

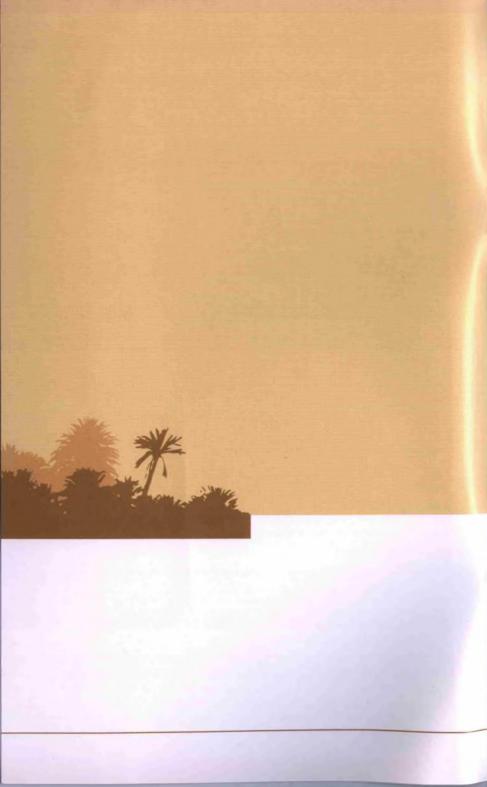




THE PALM GROVE AT



The unique palm grove in Greece and Europe







At the northern end of the east coast of Crete, on cape Sidero, and next to the ruins of the ancient city of Itanos, lies the palm grove of Vai. It covers about 20 hectares in a long, narrow valley that reaches down to the beach.

The grove consists of native *Phoenix theophrasti* palms, also called as Theophrastus palms, and is unique in Greece, in Europe, and possibly in the world. Along the palm grove flows a stream, which creates a seasonal marsh with rush at its outflow into the sea.

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THE THEOPHRASTUS PALM

Until recently, the Theophrastus palm was believed to be nothing more than a variety of the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*). The first to describe the Vai palm as a distinct species, in 1967, was the Swiss botanist Greuter, who named it *Phoenix theophrasti* in honour of the ancient Greek philosopher and naturalist Theophrastus, the first to record the presence of these palms in Crete.

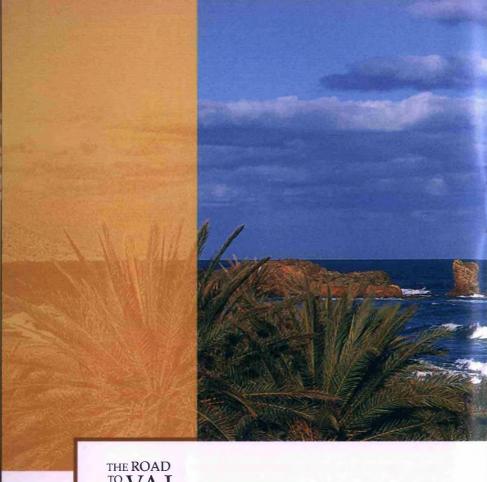
The Theophrastus palm is endemic to the eastern Mediterranean. It flourishes in sandy hollows near the sea and in small valleys forming gullies with permanent or periodical water flow.





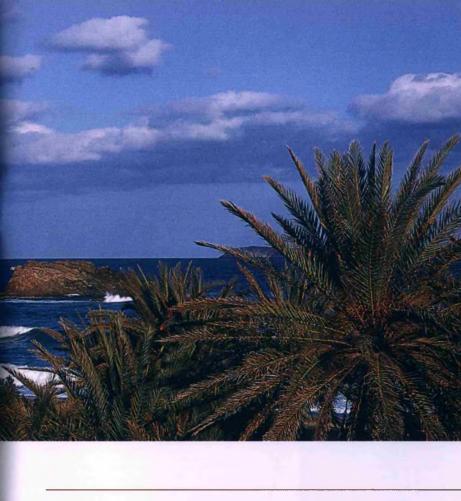
Both in antiquity and later the palm must have been widespread, as evidenced by place names in Crete and the south-east Aegean (Phoenike, Phoenikas, Phoenikia and Phoenikorema among others). The place name Vai also means palm in Greek.

Today, outside Vai, there are isolated trees and clumps of palms elsewhere in Crete (Preveli, Agios Nikitas etc.), on the islands of the south-east Aegean, in Cyprus and south-west Turkey. Only at Vai, however, are they present in sufficient numbers and extent to deserve to be characterised as a forest.



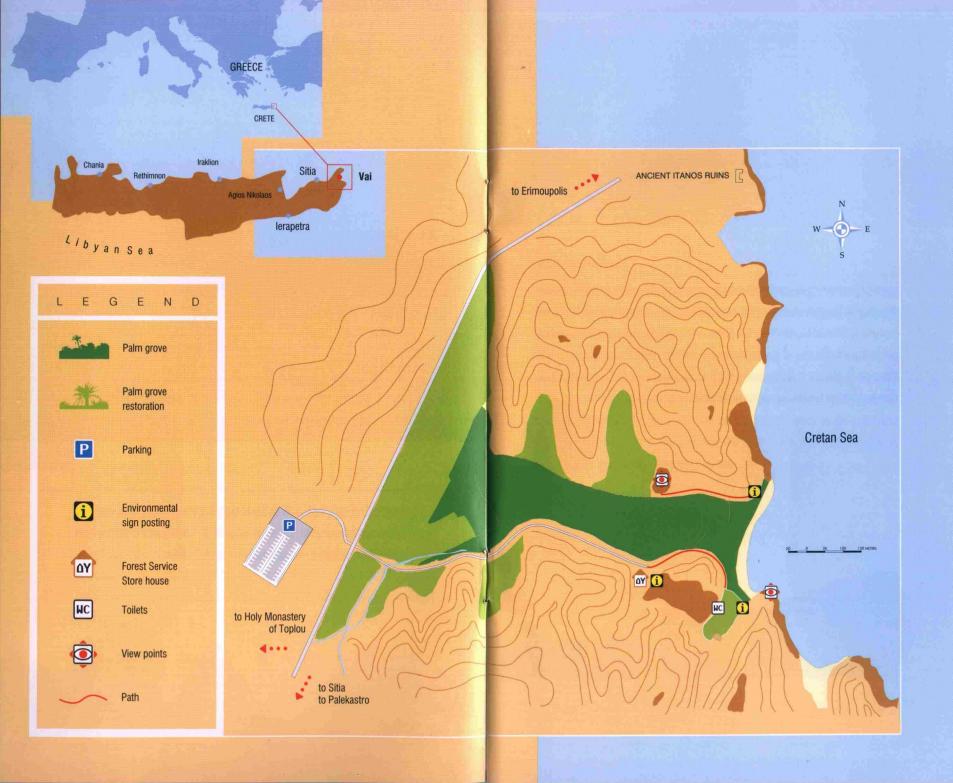
The Vai palm grove is 30 kilometres from Sitia and only 8 kilometres from Palekastro. The approach to the palm grove winds through a landscape of remarkable beauty. Hills and lowland alternate, and the gentle slopes are covered by low shrubs such as thyme, rockrose and heath. The natural landscape prevails, whereas olive groves and vineyards are scattered throughout.





The palm grove comes into view unexpectedly between two hills covered by low shrubs. Its appearance, in conjunction with the features of the surrounding area, comes as a pleasant surprise to the visitor.







LEGENDS...

have been woven to explain the existence of the palm grove in this location, drawing on the rich history of the area and of Crete. One story has it that the grove was born of stones from the dates eaten by Egyptian soldiers, who had come to help the city of Itanos in its war with its neighbours, and who had camped at Vai. In another version the date-eaters were the pirates who ravaged Crete from end to end during the 16th century A.D.





...AND REALITY

Whatever the reason of its appearance at Vai is, the palm grove survives here because of suitable conditions, such as the hot dry semi-desert climate and the relatively high water table.

The presence of the palm in Crete in ancient times is proved by coins from ancient Itanos and Ierapetra showing the tree, and also from depictions on other archaeological finds, such as pottery. Theophrastus, in his book "On History of Plants", written in the 4th century B.C., refers to the palm and distinguishes two types, the tree and the bush palm. Pliny, in his Natural History, also mentions palm trees in Crete.







THE ENVIRONS

Clumps of Theophrastus palms are to be found in the hollow next to Vai, where ancient Itanos has been located. The locals call it Erimoupolis (Desert Town). The ruins indicate that the area was already inhabited in prehistoric times. Its heyday, however, came in the Hellenistic period, when it flourished as a major port and trading centre in contact with the eastern Mediterranean and north Africa. This prosperity continued into the Byzantine period, as can be seen from the ruins of the town's significant early Christian churches.





Six kilometres from Vai, at the base of Cape Sidero, the Toplou monastery, also known as the Virgin of the Cape, rises majestically from the rocky landscape. Here, Theophrastus palms have been found in a gully running northwest of the monastery, mostly in spots that hold water until summer.

The name Toplou refers to the right the monastery had secured to possess a cannon during the Ottoman period. The latest discoveries of frescoes suggest that the monastery was built during the 14th century. It played an important role in the history of eastern Crete and became the guardian of religious and national tradition. Today, the monastery houses two noteworthy museums, one ecclesiastical, with icons, relics and church plate, and another displaying the works of 17th-19th century Greek engravers.





The Vai palm grove, due to its uniqueness and importance, is protected under Greek, European, and international law. It is protected as an Aesthetic Forest, as a Special Protection Area, in accordance with Directive 79/409/EEC on the protection of birds, and is part of the European ecological network of protected areas "Natura 2000". It has also been characterised as a Specially Protected Area in accordance with the Barcelona Convention on protecting the Mediterranean Sea from pollution.

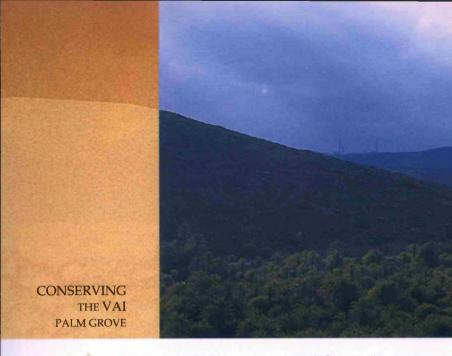




Lastly, the species *Phoenix theophrasti* is protected under Directive 92/43/EEC "on the conservation of natural habitats and wild flora and fauna".

To visit the palm grove is to take a short but fascinating trip back into Greece's natural history and heritage. By all means visit Vai, and treat it with the respect it deserves.





A three-year LIFE-Nature project entitled "Conservation measures for the palm forest of Vai" has been under way since 1999. The project aims to improve the conservation status of the palm grove. It is expected to restore and extend the grove, regulate tourist activity and promote sustainable tourism.





The project actions are implemented with the collaboration and active involvement of local authorities and other relevant bodies.

The bodies responsible for carrying out the project are the Greek Biotope/Wetland Centre, the Holy Monastery of the Virgin of the Cape (Toplou) and the Forest Directorate of Lasithi. The Municipality of Itanos, within whose boundaries the palm grove lies, is also heavily involved. The project is carried out with the support of the European Commission-General Directorate Environment and the Hellenic Ministry of Agriculture-General Secretariat for Forests and the Natural Environment.



 $\label{eq:Texts} Texts$ Nikos Kyfonidis and Vassiliki Tsiaousi

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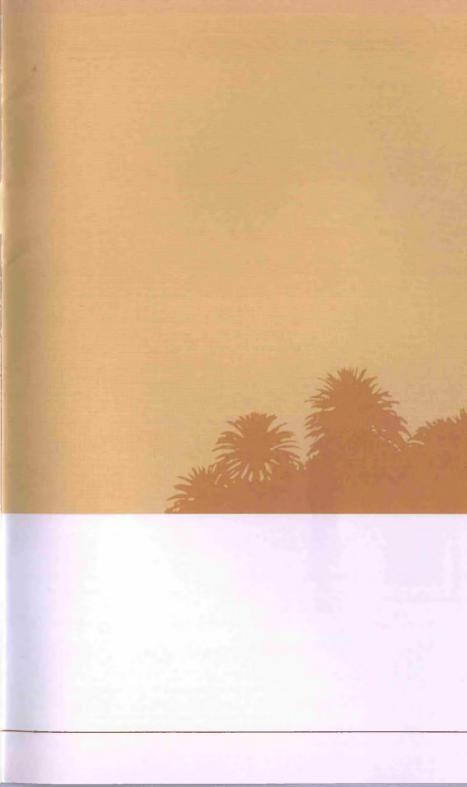
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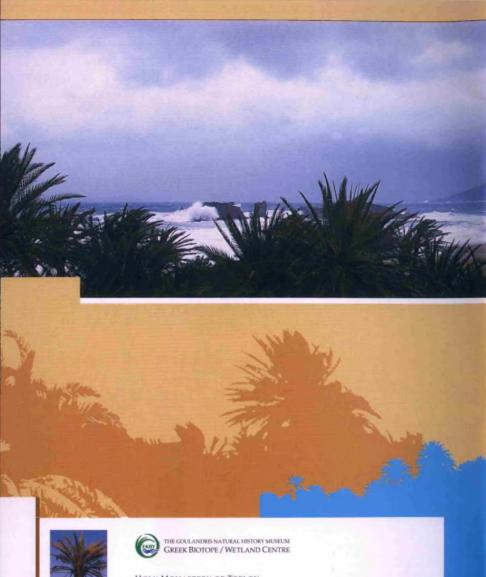
Photos of the palm grove
Photographic files of EKBY/ Nikos Kyfonidis

Photo of the earthware jar "Museum of Iraklion- Illustrated Guide, Ekdotike Athenon S.A."

Photo of copper coin of the Archeological Mouseum of Sitia Kostas Lympitakis









HOLY MONASTERY OF TOPLOU

REGION OF CRETE FOREST DIRECTORATE OF LASITHI



MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE GENERAL SECRETARIAT FOR FORESTS AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

With the cooperation of the Municipality of Itanos

