LAZ, a people of South Caucasian stock (Iberic, “Georgian”) now dwelling in the southeastern corner of the shores of the Black Sea, in the region called in Ottoman times Lazistân.

1. History and geography

The ancient history of the Laz is complicated by the uncertainty which reigns in the ethnical nomenclature of the Caucasus generally; the same names in the course of centuries are applied to different units (or groups). The fact that the name Phasis was applied to the Rion, to the Čorokh (the ancient Akampsis), and even to the sources of the Araxes, also creates difficulties.

The earliest Greek writers do not mention the Laz. The name Λαζοί, Λα mktimei is only found after the Christian era (Pliny, *Nat. hist.*, iv, 4; *Periplus of Arrian*, xi, 2; Ptolemy, v, 9, 5). The oldest known settlement of the Lazoi is the town of Lazos or “old Lazik” which Arrian puts 680 stadia (about 80 miles) south of the Sacred Port (Novorossiisk) and 1,020 stadia (100 miles) north of Pityus, i.e. somewhere in the neighbourhood of Tuapse. Kiessling sees in the Lazoi a section of the Kerketai, who in the first centuries of the Christian era had to migrate southwards under pressure from the Zygoi (i.e. the Čerkes [q.v.] who call themselves Adighe (Adzighë); the same author regards the Kerketai as a “Georgian” tribe. The fact is that at the time of Arrian (2nd century A.D.), the Lazoi were already living to the south of Sukhum. The order of the peoples living along the coast to the east of Trebizond was as follows: Colchi (and Sanni); Machelones; Heniochi; Zydrite; Lazai (Λα mktimei), subjects of King Malassus, who owned the suzerainty of Rome; Apsilae; Abaci [cf. abkhaz]; Sanigae near Sebastopolis (= Sukhum).

During the centuries following, the Laz gained so much in importance that the whole of the ancient Colchis had been renamed Lazica (Anonymous *Periplus*, *Fragm. hist. graec.*, v, 180). According to Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, ch. 53, in the time of Diocletian (284-303), the king of the Bosporus, Sauromatus, invaded the land of the Lazoi and reached Halys (N. Marr explained this last name by the Laz word meaning “river”). Among the peoples subject to the Laz, Procopius (*Bell. Got.*, iv, 2, 3) mentions the Abasgoi and the people of Suania and Skymnia (= Lechkum). It is probable that the name Lazica referred to the most powerful element and covered a confederation of several tribes. The Laz were converted to Christianity about the beginning of the 6th century. “In the desert of Jerusalem” Justinian (527-65) restored a Laz temple (Procopius, *De aedificis*, v, 9), which must have been in existence for some time before this. The Laz also sent bishops to their neighbours (Procopius, *Bell. Got.*, iv, 2). In Colchis the Laz were under the suzerainty of the Roman emperors, who gave investiture to their kings, and the latter had to guard the western
passes of the Caucasus against invasions by the nomads from the north. On the other hand, the monopolistic tendencies of the commerce of Rome provoked discontent among the people of Colchis. In 458 King Gobazes sought the help of the Sāsānid Yazdagird II against the Romans. Between 539 and 562 Lazica was the scene of the celebrated struggle between Byzantium under Justinian and Persia under Khūsraw I Anūshirwān.

According to Procopius, who accompanied Belisarius on his expeditions, the Laz occupied both banks of the Phasis, but their towns (Archaeopolis, Sebastopolis, Pitius, Skanda, Sarapanis, Rhodopolis, Mochoresis) all lay to the north of the river, while on the left bank, which was desert land, the lands of the Laz only stretched for a day's march to the south. Nearer to Trebizond were the “Roman Pontics”, which only means that the inhabitants were direct subjects of the Roman emperor and not of the Laz kings; from the ethnic point of view, the “Roman Pontics” could not have been different from the Laz. This strip of shore continued longest to shelter the remnants of the Laz.

In 1204 with the aid of troops lent by queen Thamar of Georgia, Alexis Comnenus founded the empire of Trebizond, the history of which is very closely connected with that of the southern Caucasus. Nicephoros (v. 7) says that the founder of the dynasty had seized “the lands of Colchis and of the Lazes”. In 1282 John Comnenus received the title of “Emperor of the East, of Ivoria and of the lands beyond the sea”. In 1341 the princess Anna Anakhutlu ascended the throne with the help of the Laz. The lands directly under the authority of the emperors of Trebizond seem to have extended as far as Makriali, while Gonia was under a local dynasty (cf. the Chronicle of Panaretos, under the year 1376).

In 865/1461 the Ottoman Sultan Meḥmed II conquered Trebizond, and as a result the Laz came into contact with Islam, which became their religion in the form of the Shāfi ‘ī madhhab. The stages of their conversion are still unknown. The fact is that, even in the central regions of Georgia (Akhaltsikhe), Islam seems to have gained ground gradually from the 13th century onwards (N. Marr, in Bull. of the Acad. of St. Petersburg [1917], 415-46, 478-506).

In 926/1519 Trebizond, with Batum, was made a separate eyālet. According to Ewliyā Čelebi, who went through this region in 1050/1640, the five sandjak s of the eyālet were: Djanikha (Djianlk = Samsun?), Trebizond, Gūniya (Gonia) and Lower and Upper Batum. The modern Lazistān was governed from Gonia, for among the kadā’s of this fortress we find Atina, Sumla, Witce/Biče (= Witse) and Arkhawīf (Ewliyā and the version of the Djihān-nūmā in Fallmerayer, Original-Fragmente, in Abh. d. Bayer. Akad. [1846]). Ḥādijī Khalfīfa and Ewliyā Čelebi, deceived by the similarity in sound of Caucasian names (as also was Vivien de St. Martin), proposed a theory of the identity of the name Lezgi and Laz. Ewliyā calls Trebizond the “former Lezgi wilāyet”. Ḥādijī Khalfīfa, after enumerating the peoples of the district of Lezgi as Mingrelians (Megril), Georgians, Abkhaz (Abaza), Čerkes and Laz, adds that the latter are those who live nearest to Trebizond. To the
south-east of Trebizond in the Çepni mountains he mentions the Turks who “worship as their God (ma‘bud) the Șāh of Persia (i.e. are extreme Șī‘īs) and are associated (muṣḥtarīk) with the Laz”. Hādīdī Khalfā and Ewliyā do not agree on the number of the fiefs of Trebizond; Ewliyā only says that the value of the eyālet has depreciated through the unruliness of many of its 41 nāhiye s (Djihānnāmā, 429; Ewliyā, ii, 81, 83-5).

The first serious blow to the feudal independence of the derebey of Lazistān was only struck at the beginning of the 19th century by the Ottoman Pasha of Trebizond; but Koch, who visited the country after his expedition, still found most of the hereditary derebey s in power, although shorn of some of their liberties. He counted fifteen of them: Atina (two), Bulep, Artashin, Witse, Kapiste, Arkhawe, Kisse, Kháopa, Makria (Makriali), Gonia, Batum, Maradit (Maradidi?), Perlewan and Çat. The lands of the three latter lay, however, on the Çorokh behind the mountains separating this valley from the river of Lazistān in the strict sense. On the other hand, among the derebey s of Lazistān was the lord of Hamşhin, i.e. of the upper valleys of Kalopotamos and of Fortuna, inhabited by Muslim Armenians. According to the Armenian historian Levond, tr. Chahnazarian, Paris 1826, 162, the latter with their chief Hamam of the Amatuni family had settled in the district in the time of Constantine VI (780-97) (the old Tambur was given the name Hamşhin < Hamamschen, “built by Hamam”). It is evidently this region that Clavijo (1403-6), ed. Sreznewski, St. Petersburg 1881, 383, calls “tierra de Arraquiel”. He adds that the people, dissatisfied with their king Arraquiel (Arakel?), submitted to the Muslim ruler of Ispir. The Hamşhin are now Muslims, and only those of Kháopa have not forgotten Armenian. A Hamşhin lexicon was published by Kipsidze.

With the institution of the wilāyets, the sandjak of Lazistān became part of the wilāyet of Trebizond. Its capital was at first Batum but, after the Russian occupation of Batum in 1878, the administration of the sandjak was transferred to Rize (Rhizaion), detached for this purpose from the old central sandjak of Trebizond. That part of Lazistān lying to the west of the Ottoman-Russian frontier occupied a strip of coast 100 miles long and 15 to 20 miles broad. The kādā‘s of the sandjak were: Kháopa, Atina and Rize, subdivided again into 6 nāhiye s (Sāmī-Bey, ǧamūs al-‘lam, v, 3966). Cuinet, La Turquie d’Asie, i, 118-21, mentions Of as a fourth kādā‘ and gives 8 (7) nāhiye s (Hamşhin, Karadere, MMapawri, Waḵf, Kurā-ye sab’a, Witse, Arḵawi). In 1880 there were in the sandjak 364 inhabited places with 138,467 inhabitants, of whom 689 were Orthodox Greeks and the rest Muslims (Laz, Turkicised Laz, Turks and “Hamşhin”). The number of true Laz cannot be more than half the total population.

The term Laz is used in the west of Turkey to designate generally the people of the country round the south-east of the Black Sea, but in reality the people calling themselves by this name and speaking the Laz language now live in the two kādā‘ s, modern ilçes: Kháopa (between Kopmush and Gurup) and Atina (between Gurup and Kemer). Laz is spoken in 64 of the 69 villages of the kādā‘ or
ilçe of Atina. To these should be added the very few Laz who used to live in Russian territory to the south of Batum. These Laz were incorporated in Turkey by virtue of the Turco-Soviet treaty of 16 March 1921, which moved the Turkish frontier to Sarp (to the south of the mouth of the Čorokh). Rize and Batum are now outside the Laz country proper.

Due to its remoteness and to its proximity to the Russian frontier, Lazistān has only been marginally affected by the modernisation of Turkey in recent years. Communications are poor, and roads largely unmade. The ancient port of Hopa, which is the end of the line for passenger and mail steamers from Istanbul, has been equipped with a modern harbour which includes two massive artificial moles. At Sarp, which is only about 10 miles from the important Soviet port of Batum, there is a flourishing tea factory surrounded by the highly-productive plantations of this bush.

The Laz have traditionally been regarded as very conservative in their Islamic religion, and the old Turkish shadow theatre (Karagöz [q.v.]) and popular theatre (Orta oyunu [q.v.]) often portrayed the Laz as slow-witted rustics; a Turkish proverb stated that “a Muslim does not eat Laz jelly”, Lazların termonu müsülman yemez onu (termoni < Greek θέρηος). In fact, despite a long-established reputation for brigandage and for smuggling goods across the Turco-Russian frontier, the modern Laz are highly intelligent. They are skilled tillers of the soil, and were in the past often to be found in the towns of eastern Turkey as gardeners. Today they are to be found in towns all over Turkey in their traditional calling of bakers and pastrycooks; before the First World War many Laz went to Russia to work as bakers, and often returned with Russian wives who became converts to Islam. They are shrewd and enterprising businessmen, and have secured a large portion of the real estate market in Istanbul. When modern educational opportunities are available to them, they readily respond to this stimulus. They are also excellent sailors, and form a large proportion of the crews of many Turkish vessels.

2. Language

The Laz language is closely connected with Mingrelian (which is a sister language of Georgian), but N. Y. Marr found in it sufficient peculiarities to consider it a Mingrelian language rather than a dialect. In the Lazo-Mingrelian group he believed that he could find resemblances to the more Indo-European elements in old Armenian (Grabar). There are two Laz languages, eastern, and western with smaller subdivisions (the language of the Čkhala). Laz is very full of Turkish words. It has no written literature, but there are local poets (Rashid Ḥilmi, Pehliwān-oghlu, etc.). The Laz are forgetting their own language, which is being replaced by the Turkish patois of Trebizond (cf. Pisarev in Zapiski VOIRAO [1901], xiii, 173-201), in which the harmony of the vowels is much neglected (cf. a specimen in Marr, Teksti i raziskaniya, St. Petersburg, vii, 55).
The Georgians call the Laz Č’an, but the Laz do not know this name. “Č’an” is evidently the original of the Greek name Sannoi/Tzannoi, and it survives in the official name of the sandjak of Samsun (Ďjanîk). From the historical point of view, the separation of the Laz and Č’an seems to have taken place, in spite of the close relationship between the two of them. In the time of Arrian, the Sannoi were the immediate neighbours of Trebizond. In an obscure passage in this author (cf. the perplexed commentary of C. Müller, in Geogr. graeci minores, ad Arriani Peripl., 8), he places on the river of the frontier between the Colchians (Laz?) and the θυαννη (?). Koch mentions the interesting fact that the people of Of speak a “language of their own”, and according to Marr, the people of Khoshnishin (near Atina) speak an incomprehensible language. Procopius places the “Sannoi who are now called the Tzannoi” on the area adjoining the mountains separating Čorokh from the sea (the Parayadres range, the name of which survives in the modern Parkhar/Balkhar). Marr’s researches showed that the Č’an (Tzannoi) had at first occupied a larger area, including the basin of the Čorokh and its tributaries on the right bank, from which they were temporarily displaced by the Armenians and finally by the Georgians (K’art’li). The chronicles of Trebizond continue to distinguish the Laz from the Tzianids (ζιανίδες). The latter in alliance with the Muslims attacked the possessions of Trebizond in 1348, and in 1377 were punished by the Emperor. At this period the Tzianids must have been in the southwest of Trebizond (besides, the sandjak of Đjanîk is to the west of this port). Thus the Georgian application of the name Č’an to the Laz may be explained by the confusion of the two tribes one of whom (the true Č’an living to the south and west of the Laz) was ultimately thrust to the west of Trebizond.

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