

***Micromeria acropolitana* (Lamiaceae) – epilogue**

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Abstract. *Micromeria acropolitana* was first collected in 1906 from the Acropolis, Athens, and considered extinct until its rediscovery in 2006, a hundred years later. Its greatest threat within the archaeological site is human disturbance. It still survives in its original habitat, the natural rock of the hill. The true identity of *Micromeria acropolitana* is now elucidated. It is a more woody representation of *M. nervosa*.

Key words: *Micromeria*, Acropolis of Athens, Greece, extinction, re-investigation, taxonomy

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Introduction

René C.J.E. Maire (1876–1949) and Marcel G.C. Petitmengin (1881–1908) were two French botanists and explorers who collected in the Peloponnese and Sterea Ellas during 1904 and 1906 (Maire & Petitmengin 1908). It was during a visit to the Acropolis on 30 August 1906 that they discovered the plant later to be published by Halácsy as *Micromeria acropolitana* Halácsy (Halácsy 1908). Gregory Tsounis is a biologist interested in the flora and fauna of Greece. Together with his son Lambros he started to investigate the Acropolis and the surrounding archaeological sites and areas.

Archaeological sites are often rich in anthropogenic species and sometimes the last bastion of rare and endemic taxa. The Acropolis of Athens has offered sanctuary to a small perennial labiate for more than 5000 years. Its greatest threat is human intervention. Artemis Yannitsaros, former professor of botany at the University of Athens, writes in 1998: “Acropolis seems to have been deprived of at least one of its species, strictly endemic, that is of a unique species of this area only. This is *Micromeria acropolitana* or *Satureja acropolitana* (Halácsy) Greuter & Burdet, of the Labiatae family, which must be considered today as a species disappeared not only from the Hellenic but from the global flora”. These are dramatic statements,

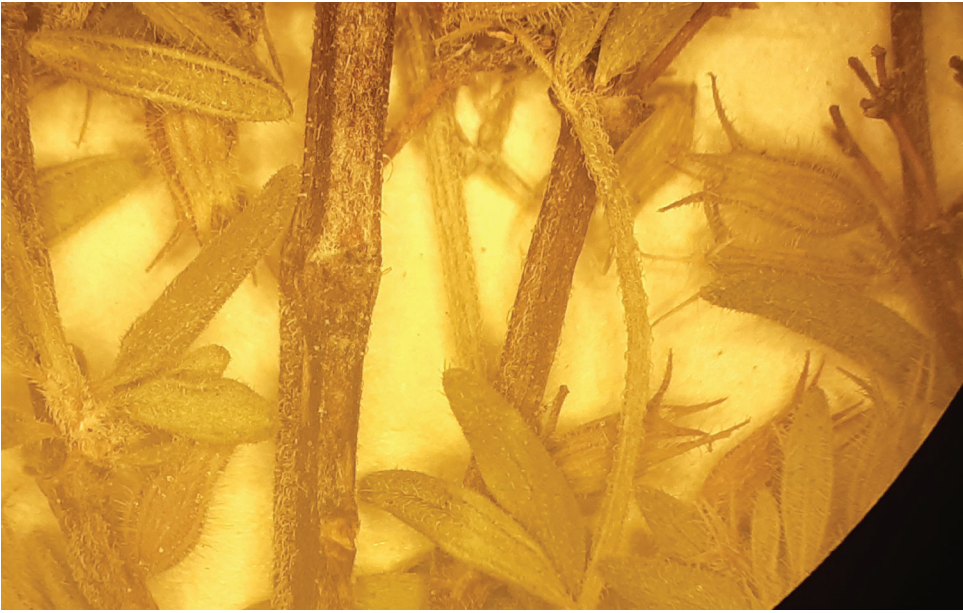


Fig. 1. *Micromeria nervosa*: fragment of an inflorescence (from WU-0040407, type of *M. acropolitana*).

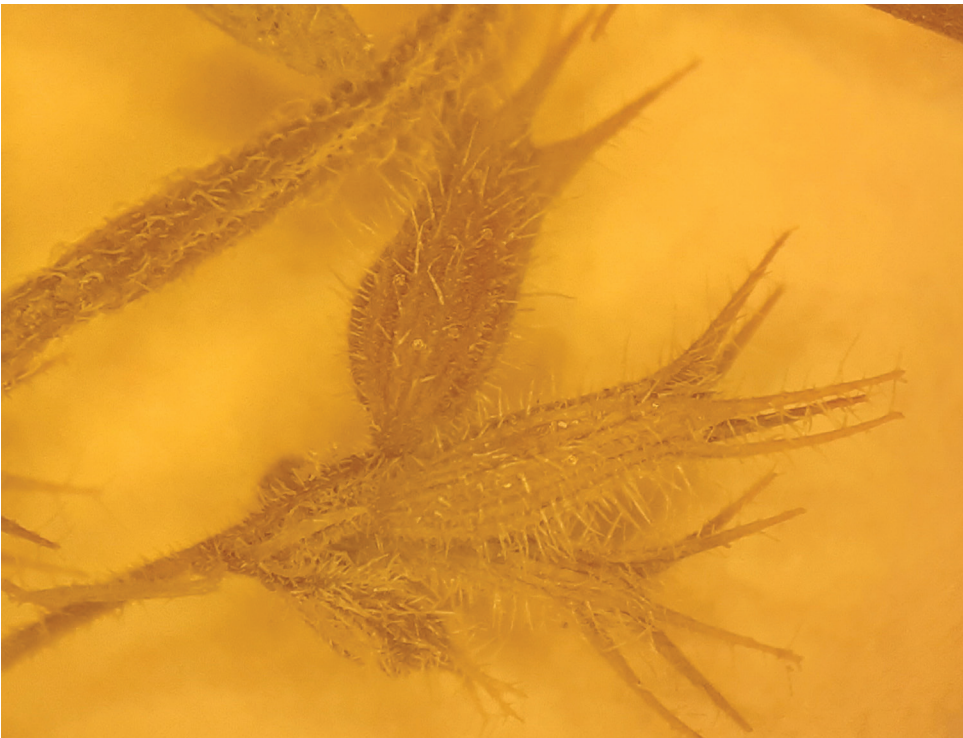


Fig. 2. *Micromeria nervosa*: calyces (from WU-0040407, type of *M. acropolitana*).

likewise echoed by Zervou & Yannitsaros (1999) and Phitos & al. (1995) in a Red Data Book of Greece. Theophanis Constantinidis, a botanist at the University of Athens, wrote in the Greek newspaper ‘Kathimerini’ published on 31 August 2003, “The mysterious *Micromeria acropolitana* (*Micromeria* of Acropolis) is

a small and humble perennial species growing exclusively in the rock of Acropolis, which, for about a century now, nobody has ever seen again, neither in the rock of Acropolis nor anywhere else”. Thus despite floristic investigation of the area by Paterson (1979), Sarlis (1994), Zervou & Yannitsaros (1999) and other researchers, no one has rediscovered the plant. It was declared under official protection (Presidential Decree 67 for protection of wild flora and fauna) as from 30 January 1981.

During their wanderings on the site in 2006, Gregory and Lambros Tsounis found a small population of 50–60 plants which they thought must surely represent the long-vanished *M. acropolitana*. In June 2009 they wanted to confirm the identity of their plant, to see if it was indeed *M. acropolitana*. A visit to the website of the Herbarium of the Institute of Botany at the University of Vienna gave them confidence as the plants they had

been observing for three years seemed identical to the type specimen of *M. acropolitana* deposited there. They were slightly apprehensive as no one has rediscovered *M. acropolitana* since Maire and Petitmengin in 1906 and it was now a hundred years later. They sent three digital images of their plant to Kit Tan at

Copenhagen. She responded immediately with a request to send specimens for further study as nothing critical can be identified from photographs. So they sent seven specimens to Copenhagen. Kit Tan replied that six of them are a variant of *M. juliana* (L.) Benth. ex Rchb. but the seventh looked interesting and she would compare further with four other taxa which are superficially similar. They soon received confirmation that their plant was indeed identical to the long-lost, elusive endemic of the rock of Acropolis. Their joy was tremendous at this good news.

Results and discussion

Micromeria acropolitana has now been re-discovered (Tan & al. 2010). However, it seems inconceivable that a plant from a random collecting by Maire and Petit-

mengin on a visit to the Acropolis in the height of summer in 1906 could have been “lost” and invisible for more than a hundred years. There are hardly any confirmed cases of plant extinction in Greece. Why had this species not been rediscovered earlier? Some answers emerge.

The first is that the Acropolis is a protected site. No plants can be collected. The number of *Micromeria* specimens from the site available for critical examination is very few in herbaria, and are in demand, even by the media.

Secondly, the cost of a ticket to visit the site. At 20 euros per visit, the expense does not encourage frequent visits for *in situ* observations.

More relevant, is the availability (or unavailability) of the type material at WU (University of Vienna) on which the description of *M. acropolitana* was based. Halácsy first thought to name the species *M. athenae* n. sp. but later chose *acropolitana* as a more suitable



Fig. 3. *Micromeria nervosa* (from the Acropolis, Athens; inflorescence photo by Lambros Tsounis, illustrations of stem, leaf and flower by Anna Skoumalova).

epithet. The material at NCY (University of Nancy, France) could not be found so the only type-source is at WU. A comparison with virtual images suffices to confirm that the plants from the Acropolis were similar to the type material of *M. acropolitana* kept at WU. However, it was impossible to download adequate analytical details to provide an overview of the plant's taxonomic affinities.

This was solved with the help of Dieter Reich who had recently been appointed to a herbarium post at WU. At Kit Tan's request he kindly prepared several images of the type specimen (Figs. 1 & 2) which left no doubt that *M. acropolitana* is identical to *M. nervosa* (Desf.) Benth., a species common in Attikis, Sterea Ellas (Fig. 3).

Halácsy (1908) diagnosed *M. acropolitana* against *M. nervosa* by the statement "caulibus suffruticosis valde ramosis ...". In actual fact the former is not more suffruticose nor more strongly branched than the latter. Constant weeding, cleaning of the stonework and daily trampling by 20,000 tourists at the height of the season had not allowed plants at the Acropolis to develop into more robust and woody individuals. Thus no one equated *M. acropolitana* with *M. nervosa*.

One may say that in this case bad evidence is in fact good evidence. But why should it be an epilogue? Well, this article serves as a conclusion of several events and tells us what *Micromeria acropolitana* really is. It provides clarity by the identification and ties

up loose-ends, and it takes place after the main story of rediscovery by Gregory and Lambros Tsounis. This is the definition of an epilogue.

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