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# A History of Bandung

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## Introduction

Bandung, the capital of West Java province, is a city marked not only by its lush, mountainous vistas and cool climate, but also by a vibrant and multifaceted history. As Indonesia's third-largest metropolis, Bandung holds a unique place in the archipelago's story—one shaped by ancient kingdoms, colonial ambitions, revolutionary fervor, and the ceaseless drive for modern innovation. This book, "A History of Bandung," traces the evolution of the city from its earliest formation to its contemporary position as a creative, technological, and educational powerhouse.

The land that would become Bandung has been inhabited for millennia, as evidenced by traces of early humans along the banks of the Cikapundung River and the remnants of an ancient volcano-bound lake. In pre-colonial times, the area formed a vital part of the powerful Sunda Kingdom, before coming under the influence of the Mataram Kingdom in the 17th century. Flood-prone lowlands and strategic moves by local rulers set the stage for the city's eventual foundation at its present location—at the site of holy wells, now the city's bustling central square.

Colonial rule dramatically transformed Bandung. The Dutch, drawn by the rich volcanic soil and strategic location, established Bandung as a center for plantations, administration, and leisure. The construction of the Great Post Road (De Groote Postweg) in the early 19th century, rail links, and burgeoning plantations all catalyzed the city's growth, while elegant Art Deco architecture and a cosmopolitan lifestyle earned Bandung the sobriquet "Parijs van Java." These changes were underpinned by significant social transformations, including the establishment of schools, infrastructure, and an administrative apparatus that reshaped local society.

Bandung emerged as a flashpoint during Indonesia's struggle for independence. The burning of the city during the "Bandung Lautan Api" in 1946 was a powerful symbol of sacrifice in the name of freedom and became etched into national memory. In the new republic, Bandung became the heartbeat of West Java, hosting the epochal Asian-African Conference in 1955 and affirming its place in global history as a site where the spirit of decolonization and international solidarity was kindled.

Yet Bandung's story is more than the sum of wars, conferences, and colonial buildings. It is the story of Sundanese culture and creativity, of transformation through education and innovative industry, and of a city continually reinventing itself amid the successes and challenges of urban life. While rapid growth has brought issues common to modern metropolises—overpopulation, environmental concerns, and pressures on infrastructure—Bandung's remarkable adaptability and creative vitality continue to define its identity.

This book is both a chronicle and a celebration of Bandung. From its geological roots to its hopes for a “smart” and sustainable urban future, "A History of Bandung" offers a panoramic journey through time, highlighting the city’s enduring spirit and its importance to Indonesia and the world beyond.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Land Before Bandung: Geography and Early Human Settlement**

Long before the first stones were laid for a modern city, the land that would become Bandung was shaped by colossal geological forces and inhabited by life forms far removed from the hustle and bustle of today. Situated in the heart of the Parahyangan highlands of West Java, the region is a vast, fertile basin cradled by a ring of volcanic mountains. This dramatic topography is no mere backdrop; it is the very foundation upon which Bandung's history is built. The basin itself is an ellipse stretching approximately 60 kilometers east to west and 40 kilometers north to south.

The story of the Bandung basin's formation is a tale written in fire and time, a dramatic episode in the Earth's history. Millions of years ago, during the Miocene period, parts of the northern Bandung area lay beneath a sea, leaving behind coral fossils that now form limestone ridges like those found in Padalarang. But the true architect of the basin was volcanic activity. Around 2 million years ago, a massive ancient volcano, Mount Sunda, is believed to have towered over the landscape, perhaps reaching heights of around 3,000 meters.

Mount Sunda's story is one of explosive power. Over vast timescales, cataclysmic eruptions occurred, fundamentally altering the topography. One particularly violent eruption, estimated to have taken place between 126,000 and 20,000 BCE during the Pleistocene epoch, caused the collapse of the ancient Sunda mountain and led to the formation of a caldera. This event was so significant that it blocked the course of the ancient Citarum River, turning the low-lying basin into a massive prehistoric lake.

This vast body of water, sometimes referred to as "the Great Prehistoric Lake of Bandung," transformed the basin into an enormous inland sea. The lake is believed to have existed for tens of thousands of years, accumulating layers of sediment – fine clays, silts, and sands – that now lie deep beneath the modern city. These ancient lakebed deposits, known geologically as the Kosambi Formation, are a defining characteristic of the basin's subsurface.

Life around such a lake would have been abundant. The fertile volcanic soils, constantly replenished by ash, supported lush vegetation. The lake itself would have teemed with aquatic life, and the surrounding forests and grasslands provided habitat for a variety of animals. It was into this rich environment that early human species ventured, drawn by the availability of water, food, and shelter.

Archaeological evidence unearthed over the years confirms the presence of early

humans in the Bandung area long before any written records were made. Findings suggest that hominin species, specifically *Homo erectus*, inhabited the banks of the Cikapundung River and the shores of this ancient lake. The Cikapundung, a vital artery flowing through the basin, would have been a crucial water source and a corridor for movement.

The discovery of tools, particularly obsidian artifacts, in areas like Upper Dago and around Padalarang provides tangible links to these ancient inhabitants. These stone tools, often found at elevations suggesting the former shoreline of the prehistoric lake, indicate that these early humans were interacting with and utilizing the resources of this unique environment. Obsidian, a volcanic glass, would have been a valuable material for crafting sharp edges for cutting and hunting.

While fossil remains of *Homo erectus* are more famously associated with sites like Trinil, Sangiran, and Ngandong on Java, recent discoveries in the now-submerged lowlands of Sundaland (an area that connected Java to the Asian mainland during periods of lower sea level) also include *Homo erectus* skull fragments and other vertebrate fossils, some housed at the Geological Museum in Bandung. These finds provide a broader picture of *Homo erectus* dispersal and their adaptation to different environments, including the riverine lowlands adjacent to volcanic highlands like the Bandung area.

Imagine these early inhabitants navigating a landscape dramatically different from today's urban sprawl. Vast forests covered the mountain slopes, and the flat basin floor was dominated first by a grand lake and later, as the lake gradually drained around 18,000 BCE, by a swampy plain crisscrossed by rivers. The draining of the lake, perhaps due to geological activity or gradual erosion of the natural dam, marked another significant transition in the basin's history.

Life for *Homo erectus* here would have been a constant engagement with the natural world. Hunting game in the forests, gathering edible plants and fruits from the fertile lowlands, and utilizing the resources of the rivers and the shrinking lake would have been central to their survival. The presence of cut marks on animal bones found in some archaeological contexts suggests active hunting and processing of food.

While definitive details of their daily lives remain largely speculative, the archaeological remnants paint a picture of resilient early humans adapting to a dynamic environment shaped by powerful geological forces. They were the first custodians, albeit unknowingly, of this remarkable basin, their presence a faint whisper in the deep past of the land that would one day become Bandung. The passage of countless millennia between these early inhabitants and the first recorded history around 1488 remains largely a mystery, a vast expanse of time where the land continued to evolve, waiting for the next chapters of its story to unfold.

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