei, who eventually settled in the coastal area stretching from the Neretva River delta down towards the Bay of Kotor and into modern Albania. They are particularly notable in historical accounts due to their wars with the Romans.

Further south along the coast, the Enheleans inhabited the area from Rhizon (modern Risan) to Buthua (modern Budva). Risan is considered one of the most important ancient Illyrian towns and potentially the oldest settlement in Montenegro, with its history stretching back to the Bronze Age and likely hosting an early Greek colony before the arrival of the Illyrians.

Inland, around the area of Skadar Lake (referred to as the "Labeatian Lake" in some ancient texts), lived the Labeates. Their important town was Scodra (modern Shkodër in Albania), which would later serve as a capital for the Illyrian kingdom. Near the confluence of the Zeta and Morača rivers, close to modern Podgorica, were the Docleates, centered around the town of Doclea (also known as Dioclea). The Docleates were known for their cheese, which was reportedly exported within the Roman Empire, indicating a level of economic activity and organization.

In the northern parts of Montenegro, the Autariatae were present, with their name potentially preserved in the name of the Tara River. The Pirustes, known for their mining skills, likely inhabited areas rich in ore deposits, such as around modern Pljevlja. This suggests that while many Illyrians were pastoralists, some tribes also engaged in resource extraction.

The Illyrians were often organized into large tribes led by "kings" or chieftains. Periodically, these tribes would form broader coalitions, especially in response to external threats or to launch their own expeditions. Greek historical sources from the 6th century BC onwards mention the Illyrians, providing some of the earliest written accounts of these people in the region.

By the 3rd century BC, an indigenous Illyrian kingdom began to take shape, with its capital eventually located at Skadar. This kingdom, particularly under rulers like Agron and his wife Teuta, became increasingly involved in activities that brought them into direct confrontation with Rome. Their control extended over various Illyrian tribes and coastal settlements, forming a significant political entity in the southern Adriatic. Coastal towns that have ancient Illyrian roots include Ulcinj, Budva, and Risan, along with inland strongholds like Medun.

The Illyrian state, however, faced mounting pressure from the expanding Roman Republic. The Illyrians' piratical activities in the Adriatic were a particular point of contention for Rome, which relied heavily on maritime trade and transport. This led to a series of Roman punitive expeditions and wars aimed at curbing Illyrian power and securing the Adriatic.

The Illyrians, with their tribal structures and fortified settlements, offered resistance, but they were ultimately unable to withstand the sustained military might of Rome. The coastal towns, while important centers of trade and artisan activity, were also vulnerable to Roman naval power. The rugged interior provided a degree of refuge, but it did not offer the resources or unified organization necessary to repel a determined imperial force.

The period leading up to the Roman conquest saw the Illyrian kingdom engaged in a struggle for survival. Despite periods of strength and expansion under leaders like Agron, internal divisions among tribes and the growing Roman military presence in the Adriatic and Balkan region proved increasingly difficult to overcome. The fate of the Illyrian state and the land that would become Montenegro was on the cusp of a dramatic transformation as Roman legions pushed eastward.

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