

# Public Space in Therasia: A Traditional Landscape Defined by Informality

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doi 10.5281/zenodo.17131372

**ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ:** Η Θηρασιά, μέρος του συμπλέγματος της Σαντορίνης στις Κυκλάδες, Ελλάδα, ακολούθησε διαφορετική πορεία από τη Θήρα. Σε αντίθεση με τη Θήρα, κέντρο εμπορίου, πλούτου και τουρισμού, η Θηρασιά παρέμεινε λιγότερο γνωστή, διατηρώντας λιτό, φτωχικό χαρακτήρα, εμφανή στους δημόσιους χώρους της, παρόλο που μοιράζεται παρόμοιο κλίμα και γεωμορφολογία. Η παρούσα εργασία παρουσιάζει σύντομη ιστορική αναδρομή της αστικής ανάπτυξης της Θηρασιάς τους τελευταίους τρεις αιώνες, ακολουθούμενη από ανάλυση των δημόσιων χώρων της. Η μελέτη εξετάζει ολοκληρωμένα τους δημόσιους χώρους του νησιού. Τα ευρήματα καταδεικνύουν ότι η πλειονότητα των δημόσιων χώρων αναπτύχθηκε οργανικά, από τις πρακτικές ανάγκες των τοπικών κοινοτήτων, και όχι από επίσημο κρατικό σχεδιασμό. Αυτή η ανεπίσημη ανάπτυξη αναδεικνύει την προσαρμοστικότητα και κοινωνική δυναμική της χωρικής ανάπτυξης στο νησί, καθώς και την απόρριψη προσπαθειών για επιβολή πιο επίσημης, κρατικής οργάνωσης των δημόσιων χώρων.

**Λέξεις-Κλειδιά:** Θηρασιά, μη τυπικός δημόσιος χώρος, Κυκλάδες,

**ABSTRACT:** Therasia, part of the Santorini complex in the Cyclades, Greece, has followed a distinct path compared to Thera. Unlike Thera, a hub of trade, wealth, and tourism, Therasia has remained obscure, retaining a modest, impoverished character evident in its public spaces, despite similar climate and geomorphology. This paper presents a concise historical account of Therasia's urban development over the past three centuries, followed by an analysis of its public spaces. This study examines the public spaces of the island in a comprehensive manner. The findings demonstrate that the majority of public spaces in Therasia were developed organically, driven by the practical necessities of local communities rather than formal state planning. This informality serves to illustrate the adaptive and communal dynamics of spatial development on the island, as well as a clear rejection of attempts to impose a more formal, state-driven organization of public spaces.

**Keywords:** Therasia, informal public space, Cyclades, customary laws

## I. THE EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC SPACE IN CYCLADES AND THE UNIQUE CASE OF THERASIA

Therasia is located to the west of the island of Thera, with its eastern side forming the western edge of the Santorini volcano's caldera (Figure 1). Throughout its history, the fate of this small island appears to have been inextricably linked to that of Thera. Despite the proximity of Therasia to Santorini, (just a 10-minute boat ride from the port of Oia), the former has not experienced the same level of development and modernization that Santorini has undergone during the past five decades. Consequently, the natural landscape of Therasia has remained largely

untouched by modern construction activity, resulting in the preservation of its traditional character and a modest and impoverished sense of place that is reflected in its public spaces.

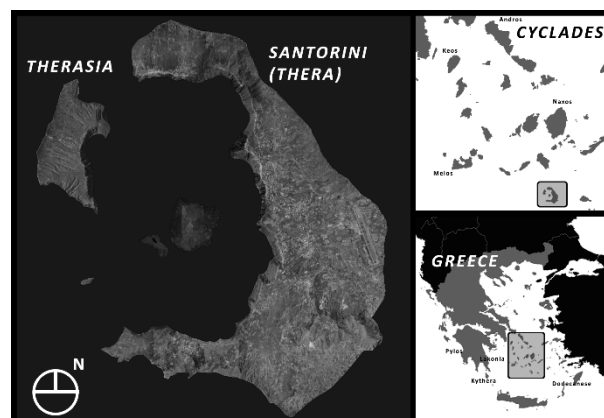


Figure 1 - Therasia, Santorini and Cyclades, Greece.

The villages and towns across the Cyclades, which began to take shape from the late medieval period through to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, are distinguished by several key features. These include tightly packed, interconnected buildings, narrow pathways and roads that serve both access and communication purposes, and a prevalence of modest, often two-story homes. This architectural style reflects a pervasive sense of spatial efficiency that governs the layout and organization of these settlements [1]. The use of public space in the Cyclades, particularly in these traditional settlements, is deeply tied to their historical and environmental context [2]. The narrow streets and dense layouts were not only a response to limited land availability and the need for defense in earlier times but also fostered a communal way of life. Public spaces, such as small squares or widened sections of pathways, often served as informal gathering points for social interaction, trade, or religious activities, though they were minimal due to the emphasis on spatial economy [3] - [4]. On the islands of Santorini and Therasia, two primary settlement patterns emerge: linear settlements, typically perched along the caldera's edge, and rupestrian settlements, carved into the ravines [5] - [7]. These settlements, particularly on Therasia and to a large extent on Thera, adhere to the Cycladic norms of dense construction and limited space, yet they possess distinctive traits that set them apart. Therasia and Santorini feature Greece's only rupestrian settlements, carved into volcanic soil, showcasing adaptive use of the terrain. While Therasia's settlements align with Cycladic norms, their partial abandonment sets them apart—many lie deserted or repurposed as animal pens or storage, unlike Santorini, where tourism has erased smaller historical sites [8] - [9].

The roots of Greek urban informality can be traced back to the broader social, cultural, and economic dynamics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as highlighted by Theocharopoulou [10]. This informality is seen as a manifestation of Greek cultural identity, driving both the modernization and urbanization processes, particularly in Athens and in mainland Greece. Nevertheless, an examination of the urban history of the Cyclades reveals the presence of informal public spaces that have existed for several centuries; this phenomenon is attributable to the multifaceted historical factors and social particularities that characterize the morphology of Cycladic settlements. The built environment of the Cyclades at the micro-urban scale was primarily shaped by customary laws—a collection of locally recognized rules and practices governing the use and regulation of space. [2].

The built environment in the Cyclades has been shaped over the last centuries by a set of customary rules that governed land ownership and usage rights, emphasizing the respect for private property. Key practices included the a) acknowledgment of earlier usage rights allowing access across private land if no public road was available [11] b) exclusive ownership of trees and cistern separate from land ownership [12], and c) the establishment of condominium rights enabling individuals to own distinct floors within buildings. Also, d) building regulations ensured respect for sunlight and views, necessitating consent for openings facing adjacent yards [13]. These customary rules fostered a compact urban layout, allowing for shared communal spaces and a unique Cycladic architectural character that balanced social cohesion and flexibility in design. All of the aforementioned customary rules were applied in Santorini and Therasia [1].

The customary laws that had previously shaped much of the building environment in Cyclades were abolished in 1856 by legislation of the modern Greek state [Drakakis, 1967]. Nonetheless, the general morphology of the settlements remained consistent for several decades. The state endeavored to safeguard the traditional character of the urban fabric in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a century later, by implementing the General Building Regulation (GBR) in 1973 and subsequently updating it in 1985, 2000 and 2012 [14] - [17]. However, it was only with the advent of mass tourism that a transformation in the character of Cycladic settlements occurred, as modern forms of accommodation became necessary to support the influx of tourists [18].

Santorini has followed a similar trajectory to other Cycladic islands, but Therasia has diverged from this. From the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Therasia began to experience a gradual economic and demographic decline [19] - [21], which only recently began to recover. The unregulated build-up and expansion that is so prevalent in the Cyclades, and especially in Santorini [22], is a phenomenon that is widespread in Therasia [23] - [24], but for different reasons, since there is no tourist pressure.

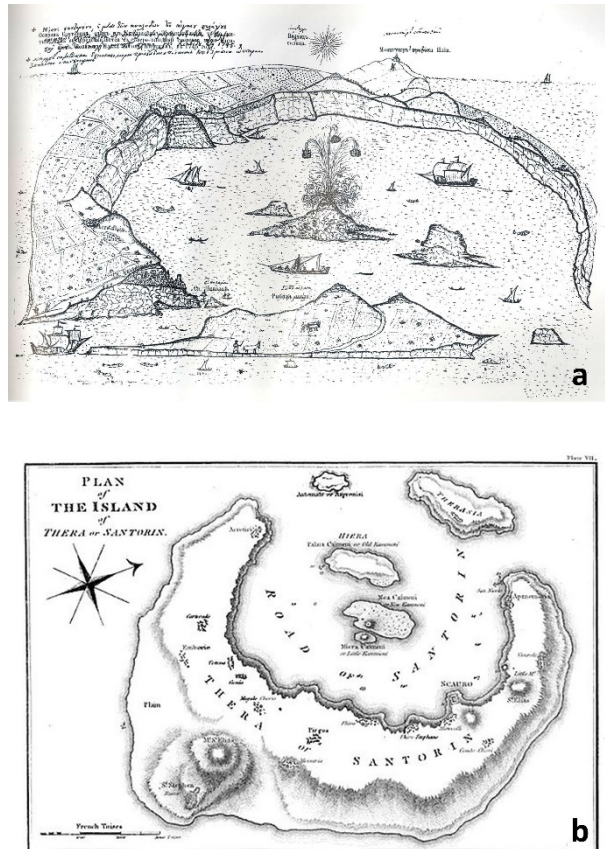
Therasia has been the focal point of research endeavors over the past fifteen years, with two research programs, Thales (2012–2015) and Arch2Plant (2021–2024). The two research programs focused on the active major settlements of Manolas, Potamos and the semi-abandoned Agrilia [25] - [27], as well as the rural built environment and abandoned settlement sites [21], [28] - [30]. However, none of the previous studies have explored the type and the significance of the production of built space, formal and informal, during the last centuries.

This research constitutes the inaugural investigation of unregulated and informal public spaces in Therasia. The objective of this study is threefold: firstly, to define the informal public spaces in Therasia diachronically and their distinctive characteristics; secondly, to map every informal public space on the island, urban and rural, examining both existing and abandoned settlements; and thirdly, to gain an in-depth understanding of the evolution of public space up to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## II. SETTLEMENT DEVELOPMENT IN THERASIA AND PUBLIC SPACES

Over the past three centuries, Therasia's urban development has undergone significant shifts, shaped by economic, demographic, and environmental factors. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the island saw its earliest seasonal settlements, likely tied to Volia in the south, with evidence of activity from the post-Byzantine period. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Therasia was fully terraced and cultivated, as depicted in a 1745 sketch by monk Vasilij Grigorovic Barskij (figure 2), with dry-stone walls and an east-west road indicating rural organization. The village of Manolas emerged by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, recorded on Oliver's map, alongside Volia and scattered habitat sites. The 19<sup>th</sup> century marked a period of growth, with settlements like Potamos, Agrilia, and Kera established amid demographic increases following the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca and the Greek War of Independence (1821–1832). Viticulture drove the shift from seasonal to permanent settlements. By 1875, Volia was abandoned, its residents moving to Agrilia, while mining for the Suez Canal boosted Potamos and Agrilia's populations. However, terrace abandonment began in the remote northern and southern regions.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Therasia's countryside remained active, though mining declined, doubling Manolas' population near Korfos port. Smaller settlements like Trachylas and Spendandes evolved into micro-settlements, and sites like Agios Georgios transitioned to permanent habitation, fueled by a wine production resurgence. Dry-stone walls saw repairs, and agrarian buildings became farmsteads as landless farmers gained ownership.



**Figure 2** - (a)Barskij map (1745) and (b) Olivier's map (1801, drawn in 1794). Source: Monioudi-Gavala, D. Santorini: Society and Shelter 15<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century brought decline, with southern fields abandoned by 1975, followed by northern and central areas. Volcanic eruptions (1925, 1939, 1950) and a 1956 earthquake, combined with urbanization, migration, and agricultural changes post-World War II, emptied the countryside. Only Manolas, Potamos, and the ports of Riva and Korfos survived, the latter now serving tourism.

### III. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Between 2021 and 2023, in the context of the research program Arch2Plant were carried out seven field expeditions in Therasia to examine the landscape, document existing and abandoned settlements, and analyze the island's rural architectural heritage. The study combined conventional and modern techniques to gather architectural and topographic data. Traditional land surveying was conducted using a total station, while aerial reconnaissance was performed with a DJI Mavic 3 UAV. The UAV proved instrumental in expediting the documentation process, enabling systematic image collection, particularly in challenging locations since many areas are obscured by dense vegetation.

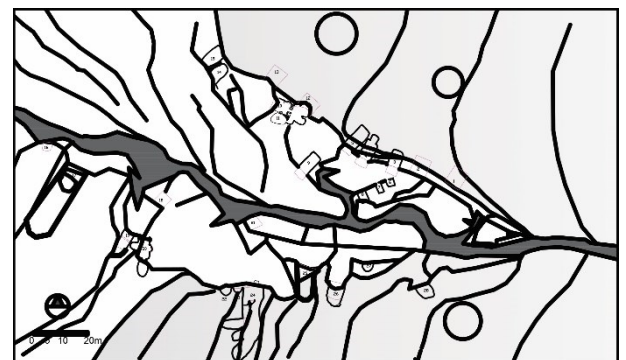
To analyze settlement distribution, detailed data sheets were compiled for each site, aiding in the production of maps and architectural plans of built environments. Historical aerial images from the 1940s, 1960s, and 1980s, as well as cartographic materials from the Hellenic Military Geographical Service, were referenced alongside

contemporary data to facilitate comparative analysis. Maps illustrating rural architecture and a series of orthophoto maps for all surveyed sites were created using software such as Autodesk AutoCAD and Adobe Photoshop, along with Geographic Information System (GIS) tools for geophysical, slope, and visibility mapping.

### IV. RESULTS

To better identify and study the informal spaces in Therasia's settlements, two milestone dates were defined. The first is 1856, when customary practices were abolished by the Greek state, and the second is 1973, when the General Building Regulations began to take effect. Accordingly, the settlements were examined across three time periods: a) from the late medieval period to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, b) from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1970s, and c) from the 1970s to the present day.

A) From the late medieval period to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, all abandoned settlements were studied, but only Volia (Figure 3) was abandoned by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century or earlier [21]. Volia, constructed at the mouth of a ravine, has its residential complexes built into the cliffs. These complexes are delineated by dry-stone walls and terraces, each featuring a courtyard on a terraced area in front of the house. The main—and only—road runs along the bottom of the ravine, with indentations leading to the courtyard of each residential complex. There is no clear path from the main road to the fields above the settlement, suggesting that movement to the fields required crossing the courtyard of a private property. This indicates that the customary law permitting access across private land in the absence of a public road was in effect in Volia.



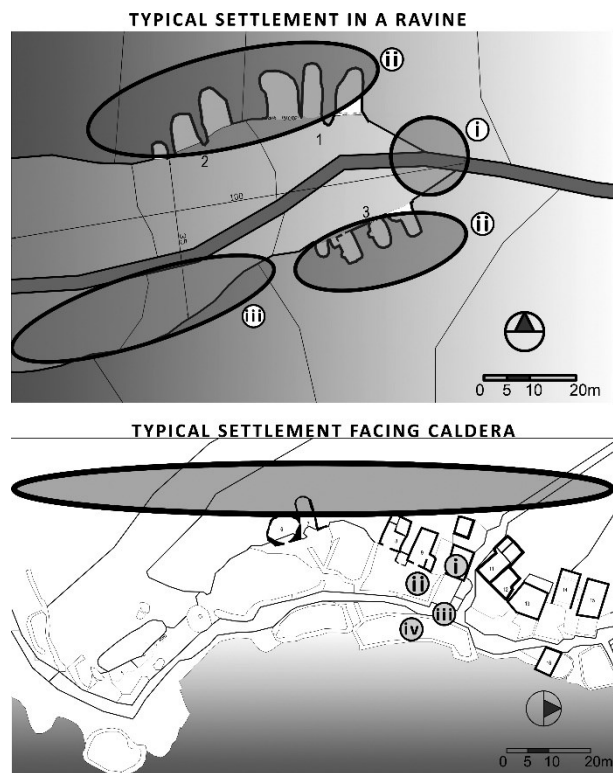
**Figure 3** - Town plan of Volia.

Since there were no official state spatial regulations governing settlements during that period, Volia developed organically, providing its residents with a highly protected location near the southern fields. The main road, though public, was informal. While public property was highly regarded, there were instances where parts of it were incorporated into the settlement's circulatory system. These semi-public and semi-private paths are also characterized as informal.

B) The century of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to late-20<sup>th</sup> century is the most active period regarding the spatial expansion and

decline in Therasia. Many smaller settlements sited were established only to diminish some decades later. Only Manolas, Potamos and the port of Riva managed to survive at the end this period.

In Therasia, settlements are classified into those in ravines and those facing the caldera, both exhibiting a distinct linear organization (Figure 4). Ravine settlements are arranged along the narrowest sections of the terrain, where residential complexes are placed side by side. Their layout follows a consistent sequence of rupestrian buildings, courtyard, road, and garden, although spatial constraints sometimes necessitate omitting the courtyard or garden. Similarly, caldera-facing settlements adopt a linear configuration along north-south terraces that maintain the same sequential arrangement [21].

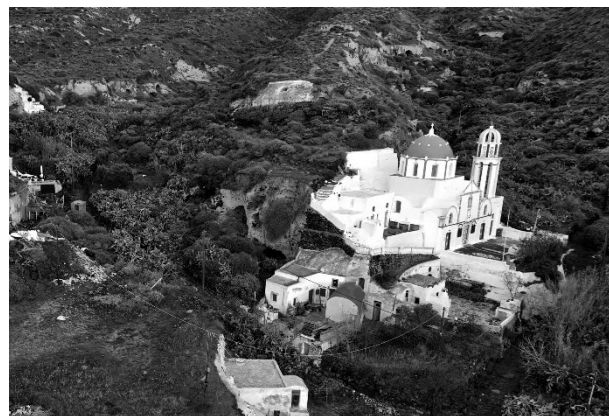


**Figure 4** - The typical settlement in a ravine exhibits the following characteristics: i) The settlement is situated in a narrow portion of the ravine, ii) The residential complexes located on the northern cliff exhibit a 2.5:1 ratio in comparison to the southern cliff, and iii) The gardens are typically positioned in the southern part of the ravine. Typical settlement facing caldera: The top of the caldera serves to protect the houses from the strong northwestern winds. The typical arrangement from west to east is as follows: i) house, ii) courtyard, iii) road, iv) garden.

The public space in both settlement types consists almost solely of roads. These roads, constructed in accordance with the geomorphological elements and topography of the sites, were built and evolved organically, creating characteristic informal spaces. The majority of the social interactions among the Therasians took place in these linear and narrow spaces. What differentiates the two settlement types is that the roads in the ravines are more cramped, offering visual isolation and protection from the elements, while the roads in the caldera, though exposed to the north winds, provide better conditions for gatherings. Possible places for such gatherings include

areas with benches for sitting and outdoor stairs are elements that were private but had a public character.

Despite the abolishment of customary laws, there is no differentiation in the spatial organization of the settlements between this period and the former one. While some settlement sites show no difference in the management of their public spaces compared to Volia, others have a key element that serves as a social and spatial focal point in the organization of the villages: the churches. Therasia has 25 churches, of which 13 are located within settlement sites. Among these, the most notable is the Presentation of the Virgin Mary in Agrilia (Figure 5). These churches shape the space within the settlements by serving as gathering places for the residents. Interestingly, the public space itself does not change. There is no square adjacent to them, nor do the roads become wider, nor is there any other special organization of the space around them. Instead, the courtyards of the churches, strictly delineated by dry-stone walls and terraces, are used as semi-public gathering spaces. The Therasians give the courtyards of the churches a de facto public character, making them informal public spaces.



**Figure 5** - The church of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary in Agrilia.

C) Over the last 50 years, a series of General Building Regulations [GBRs] have protected the traditional built environment in Greece. A presidential decree in the 1990s safeguarded the settlements along the caldera, prohibiting the construction of new buildings. Spatial changes in Therasia have been concentrated in the villages of Manolas and Potamos, as well as the ports of Riva and Korfos, due to a rapid population decline in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that left most settlement sites abandoned [21]. In Manolas and Potamos, the town plan has remained unchanged, with modifications occurring only within private properties. Many gardens and courtyards have lost their function, and property fragmentation has been observed [26], though without major spatial expansion. Until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the villages largely retained their original layout, with only a few buildings constructed on their outskirts. Public space has maintained its previous character, serving almost exclusively as the villages' circulatory system. The informal spaces, consisting of semi-public areas such as church courtyards, roadside benches, and pathways

within private properties, have persisted throughout this period and continue to serve as gathering places for villagers (Figure 6).



**Figure 6** - Modern custom bench on the main road of Manolas. Source: Daniil.

During this period, the most significant state intervention took place, leading to the creation of formal public spaces. The construction of the modern port of Riva and the island's road network introduced relatively large spaces compared to the overall size of the island. The port of Korfos was also developed, catering exclusively to tourists visiting from Santorini for short stays. However, the small port was not expanded with proper town planning, resulting in a cramped pathway between the tourist shops, taverns, and the narrow beach. All public spaces in Korfos characterized as informal.

Since the 2020s, however, the established spatial organization has begun to change, driven by the rapid pace of tourism development in Santorini. Despite existing GBRs, new buildings are being constructed along the caldera, creating new informal spaces with a different character than before. At the same time many existing structures are being repurposed to accommodate growing tourist demand. This shift marks a transformation in Therasia's built environment, redefining the relationship between formal and informal space.

## V. DISCUSSION – CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Therasia's public spaces, shaped by centuries of organic development, are predominantly informal, reflecting adaptive responses to local needs rather than state-imposed frameworks. This research, the first to systematically investigate unregulated and informal public spaces on the island, has successfully defined their diachronic evolution and distinctive characteristics, mapped their distribution across urban and rural settings, and elucidated their transformation up to the early 21st century. The informal spaces—ranging from narrow roads and church courtyards to benches and pathways—emerged from customary practices, underscoring a

flexible spatial organization that blurs the boundaries between public, semi-public, and communal domains. This ambiguity in spatial use fosters a sense of communal ownership and interaction, a characteristic deeply rooted in the local social fabric.

Despite their cramped and limited appearance, Therasia's settlement spaces exhibit remarkable flexibility, facilitated by a significant grey zone in their publicness. Customary laws, rooted in local traditions and collective agreements rather than formal regulations, have been the primary drivers of this informal urban space [1] - [2]. This informality, a hallmark of Greek cultural identity, empowered small-scale builders and non-professionals to shape Therasia's built environment, contrasting with the codified urban planning seen elsewhere. This grassroots involvement has contributed to the organic and human-scaled development of Cycladic settlements. [10].

In the case of Therasia and the Cyclades in general, outdoor staircases and benches for communal use were constructed, promoting interaction among inhabitants. The sharing of public and semi-public spaces was further facilitated by the region's mild climate and the prevailing "outdoor lifestyle." Such spatial practices underscore the adaptability of the built environment to the socio-cultural context of the Cyclades.

Over the last 50 years, the divergence between Santorini and Therasia has increased, primarily due to Santorini's transformation into a global tourist destination [9], [20]. As spatial planning in Santorini adapted to accommodate millions of visitors, Therasia remained largely unchanged, preserving its historical settlement patterns and customary spatial practices. This contrast highlights the impact of tourism-driven development on urban planning and the resilience of traditional settlement structures in the absence of intense external pressures. In conclusion, the built environment of the Cyclades reflects a unique interplay between informality and formal regulation, shaped by historical autonomy, cultural exchanges, and local practices. The case of Therasia, in particular, exemplifies the persistence of traditional spatial organization despite broader regional transformations. Understanding these dynamics provides valuable insights into the role of customary laws and informal spatial practices in shaping resilient and adaptive built environments.

**Funding:** The research project was supported by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (H.F.R.I.) under the "2nd Call for H.F.R.I. Research Projects to support Post-Doctoral Researchers" (Project Number: 00448).

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