

RAISING THE BELGICA?



Report from an inspection trip to Belgium
October 18-21, 2010



TROMSØ UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

Stephen Wickler

Background - the polar expedition vessel *Belgica*

Belgica was a barque-rigged steamship that was built in 1884 by Christian Brinch Jørgensen at Svelvik, Norway as the whaler *Patria*. The ship was 35.97 metres (118 ft 0 in) long, with a beam of 7.62 metres (25 ft 0 in) and a draught of 4.11 metres (13 ft 6 in). In 1896, she was purchased by Adrien de Gerlache for conversion to a research ship, taking part in the Belgian Antarctic Expedition of 1897-1901, becoming the first ship to overwinter in the Antarctic. In 1902, she was sold to Philippe, Duc d'Orléans and used on expeditions to the Arctic in 1905 and from 1907-09.

In 1916, she was sold and converted to a passenger and cargo ship for transport of coal, serving Spitsbergen from the Norwegian mainland under the name *Isfjord*. In 1918, she was sold and renamed *Belgica*, being converted to a floating cod liver oil refinery and fish processing plant. Requisitioned by the British in April 1940, she was used as an ammunition depot. The vessel was sunk during a German air raid at Brurvika near Harstad in May 1940 and rediscovered by divers in 1990. The vessel was owned by Kristian Holst AS up until February 2007 when it was donated to the non-profit Belgian organization The Belgica Society (vzw Belgica Genootschap).

Raising the *Belgica*?

The Belgica Society has ongoing plans to raise the wreck and transport it to Belgium where it will be conserved and exhibited. The construction of a sailing replica of the *Belgica* is also underway in Boom, Belgium by the organization New Belgica. Tromsø University Museum was initially contacted by the Belgica Society in 2006 (Termote and Cattrijsse 2006) and has been regularly updated and informed of developments regarding plans for raising the wreck since this time. As it was built more than 100 years ago, the *Belgica* is automatically protected under Paragraph 14 of the Norwegian Cultural Heritage Act and Tromsø University Museum will be responsible for evaluating an eventual application from the Belgica Society for dispensation from the Cultural Heritage Act. The evaluation will provide an professional assessment of the quality of the arguments made by the applicant supporting the application. This evaluation will be sent to the Directorate for Cultural Heritage (Riksantikvaren) who is responsible for processing the application and making the final decision regarding dispensation.

An evaluation by Tromsø University Museum would include the following assessments and components:

- Scientific potential of the wreck.
- Research value of the wreck in relation to national, regional and local interests.
- Recommendations for research questions of relevance and a project plan for implementation of the salvage objectives.
- A budget with itemized expenditures for each stage of the salvage operation and subsequent conservation and exhibition. A timeline for completion of individual stages should also be provided by the applicant.

The author of this report, who is delegated responsibility for the management of submerged cultural heritage in Tromsø University Museum's district, was contacted by Kjell Kjær, Vice-President of the Belgica Society, in September 2010 regarding a possible visit to Belgium. A formal invitation was subsequently extended by the President of the society, Willy Versluys, to

visit Belgium in order to obtain firsthand information regarding the facilities planned for potential conservation and exhibition of the *Belgica* in anticipation of an application for raising the wreck.

Trip scheduling and goals

Following contact with the Belgica Society, it was originally proposed that the author would travel to Belgium with a representative of the Directorate for Cultural Heritage in Oslo. As there was a scheduling conflict for the person from Oslo, the author traveled to Belgium with Kjell Kjær who represents the Belgica Society in Norway. A letter had been sent in advance by the author to the Belgica Society with a list of objectives for the visit and potential institutions and individuals to meet during the trip. Willy Versluys had responded to these requests by organizing a detailed itinerary in which the requests were met in a most satisfactory manner. As both Oct. 18 and 21 were travel days, we had a total of two days in which to achieve the goals of the trip.

The primary goal of the visit was to contact the Belgica Society and obtain an overview of the current status of activities related to the potential raising of *Belgica*. The following related goals were also presented in the letter.

1. A briefing on the results of a fact-finding mission conducted on Sept. 13-14, 2010 (postponed from March) coordinated by the Norwegian and Belgian Ministry of Defense involving an EOD-team of divers to assess the situation regarding explosives on board *Belgica* and the risk involved in their planned removal. At the time of the visit to Belgium, the report from the Belgian Ministry of Defense had yet to be released.
2. Meet with representatives of the Flemish Heritage Institute to discuss issues related to cultural heritage legislation and legal requirements necessary for raising *Belgica* and exhibiting it in Belgium.
3. Discussion and meetings linked to other activities surrounding the *Belgica*.
 - Ongoing replica construction by the New Belgica Project.
 - Current and future exhibitions related to *Belgica* (traveling exhibition “Destination Harstad?”, planned exhibition at the Trondenes Historiske Senter in Harstad coordinated by Lisa Bostwick).
 - Plans for conservation of the wreck and future display in Belgium – current facilities and potential construction of new facilities.
 - Status regarding assessment of the wreck in terms of preservation and potential salvage (see Gregory et al. 2008) and recommendations from the symposium and workshop “Conservation of Historic Wrecks for Future Generations”, Hasselt University, Oct. 26-27, 2009.
 - Potential involvement of researchers (historians, archaeologists and others) from the University of Tromsø and other interested parties in future projects related to *Belgica*. One possibility could be a symposium or workshop in connection with Norway’s celebration of the Nansen-Amundsen Jubilee in 2011 marking the 150th anniversary of Fridtjof Nansen’s birth and 100th anniversary of Roald Amundsen’s expedition to the South Pole (see the Norwegian Polar Institute’s website: <http://www.nansenamundsen.no/no/>)

Day 1 (October 19)

The author and Kjell Kjær were met at the airport in Brussels on the evening of Oct. 18 by Helge Seifert, Liaison Officer for the Belgica Society. We were driven to Ostend and met by Willy Versluys who presented our trip itinerary. Visits to two institutions in Brussels and one in Ostend were made the following day by the author, Willy Versluys, Kjell Kjær and Helge Seifert.

Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Brussels (www.naturalsciences.be)

We were met by Dr. Gérard Cobut and Ms. Greet Boey and shown a recent exhibit on the Antarctic expedition of Adrien de Gerlache with *Belgica* which included an excellent multimedia presentation based on logbooks from the voyage. We were also taken to see some of the zoological specimens collected during the voyage that are in the museum collections. The potential for public outreach and education connected to *Belgica* as a scientific research vessel were discussed during this visit.



Visiting the *Belgica* exhibition. (l to r: W. Versluys, K. Kjær, H. Seifert, W. Loy, G. Cobut, G. Boey)



Inspecting fish collected by the *Belgica* expedition.

Flemish Heritage Institute, Brussels (www.vioe.be)

The institute is responsible for cultural heritage management and legislation in Flanders. A meeting had been arranged with the Head of the Division for Research Outreach and Heritage Experience and the Maritime Archaeology and Nautical Heritage unit, Dr. Marnix Pieters. Dr. Pieters is responsible for the management of submerged cultural heritage in Flanders and is also a member of the Belgica Society. The author had met him previously in Harstad where we dived on *Belgica* together. Dr. Pieters is currently involved in organizing the conservation of archaeological objects from marine contexts and we discussed potential locations where conservation of *Belgica* could be carried out. One possibility is a large warehouse facility that has recently been made available by the Flanders Marine Institute in Ostend for the conservation of marine finds.



Meeting with Dr. Marnix Pieters (l to r: Marnix Pieters, Willy Versluys, Kjell Kjær).

Flanders Marine Institute, Ostend (www.vliz.be)

The Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ) is the coordination and information platform for marine scientific research in Flanders. It is a focal point for marine and coastal-related research and serves as an international contact point. The VLIZ signs cooperation agreements with Flemish research groups and administrations and furthermore integrates its activities in national and international networks. Major activities are the management of the Flanders Marine Data and Information Centre (VMDC), the Infodesk, the Sea Library and the research vessel 'Zeeleeuw'.

We had a meeting with the General Manager, Jan Mees, who is also Secretary of the Belgica Society. The offices of the Belgica Society share the same facility as the Flanders Marine Institute. Mr. Mees provided a general introduction to the institute and highlighted their role in providing infrastructural support to various agencies, including the Flemish Heritage Institute. The possibilities for contributing to obtaining appropriate facilities for conservation and exhibition of *Belgica* were discussed.

Day 2 (Oct. 20)

Visits to two ongoing projects in Antwerp and the surrounding area were made by the author, Willy Versluys, Kjell Kjær and Helge Seifert.

New Belgica Project (De Steenschuit vzw), Boom (www.newbelgica.org)

The non-profit organization New Belgica was established in 2007 as a social assistance project to build a replica of *Belgica* at the shipyard De Steenschuit in Boom which specializes in traditional shipbuilding. The construction is anticipated to extend for approximately five years (2009-2013) and enjoys the patronage of Her Majesty Queen Paola of Belgium, the Governor of the Province of Antwerp and the Flemish Regional Government. A number of large private companies and banks are also among the sponsors. The project is also part of a recently funded EU Interreg program called Heroes 2C promoting cross-border collaboration. This program also includes rebuilding of the paddle steamer *Medway Queen* in Medway, England and building *Jean Bart*, a replica 18th century man-of-war, in Gravelines, France.



Visiting the shipyard at Boom (l to r: Kjell Kjær, Willy Versluys, Eddy Steur).

A visit was made to the shipyard where a sailing replica of *Belgica* is currently being constructed and were given a tour of the facility by project director Eddy Steur. A new larger facility has recently been made available where construction of the replica will be completed. This is part of a large shipbuilding and dry dock complex being developed by the company Marintec Shipyard and will also have adequate space for conservation of the *Belgica* wreck. Future conservation and display of the wreck at this facility is also supported by the Province of Antwerp. The shipyard facility is adjacent to a restored traditional brick factory that has been converted to an open air museum. If the wreck of *Belgica* was to be conserved and exhibited here, it would be an integral part of the museum and interpretive center for traditional shipbuilding and brick making which have existed side by side since the medieval period in this area.



The new shipbuilding hall at Boom with full scale keel and hull sections of the *Belgica* replica.

Conservation Laboratory, The Cog Project, Antwerp (www.kogge.be)

The Cog Project (De Kogge) is a recently initiated archeological project directed by the Flemish Heritage Institute which involves recording the remains of a fourteenth century cog discovered during construction work in Antwerp harbor in 2000. The remains were placed in storage until 2010 when digital recording and analysis began. A decision regarding funding for conservation of the cog will be made by mid-2011. If conservation funding is approved, it will be necessary to obtain adequate facilities and purchase equipment such as a large freeze dryer for this lengthy and costly process. One possible facility that is already available is the warehouse provided by the Flanders Marine Institute in Ostend.



Project leader Tom Lenaerts at the Cog Project laboratory.

The project leader, maritime archeologist and researcher Tom Lenaerts, presented the ongoing documentation work and discussed issues such as conservation of the *Belgica* wreck. He has also dived on the *Belgica* and is a member of the Belgica Society. There are possibilities that a conservation facility developed for the cog project could also be used for conservation of the *Belgica*, although this would be dependent on future funding and the timetable for work on the cog.

Summary of results and preliminary conclusions

My overall impressions of the visit to Belgium and ensuing discussions regarding the future of the *Belgica* have been positive. The time invested was well worth the effort in terms of obtaining a better overview of the current situation and feasibility of future plans for the wreck on the part of the Belgica Society. I was struck both by the professionalism and the wide range of individuals from many walks of life that are involved in, and actively support, the Belgica Society and its goals. The visit has also reinforced my previous experience with the society since 2006 as a serious organization with considerable resources that is committed to following the proper guidelines for pursuing their interests. I was also impressed by the importance of the *Belgica* to

Belgians as a national symbol uniting Flanders and Wallonia and the apparent widespread interest in this vessel among the public at large. In contrast, the *Belgica* and its importance to polar exploration appears to be largely unknown in Norway.

A majority of the goals for the visit were satisfied to a considerable extent. A major issue which remains unresolved, is the feasibility of raising the wreck given the current poor state of wood preservation and other related issues. The impact that removal of explosives from the wreck will have on the overall stability of the vessel is also unclear and a topic of considerable concern. The Belgica Society will be required to submit a detailed plan for explosives removal and close monitoring and documentation of the process will be necessary, should it be approved. More extensive *in situ* measurement and assessment of wood preservation status following removal of the explosives is also recommended prior to any attempt at salvage. It is also recommended that this work be conducted by the same group from the National Museum of Denmark who conducted the initial tests (see Gregory et al. 2008).

Although most of the time in Belgium was spent focusing on the potential for conservation and exhibition of the wreck, other topics were discussed such as future cooperation between Norway and Belgium in the form of joint research and public outreach concerning the importance of the *Belgica* to both countries. This included current and future plans for *Belgica*-related exhibitions in Norway and Belgium and the possibilities for a seminar or workshop connected to the Nansen-Amundsen Jubilee in 2011.

Literature Cited

Gregory, David, Jensen, Poul and Strætkvern, Kristiane 2008. *Assessment of the state of preservation of the wreck of the Belgica*. Unpublished report by the National Museum of Denmark, Conservation Dept. commissioned by the Belgica Society.

Ternote, Thomas and Cattrijsse, Andre 2006. *Raising the Belgica: a report on the visit to Norway by the Belgica Society, 19-23. August 2006*. Unpublished report by the Belgica Society.

Report submitted by:

Dr. Stephen Wickler
Researcher / Maritime Archeologist
Department of Cultural Sciences
Tromsø University Museum
University of Tromsø
NO-9037 Tromsø, Norway