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# The Monastery and Cloister of Saint Neophytos "comes alive" through 3D

The birth of the idea, the development and the significance of the project



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**Three-dimensional visualization of the Enclosure of Saint Neophytos in Paphos – The birth of the idea, the evolution and the significance of the project**

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Yesterday becomes today and today sees the future, through the **3D visualization of the Cloister of Saint Neophytos in Paphos** and the digitization of objects from the monastery's museum, archive and library through the European program EUreka3D-XR (2025-2026), which also includes two pilot applications in Spain and France with four scientists in the field involved in the study and completion of the entire project.

The four scientists are Marinos Ioannidis, Academic in the field of digital cultural heritage, Professor and Director of the Digital Cultural Heritage Laboratory and Head of the UNESCO Chair for Digital Cultural Heritage at the Cyprus University of Technology, Nadia Magnenat – Thalmann: Academic, internationally recognized computer scientist, Professor at the University of Geneva, Founder and Director of the MIRALab research laboratory at the University of Geneva, Antonella Fresa, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Specialist, General Manager of Promoter Srl and Vice President of the Photoconsortium of Italy and Maria Paphiti, Byzantine art historian with professional activity in

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the documentation, study and decisive contribution to the repatriation of looted Byzantine works of art from Cyprus.

In statements to CNA, the scientists refer **to the project, the birth of the idea, its development and significance.**

Regarding how the idea for the entire project was born, Mr. Ioannidis said that “ **the idea for the project was born through a previous European program of the Marie S. Curie network** (www.ITN-DCH.net – 2014), within the framework of which we were obliged to digitize material of significant cultural and historical value for Cyprus”.

He added that “it was then that we approached the monastery of Agios Neophytos and thus began our first collaboration, during which we digitized objects from the museum, the archive and the library, while at the same time, for the first time, the 3D digitization of the Enclave was also included, a fact that was particularly important for the subsequent development of our work.”

As Mr. Ioannidis explained, “our project includes three pilot applications, the first being implemented in Cyprus and concerns the Enclave of Saint Neophytos, the second relating to the walls of the city of Girona in Spain, where, through digital representation, the stages of their construction are highlighted from the Roman era, the Middle Ages, to the most recent, and the third case concerns the Bibracte region in France, an archaeological site that is not currently visible as a monument in the landscape.”

He stated that “these three pilot projects began approximately 15 months ago and have now been implemented, while the results concerning the Enclave of Agios Neophytos will be presented on site on May 24, 2024, while on May 26, 2026, all three projects will be presented at the opening ceremony of the high-level conference on Digital Cultural Heritage at the Technical University of Cyprus, in Limassol.”

Mr. Ioannidis said that “today we are implementing a project which, by Cypriot standards, is unique, while at a European level it is among the most innovative projects in this specific sector.”

Antonella Fresa noted in her statements that “once the 3D model is successfully created, properly documented and securely stored, it becomes available for various forms of reuse, particularly for innovative forms of storytelling and immersive user experiences.”

As Ms. Fresa said, “this is the starting point of the EUreka3D-XR project, which developed five open access tools, dedicated to cultural professionals, for the reuse of 3D and 2D collections in XR experiences, such as the one created in Cyprus, where we are actually “reliving” the monastery of Agios Neophytos and its tangible and intangible heritage in the virtual world.”

When asked about what steps were followed and when the project began and was completed, Mr. Ioannidis said that the project has a duration of 18

months and specifically began on February 1, 2025 and will be completed on July 31, 2026. He added that “this is a project co-financed by the European Union, with the funding not being full, but being covered jointly by European and state resources.”

The implementation of the three pilot applications, in Cyprus, France and Spain, began approximately two months after the start of the project.

Regarding the basic implementation steps, Mr. Ioannidis said that these began with the **three-dimensional digitization of the selected cultural objects and spaces**, however, this process was not limited to geometric mapping, but aimed at producing highly accurate authentic digital representations.

He briefly explained that “overall, the process includes digitization, documentation, modeling and final presentation, with the aim of highlighting cultural heritage in a modern, interactive and scientifically documented manner, while the data produced is then made available to Miralab, in order to be further processed and utilized.”

Antonella Fresca, in response, said that “during these 18 months, XR tools and XR demonstration experiences in Girona, Bibracte and Paphos have been designed, developed, iteratively evaluated and improved, as well as evaluated by stakeholder communities.”

He noted that “the excellent presentation of the project results, within the framework of the high-level Digital Heritage Summit 2026, under the auspices of the Cyprus Presidency of the EU, is the highlight of the project, which will ultimately be presented to all cultural heritage professionals, curators, researchers and educators.”

The scientists were invited to describe **the work done at the Monastery of Agios Neophytos and what the visitor should expect.**

Mr. Ioannidis said that “the project’s scenario is based on the creation of a complete three-dimensional digital space, which represents the Enkleistra, the cave where the Saint lived, and specifically this space is rendered with high precision, 1:1, so that it fully corresponds to its natural, analog form.”

At the same time, he continued, “based on the recorded historical material about the life of the Saint, and in collaboration with the monastery as well as with the contribution of experts — historians, archaeologists and other scientists — a scenario was developed, which combines historical documentation with digital storytelling.”

Marinos Ioannidis noted that “the basic idea is the transition from the real, physical space to the digital one, which results in the visitor having the opportunity to simultaneously experience the experience of visiting the natural environment, namely the cave, as well as its digital, three-dimensional copy.”

He stated that “in the digital space, unlike the

physical one, the visitor encounters Saint Neophytos in a virtual three-dimensional form, a representation based on historically documented visual material, specifically a portrait painted in 1183 by Theodore Apseudis, who had access to the Saint.”

Mr. Ioannidis explained that through this representation, Saint Neophytos “comes alive” in the digital space and interacts with the visitor, thus presenting a narrative environment in which his life, work and spiritual imprint unfold, as has been recorded by researchers and confirmed by the monastery and the project’s collaborators.”

He added that “ **all the content – texts, narratives and testimonies – is based on documented sources and material** that has been collected and recorded by the research team, while the goal of the script is the transition from the simple viewing of a monument to the experience of a living narrative that results, through this environment, in the visitor not simply observing, but experiencing history.”

Nadia Magnenat-Thalmann responded to the same question by saying that “visitors can explore the Enclosure of Saint Neophytos in a completely new way while, alongside the impressive frescoes, they wear special glasses for the 3D visualization of the environment that bring the past to life: the monk Saint Neophytos appears to emerge from the wall in front of them, in full three-dimensional form, telling his story, for example where he came from, how he lived and what inspired him.”

He added that “ **as visitors move through the space, they can also interact with it** , choosing simple questions directly through the glasses, thus creating a personal and experiential experience.”

He explained that “this immersive experience is made possible through augmented reality technology, which was developed by MIRALab and the University of Geneva, within the framework of the European project Eureka3D-XR.

Regarding the technical procedures and requirements of the project, Mr. Ioannidis said that “initially, the project began with the 3D digitization of the Enclave, a process that was necessary, as we needed a complete 3D digital inventory of the space.”

The recording was done with high precision, point by point, so that we could end up with an authentic and absolutely faithful digital copy of the real space.

As Mr. Ioannidis stated, “this digital model formed the basis on which a significant part of the history of Saint Neophytos was recorded and incorporated, although the approach was not limited to the geometric representation of the space, but expanded to the narration and documentation of his life and spiritual work.”

He explained that “subsequently, this material was enriched with historical and theological content, that is, with the story of Saint Neophytos himself and the message he wished to convey.” He noted that “the interpretation and composition of the script was done in collaboration with the monastery and with the contribution of experts in order to ensure historical

contribution of experts, in order to ensure historical and theological accuracy."

Mr. Ioannidis said that at this stage, **modern artificial intelligence technologies were also incorporated**, which allow for interaction and the "live" presentation of Saint Neophytos in the digital space, while at the same time, the project utilizes the Metaverse environment, that is, a virtual, interactive space, where the visitor can experience the experience in a multidimensional and immersive way.

On the same topic, Ms. Thalmann told CNA that "we are bringing Agios Neophytos to life through virtual reality, augmented reality and web-based 3D experiences."

He added that "from anywhere in the world, visitors can wear a VR helmet and meet the Saint in a fully immersive environment, online, chatting and interacting with him as if he were really present, while in the Enclave itself, the experience becomes even more powerful because visitors first see the genuine mural and then, wearing the helmet, watch the Saint "emerge" from the painted surface and enter the space around them."

At the same time, they still see the real environment and the people around them, thus combining history and reality into a single, uninterrupted and unforgettable experience.

Regarding the collaboration with the Monastery of Saint Neophytos and Abbot Leontios, Mr. Ioannidis said that "one of the basic facts of the project, from the beginning, was the extremely close and positive collaboration with all the monks in the monastery and especially Archimandrite Neophytos, which is also a general principle that must apply to any cultural heritage digitization project, namely, that the owner of the object or monument must have a strong relationship of trust with the team undertaking the digitization from the beginning."

He added that "it is equally important that there is continuous cooperation throughout the project, with mutual respect, transparency and understanding, since in such projects nothing can proceed without the consent, permission and, so to speak, the blessing of the people who are responsible for the space."

The answer to the question about the importance of the Enclave of Saint Neophytos in the cultural heritage of Cyprus was given by Art Historian Maria Paphitis, who said that "the Enclave of Saint Neophytos in Tala, Paphos, is an extremely important Byzantine monument of the 12th century which combines many characteristics that overall make it unique, both in Cyprus and in the wider Orthodox and Christian world."

He explained that "this is the natural cave, which Saint Neophytos discovered in 1152," noting that "he himself carved it deeper into the rock and made it a place of his ascetic residence, spiritual and theological study and writing, as well as the core of the monastery he founded, which flourishes to this day."

Ms. Paphitis said that "the walls of the cave were

Ms. Paphitis said that the walls of the cave were decorated with frescoes by the talented artist Theodore Apseudis, who not only knew the Byzantine style superbly, but also painted based on the aesthetic values of the capital of Byzantium, namely Constantinople, thus capturing some of the most representative expressions of high Komnenian art."

He added that "the mere fact that in a remote part of Cyprus, on the edge of the Byzantine periphery, a great artist signed and dated his work in 1183, is in itself impressive and without comparison in Byzantine artistic production."

As Ms. Paphitis mentioned, "equally amazing is the existence of realistic portraits of Saint Neophytos, which were painted when he was alive and on which we based our work to create the animated avatar of the Saint, which will be premiered on May 24th within the Enclave."

After the Saint's death, around 1220, the Enkleistra became his burial place, thus evolving into a funerary monument and then into a living pilgrimage center to this day. Ms. Paphitis said that "the Enkleistra of Saint Neophytos is a complete and multifaceted monument, a unique and living legacy of Byzantine art and the Orthodox culture of Cyprus which, as a prominent piece of world heritage, invites and welcomes the whole world."

He concluded by noting that "in an era when technology often has the upper hand, we have utilized the advanced means it offers both to contribute to the preservation of the frescoes and to make the Enclave, the life and work of the Saint within it, known, bringing the past to life."

In response to a question from CNA about the symbolism of the project in relation to the decline of traditional values and principles, Mr. Ioannidis said that "today, an almost 900-year-old narrative comes to remind us that in modern civilization we have become disoriented; that technology, instead of guiding us, often distances us and that we tend to forget what value means and what is the basis from which we come and as a result, we experience an increasingly intense sense of alienation from the essential."

He added that through the project's script we attempt to bring the "Saint's lesson" back to the modern experience, presenting his life and teaching in an experiential, direct and understandable way, so that the visitor can essentially approach the meaning of the project and its values.

As Mr. Ioannidis finally said, "these values such as love, reconciliation, peace, dialogue, social cohesion and brotherhood are fundamental pillars that are often absent from the modern world, and thus through this approach, their restoration to the center of the human experience is sought."

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