

FUNERAL SITES AND MEMORIALS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR. WESTERN FRONT

Fourteen years of work, reflections and discussions made it possible to obtain the inscription in September 2023 by the World Heritage Committee of the 139 sites selected from 7000 of them located on the Western Front of the First World War. This Franco-Belgian file since its origin born in Belgium in 2009 during a meeting between the University of Lille with Flemish Minister Charles Michel. In France, it was carried by the association Landscapes and Sites of Memory of the Great War, an association bringing together the departments of the Front, created on the initiative of the professor Damien M-M of the University of Lille and S. Barcellini, President of Souvenir Français. The department of Mare, then chaired by Mr. C. Bruyen, joined the association from the outset and actively cooperated in its success thanks to the investment of Mr. Frank Lesjean and his departmental reprography services, which we warmly thank.

It was a long fight, because it is the first time in its history that the World Heritage Committee has opened up to the memorial field. To do this, we had to clarify over time the exceptional universal value of this nomination, the consolidated version of which must be transmitted in December 2024 to the Committee.

Reflections inspiring the Outstanding Universal Value of this file

- The immensity of the mourning which affects more than 135 current States: the belligerent States of the time and their empires: a shared, transnational mourning which shakes up life, culture, societies and the economy of the planet;

- Tell how the belligerent States are trying to work, despite oversights and errors, to alleviate this pain of families, by striving to give for the first time in history, to each combatant victim (men and women) and workers recruited willingly or by force, if possible, an individual grave surmounted by a stele on which his name and first name would be forever engraved, without distinction of rank, in order to pay homage to him or her forever.

- Make us think about the immensity of the cataclysm translated by the construction of thousands of cemeteries to bury all the dead regardless of their status: adverse or not. This attitude differs from that observed during the Civil War, where only the Federal were systematically buried and had a nominative stele. The few Confederates buried at these sites were exhumed in the 1870s. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century that they were admitted to Arlington.

- Proclaim the birth of a new cult, that of the dead, based on individual identity for all and, for the first time in the history of humanity, in order to respond to the inhumanity of the conflict.

- Pay tribute to these men and women mobilized or recruited sometimes against their will to come and fight and die far from home without knowing why;

- Preserve, protect and transmit this pluri-national and pluri-cultural heritage: flowering of steles, memorials, necropolises, vestiges inscribed forever in our landscapes to future generations and which reflect today the immense pain of that time;

- Transmit to future generations this civil and humanist worship encouraging contemplation, and beyond reconciliation, often forgotten repentance, solidarity, international cooperation and peace. Let's learn lessons together from this shared page of history.

We thank the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Armed Forces in particular for the grant agreement favoring the organization of two international conferences at Les Invalides in 2019 and 2022. They have brought together States from around the world and the managers of the sites around this file. A special thank you to South Africa, the States of West Africa, and India, without their support, this inscription was impossible. Thank you to the Memorial Committee for hosting this exhibition.

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Professeur Emérite de l'Université de Lille.