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Mission to Cyprus: AI and 3D "bring to life" Saint Neophytos in Engleistra where he lived and was buried



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Published 02/06/2026 - 9:00 CEST

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Three-dimensional digitization and artificial intelligence create the avatar of Saint Neophytos, who now tells stories and "speaks" about the history of the monastery he founded in the second half of the 12th century.

The [Monastery of Saint Neophytos](#) is located approximately 9 kilometers north of Paphos. It was founded by the Cypriot hermit and writer Neophytos in the second half of the 12th century.

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The Monastery of Saint Neophytos is **one of the most important Byzantine monuments**, not only in Cyprus, but throughout the Orthodox Byzantine world. It has always attracted a large number of visitors. However, recently many have been arriving at the monastery **to see the saint who "came to life"**.

 The Cloister of Saint Neophytos


The Cloister of Saint Neophytos - Apostolos Staikos

Through 3D digitization, artificial intelligence, and cutting-edge virtual and augmented reality technologies, the Egkleistra, i.e. the cave of Saint Neophytos, is digitally reproduced. Now, **the saint welcomes visitors and shares stories from his life.**


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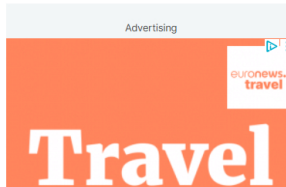


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"We have a realistic representation of the saint, inside the Enclave. So we took this portrait and created an avatar. Now, the saint guides the visitor through the space he created, where he wrote his writings and where he was ultimately buried. I wrote a tour script and then we "assigned" Saint Neophytos the role of tour guide. It is a living space, because the monastery he founded is still operating today," art historian Maria Paphitis told euronews.

One of the most important elements of the Enclave, beyond the objectively high painting quality, is the fact that the painter is documented. **There is an inscription in the first room of the enclave, which mentions the name of the artist, Theodore Apeusdis, and the date 1183.** This is extremely important and rare for Byzantine art, since icon painters almost never signed their creations.

Digital Heritage Summit 2026

Digital Heritage Summit 2026 - Apostolos Staikos

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

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

These new technologies create a fascinating world that remains unknown to the monks. One of the greatest challenges of the project was the acceptance of the proposal and the cooperation of the monastic community.

"We had to first convince the hierarchs and work with them. We had to find common ground on the issue of recording the material. **The priests had nothing to do with new technologies. They were very cautious and biased.** They didn't want us to take some element and then have artificial intelligence mutate it and present it in a very different way. So, **we had to train the monks as well.** We worked together so that they understood what we were doing and then they became our assistants," Marinos Ioannidis, director of the [UNESCO](#) Chair for Digital Cultural Heritage at the Cyprus University of Technology, told euronews.



Digital Heritage Summit 2026 - Apostolos Staikos

In addition to the Enclosure of Saint Neophytos, two other monuments participate in the EurekaED-XR project: the archaeological site of Bibracte in France and the Walls of Girona in Spain.

"The aim of Eureka 3D-XR is to show how 3D digitization can support the cultural heritage sector. This means access to data, so that monuments become more interesting for students, researchers and of course for citizens. The Enclave of Saint Neophytos is a special case for us. **It is very important because it connects the physical with the virtual world.** But it is also a connection with our emotional world. With a part of us that is neither real nor digital. **It is the spiritual dimension of our lives,**" says Antonella Fresa, vice president of [Photoconsortium](#) and coordinator of Eureka 3D-XR.

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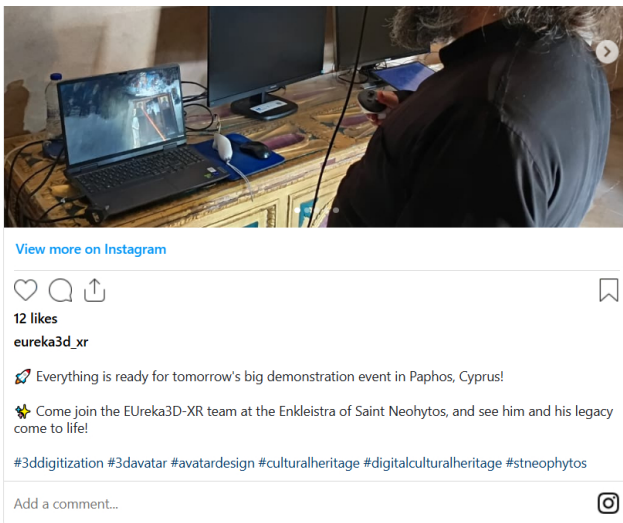
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A few years ago, at least in Greece and Cyprus, the combination of religion, artificial intelligence and 3D digitization would have caused surprise, and probably even reactions. **But now technology can "work miracles" and, why not, introduce figures and stories of the church to a wider and younger audience.**

Digital Heritage Summit 2026

Limassol hosted the Digital Heritage Summit 2026. **Some of the most important scientists** in the fields of digital cultural heritage, artificial intelligence, archaeologists, museologists, representatives of UNESCO, [Europeana](#) and major European universities participated.



The focus of the dialogue was on **how technology is redefining our relationship with history and collective memory.**

*"Problems can arise, such as wars, natural disasters and accidents. This means the destruction of cultural heritage. We know what is happening in Ukraine. It is very important, first of all, to record it, to preserve it, but also to make it accessible to the wider public. It is very important to make it available in digital form, because **digital technology breaks down many barriers.** Anyone with an internet connection can download the material and **access any information that is on European platforms,**"* says Anthony Cassar, Head of Technology and Experience Development at [Heritage Malta](#).





Digital Heritage Summit 2026 - Apostolos Staikos

One of the issues discussed is the protection of cultural heritage, as well as the repatriation of antiquities that were illegally removed from some countries.

Nicosia is leading this fight and working for the return of relics belonging to the [Republic of Cyprus](#).

"Since the illegal invasion of 1974, we have lost a very large part of our cultural heritage. We monitor the internet, markets and auctions. If we identify something that may not have been acquired legally, we cooperate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the police and our legal service. I must note that in recent years we have had many successes, we have managed to bring back many objects," Vasiliki Kassianidou, Deputy Minister of Culture of the Republic of Cyprus, told euronews.

The Digital Heritage Summit 2026 was held under the auspices of the [Cyprus 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 are not only used for documentation, they are now creating experiences. **Beyond the digitization of monuments, the goal is to "lively" interact with the past.**

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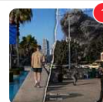
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