

A saint as an avatar: AI and 3D bring monk Neophytos to life in Cyprus



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Through 3D scanning and AI, Saint Neophytos has been resurrected as an avatar. He now tells visitors in Cyprus anecdotes and the history of the 12th-century monastery.

The [Monastery of Saint Neophytos](#) is located about nine kilometers north of Paphos on the island of Cyprus. It was founded by the Cypriot hermit, writer, and monk Neophytos in the second half of the 12th century.

The hermitage of Saint Neophytos is **one of the most important Byzantine monuments** – not only in Cyprus, but in the entire Orthodox world. The cave and the mountain monastery have always attracted many visitors. Recently, however, many have been coming to the monastery **to see the saint, who has supposedly "returned to life."**



The Hermitage of Saint Neophytos - Apostolos Stalikos

Using 3D digitization, artificial intelligence, and innovative virtual and augmented reality technologies, the hermitage, or rather the cave of Saint Neophytos, is digitally reconstructed. **The saint now greets visitors and tells stories from his life.**

"We created a realistic depiction of the saint in his hermitage. We took this portrait and developed an avatar. Now the saint guides visitors through the space he himself created, where he wrote his works and where he was eventually buried. I wrote a script for the tour and then, in a sense, assigned the role of guide to Saint Neophytos. It's a living place because the monastery he founded is still active today," says art historian Maria Pafiti.

Signed icons from the 12th century

One of the most important features of the mountain monastery, besides its exceptional paintings, is the fact that the artist is documented by name. **An inscription in the first room of the hermitage names Theodoros Apsevdís and the year 1183.** This is extraordinarily important and rare for Byzantine works, as icon painters almost never signed their works.





Digital Heritage Summit 2026 - Αμβρόσιος Στάκος

Cypriot monks and the world in 3D

For this project, the [Digital Heritage Laboratory of the Technological University of Cyprus](#) is collaborating with the [MIRALab](#) of the University of Geneva.

This project is part of the [Eureka3D-XR](#) initiative, which is funded by [Digital Europe](#). The program develops innovative tools and scenarios for extended reality applications.

For the monks, these new technologies represent a fascinating but unfamiliar world. One of the biggest challenges was convincing the monastic community and winning them over to collaborate.

*"We first had to convince the church dignitaries and work with them. We needed a shared understanding of how to capture the material. **The priests had no connection to new technology. They were very cautious and prejudiced.** They didn't want us to record something and then have artificial intelligence alter it and present it in a completely different light. So **we also had to train the monks.** We worked together until they understood what we were doing, and they later became our assistants,"* Marinos Ioannidis, head of the [UNESCO](#) Chair in Digital Heritage at Cyprus University of Technology, told Euronews.



Digital Heritage Summit 2026 - Apostolos Staikos

Besides the hermitage of Saint Neophytos, the EurekaED-XR project includes two other sites: the archaeological museum of the Gallic city of Bibracte in Burgundy, France, and the city walls of Girona in Spain.

*"The goal of Eureka 3D-XR is to demonstrate how 3D digitization can support the field of cultural heritage. It's about providing access to data so that monuments become more interesting for students, researchers, and, of course, the general public. The hermitage of Saint Neophytos is a special case for us. **It's very important because it connects the physical and virtual worlds.** At the same time, it creates a connection to our emotional world, to a part of us that is neither material nor digital. **This is the spiritual dimension of our lives,**"* says Antonella Fresa, Vice President of the [Photoconsortium](#) and coordinator of Eureka 3D-XR.

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 Everything is ready for tomorrow's big demonstration event in Paphos, Cyprus!

 Come join the Eureka3D-XR team at the Enkleistra of Saint Neophytos, and see him and his legacy come to life!

#3ddigitization #3davatar #avatar design #culturalheritage #digitalculturalheritage #stneophytos



Just a few years ago, the combination of reality, artificial intelligence, and 3D digitization

Just a few years ago, the combination of religion, artificial intelligence, and big data would have likely provoked astonishment and even resistance in Greece and Cyprus. **Today, however, technology can perform true "miracles"—and why shouldn't it bring the figures and stories of the Church closer to a wider and younger audience?**

Digital Heritage Summit 2026

Limassol hosted the Digital Heritage Summit 2026, a summit on digital heritage research. **It was attended by some of the most important scientists** in the fields of digital heritage and artificial intelligence, as well as archaeologists, museologists, and representatives from UNESCO, [Europeana](#), and major European universities.

The discussions focused on **how technology redefines our relationship to history and collective memory**.

*"Wars, natural disasters, or accidents can happen. This means the destruction of cultural heritage. We know what is happening in Ukraine. It is very important to first document and preserve this heritage, and at the same time make it accessible to a wide audience. It is crucial to provide it in digital form because **digital technology removes many barriers**. Anyone with internet access can download the material and **access any information available on European platforms**,"* says Anthony Cassar, Head of Technology and Experience Development at [Heritage Malta](#).



Digital Heritage Summit 2026 - Apostolos Stalkos

Topics also included the protection of cultural heritage and the return of antiquities that were illegally removed from numerous countries.

Nicosia is playing a leading role in this struggle and is working towards the return of cultural objects belonging to the [Republic of Cyprus](#).

"After the illegal invasion of 1974, we lost a very large part of our cultural heritage. We monitor the Internet, markets, and auctions. If we discover something that may not have been acquired legally, we work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the police, and our legal service. I would like to emphasize that we have achieved many successes in recent years and have been able to return numerous objects," Vasiliki Kassianidou, Deputy Minister of Culture of the Republic of Cyprus, told Euronews.

The Digital Heritage Summit 2026 was held under the patronage of the [Cypriot Presidency of the Council of the European Union](#).





Digital Heritage Summit 2026 - Pambos Charalambous

Cultural heritage is entering a new era. Virtual and augmented reality technologies no longer serve merely for documentation; they now create experiences. **Beyond the simple digitization of monuments, it's about a "living" interaction with the past—as with the avatar of the hermit Neophytos.**

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