

Antonio Lasciac and his architectural works in Arabic eyes¹

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Abstract:

The cosmopolitan, remarkable designer and chief architect of (Abbas Hilmi II) Khedive's royal palaces, Antonio Lasciac (Italian and English) or Anton Laščak (Slovene) with multinational origin, was an exceptional personality, who played an influential role in the field of architecture in Egypt and overseas. He is one of the most appreciated foreign architects praised by the Arabs throughout modern history. Here, we focus on the picture of Antonio Lasciac and his architectural works as well as his undetermined citizenship together with the most well-known story about him as portrayed in the scientific studies and Arab press. Researchers and journalists published several interesting and positive reports, opinions and topics on him. Among the sources of this research I am presenting press articles, related studies, together with other trusted internet websites.

Keywords:

Egypt, Antonio Lasciac;
architecture;
belle époque;
Austro-Hungarian.

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Introduction

Foreign architects who worked in Egypt during the reign of Mohamad Ali³ and his successors left a great impact on Egyptian architecture. They played a prominent role and retained a monopoly in the reconstruction work after the British bombardment and occupation in 1882 (Saad, 2018, p. 131). The architects Pietro Avoscani,⁴ Mario Rossi⁵ and Antonio Lasciac were at the top of the most famous names in the world of architecture. They have implemented the magic of their country to the Egyptian architecture (Moustafa, 2014). Antonio Lasciac was “an architect and engineer, poet and musician, a man of talent and hobby, he left a legacy that is considered one of the architectural achievements not only in the Egyptian architectural heritage, but on the level of architecture in general” (Nasr, 2018, p. 84). In this article, I am presenting the following main points on Lasciac: brief biography about him, the issue of his undetermined citizenship, his picture and his architectural works as well as the most well-known story about him, as read in the Arab World.



Figure 1. Antonio Lasciac, chief architect of the Royal Palaces

³ Mohamed Ali Pasha (1769–1849), was the governor of Egypt from 1805 to 1848. He is considered the founder of modern Egypt.

⁴ Pietro Avoscani (1816–1891) was an Italian architect, who emigrated to Egypt in 1837. Among his prominent works in Egypt, we can list: Palace of Gabbar (1846–48), Ras Al-Tin Palace (1847), Palaces of Abbasiyya and Hilmiyya (1849), Palaces of Gazira and Chubra, (1860–61), Khedivial Opera House (1869), Zizinia Theatre (1863).

⁵ Mario Rossi (1897–1961) was an Italian architect, specialized in Islamic architecture. Among his notable works in Egypt: Votive church of the Syriac Catholic Cemetery, Villa Hassan Sabry, Italian World War I Memorial, Latin Cemetery, Abbassia, Umar Makram Mosque at Tahrir Square, Zamalek Mosque, Abu Al-Abbas Al-Mursi Mosque, Abderrahim Al-Qenawi Mosque, Al-Qaed Ibrahim Mosque, Mahatet Al-Raml, Mohamed Kurayyim Mosque.

Brief biography of Lasciac and his works in Egypt

I am not going to give detailed analysis of Lasciac's life, as it was really well-studied and professionally covered by Eastern (See: Awad, 2008; Khalil, 2009; Ahmed, 2018; Rabbat, 2020; Abdel-Rahman, 2016; El-Wakil, 2016)⁶ and Western (See: Godoli, 2006; Barillari, 1998; Kuzmin, 2015) researchers, but it's still worth briefly investigating some main points in Lasciac's life and achievement in Egypt.

Lasciac – not well-known in Italy but with a huge professional experience and fame in the Arab World – was born in Gorizia in 1863 as the first of ten children, three among them died in their early childhood. He moved to Alexandria directly after the city's destruction by the British Army in 1882, in order to participate in the reconstruction works. From that date until the beginning of the First World War (WWI), Lasciac alternated long periods in Egypt with frequent trips to Europe to purchase marbles and furniture for the true luxury apartments and buildings he designed. In 1907, he was appointed as the chief architect of royal palaces, but "owing to his frequent stays in Gorizia, he lost his job at the Court of Abbas Hilmi, but above all he had to leave Egypt, because of his Austrian passport, being a citizen of an enemy state in time of war" (Kuzmin, 2015, p. 52). After the outbreak of WWI, the US representative received the authorities of the Austro-Hungarian Consul in Egypt, since the empire's diplomatic presence lasted in Cairo until September 1914,⁷ when General Maxwell, commander of the occupier British army ordered expelling the diplomats of the German and Austro-Hungarian consulates from Egypt's territory (Al-Naggar, 2011, p. 52). After WWI, Lasciac returned to Egypt, where he completed several successful works, in parallel with other notable architectural achievements abroad. Alternating winter in Egypt and summer in Europe, on 5 October 1946, he moved to Cairo, where he died on 26 December of the same year, and he was buried at the Latin Cemetery of the Egyptian Capital (Cochelli, Sdegno, Kuzmin, 2018, pp. 217–220).

Lasciac's notable projects can be found in Europe, Asia, and Africa. His African architectural accomplishment is still present in Egypt. Among his great works in Egypt, we can list the following: he built a series of residential apartments (1883–1886) for the Société Anonyme des Immeubles d'Égypte on the rue Cherif and the Place des Consuls, the Menasce Okelle (1883–1885). Then, he also built commercial and other facilities such as Ramleh railstation (1883) and the headquarters of the Jewish Alexandrian Community (1887), Palace of Prince Said Halim Pasha⁸ (1896–1899),⁹ Suarès Palace¹⁰ or the Risotto Club¹¹ of Italian Neo-

⁶ The last study dealt with Antonio Lasciac was realized in 2019: a master thesis, discussed in the Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotels (*Egoth*, Alexandria), entitled "Political and public figures and their role in shaping the material heritage of Alexandria during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries," Antonio Lasciac was strongly present. The researcher Micheal Mohebb Makram Fahim aimed to portray the biography of some of the most prominent foreign figures including engineers, artists, writers, merchants and their role in drawing the features of the material heritage of Alexandria in the modern era.

⁷ Only one consular officer remained in Cairo until he was arrested by the British in December 1915.

⁸ Said Halim Pasha (1863–1921) was appointed in the Council of State in Istanbul in 1888, later in 1911, he served as Foreign Minister and in 1913 as Grand Vizier.

⁹ The palace reflects Neo-Baroque style with Art Nouveau ascents.

¹⁰ It was first used as residence of banker Raphaël Suarès (1844–1906).

¹¹ Later it hosted the Italian social club Circolo del Risotto.



Renaissance style (1897), Villa Mazloum Pasha (1898–1899, Alexandria), Palace of Prince Kamal Al-Din Hussein And Princess Niemat-Allah¹² designed in Neo-Baroque style (1906, Cairo), as well as the building of the Assicurazioni Generali (Insurance Company) in Cairo in 1911 and the villa of Princess Fatma Al-Zahra in 1919 (today the fantastic Jewelry Museum of the Crown in Alexandria), the headquarters of the Misr¹³ Bank (1922–1927) and the Alexandria railway station, completed in 1946 (See: Scientific Office of the Italian Embassy in Egypt, n.d, pp. 14–26; Cochelli, Sdegno, Kuzmin, 2018, pp. 218–219).

Lasciac's undetermined nationality in the Arab World

After a long-term research in many different Arabic sources on Lasciac, I realized that the real and accurate nationality of Lasciac is still undetermined in the Arab World. Many sources indicate that he was Italian, while others mention that he was Austrian or Austro-Hungarian, while others conclude that he was only Hungarian. He was also Italian-Slovenian, and a sole Slovenian according to some writings. Huge contradictions can be found concerning his nationality in Arab Academia and also in the press. Researchers and journalists disagree on this point. Here, I am going to explain and analyse the reasons of these contradictory statements, referring to the Arab mentality and mode of thinking, as the following:

Talking about being an Austro-Hungarian or only Austrian citizen comes from the fact that he was born in Gorizia, which was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire¹⁴ at that time, and he completed his studies of architecture in Vienna (See: Kuzmin, 2015, p. 198; Cochelli, Sdegno, Kuzmin, 2018, p. 217).¹⁵ Only few Arab researchers and journalists know that Gorizia was a part of the Dual Monarchy, and they wrote, that he was Austro-Hungarian. The majority in the Arab world, especially non-researchers, do not know about the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as if it did not even exist, and they call it simply Austria without mentioning the Hungarian part of it, consequently, they said that he was only Austrian.

¹² The daughter of Khedive Mohamed Tawfik Pasha (1852–1892) and spouse of Prince Kamal Al-Din Hussein (1874–1932)

¹³ This Arabic word means Egypt.

¹⁴ Austria-Hungary, or the Dual Monarchy was a great power in Central Europe between 1867 and 1918.

¹⁵ Diego Kuzmin affirmed that, he was graduated at the University of Vienna (See: Kuzmin, 2015, p. 198). Three years later of this first study, Paola Cochelli, Alberto Sdegno and the same scholar of the first study Diego Kuzmin confirmed in their study entitled *Researches on Architectural Heritage Drawing Between Italy and Slovenia: The Antonio Lasciac's Villa*: "Unlike described from preceding biographies, his graduation diploma at Vienna University of Technology has not been found, but recent researches have identified an internship at the Building Office of the Gorizia Municipality in 1876 and a period of professional activity in his city before leaving for the Egypt." (See: Cochelli, Sdegno, Kuzmin, 2018, p. 217).

It is also said that Lasciac was a Hungarian citizen. The reason for this is because he had a strong relationship with the Hungarians residing in Egypt in that era, especially with the famous Hungarian architect, Miksa Herz Pasha,¹⁶ who had relevant works in Cairo, and with May Török¹⁷ (See: Al-Naggar, 2019, pp. 6–17), the Hungarian wife of Abbas Helmi II, Khedive of Egypt, “the good spirit for Europeans at the Khedivial court” (Rafaat, 1994, p. 13). Lasciac was appointed as chief architect of royal palaces, maybe after the personal and direct intervention of May Török as he designed and built the Khedive's Palace (Saray) in Tchibukli,¹⁸ achieving all *the desires and dreams* of the Hungarian wife of the last Khedive of Egypt (Jarmik, 2017, pp. 1–13). The palace, completed in 1907 by Lasciac, was a turning point in Lasciac's life, as he was directly appointed in the same year as chief architect of royal palaces. Abbas's second wife claims in her memoirs *Harem*¹⁹ that: “she took an active role in the creation of Tchibukli Saray right from its drawing board phase to the selection of the wallpaper and upholstery material. It was also Countess May who assigned and approved the landscaping of the palace gardens, its winding footpaths, each re-planted tree, every rose bush, not forgetting 'lovers lane' connecting Chalet to Saray which held such a special memory for the royal couple. [...] It was there that she spent intimate holidays with the Khedive away from officialdom” (Rafaat, 1994, p. 13).



Figure 2. Tchibukli Saray (Khedive Palace, Çubuklu Palace) (Yalav-Heckerroth, 2016)

¹⁶ Miksa Herz (1856–1919) Hungarian architect, conservator, First Director of the Arab Museum, and architectural historian, active in Egypt.

¹⁷ May (Marianna) Török Szendrői (in Hungary), or as she referred to herself as Djavidan Hanem (in Arabic and Turkish), secret consort of Abbas Hilmi II (1900–1910), and Khediva of Egypt (1910–1913). The well-known Countess May Török was born in Philadelphia (USA) of Hungarian origin on 15 June 1877, when her parent's marriage was closed to its end. Her mother was Countess Zsófia Vetter von der Lilié, who was married three times to three different Hungarian men: her first husband was Count József Török, former head of Ung county. Later, she married Tivadar Puskás, the brilliant Hungarian entrepreneur and telephone pioneer. After Puskás's death, she married a painter, Károly Cserna (1867–1944).

¹⁸ The Khedive's Palace or Çubuklu Palace was designed in the Art Nouveau style, incorporating characteristics and details of neo-classical Ottoman architecture.

¹⁹ The original German *Harem* was published in Berlin in 1930. Its Arabic translation was published three times as follows: in 1980 by the state-run Dar Al-Hilal Publishing House, Cairo, and later reprinted by Al-Kahera journal of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, and third in 2004 by Dar Almada, Damascus.



Figure 3. May Török (1877–1968)



Figure 4. Miksa Herz (1856–1919)

As for being Slovenian, it comes primarily because his family name *Laščak* is Slovenian and not Italian nor Austro-Hungarian, and his father *Peter*, a “tanner” descended from Slovenia. The family of Peter Lasciac came from the Valley of Soča river, today located in Slovenia. In addition, he began his life working with a Slovenian person and his wife, Maria Plesnizer (Marija Alojzija Plesničar) was also a Goritian woman coming from a Slovenian family (Kazamias, 2015).²⁰

Most Arabic sources refer to his Italian citizenship due to several reasons: most of the arab journalists and also many specialized researchers are convinced that Gorizia, where Lasciac was born in the house of his mother’s parents,²¹ has been an Italian city throughout history and it had no Austro-Hungarian dependency at all. The second reason is that Lasciac did many prominent architectural works in Italy, and lived there for long periods of his life, including the whole period of the WWI, although Italy was the enemy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.²² In addition, to Arabic speakers, the name Antonio sounds Italian. Moreover, Lasciac’s mother, Giuseppina Trampus, was Italian. Lasciac had three children with fully Italian names as follows: Plautilla Angelina Francesca, Fabbrizio Antonio Giuseppe and Romeo Italico Alessandro. For Arab architects and specialists, his architectural designs and construction style, which tends

²⁰ Talk given on 29 October, 2015 at the Hellenic Centre, London, for the book launch of Vittoria Capresi and Barbara Pampe, *Discovering Downtown Cairo: Architecture and Stories*, Berlin, Jovis, 2015.

²¹ The house still exists today, at the corner of Via Veniero and Piazza San Rocco in Gorizia.

²² A question raised here in the Arab press: why Lasciac settled in Rome and not in his original city Gorizia during the WWI? The question remained unanswered for a long time, although the answer is so easy: Gorizia became the scene of serious battles between the Italian and Austro-Hungarian armies, and it was seriously damaged and most of its inhabitants were evacuated by early 1916, consequently he couldn’t accomodate there during that period.

to Italians,²³ refer in their minds to that he was Italian. Additional persuasive reason, for being Italian citizen, is that Lasciac's most archival documents are kept in Gorizia, mainly in five official archives: in the Historical Archive of the Municipality of Gorizia,²⁴ in the State Archive of Gorizia,²⁵ in the Provincial Museums of Gorizia,²⁶ in the Historical Provincial Archive of Gorizia²⁷ and in the Photo Library of the Provincial Museums²⁸ (Kuzmin, 2015, p. 201). Furthermore, Lasciac had always expressed Italian feelings. We can say that in the point of view of the Arabs, Antonio Lasciac, mainly due to his Italian character and his Italian architectural heritage, was rather Italian than Slovene or Austrian or Hungarian.

In my own point of view, the truth on his nationality is the following: Lasciac was born in the County of Gorizia, which was part of the Austrian Littoral²⁹ in 1849,³⁰ and was granted regional autonomy after becoming the Princely County of Gorizia and Gradisca³¹ in 1861. Lasciac possessed an Austrian passport until the end of the WWI, although he was settling in Italy. In November 1918, the Italian armed forces occupied Gorizia, where they introduced their own administration, and in 1920, the town became officially part of Italy. In 1927, it became a provincial capital within the Julian March administrative region. Although the town was shortly occupied by the Slovenians in September 1943, and by the Yugoslavians in May and June 1945, it remained Italian. Accordingly, Lasciac became an Italian citizen after WWI, as Gorizia was included in the territory of Italy.

Antonio Lasciac's picture and his works in the eyes of Arab Academia and Press

There are many comprehensive studies written, and seminars (See: Taher, 2018) organized by Arabic scholars and specialists, that dealt with the life and works of Antonio Lasciac, and these can be counted despite their large number. As for the short newspaper articles talking about one or more of his works, these cannot be enumerated. It suffices to write Antonio Lasciac "أنطونيو لاشياك" in Arabic on the Internet to see that, or you can do the same step in the database of the Egyptian National Library and Archives³² in Cairo to find out the huge amount of sources mentioning him. Here, I am going to focus on the most important Arabic sources and articles dealing with Lasciac and his works.

²³ The usual stylistic European eclecticism often inspired by the Italian Renaissance – adopted by Lasciac, as he did for example, in the villa of Princess Fatma Al-Zahra, now the Museum of the Crown Jewels – refers to his Italianity in the Arabs' eyes.

²⁴ In Italian: Archivio Storico del Comune di Gorizia.

²⁵ In Italian: Archivio di Stato di Gorizia.

²⁶ In Italian: Musei Provinciali di Gorizia.

²⁷ In Italian: Archivio Storico Provinciale di Gorizia.

²⁸ In Italian: Fototeca dei Musei Provinciali.

²⁹ It was a crown land of the Austrian Empire, composed of Istria peninsula, Gorizia and Gradisca, and the Imperial Free City of Trieste.

³⁰ It was included in the Austrian Littoral along with Trieste and Istria.

³¹ It was a crown land of the Habsburg dynasty within the Austrian Littoral. Now a border area between Italy and Slovenia.

³² It was established in 1870 in Cairo. It is the largest library in Egypt, and it is a non-profit government organization.



There are many Arabic studies that focus on analyzing and studying the works of Lasciac not only in Egypt, but also abroad. Dr. Karima Nasr, well-known Egyptian researcher and specialist, in her analytical study of Lasciac's style said: "Antonio Lasciac had a fixed style in building palaces: each one consists of two floors and a basement, while the styles of their façades differed according to their construction periods and the extent to which his architectural experience was affected by the Architecture of the Orient. The architectural styles of Lasciac in Downtown Cairo can be divided into four styles: first, he began designing using the new classical style, the revival of the Greek and Roman arts, which he brought from Italy, then he started relinquishing gradually the implementation of the new Renaissance style, followed by the newly introduced Baroque, and finally recognizing the greatness of the Islamic architecture, he turned to the new Islamic style." Moreover, it is worth dealing with his *meticulous or cumulative style*, which indicates the interference of the client's desires as most of them were from the royal family, princes and wealthy people, and by virtue of their spending long times outside the country, it was reflected on their own taste. All the downtown buildings established by Lasciac depend on the new classical style, excepting for the decorative elements, depending on the taste of the architect or the owner of the building. Lasciac arranged the architectural elements together in a style that reflects shadow and light (Nasr, 2016, p. 275). Completing the image of Lasciac's architectural style, Nasser Rabbat said:³³ "Lasciac was gradually adopting the *eclectic Islamic styles* popular among architects in Egypt at the time, but was accommodating the taste of his clients among the ruling class, like Said Halim, who demanded the prevalent European styles for their buildings" (Rabbat, 2020, pp. 151–152).

Dr. Inas Abdelsabour Ahmed, Egyptian scholar and architectural historian, praises Lasciac's wonderful work: "Prince Yusuf Kamal's Palace was one of the most beautiful palaces of Mohamed Ali's family, and his palace had merged European Architecture in Eastern Architecture (Arabic Islamic). The palace was built in 1908 and was designed by the famous royal palace architect Antonio Lasciac, one of the most famous architects who came to Egypt [...] this palace was a model of the steadfastness of aesthetic values in the face of the attack of modern civilization" (Ahmed, 2018, pp. 719–737). Mohamed Hassan, director general of the Islamic Antiquities Sector in Qena,³⁴ said about the same palace: "It is one of the most important palaces in Egypt in general, and in southern Egypt in particular, because of its wonderful location on the Nile River and its unique architectural style" (Marie, 2019).

Regarding Lasciac's image in the Arab press, we can say that the Arab journalists published several interesting and positive reports and opinions on him, unusually without any criticism. Dina Moustafa, well-known Egyptian young journalist, in her long article published in Al-

³³ Nasser Rabbat is an architect, historian, and the Director of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His scholarly interests include the history and historiography of Islamic architecture, art, and cultures, urban history, and post-colonial criticism.

³⁴ Qena is a city in Upper Egypt, and it was known in antiquity as Kaine.

Ahram³⁵ dated 10 December, 2014, said: “History will not ignore the most famous designer of the presidential palaces in Egypt Antonio Lasciac, the Italian architect who designed buildings that are *European antiques* in Egypt. [...] Lasciac combined in his design the construction of downtown buildings between local and European architecture to form a *new classic style* representing an architectural edifice that is unparalleled in modern Egyptian architecture” (Moustafa, 2014).

The most well-known story on Lasciac in the Arab World

Since we are talking here about Lasciac from an Arab point of view, we must mention the most famous and widespread story about him, narrated by Dr. Amro Talaat, Egyptian historian, in his article posted by Rawi magazine, Egypt’s Heritage Review. Although it is a little funny, it also carries a kind of respect and appreciation for this man and his endless precision. When Ismail Pasha,³⁶ Khedive of Egypt, deposed from the throne, he took three of his four wives with him. In 1895, Khedive Ismail and his first wife (Shehret Feza Hanim)³⁷ passed away, then Djananiar Hanem³⁸ and Jeshm Afet Hanem³⁹ decided to return to reside in Egypt together! The two wives asked Antonio Lasciac, to design a palace for them in the garden of the old palace, so he built the Saffron Palace (Saray of Zafaran) for them,⁴⁰ which would be the only palace in Egypt and perhaps in all over the world that two wives built to reside in together, by mutual agreement and free will, after the death of their husband! The palace is composed of a basement and two floors and has five entrances and is surrounded by a 40-acre⁴¹ garden. Upon entering the main entrance, you find yourself in a spacious, very luxurious hall surrounded by beautiful marble columns that add more and more to its splendor. The two wives were keen to decorate the walls with the letter “I”⁴² above the Egyptian crown in memory of their husband! A double staircase with a wonderful iron railing, which is one of the most beautiful elements of the palace, leads you to the foyer of the upper floor, which divides the floor into two wings, exactly equal in size and number of rooms, a suite for each of the two wives. As if Lasciac had intended his determination to help the continuation of friendship

³⁵ *Al-Ahram*: Founded in Alexandria in 1875 by two Lebanese brothers, Beshara Takla and Saleem Takla. It began as a weekly newspaper published every Saturday. Its first issue appeared on August 5, 1876. The paper was relaunched as a daily newspaper in January 1881. In addition to the main edition published in Egypt, the paper publishes two other Arabic-language editions, one geared to the Arab world and the other aimed at an international audience, as well as editions in English and French.

³⁶ Ismail Pasha (1830–1895), was the Khedive of Egypt from 1863 to 1879. He was removed at the behest of Great Britain and direct intervention of the Ottoman Sultan. He greatly modernized Egypt and Sudan developing the industrial and economic sectors, and expanding the country's boundaries in Africa.

³⁷ Shehret Feza Hanem (1829–1895) was the ethnic Circassian Princess, and the first wife of Khedive Ismail.

³⁸ Jananiyar Hanem (1835–1912) was the Princess consort of Khedive Ismail Pasha of Egypt. She married Ismail Pasha as his second wife before his accession to the throne. She gave birth to six children.

³⁹ Jeshm Afet Hanim (1863–1907), consort of Khedive Ismail Pasha of Egypt. She was the adoptive mother of the future Sultana of Egypt Melek Tourhan.

⁴⁰ It is located in Cairo. Now it is the main office of the Presidential Office of the Ain Shams University. The Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936 was signed and the Arab League was founded in 1945 there.

⁴¹ It is a unit of land area, which is exactly equal to 10 square chains, and approximately 4,047 m², or about 40% of a hectare.

⁴² The first letter of the name Ismail, their husband, Khedive of Egypt.

between them, so, he made sure to divide the space of the palace between them fairly! Indeed, the two wives lived there together in friendship until Jeshm Afet Hanem died in 1907, and Djananiar Hanem followed her in 1912, and she was the last member of the royal family to live in the palace (Talaat, n.d.).



Figure 5. Entrance and stairs of the Saffron Palace

As a conclusion, It is worth mentioning that using the aforementioned sources accompanied with structural analysis, I tried to draw the three main points of my research topic on how the Arabs portrayed the great architect Antonio Lasciac and his unforgettable works, still seen in many places. I hope that my research puts an accepted and persuasive clarifications to the controversy disributed in the Arab World on Lasciac's nationality, after giving more analitical details on the possible versions in this regard, as well as on the truth, I believe in, according to the previously mentioned historical facts, concerning his legal identification.

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Conflict of interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exist for this manuscript.

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