

THOUGHTS ON THE 27TH EAC CONFERENCE

National Museum and Research Centre of Altamira, Santillana del Mar, Cantabria, Spain, 19–21 March 2026

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The 27th Annual Meeting and Symposium of the European Archaeological Council (EAC), held under the title Bridging Borders in Heritage Protection, was not merely a thematic professional meeting but a kind of diagnosis: it offered an accurate picture of the current state of archaeological heritage management in European countries and of the tools that may help reduce the looting of archaeological sites and assess and evaluate the resulting cultural, social and scientific losses (Fig. 1).

The event was hosted by the Spanish Ministry of Culture, the Altamira Museum and the Mayor of Santillana del Mar. Since the world-famous cave containing works of prehistoric art has only exceptionally been open to visitors since the early 2000s – for example, to residents of the town who have reached the age of 18 in a given year – a life-size replica of the cave was completed by 2001 as part of the museum. Constructed using natural materials and techniques and covering almost 400 square metres, it accurately reproduces the forms of the original ceiling, walls, and cavities (Fig. 2).

The symposium focused on the illicit trade of cultural objects and the destruction of archaeological sites, yet the opening presentations already made it clear that the problem extends far beyond the traditional framework of criminal activity. The question is not only how looting may be prevented, but also to what extent existing legal, institutional and social systems are capable of interpreting and addressing these phenomena.

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Fig. 2. The life-size replica of the Altamira Cave in the museum built beside the site



Fig. 1. The conference at the Altamira Museum

One recurring theme of the conference was the duality of legal regulation. International regulations provide a substantial legal framework – including the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, the 1992 Valletta Convention on the protection of the archaeological heritage, the 2005 Faro Convention on the value of cultural heritage for society, the 2017 Nicosia Convention on offences relating to cultural property, as well as two EU regulations (Regulation EC No. 116/2009 on the export of cultural goods and Regulation 2019/880 on the introduction and import of cultural goods) – and national legislation

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is likewise available. Nevertheless, their practical implementation is often difficult and in many cases proves inadequate.

A distinctive feature of crimes against heritage is that the damage cannot be measured solely in monetary terms. In the case of a looted site, not only objects disappear, but also contexts, connections, and historical narratives are destroyed – all those elements that constitute the true value of archaeology. Yet the legal definition, analysis, and evaluation of this complex loss are extremely difficult.

It is therefore unsurprising that several presentations explicitly called for the development of new assessment models capable of quantifying scientific and cultural losses as well. The problem thus lies not in the absence of regulation, but rather in its limited interpretative scope and in the constraints affecting the instruments of enforcement.

The organisation's general assembly took place on the opening day. During the meeting, two new publications were presented: the [proceedings](#) of last year's heritage management symposium and the [abstracts](#) of the conference papers, as well as the latest EAC publication, [EAC Guidance 11](#), concerning the assessment of the significance of archaeological sites (*Fig. 3*).

In the opening lecture, Carlos González Barandiarán, representative of the Ministry of Culture, outlined the legal framework for combating the illicit trade in archaeological heritage. Of the [three conference sessions](#), the first focused on the possibilities of legal measures against the looting of archaeological heritage, the second presented examples of successful cooperation, while the third explored innovative approaches aimed at reducing criminal activity.

Leonard de Witt, former president of the EAC, expressed the hope that effective international cooperation could become a means of reducing the looting of archaeological sites. He cited several examples, including the Pandora IX programme, carried out with the participation of law enforcement and customs authorities from 23 countries, which resulted in 80 arrests and the seizure of 37,727 objects, including archaeological finds, works of art, coins, and musical instruments. The following speaker presented the instruments of the Spanish National Archaeological Plan. The Hungarian speakers, archaeologist Gábor Virágos and police officer István Elekes (Head of the Art Protection Subdivision of the National Bureau of Investigation of the Rapid Response Police), pointed out that, in their view, certain archaeological crimes can be traced back to regulatory shortcomings and highlighted the legal blind spots and overlaps in criminal jurisdiction that arise from them. According to the speakers, large-scale illegal metal detecting in Hungary presents serious risks, since the estimated number of detector users is around 15,000, whereas the number of registered detectorists is only 400–500, and the boundary between 'ethical' and illegal metal detecting remains blurred. Finally, they called for new European regulations – including the creation of an international database for the management of heritage crimes – and for further coordinated action.

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One of the most widely discussed ideas of the conference was connected to the presentation by Despoina Markaki (Ephorate of Antiquities of Heraklion, Panteion University, Greece), which focused on the concept of 'legalised vandalism'. Markaki's analysis drew attention to the fact that a significant proportion of heritage destruction is not the consequence of illegal activity but, on the contrary, takes place within the frame-

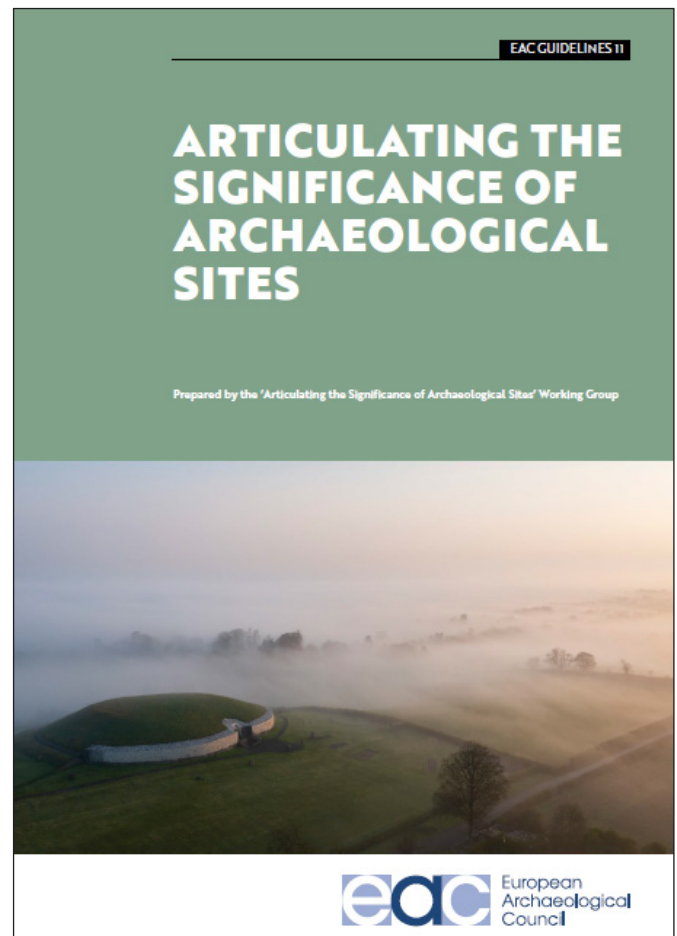


Fig. 3. EAC publication on the assessment of the significance of archaeological sites

work of lawful, state-authorised processes. The case studies presented – especially the example of Papoura in Crete – demonstrated that authorisation procedures connected to large-scale infrastructure projects and heritage management often serve not the prevention of loss but rather its administrative management. Within this system, the role of archaeology itself becomes ambivalent: “rescue excavations” frequently appear as a precondition for destruction and thus, albeit unintentionally, legitimise interventions that cause irreversible damage. Markaki’s argument is particularly important because it demonstrates that the current heritage protection framework is not necessarily designed to prevent damage but rather to channel it into regulated forms. The resulting losses often remain ‘invisible’, since they occur within the boundaries of legality and therefore do not appear either as crimes or as systemic problems.

This recognition raises a fundamental question concerning the current model of heritage protection: do the existing institutional and legal structures truly serve preservation, or do they rather maintain a compromise system in which certain forms of destruction become accepted and manageable?

One of the most frequently quoted remarks of the conference – “only people who know people can act” – may at first sound almost banal, yet it captures one of the fundamental problems of the system with precision. In nearly every case presented, effective action depended on cooperation between institutions: the joint work of police forces, customs authorities, museums, research institutes, and civil actors. At the same time, such cooperation is often based on personal relationships and rarely built upon stable institutional frameworks. This structural deficiency is particularly problematic in relation to a phenomenon that is fundamentally international in nature. Networks involved in the illicit trade of cultural goods are well organised and transnational, whereas the measures taken against them are frequently fragmented and ad hoc.

One important outcome of the conference was that the role of civil communities came to be viewed in a new light. In the case of metal detecting, diving, or even the online antiquities trade, civil society often appears as a risk factor; nevertheless, several presentations argued that, within appropriate frameworks, these groups may become active participants in protection. The Slovenian, Luxembourgish, Czech, and other Nordic and Baltic examples clearly demonstrated that a combination of improved regulation and public involvement may function effectively. Community monitoring, voluntary participation, and awareness-raising can mobilise resources that are otherwise inaccessible to state institutions. Such an approach, however, requires a delicate balance: excessive liberalisation may lead to abuse, while excessive restriction may alienate those who could potentially become partners.

The conference made it clear that new technologies are also playing an increasingly important role in heritage protection. Monitoring the online antiquities market, the application of artificial intelligence, and the use of drones and satellite systems all represent tools that open up new possibilities while simultaneously creating new challenges. The contradictions of digitalisation are evident here as well: while technology may assist protection, the same technology also enables the global and virtually uncontrollable expansion of the antiquities trade. Perhaps the most important lesson of the EAC symposium was that the protection of archaeological heritage cannot be addressed within the framework of a single discipline. Law, archaeology, criminology, community participation, and technology are all necessary, yet none is sufficient in itself. The greatest challenge facing the current system is not the creation of the necessary instruments but the lack of their integration. Until this is achieved, heritage management will remain reactive: instead of preventing damage, it will continue merely to interpret and mitigate it retrospectively. The conference title – *Bridging Borders* – may therefore be understood not only in a geographical sense. The real boundaries that must be bridged lie between disciplines, institutions, and ways of thinking.

The present report offers only an overview of the more significant issues discussed during the conference; as in the case of every EAC heritage management symposium, the papers delivered will be published in next year’s proceedings. Following the scientific sessions, participants had the opportunity to visit two further sites among the ten Cantabrian caves included on the World Heritage List, namely Las Monedas and El Castillo in the Castillo Mountains, where a wide range of cave paintings and engravings could be viewed in their original setting.