

June 17th 1841, the first tragedy which involved two steamships on the Mediterranean sea.

# The sinking of the SS. Polluce

di Alessandro Arseni

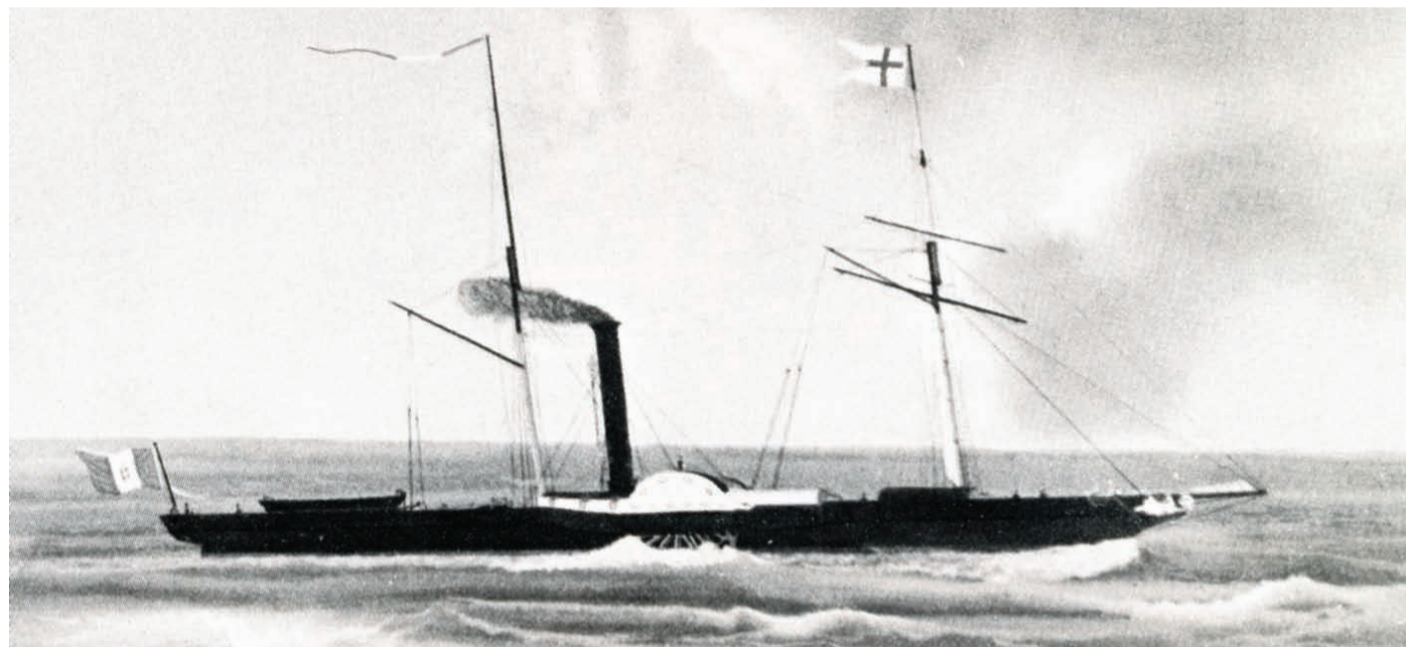
Raffaele Rubattino could have been justly proud of himself in the early months of 1841. Years before his time, he had an idea of what the future would be like for sea travel. When he was only 30 years of age he was bursting with new ideas, and more importantly, could see their potential. It was society, the people around him, who were so slow at adapting to a changing world.

Now was the time to do away with passengers who just slept on deck under covers, or strung up hammocks to sleep like seamen. What could be better than to journey on ships that traveled under their own steam, to sleep in comfortable cabins, and to dine in dining rooms, sitting at the Captain's Table next to the Captain of the ship in his white uniform?

Rubattino was able to make full use of his two steam ships, the *Dante* and the *Virgilio*, on Sundays too, when the Navigation Company of Naples organized trips to the Isle of Ischia, cruises round the Island of Sicily, in addition to its "Pleasure Cruises" to Portofino, Chiavari, and Rapallo, which were of great attraction, flags flying and refreshments served on board! The tickets were exceptionally cheap, only 5 lire single, and 8 lire return! It was much more important to attract passengers and to gain their confidence about traveling aboard steamships. There were always some who were afraid when the huge motors started and the paddles began to turn under their gigantic steel hubs. News about boilers exploding was always frightening, but, in retrospect, who could have written about "steam ships" without an explosion or two? It was the price that had to be paid for progress. In England, it was rumored that they were planning to build "steam carriages" that would travel across the countryside! "The Railway Journal" had already written an article about them!

It seemed that with the invention of the engine, one could go wherever one wanted, and quickly too! All the coastal European countries, Swiss lakes, and large rivers, such as the Danube for the Austrians and the Hungarians, were navigated by steam ships. It didn't matter what size they were or what they carried as long as they traveled faster than a rival means of transportation. When European Royal Families started taking trips on steam ships, their approval confirmed the success. The English ship-builders, pioneers in engineering, were inundated by requests to build steam ships, and when they were not able to keep up with the demand, they concentrated on making the engines, contracting out the fabrication of the hulls to the French shipbuilders of Le Havre. By now the engines had been perfected, less bulky and more powerful, brought up to a potential of 500 horse-power, the same power level as the English *Great Western*. Also, at the same time, their designer, the well known engineer Brunel, was working on one with 1000 horse-power, with a 3000 ton, iron hull, 600 tons more than any other known vessel. It was rumored that it was going to cross the Atlantic in only ten days, as opposed to the 14-15 days for the normal transatlantic vessels.

But Rubattino's ships only needed to coast the Italian peninsula, going down as far as Naples calling in at Livorno and Civitavecchia, then going along to Marseille and back again. Backwards and forwards, punctually, and speedily. In addition, the Royal Sardinian Postal Service had realized that mail would reach its



destination more regularly and securely with a steam ship, that was not affected by headwinds or currents, and would be much safer than sending it by stagecoaches travelling on treacherous roads, often fraught with brigands and highwaymen.

The postal service along the Italian shores worked well, and the De Luchi - Rubattino accounts were showing encouraging results. During the first seven months of the previous year, the *Dante* alone, achieved more than sixty times to go to Livorno, with an occasional call into Civitavecchia, bringing in more than 80,000 lire (or nearly 300,000 Euros at today's rate of exchange). After expenses, this left an initial profit of about 31,000 lire. Lots of money!

Rubattino and his companions started out with a couple of ships: the *Dante* (1837) was second hand, weighed 80 tons, bought from the Tuscan Navigation Company and was originally named the *Etrusco*; and the *Virgilio*, built in 1840 in Livorno but with English engines and weighing 145 gross tonnage. The *Virgilio* was more capacious than the *Dante* and it travelled regularly to and from Naples. Both ships being a little more than thirty metres long were, anyway, smaller than the Imperial French Messengers ships, or the Bazin brothers' *Sully* and *Pharamond*. In 1841 the Bazins were about to launch the *Charlemagne*, Fraissinet, the other French

ship owner was launching the *Amsterdam*, and the Neapolitans were even doubling their fleet with the *Mongibello* and the *Ercolano*. Rubattino turned his glance towards his desk and smiled complacently.

Very soon two new jewels would be coming into the harbour: the *Castore* and the *Polluce*, named after Zeus's sons, the mythical Argonauts. He had ordered their engines from the Blackwall shipyards in England, and hulls were from the Le Havre shipyards in Normandy. Both would serve the Italian Line, with ports of call from Marseille to Naples. Both had cost one million francs. At last, on 25th April 1841, the *Polluce* docked in Genoa. It was built of wood and lined with copper. It was driven by two big paddle wheels positioned in the centre of either side of the hull, and linked to a 200 horse-power engine. The crew consisted of 35 sailors and the *Polluce* was able to transport around ninety passengers. After a few days in port for the finishing touches and waiting for its Nationality Certificate, on 30th April the *Polluce* set out for Livorno, Civitavecchia and Naples, where it arrived on 3rd May. It started back on 5th May for the return journey, stopping the next day in Civitavecchia once again and, as it had done in other ports along the way, delivered and picked up mail. Among the letters consigned on board, one is actually still in existence, and to date it is



Image 1-The only one recorded letter travelled on board the *Polluce*, from Civitavecchia May 6, 1841 to Genoa. 6 bajocchi due on departure and 50 cents on back at arrival. Backstamped "Genova 8 May 1841". (Coll. Adami)

proof of the only letter known to have travelled on the *Polluce*. There would have been two, but on 12th May 1841 destiny intervened to make the *Polluce* meet up with the *Mongibello* for the first time.

In Marseille, that day, the sky was clear. A light Westerly breeze was heralding the early arrival spring. The brand new steamship *Mongibello* had just docked. The Administration of the steamship line The Two Sicilies, had ordered it from the Maudslay Fields English shipyards with a potential of 240 horse-power. The *Mongibello* had arrived from London and Cadice after a difficult journey. And there it was, the black shiny hull, the blazing brass and, under the deck, bronze, marble, and mirrors with golden frames which made it a masterpiece of naval art. In addition, no other ship possessed a mahogany dining table seating eighty, and crystal glass in the portholes allowing panoramic views. No ship was so beautiful!

Claude Clerk, the Neapolitan company agent, was on the dock, full of excitement and pride, boasting of the "marvels" of "his" new Paquebot. He had also managed to accumulate some merchandise for delivery to Naples for this first trip. He felt it was necessary to challenge the Sardinian and French trading routes with faster, more capacious and more economical ships. And this ship perfectly matched the needs of the Neapolitan Navy, and was, at the same time, a challenge that Europe could be proud of. Its arrival was announced proudly with the following statement: "Our company, the first to introduce steam navigation to the Mediterranean, is proud of the high honour and praiseworthy envy that this new example of navigation has created, and which cannot but be of huge advantage to the daily operation in each and every field of the traffic and trading industry..."

The *Polluce* was nearby. She had arrived two days earlier, she was loading goods, mail and passengers to travel back to Genoa, and from there down to Livorno, Civitavecchia and, finally, Naples. It was the second time she had stopped in Marseille and Captain Lazzolo, her commander, was looking at the new arrival with a mixture of self-confident experience and a little concealed envy. The Neapolitans had declared 40 more horse-power. Could that be true? And yet, the *Polluce* too, had engines designed by the well known Barnes of London, as had her twin, the *Castore*. And the trimmings? Those of the *Polluce* had been done in a tasteful way, above all paying attention to the comfort of the passengers, but with a simple and efficient elegance. In the end, she was a commercial ship, and Master Rubattino did not like unnecessary waste.

From Marseille, the two ships left at the same time, and sailed the first stretch of sea side by side. Then the *Mongibello* broke away and headed towards Naples, taking some letters that should have been on the Sardinian ship, if the Neapolitan one had not stopped in Marseille on the same day. The *Mongibello*, during her first appearance and even before coming into actual service, had already succeeded in stealing some business from the Sardinian line.

Everything seemed to be going well for Rubattino: his steamships, now four, were sailing regularly and every day one of his ships was in a different port, loading and unloading goods. But tragedy struck the Genoese ship owner. This was the first accident that the Italian Merchant Navy, with its two-wheeled paddle ships, had ever been involved in. During the night between 17th and 18th June 1841, the *Polluce* sank, in just a few minutes, following a collision at open sea with the Neapolitan ship, the *Mongibello*.

The Sardinian ship (the *Polluce*) had left Civitavecchia in the afternoon of the 17th, heading for Livorno, where she should have arrived on the morning of the 18th, at first light of dawn. The *Mongibello*, instead, left Livorno at 5 pm, heading towards the Pontifical port (Civitavecchia), and then on to Naples. Just before midnight, both the ships were in the Piombino channel, near Porto Longone, five miles from the shore. According to the first witnesses, on the Sardinian ship.... "from a distance you could see a light, probably from a steamship, and the captain ordered to helmsman to heave to the right in order to avoid a collision. And this was done. However, the light kept coming nearer and, to no avail, the *Polluce* crew shouted with all their might, in Italian, French and English, to

the other ship to heave to and to head towards her right. All was in vain! The *Mongibello* collided with the *Polluce*, striking the left side, from wheel to stern, and in less than 15 minutes the *Polluce* filled with water and sank. One can imagine the fear and confusion of that moment! The captain and crew vied with zeal in order to save the 46 passengers.

The *Polluce's* engineer, after stopping his ship's paddle-wheels jumped onto the *Mongibello* and had their engineer to stop their paddle-wheels, which were still moving. Meanwhile the *Polluce's* crew launched the *Mongibello's* boats to save the passengers. There was only one life lost, Captain Costigliola himself, due to a blow on the head. So perished one of the Merchant Navy's best and most well-known steam ships..." When the news was announced to Rubattino, it is said that he lost control of himself and.. "burst into tears, with emotion so painful and heartrending, that all present were impressed".

Researches after the wreck begun immediately. Virgilio and Dante were sent to inspect the place of the shipwreck. And also Rubattino, though suffering from seasickness, went several times to that spot together with skilful engineers in order to examine the real chances of recovering the hull, located at about 100 metres from the surface. For months many attempts were made and the expenses amounted to 250.000 liras of those times (over 1.000.000 Euros), without obtaining any result. In the meanwhile the lawsuit against the Administration of the Steam Navigation Company of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was far from being resolved. It came to an end only several years later with scanty financial results.

Why Rubattino engaged such a remarkable amount of resources for the recovering of *Polluce*? Besides the fact that the ship was new, what of so important did it convey to deserve such a great investment of money? The answer arrives in February 2000 only, when a group of English people hires a tugboat beginning a series of researches, less of three miles away from Elba Island. For about twenty days they fathom the bottom with the help of a bucket, lifting tons of material and destroying great part of the wreckage but also finding thousands of coins, jewels, watches, crockery, china and, as it seems, *Polluce's* bell too.

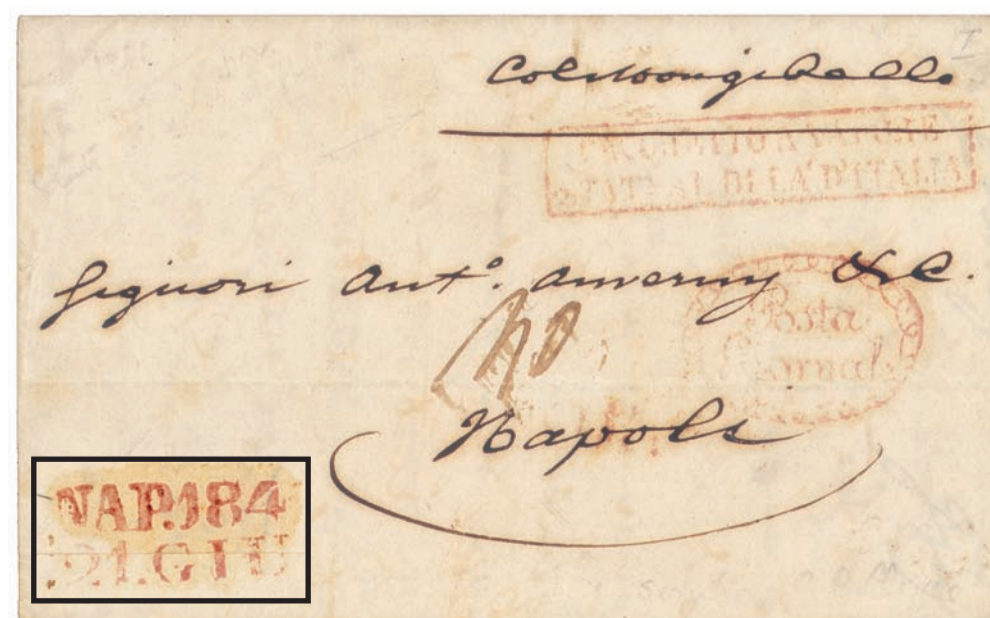
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Jewels found on board of the wreck of the SS *Polluce*.



Image 2-Marseille, May 12, 1841. Two steamships are on the dock. The sender wrote on the right side "Col *Polluce*" of the Sardinian SS Company. The *Polluce* should stopped to Genoa, Leghorn, Civitavecchia and finally at Naples on May 16th. The *Mongibello*, coming from London and directed to South without any stop, should arrived to Naples on May 15th. As soon as the sender known that the neapolitan's ship should be faster than *Polluce*, cancelled "Col *Polluce*" and wrote "Col *Mongibello*" on the left side of the cover. (Coll. Adami)



From Marseille June 15, 1841 to Naples, travelled on board of the *Mongibello* during the night of the tragedy. The *Mongibello* left Leghorn on the evening of June 17, directed to Civitavecchia and Naples where she should arrived on the morning of June 20. But, after the accident on the night of June 18, the *Mongibello* come back to Leghorn with the savage passengers of the *Polluce* and departing the evening of June 19, arriving with a day's delay on June 21. Left corner: arrival backstamped "June 21st, 1841" instead June 20th. (Coll. Arseni)