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Cyprus: Artificial intelligence and 3D bring Saint Neophyte to life in his grotto.



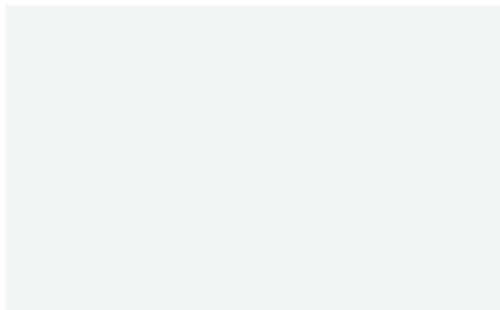
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Three-dimensional digitization and artificial intelligence have created an avatar of Saint Neophyte, who now tells stories and talks about the monastery he founded at the end of the 12th century.

The [Monastery of Saint Neophytus](#) is located nine kilometers north of Paphos. It was founded by the Cypriot hermit and writer Neophytus in the second half of the 12th century.



The Church of Saint Neophytus is one of the most important Byzantine monuments, not only in Cyprus, but in the entire Byzantine Orthodox world. It has always attracted a large number of visitors. In recent times, however, many come to the monastery to see the saint who "came to life".



Through three-dimensional digitization, artificial intelligence (AI), and cutting-edge virtual and augmented reality technologies, the Egleistra, or the grotto of Saint Neophyte, is recreated in digital format. Now, the saint welcomes visitors and shares stories from his life.

"We created a realistic representation of the saint inside the Egleistra. We took that portrait and developed an avatar. Now, the saint guides the visitor through the space he created, where he wrote his texts and where he was eventually buried. I wrote a visitor's guide and then we 'assigned' Saint Neophytus the role of guide. It's a living space,



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because the monastery he founded continues to function to this day," art historian Maria Pafiti told Euronews.

One of the most important aspects of the Egleistra, beyond its high pictorial quality, is the fact that the painter is identified. **There is an inscription in the first room of the Egleistra that mentions the artist's name, Theodore Apevdhis, and the year 1183.** This is extremely important and rare in Byzantine art, since iconographers almost never signed their works.



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For this project, the [Digital Heritage Laboratory at the Cyprus University of Technology](#) collaborated with [MIRALab](#) at the University of Geneva.

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

These new technologies create a fascinating world that, however, remains unknown to the monks. One of the greatest difficulties of the project was gaining acceptance of the proposal and the collaboration of the monastic community.

"First, we had to convince the hierarchs and work with them. We needed to find common ground on how to record the material. **The priests had no contact with new technologies. They were extremely cautious and suspicious.** They didn't want us to collect content that artificial intelligence could later alter and present in a very different way. So, **we also had to train the monks.** We worked together so that they understood what we were doing and, later, they became our allies," explained Marinos Ioannidis, director of the [UNESCO](#) Chair for Digital Cultural Heritage at the Cyprus University of Technology, to Euronews.



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In addition to the Church of Saint Neophyte, two other monuments are participating in the EurekaED-XR project: the archaeological site of Bibracte, in France, and the walls of Girona, in Spain.

"The goal of Eureka 3D-XR is to show how 3D digitization can support the cultural heritage sector. This involves facilitating access to data, so that monuments become more interesting for students, researchers and, naturally, for citizens. The Church of Saint Neophyte is a special case for us. **It is very important because it connects the physical world to the virtual world.** But it is also a connection to our emotional world, to a part of us that is neither real nor digital. **It 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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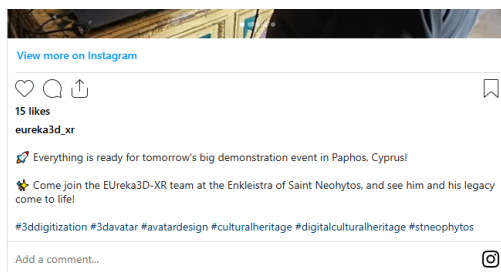
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A few years ago, at least in Greece and Cyprus, the combination of religion, artificial intelligence, and three-dimensional digitization would have caused surprise and, most likely, resistance. **Today, however, technology can "work miracles" and, why not, introduce figures and stories of the Church to a wider and younger audience.**

Digital Heritage Summit 2026

Limassol hosted the summit dedicated to Digital Cultural Heritage 2026. **Participants included some of the most prominent scientists** in the fields of digital cultural heritage and artificial intelligence, as well as archaeologists, museologists, and representatives from UNESCO, [Europeana](#), and major European universities.



At the heart of the debate was **how technology redefines our relationship with history and collective memory.**

*"Problems can arise, such as wars, natural disasters or accidents. This implies the destruction of cultural heritage. We know what is happening in Ukraine. It is essential, first and foremost, to document it, preserve it and make it accessible to the general public. It is very important to make it available in digital format, because **digital technology breaks down many barriers**. Anyone with an internet connection can download the material and **access any information available on European platforms**,"* emphasizes Anthony Cassar, head of the technology and experience development unit at [Heritage Malta](#).

