

UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE BELGIAN PART OF THE NORTH SEA

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The Belgian part of the North Sea has a surface area of about 3500 km² which is about the size of the province of West Flanders. West Flanders is also the only Belgian province with a coastline, in total 66 km. In this small part of the North Sea a lot of commercial activity is taking place or even seems to be concentrated: wind farms, aggregate extraction, fishing, construction works,... Together with a very intensive traffic of between 200 and 300.000 ships crossing the Channel per year, this is a very busy part of the North Sea in which heritage is frequently seen merely as a complicating factor without noticing the opportunities it can offer. For the moment we know of two major types of archaeological heritage in the North Sea: lost settlements and wreck sites. Due to coastal erosion at least since the middle ages several coastal settlements are actually situated in the intertidal or even in the subtidal zone. Without systematic heritage-focused survey work already more than 300 heritage sites, mostly wreck sites are identified, most of them dating from WOI and WOII. At this moment the geology of the Belgian part of the North Sea is being more and more unravelled which is giving high hopes to identify zones of major interest in relation to palaeolithic remains. Although we have a long established maritime tradition/long maritime history with for example international medieval gateways such as Bruges and Antwerp, we seem to have rather neglected maritime archaeology. It is only from 2003 onwards that Flanders is gradually devoting research time to this specific field of study and we are very glad to have in our agency at this moment at least a few dedicated and experienced researchers participating in international maritime projects.

The UNESCO Scientific Colloquium and the Regional Meeting is of major importance to raise awareness at the level of the authorities. We hope it will give a boost to underwater archaeology in the Belgian part of the North Sea.

We ourselves are also sure to learn a lot during these days, from your interventions and discussions and we would like to benefit also from your presence to show a bit of our work first of all during the poster sessions but also via a small but devoted bookstall.

Last but not least also a warm welcome on behalf of the Flanders Heritage Agency.