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A History of Georgia

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Ancient Beginnings: The Land and Its Peoples
- **Chapter 2** The Rise of Colchis: Myths and Early Statehood
- **Chapter 3** The Kingdom of Iberia: Foundations in the East
- **Chapter 4** Encounters with Empires: Persians, Greeks, and Romans
- **Chapter 5** Early Christianity and the Formation of a Nation
- **Chapter 6** The Unification of Georgian Kingdoms
- **Chapter 7** The Bagratid Dynasty and National Consolidation
- **Chapter 8** David IV the Builder and the Georgian Renaissance
- **Chapter 9** The Golden Age under Queen Tamar
- **Chapter 10** Georgia at Its Zenith: Culture, Power, and Influence
- **Chapter 11** The Mongol Invasions and the Coming of Decline
- **Chapter 12** The Fragmentation of the Kingdom
- **Chapter 13** Survival among Empires: Ottomans and Persians
- **Chapter 14** Religion and Identity under Foreign Rule
- **Chapter 15** The Path to Russian Protection
- **Chapter 16** Annexation by the Russian Empire
- **Chapter 17** Resistance, Enlightenment, and National Revival
- **Chapter 18** Georgia in the 19th Century: Social and Economic Changes
- **Chapter 19** War, Revolution, and Brief Independence (1918–1921)
- **Chapter 20** Sovietization and the Georgian SSR
- **Chapter 21** Stalin, Collectivization, and Cultural Transformation
- **Chapter 22** Dissent, Nationalism, and the Road to Independence
- **Chapter 23** Post-Soviet Upheaval: Civil War and Separatism
- **Chapter 24** Reform, Conflict, and the Struggle for Democracy
- **Chapter 25** Contemporary Georgia: Challenges and Aspirations

Introduction

Georgia, positioned at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, is a land defined by its diversity, resilience, and enduring spirit. Steeped in antiquity, the country's roots run deep, entwined with the folklore of the Golden Fleece, the legends of ancient Colchis and Iberia, and the chronicles of kingdoms that flourished in the shadow of mountains and by the shores of the Black Sea. Its strategic geography has made Georgia both a prize and a fortress—coveted by empires, shaped by trade routes, and forged through encounters with a tapestry of cultures.

The history of Georgia is one of remarkable continuity and adaptation. Over millennia, Georgian peoples have weathered conquest and fragmentation, yet have managed to preserve a distinct national identity. The adoption of Christianity in the early 4th century AD not only bound the kingdom together but also crystallized a unique cultural and religious legacy that would act as a bulwark against centuries of foreign domination and political turmoil. From the heights of the medieval Golden Age, when Georgia was a beacon of power and culture in the Christian East, to the long struggles against Mongol, Ottoman, Persian, and Russian rulers, the Georgian saga is marked by both luminous triumphs and somber trials.

Modern Georgia's journey is no less complex. The 19th and 20th centuries brought seismic changes; the absorption into the Russian Empire, the brief flicker of independence after World War I, and the stern realities of Soviet rule transformed every facet of Georgian society. The path to sovereignty in the wake of the Soviet collapse was fraught with civil strife, economic hardship, and unresolved territorial disputes, leaving deep scars but also awakening a spirit of reform and renewal.

Georgia's contemporary story is shaped by its aspirations toward European integration, its efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, and the persistent challenges of regional instability. The scars of recent conflicts—particularly in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—remain tender reminders of unresolved national questions and the persistent influence of larger neighbors like Russia.

Throughout its long history, Georgia has confronted adversity with resolve, drawing from an ancient wellspring of culture, language, and faith. The resilience of its people, the vibrancy of its traditions, and the beauty of its landscapes have left a mark on world history out of proportion to its modest size.

This book seeks to tell the story of Georgia in all its complexity: from the myths and origins of antiquity to the pressing dilemmas of the present day. It is a tale of perseverance, adaptation, and a keen sense of identity—a narrative that captures not

only the major political milestones but also the cultural, religious, and social currents that have shaped one of the world's most fascinating nations.

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CHAPTER ONE: Ancient Beginnings: The Land and Its Peoples

Georgia occupies a truly unique position on the world map. Situated squarely at the juncture where Eastern Europe meets Western Asia, the country has long served as both a bridge and a barrier between vastly different cultures and civilizations. This geographic reality has profoundly shaped its history from the very earliest times. To the north, the formidable Greater Caucasus mountain range stands as a colossal natural wall, separating Georgia from the vast Eurasian steppes and Russia. To the south, the Lesser Caucasus mountains create further natural divisions, bordering present-day Turkey and Armenia. To the west lies the Black Sea, offering both a connection to the Mediterranean world and a natural boundary. This varied topography, from subtropical coastlines to alpine peaks, has fostered a rich diversity in landscapes and, historically, has contributed to regional distinctions among its inhabitants.

The land itself is a tapestry of towering mountains, deep river valleys, and fertile plains. The Mtkvari (known historically as the Kura) and Rioni rivers are the major arteries, flowing from west to east and north to west respectively, carving through the landscape and providing vital water resources that have supported human settlement for millennia. This dramatic topography, while providing defensive advantages, also made communication and unification challenging throughout history.

Long before the rise of kingdoms and the chronicling of events, the territory of modern Georgia was home to some of the earliest human inhabitants outside of Africa. Astonishing archaeological discoveries at Dmanisi in southern Georgia have unearthed hominin fossils, specifically *Homo erectus georgicus*, dating back as far as 1.8 million years ago. These findings are among the oldest evidence of early humans in Eurasia, suggesting that the South Caucasus region played a crucial role in the dispersal of our ancient ancestors across the globe. Imagine these early pioneers, navigating a landscape vastly different from today, armed with only the most basic stone tools, adapting to new environments as they ventured far from their African origins.

Following these incredibly ancient traces, the archaeological record in Georgia continues through the Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods. Sites scattered across the country, from the highlands to the coast, reveal the lives of hunter-gatherer societies. They hunted the fauna of the time and foraged for edible plants, their movements dictated by the availability of resources and the changing seasons. The end of the last Ice Age brought significant climatic shifts, influencing lifestyles and leading to gradual changes in subsistence strategies.

The transition to the Neolithic era, beginning in Georgia at least by the 6th millennium BC, marked a profound transformation. Evidence of early agriculture and animal domestication appears, signifying a shift from nomadic foraging to more settled ways of life. Sites like those of the Shulaveri-Shomu culture in eastern Georgia, dating from the late sixth to early fifth millennium BC, showcase early agricultural practices and the establishment of permanent settlements with distinctive circular mud-brick structures. This period also saw the development of pottery, allowing for the storage of food and liquids, a seemingly simple innovation that had far-reaching consequences for societal development. Intriguingly, archaeological finds in Georgia dating to the early Neolithic period have provided the earliest biomolecular evidence for grape wine and viniculture from the Near East, around 6,000-5,800 BC, suggesting a very long tradition of winemaking in the region. This positions Georgia as a potential "cradle of civilization" in this specific, rather delightful, regard.

The Bronze Age, roughly from the 4th to the 2nd millennium BC, brought further complexity and technological advancement. Early metallurgy began in Georgia even earlier, in the 6th millennium BC, with metal objects found in Neolithic layers. However, the use of metal became more extensive from the beginning of the 4th millennium BC. This era is characterized by significant developments in metalworking, with the production of bronze tools, weapons, and intricate artifacts. Archaeological cultures like the Kura-Araxes culture (c. 3400-2000 BC), which spanned a large area of the South Caucasus and beyond, show evidence of economic stability based on raising cattle and sheep, as well as noticeable cultural development. This widespread culture, centered on the basins of the Kura and Aras rivers, demonstrates early regional interconnectedness.

Another notable Bronze Age culture in eastern Georgia was the Trialeti culture, known for its large burial mounds, or kurgans, which often contained rich grave goods, including gold and silver ornaments, suggesting a society with increasing social stratification and distinct burial practices. In western Georgia, the Colchian culture emerged and flourished during the Bronze and Iron Ages (c. 2700-700 BC). This culture is particularly known for its highly developed bronze production and artistic craftsmanship, with numerous copper and bronze items found in ancient graves. The presence of these sophisticated metalworking traditions highlights the ingenuity of the early inhabitants of the region and their connections to broader metallurgical networks.

The transition to the Iron Age, around the late 2nd to early 1st millennium BC, marked another significant shift. Iron tools and weapons began to replace bronze, impacting agriculture, warfare, and daily life. This period also saw the rise of more complex societal structures and the emergence of what are considered proto-Georgian tribal unions. While the formal kingdoms of Colchis and Iberia, which will be explored in the following chapters, solidified later, the Iron Age laid the groundwork for these state

formations. Sites like Uplistsikhe, an ancient rock-hewn town dating back to the early Iron Age, provide a glimpse into early urban settlements and their unique architecture carved directly into the rock.

Genetics studies suggest that the Caucasus region played a pivotal role in the peopling of Eurasia, with a distinct lineage, dubbed Caucasian Hunter-Gatherer (CHG), splitting from Western European Hunter-Gatherer lineages around 45,000 years ago. This CHG lineage later separated from early Anatolian farmers around 25,000 years ago. These findings underscore the deep roots of the populations in the Caucasus and their unique genetic history. The ancestors of modern Georgians are generally believed to be descendants of early Kartvelian-speaking tribes who inhabited the South Caucasus and northern Asia Minor since the Neolithic period. Linguistic analysis suggests that the Kartvelian language family, unique to this region, is one of the oldest in the world, with the Svan language possibly splitting from Proto-Kartvelian as early as the 19th century BC. By the 8th century BC, the Zan language, the basis for Mingrelian and Laz, had also become distinct. This linguistic divergence reflects the ancient presence and gradual evolution of Kartvelian-speaking peoples in the area.

Thus, the land that would become Georgia, shaped by its dramatic geography at the crossroads of continents, was inhabited by diverse groups of people for hundreds of thousands of years before recorded history began. From the earliest *Homo erectus* at Dmanisi to the sophisticated metalworkers of the Bronze Age and the emerging tribal structures of the Iron Age, these ancient inhabitants laid the foundation for the rich and complex history that was to follow. They were the first to navigate its mountains and valleys, cultivate its fertile lands, and forge a connection with this unique and enduring territory.

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