

Mt Ida in Mythology and Classical Antiquity - a Plant Scientist's Approach

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The word 'idi' (or 'ida' in its Dorian form) was used in early Ancient Greek under various, closely related **meanings**: trees for timber (only in plural), forest, wood, timber (e.g. timber for shipbuilding); it was also used to denote a densely wooded mountain (Dimitrakos 1964). The 2 most famous synonymous mountains among them are Mt Ida of Crete (the highest of Crete, 2456 m) and Mt Ida of Troad (today Kaz Dağ, 1774 m).

Mythology

Despite its relatively low height, Mt Ida was the home of several myths. A short narration of the three, by far most important myths related to Mt Ida follows.

1. Zeus and Ganymede

Ganymede, whose name means 'bright', 'brilliant' or 'irradiant' was said to be the most beautiful of mortals. He was the youngest son of the King Tros (brother of Ilus, the founder of Troy) and his wife Callirhoe. Ganymede, when barely adolescent, was guarding his father's sheep in the mountainous slopes of Ida near Troy, Zeus fell in love with him, changed himself into an eagle and abducted Ganymede to Mount Olympus (Figure 1). Ganymede was chosen by Zeus to be forever young as bearer of the golden cup of divine nectar and when the Olympian gods of ancient Greece gathered for a feast, it was Ganymede who served them wine. As a compensation for his kidnapping, Zeus offered his grieving father, King Tros, a stable of magnificent horses. The same root (the verb 'ganymai' - γάνυμαι - meaning radiate) is also found in oregano, meaning the 'beauty (brightness) of the mountains'.



Figure 1. The abduction of Ganymede by Zeus. Painting on a wall, dated 490-480 BC; Louvre Museum, Paris.

2. Aphrodite and Anchises

The main narrative of the 5th *Homeric Hymn* to Aphrodite concerns the affair of Aphrodite and Anchises. Anchises came from Dardania, a territory neighbouring Troy named after Dardanus, who once colonized it after leaving the island of Samothrace where he had lived until then. Zeus caused Aphrodite to fall in love with Anchises to teach her a lesson. Aphrodite journeyed first to Paphos on the island of Cyprus and from there to Mt. Ida where she met Anchises (Figure 2). “*And so he put in her heart sweet desire for Anchises who was tending cattle at that time **among the steep hills of many-fountained Ida**, and in shape was like the immortal gods. Therefore, when laughter-loving Aphrodite saw him, she loved him, and terribly desire seized her in her heart. ... And laughter-loving Aphrodite put on all her rich clothes, and when she had decked herself with gold, she left sweet-smelling Cyprus and went in haste towards Troy, swiftly travelling high up among the clouds. So she came to **many-fountained Ida, the mother of wild creatures** and went straight to the homestead across the mountains. After her came grey wolves, fawning on her, and grim-eyed lions, and bears, and fleet leopards, ravenous for deer: and she was glad in heart to see them, and put desire in their*”

breasts, so that they all mated, two together, about the shadowy coombes.” Aphrodite convinced Anchises that she was a mortal girl who had been sent to Troy to be Anchises’ wife and to bear him children. After they made love, Aphrodite put Anchises to sleep and resumed her immortal form. Upon awakening, Anchises was terrified to discover that he had just slept with a goddess. Aphrodite calmed him by telling him that everything would be all right and she would give birth to their son, Aeneas.



Figure 2. The love affair of Aphrodite and Anchises on Mt Ida. Oil on canvas by William Blake Richmond (painted in 1889); Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, England.

3. The judgement of Paris

According to the legend, the chain of events that led to the Trojan War started at a royal wedding. Peleus, king of the Myrmedons was marrying the sea nymph Thetis. Many gods attended the wedding, but Eris, daughter of Zeus (Jupiter), king of the gods, wasn't invited because she was the goddess of discord and bound to cause trouble. Angry at being excluded, Eris decided to disrupt the wedding banquet. She threw a golden apple marked 'to the fairest' among the guests. The goddesses Hera (Juno), Athena (Minerva) and Aphrodite (Venus) were there, and each thought that she was the fairest of them all. They bickered for a while about who deserved the apple, then asked Zeus to decide the matter. But Zeus didn't want to get involved, so he sent them with the escort of his loyal god-messenger Hermes (Mercury) to the prince Paris, the son of King Priam of Troy. Paris (or Alexander) had been raised as a simple shepherd and was spending most of his time playing the lyre and grazing his cattle in the nearby mountain range of Ida (Figure 3). The goddesses tried to rig the contest by bribing Paris: Athena promised to turn him into an invincible soldier, Hera promised to make him the king of all Europe and Asia and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, promised him the most beautiful woman in the world. The latter sounded better to Paris than power and glory, so he awarded the Apple of Discord to Aphrodite. Thus **the first beauty contest in human history took place in Mt Ida** and the prize was a golden apple (a botanical symbol of beauty and fertility). Paris' reward was Helen of Sparta and the unfortunate consequence was the 10-year long Trojan War.



Figure 3. The judgement of Paris. Detail from a ceramic cup: Paris (sitting in the right), Hermes, Athena, Hera, Aphrodite and Eros; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany.

All these quite well known myths share a common characteristic: they all deal with superb beauty and therefore it can be concluded that in this way they also **reflect the natural beauty of Mt Ida.**

Homer's Iliad and the Trojan War

1. Homer's Iliad

Mt Ida is mentioned 47 times in the *Iliad*. Zeus seats and rules at the summit (Gargarus) of the “**wooded, many-fountained and mother of wild beasts Mount Ida where are his grove and fragrant altar**”. Zeus overlooks the city of Troy and the ships of the Achaeans, watches the battles and sends his thunders and lightnings. Since Zeus was supporting the Trojans, Hera, his wife, plotted to set Zeus to sleep in order to let the Achaeans take advantage in the war: “*Presently they [Hera and Sleep] reached many-fountained Ida, mother of wild beasts Here Sleep halted, and ere Zeus caught sight of him he climbed a lofty pine-tree- the tallest that reared its head towards heaven on all Ida. He hid himself behind the branches and sat there in the semblance of the sweet-singing bird that haunts the mountains and is called Chalcis Hera then went to Gargarus, the topmost peak of Ida, and Zeus, driver of the clouds, set eyes upon her. As soon as he did so he became inflamed with the same passionate desire for her that he had felt when they had first enjoyed each other's embraces, and slept with one another without their dear parents knowing anything about it. He went up to her and said, 'What do you want that you have come hither from Olympus - and that too with neither*

chariot nor horses to convey you?’ Then Hera told him a lying tale ... (about the purpose of her visit). And Zeus said, ‘Hera, ... for the present let us devote ourselves to love and to the enjoyment of one another. ... Hera again answered him with a lying tale. ‘Most dread son of Saturn’, she exclaimed, ‘what are you talking about? Would you have us enjoy one another here on the top of Mount Ida, where everything can be seen’ ... And Zeus answered, ‘Hera, you need not be afraid that either god or man will see you, for I will enshroud both of us in such a dense golden cloud, that the very sun for all his bright piercing beams shall not see through it’. With this the son of Saturn caught his wife in his embrace; whereon the earth sprouted them a cushion of young grass, with dew-bespangled lotus, crocus, and hyacinth, so soft and thick that it raised them well above the ground. Here they laid themselves down and overhead they were covered by a fair cloud of gold, from which there fell glittering dew-drops. Thus, then, did the sire of all things repose peacefully on the crest of Ida, overcome at once by sleep and love, and he held his spouse in his arms.” (Homer, *Iliad*, Book XIV).

2. The ‘Optical Telegraph’

The first reference to the systematic use of fire signals to transmit messages can be found in the descriptions of the fall of Troy after the siege of the Achaean army. Two relevant passages in the play *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus describe how fire beacons were used to signal in a single night the fall of Troy to Mycenae, over a distance of roughly 600 km. The first beacon was lit in the city of Troy and the second one on the summit of Mt Ida, **making use of the timber amply available in the mountain**. From Mt Ida the signal was transmitted consecutively to Lemnos, Mt. Athos, Mt Macistus (Euboea), Mt Messapius, Mt Cithaeron, Mt. Aegiplanetus, Mt Arachnaeon and Mycenae.

3. The construction of the Trojan Horse

According to the stratagem and the plans perceived by Odysseus (Ulysses), Epeius, a famous carpenter, constructed an immense wooden horse, the Trojan Horse (Figure 4). Half of the Achaean army, with axes in their hands, **were sent to cut down trees on Mount Ida**, and thousands of planks were cut from the trees by Epeius and his workmen, and in three days he had finished the horse. In the hollow belly of the horse a number of Achaean soldiers were hidden (according to various versions: 12, 50, 100 or even 3000).

It is in Homer’s *Odyssey* that the story of Trojan horse was told for the first time. Odysseus speaks to the bard Demodocus: “*Demodocus, there is no one in the world whom I admire more than I do you. ... so accurately do you sing the return of the Achaeans with all their sufferings and adventures. Now, however, change your song and tell us of the wooden horse which Epeius made with the assistance of Athena, and which Odysseus got by stratagem into the fort of Troy after freighting it with the men who afterwards sacked the city. If you will sing this tale aright I will tell all the world how magnificently heaven has endowed you.*”

4. The Aeneas’ fleet

Aeneas, the son of Aphrodite and Anchises, fought in the side of the Trojans and was one of the few people who escaped the sack of Troy. At the end of the Trojan War, when the city was on fire, Aeneas snatched both his young son Ascanius and his father Anchises (an old man at that time) from death. Aeneas, with a remembered gesture of piety, set his father on his shoulders and led his young son by his hand. This action in which three generations were rescued was, some believe, the work of Aphrodite, who guided them through the roar of fight and destruction; for it is told that wherever they walked the flames gave back before them. After leaving Troy Aeneas came to Mount Ida, where he was joined by inhabitants and troops who had left Dardanus and other cities. At the foot of the mountain, Aeneas and his followers **built a fleet of twenty**

ships with timber from Mt Ida and sailed off in the first days of summer from Antandros, the harbour city to the south of the mountain. After many years of adventures and wanderings described in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas arrived to Latium and set the foundations of Rome.



Figure 4. The Trojan Horse, from a relief vase found in the Cyclades, 6th century BC.

Historical works by Herodotus and Thucydides

1. Herodotus

Mt Ida is mentioned 3 times in Herodotus' *History*. The first refers to the time of Kings Croesus and Cyrus (6th century BC), when the cities around Ida decided not to participate in the Aeolian confederacy. The other 2 citations concern the start of Xerxes march against the Greeks (480 BC) when **a big storm caused significant casualties to the Persian army camped in the slopes of Ida.** '*... the troops [of Xerxes] advanced across the plain of Thebe, passing Adramyttium, and Antandrus, the Pelasgic city; then, holding Mount Ida upon the left hand, it entered the Trojan territory. On this march the Persians suffered some loss; for as they bivouacked during the night at the foot of Ida, a storm of thunder and lightning burst upon them, and killed no small number.*' Thus, Mt Ida showed once more its wild nature as a confirmation of Zeus' (the ruler of thunder and clouds) favourable place.

2. Thucydides

Thucydides (*History of the Peloponnesian War*) mentioned Mt Ida when describing the facts of the seventh and eighth years of the war. "*Meanwhile, the Mitylenian and*

other Lesbian exiles set out, for the most part from the continent, with mercenaries hired in Peloponnese, and others levied on the spot, and took Rhoeteum, After this they marched against Antandros and took the town by treachery, their plan being to free Antandros and the rest of the Actaeon towns, formerly owned by Mitylene but now held by the Athenians. Once fortified there, **they would have every facility for ship-building from the vicinity of Ida and the consequent abundance of timber**, and plenty of other supplies, and might from this base easily ravage Lesbos, which was not far off, and make themselves masters of the Aeolian towns on the continent.” Mt Ida was still a very important source of timber.

Theophrastus

Theophrastus of Eressus (371-286 BC) is currently widely appraised as the founder of Botany and co-founder, with Aristotle, of the science of Biology (Morton 1981). **Theophrastus spent 3 years (347-344 BC) in the coastal city of Assos** when Aristotle and his colleagues moved there after an invitation by Hermeias, the hegemon of the city and a former student of Aristotle at Plato’s Academy in Athens (Thanos 1994). Aristotle and his associates founded the School of Assos but, unfortunately, the venture came to an abrupt end with the assassination of their patron, Hermeias; thus the staff of the school had to flee the city and move to Theophrastus’ homeland, the Island of Lesbos, just a few kilometers across the North-East Aegean Sea. It is highly probable that during his stay in Assos, Theophrastus became well acquainted with large parts of Troad (including the important port-city Antandros and the south-facing mountainous slopes of Ida), its people and particularly its nature and plants.

This intimate relationship is very well reflected in Theophrastus’ botanical writings both by his numerous citations to the local plants and the appreciation expressed to the ‘people of Ida’ for providing ample information (Morton, 1981; Amigues, 1988-1993). A numerical proof of this deep influence is the total number of **22 direct citations to Mt Ida** (18 of them in *HP Book 3* ‘on wild trees’). From a sum of 903 direct geographical citations by Theophrastus in his works ‘on plants’ (*HP, CP*) (Thanos 2002), those devoted to Mt Ida comprise by far the largest number referred to a single mountain. In addition, another 4 citations refer to the city of Antandros (today Küçükkuşu), 7 to the Idaean Pine (*Pinus nigra*) and 3 to the laurel of Alexandria (*Ruscus hypoglossum*). No citations are made to Assos (nor Eressus, his hometown); already at Theophrastus’ time, it was improper scientific style to include details or incidents that could be considered personal!

Theophrastus describes and compares the two pine species growing in Mt Ida (*HP* 3.9.1.-2.); ‘Pine is not divided into male and female as is the rule with other plants, but according to the people of Ida into the Idaean pine and the maritime pine’ (*HP* 3.9.1.). He also furnishes several pieces of information in relation to the resin and pitch extraction as well as to torch-wood making (*HP* 3.9.3., 9.2.5., 9.2.7.). It is a pity that Arnold, the authority of *Pinus nigra* was obviously unaware of Theophrastus’ works, otherwise he would have named this species ***Pinus idaea***. It is also unfortunate that in the current scientific literature, several common names are widely used, such as Corsican pine, Austrian pine, black pine or European black pine instead of the most appropriate one **Idaeon pine**.

Theophrastus describes a **3-phased pattern of annual growth** for pines, silver firs and oaks (*HP* 3.5.1.-2.). This pattern is most probably based on his own measurements and observations from Mt Ida, specifically cited in conjunction to the particular timing furnished for each growth cycle. This is a quite striking remark and should be further

Table 1. List of plants quoted by Theophrastus (*History of Plants, HP*) as growing on Mt Ida. Plant identification (latin and common English names, respectively) is based on Amigues (1988-93) and Hort (1926).

Abies equi-trojani (= *A. nordmanniana* subsp. *equi-trojani*) (silver fir) *HP* 3.5.1., 3.6.5.
Acer spp. [*platanoides*, *obtusatum*] (maple) *HP* 3.6.5., 3.11.2.
Alnus glutinosa (alder) *HP* 3.6.5.
Cornus mas (male cornelian cherry) *HP* 3.12.2.
Cornus sanguinea (female cornelian cherry) *HP* 3.12.2.
Corylus avellana (hazel) *HP* 3.6.5.
Crataegus spp. – 3 species (hawthorn) *HP* 3.12.5.
Fagus spp. (beech) *HP* 3.6.5.
Fraxinus spp. [*angustifolia*, *ornus*](ash) *HP* 3.6.5., 3.11.4.
Juniperus oxycedrus (juniper) *HP* 3.6.5., 3.12.3.
Juniperus phoenicea (juniper) *HP* 3.6.5., 3.12.3.
Malus domestica (apple) *HP* 4.5.4.
Paliurus spina-christi (paliure) *HP* 3.11.2.
Pinus brutia (maritime pine) *HP* 3.9.1, 9.2.5
Pinus nigra (Idaeon pine) *HP* 3.9.1, 3.9.2, 9.2.5.
Pistacia terebinthus (terebinth) *HP* 3.15.3.
Prunus domestica (plum) *HP* 3.6.5.
Punica granatum (pomegranate) *HP* 4.5.4.
Quercus spp. (oak) *HP* 3.5.1, 3.6.5, 3.8.2.-6.
 Q. cerris *HP* 3.8.2.-6.
 Q. frainetto *HP* 3.8.2.-6.
 Q. infectoria *HP* 3.8.2.-6.
 Q. ithaburensis subsp. *macrolepis* (*Q. aegilops*) *HP* 3.8.2.-6.
 Q. pedunculiflora *HP* 3.8.2.-6.
Ruscus hypoglossum (laurel of Alexandria, butcher's broom or Caesar's laurel) *HP* 3.17.4.
Salix caprea (= *S. idae*) (goat willow) *HP* 3.17.3.
Sorbus domestica (service tree) *HP* 3.6.5.
Sorbus graeca (= *S. cretica*) (sorb) *HP* 3.17.5.
Taxus baccata (yew) *HP* 3.10.2.
Ulmus montana (elm) *HP* 3.14.1.
Vaccinium myrtillus (bilberry) *HP* 3.17.6.
Vitis vinifera (vine) *HP* 4.5.4.

investigated in relation to both Llamas growth (Oliver and Larson 1996) and polycyclic growth (reported to include 1-6 growth units per year in *Pinus brutia*; Barthelemy *et al.* 2000).

In Theophrastus' time, Mt Ida was still considered a timber producing area, especially for shipbuilding (based in general on silver fir, black pine and cedar trees), albeit a rather minor one – perhaps the consequence of overexploitation through many centuries. “**Timber for shipbuilding is produced in a few areas; namely in Europe: in the region of Macedonia, Thrace and Italy; in Asia: in Cilicia, Sinope and Amisus, and also the Mysian Olympus and Ida – but in the latter parts it is not abundant.**” (HP 4.5.5.).

Theophrastus cites 33-35 different plant taxa as being present on Mt Ida (Table 1). Almost all these plants are trees and their presence on the mountain range of Ida is mentioned together with their description in *HP Book 3* ‘on wild trees’. Their identification is based on the recent, excellent work of Amigues (1988-1993) and their actual presence in the area is verified by the *Flora of Turkey* (Davis 1965-1988). In *HP Book 3*, Theophrastus presents the most important tree species and his reliance on the information of the people of Ida is evident and properly acknowledged. For instance: 1. he brings up the rarity of yew (*Taxus baccata*) on Mt Ida in contrast to Macedonia and Arcadia (HP 3.10.2.); 2. he describes five sympatric oak (*Quercus*) species on Mt Ida as recognized by the locals (HP 3.8.2.-6.) and 3. he compares the depth of the roots among various tree species on the basis of the information provided by the people of Ida, among others (HP 3.6.5.).

Although Theophrastus was certainly unaware of the chemical preferences of plants in relation to their soil substrates, he did observe some apparently unexplained inconsistencies in the geographic distribution of specific plants. “*Certain plants can grow in certain areas but not in others. For instance, Tmolus (Boz Dağ) and the Mysian Olympus (Ulu Dağ) have the walnut and chestnut in abundance, and also vine, apple and pomegranate; while Mt Ida has not the former and the latter are rare.*” (HP 4.5.4.). According to Amigues (1989), the presence of extended calcareous zones in Ida (particularly in the southern part of the range) results in excluding chestnut, a typical calcifuge species.

Theophrastus introduced the concept of **endemism** when presenting the ‘unique’ or ‘distinctive’ plants of an area and particularly of a mountain (HP 3.17.1.-6.). The ‘characteristic’ plants of Mt Ida (Figure 5) according to Theophrastus are: *Salix caprea*, *Ruscus hypoglossum*, *Sorbus graeca* and *Vaccinium myrtillus* (HP 3.17.3.-6.). These plants are efficiently described, as is the rule with Theophrastus’ descriptions and recently were correctly identified by Amigues (1989). Their previous identifications by Hort (1926) were, respectively: *Salix cinerea*, *Ruscus hypophyllum*, *Amelanchier vulgaris* and *Vitis vinifera* var. *corinthiaca*.

Of course the above mentioned 4 species are not truly endemic to Mt Ida, according to our modern floristic knowledge, but they are indeed quite distinctive plants of the area. Therefore, they should be given a distinguished status and, in addition, appointed as **emblematic plants** together with *Abies equi-trojani*, *Rubus idaeus* and *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*. The latter two species (and *Salix idae* Görz, a synonym for *S. caprea* L.) are the only plants named after Mt Ida. Red raspberry was given its latin name (*Rubus idaeus*) by Linnaeus on the basis of information on its abundance, furnished by Dioscorides, while Theophrastus failed to cite its presence in the area. Linnaeus also named *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* (the vine of Ida, HP 3.17.6) an unfortunate misinterpretation for *V. myrtillus*. However and despite the absence of the former species from the area, *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* could still be used as a ‘plant emblem’ of Mt Ida.

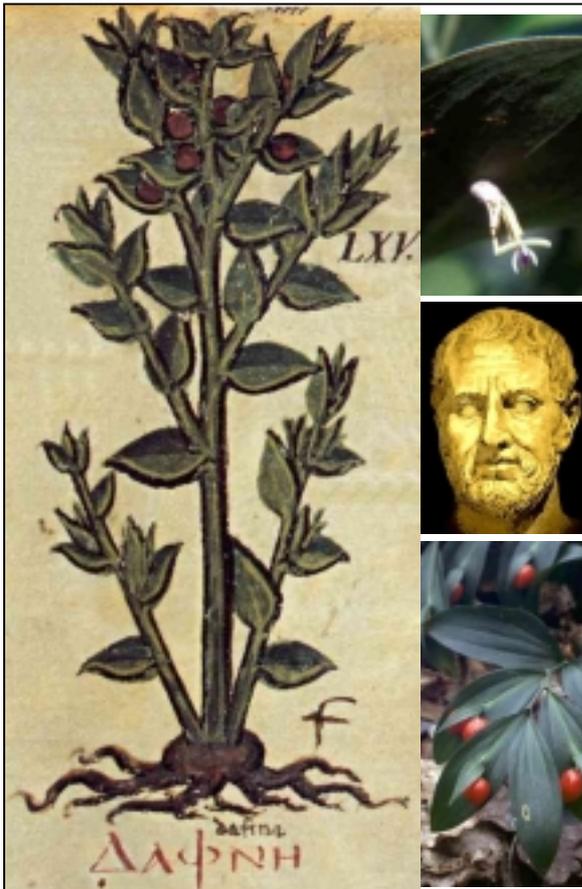


Figure 5. Certain characteristic plants of Mt Ida according to Theophrastus (center inset). Upper left: Laurel of Alexandria (*Ruscus hypoglossum*) as illustrated in Dioscorides' *De Materia Medica* (Miletos Publications); flower and fruits of *R. hypoglossum* in the small photos (© Thomas Schoepke and Terra Foundation, respectively). Upper right: Goat Willow (*Salix caprea*) illustrated by Thomé (1885). Lower left: Red Raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*) illustrated by Thomé (1885). Lower right: Lingonberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) illustrated by Lindman (1901-1905).

Perhaps the most charismatic species among the 7 plants suggested above is the laurel of Alexandria, *Ruscus hypoglossum*. This plant is a shrub with impressive red fruit produced on the midrib of the 'leaf'. The vernacular name laurel of Alexandria is a very ancient one and, surprisingly, still in some use today. Since Theophrastus has made use of it, it is older than Alexander the Great and cannot stem from Alexandria of Troad, a city close to Troy founded by Alexander himself. Instead, according to Amigues (1989), based on Strabo, Alexandria is a region (or a village) in the slopes of Mt Ida, near Antandros and its name is a tribute to Paris. Paris was also called Alexander; for instance, Homer in *Iliad* did refer to him 13 times as Paris and 46 as Alexander, the literal meaning of which is 'keeping men away' and implying strength and bravery. It was also believed that this place was the real site of the beauty contest and Paris' judgement.

Finally, Theophrastus cites **Antandros, an ancient city well known for its timber trade and shipbuilding industry** in relation to a peculiar myrtle plant, the wood properties of chestnut and a curious incident with a plane tree. The specific myrtle (*Myrtus communis*) in Antandros, according to Amigues (1989) is an example of a possible, not well fixed, hybrid bearing red fruit which later on turned to black (*HP* 2.2.6.). The wood of the sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) "... is said that when it is about to split, it makes a noise, so that men are forewarned; this occurred once at Antandros at the baths, and all those present jumped out" (*HP* 5.6.1.). Finally, a plane (*Platanus orientalis*) in Antandros, when blown down by a storm was raised up overnight, perhaps by a strong wind force (Theophrastus' explanation, *CP* 5.4.7., *HP* 4.16.2.-3.).

Dioscorides

Theophrastus life coincides with the end of the Classical Greek Antiquity and it would do justice to the title of the article to conclude here this historical and scientific study. However, it was considered proper to include some interesting citations related to Mt Ida by Dioscorides who lived 4 centuries later (1st century AD), during the Roman period. Dioscorides, the father of Pharmacology, was a native of Anazarbus in Cilicia. In his well-known herbal *De Materia Medica*, Dioscorides (Kaktos publications) describes the medicinal properties of the **Idaean raspberry** (*Rubus idaeus*) and the **Alexandrian laurel or Idaean root or chamaedaphne** (*Ruscus hypoglossum*).

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