

***Asperula stricta*, another species reported in error from Cyprus**

Ralf Hand

Abstract. – For the sole record of *Asperula stricta* in Cyprus no authenticating specimen seems to exist. All pieces of evidence suggest a misidentification of the endemic *A. cypria*.

Address. – Ralf Hand, Winterfeldtstr. 25, D-10781 Berlin, Germany; ralfhand@gmx.de

Introduction

Traditionally, only taxa substantiated by corresponding specimens are accepted as components of the flora of Cyprus. The current checklist (Hand & al. 2011 –) follows the basic flora for the island in this respect (Meikle 1977, 1985). The latter author accepted only but a few species, for which he was unable to trace herbarium material. In such cases, Meikle trusted the authority of experienced botanists who published the records in question. In one such species, *Asperula stricta* Boiss. (*Rubiaceae*), the sole record is based on a publication by Post (1900). The species has never been confirmed in Cyprus since. Papachristoforou & Kyriakou (in Tsintides & al. 2007) classify it as “Data deficient” in the Red Data Book for Cyprus. In such cases, inevitably questions arise: where can the corresponding specimen be found and whether the species has ever been collected in Cyprus.

Results

The original entry in Post’s (1900: 94) “Fasciculus X” of his series “Plantae postianae” reads “*Asperula stricta* Boiss. P. 35. Buffavento, Chypre, fruits: juillet.”. The page number refers to the third volume of Boissier’s (1875) “Flora orientalis”. Meikle (1977) gives a translated and supplemented version “Buffavento, July 1894, Post s.n.”. Thus, he assumes the existence of a specimen. George Edward Post (1838–1909), an American physician, missionary and botanist, lived and worked in present-day Lebanon from 1863 with short interruptions (Stafleu & Cowan 1983, American University of Beirut 2020, Musselman 2020). According to the same sources his main collections from the Levante and neighbouring areas are conserved at BEI (abbreviations following Thiers 2020); further material has been distributed to various herbaria in Europe and N America.

Repeated searches in BEI, a well-maintained collection without losses, for a specimen of *A. stricta* or any other *Rubiaceae* collected by Post in Cyprus did not lead to any positive results. The results were the same for various other collections such as B, BM, E, FI, HUJ, MO, OXF and US. Also, in G, a key European collection of Post gatherings (Musselman 2006), no specimen could be traced. British and Cypriot collections have already been analysed by Meikle (1977).

In his series "Plantae postianae", published in ten parts between 1890 and 1900 (for details see Stafleu & Cowan 1983) focusing on new regional records, Post included data from Cyprus starting with the 8th instalment. Taking into consideration the Cypriot entries but also those from Turkey, Syria and Lebanon, doubts must be raised if all records really refer to herbarium specimens. The latter are marked with corresponding collection numbers, e. g. in *Ferula cypria* or *Siler cordifolium*, to name but two examples from the same page of Fasciculus X, where the *A. stricta* entry can be found. Entries without collection numbers often have locality descriptions in a very general manner such as "Chypre, partout" or "Plaines de Chypre". Post (1900) writes in the very short introduction about "Liste des plantes recueillies à Chypre ...", but this term may refer to collected and recorded only plants. Obviously, it is a mixture of both. However, in the first fascicles of the series the proportion of numbered entries is much higher. The introduction to the 9th instalment of the series (Post & Aufran 1899) says that numbered entries refer mostly to species new for certain regions or even to science. The question of unnumbered entries can only be solved by comparison of hundreds of cases with existing specimens. However, relatively many type gatherings of Post taxa are missing (Musselman & Saoud 2004), which could also be the case in other material.

The surroundings of Buffavento castle, a Medieval founding in the central Pentadaktylos range, belong to the botanically relatively well-researched parts of Cyprus. It has been visited by many of the 19th century explorers of the Cyprus flora (see Meikle 1977: 8–16). And, it is still popular in field botany nowadays because of its rich flora in a spectacular setting. Some cliffs may be difficult to approach or even inaccessible but Post was challenged by the same conditions. Surprisingly, neither in BEI nor in the other checked herbaria any gathering of *A. cypria* Ehrend. (previously known as *Galium suberosum* Sm.) could be found. This species may have escaped his attention, although it is one of the common endemics of Cyprus. As an experienced and indefatigable fieldworker (Musselman 2006) he certainly would have made a gathering of this endemic. However, recent experiences show that many foreign field botanists ignore or even overlook this rather unspectacular and late-flowering plant. Post certainly was familiar with *A. stricta* from SW Asia but he may have mixed it up with *A. cypria* at Buffavento where he saw it in the fruiting state only.

To sum up, no specimen of *A. stricta* from Cyprus seems to exist. The only record most probably refers to a mere field observation. *A. stricta* probably was reported in error for the common endemic *A. cypria*. Occurrences of *A. stricta* cannot be ruled out, but under the current circumstances it should be omitted from the official checklist of Cyprus because no scientific proof exists.

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