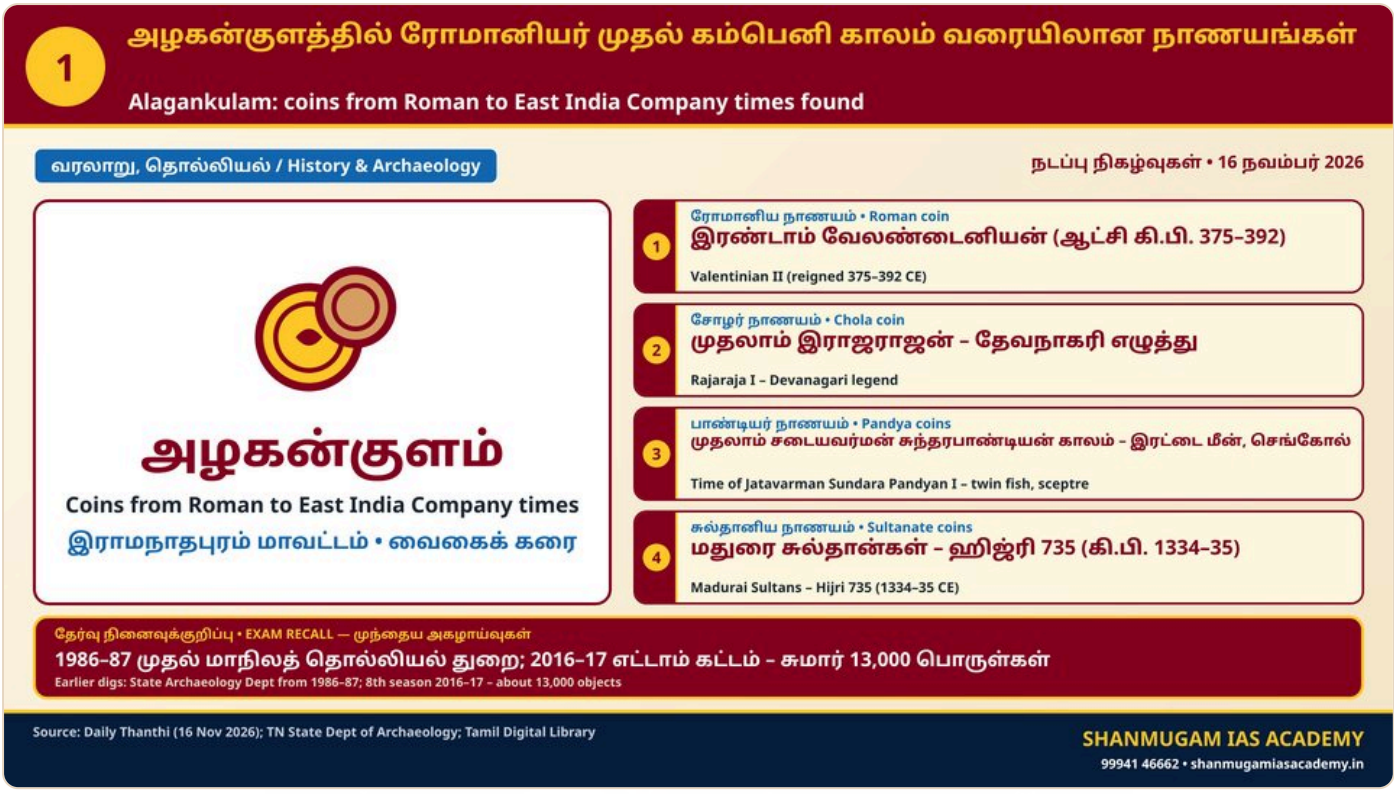
Alagankulam: coins from Roman to East India Company times found

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News

Daily Thanthi reported on 16 November 2026 that students of the International Institute of Tamil Studies (Ulaga Tamil Aaraichi Niruvanam), Chennai, guided by Prof. Mayakrishnan and joined by advocate and former panchayat president Asokan, surveyed earlier excavation areas and the coast at Alagankulam in Mandapam union, Ramanathapuram district. In about three hours they found a coin of the Western Roman emperor Valentinian II, a coin of Rajaraja Chola I bearing Devanagari script, twin-fish-and-sceptre coins of the time of Jatavarman Sundara Pandyan I, copper coins of the Madurai Sultans dated Hijri 735, an East India Company copper coin and metal-smelting debris. The students said the finds show Alagankulam's long history of trade with the wider world. They asked the government to set up a museum to display the antiquities found there.

Key facts for the exam

Point	Details
Place	Alagankulam, Mandapam union, Ramanathapuram district – on the Vaigai, about 3 km from the sea
Survey team	Students of the International Institute of Tamil Studies; Prof. Mayakrishnan; Asokan

Point	Details
Roman coin	Valentinian II (reigned 375–392 CE)
Chola coin	Rajaraja I – Devanagari legend
Pandya coins	Time of Jatavarman Sundara Pandyan I – twin fish, sceptre
Sultanate coins	Madurai Sultans – Hijri 735 (1334–35 CE)
Others	East India Company copper coin; smelting debris
Earlier digs	State Archaeology Dept from 1986–87; 8th season 2016–17 – about 13,000 objects
Demand	A site museum at Alagankulam

Background

- Archaeology: Alagankulam lies on the Vaigai, about 3 km from the seashore. The Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology dug there in several seasons from 1986–87, finding rouletted ware, fragments of Roman wine jars (amphorae), potsherds with Tamil-Brahmi writing of the 1st century BCE, Roman coins of Valentinian II and beads. The eighth season in 2016–17 yielded about 13,000 antiquities, including burnt-brick structures, a shell-bangle workshop, an iron-smelting area, a terracotta ring well and silver punch-marked coins.
- History – Indo-Roman trade: The 'Periplus of the Erythraean Sea', written in the 1st century CE by an unknown Greek merchant, describes Tamil ports and exports such as pepper, pearls and fine cloth. Pliny complained of Roman gold draining to India. At Arikamedu near Puducherry, Mortimer Wheeler excavated in 1945 and found Roman amphorae and rouletted ware; the site is identified with 'Podouke' of the Periplus.
- Timeline from the coins: Valentinian II ruled the Western Roman Empire in 375–392 CE. Rajaraja Chola I (985–1014 CE) built the Brihadeeswarar temple at Thanjavur. Under Jatavarman Sundara Pandyan I (from 1251 CE) the Pandyas again became the leading power of the South. Around 1335, Jalaluddin Ahsan Shah, a Tughluq governor, declared independence and founded the Madurai Sultanate; it fell to the invasion of Kumara Kampana of Vijayanagara, told in Gangadevi's 'Madhura Vijayam'.
- Geography: The Vaigai rises in the Varusanadu hills of Theni district (Western Ghats), flows past Madurai and Sivaganga and reaches Palk Bay in Ramanathapuram district. Close to the Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar, Alagankulam was well placed for sea trade with Sri Lanka, South-East Asia and the West.

Tamil Nadu link: This is entirely a Tamil Nadu story. Coins at one site spanning the Roman period (4th century CE) through the Cholas, Pandyas, Madurai Sultans and the East India Company show that the Tamil coast took part in world trade continuously for centuries. The demand for a museum for Alagankulam's antiquities has been raised before as well.

Frequently asked questions

What is this news about?

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advocate and former panchayat president Asokan, surveyed earlier excavation areas and the coast at Alagankulam in Mandapam union, Ramanathapuram district.

What are the key facts to remember for the exam?

Place: Alagankulam, Mandapam union, Ramanathapuram district – on the Vaigai, about 3 km from the sea; Survey team: Students of the International Institute of Tamil Studies; Prof. Mayakrishnan; Asokan; Roman coin: Valentinian II (reigned 375–392 CE); Chola coin: Rajaraja I – Devanagari legend.

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Practice questions (with answers)

1. The twin-fish symbol on 13th-century coins found at Alagankulam was the royal emblem of which dynasty?

A) Cheras

B) Cholas

C) Pandyas

D) Pallavas

Answer: C – Explanation: Pandyas – the fish banner. Cholas – tiger; Cheras – bow; Pallavas – Nandi (bull). These coins are of Jatavarman Sundara Pandyan I's time.

2. Arikamedu, the Indo-Roman trading site excavated by Mortimer Wheeler in 1945, is near which city?

A) Mamallapuram

B) Puducherry

C) Nagapattinam

D) Cuddalore

Answer: B – Explanation: Puducherry – on the Ariyankuppam river. Wheeler's 1945 dig dated Arikamedu by Roman pottery and confirmed Indo-Roman trade.

3. Who founded the Madurai Sultanate around 1335, whose Hijri-735 coins were found at Alagankulam?

A) Jalaluddin Ahsan Shah

B) Malik Kafur

C) Muhammad bin Tughluq

D) Alauddin Khalji

Answer: A – Explanation: A Tughluq governor, he declared independence. Kumara Kampana of Vijayanagara later overthrew it – told in Gangadevi's 'Madhura Vijayam'.

4. Which 1st-century CE Greek sailing guide by an unknown author describes the ports and exports of Tamilakam?

A) Indica

B) Geographia

C) Periplus

D) Natural History

Answer: C – Explanation: Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. Indica – Megasthenes; Geographia – Ptolemy; Natural History – Pliny the Elder.

5. What are the handled Roman jars, used to carry wine and oil and found at sites like Alagankulam, called?

A) Amphorae

B) Rouletted ware

C) Burial urns

D) Ring wells

Answer: A – Explanation: Amphorae – tall, high-necked Roman jars. Rouletted ware is dishes with a wheel-made pattern; a ring well is lined with terracotta rings.

Sources: Daily Thanthi; Tamil Nadu State Dept of Archaeology; Tamil Nadu State Dept of Archaeology – tnarch.gov.in/node/23; Tamil Digital Library (TN Govt) – 'Alagankulam – a preliminary report'; The New Indian Express (Sept 2017, eighth season – about 13,000 antiquities). © Shanmugam IAS Academy.