

**De Clercq Maikel**

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## *A First Assessment of Belgian Continental Shelf Prehistory*

Little attention has been paid in Belgium to submerged prehistoric landscapes and to the related underwater cultural heritage (UCH). This is deplorable in view of the increasing pressure of commercial activities at sea and the unique setting of the Belgian Continental Shelf (BCS), close to the nearby confluence of major Late Quaternary fluvial systems at times of lower sea level. Moreover, the relatively thin and fragmented Quaternary sediment cover renders prehistoric sites extremely vulnerable to disturbance of commercial activities and to natural erosion at the seabed, as most of these occur at limited burial depth. Based on a solid stratigraphical framework between the Quaternary deposits and the archaeological heritage that is buried within, an archaeological potential map (APM) of the BCS can be developed. Such a map provides a degree of quality at any given location whether the site is likely to contain UCH or not. This should help avoid or reduce any unnecessary damage to buried heritage and simultaneously increase the cost-efficiency of commercial activities at sea.

A first major step towards an APM concerns the development of an improved geological model of the Quaternary deposits, based on all existing and newly collected seismic, core data. The new model provides a first glimpse of the potentially preserved prehistoric archaeology within the Quaternary layers in the context of the associated landscape remnants. Combining the layer model with information and knowledge from the neighbouring Dutch, French and UK North Sea area as well as from Belgian and Dutch coastal onshore areas has allowed new insights into submerged landscapes and their potential for UCH on the BCS.

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