

Ostia Antica Archaeological Park: Public Archaeology initiatives and projects as part of the European Heritage Label

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WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN HERITAGE LABEL?

The Archaeological Park of Ostia Antica, awarded the European Heritage Label in 2020, has distinguished itself since its establishment for its focus on public archaeology, both through traditional educational and communication activities and through specific projects aimed at particular audiences, such as ethnic and linguistic minority communities settled in the area. The European Heritage Label is an award that the European Commission – Directorate General for Education Art and Culture – gives to cultural sites in Europe that embody the founding values of the European Union (i.e. the universal values of human rights) and the values of European identity (historical, geographical, traditional and cultural values). Sites, widespread sites (i.e. groups of sites with a common theme) and symbolic objects – such as the Lisbon Charter for the Abolition of the Death Penalty, approved in 1867, or the Maastricht Treaty – are eligible to compete. The aim of the European Heritage Label is to enhance the common cultural heritage by improving mutual understanding among European citizens, helping to strengthen the sense of belonging to the European Union and promoting intercultural dialogue.

Those applying for the European Heritage Label must present a long-term sustainable project aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue and openness, not only to Europe (through the use of English or European languages in communication), but also to the surrounding area.

To date, only five sites in Italy have been awarded the EHL; among them, the archaeological Area of Ostia Antica is the only archaeological site and the only cultural site affiliated with the Ministry of Culture.

The values embodied by the Park are a vocation to multiculturalism, civil coexistence, integration, and therefore cultural exchange and the circulation of ideas, interreligious dialogue and the common market. Looking more broadly at the ancient Ostia-Portus territorial system, it also embodies a two-thousand-year-old vocation to international circulation.



Fig. 1: Il Logo dell'European Heritage Label



Fig.2 «Public Archaeology in Ostia antica»: the project in collaboration with Scuole Migranti Association



Fig.3 «Cantieri della didattica: Let's built our History!» the final performance

PUTTING VALUES INTO PRACTICE: THE “PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY IN OSTIA ANTICA” PROJECT IN COLLABORATION WITH “SCUOLE MIGRANTI” ASSOCIATION

During 2022, a pilot project was launched, created thanks to specific funding obtained through a small call for proposals exclusively for sites belonging to the European Heritage Label network. Entitled “Public Archaeology in Ostia Antica”, it was aimed at ethnic and linguistic minority communities living in the area who do not visit the cultural sites in the park. For this pilot project, the Archaeological Park of Ostia Antica worked in collaboration with Scuole Migranti - Network for Linguistic and Social Integration in Rome. The project was replicated in the 2023/2024 school year and its third edition was launched in November 2025. The activities are co-designed with Italian language schools for foreigners in the areas closest to Ostia: the visits and workshops that take place in the archaeological area, culminating in a performance staged at the Theatre of Ostia Antica, require preparation in the classroom and are genuine cultural mediation activities, important steps towards social as well as linguistic integration.

In ancient times, Ostia was a cosmopolitan city, where people from all over the Mediterranean converged: a lively melting pot of individuals, ethnic groups and civilisations open to exchange and dialogue. In light of this vocation, the Archaeological Park of Ostia Antica wanted to involve ethnic and linguistic minority communities, making them actively participate in the history of the territory, both in terms of knowledge and dissemination, as part of a public initiative to protect, enhance and pass on cultural heritage to future generations, in line with the founding principles of the Faro Convention on the value of cultural heritage for society. In this sense, it is aimed at those “new residents” of our territory who are less likely to spontaneously visit places of culture for linguistic, cultural or integration reasons.

The aim and the phases of the project are explained in this video on the Park's Youtube Channel:

https://youtu.be/nxq3nJaTw3k?si=mmN_nKgW77oYxRps

OTHER PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES OF THE PARK IN LINE WITH THE EUROPEAN HERITAGE LABEL

One of the objectives of the European Heritage Label is to work towards audience engagement, particularly among young people. Thanks to funding from small EHL calls for proposals, we involved the Roma 59 Scout Group from Casal Palocco (Municipality X) with the aim of moving beyond the perception of archaeological sites as mere playgrounds and linking them to the concept of care and awareness of cultural heritage. The other funded project was aimed at primary schools in the area: “Cantieri della didattica: let's build our History!” involved 200 children who took part in the Park's Educational Services workshops on the themes of multiculturalism, interreligious dialogue and the international movement of goods and people, culminating in a performance in the theatre of Ostia Antica in front of an audience of 400. As part of the European project AHEAD – Accessible Heritage Experience for Audience Development, officials involved in communication and educational services underwent training in the ACED – Audience Centred Experience Design methodology, which they then applied in identifying and engaging specific target audiences for the co-design of targeted activities. These co-design sessions gave rise to two prototype projects that will be developed in 2026 by the Educational Services of the Ostia Antica Archaeological Park.

The Park's membership of the EHL network, embracing its mission of audience engagement, has led to the creation of a whole series of activities (an overview of which is given above) aimed at different audiences and designed for each of them – including through co-design – new ways of enjoying the Park's archaeological heritage. By focusing on the active involvement of people, we are working towards a Park that is truly open to all.

REFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EHL Website: <https://ehl-bureau.eu/en/>

AHEAD Project website: <https://aheadeurope.eu/>

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AHEAD Project was carried out and coordinated by Melting Pro (Giulia Fiaccarini, Antonia Silvaggi, Clio Biasco and Carmen Granito)



Fig.4: First phase of the AHEAD Project: create your own map of Ostia!