

Eastern Turkey: A Historical Introduction

Eastern Turkey: A Historical Introduction

Eastern Turkey, the land beyond the Upper Euphrates, stands in stark contrast to better-known Turkish Mediterranean fringe. A ruggedly alluring land, Eastern Turkey has a cultural landscape that is as impressive as it is diverse. This tour commences in Gaziantep, where we begin a trek through the 'wild east'. We shall explore virtually every aspect of Eastern Turkey's rich heritage, from the striking symbolism of its Neolithic past through the formidable achievements of its little known Urartian Kingdom to the decadent years of Ottomans. Geographically, the physical regions we will cross are as dramatic as the cultures they sustained. Starting in the sun-baked expanses of the Mesopotamian Plains (that once formed part of the 'Fertile Crescent'), we will head north, climbing into the eastern highlands. Along the way the tour will visit the lofty peaks of the Taurus Mountains where Nemrut Dagh - mountain of the gods - one of Turkey's most important sites, is situated. From there we will follow several natural corridors that carve through the mountainous terrain and position ourselves for several days in a region that served as the Silk Road's entry point into Turkey. Here, at the very frontier of Anatolia, the tour will include visits to a number of sites and also take us past Mount Ararat, another daunting symbol of the East, which signals the beginning of a vastly different landscape, that of ancient volcanoes. From these easternmost regions the tour we head inland past Erzurum, with its superb Seljuk architecture, and cross over the wooded Pontic Mountains, journeying down to the cool and misty Black Sea littoral, home of the (Byzantine) Trapezuntine Empire.

Historical Overview

Asiatic Turkey or Anatolia is formed of a central plateau fringed by mountain ranges that slope down to the Black Sea in the north and the Mediterranean in the south. The eastern part of Anatolia is dominated by the Taurus Mountains, a series of mountain chains interspersed with lakes that divide the Anatolian plateau to the west from Mesopotamia to the east and then sweep northwards to join the Caucasus. This striking region is the source of the Tigris and Euphrates and hence a land invested with mythical significance by the earliest inhabitants of the Near East. Historically, the mountains of Eastern Anatolia have functioned as a frontier zone, sheltering peoples seeking refuge from imperial powers in Mesopotamia, Central Anatolia, and the Mediterranean. They also provided nomadic peoples from Central Asia with a route, albeit arduous, westwards.

The earliest Indo European speakers to dominate Eastern Anatolia were the Hittites, who founded a mighty empire to the west of the Taurus Mountains during the middle of the second millennium BCE. The Hittite superpower was capable of fighting the Egyptians to a standstill (famously at Kadesh in modern Syria in 1274 BCE) and successfully dominated a cluster of small Hurrian city states that squatted the Lake Van hinterlands, sending tribute west to the great Hittite capital in the form of iron ore and worked weapons, while trading surplus copper and manpower south and East to their kith and kin kingdoms of Mitanni and Urartu. The latter kingdom is recorded in the Bible as Ararat and famously lent its name to the mountain sanctuary of Noah, while proudly a symbol of Armenian identity into the modern era. Urartu successfully fought off the predations of mighty Assyria and famously had her bloody revenge in alliance with Babylon and the Medes of North western modern Iran in 612 BCE, as gleefully recorded in the Old Testament Book of Nahum. Later Hurrian successor states to Urartu traded alike with the Phrygian and Lydian kingdoms of Western Anatolia and the heaving Phoenecian city states of Tyre, Sidon and Byblos to the south, while successfully repelling predatory incursions fainting their mountain fastness. With the

meteor-like eruption of Alexander the Great through the Persian Satrapies of Anatolia in 334/333 BCE, subject peoples of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, including the Armenians, grabbed the opportunity for independence before being subject to the Hellenistic successor states of the Seleucids and Antigonids. Chaos and war between these Greek kingdoms at the end of the first millennium BCE offered opportunity for the pastoralist ancestors of modern Kurdish speaking peoples who settled the high valleys of Eastern Turkey where they have remained a fixture for the last two thousand years.

During the Seleucid period, Armenia, neighbouring Cappadocia and Commagene became part of the Greek commercial and cultural sphere, and when the Romans pushed the Seleucids aside they became vassal states of the Roman Empire. In the 1st century AD Trajan imposed direct rule on Eastern Anatolia. Although Roman legions struggled to retain control over the region and prevent its takeover by the Persian Sasanians, Christianity made great inroads laying the foundations for a regional flowering of Byzantine and Armenian Christian culture. In the 7th century AD the Arabo-Muslim conquest of the Near East transformed Eastern Anatolia into a frontier zone between the Byzantine and Muslim spheres. Although Arab armies could do no more than raid across the Taurus Mountains, a variety of nomadic Muslim peoples, including Arab Bedouin, Kurds, and Oghuz Turks, began to push into the region, founding small Muslim principalities such as Diyarbakir and Mardin that added a new layer to the culture of Eastern Anatolia.

A crucial moment in the Muslim migration west was the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 when the Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantines and moved across the Taurus Mountains to establish the Seljuk sultanate of Rum. This triggered a Byzantine appeal to Europe for assistance and the First Crusade that led to the creation of the principality of Edessa and temporary Frankish usurpation of Armenian sovereignty. In succeeding centuries the Turkification of Anatolia proceeded, sweeping around Christian Armenia and in time reaching the gates of Constantinople. As the Turks moved west they carried with them the art, architecture and nomadic culture of Eastern Anatolia which was eventually amalgamated with the imperial Byzantine tradition in the Ottoman transformation of Constantinople into Istanbul.

During the Ottoman period, Eastern Anatolia served as the marches between the Ottomans and the Safavids of Iran, a dynasty of Turcoman origin who considered Eastern Anatolia the natural heart of their state, but were forced south-eastwards into Iran by the Ottomans. It also remained a refuge for the Armenians and the Kurds, who preferred holding to their mountain fastnesses to losing their independence to the central Ottoman or Safavid governments. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, economic rivalry between the sedentary Armenians and the pastoral Kurds, and the expansion of Russia through the Caucasus heralded a turbulent period in the history of Eastern Anatolia. In 1923 it became part of the new state of Turkey, the final political expression of the Turkification of the region, symbolised by the establishment of a new capital at Ankara at the centre of the Anatolian plateau. Eastern Anatolia nonetheless retained its diversity and preserved the traces of the many cultures and civilisations that have sheltered within the confines of the Taurus or passed through them.