

Science Diplomacy and Heritage: On the Politics of Fragments, the Role of Science and the Perception of Lacunas

First Colloquium of the TEP Science Diplomacy and Culture



© Ali Cherri, Angel of History, 2023, Roman marble head of a deity, plaster, steel, 53 × 21 × 11 cm

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The conference *Science Diplomacy and Heritage: On the Politics of Fragments, the Role of Science and the Perception of Lacunas* took place at the Teatrino di Palazzo Grassi in Venice, bringing together leading voices from diplomacy, academia and the arts, as well as representatives of cultural institutions. Organised by the University for Continuing Education Krems under the coordination of Christina Hainzl, in close cooperation with the EUTOPIA European University Alliance and Palazzo Grassi–Pinault Collection, and supported by the European Union Science Diplomacy Alliance, the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe and the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe, the conference created a trans-disciplinary platform for reflecting on the political, scientific and cultural dimensions of heritage in times of global uncertainty.

The event opened with welcoming remarks by Bruno Racine (Palazzo Grassi – Punta della Dogana) and Christina Hainzl and Viktoria Weber (University for Continuing Education Krems), as well as Jan Marco Müller (European Commission), Magdalena Landry (UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe), Roland Hinterhölzl (EUTOPIA/Ca' Foscari University Venice) and Alessandro Lombardo (European Union Science Diplomacy Alliance). These were followed by two keynote lectures, two panel discussions, an artist's talk and a concluding performance, bringing academic, diplomatic and artistic perspectives into a dialogue that is discussed in sequence below. Venice itself provided a fitting setting, as a place where the interdependence of cultural and natural heritage, environmental change and political responsibility are especially visible.

Keynote by Dan Hicks *Staying with the Fragments*

In his keynote, Dan Hicks, Professor of Contemporary Archaeology at Oxford University, a curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum and a fellow of St Cross College, offered a critical analysis of the relationship between monuments, museums, memory and colonial violence. He argued that the period between the 1870s and the 1920s saw the emergence of a distinct and largely unnamed cultural and political movement across the areas of archaeology, anthropology, art and architecture. This movement deliberately intertwined these fields with museums, monuments and public memory in order to legitimise imperial expansion and militarised forms of domination. He terms this formation ‘militarist realism’, describing it as a system that embedded ideas of cultural supremacy into institutions and public space and made imperial rule appear natural and inevitable.

Hicks interpreted contemporary phenomena such as Fallism, restitution claims and the decolonisation of knowledge as responses to this enduring formation. Statues, museum collections and academic disciplines are not neutral but part of a historical system that stabilises colonial hierarchies. He made the key distinction between history and memory, maintaining that removing a monument does not erase history but reshapes public memory. Monuments are instruments of remembrance, and societies have the right to decide whom they wish to honour.

Using examples such as the Edward Colston statue in Bristol and the Cecil Rhodes monument in Oxford, Hicks showed how debates often shift from questions of present-day values to abstract defences of historical figures. He suggested how, in some cases, an empty plinth can be more meaningful than a recontextualised statue.

From an archaeological perspective, Hicks emphasised that colonialism should not be seen as a closed chapter, as its material and institutional legacies continue into the present. Restitution and the treatment of human remains are therefore urgent ethical and diplomatic issues that require transparency and accountability. He concluded that monuments endure only because societies choose to maintain them. Preservation is a political decision, and heritage demands ongoing reflection on what to inherit and what to leave behind.



Panel I *Monuments and Mindsets*

The first panel, Monuments and Mindsets, examined how science and culture function within international relations, particularly in the contexts of crisis, restitution and structural inequality. The discussion focused on responsibility: on how states and institutions can use heritage and scientific knowledge to strengthen cooperation rather than deepen divisions.

Regina Ruzs, Director General for International Cultural Affairs at the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and Foreign Affairs, challenged the conventional notion of ‘soft power’. By arguing that culture is not soft but a ‘power of relations’, she shifted the focus from influence to reciprocity and mutual engagement. In Austria, international cultural relations are institutionally embedded within the Foreign Ministry and treated as a strategic component of diplomacy rather than as an auxiliary field. As concrete examples, she referred to the recently adopted Africa Strategy of the Austrian Foreign Ministry, the opening of a new cultural institute in Pretoria and the plan to open another in Ghana. She also noted that a State Secretary is now specifically in charge of international cultural relations, which signals strengthened political commitment. Dialogue, empathy and mutual understanding, she added, are not new policy slogans but historically rooted principles that form part of Austria’s diplomatic DNA. Through initiatives such as ‘Dialogue Residencies’, Austrian artists and scientists collaborate abroad in jointly developed formats that prioritise exchange and co-creation instead of hierarchical influence.

Volker Erhard, Head of Cultural Preservation at the German Federal Foreign Office, reflected critically on the traditional understanding of soft power, in which states seek to make others voluntarily follow their lead. He advocated partnership without asymmetry, particularly within the framework of the EU. He noted that this framework offers EU crisis missions the possibility of embedding cultural heritage experts, who can advise not only on the protection of sites but also on how heritage can be used preventively to avoid escalation, to safeguard or evacuate during active conflicts and to support reconciliation when a conflict is over. Germany has developed innovative mechanisms such as the Cultural Heritage Response Unit (CRU) for post-disaster heritage protection and a digital archive initiative in Tuvalu, whose role is to preserve both tangible and intangible heritage in the face of climate displacement. For Erhard, crises present not only risks but opportunities for institutional innovation.

Muhammad Adeel, a diplomat from Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs currently serving in the Embassy of Pakistan to the EU who trained as a water scientist, described science diplomacy as a platform that brings together diverse actors to generate synergies. Pakistan’s extreme vulnerability to climate change, despite being a minimal emitter, makes safeguarding infrastructure and major heritage sites, including those of the Indus Valley Civilisation, particularly urgent. Flooding, water governance and regional security concerns directly affect cultural preservation. Adeel stressed the need for whole-of-government and multilateral approaches, pointing to Pakistan’s role in intergovernmental scientific organisations and the importance of aligning regional and global frameworks instead of creating parallel structures. He regards science diplomacy as a tool that enables states to address climate risk, geopolitical tension and heritage protection through coordinated technical and diplomatic cooperation.

Samuel Partey, Head of Unit and Regional Advisor at UNESCO's Venice Office, linked UNESCO's science–culture approach to the Man and the Biosphere Programme, which emerged from scientific concern about environmental degradation and called for a peacebuilding relationship between humanity and nature. Today, with over 750 biosphere reserves worldwide, countries use this framework to combine biodiversity and climate goals with the protection of cultural identity. Partey stressed that the nomination process for the programme provides a scientific foundation to heritage protection and integrates it into national strategies. He also underlined the role of UNESCO's conventions and open science initiatives in promoting shared standards and the cross-border exchange of knowledge.

Alessandro Garbellini, Head of Space, Multilateral Science Diplomacy and Intellectual Property at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, identified inclusion as one of the keywords of contemporary science diplomacy. In a digital society in which access to AI and high-performance computing is extremely costly, he warned that technological progress risks deepening global inequalities unless it is embedded in multilateral frameworks. For this reason, he pointed to the responsibility of governments for ensuring that scientific cooperation and heritage protection remain high on the political agenda, highlighting support for Ukraine's damaged research infrastructure and scientists in exile as concrete examples. Within this broader strategy, Italy's establishment of an AI research centre in Bologna in cooperation with the United Nations University is designed to provide publicly accessible computing infrastructure, particularly for researchers from the Global South. He complemented this structural perspective with a cultural example, describing how bottom-up artistic engagement in Oman ultimately led to the country's first participation in the Venice Biennale, demonstrating how inclusive initiatives can translate into diplomatic outcomes.

The discussion then turned to restitution and legal frameworks. Katalin Andreides, a Rome-based art lawyer specialising in provenance and restitution, provided a systematic differentiation between three categories of looted art: antiquities, Nazi-confiscated art and colonial-era looted objects. Each category presents distinct legal challenges. Looted antiquities are addressed by conventions such as the UNESCO 1970 convention and UNIDROIT, as well as EU import regulations, although provenance gaps remain a persistent obstacle. The treatment of Nazi-confiscated art is guided by the Washington Principles, which are morally binding but not legally enforceable. Colonial restitution claims present the most complex challenges due to their long historical duration, shifting sovereignties and evidentiary difficulties. Andreides made clear that the law alone cannot resolve these disputes and that interdisciplinary expertise, including history, provenance research, ethics, diplomacy and the increasing use of scientific tools such as AI are indispensable. Ultimately, restitution depends on political will and policy choices.

Ivor Agyeman-Duah, Director of the Manhyia Palace Museum in Ghana, placed restitution within the broader framework of national responsibility and cultural policy. He argued that, without historically grounded national cultural strategies, governments lack direction in international negotiations. In many West African contexts, tourism often overshadows cultural development, while weak regional structures limit effective participation in multilateral frameworks. Against this background, Agyeman-Duah described his role as chief negotiator in securing the return of Ashanti regalia that were looted during the Anglo-Ashanti wars and held for over 150 years in the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Given that UK law prevents permanent deaccession, Ghana pursued a loan arrangement, which

was negotiated over nine months and resulting in the return of 32 objects. The decision generated global attention and domestic controversy, particularly regarding the legitimacy of loans for looted objects and the question of whether they should belong to the nation state or their original community. Agyeman-Duah emphasised the importance of coalition-building with supportive museum actors and of deliberately avoiding legal confrontation and relying instead on historiography, moral argumentation and pragmatic diplomacy, while acknowledging structural limitations in domestic legal and art-historical expertise.

Climate change emerged as a central interdisciplinary issue, with Venice serving as a symbolic example of a heritage city under environmental pressure. The discussion touched on the growing reliance on private funding for restoration and the potential implications of this for ownership and governance. Several core conclusions crystallised across the panel: science and culture are integral to contemporary diplomacy; soft power must be reinterpreted as partnership rather than hierarchy; restitution is embedded in moral and political contexts beyond legal frameworks; and the inclusion of actors from the Global South is essential to legitimacy. Overall, the panel presented science and cultural diplomacy as practical, institutionally grounded tools for addressing contemporary crises.



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Keynote by Peggy Oti-Boateng *Bridging Wisdom and Innovation: Science Diplomacy for a Shared Planet*

In her keynote, Peggy Oti-Boateng, a seasoned leader in STI research training and policy and until recently the Executive Director of the African Academy of Sciences (AAS), drew on four decades of experience in science policy and African research leadership to argue for a structural integration of science, culture and diplomacy. Challenging predominantly European conceptions of science diplomacy, she maintained that Africa has long practiced diplomacy through cultural exchange, shared resource management and environmental stewardship, even if these have not been named as such. Framing Africa as the cradle of humanity, she presented heritage as a living foundation for global cooperation.

Pointing to shared resources such as the River Nile, Oti-Boateng illustrated how diplomacy is embedded in negotiated coexistence. Cultural identity, as expressed through language, textiles, symbols, music and oral tradition is, she argued, coming under increasing threat from climate change, extractive practices and urban expansion. Referring to sites such as Elmina Castle and the diaspora festival PANAFEST, she pointed out that heritage spaces function simultaneously as repositories of memory, identity and scientific knowledge, and as platforms for diplomacy in action.

Oti-Boateng called for moving beyond rhetorical commitment and toward institutional consolidation, advocating a normative framework for science diplomacy comparable to the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science. Science diplomacy, in her view, must be grounded in trust, reciprocity and equitable partnership rather than one-directional knowledge transfer.

Illustrating the convergence of innovation and heritage with examples of digital mapping, satellite monitoring, AI-supported preservation and scientific research on historical materials, Oti-Boateng stressed that technological advancement must be guided by ethical reflection and cultural wisdom. She concluded by citing the Ubuntu principle ‘I am because you are’ and framing science diplomacy as a pathway toward global resilience and a shared planetary future built on interconnectedness and collective responsibility.



Panel II *Heritage in an Era of Uncertainty*



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The second panel, *Heritage in an Era of Uncertainty*, shifted the focus from restitution and legal frameworks to the structural conditions under which heritage issues are negotiated today. Rather than focussing on who owns the past, the discussion examined how heritage is shaped by geopolitical conflict, environmental pressure, educational practice, research infrastructures and power asymmetries in knowledge production. Across different regional perspectives, the panel explored how science diplomacy operates within these tensions.

Martina Schubert, Deputy Director of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, characterised heritage as a growing field of diplomatic expertise. Since the end of the Cold War, she observed, culture, memory and historical narratives have become central arenas of international politics. Heritage has evolved into a globally contested terrain, in which identities and symbolic claims are negotiated across borders. She noted that recent geopolitical conflicts have demonstrated how language, monuments and historical narratives can acquire political significance beyond the cultural sphere. Diplomats must therefore develop cultural literacy: the ability to detect symbolic dimensions in political disputes, understand historical sensitivities and use cultural knowledge for de-escalation and trust-building. At the Diplomatic Academy, this translates into integrating memory studies, cultural theory and international heritage law into diplomatic training.

Abdelrazek Elnaggar, Professor of Heritage Science at Ain Shams University and Coordinator of the SloveNile Heritage Science Platform, approached the panel from the perspective of heritage science diplomacy. He first situated Egyptian heritage within global knowledge production, noting that European museums holding Egyptian collections function not only as exhibition spaces but as research hubs closely linked to innovation, tourism and education. Against this background, he argued that debates on social justice must be complemented by 'science justice', meaning equitable access to scientific infrastructure and interpretative authority. He presented heritage science as a relatively new transdisciplinary field and referred to the European Research Infrastructure for Heritage Science as a framework dedicated to expanding access via national nodes, including Slovenia. To operationalise sustainability, he introduced the 'Nine Principles of Green Heritage Science', which include

measurable indicators and the democratisation of research tools beyond Western centres. The SloveNile platform exemplifies this approach by building structured cooperation, mobility and capacity-building between Slovenia and Egypt, embedding bilateral exchange within broader European heritage partnerships.

Francesca Tarocco, Professor of Buddhist Studies and Chinese Religions at Ca' Foscari University and Director of the Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE), began by situating science diplomacy within education, describing classrooms as everyday sites of negotiation in increasingly multicultural environments and calling for properly resourced academic infrastructures. She then turned to Venice, where she lives and works, presenting the city as a tangible example of climate vulnerability. Rising sea levels and overtourism, she noted, reveal the limits of technocratic preservation strategies. Introducing the concept of biocultural heritage, she proposed that heritage must extend beyond monuments to include ecosystems, non-human life and community relations. In this context, she presented NICHE as a centre 'in and of Venice' that treats the city as both a real and an imagined space for environmental reflection, inviting scholars, particularly from Africa and Asia, to engage questions of climate change and heritage while consciously seeking to provincialise Europe. Drawing on her research in China, she added that UNESCO heritage designation can function ambivalently, operating both as a state-driven nation-building instrument and as a catalyst for grassroots preservation initiatives.

Cengiz Günay, Director of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs and a specialist on Turkey and the Middle East, called for a broader understanding of science diplomacy beyond state actors, pointed to a persistent North–South imbalance in knowledge production, whereby expertise is often assumed to flow primarily from North to South, and urged greater recognition of the knowledge emerging from societies that are directly confronting climate change. He then turned to heritage, which he characterised, in contexts of competing identities, as a political battleground shaped by nation-building narratives and the external logics of prestige and tourism and illustrated by museum narratives that culminate in the modern nation-state. Linking these dynamics to the global rise of nationalism and authoritarian politics, he cited the reconversion of Hagia Sophia as a deliberate political signal. Increasing autocratisation, he noted, is limiting the scope for critical scholarship and scientific exchange, making research and science diplomacy in parts of the region more constrained and, at times, dangerous.

Nadia von Maltzahn, Principal Investigator of the ERC project *Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad* and a researcher at the Orient-Institut Beirut, reflected on the role of long-term research infrastructures in times of crisis. Effective science diplomacy, she argued, depends on pre-existing networks of trust and cooperation that can endure political rupture. Speaking in the light of her experience with a German research institute in Lebanon, she stressed that such structures must be in place before a conflict escalates because, once a crisis unfolds, it is often too late to create them. She noted that her ERC-funded project had emerged from earlier research and local archival needs rather than from a predefined policy agenda, and had been recognised as urgent before the recent crises began. At the same time, she added, working within a European-funded German institution creates ambivalent perceptions: in the context of Germany policy toward Israel and Gaza, the institute is sometimes seen as representing national positions, which can lead to refusals to participate. In other cases, however, it has been trusted precisely because of its association with German academic rigour.

Across the discussion, heritage emerged as a politically charged arena in which identity, legitimacy and power are actively negotiated rather than passively preserved. The panel emphasised that science diplomacy operates within these contested environments and requires long-term institutional infrastructures, educational training and equitable access to research capacities if it is to function effectively. Persistent North–South asymmetries in knowledge production, debates over interpretative authority and the politicisation of heritage narratives reveal that scientific cooperation is embedded in broader power structures. At the same time, environmental pressures, overtourism and climate vulnerability, as exemplified by Venice, demand interdisciplinary and ethically grounded approaches that move beyond monument-centred preservation. Finally, shrinking academic freedom in parts of the world highlight that science diplomacy itself depends on protected spaces for critical research and exchange.

Artist's Talk with Ali Cherri and Bruno Racine, followed by the performance *The Book of Mud*

The conference concluded with the artist's talk *Between the Old and the New—Heritage of Our Time*, which featured the artist and filmmaker Ali Cherri and Bruno Racine, Director of Palazzo Grassi–Punta della Dogana, in conversation with Christina Hainzl (University for Continuing Education Krems). The evening continued with Ali Cherri's performance *The Book of Mud* in the atrium of Palazzo Grassi (see: Palazzo Grassi–Punta della Dogana–Collection Pinault). A podcast on Science Diplomacy and Heritage will be released soon.



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