

IELTS PRACTICE TASK

What secrets lie beneath the waters of the Rhône?

No one ever suspected that an ancient Roman ship – a long wooden barge – had been preserved in the most powerful river of France.

The Romans needed millions of curvy clay jars called amphorae to ship wine, olive oil, and fish sauce around the empire, and often didn't use them more than once. During the first century A.D. in the town of Arles, on the Rhône River in what is now southern France, the workers unloading this kind of cargo threw the empty amphorae into the river.

Nowadays, the Rhône is the most powerful river in France. Most people cannot imagine wanting to dive into it. Neither could archaeologist Luc Long, at first, but once he discovered the amphorae, his future opened before him. He's been investigating the Roman dump ever since. For the first 20 years or so, neither the local authorities nor the general public paid much attention to what he was doing. But while diving in 2004, he noticed a mass of wood swelling from the mud at a depth of 13 feet. It turned out to be the aft port side of a 102-foot-long barge. The barge was almost intact; most of it was still buried under the layers of mud and amphorae that had sheltered it for nearly 2000 years. Long and a colleague sawed a section out of the exposed part, which the colleague analysed in minute detail. In 2007, three younger archaeologists, Sabrina Marlier, David Djaoui, and Sandra Greck, took over the study of the barge, which by now Long had named *Arles-Rhône 3*.

As they began diving onto the wreck of the barge that year, Long proceeded with his survey of the rest of the dump and started finding pieces of the town: monumental blocks of stone and also statues. Word began to leak out. The French customs police warned Long that antiquities thieves might be watching his operation. When his divers found a life-size statue of Neptune, god of the sea and sailors, they brought it up at night. Before that diving season was out, another statue was discovered: a marble bust that looked like Julius Caesar. Portraits of Caesar are surprisingly rare. This one might be the only surviving one that was sculpted while he was alive.

'You have to understand,' said Claude Sintès, the director of the Arles antiquities museum, 'Arles is a small town. The locomotive workshop closed in 1984, the rice mill and the paper mill within the past decade. What's left is mostly tourism. The tourists come in part for Van Gogh, who painted here for a time. But the town sits on deposits of the Roman past—you can't sink a shovel into your garden without hitting a Roman stone or tile.' The exhibition, later built around the bust of Caesar, after news of it spread around the world, showed that some of the excavated artefacts were commercial grade. 'The exhibition's success was astonishing,' Sintès said. 'When a modest town like ours got 400,000 visitors, the politicians understood that the economic return was strong.'

TASK TYPE 7 Multiple Choice (with more than one answer)

By the fall of 2010, those officials were looking for more culture to invest in. Suddenly nine million euros became available to build a new wing on Sintes's museum and put a Roman barge into it. There was just one catch. The project would need to be completed by 2013. That sounds like enough time unless you know about ancient wood. Mud had protected the wood of *Arles-Rhône 3* from microbial decay, but water had dissolved the cellulose and filled the wood's cells, leaving the whole boat soft and spongy. If the water evaporated, the whole barge would collapse. The solution was to bathe the wood for months in polyethylene glycol, then freeze-dry it. But the barge would have to be cut into sections small enough to fit into the freeze-dryers. And the process would take nearly two years. That left only one excavation season, 2011, to extract the boat from the Rhône, and usually the Rhône is safe for diving only from late June to October; otherwise the current is too strong. Three or four months would not be enough to excavate *Arles-Rhône 3*. Then 2011 arrived. It hardly snowed in the Alps that winter; that spring it barely rained. The Rhône's current was so gentle that Sabrina Marlier's team got in the water by early May. Her team worked straight into November and completed the job.

When *Arles-Rhône 3* sank, it was carrying 33 tons of building stones. They were flat, irregular slabs of limestone, from three to six inches thick. The boat was pointed upstream, indicating it had been tied up at the quay when it sank. A flash flood had probably swamped it. As the flood subsided, the cloud of sediment it had kicked up settled out of the water again, draping the barge in a layer of fine clay no more than eight inches thick. In that clay, in contact with the boat, Marlier and her team found the crew's personal effects. A sickle they'd used to chop fuel for their cooking fire, with a few wood splinters next to the blade. A plate and a gray pitcher that belonged to the same man—both bore the initials AT. 'That's what's exceptional about this boat,' said Marlier. 'We're missing the captain at the helm. But otherwise we have everything.'

Questions 1 and 2

Choose **TWO** letters, **A–E**.

The list below gives some of the possible reasons why Luc Long's excavation work in the Rhône was challenging.

Which **TWO** of these reasons are mentioned by the writer of the text?

- A** the local authorities' restrictions on certain projects in the river
- B** the competitive attitudes of other archaeologists working in the area
- C** the possibility of excavated items being stolen
- D** the fact that any excavation would interrupt tourist activities
- E** the need to complete a particular project within a given time

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2

TASK TYPE 7 Multiple Choice (with more than one answer)

Questions 3 and 4

Choose **TWO** letters, A–E.

Which **TWO** of the following statements are true of the Roman boat?

- A It had been constructed in a way that was unusual for Roman times.
- B It had been broken into several parts by the force of the mud it was under.
- C It was excavated so it could bring economic benefit to the area.
- D It was carrying a kind of cargo for which it had not been originally designed.
- E It contained more preserved items than are normally found on an excavated boat.

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