

WWW.MARITIEME-ARCHEOLOGIE.BE – A DATABASE FOR BELGIAN MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY

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The North Sea area, under Belgian jurisdiction, is roughly comparable to the size of a Belgian province. The archaeological heritage of this so-called 11th province is known to be very rich and varied: from almost intact World War I submarines and well preserved wooden shipwrecks to Roman statues and prehistorical artefacts.

Only recently, in October 2004 a governmental agreement of cooperation between the Flemish minister of Monuments, Landscapes and Archaeology and the Federal minister for the North Sea, put an end to the scientific and institutional neglect of this maritime heritage.

Since the Maritime Archaeological cell of the Flemish Heritage Institute (VIOE) has worked on the development of an exhaustive database of this heritage. The realization of this online database is initiated by the VIOE, in cooperation with the Province of West-Flanders, more specifically the Provincial Museum Walraversijde that made a major financial contribution to the project. The Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ) is hosting this database and the Flemish administration for waterways and seaways (coastal department – Flemish Hydrography) offered useful information about shipwrecks as well as the maritime maps. The database itself is developed by a team of Axis Software & Services under supervision of Manager Web Application Jan Lettens.

The main goal of the database is to collect as much information as possible about the archaeological heritage in the Belgian Territorial Sea, the Belgian Continental Shelf and the Flemish riverbeds as well as about all water oriented archaeological structures. This information is spread over different governmental and scientific organisations, museums, local historical societies, individual divers, fishermen, collectors etc.

Therefore the new database is linked to an interactive website, which invites institutes and individuals to share their valuable information.

This large amount of information was bound to be divided into four main structural categories: wrecks (ships as well as aircrafts), structures (e.g. lighthouses, sluices, bridges, salterns, ports and drowned settlements), artefacts and events. In the future an extra dimension will be added: the maritime heritage still in use.

It's very important to locate these artefacts, structures or wrecks. This way certain artefacts or individual events (e.g. a fishing net getting stuck to something in a distinctive area in 1990 or a testimony of a ship hitting a mine in the River Scheldt in 1944) might later be associated with the same wreck or structure.

An important starting point when entering this information, is the source or reference (e.g. book, institute or person) for each subcategory. This way each contribution will stay distinguishable. On simple demand information can be hidden from the public. The VIOE has scientific responsibility for the contents and all incoming information will be checked for accuracy and quality in dialogue with the contributor.

We aim to build a scientific valuable database in order to reach a greater knowledge of our maritime heritage. This must lead to a better management of the maritime archaeological archive and will make it more accessible for specific research. In the future this can also lead to the protection of specific wreck sites.

References

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