



# Polluce Wreck

**THE OFFICIAL RECOVERY**

THE CONTINUED STORY ABOUT POLLUCE WRECK. FIRST PART CAN BE FOUND IN X-RAY #7

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It was one of those highly unlikely chains of unforeseeable events that led us to Elba the picturesque but somewhat mislaid lump of land in the Mediterranean made famous by emperor Napoleon's exile here: The fact that the treasure ship Polluce was finally being excavated.

As our regular readers may recall from our previous issue this is where the treasure ship Polluce sank to the bottom in 1841. The official excavation is finally under way coinciding with our attendance so this



A model of how Polluce looks like on the seabed, 103m down



Top: A delicate fingering with ivory portraits  
Above: the sorting table.  
Right: Massimo Anselmi with a gold pocket watch





(above). A watch as it came out of the mud. A little later the face came to light too (below) as did more coins and some yet to be identified artifacts

Four pictures above, clockwise from top left: The excavation barge that was held in place by four massive anchors. The winch bringing up the baskets with artifacts. The mesh cash into where all the suctioned mud and objects were deposited, There was mud, mud and mud everywhere.

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was a once-in-a-life time opportunity not to be missed. And here we are on a - rather uncharming I must say - barge with a huge crane, a lot of commercial diving equipment, a decompression chamber and lots of pressure tanks.. It is a truly big set-up. I am couple of containers the dive tenders have their command center from where they are in constant contact with the divers below.

### Saturation divers

103 meter below the surface saturation divers, are working their way across the remainder of the wreck meticulously sorting and sifting through the debris, rectangle by rectangle. On a tv-monitor in the coffee-room we can follow the divers' progress. The image is grainy and comes from a camera mounted on the divers' helmet, enabling us to see what is going on in a restricted field in front of the divers. Sometimes we see a hand, sometimes the suction head protrude into the

From top: Work at the sorting grid where two meshes, one finer below retained any solid objects. A lump of coins, silver or gold stuck together. Officers from the carabinieri displaying some of the finds. A big lump of coins being wrapped for shipment back to the safe in the castle on shore.







Another 4 x 4 meter search grid has been welded together and is now being lowered into the water by the huge crane. In the foreground the decompression chamber can be seen behind with the big umbilical cord carrying the essential communications, hot water for the divers' suits and breathing gases going over the chamber

view as they remove a century and half of silt from whatever remain of this once so stately vessel. Once in a while we see some old timber, then some rock and then something that appears to be ... treasure? ... or...maybe not.

It is hard to make out on that little grainy monitor in the crewroom, the image quality isn't exactly a match for BBC's Blue Planet DVD collection.

From the starboard side of the wide barge the dive bell is suspended in heavy cables and a umbilical. The stream of bobbles rise from so deep – over 100 meters – through the water column that they break up into a myriad of smaller bubbles that turn the surface beside the barge into a froth. I can't help pondering how "another day at the office" may be like down there. The divers has to spend three weeks of ul-

mate boredom in compression where they work in four hour shifts.

### €350 a day

They must be paid very well I surmise out loud. About €350 a day comes the answer from behind me where one of the Italian tenders is having a smoke and a break and we get to talk. Not exactly a stately salary for enduring such an ordeal with the ever present dangers and lasting effects on your health. And for being without the wonderful Mediterranean sunshine that we can now enjoy - the sea is flat and it is pleasantly warm considering it is almost November. The atmosphere is pleasantly relaxed yet laden with tickling expectations of what the baskets may bring up next time. Many of the men around me are weatherbeaten veteran of the offshore or salvage industry.

Sturdy, with grey hair and furrowed faces they radiate all the experience and hard lives you can imagine. Yet they seem to retain this boyish goofiness and childlike expectations that only boys with toys can muster. Maybe a treasurehunt is a pleasant break from the dirty oilbusiness or the tedium of salvage work.

### Carabinieri

Needless to say there was also police on board. Huge, stern looking carabinieri from the art and antiquities sections' underwater squad who, however, turned out to be just another bunch of jokesters, were there in strenght to provide the necessary protection and guard the treasure. No wonder. Some rumours had it that there might be as much as four tons of goldbars down there too. It has been alleged that a secret cache of

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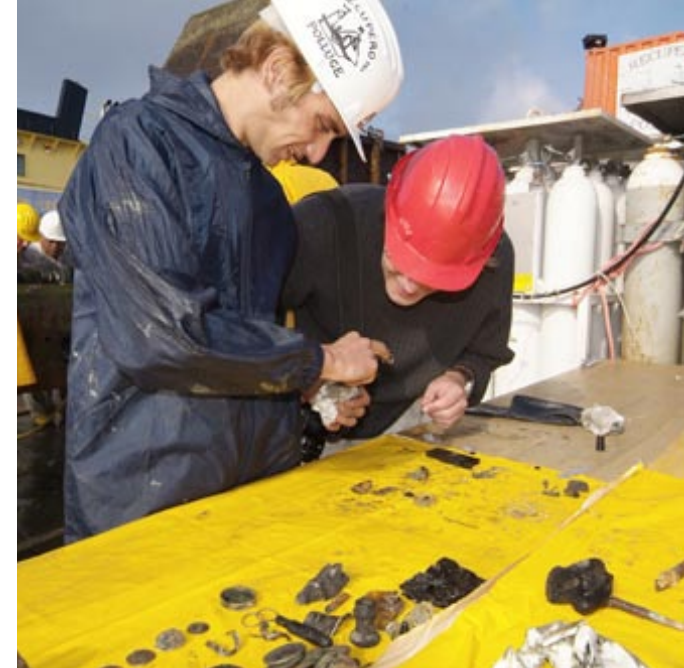
goldbars were stashed somewhere in the fore departments and not listed on any cargo declarations. When Polluce sank it was a volatile era in Europe's history and many of the familiar nationalstates that we know of today, most notably Germany and Italy, were only starting to come together in a painful process.

It is an unreal sensation being out here. How many of us have heard tales or stories about treasures, say like in the tales of 1001 night, pirate movies or our childhoods' bedtime stories? Most of us I guess. How many ever get to see actual treasure, see it come to light, let alone get to handle it? The chances of this must be like winning the lottery. Yet, I am witnessing it. Gold, silver, glassware, jewellery and other items come out of the grey clayish mud being brought up from the seabed.

### Mud all over

One of the metal baskets is now being hoisted out of the water and swung into the cradle on the scaffold in which it fits and a new empty basket sent back down. The crew and the carabinieri shovels the content out on a big mesh for closer examination. It is a very dirty job. There is mud and grey stains everywhere.

The slurry of the mesh is then doused down with hand showers to wash off the silt from any solid objects. Most of it is gravel, sticks, pieces of timber and seashells. But here and there is a coin or two. Or some manmade object or piece thereof that is not always easy to identify. Who knows what broken of corner of a 1830's household item look like? I don't for sure - and I am helplessly puzzled by this clearly manmade, round object with concentric grooves and a spongy feel to it that I am now holding in my hand. I have no clue whatsoever what it might be. There is also this oblong cylindrical







Dig in and pick out the coins, lads

the watch turns up too, still with a hand attached to it. It seems that it stopped at three o'clock.

### The plot thickens

Was that the real time for the collision frozen in time like on the crimes series on tv? That time doesn't correspond with the official records, so did the hand simply shift later perhaps as a result of all the dredging? Perhaps.

But there is, nonetheless something quite fishy, pardon the unintended pun, about this shipwreck. For one, what is it doing here, many miles from the shipping lane? Granted, that they didn't have much radar and GPS in those days but the night was clear and calm and there were lighthouses guiding the traffic up channel of Piombino. Yet this wreck lies tucked away under the coastline of Elba. And what was the other ship that collided with

thing about the size and shape of a modern ballpen casing, but ending in what seems to be a knee joint. What the h... is it, everyone seem to speculate. Nobody was able to help me out for my ignorance however.

I can't help wanting to get close to the mesh and watch. The men rinsing are wearing oilskins and with all the water and mud going everywhere it is a wise choice of garment. Me, on the other

hand, not knowing before I came here what to prepare for, I am wearing a sweater and trainers which is less than ideal. Much less. Needless to say, before the day was over I was in a complete mess. But who cares? And my mother is not here to complain. Coins come out of the slurry, then a delicate chain, some glassware, a bit of charred or tarred rope and then this casing of a exquisite pocket watch with a delicate clockwork inside. A few moments later the face of



Polluce's position (red dot) in relation to the shipping lane passing north-south through the channel de Piombino - the strait between mainland Italy and Elba. For an idea about the scale the strait is about 10kms wide.

So the question remains: What was Polluce doing on that position? And the Mongibello, the other steamer that collided with her?



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Securing the treasure. G. Mirto co-author on the book about Polluce smiles after a good day's work. And, no fellas, we didn't sneak any coins down our pockets. It is all going to end up in the museums

Polluce, the Mongibello, doing here, on this weird offsite location also?

### Further speculations

Enrico speculates that the collision wasn't really an accident after all - though the result of Polluce sinking was probably not intended. The matter at hand is that Polluce was carrying a very significant amount of valuables and had very prominent passengers among which we find the count of Canino, Napoleon's grandson, for one. Was the Polluce perhaps intercepted?

And how could the Mongibello hit Polluce in her port side, behind the paddlewheel, if Polluce was heading north and Mongibello south as otherwise claimed? It doesn't take much analytical skill to arrive at the conclusion that the Mongibello must most likely have come from behind, and not from the front to strike where she did. Did Polluce head south at the time, or did the Mongibello come after her round the island of Elba.

Who knows? Only one thing's for sure and that is Polluce still proves to be fertile ground for speculation and that is where we leave the tale about Polluce and the island of Elba for this time. But the last chapter is surely not written yet. ■

Author Enrico Cappeletti (right) savouring the moment with master diver Primo Padoan (left)

