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Editorial Note: Strandzha Mountain – a history and nature reserve

Dimcho Zahariev

*Department of Plant Protection, Botany and Zoology, Faculty of Natural Sciences,
Bishop Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, 115 Universitetska Str., 9700 Shumen, Bulgaria*

A mountain does not have to be very high or majestic to fall in love with it. It is enough for it to envelop you with coziness to make you want to return to it again. Such is Strandzha Mt – nestled in the southeastern part of Bulgaria, it is one of the least populated parts of the country, because it has always carefully preserved its nature. It has survived a lot – from ancient times to the present day. This is evidenced by the many different names it has received over the centuries: Tratonzos (a name given to it by the Thracians), Mons Asticus (Mountain of the Astes), Hemimont (Red Mountain), Paroria (from the Greek “borders”).

In the period 12th century BC - 1st century AD Strandzha Mt was located in the lands of the Thracian Odrysian Kingdom. The capital - the city of Bizia (today's city of Viza in Turkey) is located on the southeastern slopes of the mountain. Many traces have remained from the time of the Thracians in the mountain. The Thracian fortresses on the territory of Strandzha Mt are about 60 in number. These stone witnesses speak both of the strong economic growth during this period on the one hand, and of intertribal feuds and foreign invasions. The significant Thracian presence is also proven by the large number of discovered Thracian archaeological monuments: 20 dolmens, 24 mound necropolises and 11 independent tomb mounds. The marble domed tombs in the areas of "Mishkova Niva" and "Propada" deserve special attention.



Figure 1. Thracian domed tomb in the Propada area near the town of Malko Tarnovo
(Photo by Dimcho Zahariev, 2013)

Apart from the listed monuments, the two Thracian sanctuaries of Indipasha and Kamenska Barchina belong. The Indipasha sanctuary has to some extent retained its significance over the centuries. It is visited by people seeking healing from their illnesses. The name "Indipascha" is thought to mean "after Easter". It is believed that the water that springs from under a huge rock is most healing exactly a week after Easter. The Kamenska Barchina sanctuary includes rocks of different shapes: stone pyramids, stone mushrooms, etc., in which circles with cult purposes are carved.



Figure 2. The spring in the Thracian sanctuary of Indipasha
(Photo by Dimcho Zahariev, 2013)

There are still ancient finds waiting for their discoverer. Unique in this respect are the sunken settlements in the bays of the village of Varvara, the town of Ahtopol, the village of Sinemorets, the Silistar area and north of the mouth of the Rezovska River.

In 45 AD, the Romans conquered Strandzha Mt and it became part of the Roman Empire. After the division of the Roman Empire, the mountain remained within the borders of the Eastern Roman Empire. During the reign of Emperor Justinian, the Great (527-565 AD), the Eastern Roman Empire reached its largest territory. At that time, a number of small fortresses were built on the banks of the Strandzha rivers Veleka and Rezovska, which were part of a large-scale defense system in response to attacks by the Avars, and later the Slavs. On the territory of Strandzha Mt, in addition to the town of Bizia, there were three more important economic and cult centers for centuries during the time of the Odrysian Kingdom and the Eastern Roman Empire. They are located on the territory of the present-day settlements of Malko Tarnovo (Bulgaria), Demirköy (Turkey) and Kırklareli (Turkey).

During the rule of the Bulgarian Khan Krum (814-836 AD), Strandzha Mt became part of the territory of Bulgaria. In the following centuries, it was periodically ruled by either the Eastern Roman Empire or Bulgaria. After the conquest of the territory of Bulgaria by the Ottoman Turks, Strandzha Mt became part of the Ottoman Empire. According to local legend, when the troops of Sultan Murad besieged the Black Sea fortress of Urdoviza (today's city of Kiten), its ruler, the boyar Stana, decided to surrender it in order to preserve the lives of the inhabitants in the area. The condition was that the sultan would grant her autonomy, which would include both the city and as many villages as a horseman could tour in one day. The horseman toured 17 villages, which were called "tsar's land" or "hasekiya" (from Turkish has - free from taxes and yaka - land). This legend is associated with the name Atliman (from Turkish at - horse and liman - bay) of the bay north of the present-day town of Kiten, where the horseman and the horse died of exhaustion. It is believed that this autonomy lasted until 1845, when the sultan's firman, granting privileges to the population of Hasekiyat, was destroyed, and its last guardian, Hadji Stoyan from the village of Zvezdets, was killed.

From the period of the Ottoman Empire, the architectural style remains, which can still be seen in the settlements in the area. In cities such as Malko Tarnovo, the houses are two-story and have many windows for good lighting of the rooms. In the villages, the houses are one-story or two-story and have a more simple architecture. One of the villages in Strandzha Mt has been declared an architectural reserve. This is the village of Brashlyan. It has preserved authentic houses from the 18th-19th centuries. It is believed that the oldest house in the village was built in the 17th century. 76 houses are architectural monuments of culture, and 9 of them are of national importance.

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Figure 3. The architectural style in Strandzha Mt: A. One of the houses of the historical museum in the town of Malko Tarnovo, B. A typical village house in the village of Stoilovo (Photos by Dimcho Zahariev, 2013)



Figure 4. Houses in the architectural reserve of the village of Brashlyan (Photo by Dimcho Zahariev, 2013)

For about two millennia, Strandzha Mt has been a supplier of marble, metals (iron and copper), meat and dairy products, hides and wood for the states that ruled this mountain. Due to the lack of intensive agriculture over the centuries and the small population, the mountain turns out to be a kind of reserve of unique plant and animal species, as well as natural habitats. The flora of the Bulgarian part of the mountain includes 1666 plant species. Of these, 63 species are relict, and 7 species are found only in this region of Europe. The fauna includes 99 endemic species of invertebrates. The vertebrate fauna is the richest among the Bulgarian protected areas and includes 263 species.

Strandzha Mt is characterized by forests of the South Euxine type. Mesophilous forests of *Fagus orientalis* Lipsky with an evergreen understory of laurel shrubs, most often *Rhododendron ponticum* L., are

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found only in Strandzha Mt in Europe. They are widespread in Western Transcaucasia, Colchis and the Black Sea coast of the Asia Minor Peninsula. These forests are distinguished from the deciduous forests of the temperate climate and form their own subbiome.

A large part of the mountain on the territory of Bulgaria has been declared the Strandzha Mt Nature Park. This is the largest protected area in Bulgaria. The second largest bird migration route in Europe, called Via Pontica, passes over Strandzha Mt. The total number of habitat types is 121, and according to this indicator the park is in first place among protected areas in Europe. Within the borders of the European Union within the Black Sea biogeographical region, only in Strandzha Mt Nature Park is natural habitat 4030 European dry heaths registered under the classification of Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora.



Figure 5. Natural habitat 4030 European dry heaths: A. with *Calluna vulgaris*, B. with *Erica arborea* (Photos by Dimcho Zahariev, 2013)

Within the boundaries of the Natural Park, territories for stricter protection have been declared. These are the reserves: Vitanovo, Silkosiya, Sredoka, Tisovitsa, and Uzunbudzhak. Silkosiya Reserve is the oldest protected area in Bulgaria. The phenomenon of “vegetation inversion” is observed in it: under normal conditions, beech forests occupy the colder terrains at higher altitudes, and oak forests are found in the lower and warmer parts. In the Silkosiya Reserve, the opposite is observed: beech forests are located in the low parts and in the valleys, while oak forests are located in the higher parts.

Strandzha Mt is also characterized by an inversion in the location of brown forest soils on the ridges of the hills, instead of on the slopes. Within the boundaries of the Natural Park is the only distribution of

yellow earth soils (Alisols) in Europe and the only distribution of red earth soils (Nitisols) in Bulgaria. Red earth soils belong to paleosols with relict signs of a Mediterranean climate.

The relict nature of soils, natural habitats and plant species is due to the favorable geographical location, which ensured their survival during the several glaciations in Europe. During the Tertiary, heat-loving and moisture-loving laurel forests were widespread in Europe and reached as far as the Scandinavian Peninsula. During the glaciations during the Quaternary, glaciers reached the Danube River, but south of it on the territory of Bulgaria there were glaciers only in the high mountains. The rest of the country's territory was free of ice cover. The presence of relatively high air humidity and moderate temperatures in Strandzha Mt is determined by the proximity of the three neighboring seas: the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean Sea. The characteristic deep ravines and wide river valleys are the original paths for the entry and spread of life-giving moisture from the sea coast to the interior of the mountain. Thus, Strandzha Mt becomes a kind of reserve and can be declared the "living museum" of Tertiary Europe.

Front Cover

A view of Strandzha Mountain between the villages of Brashlyan and Stoilovo

Photo by Prof. Dimcho Zahariev

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