



CYPRUS

Out of the Fresco, into the data space

PUBLISHED 26/MAY/26 **BILUN GUNES** **NECTARIA GEORGIADOU**
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On Monday afternoon, 25 May, in a lecture hall at the Cyprus University of Technology in Limassol, a 12th-century saint stepped out of a fresco and began to speak. The figure was a virtual reconstruction, part of an extended reality experience built over more than a decade by researchers from Cyprus and Geneva, but the monks who had seen it first, at the Enkleistra of Saint Neophytos in Paphos the previous Saturday, had not found the distinction particularly relevant. When asked to rate it from zero to ten, they gave it eleven.

The moment, shared by Professor Marinos Ioannides to warm laughter during Monday's pre-event, captured something that ran through the entire afternoon, the growing capacity of digital cultural heritage tools to move not just specialists, but the communities whose stories they carry.

The pre-event, titled "Building Cultural Bridges, Shaping Shared Futures: The Power of the Europeana Network Association Community," ran as the opening session of the Digital Heritage Summit 2026, which continues through 29 May at the Cyprus University of Technology. Organised by the Europeana Network Association (ENA) in cooperation with the UNESCO Chair on Digital Cultural Heritage, A4LAM, and the Cyprus Association of Information Scientists, it drew cultural heritage professionals, academics, policymakers, and practitioners from across Cyprus and Europe.

A monastery, a boat, and a decade of work

The afternoon's striking presentation came from Ioannides of the UNESCO Chair and his collaborator, Professor Nadia Thalmann of the University of Geneva and its spin-off Mira Lab, who walked attendees through two Cypriot objects now held in the Europeana data space.

The first was the Lambusa, a historic boat connected to Limassol's maritime memory. Ioannides described how, when the Municipality of Limassol sought to preserve the vessel, the original naval drawings were missing, making restoration work impossible. His team applied 3D digitisation and reverse engineering to reconstruct both the boat and its documentation, producing new drawings and guidelines that allowed preservation work to begin. The digitised object was submitted to Europeana by Cyprus's minister responsible for culture two years ago.

The second case study marked the transition from the EUreka3D project to its successor, EUreka3D-XR, co-financed under the EU's Digital Europe Programme. The Enkleistra of Saint Neophytos in Paphos, a cave monastery approaching 1,000 years old, is showing visible signs of structural stress from ground movement in the surrounding area. The team documented it through high-precision 3D models and developed an immersive XR experience in which Saint Neophytos himself appears to emerge from the fresco walls and narrates his story, from his origins as a monk seeking the eremitic life through his years of solitary prayer and writing.

Thalmann, a pioneer in virtual human modelling since the 1980s, noted that the collaboration with Cyprus began in 2012, when Ioannides first brought her to the site. The experience was designed not to be "Disney-like" but to carry genuine historical, behavioural, and spiritual accuracy, with the saint's voice, gestures, and narrative developed with specialists in the field. The monks who were shown the result before Monday's presentation responded, in Ioannides' words, with the kind of reaction that made the years of work feel worthwhile. The Enkleistra was formally submitted to Europeana by Cyprus's minister of culture two weeks ago.

An AI reckoning, still in progress

Much of the afternoon's discussion turned on artificial intelligence, and specifically on what the cultural heritage sector's role within it should be.

Ines Vodopivec, Vice Chair of the ENA and Secretary General of AI for Libraries, presented the work

of the AI Alignment Assembly, launched in spring 2025. The assembly gathered more than 10,000 feedback points from cultural heritage workers and institutions on the AI-related subjects the sector most urgently needs to address. A white paper drawing on that work is expected to be published in mid-June 2026.

Vodopivec's central argument was that cultural heritage institutions have long been passive players in larger research and data ecosystems, present as data providers but rarely looped back into the final results of the work they enable. In an AI environment, she argued, that passivity carries real costs. If the sector does not actively engage with AI factories, data labs, and research infrastructures, it risks having its collections shaped into training data for models it has no hand in building and no stake in governing.

She also drew attention to a structural imbalance within many cultural institutions, where cataloguing departments absorb a disproportionate share of budgets and personnel, leaving insufficient capacity for innovation, research partnerships, or public-facing digital work. The question for the sector, she suggested, is not whether to use AI but how to use it actively rather than be used by it.

Building the data space, piece by piece

Sofie Taes, opening the session on behalf of the ENA, gave attendees a detailed account of Europeana's current scale and direction. The platform now holds more than 61 million cultural heritage items, with each record labelled to indicate whether it is openly licensed, conditionally reusable, or restricted. Membership of the ENA stands at nearly 6,000 individuals, growing by 60 to 70 new members each month, and now extends beyond Europe to include institutions from Latin America, Brazil, and Asia.

Taes highlighted several recent milestones. A memorandum of understanding signed by the Europeana Foundation with the Italian Ministry of Culture in December 2025 will bring approximately 10 million digitised Italian records into the data space, a model she said she hoped other member states, Cyprus included, might consider pursuing.

She also spoke about the Twin It! campaign, which invited each EU member state to select at least one monument, site, or artefact for 3D digitisation and submission to the data space, alongside a reuse scenario. Twenty-six member states participated, joined by Montenegro and Ukraine, producing 55 3D assets covering museum objects, natural sites, archaeological heritage, and cultural landscapes. High-level support came from Executive Vice-President Henna Virkkunen and Cyprus' Deputy Minister of Culture Vasiliiki Kassianidou.

Ukraine featured prominently throughout the day. The first batch of 3D-digitised Ukrainian monuments, produced in partnership with Europeana, NGO Pixelated Realities, XR Culture, and the 4CH competence centre, has now been published in the data space. UNESCO has recorded damage or destruction at 515 cultural sites in Ukraine since 2022. A call is open for Ukrainian content providers to aggregate further material.

On aggregators and memory

Antonella Fresa, speaking on behalf of the aggregator community, offered a technically grounded reflection on the challenges 3D digitisation poses for the sector. Unlike flat images, 3D objects require specialised software to represent and visualise, and the full value of any 3D model depends on paradata, the documentation of how it was made, what equipment was used, and under what conditions. Quality, she argued, is not inherent in the fact of digitisation; it has to be built and verified at every stage.

Fresa introduced the concept of the memory twin, distinguished from the digital twin. A digital object alone is not enough to preserve cultural heritage meaning. The object needs to be contextualised, connected to the community memory and historical knowledge surrounding it. That contextualisation is what makes heritage data genuinely useful, particularly as AI systems trained on decontextualised datasets risk producing outputs that are unreliable or culturally thin.

Maria Kagkeliidou, presenting the ENA's communicators community, noted that the network now includes nearly 2,700 members working across communications, education, EU project dissemination, tourism, and curation. The community organises webinars, an annual Digital Storytelling Festival, and face-to-face meetups, with sessions held in Athens and Siena in 2025 and more planned.

Cyprus as participant, not just host

Several speakers, unprompted, circled back to Cyprus's particular position in this landscape. Ioannides had framed it in his opening remarks: the island began this journey twenty years ago, and the work is still accelerating. Chris de Loof, reviewing the network's Cypriot data, noted that more than 70,000 objects connected to Cyprus are currently in the Europeana database, drawn from collections across Europe, with Sweden the single largest external provider. There are 105 ENA members from Cyprus.

The subtext across Monday's sessions was that Cyprus, holding the EU Council Presidency and hosting this summit, is being watched to see whether it moves from symbolic positioning to active institutional participation. The Lambusa and the Enkleistra are already there. The question the week's remaining sessions are likely to return to is how many more will follow.

The Digital Heritage Summit 2026 continues at the Cyprus University of Technology through 29 May, with round table discussions, keynote addresses, and the Hackit!4EU Hackathon running across the remaining days. The full programme is available on the [website](#).

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✉ contact@policypress.cy
📍 1 Kinyra, 1102 Nicosia - Cyprus
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