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## Laz

The **Laz** (self-designation, *Lazi*) are an ethnic group concentrated in the south-eastern corner of the Black Sea, in the Turkish provinces of Artvin and Rize. A minority lives on the Georgian side of the modern state border. The Laz in northeast Turkey share space with neighbouring groups, including ethnic Turks, Hemshin, and Georgians. Together with Mingrelian, Georgian, and Svan, their language (*Lazuri*) belongs to the South-Caucasian family. Migrants from the northeast (today's southern Abkhazia), *Lazuri* speakers settled in their present homeland in antiquity. It is difficult to gauge the demographic situation of the Laz today since they lack recognition as an ethnic minority and no official statistics are available. Unofficial population estimates for the second half of the twentieth century range from 90,000 (Benninghaus, 176) to 250,000 (Feurstein, 206), while ethno-nationalists quote still higher figures. Political considerations aside, figures depend on the criteria used for assessment, such as fluency in *Lazuri* or emotional identification. The situation is further

complicated by patterns of intermarriage with neighbouring groups and by the tendency to apply the designation "Laz" and a range of associated stereotypes to a much broader region, including most of Turkey's Black Sea coast. The "real Laz" are located between the villages of Melyat (in the district of Pazar) and Sarp (a border village). Little is known about the earliest history of the region and its peoples. The myth of Jason and the Argonauts who travelled to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece may have referred to the early Georgian polity of *Kolkheti* (western Georgia) which incorporated *Lazica*, a kingdom which in the sixth century C.E. played a decisive role in the wars between Persia and Byzantium. Following the arrival of the Arabs in the seventh century, the Laz relocated within the borders of Byzantium and embraced Christianity. By the thirteenth century *Lazica* was part of the Trapezuntine Empire. Following the Ottoman conquest, the Laz gave up their orthodox Christian faith in favour of Sunni Islam. Thus, "the history of the Laz after the 7<sup>th</sup> century is that of a Byzantinized and now Turkicized minority" (Byrer, 178).