



# Book Review: Flora of the Athos Peninsula

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Arne Strid, Stylianos Charalampidis, Panayotis Dimopoulos & Thomas Raus. 2025.

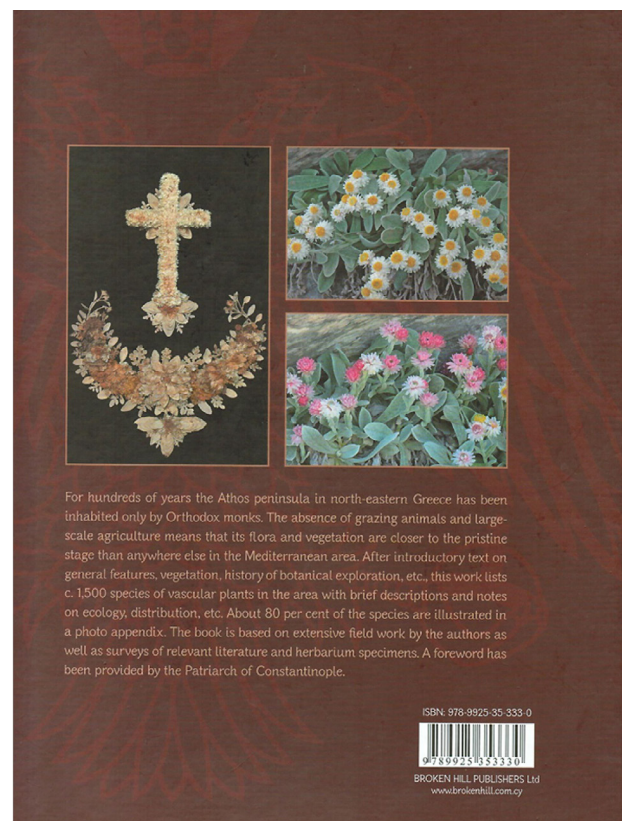
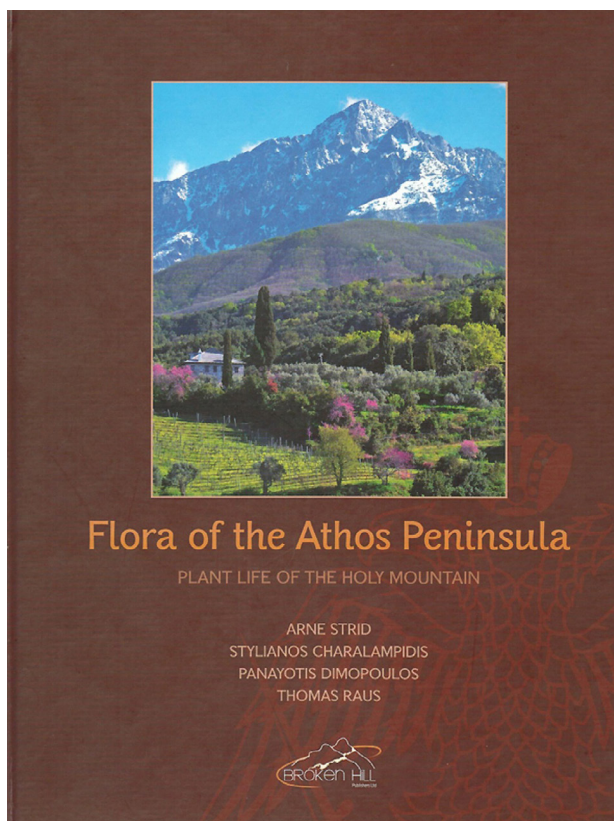
## Flora of the Athos Peninsula

PLANT LIFE OF THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

Broken Hill Publisher Ltd, Hardcover, 566 pp. ISBN: 978-9925-35-333-0

The Athos Peninsula, designated as an important UNESCO World Heritage Site, is one of the most fascinating regions of Greece. It is distinguished by its unique natural beauty, its role as a major center of Eastern Orthodox monasticism, and its interesting, but poorly stud-

ied flora. These features have drawn the attention of four renowned botanists – A. Strid (Denmark), S. Charalampidis and P. Dimopoulos (Greece), and T. Raus (Germany), – who combined their expertise and efforts to present *Flora of the Athos Peninsula*.



Based on the rich Flora Hellenica Database as the primary source of information (currently comprising 1 068 209 georeferenced floristic records), numerous visits to the Athos Peninsula over a period of 44 years, published literature, collected herbarium specimens, and various other databases, the authors present this book.

The information there is organized into nine chapters: **1. General features, History and monastic communities;** **2. Geomorphology and geology;** **3. Climate;** **4. Vegetation;** **5. Analysis of the Athos flora;** **6. History of botanical exploration;** **7. Vascular plant taxa described from Athos;** **8. Glossary of descriptive terms;** **9. Floristic part.**

The authors have examined the history of the Athos Peninsula, introducing interesting and curious facts from its Roman, Ottoman and modern periods. As early as 963 AD, the Peninsula became a center of organized monastic life, where monks found an ideal place for peaceful worship of God. There are 20 large monasteries on its territory, built in such locations and in such a way that they blend harmoniously into the surrounding environment. For each of them, the authors have provided useful and interesting information, describing them as veritable repositories of illuminated biblical and ancient Greek manuscripts, frescoes, icons, and gold artifacts. The authors also note that, in addition to these treasures, the monasteries have preserved important works by ancient botanists.

Athos has enjoyed a privileged legal status based on the law of the Hellenic Republic, international public law, and European law. The region is also noteworthy for having been self-governed since the time of the Eastern Roman Empire, with special jurisdiction granting the monastic authorities the right to restrict the free movement of people and goods within its territory. Only men are allowed to enter, while the presence of women is prohibited in accordance with the local monastic tradition.

A combination of strongly rugged relief, geology, and climate, together with the overall inaccessibility of the region and the absence of grazing livestock, such as sheep and goats, has favored the development of dense and diverse vegetation. Forests cover more than 90% of the Peninsula. The authors note that the diversity of



Veg. Fig. 17. Limestone cliffs in the summit area are home to rare and local species such as *Aethionema orbiculatum*, *Helichrysum sibthorpii* and *Viola delphinantha*.

landscapes and habitats, natural beauty, and biodiversity have changed little over the centuries.

The Peninsula is included in the European network of protected areas Natura 2000. Development of monastic life has been an important factor in preserving its natural heritage. Hunting is officially prohibited. Cultivated land accounts for only about 4% of the total area.

Being the easternmost of the three peninsulas of Chalkidiki, Athos differs from the other two not only geographically, but also geologically, geomorphologically, climatically, and historically. It is considered a continuation of the Thracian mountain range, the Rhodope Mountains. Back in time, it was part of the floor of the ancient Tethys Ocean, which had gradually become shallower due to tectonic plate movements. That section provides useful information about the character and features of the rocks forming its northern and southern parts (Chapter 2).

The Peninsula's climate is influenced by altitude, prevailing northeastern winds, and air currents. It is purely Mediterranean in the north and along the coast, at eleva-



PLATE 81. 1. Hypericaceae: *Hypericum vesiculosum*. - 2. Iridaceae: *Crocus athous*. - 3. *Crocus cancellatus* subsp. *mazziaricus*. - 4. *Crocus chrysanthus*. - 5. *Crocus olivieri*. - 6. *Crocus pulchellus*. - 7. *Crocus vaclavii*. - 8. *Gladiolus illyricus*. - 9. *Gladiolus italicus*.

tions of 150–500 m. Inland, in the zones between 500 and 1500 m, a transitional Mediterranean to continental climate prevails, reflected in the dominance of broad-leaf vegetation types (oak, chestnut and beech forests), as well as montane Mediterranean coniferous forests. In the highest parts of Athos, above 1600 m, a purely continental climate is observed (Chapter 3).

Due to the absence of grazing and large-scale agriculture, much of Athos' vegetation remains relatively unchanged. The coasts are predominantly rocky, soon giving way to slopes with evergreen shrublands and coniferous forests. Hills at moderate elevations are generally covered with mixed forests dominated by deciduous oaks, and at higher altitudes - by beech. Coastal halonitrophilous vegetation grows on sandy beaches, has low cover, and is dominated by annual, often succulent halophytic species (Chapter 4).

Based on their research, the authors have analyzed the flora and present its taxonomic diversity. Life forms are classified according to Raunkiaer. Hemicryptophytes are the widest-spread, followed by therophytes,

geophytes, phanerophytes, and chamaephytes; their full spectrum is presented in a table and diagram. A habitat spectrum for the territory is also provided (Chapter 5).

Very useful information is presented on the history of botanical research, from the time of Linnaeus and subsequent botanists, namely Sibthorp, D'Urville, Frivaldsky, Grisebach, Orfanides, Adamović, Turrill, etc., who had worked in that area (Chapter 6).

Approximately 170 taxa of vascular plants have been described from the territory of Athos (Chapter 7), some of which bear the name of the Peninsula (*Crocus athous*, *Hypericum athous*, *Viola athois*, etc.), and are endemic to Greece. Species described from there also include *Viola delphinantha* from the limestone cliff crevices, *Campanula orphanidea*, *Centaurea rutilifolia*, *Digitalis viridiflora*, *Festuca sancta*, and *Trachelium rumelianum*, distributed only on the Balkan Peninsula.

A glossary of specialized terms includes those used in botanical descriptions of the taxa, with emphasis on diagnostic characteristics (Chapter 8).

The main information in the book is presented in Chapter 9, the Floristic part. Within the three main groups—vascular cryptogams, gymnosperms and angiosperms—the taxa are arranged alphabetically by family, genus, and species. A total of 1469 native and naturalized species are included, belonging to 610 genera and 131 families. Nearly two-thirds of the families, half of the genera, and one-quarter of the species distributed in Greece can be found on Athos. The richest families in terms of genera are *Asteraceae* (69 genera) and *Poaceae* (58 genera). Families with more than 10 genera comprise 350 genera, representing 57.4% of those in the flora of Athos. Sixty-six families (50.4%) of the Athos flora contain only one genus. All species are provided with concise descriptions; the authors note that these refer to the material from the region and do not necessarily encompass the full diversity of the taxon. Information on ecology and flowering time is included, followed by the plants' distribution on the Peninsula and overall distribution. For illustrated taxa, the number of the photoplate and the taxon included in it are indicated after the name. About 80 percent of the species in the book are illustrated with original color photographs, arranged in 135 plates.



From left: Stylianos Charalampidis, Arne Strid, His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch, Panayotis Dimopoulos and Thomas Raus (2025).

After the color photoplates, a list of cited literature and an index to scientific names are provided. At the end of the book, a map of the Athos Peninsula (1:75 000) is included.

Undoubtedly, the publication of *Flora of the Athos Peninsula* is a significant event in botanical literature, and its authors deserve the readers' admiration. Difficult access to that territory further deepens the respect for them. For every specialist in botany, environmentalist or plant enthusiast, it will be a privilege to own this richly illustrat-

ed book, featuring photographs of the beautiful nature of the Peninsula. It is no surprise that the Ecumenical Patriarch, under whose authority this territory lies, has welcomed the book and wrote a foreword to it, in which he finally notes: "*This book is a wonderful testament to the plant life on the Athonite Peninsula*". On the occasion of the book's presentation, the authors were invited by him to a reception at the Patriarchate in Fanari, Istanbul, quite a memorable event.

**Once again, congratulations and respect to the authors!**