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EDITOR'S NOTE

Abbreviation:

AAFB: Association des Archivistes Francophones de Belgique

ANCBS: Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield

AWaP: Agence wallonne du Patrimoine

BSB: Blue Shield Belgium

CCE: Centre de conservation et d'étude

CIPAR: Centre Interdiocésain du Patrimoine et des Arts Religieux

FWB: Fédération Wallonie–Bruxelles

ICBS: International Committee of the Blue Shield

KIK–IRPA: Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage

- 1 In July 2021, many museums, archives, churches, and other heritage sites suffered significant damage due to flooding in the valleys of the Meuse and its tributaries.¹
- 2 From the outset, it was evident that this incident was a disaster of unprecedented scale, impacting not only Belgian territory but also Germany and France and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands. There were 39 casualties, making it the deadliest natural disaster in Belgian history. In Wallonia alone, 9670 hectares were flooded, affecting a total of 100,000 people and 45,000 homes.² The estimated damage costs amounted to 5 billion 164 million euros.³ In terms of tourism, leisure, and heritage, the Walloon agency for immovable heritage, Agence wallonne du Patrimoine (AWaP), estimated that around 94 listed monuments had suffered damage. The Walloon Government projected the total cost of the measures and damage at €41,130 million.⁴ We have not collected

any official figures related to the impact on cultural heritage, which is the responsibility of the French Community or the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB).

- 3 Coordinating an emergency in Belgium occurs at the municipal, provincial, or federal level. At each level, respectively, the mayor, the governor, or the Minister of the Interior may declare an emergency phase.⁵ In the case of the flood of the Meuse and its tributaries, the federal phase was declared on July 15 by the Minister of the Interior, Annelies Verlinden. The National Crisis Centre served as the strategic coordinator of the crisis, responding swiftly to needs on the ground (for example, by providing specific equipment). It coordinated regular meetings with governors, fire departments, medical services, law enforcement, civil protection, the army, and others while managing communication with the public and the media. After 11 days, the situation transitioned into a recovery phase, and the Minister decided to conclude the federal phase. Regional authorities, governors, and local authorities took over.⁶
- 4 Since protecting and safeguarding heritage in emergency situations is the core mission of the association, Blue Shield Belgium (BSB) played a significant role in the aftermath of these floods. This paper aims to analyse BSB's response to the flood disaster of 2021, highlighting its role in safeguarding cultural heritage threatened by wars, natural disasters, and human-made disasters. It details the organisation's history, objectives, and operational strategies in disaster response, emphasising the importance of preparedness, collaboration, and community engagement. The authors also seek to raise awareness about the protection of cultural heritage during crises and showcase the lessons learned for future disaster management.

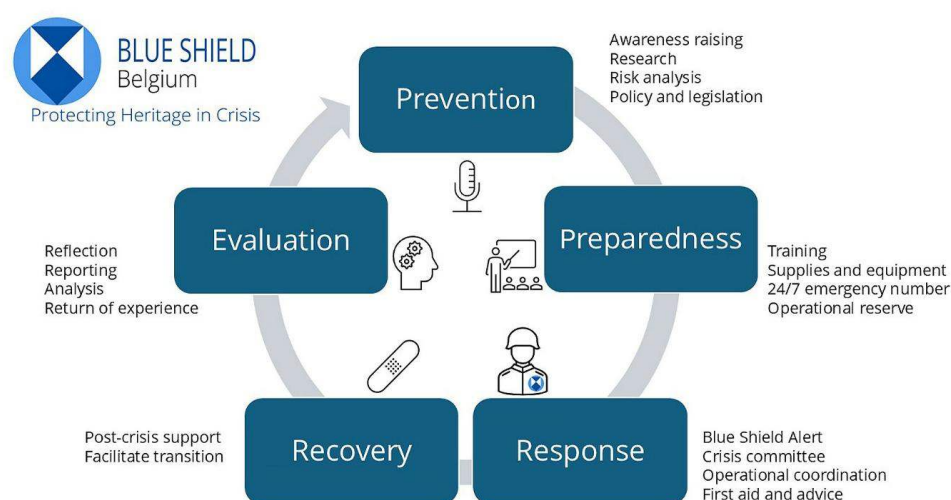
The Blue Shield Movement

- 5 It has been 70 years since UNESCO's Hague Convention emphasised the fate of both *movable and immovable cultural heritage* during armed conflicts.⁷ This emerged in the aftermath of the extensive destruction caused by the world wars in the first half of the 20th century. This foundational international legal framework sets a precedent for heritage preservation in international humanitarian law. Protecting cultural property, whether in peacetime or during armed conflict, preserves the memories of peoples and societies, creating a shared narrative for future generations. Culture is a vital component of human identity and a source of resilience for communities. Instruments such as the 1954 Hague Convention and its two Protocols seek to establish and promote respect, diversity, and peace.⁸
- 6 Together with the Conventions for the Protection of Victims of Armed Conflict (adopted in Geneva in 1949) and their 1977 Additional Protocols, along with the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its 1954 and 1999 Additional Protocols, these agreements form the two pillars of International Humanitarian Law.
- 7 The anniversary of the Convention was solemnly commemorated in 2024 with a series of events, symposia, and conferences. The Convention stipulates that state parties must adopt the necessary preventive measures in peacetime to ensure the protection of heritage, safeguard cultural property in the event of armed conflict, establish appropriate mechanisms for such protection, and create specialised units within their armed forces responsible for heritage protection. Furthermore, cultural property to be

protected should be identified and labelled with the Blue Shield, an emblem that must be respected similarly to the Red Cross. One could say that just as the Red Cross is committed to helping people, the Blue Shield movement is dedicated to protecting cultural heritage.

- 8 In 1996, the four major non-governmental heritage organisations – ICOM, ICOMOS, ICA, and IFLA – founded the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) to implement the guidelines of the Hague Convention.⁹ National committees were formed and united in 2008 to create the Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield (ANCBS). In 2016, the ICBS and ANCBS merged to establish Blue Shield International.¹⁰ The definition of armed conflict was broadened to include both natural and man-made disasters.¹¹
- 9 As one of the first committees in Europe, the Belgian committee of the Blue Shield – now known as Blue Shield Belgium (BSB) – was established in 1997 as a *de facto* association. Three years later,¹² the statutes of the non-profit organisation were published; the founding members were primarily representatives of heritage organisations, federal scientific institutions, and the authorities responsible for our country's heritage.¹³ BSB is accredited by Blue Shield International as one of the nearly 40 national committees worldwide.¹⁴
- 10 In the latest version of its statutes, one of its main objectives is to commit to protecting both tangible and intangible cultural and natural heritage in situations of armed conflict or emergencies, such as natural or human disasters (fig. 1).¹⁵ The association currently includes about 70 members, comprising professionals from the heritage sector and representatives of competent authorities and institutions nationwide.

[Fig. 1]



Blue Shield Belgium engages in different phases of the crisis management cycle.

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Assessing Our Preparedness for the Flood Disaster

- 11 Before 2021, BSB's initiatives focused on prevention and raising awareness among professionals and the public about the potential disasters that could affect heritage.

These activities were framed by Article 3 of the 1954 Convention, which stipulates that contracting parties commit to preparing measures, in peacetime, for the protection of cultural property located in their territories against the foreseeable consequences of armed conflict, taking such measures as they deem appropriate.¹⁶ Thus, conferences and workshops were organised, where Belgian and foreign participants from the heritage sector and emergency services presented tools and procedures to safeguard heritage in emergencies.¹⁷

- 12 Practical exercises were also linked to these initiatives, including an activity at the Mons' Saint Waltrude Collegiate Church in 2019. This event was co-organised with Blue Shield France and ICOMOS Wallonia-Brussels, in collaboration with the City of Mons and supported by the AWaP. During hands-on exercises at Saint Waltrude Church, various types of emergencies and specific issues were addressed, such as moisture infestation of archives and emergency planning in a listed church.¹⁸
- 13 Contacts were also established nationwide with governors overseeing crisis management at the provincial level. Since 2010, the Governor of Namur, Denis Mathen, has been particularly sensitive to the issue and wished to organise an exercise with BSB in 2020, an initiative that had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹ In 2017, a dozen members attended a Hostile Environment Awareness Training – Cultural Property (HEAT) course arranged by the Defence Department in collaboration with the Interministerial Working Group on Cultural Property. BSB was invited to nominate candidates. This training proved effective in preparing for disaster response. The association's activities to raise awareness among the government, heritage managers, and the wider public occurred on a small scale. Its operation relied on the voluntary cooperation of individuals and institutions that recognised the importance of its objectives. At the time of this unprecedented flood disaster, no procedures had been established, nor had any financial resources been gathered to develop actions on this scale. As will be shown, this crisis also had undeniable positive implications for future heritage protection.

Assessment of BSB's Emergency Response to the 2021 Flood Emergency

- 14 In mid-July, the eastern half of Belgium experienced heavy rainfall and significant flooding, with three-day precipitation totals reaching up to 300 mm. Such high amounts of precipitation far exceeded historical records and typically occur once every 200 years or even less frequently.²⁰
- 15 When the association's secretariat was asked for assistance on the morning of 15 July 2021, a chain of responses was triggered that continues to have consequences today. One of the main challenges was communication, which was twofold. On one hand, gathering information on the affected sites was crucial, as many areas were inaccessible. BSB asked one of its members, a resident of the region, to provide updates on the situation. However, communications regarding requests and offers for help needed to be streamlined. Local needs included demands for skilled volunteers. A first call for volunteers was sent out among the association's members, and by 16 July, the first responders from BSB's extensive network, including several staff members from the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), were on-site in the provinces of

Namur and Liège. They were primarily experts in conservation–restoration, archaeology, and art history. Another on-site requirement was packing and first-aid equipment. Establishing an SPOC, a single point of contact operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, proved crucial for centralising requests, offers of help, and resources. As early as the evening of 16 July, BSB provided a central emergency number for this purpose through one of the association's board members.

- 16 On 20 July, KIK–IRPA, in collaboration with BSB, established a crisis committee. It aimed to unite the managing bodies of heritage sector professionals, including heritage organisations and governments, on a consultative platform. The goal was to identify on-the-ground needs, develop strategies to address them, organise and facilitate volunteer efforts, communicate effectively, and seek funding. While KIK–IRPA primarily concentrated on monitoring the overall situation and mapping the affected sites, BSB was specifically responsible for operations, which included initiating volunteer recruitment and management and handling related aspects such as insurance, the involvement of unemployed workers, and safety.
- 17 Completing this assignment required significant effort, highlighting the need to streamline supply and demand while creating an appropriate working environment. A notable advancement in the deployment of volunteers from across the country occurred on 2 August 2021 with the introduction of online registration forms. These volunteers included curators, experts in conservation and restoration, specialists in built heritage and art history, archivists, library scientists, archaeologists, and other professionals from the heritage sector. Over time, the coordination of offers and requests for volunteer assistance and disaster relief materials improved, leading to more effective responses in the field. Direct communication with local heritage managers proved essential for the smooth operation of activities. A general call for volunteers targeting the broader heritage community was issued on 8 August. This message included practical information on working safely. Simultaneously, a database was established to document requests for help from the affected institutions, along with offers from volunteers or organisations able to provide material assistance, such as emergency supplies or specialised equipment. The forms were made available online through the BSB website in two languages.

[Fig. 2]



Blue Shield Belgium supported the AWaP when the archaeological depot of the Walloon region, the Centre de conservation et d'étude (CCE) in Saint-Servais (Namur Province), experienced flooding on two occasions.

© Blue Shield Belgium (Vanessa Boschloos).

- 18 On-site interventions require thorough preparation in close consultation with the manager of the affected site. Accompanied by BSB board members and others, the volunteer experts quickly travelled to the disaster area to provide hands-on support, advise local managers and curators, and administer first aid (fig. 2). Assistance was also offered in planning future interventions and conservation projects. It is crucial to recognise that requests for assistance can change rapidly, depending on the disaster's scale and how the situation evolves.
- 19 Some aspects required more attention. What about the equipment and insurance for a large number of volunteers? In some cases, the sites were prepared for this; in others, BSB was asked to take charge. Eeckman Art Insurance was willing to intervene in this matter. Obtaining insurance for damage to works of art proved too costly for our nonprofit organisation, but through Eeckman, BSB secured Civil Liability insurance and work accident insurance with Ethias, a Belgian insurance group.
- 20 For security reasons, volunteer experts needed to be identified and sighted on-site – a need particularly emphasised by the affected institutions. In early August, reflective vests featuring the BSB logo and web address were purchased. This uniform provided essential recognition for the volunteers and members of the BSB, as well as a degree of authority from local administrators, which certainly enhanced operations in the field. Steps were also taken with the National Employment Service to ensure that starting from the end of September, individuals entitled to unemployment benefits could automatically volunteer for our missions while retaining their rights. A handful of

volunteers raised this issue in their applications and were subsequently able to engage without hindrance.

- 21 In total, 33 calls were distributed, engaging 85 volunteer experts out of 158 registered participants.²¹ A total of 361 staff-days were completed. Their efforts were promoted and highlighted on social media, and in May 2022, the volunteers were invited to a gathering that included a debriefing, information sharing, and a training.
- 22 Another important aspect of disaster management is providing temporary or long-term facilities for the secure storage of evacuated materials. BSB played a significant role in this process, as demonstrated by the Centre de conservation et d'étude (CCE) in Saint-Servais, for which the military established a depot in Jambes. BSB also managed the loans and transportation of specialised equipment for conservation and emergency treatment – whether donated or borrowed – that was made available. For instance, BSB successfully loaned a mobile quarantine and decontamination cabinet for books and archival documents from Blue Shield France.²²
- 23 In addition to addressing immediate practical needs, there was a lack of financial resources to mitigate damage to heritage. Partly due to the catastrophe's impact, the Belgian population demonstrated great solidarity and willingness to help, including financially. Consequently, the crisis committee explored the possibility of establishing a fundraising campaign for the post-crisis recovery phase. In late August 2021, members of the crisis committee created a 'Donors' Circle' under the auspices of the King Baudouin Foundation.²³ The Association des Archivistes Francophones de Belgique (AAFB) assisted with the campaign's graphic design, which, although initially successful, required significant effort for administrative follow-up. In May 2022, the decision was made to terminate this campaign. BSB was asked to select restoration projects and present them to the members of the Donors' Circle. The meeting participants chose to distribute funds equally among three different projects.²⁴ BSB managed the administration at the conclusion of this initiative and thanked all those who contributed.

Salvage and Recovery Projects Involving BSB

- 24 The four categories of heritage sites impacted and solicited our support were museums, archives, churches, and the previously mentioned CCE, i.e., the conservation and storage facility for archaeological finds in the Walloon region. BSB members and volunteers were sent to sites across all four categories, making every effort to assign experts knowledgeable in the specific type of heritage affected to each site.²⁵

Museums

- 25 Assistance focused on the Museums of Verviers. Initially, there was no electricity, internet access, or inventory. The basic equipment necessary to restore the optimal conservation climate was insufficient. Furthermore, removing objects from the ceramics collection in the basement where they had been displayed, required an expert's assistance. Our efforts included recovering, rinsing, and drying the ceramics, graphic art, paintings, and furniture collections. BSB also acted as an intermediary by connecting the Museum with the Museum M of Leuven, which, as a sister institution, provided significant support during the inventory of the objects. Additionally, BSB

facilitated and participated in a workshop for conservation and restoration students from the University of Antwerp to create conservation boxes for the ceramics collection.

- 26 The reorganisation of the internal storage space of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Eupen (IKOB) using the Re-Org method required a long-term intervention. An external storage room had become unusable due to significant damage, resulting in the loss of many works. This work was conducted during the post-crisis phase in June 2022 in collaboration with an independent restorer, a BSB consultant, BSB volunteer experts, and with the support of KIK-IRPA.

Religious Heritage

- 27 We encountered additional challenges related to religious heritage. Access to permits proved challenging, and those responsible for church councils or religious organisations often faced damage themselves; some buildings were utilised to store relief goods for the local population. A strong partnership developed with the Centre Interdiocésain du Patrimoine et des Arts Religieux (CIPAR). During various missions, the resources of CIPAR, BSB, and often KIK-IRPA were combined (fig. 3). Support was given in prioritising, drying, and decontaminating artworks of all kinds. Special focus was placed on the conservation of liturgical textiles, with one mission specifically involving the relocation of tapestries from the affected church building to a different site for proper conservation. Other initiatives focused on stabilising conditions by creating a secure environment for furniture, sculptures, and paintings, along with providing the necessary supplies.

[Fig. 3]



One salvage operation for religious textiles at Saint Gilles Church in Fraipont (Liège Province).

© Blue Shield Belgium (Britt Claes).

Archaeological Heritage

- 28 The archaeological storage facility of the AWaP at the CCE was flooded twice in one week. At the CCE in Saint-Servais (Namur), staff faced nearly unmanageable conditions: tens of thousands of artefacts, the outbreak of micro-organisms, submerged crates, and some staff on holiday. Once the building was declared safe to enter and the first salvage efforts could be organised, BSB provided advice and sourced materials for packing and drying. In the weeks, months, and years that followed, BSB volunteers assisted AWaP staff in retrieving, cleaning, drying, and re-inventing archaeological objects, as well as moving crates, all in an effort to minimise the risk of losing information connected to the objects. Until 2023, BSB facilitated field schools at the CCE for conservation and restoration students from the École nationale supérieure des arts visuels de La Cambre (ENSAV).

Archives

- 29 When archives were flooded, many documents of various formats and media were damaged. Initially, few inventories were recorded, and there was a general lack of awareness regarding the importance of the documents and their storage locations. We cooperated with the well-organised State Archives in Liège by providing advice and support for the document drying process in a rotating arrangement. Even when faced with parish archives that were dirty and humid, we took initial steps to ensure the

drying was done under optimal conditions. The head of the Diocesan Archives was also informed. Given the extent of the damage at the CCE, where archaeological and archival documents such as drawings and plans were stored, we sought assistance from the restoration lab at the library of the University of Namur to handle the affected maps and plans. BSB volunteers joined in cleaning, decontaminating, drying, repackaging, and conducting a preliminary inventory of the maps and plans. We also advised the CCE on drafting guidelines for restoring these maps and plans. Together with the aforementioned library and the AAFB, we offered training in preparing an internal emergency plan, including a practical section on drying techniques.

Creation of a Permanent Secretariat

- 30 During the initial weeks and months of the crisis, the association's board members, alongside the volunteer experts, made significant efforts to provide aid wherever possible; however, this commitment could not be maintained. Numerous challenges emerged to transform the BSB into a more professional organisation. The primary challenges included fundraising, streamlining communication, highlighting heritage for the emergency services, coordinating and training volunteers, organising site-specific assistance, and managing logistics and resources. By the end of 2021, it became evident that to address these challenges, there was a necessity to establish a permanent secretariat.

Fundraising

- 31 Securing structural funding for the permanent BSB secretariat proved essential for the association to fulfil its mission to the fullest extent. The effective efforts of BSB and its volunteers during the recovery period did not go unnoticed. The AWaP capitalised on this opportunity and approved a project proposal to support the association in professionalising its activities and establishing a permanent secretariat. This project grant enabled BSB to temporarily hire a freelancer for one day a week from September 2021 to August 2022. In 2023, BSB also received four years of structural support from the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB) under the call Opérateur d'appui patrimonial, allowing it to recruit a part-time scientific assistant manager starting in June 2023. This facilitated the establishment of a permanent secretariat at the association's headquarters in Brussels, situated on the premises provided by KIK-IRPA. By further enhancing communication through the website and especially via social media, Blue Shield gained greater visibility. A quarterly newsletter keeps members and volunteers informed about activities. Additionally, a secure digital environment was created for daily management and long-term archiving.
- 32 However, with the current subsidies alone, the Belgian Committee of the Blue Shield cannot fully achieve all its ambitions. Consequently, the association had initiated a fundraising program where donations over €40 are tax-deductible. These funds are designated for three specific areas: special actions in favour of heritage in emergency situations, both in Belgium and abroad; appropriate training for our volunteer experts; and equipping the depot with emergency supplies and equipment for field interventions.

Improving Communication for Effective Emergency Management

- 33 A key task of the permanent secretariat has been – and continues to be – developing procedures that ensure a quick and efficient flow of information. This enables accurate assessment and communication regarding the location, specificity, and scale of an emergency. An operator, available 24/7 through the BSB emergency number, relays information and requests assistance to a WhatsApp group called 'BLUE SHIELD ALERT'. This group includes selected members of the BSB board and KIK-IRPA staff, with the possibility of inviting other partners in the future. When a disaster exceeds local capacities to provide adequate assistance and outside help is necessary to safeguard and rescue the affected heritage or site, expertise from across Belgium can be summoned. In major crises, this group intends to initiate the formation of a larger crisis committee, similar to the one established for the 2021 floods.

Integrating Heritage into Emergency Plans

- 34 There was a growing interest among governors and their departments in integrating heritage into the emergency plans of rescue services at the provincial level. BSB became the natural partner in this context. In October 2022, under the initiative of the governor of Walloon Brabant, an emergency exercise took place at a heritage site, the Folon Foundation in La Hulpe (fig. 4). During this event, the governor signed an agreement with BSB, establishing the association as a point of contact for heritage emergencies; the Belgian committee is now part of Discipline 4, led by Civil Protection and tasked with crisis logistics. In June 2023, a similar agreement was made with the governor of Namur following a tabletop exercise at the Castle of Freÿr.²⁶ BSB was also invited to join the provincial crisis cell. A convention with the governor of Luxembourg Province occurred in July 2024, where BSB was again included in Discipline 4. Additionally, contacts were established with the Flemish governors, leading to greater awareness of the Blue Shield's objectives and the integration of the central emergency number within the emergency planning structures at the provincial level.

[Fig. 4]



An interdisciplinary exercise at the Folon Foundation in La Hulpe (Walloon Brabant Province) preceded the signing of a convention between the governor and Blue Shield Belgium.

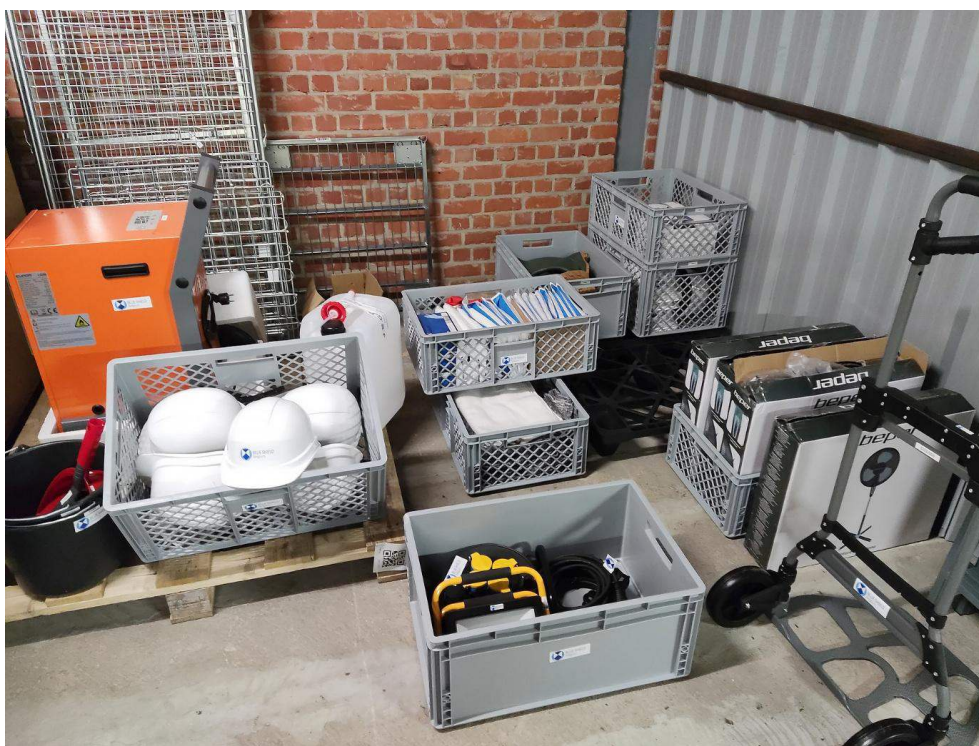
© Blue Shield Belgium (Anne-Sophie Hanse).

- 35 During a presentation tour for provincial and municipal security cells, it became clear that greater efforts were necessary from both the heritage sector and emergency services to ensure effective communication and improved mutual understanding. This includes familiarity with domain-specific terminology used in crisis management when, for example, a municipal, provincial, or federal emergency phase is activated.²⁷ Emergency services such as fire departments and Civil Protection expressed interest in addressing cultural heritage – specifically, how to handle and transport paintings or sculptures during an evacuation – and in developing emergency and evacuation plans for museums or archives. The permanent secretariat strongly encourages knowledge exchange with emergency services and collaborates closely with entities such as fire departments.

Volunteer Management and Capacity Building

- 36 Another, perhaps even greater challenge for our association is managing volunteers. Every week, new candidates apply through an online registration form, and their number has risen to over 250. How can we guarantee their employability, given that most of them are professionally involved in the heritage sector but do not necessarily have experience with disasters or crisis management? Following the example of Blue Shield France, we have decided to prepare a unit of trained and equipped volunteers, all effective members of the association, so they are ready to coordinate and supervise a group of untrained volunteers in the field. Members of this Crisis Response Team also serve as intermediaries for the emergency services coordinating the intervention on site. Finally, they collaborate with the secretariat to manage the deployment and use of materials and equipment from the BSB depot of emergency supplies (fig. 5). This depot is already in place but needs expansion.

[Fig. 5]



Blue Shield Belgium's depot of emergency supplies includes personal protective equipment, first aid materials, generators, ventilators, and dehumidifiers.

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Strengthening Partnerships

- 37 Lastly, collaboration with partners from the heritage sector – such as KIK-IRPA, ICOM, ICOMOS, FARO–Flemish Institution for Cultural Heritage, CIPAR, AAFB, etc. – is crucial for emergency response. For BSB, maintaining an ongoing dialogue with these partners is also one of the objectives outlined in its strategic plan. This cooperation requires clear agreements regarding the roles each partner is willing or able to assume with the resources at their disposal, as well as the goals they pursue. The flood that struck Verviers and its surroundings in 2021 exemplifies how the spirit of solidarity enabled various parties to overcome numerous barriers and connect, irrespective of their backgrounds. Initiatives to foster collaboration are emerging across different fields. For instance, a research project was established by the Flemish Community's Department of Culture, Youth and Media and the Flemish Agency for Immovable Heritage (agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed),²⁸ in which BSB collaborates with KIK-IRPA and FARO.²⁹ BSB is also developing standardised evacuation sheets based on input from firefighters. Together with CIPAR, it is working on creating evacuation sheets tailored to religious buildings and preparing exercises for churches. A training course on disaster planning for archivists is organised in collaboration with the AAFB. Additionally, BSB supported the creation of a practical guide to assist cities and municipalities in drafting their emergency plans for the heritage within their territories.³⁰

Conclusion: From Lessons Learned to Future Action

- 38 The floods in the Vesdre Valley caused immense human suffering and destruction. Simultaneously, their impact heightened awareness among political decision-makers, the public, and owners and managers of cultural heritage regarding the protection of heritage in crisis situations.
- 39 After the initial severe, and for some, traumatic effects of the disaster, the operation of the non-profit organisation encountered significant problems that hindered its effectiveness. For instance, there was initially a need for a permanent secretariat to prepare and supervise actions and be responsible for communication. Additionally, building a strong volunteer workforce requires quality training and supervision to ensure that rescue operations are conducted professionally. Regarding cooperation with emergency services, there was a notable lack of mutual understanding, which some governors acutely felt. The governors of Walloon Brabant, Namur, and Luxembourg stated in a convention that BSB would serve as a single point of contact for the heritage sector in the context of emergency plans. However, raising awareness among cultural heritage owners is essential. There is still much work to be done in this regard, and the non-profit organisation intends to play an active role in providing information and/or guidance on concrete projects. To address these significant challenges, structural funding is necessary.
- 40 The first step toward this was the subsidy from the AWaP, followed later by that from the FWB. As BSB is a national association aiming to develop activities across the country, a balanced subsidy, including contributions from Flanders and Brussels, is absolutely essential. Furthermore, the disaster underscored the need to provide financial assistance to affected heritage sites, preferably through a flexible form of crowdfunding. Throughout this process, ongoing attention should be given to raising public awareness through enhanced communication.
- 41 Regarding BSB, a disaster of this scale presented us with numerous challenges that initially overwhelmed our capacities. Thanks to the dedication of our members and many additional volunteers, we were able to address some of these challenges. This crisis also offered an opportunity to enhance our operations professionally and to establish a permanent secretariat as the central point of contact for our members and partners. With the commitment of its members and volunteers, along with the support of its partners, the Belgian Committee of the Blue Shield will continue to strive to protect heritage during times of crisis through effective prevention and preparedness measures.
- 42 Drawing from the experiences and lessons learned from the 2001 flood disaster, Blue Shield Belgium could consider the following future strategies to enhance its disaster response and cultural heritage protection efforts: developing more robust communication channels; placing further emphasis on training and capacity-building for both heritage professionals and emergency services; strengthening strategic partnerships; and creating a more sustainable funding model.

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NOTES

1. Serck 2021.
2. CSR–Commissariat spécial à la reconstruction 2022, p. 20.
3. CSR–Commissariat spécial à la reconstruction 2022, p. 27.
4. CSR–Commissariat spécial à la reconstruction 2022, p. 62.
5. Royal Decree of 22 May 2019.
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7. UNESCO 1954.
8. The 1954 Protocol prohibits the export of cultural property from occupied territories, as well as the sequestration of such property as war damage. Belgium ratified the protocol on 16 September 1960. The Second Protocol of 1999, ratified by Belgium on 6 October 2004, significantly expands the protective measures and clarifies the conditions under which individual criminal responsibility is incurred. It also establishes sanctions for serious violations and focuses primarily on the protection of cultural property that has been displaced or illegally exported during armed conflict.
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18. Unpublished report by M. Serck (Rapport sur le colloque de Mons, 2014 (archives BSB)).
19. In his speech for the Provincial Council of Namur on 23 October 2015 (Mathen 2015).
20. KMI 2021.
21. Unpublished annual report of Blue Shield Belgium for AWaP, 2022 (archives BSB).
22. Page à Page Conservation, *La Chambre* 40, undated.
23. Blue Shield Belgium 2021a and 2021b.
24. Blue Shield Belgium 2022.
25. Due to lack of staff, no detailed data was collected regarding the interventions of the association and its volunteers in the affected region.
26. Le Gouverneur de la Province de Namur 2023.
27. Depending on the phase (operational, municipal, provincial, or national), the crisis is managed by the mayor, governor, or interior minister, in coordination with a committee, while an operational command post (CP–OPS) is established on the ground (NCCN, National Crisis Centre, undated).
28. 'Research to prepare for a policy on disaster strategies for heritage in Flanders and the Brussels–Capital Region' 2023–2025 (Beyl 2024).
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ABSTRACTS

In July 2021, significant flooding in Wallonia severely impacted various cultural heritage sites, prompting the Belgian Committee of the Blue Shield (Blue Shield Belgium – BSB) to play a vital role in recovery efforts. Established in 2000, BSB is a non-profit organisation with approximately 70 members dedicated to protecting and safeguarding cultural heritage during crises. The association mobilised swiftly after the floods, implementing a structured response that included on-site first aid, coordinating over 200 volunteers, participating in an *ad hoc* crisis committee, and facilitating communication and logistical exchanges among stakeholders. Key initiatives involved the recovery of artworks, documents, and archaeological artefacts, as well as the establishment of emergency protocols and a central emergency number. BSB also sought to enhance its operational capacity through structural funding, leading to the establishment of a permanent secretariat for effective communication and crisis management. This disaster heightened awareness of the importance of cultural heritage preservation in emergencies among authorities, policymakers, and the public. Going forward, BSB aims to build on these experiences to strengthen its preparedness and collaboration with emergency services, ensuring a robust response to future crises.

En juillet 2021, d'importantes inondations en Wallonie ont gravement affecté plusieurs sites du patrimoine culturel, incitant le Comité belge du Bouclier bleu (Blue Shield Belgium – BSB) à jouer un rôle essentiel dans les efforts de rétablissement. Fondé en 2000, le Bouclier bleu est une association sans but lucratif comptant environ 70 membres qui se consacre à la protection et à la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel en cas de crise. L'association s'est rapidement mobilisée après les inondations, mettant en œuvre une réponse structurée comprenant les premiers soins sur place, la coordination de plus de 200 bénévoles, la participation à un comité de crise *ad hoc* et la facilitation de la communication et des échanges logistiques entre les parties prenantes. Les principales initiatives ont porté sur la sécurisation d'œuvres d'art, de documents et d'objets archéologiques, ainsi que sur la mise en place de protocoles d'urgence et d'un numéro d'appel d'urgence central. Le Bouclier bleu a également cherché à renforcer sa capacité opérationnelle grâce à un financement structurel, ce qui a conduit à la mise en place d'un secrétariat permanent pour une communication efficace et la gestion des crises. Cette catastrophe a sensibilisé les autorités, les décideurs politiques et le public à l'importance de la préservation du patrimoine culturel dans les situations d'urgence. À l'avenir, le Bouclier bleu entend s'appuyer sur ces expériences pour renforcer sa préparation et sa collaboration avec les services d'urgence, afin de garantir une réponse efficace aux crises futures.

In juli 2021 hadden aanzienlijke overstromingen in Wallonië ernstige gevolgen voor verschillende culturele erfgoedsites waardoor het Belgisch Blauwe Schildcomité (Blue Shield Belgium – BSB) werd aangezet om een vitale rol te spelen in de beredding van de crisis. BSB werd opgericht in 2000 en is een non-profitorganisatie met ongeveer 70 leden die zich toelegt op de bescherming en het behoud van cultureel erfgoed in tijden van crisis. De overstromingen zorgden voor een wake-up call. De vereniging implementeerde snel een gestructureerde respons die bestond uit: de eerste hulp ter plaatse, de coördinatie van meer dan 200 vrijwilligers, de

deelname aan een *ad-hoc*-crisiscomité en het faciliteren van communicatie en logistieke uitwisselingen tussen belanghebbenden. Belangrijke initiatieven waren het beveiligen van kunstwerken, documenten en archeologische artefacten, het opstellen van noodprotocollen en een inrichten van een centraal noodnummer. BSB trachtte ook zijn operationele capaciteit uit te breiden door middel van structurele financiering, wat leidde tot de oprichting van een permanent secretariaat voor effectieve communicatie en crisismanagement. Door deze ramp zijn overheden, beleidsmakers en het publiek bewuster van het belang van het behoud van cultureel erfgoed in noodsituaties. In de toekomst wil BSB op die ervaringen voortbouwen om de paraatheid en samenwerking met hulpdiensten te versterken en zo een robuuste respons op toekomstige crises te garanderen.

INDEX

Trefwoorden non-profitorganisatie, noodhulp, rampenbeheer, Blue Shield, overstromingen

Mots-clés: organisation sans but lucratif, intervention d'urgence, gestion des catastrophes, Bouclier Bleu, inondations

Keywords: non-profit organisation, emergency response, disaster management, Blue Shield, floods

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