

Memories of the Franco-Belgian Border: Battles, Heritage and Cooperation

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Abstract:

This article seeks to answer the following question: does the region covering the Franco-Belgian border produce a common history or separate histories? This border is easy to cross physically and has been the site of intensive cross-border flows plus more than 5,000 partnerships since 2000. Beyond these exchanges, functional cooperation and the creation of Franco-Belgian cross-border institutions, what can be said about social representations of this area's history? The following analysis of three battles and three UNESCO World Heritage listings located in the Franco-Belgian border region details the meanings these events and heritage have acquired in present-day collective memory and discusses whether a shared history is beginning to take shape or if histories distinct to each side of the border remain dominant. In doing so, this article considers the intersection between memories, heritage and (cross-)border cooperation.

Key words:

memory – heritage – border – cross-border cooperation – Franco-Belgian border

Although the subtitle of this article – ‘battles, heritage and cooperation’ – refers to the structure of the text below, this article may have alternatively been entitled ‘The Franco-Belgian border: What a (hi)story’, followed by a double exclamation and a question mark. This subtitle would have then reflected the diversity of the historical narratives to which the Franco-Belgian border – like any border – refers, a diversity firmly embedded in collective memory and reinforced, in particular, by how different sites and intangible phenomena come to be granted World Heritage status.

The question that underpins this article can be formulated as follows: does the region covering the Franco-Belgian border produce a common history or separate histories? This question may seem trivial on the face of it. After all, this border is – except during periods of terrorism or pandemic – so easily traversed physically. Moreover, it has been the subject of more than 5,000 partnerships since 2000 within the framework of projects financed by European territorial cohesion policy as detailed below. Beyond this functional cooperation and the creation of Franco-Belgian cross-border institutions, what can be said about social representation of this area's history? Is it distinct to each side of the border or is it somewhat similar?

The scope of the question at hand is wide. The discussion here, however, is limited to three battles and three UNESCO World Heritage properties. Moreover, the position adopted is that of a Belgian researcher who works in the economic and political sciences.¹ The data analysed have been drawn from a number of studies carried out thanks to collaborations instituted by the Franco-German Jean Monnet Excellence Centre in Strasbourg, the Jean Monnet Borders in Motion network (FRONTEM), the Franco-Belgian scientific interest group *Institut Frontières et Discontinuités* (IFD) and the Jean Monnet European Capitals of Culture and Cross-Border Urban Cohesion network (CECCUT). The information is based on tourist brochures, media, field trips to the areas in addition to scientific sources.

The first section of this article outlines the major phases of the definition and delimitation of the political border between the French Republic and the Kingdom of Belgium. The second section provides some details about the kinds of cooperation that link both sides of the Franco-Belgian border together, including the creation of recent European institutions of cross-border cooperation, thereby highlighting how open and porous this border really is. The third section concentrates on three battles that took place in the Franco-Belgian border region and discusses the meanings these events have acquired in collective memory. The fourth section examines the process of granting heritage status as a means of recognising and

¹ I would like to thank Philippe Walkowiak for his comments and advice on this chapter. Any inaccuracies found within the text are mine.

valorising memorial traces and it considers three examples that have been included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Finally, section five links these examples to the question of cross-border cooperation in the area and in more general terms.

Six cases are discussed in this article to trace the collective memories that influence the Franco-Belgian border region. As detailed in the text, these specific examples do not provide an exhaustive analysis of the memories that exist along the border. However, the question of whether such memories serve as the basis for a common history or separate histories is addressed and the results provide fruitful lessons concerning the uses of memory and heritage and their potential connection with (cross-)border exchanges and cooperation.

Defining the Franco-Belgian border

Without going into minute detail to trace the various occurrences that led to the delimitation of the Franco-Belgian border, it is important to define the demarcation of the Franco-Belgian border and to highlight some of the major steps that explain how the 620-kilometre-long border that separates the French Republic and the Kingdom of Belgium today came into being.²

In political terms, the territory that roughly corresponds to present-day Belgium was initially part of the Holy Roman Empire and it was gradually merged into a single entity at the instigation of the Dukes of Burgundy in the 14th and 15th centuries. The House of Habsburg, which counted Charles V – born in the county of Flanders in 1500 – among its members, inherited this entity. Its seventeen provinces were amalgamated in 1549. The seven northern provinces (the United Provinces) seceded from the Southern Netherlands or Spanish Netherlands in 1581.³ From the 17th century onwards, the Kingdom of France annexed various territories of the Spanish Netherlands following the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1668 and the Treaties of Nijmegen in 1678–9; with the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, the Southern Netherlands passed into the hands of the Habsburgs of Austria.⁴

At the end of the 18th century, France invaded the Southern Netherlands and the Principality of Liege, and they remained in French hands until 1815; in the 19th century, following the lead of independence movements in Ireland and Greece, similar movements forced the secession of the Belgian provinces from the Netherlands and the establishment of an independent state in 1830.⁵ On 19 April 1839, the Treaty of London that was signed between the Netherlands and Belgium, as well as other European powers, validated international recognition of Belgium's independence, delineated the territory of the Belgian state and established the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.⁶ The border between France and Belgium has been largely stable since 1815, although the press did report that a boundary marker had been moved 2.2 metres into French territory in 2021.⁷

Defining the Franco-Belgian cross-border region

A priori, the Franco-Belgian border cuts across a region that has been considered ‘cross-border’ for decades. The ‘cross-border’ adjective⁸ reflects the possibility of crossing, of a return to proximity between two neighbouring regions separated by a border between states, and even the emergence or re-emergence

² F. ALABRUNE, *Les Frontières de la France*, *Pouvoirs*, n° 165, 2, 2018, pp. 51–64.

³ M. MALIA, *La révolte des Pays-Bas, 1566-1609*. In L. Bury, *Histoire des révolutions*, Tallandier, Paris, 2008, pp. 157–76.

⁴ X. MABILLE, *Histoire politique de la Belgique*, Centre de recherche et d’information socio-politiques, Brussels, 2000.

⁵ X. MABILLE, *op.cit.*, p.87.

⁶ X. MABILLE, *Nouvelle histoire de la Belgique*, Centre de recherche et d’information socio-politiques, Brussels, 2011.

⁷ Website : [Belgique : la frontière avec la France repoussée à cause d'une borne déplacée \(francetvinfo.fr\)](https://francetvinfo.fr/belgique-la-frontiere-avec-la-france-repousee-a-cause-d-une-borne-deplacee) (consulted on 23 March 2023).

⁸ I use the term ‘transboundary’ when discussing World Heritage listings as this is the term used by UNESCO, whereas the term ‘cross-border’ is used in a more general sense.

of shared traits⁹. In geographical terms, the Franco-Belgian border passes through plains and forests, rarely corresponding to any natural boundary, with the exception of the Lys between Armentières and Comines-Warneton and the Honnelle at Quiévrain and, even then, it passes across them. Open at times to facilitate, for example, trade or the flow of workers, closed or more closely monitored at other moments, this border has reflected the national policies of the two states throughout the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, as well as broader European policies and European regional cooperation.

In his analysis of mixed marriages between Belgian and French people over several decades, G. Hamez has shown that European openness has not significantly altered relations in the cross-border region. It has, however, spread them further afield within both countries, leading to a change in spatial scale, which has shifted from the regional or local (i.e., the cross-border region) to a binational scale (i.e. inhabitants coming from and residing anywhere in Belgium or France).¹⁰

In more general terms, since its demarcation, the border in the Franco-Belgian cross-border region – as it is the case in many cross-border regions – has either been used as the gateway to a protected area, a discontinuity between asymmetric situations, or an almost nonexistent line, depending on various national and the European policies. Even if this article does not propose an exhaustive analysis of flows or projects, it is useful to illustrate these different situations.

During the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries and the expansion of the mining basins both in Belgium and France, the border served as a tool either used to attract people coming from Belgium to France – including during periods of strikes – or to limit the arrival of foreign, albeit neighbouring, labour... The free movement of European workers has opened up the border in a more structured way without erasing all the differences in status. Today, thousands of individuals cross the border to work. For example, in 2022, 31,657 French residents crossed the border every day to work in Wallonia and 6,465 in Flanders, while 1,027 Flemish and 7,222 Walloon travelled in the opposite direction daily to work¹¹. As for companies, a number of these have set up operations close to the border – such as Toyota, which established a factory in Valenciennes, a city ‘close to the Franco-Belgian border’, in 1998¹² – to attract workers from both countries.

As for cross-border consumer purchases, these have increased due to price, taxation or availability differentials, all of which are the result of national policies. At the same time, illegal trade, smuggling and other types of criminal activity still exist at the border. As the *musée de la vie frontalière* (museum of border life) in Godewaersvelde (France) illustrates, the border has adapted rather than modified regional practices or customs for long time and this includes illegal practices.¹³

Since 1990, Europe has established specific instruments known as Interreg programs and especially Interreg A in order to help border regions achieve rates of development that are as high as the regions which are located closer to the political and decisional centres of the Member States. The objective is to push local and regional stakeholders to limit barriers to the free movement of goods, people, capital and services and to promote cross-border projects.¹⁴ The Franco-Belgian cross-border region has been highly active since the first steps of these programs and has implemented more than 5,000 Interreg projects. For instance, even if cross-border cooperation on health exists in other cross-border regions, this type of cooperation has been developed from the beginning of the Interreg programs in the Franco-Belgian area, resulting in a shift of focus from individual flows to inter-hospital agreements and a binational framework

⁹ B. REITEL and F. LELOUP, *Borders and cross-border cooperation. A political and geographical point of view*, in: J. BECK (dir.) *Transdisciplinary Discourses on CrossBorder Cooperation in Europe*, PIE, Peter Lang, Brussels, 2019, pp. 83–119.

¹⁰ G. HAMEZ, *Du transfrontalier au transnational : Approche géographique. L'exemple de la frontière franco-belge*. Thèse doctorale en Géographie. Université Panthéon-Sorbonne - Paris I, 2004

¹¹ Website: [Travailleurs frontaliers par pays de travail ou de résidence - Iweps](#) (consulted on 5 March 2023).

¹² Website: [Notre histoire | Toyota Valenciennes](#) (consulted on 5 March 2023)

¹³ Website: [Godewaersvelde | MUSÉE DE LA VIE FRONTALIÈRE \(nord-decouverte.fr\)](#) (consulted on 10 March 2023)

¹⁴ S. SASSANO, *Interreg*, in B. WASSENBERG, B. REITEL (eds), *Critical Dictionary on Borders, Cross-Border Cooperation and European Integration*, Peter Lang, Brussels, 2020, pp.542–8

agreement.¹⁵ Such cross-border cooperation – in the Franco-Belgian cross-border region, as in other border areas – broadens the realm of the possible but relies on mutual trust, an ability to speak the same language, the learning process and the goodwill among stakeholders.

In order to capitalise on positive cross-border results beyond Interreg funding and to amplify the effects of individual or entrepreneurial initiatives, the need for official cross-border agreements or institutions has increased. In this region, this need has been met by Franco-Belgian agreements (such as the Brussels Convention as a legal form for cross-border cooperation),¹⁶ as well as by soft institutions, such as the organised zones for cross-border access to healthcare (ZOASTs)¹⁷ or cross-border police cooperation. This formalisation of cooperation was also reinforced by the creation of new European groupings. More specifically, the first European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) to have been established was the Eurometropolis Lille – Kortrijk – Tournai that was created in 2006. The Franco-Belgian border region is the focus of two other official cross-border organisations: the Greater Region (including the State of Luxembourg, Wallonia, Saarland, Rheinland-Pfalz and Lorraine) and the EGTC West-Vlaanderen/Flanders-Dunkerque-Côte d'Opale (including the province of Western Flanders, the districts of Dunkerque, Calais, Saint-Omer, Boulogne-sur-mer and Montreuil and the cities of Sully sur la Lys, Fleurbaix, Laventie and Lestrem).¹⁸

All of these examples show that, in addition to frequent daily exchanges, functional cooperation and innovative funded projects, cross-border formalization has been encouraged and established by national authorities as well as local stakeholders in order to sustain and amplify cross-border dynamics. However, in the context of this porous and peaceful border, which history is reflected by collective memory nowadays? Is this memory still fragmented? Is the recognition of heritage anchored in a common past or one that is distinct and still limited by national boundaries? To address these questions, section three considers the examples of three battles that took place before the Kingdom of Belgium became independent, while section four looks at three UNESCO World Heritage listings, all six of which are located in the Franco-Belgian border region and connected with the people and history of this area.

Battles and collective memory in the Franco-Belgian (cross-)border region

The border and representations

As a political device, the border is both an instrument of geographical delimitation and territorial discontinuity, the mark of a social construct and a symbol of differentiation.¹⁹ Even if, in the Franco-Belgian context that concerns us, it is barely demarcated, it is nevertheless perceptible, thanks to road signs or even different telephone operators.²⁰ As the research of Sylvie Considère and Thomas Perrin in 2017 and others has demonstrated, rules, practices, artefacts, as well as broadcasts, information, discourse and feelings shape the experiences and realities of border regions and contribute to the creation of social representations. The study of collective memory as developed by Brady Wagoner and Ignacio Bresco²¹ interrogates common identities that can emerge from these representations; work in this field reveals how

¹⁵ E. DELECOSSE, F. LELOUP, H. LEWALLE, *European Cross-Border Cooperation on Health: Theory and Practice*, European Commission publications, Brussels, 2017.

¹⁶ B. REITEL *French-Belgian Border* in B. WASSENBERG, B. REITEL (eds), *Critical Dictionary on Borders, Cross-Border Cooperation and European Integration*, Peter Lang, Brussels, 2020, pp. 488–93.

¹⁷ E. DELECOSSE, F. LELOUP, H. LEWALLE, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ DELECOSSE Éric, DELHUVENNE Loïc, LELOUP Fabienne, « L'Eurométropole Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai, instrument au service de l'institutionnalisation de la coopération transfrontalière », *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 2022/1–2 (n° 2526–2527), pp. 5–90.

¹⁹ F. LELOUP, *La frontière construction politique*, in : F. MOULLE (dir.), *Frontières*, Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, Bordeaux, 2017, pp. 71–103.

²⁰ S. CONSIDÈRE and F. LELOUP, Les pratiques au quotidien ou comment les habitants font avec la frontière, in: S. CONSIDÈRE ET T. PERRIN (eds), *Frontières et représentations sociales*, collection Thélème, L'Harmattan, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2017, pp. 27–59.

²¹ B. WAGONER and I. BRESO, Conflict and Memory: The Past in the Present, *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, vol. 22, n° 1, 2016, pp. 3–4.

narratives conveying collective memories can give meaning to individual memories, objects, monuments and spaces.

The special issue edited by Wagoner and Bresco²² analyses intergroup conflict dynamics, highlights the role of memory and how groups represent their past to define themselves.

Since its creation, Belgium has never been at war with France and both were allies during the world wars, but battles involving the French took place in the area, leaving their mark on the Franco-Belgian border region. Three of these battles²³ have been chosen in order to analyse the memorial framework that is associated with them. A very brief historical overview of each battle is provided for context, before their place in current collective memory and the traces which are still visible today are analysed.

The three battles that have been selected – the siege of Mons, the Battle of Jemappes and the Battle of the Golden Spurs – were fought on the territory of present-day Belgium, but they took place before Belgium gained its independence.

French cannonballs

In March and April 1691, the French besieged the medium-sized town of Mons, a city in the former of County of Hainaut which is located 15 kilometres from the present-day Franco-Belgian border on the Belgian side. This battle was known as the siege of Mons. In 1688, just a few years after the treaties of Aix-la-Chapelle and Nijmegen, Louis XIV of France embarked on a series of military campaigns and formed a plan to capture the city.²⁴ The city was besieged from 15 March to 10 April 1691. The cannons fired 57,673 cannonballs and the mortars hurled 5,750 bombs at the city.²⁵ On 10 April, the conditions of surrender were agreed, and the city was evacuated. Six years later, Louis XIV gave up the territories he had annexed whose majority returned to the Spanish Netherlands and Charles II of Spain.

Today, it is still possible to see the cannonballs in some of Mons' fortified walls as well as in the city museum.²⁶ Pointed out by city guides, they are evoked as 'vestiges of the war between France and the future Belgium'. The cannonball thus becomes a symbol of Mons' resistance. It serves to illustrate the difference between 'them', the French and 'us', the Belgians. Nevertheless, Belgium did not exist at the time of the siege and Louis XIV's wars of conquest were waged against the possessions of the Spanish kingdom, which included Mons. These narratives reinforce the memory of a 'Belgian place' defending itself against France. Therefore, they highlight how these objects are now used by Belgians to define themselves as different, how they have become part of collective memory and how Belgium represents its past to define its national identity.

Louis XIV's cannonballs appear as precursors of a distinction between France and Belgium; they insist on the division of the two sides and maintain a secessionist memory of 'Belgian' resistance against the invader. The French cannonballs in Mons are, thus, symbols of the past conflict and have been mobilised in contemporary narratives to perpetuate it.

Jemappes and the French Republic

Not far from Mons, a monument entitled 'Le Coq' commemorates the Battle of Jemappes in memory of Franco-Belgian friendship, in connection with the so-called 'Battle of Jemappes'.²⁷

This Battle of Jemappes took place on 6 November 1792 and was part of the wider French Revolutionary Wars and is considered to be the first major victory of the armies of the republic. Initially, the French

²² *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, vol. 22, n° 1, 2016.

²³ The elements presented here have been summarised in F. LELOUP, *La Frontière franco-belge* in: B. WASSENBERG (dir.), *Frontières, acteurs et représentations d'Europe*, Peter Lang, Border Studies – Borders and European Integration, vol. 5, pp.225–40.

²⁴ CREDIT COMMUNAL, 1691. *Le siège de Mons par Louis XIV*, Crédit Communal, Brussels, 1991.

²⁵ B. VAN MOL, *L'état des canons après le siège*, in : CREDIT COMMUNAL, op. cit. p. 6

²⁶ CREDIT COMMUNAL, op.cit., p.110.

²⁷ Website: [Le monument au coq à Jemappes \(Wallonie\) – TRACES DE FRANCE](#) (consulted on 5 March 2023).

objective in this engagement was not to annex new territory but promote the emergence of a belt of republics as stipulated president of the Diplomatic Committee, Jacques-Pierre Brissot, if these new political formations established governments based on the sovereignty of the people; the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Charles François Dumouriez, consequently proclaimed the independence of the (Belgian) republic on 8 November 1792; however, internal dissension, a lack of external support and a shift in the policy of the French National Convention transformed this independence into annexation in 1793.²⁸

In 1911, a monument, 'Le Coq', was unveiled in Jemappes to celebrate Franco-Belgian friendship to coincide with the *Congrès international des Amitiés françaises* (International Congress of French Friendships); this congress was organised under the auspices of a committee in which Jules Destrée, a major player in the Walloon Movement, was involved. This movement aimed to promote the specific characteristics of Wallonia, a French-speaking region in Belgium that was distinct from Flanders and Brussels. The monument was considered a symbol of the friendly relations between the French and the Walloons, their proximity and their shared values. All signs of conflicts or annexation were erased. In 1989, the Walloon movement *Wallonie Région d'Europe* tried to rekindle interest in this event but without success.²⁹

Nowadays, the monument is only visited by French tourists seeking traces of this battle which was so symbolic for the armies of the republic. Few residents of Jemappes, let alone Belgians from elsewhere, know the location or the meaning of the monument. The monument thus commemorates neither the premature independence of the Belgian state, nor an alliance with France in support of this independence. Initially a witness to Franco-Belgian *amitié* (friendship) and then a certain type of Francophilia promoted by Walloon regionalism, the monument – although located in Belgium – now essentially belongs to France's memorial heritage. For French people, it perpetuates the memory of the victories of the French revolution and the links with neighbouring friendly areas, such as Wallonia. For Walloons or Belgians more broadly, it holds little to no significance.

From the Battle of the Golden Spurs to the 11 July day of celebration

In the west Flemish town of Kortrijk, the Groeninge Monument that was erected in 1902 commemorates the Battle of the Golden Spurs or *Guldensporenslag*, as it is known in Dutch.

From the end of the 12th century onwards, a number of battles were fought between the Counts of Flanders and the King of France. The Battle of the Golden Spurs took place on 11 July 1302 on the plains of the Lys and involved several thousand French combatants and about the same number of soldiers from Flemish towns, as well as Namur, Liege, Zeeland and even England.³⁰ The Flemish troops routed Philip the Fair's army and legend has it that they captured 500 pairs of golden spurs, from which the battle derives its name. The County of Flanders briefly gained its independence, but France reconquered the territory in 1304 and did not relinquish it until Francis I ceded the county to Charles V's Holy Roman Empire.

At the time of Belgium's independence, symbols of the country's heroic history were sought and the Battle of the Golden Spurs came to be celebrated as a Belgian victory over the occupier given the romantic tendencies of the period.³¹ During this period, romanticism, using intuition and emotion, assigned a high value to the achievements of heroes and notions of historical or natural inevitability. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the focus on this victory in Flanders homed in on the struggle between Flemish and French combatants, becoming a symbol of Flemish liberation. As the Belgian historian Vincent Dujardin has argued, the battle not only came to represent independence from France, but, by

²⁸ X. MABILLE, *Nouvelle histoire politique de la Belgique*, op. cit., pp.48–9.

²⁹ Website: [Le monument au coq à Jemappes | Connaître la Wallonie](#) (consulted on 10 March 2023)

³⁰ C. ISTASSE, *Histoire, mémoire et identité : Les fêtes nationales, régionales et communautaires en Belgique*, *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 2019, n° 2412– 2413, p. 33.

³¹ C. ISTASSE, *op.cit.*0

extension, liberation from French-speaking Belgium.³² Without delving too deeply into the evolution of the federal structure of the Kingdom of Belgium, it is important to mention that, from the 1960s onwards, a series of revisions resulted in a transition away from a unitary and centralised Belgium to a federal state which was made up of three regions and three communities: the Flemish Region, the Brussels-Capital Region and the Walloon Region, plus the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community. In 1973, the date of the Battle of the Golden Spurs – 11 July – was selected as the Day of the Flemish Community and has been a public holiday since in the Flemish Region.

The Battle of the Golden Spurs is nowadays remembered less as a victory over France than over ‘francisation’. The Groeninge Monument has thus been appropriated as the memorial heritage of Flemish nationalism; it is thrust into the centre-stage during the annually celebrated Day of the Flemish Community festival where it serves as a backdrop for Flemish elected officials.³³ In this third case, the battle is recalled and even celebrated as a victory, not against France as another country, but against France and *French-speaking* influence more broadly. The memory of this battle is mobilised to assert a common Flemish identity. In other words, the narrative, monument and festival serve to reinforce and perpetuate such a representation.

These three examples illustrate how the memories of these battles have been perpetuated. Their significance has evolved over time, the narratives have been reshaped, thereby resulting in different meanings and evoked for the purposes of identity construction. In all three cases, France is opposed to ‘Belgium’. After all, France is still cast as the invader in narratives recounted about the cannonballs of Mons (even if Belgium did not exist at the time). For the Battle of Jemappes, the ideology of the French revolution and fleeting Belgian independence sparked the memory of a specific Walloon and French friendship, but it now only features in the present-day French Republican narrative. In the case of the Battle of the Golden Spurs, the memory of the conflict was invoked in the context of a Belgian national identity in the 19th century, but it has since evolved. Nowadays, it is a cornerstone of Flemish identity.

Heritage and borders in the Franco-Belgian border region

World Heritage, transboundary properties and the border region

As emphasised by several authors, including David Lowenthal, heritage is not history; it celebrates the past, it provides representations of the past in a specific ways, with specific meanings and tailors it to present-day purposes.³⁴ Physical objects or buildings related to the three battles discussed above can be defined as elements of heritage: they are conserved in order to preserve and commemorate memories of the past and to pass them from one generation to the next. As we have seen, they shape ideas about the past and these ideas may evolve along with a community’s identity. Notably, in the case of the Battle of Jemappes, French revolutionary ideology and the meaning of battle has faded for Belgian inhabitants while the status of the opponent has been redefined in contemporary Flemish narratives surrounding the Battle of the Golden Spurs.

In this section, three examples of heritage located in the Franco-Belgian border region are analysed. They have been chosen for two reasons. First, they are concerned with cross-border buildings or practices or, in other words, they are part of the traditions and the history of both northern France and Belgium. Second, they have been recognised by UNESCO as being of outstanding universal value and have, thus, been granted World Heritage status, either as transboundary or as national property, which ensures that they have world-wide exposure.

Historical or cultural heritage status bolsters memory for material or immaterial monuments, places, or events. This status is seen as a form of inheritance for locals that has been passed from previous

³² Website : 2011, RTBF, [Le 11 juillet 1302: une victoire belge devenue mythe flamand - rtbf.be](https://www.rtbf.be/article/le-11-juillet-1302-une-victoire-belge-devenue-mythe-flamand-1011777). (consulted on 5 March 2023)

³³ C. ISTASSE, *op.cit.*

³⁴ Website: [What is heritage?: 2.1 What is heritage? - OpenLearn - Open University](https://openlearn.open.ac.uk/courses/21/what-is-heritage/) (consulted on 25 March 2023).

generations and is worth preservation for present and future generations. It includes physical objects, places and even practices. The process of granting World Heritage status to a monument or tradition tends to stabilise, anchor and perpetuate the memory it represents; through the process of selection and the *mise en scène* proposed, institutional actors valorise a monument or tradition by endowing it with a particular meaning, a chosen history inserted into a coherent narrative. Granting heritage status is always linked to a discourse and a moment based on the past that still resonates in the present and is determined by preferences and political choices.³⁵ The selection process and meanings assigned to these objects, places or practices are always partial and evolving as they are based on contemporary judgments and cultural values.

A World Heritage listing reinforces the valorisation of a particular object, place or practice and its accompanying narrative thanks to UNESCO's international standing and the worldwide scope of the label. This label designates heritage, cultural or natural, tangible or intangible, that is judged to be of exceptional interest to humanity and which reflects unique specificities rooted in local history. It includes cultural heritage sites, historic cities or cultural landscapes, natural sacred sites or museums, handicrafts or documentary and digital heritage, oral traditions or traditional medicine, among others.³⁶

In most cases, heritage listings are used to commemorate material or immaterial components defined within the borders of a single state. UNESCO's current list counts includes 1,157 properties, of which 43 properties are defined as 'transboundary', that is properties which are located on the territory of concerned 'States Parties' sharing adjacent borders, while 22 properties are classified as transnational' which refers to properties that are located in several places throughout several countries. Examples of transnational UNESCO properties include the *Great Spa Towns of Europe* and the *Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding contribution to the Modern movement*.³⁷ It is important to note that the proposal for the nomination to the World Heritage List is always prepared by 'State Parties' and are prepared and submitted by State Parties jointly in case of transboundary or transnational properties. As shown in one of the following case studies, provisions exist to broaden the scope a previously listed World Heritage property so that it may be classified as 'transboundary'.³⁸

The three heritage cases discussed here are situated in the Franco-Belgian border region. The analysis of these sites fits into the socio-economic history of the area which is much the same on both sides of the border: the growth of cities in the Middle Ages and the industrial exploitation of coal that shaped the development of the North of France and Belgium in relatively similar ways. The examples selected are the network of 56 belfries in Belgium and France included on the World Heritage List; the – separate – inclusion of the Nord Pas-de-Calais mining basin on the French side and four Walloon mining sites on the Belgian side; and, finally, the – Belgian – recognition of carillons. For each of these heritage sites, the narrative that justifies their exceptionality and, therefore, the UNESCO label is outlined and the positioning of this recognition – whether it is cast as cross-border or national – is discussed.

From 32 to 56 belfries

The first heritage example concerns the belfries of Belgium and France. In 1999, 32 Belgian belfries were included in the UNESCO World Heritage List and in 2005, 23 belfries located in northern France, as well as the Gembloux belfry in Belgium, joined them.³⁹

The belfries were built between the 10th and 17th centuries; they represent the attainment of civil liberties in cities, specifically in north-western Europe.⁴⁰ These architectural masterpieces, constructed in Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance or Baroque styles, were erected in the heart of the city as a counterpoint

³⁵ C. LACOUR, F. LELOUP, L. MOYART, Culture, patrimoine, savoirs : facteurs dynamiques de développement : introduction, *Revue d'économie régionale et urbaine*, n. 5, 2014, pp. 785–99.

³⁶ Website: [UNESCO World Heritage Centre](#) (consulted on 5 March 2023).

³⁷ Website: [UNESCO World Heritage Centre - World Heritage List](#) (consulted on 23 March 2023).

³⁸ As detailed in UNESCO, *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, World Heritage Centre, Paris, 31 July 2021, art. 136.

³⁹ Website: [Belfries of Belgium and France - UNESCO World Heritage Centre](#) (consulted on 23 March 2023).

⁴⁰ B. BOVE, F. LACHAUD, P. MONNET, J.-B. SANTAMARIA, Villes et construction étatique au Moyen Âge, *Histoire urbaine*, n° 1, HS1, special issue, 2021, pp. 7–28.

to the keep, which symbolised the aristocracy and the bell-tower that was the symbol of the Church. They represented the power of the commune: they have been recognised as universal heritage because they are unique examples of urban and public architecture. As major features of the medieval town, they still play a significant role in the development of their towns today, whether they serve as a clock, a carillon, a tourist attraction, or a cultural artefact.⁴¹

Initially, only 32 Belgian belfries were recognised before another 24 French and Belgian belfries were added to the list. In this way, the case of the belfries has become a form of transboundary recognition. The cross-border nature of this heritage has led to the establishment of an annual Franco-Belgian meeting of those responsible for the restoration and maintenance of the belfries so that they may share examples of good practice, even if they do not meet more than once a year. This transboundary heritage status commemorates the collective memory related to the common development of the individual towns as a shared past and draws a transnational line which ignores the border.

Mining basin and mining sites

Our second example concerns the Nord-Pas de Calais Mining Basin on the one hand and the Major Mining Sites of Wallonia on the other, both of which were recognised as UNESCO World Heritage sites in 2012; four sites have been selected in Belgium, three of which are located in Hainaut, a Belgian province that borders France; the French mining basin selected covers 120 km located in Nord-Pas de Calais which borders Belgium.⁴² They provide evidence of the common coal mining history highlighting their architectural, technological, landscape and social significance.

Coal mining, a defining feature of the industrial revolution of the 19th and 20th centuries, had a profound effect on the living spaces where it was developed. This was not just in relation to the industrial sites themselves or the mining methods and technologies used; it also influenced the evolution of urban planning and transformed the wider landscapes through the construction of canals and the appearance of slag heaps.⁴³ The collieries dramatically reshaped urban areas, housing and ways of life in northern France and Belgium, as well as other areas in France and in Europe. They also resulted in high rates of migration, such as Belgian workers travelling to France during the first stages of mining developments in the region. The heritage listing of these former coal mining regions sheds light on the working conditions, as well as the workers' lives in the industry and wider environment.⁴⁴

UNESCO's recognition of the exceptional character of this area's heritage proceeded in a distinct manner on the French and Belgian sides. In both cases, these heritage sites exhibit the deep change in buildings, technology and the landscape although the distinctiveness of the Nord-Pas de Calais Mining Basin also resides in its: "associat[ion] with events, with living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs [and] with artistic works".⁴⁵ In 2012, the two sites have been listed separately, despite the close degree of similarity between the buildings, technology, landscape, working class conditions and social struggles highlighted by the heritage listing. Coexisting independently, they are managed by different authorities with distinct objectives on either side of the border. Moreover, they are included in different tours which overlook the collective past of the sites, including their close-knit economic and labour ties.

The carillons

In 2014, UNESCO recognised carillon culture as the best way to safeguard intangible heritage in Belgium. Applied to Belgium as a whole, but not to France, the listing acknowledges the transmission and

⁴¹ C. LAMOUR, F. DURAND, P. BOSREDON, F. LELOUP, T. PERRIN, N. POPA, C. TURSIE, *European Capitals of Culture and Cross-border Urban Cohesion: Best practices guide and toolkit for evaluation*, Luxembourg, 2022 available at [CECCUT | home](#).

⁴² Website: [Bassin minier du Nord-Pas de Calais - UNESCO World Heritage Centre; Sites miniers majeurs de Wallonie - UNESCO World Heritage Centre](#). (consulted on 5 March 2023)

⁴³ P. TILLY, Fleuves et Canaux dans la zone franco-belge entre 1814 et 1914: vers une redéfinition des espaces?, *Revue du Nord*, n° 416, 3, 2016, pp. 577–99.

⁴⁴ S. LEMBRE, Terres de travail, terrains d'histoire, *Revue du Nord*, n° 435, 2, 2020, pp. 277–88.

⁴⁵ Website: [UNESCO Centre du patrimoine mondial - Les critères de sélection](#). (consulted on 5 March 2023)

enhancement of this historical cultural phenomenon that originated in the Spanish Netherlands and dates back to the 16th century.⁴⁶

Although their chiming gives rhythm to the daily life of communes in northern France, Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia, carillons on the French side of the border have not been granted World Heritage status. UNESCO's listing is restricted to within the Kingdom of Belgium's border, thereby omitting the tradition which is still practised on the other side of the border.

The carillons are often located in belfries, therefore, their recognition could have been connected but, until now, only Belgian carillons have been granted World Heritage status.

Battles, heritage and European cooperation

The memorial elements analysed, whether they be battles or UNESCO World Heritage sites, tell us about memory in the Franco-Belgian border region. Although the battles discussed predated the existence of the Belgian state, they have been mobilised to reinforce French republicanism, as well as Belgian, Walloon or Flemish nationalism. As for the World Heritage listings, while these may point to the shared social, cultural and economic history of northern France and Belgium, two out of the three properties have served to commemorate national or regional pasts within the borders of a single state. Conversely, the Franco-Belgian area has become more and more porous through the development of formal cross-border institutions, largely as a result of European Union policies and European territorial cooperation.⁴⁷

These examples suggest that memories and historic heritage are mainly mobilised in national contexts to sustain national or regional identities. In order to link these examples and the question of cross-border cooperation, it is worth analysing the presence of European cooperation, as based on Interreg programmes, in connection with such cases. Indeed, Interreg programmes have sought to foster horizontal links across borders and sustain cohesion in cross-border regions.

First, we can draw attention to the so-called Interreg project: *A 300-year border*.⁴⁸ This project aimed to develop a series of cultural activities over two years related to the tercentenary of the Treaty of Utrecht, cast as a foundational moment of the Franco-Belgian border as it heralded an end to the War of the Spanish Succession.⁴⁹ What is interesting is that, at that time, the border was celebrated in terms of good neighbourliness; the Interreg project including the transformation of former border posts into artistic workshops and works of art aimed at re-conciliating French and Flemish sides of the border.

The case of the coal mining and mining landscapes has been addressed in various Interreg projects during the last two programmes. As part of Interreg IV, the APBM ("Agir pour la connaissance, l'évaluation, l'interprétation et la gestion du Patrimoine naturel et culturel du Bassin Minier franco-wallon" translated as 'Acting for the knowledge, evaluation, interpretation and management of the natural and cultural heritage of the Franco-Walloon mining basin') project aimed to manage the cultural and natural heritage of Franco-Walloon mining areas.⁵⁰ The *ICI* ("Itinéraire de Culture Industrielle", which roughly translates as 'Industrial culture trail') project created an industrial culture trail based on Franco-Belgian mining heritage which were eventually listed among the four Walloon mining sites that were granted World Heritage status by UNESCO in 2012.⁵¹ The *Destination Terrils* project (INTERREG V) focused on 75 slag heaps and aimed to develop tourism and the economy around these coal mining relics while preserving their heritage and ecology.⁵²

⁴⁶ Website: [La sauvegarde de la culture du carillon : préservation, transmission, échange et sensibilisation - patrimoine immatériel - Secteur de la culture - UNESCO](#). (consulted on 5 March 2023)

⁴⁷ B. REITEL and B. WASENBETG, *Territorial Cooperation in Europe – A Historical Perspective*, European Commission, Brussels, 2015.

⁴⁸ Website: [229-fr.pdf \(interreg4-fwvl.eu\)](#). (consulted on 3 March 2023)

⁴⁹ F. ALABRUNE, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Website: [101-fr.pdf \(interreg4-fwvl.eu\)](#). (consulted on 3 March 2023)

⁵¹ Website: [83-fr.pdf \(interreg4-fwvl.eu\)](#). (consulted on 3 March 2023)

⁵² Website: [Destination Terrils](#). (consulted on 3 March 2023)

Regarding the carillons, it should be noted that, since 2020, the West-Vlaanderen/Flanders-Dunkerque-Côte d'Opale EGTC has been supporting various Interreg micro-projects in order to revalorise the art of carillon music: “as French and Flemish Flanders are home to the largest number of carillons in the world, as the birthplace of the carillon can be found in this region, [and] since most of the belfries that house them are recognised as UNESCO World Heritage sites”.⁵³

These examples demonstrate that a shared past is required, at least where the development of Interreg projects is concerned. The reason why these local operators used this common history is not clear; perhaps local stakeholders are more aware and more interested in commemorating collective memories or the Interreg programmes only create functional opportunities that are shaped by their potential to attract tourists rather than their ability to resonate with locals. Answering this question clearly requires further research.

A closer look at the Interreg programmes reveals a number of other projects that are linked to the historical question of the border. More specifically, a group of four projects is worthwhile mentioning in terms of collective, possibly cross-border, memory. These were included in the Interreg IV programme (2007-2013) and dealt with the First or Second World War: *Mémoire de la Grande Guerre*⁵⁴ (i.e. ‘Memory of the Great War’) and *La Grande Guerre, corps et âmes de paix* (i.e. ‘The Great War: bodies and souls of peace’) were dedicated to commemorating the centenary of the First World War.⁵⁵ *Transmussites 14-45* and *Mémoire commune du XXème siècle* (i.e. ‘Common Memory of the 20th century’) were focused on the development of museum infrastructures and joint research in relation to both global conflicts.⁵⁶ Belgium and France were allies during these wars and these projects were designed to encourage joint commemoration of particular anniversaries.

In all these cases, cooperation from both sides of the border resulted in joint actions, essentially with touristic objectives. They illustrate the desire of actors to work together sometimes for one-off or short-term events and induce mainly a functional cooperation.

Conclusion

The question at the centre of this article was whether the Franco-Belgian border region produces a common history or separate histories. In other words, do the historic battles that ravaged the region and common heritage commemorate distinct narratives defined within the borders of a single state in spite of the openness of the border and the high degree of exchanges, cross-border cooperation and formal European institutions? Our set of six case studies is limited but provides interesting results where collective memory is concerned, both in relation to how it is shaped by commemoration and dominant narratives, as well as how it is invoked to obtain World Heritage status for various sites, objects and practices.

The three battles and their commemoration have fed nationalist or regionalist identities, they have amplified narratives espousing a rhetoric of ‘us’ against ‘them’, glorifying locals’ resistance against the outsiders’ power. In all these cases, they certainly have not promoted cross-border perspectives. In the case of the World Heritage properties, the first step to getting on UNESCO’s list always focuses on national recognition. Even if the heritage that is submitted for listing is linked to shared histories or culture – such as the belfries and their symbolic link to the rise of civil liberties in French and Belgian cities or the industrialisation of the mining basins in northern France and Belgium – their granting of World Heritage status remains overwhelmingly restricted to national boundaries.

⁵³ Website: [Le ciel comme salle de concert l'histoire des carrillonneurs. | Actualités. | Egts \(egts-gect.eu\)](https://www.egts-gect.eu/fr/actualites/le-ciel-comme-salle-de-concert-lhistoire-des-carrillonneurs). (consulted on 3 March 2023)

⁵⁴ Website: [16-fr.pdf \(interreg4-fwvl.eu\)](https://www.interreg4-fwvl.eu/fr/16-fr.pdf). (consulted on 3 March 2023)

⁵⁵ Website: [210-fr.pdf \(interreg4-fwvl.eu\)](https://www.interreg4-fwvl.eu/fr/210-fr.pdf). (consulted on 3 March 2023)

⁵⁶ Website: [20-fr.pdf \(interreg4-fwvl.eu\)](https://www.interreg4-fwvl.eu/fr/20-fr.pdf); Website: [21-fr.pdf \(interreg4-fwvl.eu\)](https://www.interreg4-fwvl.eu/fr/21-fr.pdf). (consulted on 3 March 2023)

Cross-border cooperation, such as that funded by Interreg programmes, creates incentives for and supports collective regional or local projects based on collective memories (such as the world wars). The jury is still out, however, on how sustainable these projects and the networks they forge are and whether they can influence representations and memories beyond their quantifiable outputs, which are evaluated based on elements such as audience, activity and building figures.

While the continued existence of fragmented memories that end at the border may sound surprising nowadays, analysing the way in which representations account for the past or the way heritage listing is carried out is not intended to erase any battle or opposition. Cross-border cooperation in Europe builds bridges and creates opportunities for exchange and working together. In doing so, it encourages the creation of an increasingly integrated functional space but does not address questions of representation or collective histories.

At a time of resurgent nationalism and discounting the illusion of 'borderlessness', such partial results tend to require more in-depth reflection on how collective memories and heritage can shape notions of 'us' and 'them' at the border. Beyond exchanges, flows and other cross-border actions, the border reveals itself as a singular place, a site of histories – in the *plural* – that combines diversity and continuity, rewriting and reinterpretation. Avenues of research are emerging; they focus on these narratives and representations that will provide us with in-depth answers to crossing national borders and linking heritage, (hi)stories and borders.

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