

A History of Rize, Pontos

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Introduction

Rize is a town on the Black Sea coast, 80 km (by road) east of Trabzon in north-east Türkiye (Pontos) (Plate 1; Fig. 1) with an estimated population of 102,800 (2024, worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/rize-population). Population growth is low due to high migration (Başaran 2019).

The climate of Rize is subtropical, with warm summers and cool winters. Mean average annual rainfall is a high 2,300 mm which makes the province the wettest in Türkiye and its humidity is always over 75% (Abay et al. 2016). Tea, hazelnuts and tourism are important products of the province of Rize.

Rize is built on a narrow strip of flat land between the sea and the mountains. Rize's university was founded in 2006 and has 15,000 students (Turna 2015).



Plate 1: Rize on the Black Sea coast, north-east Türkiye, 2014
(commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rize_city_overhead.jpg)

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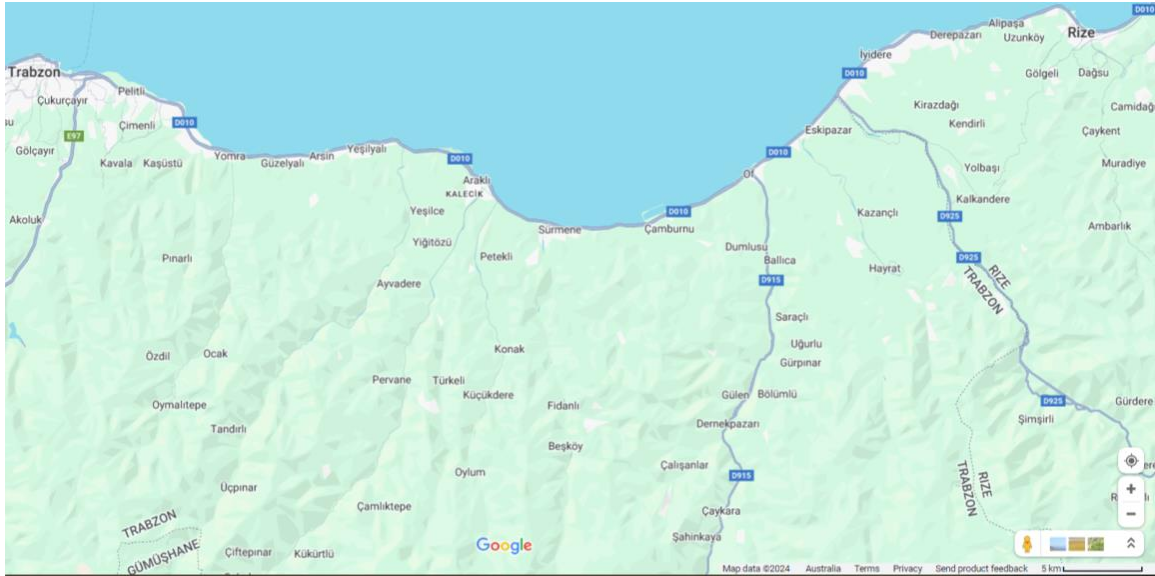


Fig. 1: Map of Trabzon to Rize, Black Sea coast, north-eastern Türkiye
(google.com.au/maps/@41.0315214,40.5054098,13z?entry=ttu)

History

The ancient Greeks established a colony at Rize sometime after 6th century BC, when the Greeks from the Black Sea port of Sinope had colonised Trabzon (400 km east of Sinope). A natural acropolis and relatively sheltered anchorage would have attracted the Greek colonists (Bryer and Winfield 1985). The Greeks probably had to remove any indigenous Anatolian natives at Rize.

Although the army of Alexander the Great (reign 336–323 BC) defeated the Persians in Anatolia, the Greeks did not march north to conquer the Black Sea coast. This area however, eventually accepted Greek authority (Şerifoğlu and Bakan 2015). In 302 BC, Mithradates I of Persian descent, established the kingdom of Pontos (Roller 2020). Mithradates and kings from the same family ruled over the area from west of Sinope east to Trabzon on the Black Sea coast until Mithradates VI was defeated by the Romans in 64 BC (Erciyas 2001). The kingdom of Mithradates VI which encompassed Pontos and other areas around the southern, eastern and north-eastern Black Sea were eventually absorbed within the Roman empire which then became part of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) empire.

For the Eastern Roman emperor Justinian I (6th century), Rize was of military importance and he overhauled its fortifications. Later, during the small Komnenoi Trebizond Byzantine empire (1204–1461), Rize was still important as an eastern frontier post. The Venetians were also active in Rize and had their own castle overlooking the bay (no trace remains) (Pugsley 2014:97). Rize also has a citadel which overlooks the town (Bryer and Winfield 1985) (see later).

In 1461, when Trabzon surrendered to Ottoman sultan Mehmed II, Rize soon came under Ottoman control and a period of Islamisation began. The late 15th century population of the Rize district had 2,063 Christian and only 162 Muslim households. Unlike central and western Pontos, the Greek population was unable to maintain its

Christian religion in the face of conversion in the 17th century (Bryer and Winfield 1985:331).

According to the Greek population in northern Anatolia census of 1910–1912, there were 1,424 Greeks in the county (*kaza*) of Rize (Alexandris 1999:64). Rize had two Greek churches [possibly destroyed by the Turks in early 1918]² and one Greek school (Chrysanthos 1933:795).

In 1914 (prior to entering World War I), the Ottoman Turks applied a boycott against Christian businesses. Many of the Christians in Rize decided to emigrate, because the local officials declared that unless they did so they would be massacred. The boycott was also enforced at Athina (Turkish Pazar, 40 km east of Rize on the Black Sea). Christians were forced to close their establishments and take refuge in Sürmene. The economic boycott also affected the Greek communities in Trabzon, Of (to the east of Trabzon) and other locations (Greek Patriarchate 1919:112).

From March 1916 to early 1918, Rize and north-east Anatolia was occupied by Russian forces. Prior to the Russian occupation, the Ottoman Turks had evacuated Rize and moved west, away from the Russian threat. Russian army officer, Sergei Mintslov, visited Rize en route to Trabzon in mid-1916 and was less than flattering of the small town.

I came upon the main, narrow and winding street; two-storey houses of typically Turkish construction had a gloomy appearance ... Coffee houses of the most wretched type, little shops and bakeries occupied the lower stories of the houses. The traders were exclusively Greek; there was not a trace of Turks. In somewhere near a quarter of an hour, I had walked around the whole town, making up in all, three horrible streets; heaps of our soldiers were to be seen everywhere (Mintslov 1923:25).

In late 1917 to very early 1918, Turkish bands attacked the country from Rize to Platana (west of Trabzon), destroying Greek villages and killing many Christians. Rize was destroyed and its habitants were compelled to emigrate to Russia. Churches, schools and houses were demolished. Out of [up to] 2,000 Greeks, only four remained in Rize. Chrysanthos (Greek Orthodox metropolitan of the Trabzon metropolitanate, which included the town of Rize), understood that the Turks were aiming to exterminate the Greeks. In January 1918, Chrysanthos wrote to Ottoman General Vehid Pasha notifying him of what the Turks were doing to the Christians. While he waited for assistance from the General, Chrysanthos distributed arms to Christians for their own protection. By this measure and the resistance offered, many areas were saved (Greek Patriarchate 1919:113–114).

From September 1922, after the defeat of the Greek army in western Anatolia in the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922), Greeks were pressured to leave Anatolia for Greece. The forced expulsion was finalised with the Exchange of Populations under the Lausanne Convention (signed in January 1923).

² Words within square brackets '[]' within a reference are the author's words.

Rize Today

Tea cultivation

The Rize province with its mountainous topography and climate is the main tea producing area in Türkiye. Much of the province is under tea cultivation with more than 200,000 families involved in the industry (Aylangan (2011) in Haq and Boz (2019). In 2019, Türkiye was the world's 5th largest producer of dry tea. Türkiye's tea producing areas were mainly in Rize (66%) and in Trabzon (20%) (Yildirim and Karaca 2022).

The [eastern] Black Sea region of Türkiye is a highly landslide-prone area, due to its steep topography and heavy precipitation. In the Rize region, every year from 1973 to 2010 there were casualties due to landslides. As the forests have been cleared and used for tea cultivation, the number of landslides has increased (Kasahara et al. 2022).

Feretiko (Rize Fabric)

Feretiko weaving is made up of 40% hemp fibre and 60% cotton. It has a silken appearance and absorbs sweat. It is made into dresses, table cloths, curtains and bed sheets (Birnaz 2018).

According to Cavus (2016), women in Rize have woven feretiko from hemp yarn on their handlooms for centuries. However, hemp cultivation decreased with the development of tea cultivation after the 1930s and by the 1960s the production of feretiko ceased. This handicraft regained importance after 2003 and has potential in the promotion of tourism in the province. Today, however, there are the following problems in its production:

- The fabric is not well-known.
- There are products incorrectly labelled as feretiko.
- Hemp yarn is imported and the quality varies. Local hemp cultivation and the establishment of facilities to obtain yarn are needed.

Tourism

Tourism is of great importance to the province with its valleys, mountains, lakes, historical arched bridges, castles and streams fostering mountaineering, white water sports, bird watching, caving, heli-skiing, cycling and gastronomy tourism. In 2019, just over one million tourists visited Rize—23% of whom came from abroad (Birnaz (2018); Başaran (2020)).

Rize is rich in handicraft like copper work, woodwork and basket weaving (www.rizekulturturizm.gov.tr 25/08/2010). Traditional food of the Rize region includes anchovies (hamsi), muhlama (slow-cooked corn flour, butter and cheese), haşıl (cooked with kavut flour) and Anzer honey (rize.goturkiye.com/taste).

Rize Castle

Located in the south-west of the town centre, the castle is built on an area of 480 m² on a 150 m hill (Plate 2). It consists of inner and lower castles. The inner castle has five towers, surrounded by walls and is believed to have been built under the reign of Eastern Roman emperor Justinian I (6th century). The lower castle was built in the 13th century (rize.goturkiye.com/see).



Plate 2: Rize Castle, north-east Türkiye (rize.goturkiye.com/see)

Zil Castle

Zil castle is located 15 km south of Rize, on the slopes of the Firtina River. The castle was built 100 m above the stream bed and comprises outer walls, middle walls and an inner citadel (Plate 3). The castle provided security for the region and the important medieval caravan route south-east to İspir. The castle was also used after the conquest of the Ottomans. The castle has undergone recent restoration (rize.goturkiye.com/see).



Plate 3: Zil Castle south of Rize, north-east Türkiye (rize.goturkiye.com/see)

Mataracı Mehmet Efendi Mansion

Built in 1921, the three-storey Mataracı Mehmet Efendi Mansion is located in the town centre (Plate 4). The Mataracı family donated the building to the Governor of Rize and it subsequently became a museum. The mansion was renovated in 1985 and exhibits ethnographic artefacts (rize.goturkiye.com/see).



Plate 4: Mataracı Mehmet Efendi mansion, Rize
(muze.gov.tr/s3/MysFileLibrary/90977714-760f-47c8-9829-827c86acdc41.pdf)

Rize Ethnographic Museum

The building is located in the town and was built in the 19th century with a basement and two floors. It is one of the best examples of civil architecture and in 1998 was turned into a museum (rize.goturkiye.com/see). The museum houses a collection of 1,179 artefacts (turkishmuseums.com/museum/detail/2221-rize-muzesi/2221/4).

İslampaşa Mosque

The İslampaşa Mosque was built in 1571 using rubble stone. It is located in the Rize town centre (Plate 5) and is surrounded by a cemetery (kulturportali.gov.tr/turkiye/rize/gezilecekyer/kursunlu-camii-slampasa-camii).



Plate 5: İslampaşa Mosque, Rize

(kulturportali.gov.tr/turkiye/rize/gezilecekyer/kursunlu-camii-slampasa-camii)

Conclusion

Rize was colonised by ancient Greeks and was subsequently occupied by various people including the Ottoman Turks soon after Trabzon fell in 1461. It is famous for its mountainous terrain and for being the wettest region and the main tea producing area in Türkiye.

The Rize region is trying to foster more tourism through its spectacular natural beauty, architecture, traditional gastronomy and cultural artefacts such as woodwork, copper work and Rize fabric (feretiko).

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