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A Concise History Of The Armenian People From Ancient Times To The Present

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Introduction: A Story of Survival and Identity

The history of the Armenian people is one of the most remarkable and enduring narratives in human civilization. Stretching back over three millennia, it is a story woven with threads of profound cultural achievement, devastating tragedy, and an unyielding will to survive. To understand the Armenian people today, both within the borders of the modern Republic of Armenia and within the vast global diaspora, one must journey through their ancient past. This article provides **A Concise History Of The Armenian People From Ancient Times To The Present** , exploring the key epochs that have shaped their unique national identity, language, and faith. From the highlands of the Caucasus to the halls of power in medieval Europe and the challenges of the modern world, the Armenian journey is a testament to resilience.

The Cradle of Civilization: The Armenian Highlands

The story begins not with a single event, but with a place. The Armenian Highlands, a mountainous region spanning parts of modern-day Turkey, Armenia, Iran, and Azerbaijan, have been inhabited since the Stone Age. This geography is central to **A Concise History Of The Armenian People From Ancient Times To The Present**, as it provided both a natural fortress and a crossroads for empires. The region is traditionally considered the location of the Garden of Eden by some ancient texts, and it was here that the first identifiable proto-Armenian cultures began to emerge. The Bronze Age witnessed the rise of the Hayasa-Azzi confederation and the kingdom of Urartu (also known as the Kingdom of Van), which flourished between the 9th and 6th centuries BCE. The Urartian civilization, with its advanced irrigation systems, fortresses, and cuneiform inscriptions, laid a foundational layer of statehood and culture in the land that would become Armenia.

The Rise and Fall of Classical Kingdoms

The Orontid Dynasty and the Satrapy of Armenia

Following the collapse of the Urartian kingdom, the region fell under the sway of the Median and then the Achaemenid Persian Empires. Under Persian rule, the territory was organized into a satrapy (province) called Armenia. The local ruling dynasty, the Orontids (Yervanduni), governed this satrapy, preserving a distinct Armenian identity while absorbing Persian administrative and cultural influences. This period, spanning from the 6th to the 4th centuries BCE, is considered the direct precursor to the first unified Armenian state. The Orontids established a hereditary line that would bridge the gap between the ancient world and the Hellenistic era, setting the stage for a more powerful Armenian kingdom.

The Artaxiad Dynasty and the Empire of Tigran the Great

The most glorious chapter of ancient Armenian history began with the rise of the Artaxiad (Artashesian) dynasty in 190 BCE. Declaring independence from the fading Seleucid Empire, King Artashes I founded a new capital at Artashat, on the banks of the Araxes River. However, it was his descendant, **Tigranes II the Great** (reigned 95–55 BCE), who transformed Armenia into a regional superpower. At its zenith, the empire of Tigran the Great stretched from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean, encompassing parts of modern Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Tigran founded a new capital, Tigranakert, which became a vibrant center of Hellenistic culture. This era was a high-water mark in **A Concise History Of The Armenian People From Ancient Times To The Present** , demonstrating Armenian military and political power on a grand scale. However, this golden age was short-lived. Rome, under Lucullus and later Pompey, saw Tigran's power as a threat. After a series of conflicts, Tigran was forced to submit to Rome, becoming a client king and ceding vast territories. Armenia was now caught in the relentless geopolitical struggle between Rome and Parthia.

The Arsacid Dynasty and the Adoption of Christianity

The struggle between Rome and Parthia (and later the Sassanid Empire) defined Armenia for the next four centuries. The native Arsacid (Arshakuni) dynasty, a branch of the Parthian royal house, came to power in 54 CE. Armenia became a buffer state, a kingdom fought over and partitioned between East and West. Despite this precarious existence, the Arsacid period ushered in the most transformative event in Armenian history: the adoption of Christianity as the state religion.

In the early 4th century (traditionally dated to 301 CE), King Tiridates III, under the influence of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, declared Armenia the first nation in the world to officially adopt Christianity. This decision was not merely spiritual; it was a profound political and cultural act. By embracing a religion distinct from both the Zoroastrianism of Persia and the paganism of Rome, Armenia forged a unique and powerful national identity that would prove to be its greatest shield and unifying force for centuries to come. This event is a cornerstone of **A Concise History Of The Armenian People From Ancient Times To The Present** .

The Medieval Crucible: Bagratids, Cilicians, and the Crossroads of Empires

The Golden Age: The Bagratid Kingdom of Armenia

After centuries of Arab and Persian domination following the fall of the Arsacids, the Armenian people re-established their sovereignty with the rise of the Bagratid (Bagratuni) dynasty in the 9th century. King Ashot I the Great was recognized as King of Armenia by both the Byzantine and Arab caliphates in 885 CE. The capital was established at the magnificent city of Ani, known as the "City of 1,001 Churches." This was a true golden age of Armenian culture, a period of remarkable architectural, literary, and theological achievement. The great historian Movses Khorenatsi (Moses of Choren) wrote his seminal "History of Armenia" during this era, and the distinctive cross-stones known as *khachkars*became a unique art form. The Bagratid kingdom, however, could not withstand the new threat emerging from the east: the Seljuk Turks. In 1064, Ani was sacked, and Armenian political independence in the highlands was extinguished for centuries.

The Kingdom of Cilicia and the Crusader Connection

While the homeland was under foreign rule, a new Armenian state emerged on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea: the Kingdom of Cilician Armenia (1080–1375). Founded by the Rubenid dynasty, a branch of the Bagratids, this kingdom was a unique hybrid. Geographically separated from the highlands, Cilicia developed a distinct culture that was deeply influenced by its interactions with the Crusader states, the Byzantine Empire, and European trading powers such as Genoa and Venice. The Cilician Armenians were crucial allies of the Crusaders, and their kingdom became a bridge between East and West. It was during this

period that the Catholicosate of the Armenian Church moved to Sis (in Cilicia). The Cilician kingdom also produced a rich tradition of illuminated manuscripts and legal codes. Ultimately, the kingdom fell to the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt in 1375, but it left an indelible mark on the Armenian national consciousness as a symbol of resilience and international engagement.

Dark Centuries: Ottoman, Persian, and Russian Rule

Life Under the Ottoman and Persian Empires

For the next four centuries, the Armenian homeland was divided between the Ottoman Empire (in the west) and the Safavid Persian Empire (in the east). This period, a central part of **A Concise History Of The Armenian People From Ancient Times To The Present** , was one of endurance. Armenians were treated as *dhimmi* (second-class citizens) under Islamic law, facing heavy taxation and periodic persecution. Yet, they persevered. Many Armenians became successful merchants, bankers, and artisans. A distinct and influential Armenian mercantile class, centered in Constantinople (Istanbul) and the towns of Anatolia, emerged. In the Persian Empire, the forced relocation of Armenians by Shah Abbas I in 1604 created a vibrant community in New Julfa (Isfahan), which became a hub for global trade.

Despite their economic importance, Armenian communities were vulnerable. The Armenian Apostolic Church remained the central institution of national life, preserving the language, liturgy, and identity. This period also saw the rise of the *millet* system in the Ottoman Empire, where religious communities were granted a degree of autonomy. The Armenian *millet*was led by the Patriarch in Constantinople, who held significant authority over civil and religious affairs. This system, while providing some stability, also reinforced the second-class status of Armenians and set the stage for future conflict.

The Armenian National Awakening

The 19th century witnessed a powerful national awakening among Armenians. Influenced by European nationalism and the Enlightenment, Armenian intellectuals in Constantinople, Moscow, and Venice began a revival of the classical Armenian language (*Grabar*) and the development of a modern, standardized literary language (*Ashkharhabar*). This period saw the establishment of Armenian schools, newspapers, and political societies. The goal was clear: to revitalize Armenian culture and to seek political rights and autonomy within the decaying Ottoman Empire and the expanding Russian Empire. The Russian Empire, which had annexed Eastern Armenia from Persia in the early 19th century, provided a more stable environment for cultural development, though it was also a place of increasing Russification pressure.

The Catastrophe: The Armenian Genocide

The early 20th century brought the most profound tragedy in the long history of the Armenian people: the Armenian Genocide. During World War I, the ruling Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire, driven by a pan-Turkic ideology and viewing the Armenian population as a potential enemy within, orchestrated a systematic campaign of extermination. Beginning on April 24, 1915, with the arrest and execution of hundreds of Armenian intellectuals and community leaders in Constantinople, the genocide involved mass deportations, death marches into the Syrian desert, and outright massacres. It is estimated that 1.5 million Armenians were killed.

The trauma of the Armenian Genocide is a defining experience in **A Concise History Of The Armenian People From Ancient Times To The Present** . It resulted in the near-total destruction of the Armenian population in its ancient homeland. Hundreds of thousands of survivors fled to all corners of the world, creating a vast and influential diaspora. The genocide remains a highly contested historical issue due to Turkey's official denial, and it is a central element of modern Armenian national identity, focused on recognition, justice, and remembrance.

The Soviet Era and the First Republic

In the immediate aftermath of World War I and the collapse of the Russian and Ottoman Empires, a brief window of independence opened. The First Republic of Armenia was declared on May 28, 1918, in the small town of Sardarapat, where Armenian forces had miraculously defeated an advancing Ottoman army. This republic was a short-lived but powerful symbol of national self-determination. However, it was eventually overwhelmed by the advancing Red Army and, in 1920, was incorporated into the Soviet Union, becoming the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.

For the next 70 years, Soviet Armenia was a separate, defined republic, a situation that paradoxically preserved a degree of national territory and identity. Under Soviet rule, Armenia underwent rapid industrialization and urbanization. Yerevan, the capital, was transformed from a small provincial town into a major city. However, this came at a great cost. The Soviet regime brutally suppressed the Armenian Apostolic Church, enforced collectivization, and imposed a rigid Communist ideology. The memory of the genocide was also suppressed, as Soviet policy sought to maintain good relations with Turkey. The Nagorno-Karabakh issue, a predominantly Armenian-populated region within Soviet Azerbaijan, was also a festering source of tension.

The Present: Independence, Challenges, and Diaspora

The Third Republic and the Karabakh Conflict

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 allowed Armenia to once again declare independence. The modern Republic of Armenia is a direct successor to the First Republic. However, independence was immediately followed by a devastating war with Azerbaijan over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh). The war from 1991-1994 ended in a military victory for Armenian forces, who secured control over

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