

The UNESCO convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (Paris, 2001) and maritime WWI heritage in the Belgian part of the North Sea

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2014 marks the centenary of the First World War (WWI). All over the world this has rekindled the interest in underwater cultural heritage linked to this cataclysm. This kind of heritage is covered by the UNESCO convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (Paris, 2001). This convention entered into force on 2 January 2009, and its 10th anniversary was celebrated with a scientific colloquium in Brussels in late 2011. At present (August 2013) it has been ratified by 45 countries, and a growing number of other countries are considering giving up the objections they initially had to this convention. Belgium acceded to the treaty on 5 August 2013. France and Belgium are currently the only two nations in Northwestern Europe to have ratified the convention. It is hoped that other countries bordering the North Sea such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany and Denmark will follow the French and Belgian example in time.

The UNESCO convention defines underwater cultural heritage as *"all traces of human existence having a cultural, historical or archaeological character which have been partially or totally underwater, periodically or continuously, for at least 100 years"*. As a result, all wrecks of ships sunk in the Belgian part of the North Sea during WWI will progressively be covered by the scope of this convention in the course of the commemoration period (2014-2018).

This new situation undoubtedly raises all sorts of questions. Did WWI have a significant maritime component? What does the convention basically say? What does this mean for the Belgian part of the North Sea? How much and what kind of heritage dating from WWI is present there and how well has it been preserved? Below we will try to formulate an answer to these and other questions.



■ These British war graves are located at Saint Donatian's church in Zeebrugge. No graveyard existed here at the beginning of the First World War. When 44 Germans were killed by a tram accident on 26 September 1915, they were buried outside the church. The 'Deutscher Ehrenfriedhof' (German cemetery of honour) would steadily grow during the war. Another 40 Germans who had died on two torpedo boats (S15 and S20) during a naval battle were also interred here on 5 June 1917. The monument in the picture is a memorial to them. (Marnix Pieters, Flanders Heritage Agency)

The UNESCO convention and WWI

None too soon

Even though the First World War was mainly fought on land, the maritime component was never far away. A few examples concerning the western front are the initial phase of the war dubbed the '*Race to the Sea*', the flooding of the Yser plain (Van Pul 2004) and the British raids from the sea on Zeebrugge and Ostend in an attempt to block both U-boat harbours. In addition, numerous important naval military actions (Bennett 2005) took place throughout the world, such as the battles of Coronel and the Falkland Islands at the end of 1914, the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915, aimed at keeping the entrance to the Black Sea open, the Battle of Jutland in 1916, etc.

Yet the maritime component of the archaeological heritage of WWI threatens to fade into the background. This is to a large extent due to the rather inaccessible character of this heritage, often located on or buried in the seabed. Until recently, this heritage was sometimes compromised by ignorance or even profit motives. Shipwrecks were salvaged and scrapped without adequate registration, research or consultation with the flag state involved. In addition, many scuba divers visit the war wrecks within the scope of what could be called a 'souvenir hunt', to put it mildly. This way the collective memory with regard to both world wars is gradually being erased without a metaphorical 'backup' being made. Especially now when fewer and fewer eyewitnesses of WWI remain, archaeological heritage is becoming ever more important as a physical point of contact with or a last witness of this crucial period in world history. It is therefore laudable that Belgium acceded to the above-mentioned UNESCO convention

in 2013 – even before the start of the WWI commemoration – and thus committed itself to progressively take care of this heritage. Belgium may only have a small area of the North Sea under its supervision, but throughout history this part of the North Sea has been a very busy shipping area, as was shown by the discovery of a 3500-year-old boat in Dover (Clark 2004).

Protection and cooperation, the pillars of the convention

What are the key elements of this convention? The first basic principle is the protection of underwater cultural heritage for the benefit of humanity. As in the case of archaeological heritage on land, the preservation of underwater heritage in its original location is considered as the first option. The convention distinguishes two kinds of threats from which heritage needs to be protected. From this point of view, the most serious threat is posed by specialised salvage companies that specifically search for archaeological 'treasures' all over the world and bring them to the surface in order to make a profit from their sale. Often they do not care about the fact that this heritage actually belongs to the collective memory of humanity, that it deserves to be properly investigated and that everyone should get the opportunity to "experience" it. It is estimated that 98% of the world's seabed has currently become accessible to this kind of salvage activities as a result of the rapid development of all sorts of equipment, which makes the ratification of this convention more urgent by the day. In addition to the protection against salvage companies, the convention also states that the sale, irretrievable dispersal and commercial exploitation of underwater cultural heritage is absolutely forbidden.

The convention also includes a general article on protection against all manner of human activities in marine areas which are not specifically directed at underwater cultural heritage but may incidentally affect it nonetheless. The convention stipulates that member states shall use all available means to protect this heritage against this type of activities. Although it is clear that such activities include dredging, natural resource exploitation, construction activities, trawling, etc., the text does not contain any list thereof. Not listing these activities has the advantage that future activities are not excluded in advance. The protective measures are firstly aimed at the cultural heritage present in marine areas controlled by the member state concerned, and secondly cover all marine areas around the world via the member state's jurisdiction with regard to its own residents and the ships flying the flag of the member state. If in situ preservation is not possible or desirable and an underwater site nevertheless has to be excavated, this activity has to comply with the rules annexed to the convention. These rules do not differ fundamentally from the standards of archaeological research on land.

In addition to protection, cooperation between member states is the second basic principle of the UNESCO convention. Through ratification, states join a club, so to speak, of countries willing to commit themselves to the conservation of underwater cultural heritage and wishing to support one another in this if need be. This cooperation can assume different shapes. Member states are encouraged, for example, to conclude mutual agreements within the scope of specific situations/cases. Information exchange is an important aspect of this cooperation, and the UNESCO Director-General plays an intermediary part in this. The member states of the convention meet at least once every two years. A 'verifiable link' with underwater cultural heritage in the territorial waters of another member state is sufficient grounds for a member state to formally enter into cooperation with the other member state. The convention does not regulate the rights of ownership, allows salvage under certain conditions and is also fully applicable to wrecks of state-owned vessels (e.g. WWI shipwrecks).

For more information regarding the convention, please refer to the UNESCO website: www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/underwater-cultural-heritage.



■ The UNESCO headquarters in Paris (UNESCO)



■ In situ display of underwater heritage is possible, as has been shown in China. Left: the museum building which provides access to the Baiheliang inscriptions, 40m beneath the water surface of the Yangtze river. Bottom: part of the inscriptions on the Baiheliang sandstone outcrop (Baiheliang Museum, pictures by courtesy of UNESCO)



The North Sea and WWI heritage

The context

What does this convention actually imply for the protection of underwater cultural heritage dating from WWI? Protection can have two different meanings in this context. On the one hand, WWI underwater heritage of significant value can be physically protected *in situ*. On the other, more general measures can be taken to prevent the WWI underwater heritage present in the Belgian part of the North Sea from being damaged without having to take mitigating actions.

In any case, the collection of adequate documentation as to the heritage in question is a minimum requirement. This should ensure that this part of our collective memory is not erased just like that, and that this information is added to the knowledge database regarding this period. The physical protection of underwater sites is not easy from a technical and practical point of view. However, a great deal of expertise has been developed throughout the world, several methods have been tried out and their usefulness in this area has been proved (Richards 2012). China even boasts a real underwater museum located at a depth of

40 m in the Yangtze River, built to display the Baiheliang inscriptions *in situ*. Baiheliang is a sandstone formation in the Yangtze river where as from 763 AD inscriptions were used to mark 72 low water levels during the Tang dynasty. These inscriptions are of considerable scientific and cultural interest and can be considered the world's oldest hydrometric station (Ge Xiurun 2010).



■ SMS Prangenhof was salvaged in 2001 (Etienne Rathé, Maritime Access)

Protection against various kinds of human activities is mainly a matter of policy and management. Strategic basic research, funded by the agency for Innovation by Science and Technology (IWT), was started up in early 2013 to provide solutions to the authorities involved and the stakeholders in Belgium. Entitled 'Archaeological Heritage in the North Sea', this project will make proposals for sustainable management of archaeological heritage in the Belgian part of the North Sea. It goes without saying that the various stakeholders (fisheries, dredging, aggregate extraction, renewable energy,

tourism, different authorities etc.) are closely involved.

So far, little scientific research has been conducted and published with regard to Belgian maritime archaeological heritage from WWI. The available material sources relating to WWI have therefore hardly been covered by the historical and social debate. The best documented shipwreck from the First World War is undoubtedly that of the salvaged and scrapped *Vorpostenboot* S.M.S. Prangenhof (Termote 2003). The wreck of this patrol boat was landed in its entirety and completely dismantled. In the

process, archaeological observations were also carried out, which provided a good insight into the way in which a former fishing boat could be turned into a warship.

WWI wrecks in the Belgian part of the North Sea: an overview

Despite the limited research conducted into maritime archaeological heritage linked to WWI, it is possible to sketch an overall picture of the number of sites as well as the importance and distribution of shipwrecks from this period in the Belgian part of the North Sea. This is based on three available databases (www.vlaamsehydrografie.be/wrakkendatabank.htm; www.maritiemearcheologie.be; www.wrecksite.eu/) as well as various overview publications on shipwrecks such as Hepper 2006 and Termote & Termote 2009.

These sources show that 40 wreck sites can currently be attributed to WWI. In addition, there are a few dozen wreck sites which are possibly linked to WWI. These have not been included in the present overview. A number of them probably have to be linked to ships which are known from written sources to have sunk in Belgian waters during WWI but whose wreck site has not yet been identified. In addition, the sites of ships sunk in the ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend during raids in the spring of 1918, notably HMS *Vindictive*, HMS *Thetis*, HMS *Intrepid*, HMS *Iphigenia* and HMS *C3*, have not been taken into account either, as these were salvaged very shortly after the war, presumably without leaving many traces at the site where they were sunk. At a rough estimate, the number of wrecks could therefore be doubled or even tripled,

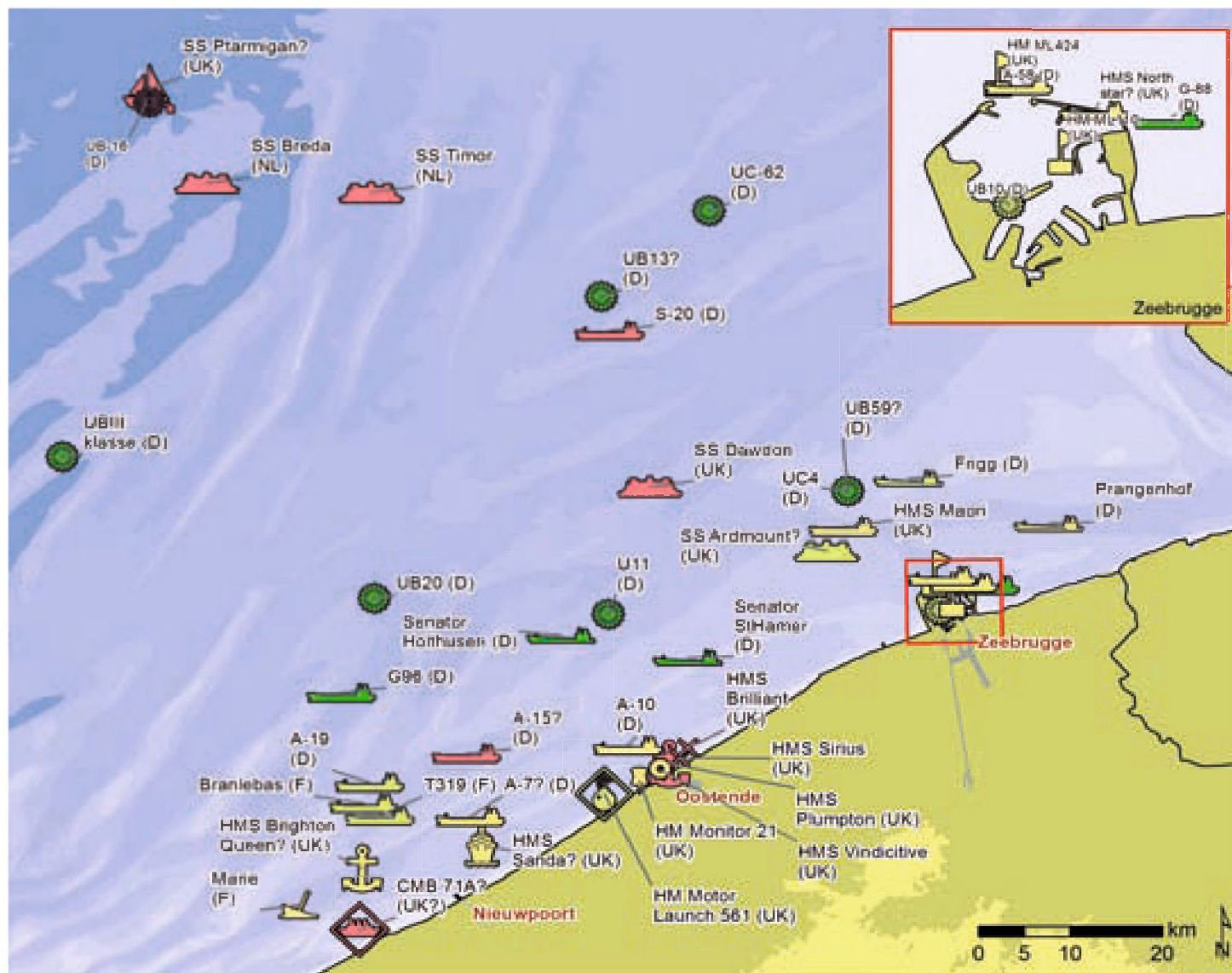
especially if you assume that some WWI wreck sites have not yet been mapped, for instance because they are not clearly visible or even invisible on the seabed.

If we classify the 40 known wreck sites in the Belgian part of the North Sea by nationality, we notice that German (20) and British (15) wreck sites in particular are well represented. There are also 3 French and 2 Dutch wreck sites.

Many of these ship wrecks have been partially or completely salvaged or 'levelled' over the years. Only 18 out of 40 wreck sites (2 British, 14 German and 2 French) escaped this fate, and the British heritage has been hit hardest. The reason for this is not exactly clear, although the share of

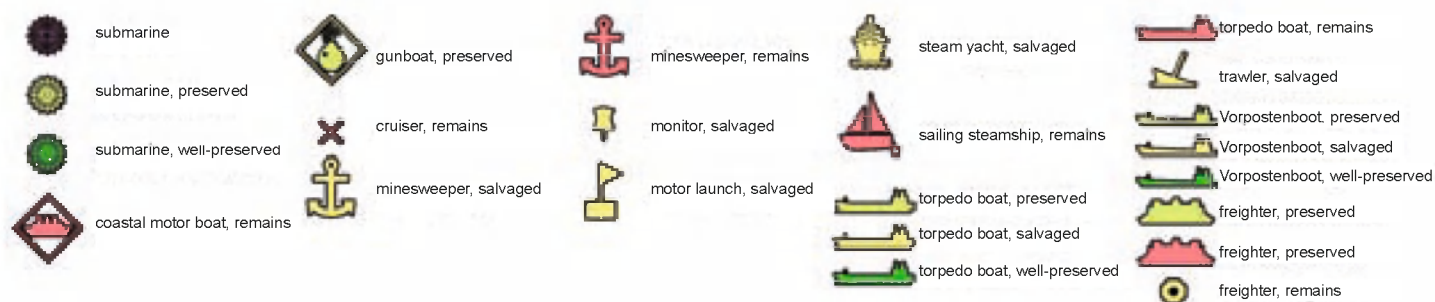
German submarines seems to play a part, as these rarely hinder shipping traffic due to their location as well as their nature. As a result, they do not compromise the safety of navigation much and are not usually salvaged.

At present, about a hundred years after the Great War, about half of the known and documented shipwrecks from WWI are still present in the archaeological record of the North Sea. So it is not too late to deal with this heritage in another manner. Moreover, several unidentified wreck sites undoubtedly exist that have probably been well preserved precisely because they are unknown and – as far as we know – have never been 'visited' as a result.



VLIZ, Nathalie De Hauwere

Map of the Belgian part of the North Sea featuring all 40 wreck sites from WWI. Some of these wrecks have been salvaged (VLIZ)





■ British Coastal Motor Boat 33A, stranded in Ostend, spring of 1918
(Royal Museums Greenwich)

If we consider the state of preservation of the 18 known remaining wreck sites from WWI, we immediately notice that mostly German ship wrecks have been well-preserved. German ship wrecks are the most numerous and about 2/3 of them have been well or relatively well preserved. These include several U-boats, which have a better chance of weathering the ravages of time thanks to their sturdy structure: U-11, UB-10, UB-13, UB-20, UB-59, a UB-III type submarine, UC-4 and UC-62. In addition, 2 torpedo boats (G-88 and G-96) as well as 3 *Vorpostenboote* ('Senator Holthusen', 'Senator Sthamer' and 'Frigg') have been preserved fairly well.

As far as the distribution of WWI wreck sites in the Belgian part of the North Sea is concerned, it is striking that the vast majority of them, 33 out of 40 wreck sites, is situated within the Belgian territorial sea, so relatively close to the coast. Three out of seven wreck sites located outside the Belgian territorial sea are or were situated on or just north of Thornton Bank. Furthermore, the distribution of these sites appears to be linked to the location of the three Flemish ports, with three clusters near Nieuwpoort, Ostend and Zeebrugge. Only the concentration near the port of Nieuwpoort is somewhat strange in this respect since the harbour was not used during WWI. The three French wrecks are located in the western part of the Belgian territorial waters, relatively close to the French territorial sea, while the two Dutch wrecks were situated in the eastern part of the Belgian North Sea, relatively close to the Dutch territorial sea.

Conclusion

This summary overview demonstrates that valuable underwater heritage from WWI, in particular German shipwrecks, still exists in the North Sea. This heritage needs to be treated with sufficient care. It is not very extensive, which is conducive to the manageability. The story of these material sources should on no account be neglected if we want to approach WWI holistically. Further research is also essential to better determine the historical interest of certain shipwrecks. In addition, this overview, and especially the question marks behind the names of some ships, clearly show that a number of identifications of wreck sites are uncertain and that many wreck sites are still unidentified. In other words, there still is a lot of work to be done in the field of identification and inventory of located maritime heritage in the Belgian part of the North Sea. Finally, many of these wrecks are also to be considered as maritime or war graves, an additional reason why these sites deserve appropriate attention and respect.

Major parts of two former WWI shipwrecks can also be viewed on land. Part of the bow of HMS Vindictive is set up at the Oosterstaketsel pier in Ostend, and the propeller and an anchor of HMS Maori are on display in the DAB Fleet building, also in Ostend.

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