



HERITAGE
THE HERITAGE MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION

Annual Report 2025

Editorial Development and Coordination

Maria Kagkelidou

Publication Design and Layout

Constantinos Andronis

Photography

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HERITAGE

THE HERITAGE MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION

Director's Greeting

As I look back on 2025, I do so with a deep sense of pride and gratitude. It was a year of extraordinary intensity, growth, and collective achievement—one that tested our capacity, sharpened our vision, and reaffirmed why HERITAGE exists.

Just for measure, we trained more than 1,100 heritage professionals in 2025. We managed over 100 projects across nearly 40 countries. Our communications expanded rapidly, amplifying the voices of communities and practitioners worldwide. None of this would have been possible without the commitment of our team and partners, and without the trust and sustained support of our funders and donors—including the European Union, the Mellon Foundation, ALIPH Foundation, US Public Diplomacy Funds, SNF, JMKaplan Foundation, the British Council and a growing number of public and private partners who share our belief in heritage as a force for positive change.

At the heart of our work lies a clear mission: to upskill heritage ecosystems, not in isolation, but in ways that are locally grounded, community-centered, and sustainable. In 2025, this mission took

tangible form through an expanded and evolving training offer. We enriched our Executive Leadership Education program with new curriculum areas, including Heritage based Community Tourism and Development, responding to the growing need for heritage managers to understand how cultural resources can support social cohesion and economic resilience. Our Conservation Series, Training of Trainers program, and alumni-led initiatives continued to grow, reinforcing HERITAGE's role as a global learning community rather than a one-off training provider.

2025 was also a year of transitions. Several major initiatives reached important conclusions. We wrapped up SHIFT, AHEAD, and our Small Grants for African Heritage, each representing years of sustained work, experimentation, and partnership. The African grants program revealed the extraordinary creativity and leadership present across the continent, SHIFT demonstrated how advanced technologies can serve inclusion in the GLAM sector while AHEAD reshaped how we think about participation and audience-centered heritage. These projects may have formally

ended, but their tools, networks, and lessons are very much alive. Our colleagues across the world are not simply part of our alumni community, they are part of our family.

At the same time, other efforts continued and deepened. In Pakistan and Yemen, we moved into new phases of long-term engagement, building on earlier successes to strengthen conservation practice, local capacity, and community ownership in contexts marked by fragility and resilience alike. With our EMPATHS project we are moving on from research and mapping into co-design and curriculum development—laying the foundations for a new European training framework on participatory heritage interpretation.

Looking forward, 2025 also marked important new beginnings. We launched HerMaP Mexico, our first major program in North America, opening a new chapter for HERITAGE and expanding our work into a complex cross-border heritage landscape shaped by migration, Indigenous knowledge, and cultural exchange. Alongside this, we joined two new EU-funded Horizon Europe projects, MusicSphere and EXCALIBUR,

positioning HERITAGE within the emerging European Cultural Heritage Cloud ecosystem and bringing our expertise in training, participation, and ethics into dialogue with cutting-edge digital research.

This annual report captures a year of successful completion of projects and new beginnings, yet in all cases it is a year of growth and continuity. More importantly, it reflects a collective effort to ensure that heritage remains a living resource—one that supports dignity, opportunity, and resilience for communities worldwide. As we move into 2026, we do so with renewed confidence in our people, our partners, and the shared values that guide our work.

It is impossible to put in words the feeling of gratitude I personally feel towards all of you, our stakeholders, our HERITAGE family.

Dr. Evangelos Kyriakidis,
Director, HERITAGE

2024 → 2025: Progress

*Year-on-year comparison of the key metrics
reported in the 2024 Overview*

Building Capacity

1100

Heritage Professionals
trained

2024: 1250

60

Countries reached

2024: 61

510

Organisations
capacity-built

2024: 564

22

Executive Education
topics

2024: 22

40

Workshops delivered

2024: 44

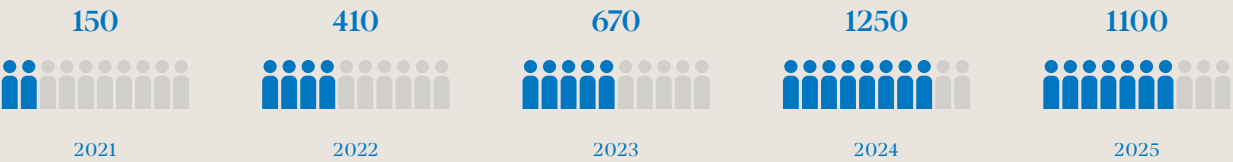
96,5%

Participant satisfaction

2024: 96,5%



Workshops Participants, 2021-2025



Delivering Impact

100

Projects managed
2024: 75

74

Small Grants awarded
across 33 countries
2024: 61

\$6,99M

Operating Budget
2024: \$4,23M

6

EU-funded active
projects
2024: 5 active

3

EU-funded projects
completed
2024: 1 completed



Small Grants for African Heritage: Scale, Fairness, and Transformation

*A conversation with Richard A. Brown, Director,
North America, Partnerships and Grants, HERITAGE*

The Small Grants for African Heritage program concluded in 2025. What made this initiative so significant for HERITAGE?

The completion of the Small Grants for African Heritage program in 2025 marked a defining moment for HERITAGE. It was ambitious in scale, rigorous in design, and deeply rooted in our long-standing commitment to community-led heritage management across Africa. Supported by the Mellon Foundation's Humanities in Place program and linked to our broader HerMaP Africa and HerMaP Gambia initiatives, the program ultimately funded 74 projects in 33 countries. What made it particularly powerful was its focus on small, strategic investments that unlock local leadership, strengthen skills, and generate measurable social and economic impact. We have also published an extensive report documenting these projects, not only as a record of achievements but as a resource for the sector.

How did HERITAGE manage the scale and diversity of applications received?

The response was phenomenal. We received an unprecedented number of proposals—over 1,700 eligible submissions from across the continent, reflecting the vibrancy, creativity, and urgency of heritage work in Africa today. To manage this responsibly, we put in place a structured, transparent, and highly rigorous regranting process. An experienced regranting team worked alongside an all African Regranting Committee composed of leading scholars, activists, and practitioners. Applications were assessed against clear criteria—heritage relevance, sustainability, community development, socioeconomic impact, and feasibility—using consistent scoring, interviews, and due diligence procedures. Selecting 74 projects from such a strong pool was no easy task, but it ensured fairness, accountability, and credibility.



You also experimented with AI in the evaluation process. Why was this important?

Following the committee's work, we partnered with researchers from the Technical University of Munich, FORTH, and Imperial College London's Group on Language, Audio, and Music—also collaborators through our EU-funded SHIFT project—to explore whether open, ethical AI could support more equitable funding decisions. Using a combination of traditional topic modelling and large language models, we analysed more than 1,700 proposals to identify recurring themes, priorities, and patterns in language. This allowed us to uncover insights about how proposals are framed, what kinds of projects tend to succeed, and where hidden biases might exist. The goal was not to replace human judgment, but to strengthen transparency, improve learning, and help both funders and applicants make better-informed decisions.

What impact did the program have beyond the grants themselves?

The impact extended far beyond financial support. All grantees participated in capacity-building activities, including project management and impact assessment training, and took part in six networking convenings in 2025, where they presented their work to peers, African funders, and HERITAGE's network. These exchanges strengthened confidence, skills, and collaboration. At its core, this program reaffirmed a simple truth: when philanthropy empowers local leadership, heritage becomes a driver of dignity, resilience, and opportunity. Africa is a heritage superpower, rich in living traditions and innovation, and this program showed what becomes possible when communities are trusted to lead the stewardship of their own heritage.

Strengthening Living Heritage in Greece

*A conversation with Theodosia Maroutsis,
Greek Programs Manager*

HERITAGE has played an active role in founding and developing Greece's Living Heritage Network. What did 2025 represent for this work?

2025 was a particularly meaningful year for our engagement with the Living Heritage Network in Greece. As a founding member, and with this being the third year of HERITAGE serving on the Network's coordinating committee, we were able to contribute both continuity and momentum. The Network has matured into a strong grassroots platform for dialogue, cooperation, and advocacy around living heritage, and HERITAGE's role has been to help shape that growth in a participatory and inclusive way. To this end we played a central role in drafting the Living Heritage Network's Mapping Questionnaire, launched in autumn 2025. This mapping exercise is

designed to identify the needs, capacities, and priorities of Greece's living heritage ecosystem, providing an evidence base for future planning, training, advocacy, and policy engagement.

What were the highlights of the 2nd National Meeting of the Living Heritage Network?

Held in Athens from 21 to 23 February, the Meeting was a major milestone. It brought together practitioners, researchers, community representatives, and institutions from across Greece. Moreover, as HERITAGE's representative I welcomed participants and helped steer discussion during the roundtable "Living Heritage Network: Formation and Perspectives," which focused on reflecting on the Network's development and future direction.



HERITAGE also delivered one of the leading side events of the meeting: a hands-on workshop for 30 participants titled “Working on the Narrative Interpretation of Living Cultural Heritage,” supporting practitioners in exploring narrative-based approaches to interpreting living heritage. But our contribution to strengthening the Network extended well beyond the meeting itself.

How has this work connected with HERITAGE’s European projects?

The Network’s activities were further strengthened through HERITAGE’s engagement in European collaborative projects.

Within the AHEAD project, I contributed by sharing insights during the 3rd Online Networking Event and by participating in an interview published in the project’s

multilingual magazine (English, Greek, Italian, and Spanish).

In the EMPATHS project, the Network’s coordination experience was disseminated through systematic stakeholder mapping, cross-sector interviews, and co-design outcomes. This process ensured that Greek experiences of living heritage were incorporated into participatory interpretation methodologies at the European level.

Collectively, these collaborations position the Living Heritage Network as a significant example of community-led heritage practice in Greece and in the broader European context.

EU-funded programs at a turning point

*A conversation with Vasia Terzi,
International Programs Manager*

2025 marked the completion of several major EU-funded projects. What did this moment represent for HERITAGE?

2025 was a significant milestone year for HERITAGE. We successfully completed three major EU-funded projects—SHIFT, AHEAD, and HerMaP Gambia—each operating in very different contexts but united by a shared commitment to capacity building, inclusion, and long-term impact. SHIFT demonstrated how advanced digital tools can make cultural heritage more accessible and inclusive. AHEAD challenged institutions to rethink participation and audience engagement, placing communities at the heart of heritage practice. HerMaP Gambia showed how sustained training and dialogue can strengthen heritage management systems at a national level. Completing these projects was not simply about closing work plans; it was about consolidating

learning, strengthening partnerships, and ensuring that results live on through training, networks, and local ownership. Each project has its own dedicated reflection in this report, but together they represent a maturation of HERITAGE's approach to EU-funded collaboration.

While some projects concluded, others continued to evolve. How does EMPATHS fit into this picture?

EMPATHS represents continuity and forward momentum. While SHIFT, AHEAD, and HerMaP Gambia reached completion, EMPATHS continued to develop throughout 2025, deepening our work on participatory heritage interpretation. The project has moved steadily from research and mapping into co-design, training development, and methodological consolidation. HERITAGE's role has been particularly focused on



grounding the project in real-world professional practice, ensuring that the emerging curriculum responds to the needs, constraints, and aspirations of heritage professionals and communities. EMPATHS also reflects our belief that participation is not a trend but a structural shift in how heritage must be interpreted and shared—especially in complex social and cultural landscapes.

Looking ahead, what do the new Horizon Europe projects, MusicSphere and EXCALIBUR, signal for HERITAGE’s future direction?

Our participation in MusicSphere and EXCALIBUR marks an important new chapter in HERITAGE’s engagement with European research and innovation. Both projects are part of the Cultural Heritage Cloud ecosystem under the

ECHOES initiative, which aims to create shared digital infrastructures for the heritage sector. MusicSphere focuses on preserving and interpreting musical heritage—specifically traditional organs and ancient instruments—through digital replicas, acoustic modelling, and immersive technologies. EXCALIBUR, on the other hand, addresses one of the most complex areas of heritage practice: the study, conservation, and interpretation of burial sites and human remains, using digital twin technologies. Together, these projects signal a deeper integration of HERITAGE’s expertise in capacity building and participatory approaches with cutting-edge digital research. They also reinforce our commitment to ensuring that technological innovation remains human-centered, ethical, and accessible to professionals and communities alike.

Building Skills, Community, and Leadership in Heritage

*A conversation with Foteini Giannoulidi,
Education Programs Manager*



2025 was a strong year for HERITAGE's education programs. What were the key developments?

In 2025, we focused on deepening both the scope and the impact of our training offer. One of the most significant milestones was the expansion of our Executive Leadership Education Programs, which now encompass 22 training topics in heritage management with the inclusion of Community Tourism and Development. This addition responds to a growing demand from heritage professionals who are navigating complex challenges related to sustainability, local economies, and community wellbeing.

Increasingly, heritage managers must understand how cultural resources can generate economic opportunities without undermining social cohesion, identity, or local values.

Another important milestone was our ability to remain up-to-date and relevant despite a complex and unpredictable socioeconomic environment. Preserving and managing heritage today requires integrated approaches that combine scientific expertise, policy understanding, community engagement, and adaptive leadership. The Executive Leadership Education Program addressed these needs through high-

impact, hands-on training tailored to today's realities, reaching more than 1,100 heritage professionals and building capacity across more than 500 cultural organizations. At the same time, we worked to strengthen our global learning community, recognising that peer exchange and long-term professional networks are as vital as formal training.

In parallel, we successfully delivered the Conservation Series Training Program for the second time, expanding the offer to include First Aid for Finds and Preventive Conservation. These programs provided participants with practical, hands-on skills that can be applied across diverse heritage contexts, from archaeological sites to museum collections.

Why was Community Tourism and Development an important addition to the curriculum?

Heritage does not exist in isolation from the communities that care for it. The Community Tourism and Development module was designed to help professionals think strategically about how heritage can contribute to inclusive economic development while remaining community-centered. We emphasized approaches that are locally grounded, ethically informed, and aligned with long-term resilience rather than short-term gains. By integrating this topic into our leadership programs, we aim to equip participants with the tools to balance conservation, social impact, and economic opportunity in ways that strengthen both heritage and communities.

How did HERITAGE support continued learning beyond individual courses?

A major highlight of the year was the first alumni conference of the Engaging Communities in Cultural Heritage Summer

School. This event brought together former participants from across the world to share research, fieldwork experiences, and community-based practices. It created a space for reflection on how training translates into real-world impact and allowed alumni to learn from one another's successes and challenges. In addition, we delivered the second edition of our international Training of Trainers program. HERITAGE recognizes the need for skilled professionals who not only understand heritage management but can also effectively teach and inspire others to preserve and promote cultural and historical assets. Beyond formal training, regular community call meetings provide opportunities for members to exchange experiences and address challenges arising from their training activities within the HERITAGE framework.

What role does the Training of Trainers program play in HERITAGE's wider strategy?

The Training of Trainers (ToT) program is central to our vision of sustainable capacity building. Rather than limiting impact to individual participants, the program prepares heritage professionals to become HERITAGE Ambassadors who can deliver high-quality, culturally sensitive training within their own communities. In 2025, the program continued to grow, building a truly global cohort of trainers. This approach allows knowledge to circulate, adapt, and scale across different cultural and geographic contexts. Together, our education initiatives reflect HERITAGE's commitment to community-centered heritage management, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the empowerment of professionals working at the intersection of culture, development, and sustainability.



EMPATHS: Building the Skills for Participatory Heritage Interpretation

A conversation with Constantinos Andronis,
EMPATHS Project Manager

PARTNERSHIP

Interpret Europe (DE)
The Story Behind (IT)
The Heritage Management Organization (GR)
Geopark Karawanken (AU)
Ethnological Museum of Thrace (GR)
Ministero della Cultura (PAFLEG) (IT)



Co-funded by
the European Union

What is EMPATHS, and why is it important for the heritage sector today?

EMPATHS responds to a growing recognition that heritage interpretation cannot remain a top-down process. Across Europe, professionals are being asked to work more closely with communities, to address social inclusion, democratic participation, and shared ownership of cultural meaning. EMPATHS is about equipping heritage professionals with the skills to do exactly that. Funded by Erasmus+, the project is developing a participatory heritage interpretation curriculum that combines theory, ethics, and practical tools, and that can be applied

across different landscapes, institutions, and community contexts.

What were the key milestones for EMPATHS in 2025?

2025 was a foundational year. Two of our most important milestones were the publication of the EMPATHS Baseline Report and Manifesto. The Report maps current practices, challenges, and opportunities in participatory heritage interpretation. It confirmed what many practitioners experience on the ground: there is strong interest in participatory approaches, but limited structured training and uneven application across the sector. The Manifesto in its turn moves the



findings forward with a collective call to reimagine how we interpret, share, and shape heritage today. We also published several complementary deliverables, including stakeholder mapping and cross-sector interviews across 18 countries, all of which fed directly into shaping the EMPATHS training framework.

How did HERITAGE contribute to shaping the project's training approach?

HERITAGE played a key role in ensuring that the training program reflects real-world conditions. In spring 2025, we led two online co-design sessions in Greece with heritage professionals from Alexandroupoli and Rizíá. These sessions marked the first structured dialogue between technical partners and piloting organisations. They allowed us to test assumptions,

hear directly from practitioners, and better understand the skills they need—particularly in facilitation, community engagement, storytelling, and emotionally resonant communication. This feedback is now embedded in the design of the upcoming pilot training.

How did EMPATHS engage with the wider professional community this year?

Sharing and dialogue were central to our approach. EMPATHS was presented at the European Association of Archaeologists Congress in Belgrade through a session focused on collaborative pathways in archaeology and interpretation. Earlier in the year, project partners also contributed to an LDnet webinar on empowering local communities for smart and sustainable cultural heritage. These moments



helped situate EMPATHS within broader European and international conversations about participation, digital change, and partnerships.

What was achieved during the Transnational Project Meeting in Athens?

The second Transnational Project Meeting, held in Athens in September, was a turning point. Partners reviewed progress across all work packages and focused on advancing the EMPATHS training program. A key discussion centered on the methodological compendium for participatory heritage interpretation, which brings together ethical principles, practical guidance, and a step-by-step methodology for co-creating meaning with communities. This compendium will be one of EMPATHS' core legacies.

What does the EMPATHS Manifesto represent for the project?

The Manifesto captures the spirit of EMPATHS. It is a collective call to move beyond authoritative storytelling and embrace heritage as a shared, democratic process. It reflects our belief that communities are not audiences but partners, and that heritage professionals are facilitators of dialogue. As we move into the next phase of the project, the manifesto serves both as a compass and a commitment to building a more participatory, empathetic, and sustainable future for heritage interpretation.



Reflections on a Year of Architectural Heritage Preservation in Times of War



A conversation with Vira Orlovska

Vira, what made the project “Architectural Heritage Preservation in Times of War: The Ukrainian Model” so urgent when it launched in 2024?

The war has placed Ukraine’s architectural heritage under immediate and ongoing threat. Beyond physical destruction, there is also the risk of losing the skills and knowledge required to document and protect these sites. Launching this project in 2024 was about responding to both challenges at once: safeguarding heritage while investing in people. Heritage is not a luxury in wartime—it is a foundation for identity, continuity, and future recovery.

What were the main objectives of the project and how were they implemented?

The core objective was education. Together with HERITAGE, the Kharkiv School of Architecture, and Skeiron, we developed a program that combined theory, ethics, and hands-on practice. Over one academic year, 30 students and 10 educators from across Ukraine were trained in international conservation standards, legal frameworks, and advanced documentation techniques such as photogrammetry and 3D laser scanning. Field internships in Western Ukraine allowed participants to apply these skills in real-world conditions.



Why was training educators alongside students such a critical component?

Training educators ensured the project's impact would extend beyond a single cohort. Through blended learning and in-person workshops, participating teachers developed heritage-focused curricula adapted to their institutions. This approach allowed conservation knowledge to spread across regions, including areas where access to in-person education has been severely disrupted by the war.

How does this project address wider structural challenges in Ukraine's cultural sector?

A 2025 report on Ukraine's cultural sector highlighted a critical shortage of professionals in conservation and restoration, especially in frontline regions.

This project directly responded to that gap. While it addressed an immediate wartime emergency, it also tackled a long-standing structural issue: the lack of systematic training in architectural heritage preservation.

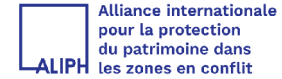
What do you see as the project's lasting legacy, despite its early conclusion?

Its legacy lies in the people and the network it created. Beyond the digital documentation of 15 heritage sites and a reusable curriculum, the project fostered a community of professionals who see preservation as an act of resilience. Although funding constraints brought the project to an early close, it demonstrated that heritage protection in times of war must be sustained, not temporary. The tools and knowledge are now in place—what is needed next is long-term commitment and support.





Preserving Shibam: Architecture, Community, and Hope



Hedaya Gharaibeh, Project Manager – Preserving the Unique Earthen Architecture of Shibam, an architect, briefs us on an important project in support of a major World Heritage Site.

OLD WALLED CITY OF SHIBAM

Shibam, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is one of the world's oldest and most remarkable examples of urban planning based on vertical construction. A key caravan stop on the spice and incense routes across the southern Arabian plateau, its multi-storey mud-brick tower houses and grid layout date to the 16th century, reflecting centuries of expertise in earthen architecture. Since 2015, Shibam has been listed as a World Heritage Site in Danger due to armed conflict, severe flooding linked to climate change, and the natural deterioration of mud-brick structures. Earthen architecture is highly vulnerable to water, humidity, and neglect, making sustained conservation both complex and urgently necessary.

What drew you to work on the preservation of Shibam, and what did it mean to lead this project?

Working in Yemen had been a lifelong dream of mine. I had studied and admired its extraordinary earthen architecture for years, so leading the Preserving the Unique Earthen Architecture of Shibam project with HERITAGE was deeply meaningful. Shibam is not just a UNESCO World Heritage Site—it is a living city, shaped by centuries of knowledge, craftsmanship, and resilience. When I first arrived, I was struck by how alive it still is, despite the many challenges it faces. To be entrusted with helping protect this heritage,

in partnership with GOPHCY, the American Foundation for Cultural Research, and with the support of the ALIPH Foundation, was both an honour and a responsibility.

What were the main priorities during the first phase of the project?

Our first year focused on understanding Shibam's architecture in depth. Together with our Yemeni technical team, we assessed more than sixty historic buildings, including the North and South Palaces and the Civil Affairs Building. We produced detailed architectural drawings and damage maps, which allowed us to develop a comprehensive Action Plan

for the rehabilitation phase. This groundwork was essential: without careful documentation and analysis, conservation risks becoming reactive rather than strategic. Shibam's earthen architecture is complex and fragile, and every intervention must respect both traditional techniques and contemporary realities.

How did collaboration and capacity building shape the project?

Working side by side with the Yemeni team was one of the most rewarding aspects of the project. At first, there was some hesitation about working closely with women on site—Maja and I were the first two women to arrive and work in the same office—but that uncertainty quickly gave way to trust and mutual respect. Collaboration became natural, full of shared learning and even

laughter. Capacity building was central to our approach: fifteen young architects and conservators joined the training program, which included workshops on photogrammetry and 3D modelling and six-month internships focused on documentation and site visits. I am especially proud that three of the trainees were women, opening doors for a new generation of Yemeni professionals.

How did the project engage the local community and address urgent risks?

Community involvement was key. Alongside technical work, we developed the design concept for a future museum in the SouthPalace through close cooperation with Shatha Safi and her team, and through consultations with women's groups, youth, and a local residents' committee. On the



technical side, we carried out a pilot pavement study, assessed the impact of air-conditioning on earthen structures, and undertook urgent stabilization works on two houses before the rainy season. As new damage emerged, further interventions followed. Looking ahead, I am proud of what this diverse team has built—combining science, tradition, and community spirit to help ensure that Shibam remains standing strong for generations to come.





Preserving Buddhist Heritage in the Swat Valley



A conversation with Conservation Architect and digital documentation expert for heritage sites, Kashif Essa of EssaNoor Architects, our partners in this project.

What makes the Buddhist rock reliefs of the Swat Valley so significant, and why was this project needed now?

The Swat Valley is one of the most important centres of the ancient Gandhara civilisation, home to remarkable Buddhist rock reliefs and inscriptions carved between the 7th and 8th centuries. These carvings are not only artistic and religious expressions; they are historical records of cultural exchange, craftsmanship, and belief systems that shaped the region. Today, however, they are under increasing threat from natural erosion, unregulated human activity, and the accelerating impacts of climate change. Phase 1 of this project was launched in response to this

urgency, with the aim of documenting, stabilising, and safeguarding these sites while building local capacity to ensure their long-term protection.

What were the main objectives and achievements of the first phase?

The first phase adopted a multi-dimensional approach that combined digital documentation, emergency conservation, community engagement, and climate resilience. Through extensive fieldwork, the project digitally documented 78 Buddhist rock reliefs using high-resolution photography, 3D scanning, and interactive geographic mapping. Emergency “first aid”

conservation was carried out on several of the most vulnerable sites to prevent further deterioration. A key milestone was the launch of a dedicated public website, offering free access to 3D models, maps, and detailed documentation. This digital platform supports research, education, site management, and global engagement, ensuring that the heritage of Swat is accessible far beyond its geographic boundaries.

How were local communities and professionals involved in the project?

Community engagement was central to the project's philosophy. Local institutions and communities were involved throughout the process through discussions, workshops, and hands-on training. Thirteen heritage professionals

and seven community members were trained in digital documentation and preservation techniques, ensuring that skills and knowledge remain locally embedded. In parallel, the project recorded six oral testimonies that capture the intangible heritage of the region. These narratives highlight the enduring influence of Buddhism on local traditions, including Gandharan wood carving, stone masonry, and shawl embroidery, strengthening the connection between tangible heritage and living cultural practices.

Beyond conservation, how does the project contribute to sustainable development and future resilience?

The project recognizes that heritage preservation must go hand in hand



with sustainable livelihoods. Alongside conservation efforts, it identified opportunities for eco-tourism and community-based economic development, including the creation of hiking trails and the promotion of local crafts, medicinal plants, and cultural tourism. These initiatives aim to generate income while encouraging stewardship of heritage sites. The project was featured in the Koel Gallery's Set In Stone Exhibition in Lahore, contributed to Pakistan's Venice Biennale presence, and concluded with a public closing ceremony at the Swat Museum, attended by students, professionals, community members, and international experts. The event showcased the project's results, launched the website, and fostered dialogue on climate adaptation, community participation, and the future of Buddhist

heritage in Swat. Together, these efforts position the project as a model for integrated, resilient heritage conservation in vulnerable contexts.





AHEAD: Advancing Participatory and Audience-Centred Heritage Practice

A conversation with Roula Gkika,
AHEAD Project Manager

PARTNERSHIP

Melting Pro (IT)
University of Deusto (ES)
Archaeological Park of Ostia Antica (IT)
The Heritage Management Organization (GR)
Impact Valley (BE)



What is AHEAD, and why is it particularly relevant for the heritage sector today?

AHEAD (Accessible Heritage Experience for Audience Development) was designed in response to a growing shift in the heritage sector: the recognition that meaningful heritage work must be participatory, inclusive, and rooted in dialogue with communities. Too often, heritage interpretation and programming are still developed for audiences rather than with them. AHEAD challenges this model by placing co-creation, participation, and shared authorship at the centre of

heritage practice. This stage of the project's work, which was co-funded by the EU and completed in October 2025—brought together heritage professionals, researchers, artists, and cultural organisations to explore how design thinking, new partnership models, and artistic practice can transform the way heritage institutions work with people and communities.

What were the main milestones and activities during the project's final year?

2025 was a very active and rewarding year for AHEAD. HERITAGE ran a series of labs in



the project's Greek hub, the Archaeological Museum of Mesara in Crete, that set the foundations for the co-creation of two new activities for the museum with the participation of local elementary school students and the wider community. We hosted the project partners for an in-person study visit in Crete in May and in July, we held the third out of a total of four AHEAD Online Networking Events, bringing together practitioners and researchers from Europe and beyond. In September, HERITAGE organized a dedicated event in Athens to share and multiply AHEAD's results with heritage managers, researchers, and cultural professionals. The project culminated in October with a public event in Brussels and a performance in Mesara, where the artistin-

residence presented a site-specific work co-created with the local community—an embodiment of AHEAD's core values in practice.

How did AHEAD bridge theory and practice in participatory heritage work?

AHEAD placed strong emphasis on experimentation and learning through practice. Artistic residencies and site-specific interventions allowed participation to move beyond consultation into genuine co-creation with communities. At the same time, research activities and professional exchanges created space for critical reflection on participatory methods, challenges, and ethics. Rather



than promoting a single model, AHEAD encouraged heritage professionals to adapt participatory approaches to their own contexts, acknowledging that meaningful engagement depends on local realities, trust-building, and long-term commitment.

What is AHEAD's legacy now that the project has concluded?

Although AHEAD formally concluded in October 2025, its impact will extend well beyond the project's timeline. The consortium has put together a transformative Capacity Building Program that is freely available online. It includes a series of video seminars, guidelines on how to run the AHEAD labs, as well as

following guidelines on how to prototype and test the solutions. Heritage practitioners are also given insights into how the implementation unfolded in the project's three hubs, in Greece, Italy and Spain. The AHEAD magazine, freely available in multiple languages and documenting case studies, insights, and reflections generated throughout the project, and the AHEAD professional networks with over 300 members are equally important outputs. AHEAD has contributed to a lasting shift in perspective, reinforcing the role of communities as partners and co-creators, and providing heritage professionals with inspiration, tools, and confidence to carry this approach forward.



HerMaP Gambia: From Training to Transformation



*A conversation with the
HerMaP Gambia Program Team*

What did the conclusion of HerMaP Gambia in February 2025 represent for HERITAGE and its partners?

The conclusion of HerMaP Gambia in February 2025 marked the culmination of five years of intensive capacity building, partnership development, and community engagement. Funded by the European Union, and complemented by HERITAGE's Mellon Foundation-supported Small Grants for African Heritage, the program demonstrated how sustained investment in people and institutions can strengthen a national heritage ecosystem. Over the course of the program, we trained more than 250 heritage

professionals and supported 10 community-led projects, creating a strong foundation for long-term impact. Completion was not an endpoint, but a moment to consolidate achievements, celebrate local leadership, and ensure continuity beyond the program's formal timeline.

How was the program's completion marked in The Gambia?

HerMaP Gambia concluded with a certificate award ceremony held during the national celebrations marking the 60th anniversary of The Gambia's independence. This was a powerful moment of recognition for the

program's trainees and partners, set within a broader national context of reflection and pride. The ceremony was accompanied by an exhibition of Gambian art organized by the Visual Arts Association, highlighting the close relationship between heritage, contemporary creativity, and national identity. One week later, HERITAGE convened a high-level policy roundtable bringing together the Minister of Tourism, Members of Parliament, EU representatives, and a wide range of stakeholders. The discussion focused on sustaining the program's results and embedding heritage management within national development priorities.

What has been the impact of the program on the ground?

One of HerMaP Gambia's most significant outcomes has been the growth of local leadership and expertise. Some of the 30 trainers who completed the program are already designing and delivering their own training activities, multiplying impact beyond HERITAGE's direct involvement. At the project level, 5 initiatives received funding through HerMaP Gambia and the Mellon Foundation's Small Grants for African Heritage, supporting museums, community spaces, documentation initiatives, and living heritage practices across the country. These projects



show how relatively small, well-targeted investments can unlock creativity, civic engagement, and local stewardship of heritage. A particularly symbolic moment came in November 2025, when His Excellency President Adama Barrow visited the Jufureh Heritage Village Museum in the North Bank Region. Developed by the Alamanding Foundation, the museum was made possible through funding from HERITAGE's Small Grants for African Heritage, supported by the Mellon Foundation, and the EU-funded HerMaP Gambia program. The museum is a community-driven initiative that goes beyond the preservation of artefacts. Conceived as a living museum, it

supports civic education, environmental awareness, artisan workshops, and storytelling gatherings at Banta Baa — a traditional space for cultural exchange. The President's visit underscored the national significance of community-led heritage initiatives and reflected the program's enduring impact. While HerMaP Gambia has formally concluded, HERITAGE continues to work in the country, supporting partners, trainers, and institutions as they transform learning into lasting impact.





SHIFT: Rethinking Inclusion and Technology in the GLAM Sector

Rob Davies, European Programs Manager, wraps up the achievements and key moments of this substantial EU-funded project

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What did the completion of SHIFT in 2025 represent for the project and its partners?

SHIFT concluded in 2025 as a landmark Horizon Europe project that brought together advanced technologies, accessibility, and inclusion within the GLAM sector. Over its lifetime, SHIFT demonstrated how artificial intelligence, extended reality, and multimodal tools can transform the way cultural heritage is created, interpreted, and accessed. The final year was particularly important, as it brought together years of research, co-design, and testing into concrete outcomes that are now ready for adoption by cultural heritage institutions. Completing SHIFT was not just about delivering tools, but about proving that

inclusive-by-design digital heritage is both achievable and necessary.

What were the key moments and outputs during SHIFT's final year?

The final year of the project was marked by strong public engagement and validation of results. SHIFT carried out four pilot implementations across Europe, testing tools and methodologies in real institutional contexts and refining them based on user feedback. The project had a strong presence at the Digital Heritage 2025 World Congress and Expo in Siena, where SHIFT tools, use cases, and accessibility frameworks were showcased to an international professional

audience. SHIFT concluded with a final online conference, “Rethinking Inclusion – AI in the GLAM Sector,” which brought together researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to reflect on lessons learned and future directions for inclusive digital heritage.

What role did HERITAGE play within the SHIFT consortium?

HERITAGE contributed to SHIFT across its entire lifecycle. From the early stages of the project, HERITAGE supported the definition of end-user requirements, ensuring that the tools being developed responded to the real needs of museums, libraries, archives, and smaller cultural institutions. As the project progressed, HERITAGE led the work package on communication, dissemination, and exploitation, coordinating outreach activities and helping position SHIFT within broader European and international conversations. HERITAGE also compiled two policy briefs that translated technical results into actionable insights for decision-makers, and developed seven dedicated training modules to support heritage professionals in adopting and using SHIFT’s tools effectively.



How does SHIFT's legacy extend beyond the end of the project?

SHIFT's impact extends well beyond its formal conclusion. HERITAGE has begun integrating several SHIFT tools into its own training programs, including the Digital Tools for Cultural Heritage Summer School, allowing professionals to experiment with inclusive AI-based technologies in applied learning environments. Together with the project's open-access tools, training resources, policy briefs, and accessibility framework, this early adoption supports long-term uptake and scaling. More broadly, SHIFT has helped shift mindsets—demonstrating that inclusion should not be an afterthought, but a core principle guiding the design and deployment of digital technologies in the cultural heritage sector.



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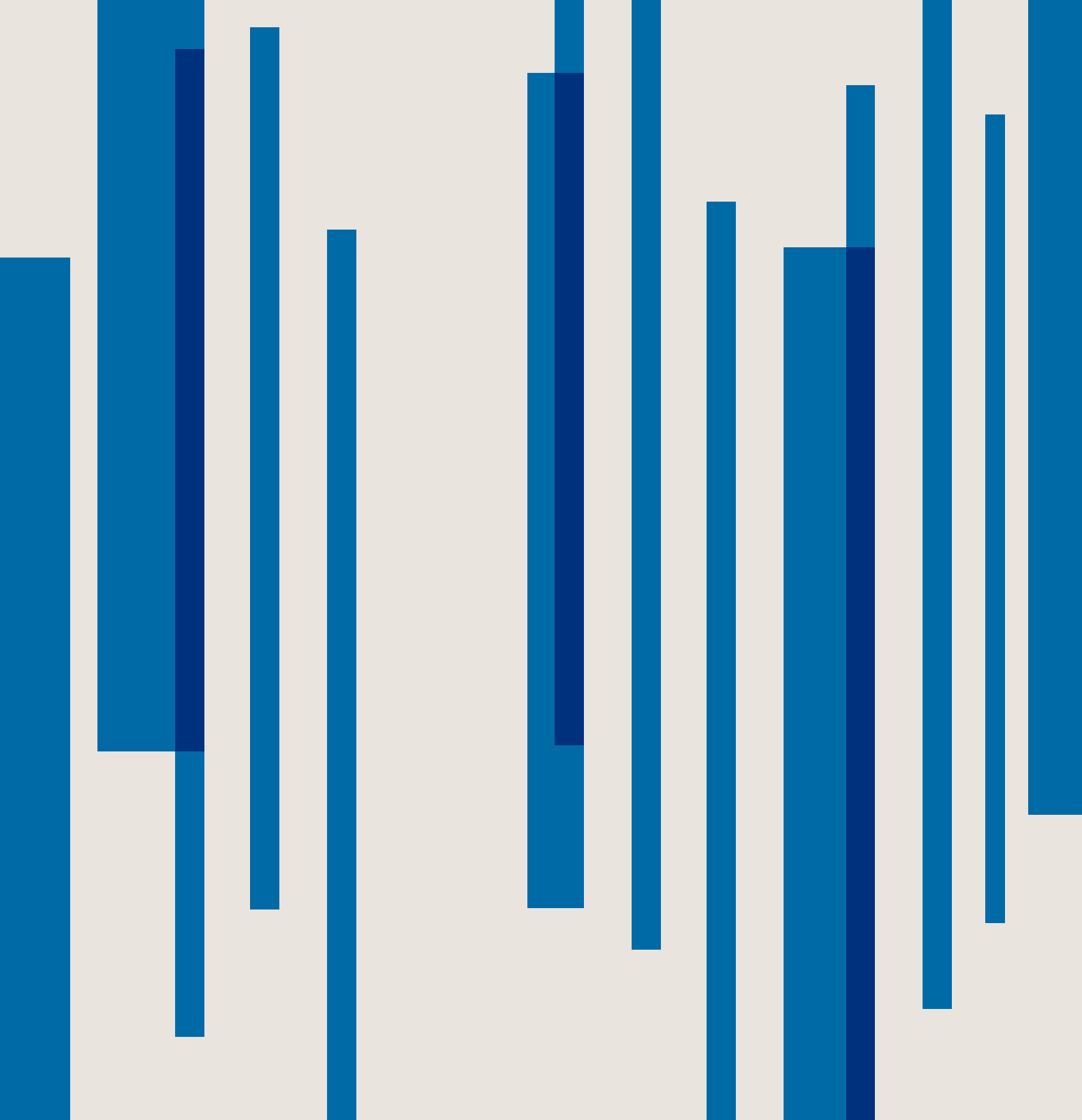
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