12th-century Chola-era Nataraja and Sivakami bronzes unearthed in Nagapattinam excavation

Weather, States, Archaeology & Infrastructure · 1 November 2026 · https://www.shanmugamiasacademy.in/current-affairs-english/2026/11/01



News

In the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology's excavation at Nagapattinam, under way since 3 Aug, two bronze idols with their pedestals were found at a depth of about 1 metre: a four-armed Nataraja in the Ananda Tandava pose (110 cm high, 100 cm wide) and a two-armed Sivakami Amman in the tribhanga pose (82 cm, 23 cm). Based on body form, ornamentation and pedestal style, experts date them to the 12th century CE (later Chola period). Tamil Development Minister A. Rajmohan released the images on X on 30 Oct. They are reported to be the first such bronzes found in a scientific excavation by the State Archaeology Department. The idols were taken to Chennai for chemical conservation.

Key facts

Site	Nagapattinam – State Archaeology Dept excavation (from 3 Aug 2026); ~1 m deep
Nataraja	Ananda Tandava, four arms; 110 × 100 cm; with pedestal
Sivakami Amman	Tribhanga pose, two arms; 82 × 23 cm
Period	12th century CE – later Chola (preliminary estimate)
Announced by	Tamil Development Minister A. Rajmohan, 30 Oct 2026 (on X)

Next	Chemical conservation in Chennai; metallurgical analysis planned

Background

- Chola bronzes: metal sculpture, begun under the Pallavas, peaked under the Cholas (10th–12th c. CE). Sembiyan Mahadevi (queen of Gandaraditya) was a great patron. They were made as processional 'utsava murtis' for temple festivals. In the Nataraja icon the god dances on the dwarf 'Apasmara' (ignorance) within a ring of flames (prabha).
- Technique – lost-wax (cire perdue; Sanskrit 'madhuchchhishta vidhana'): a model is made of beeswax and resin, coated with alluvial clay and dried; heating melts the wax out, and molten metal is poured into the hollow mould. The mould is broken to remove the idol, so every piece is unique. Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin; 'Aimpon' (panchaloha) is a five-metal alloy.
- Swamimalai, near Kumbakonam in Thanjavur district, is still the centre of sthapatis who cast idols by the lost-wax method, using the Cauvery's fine alluvial clay. 'Swamimalai Bronze Icons' carry a Geographical Indication (GI) tag.
- Nagapattinam: a major Chola port for trade with South-East Asia. Under Rajaraja I, the Srivijaya (Sailendra) king Mara Vijayottungavarman built the 'Chudamani Vihara' Buddhist monastery here; the 'Larger Leiden Plates' record Rajaraja's grant of Anaimangalam village to it. Many Buddhist bronzes found at Nagapattinam are in the Government Museum, Chennai.

Tamil Nadu link: the whole story is Tamil Nadu's – Nagapattinam was the Cholas' maritime trade hub, and the bronze-casting tradition lives on at Swamimalai. The Tamil Nadu Police Idol Wing works to recover smuggled Chola bronzes. Officials said the find gives new evidence on Chola-era metal-sculpture schools and maritime trade around Nagapattinam.

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