Pallava Art and Architecture – Mahendravarman I's Rock-cut Caves, Mamallapuram (UNESCO 1984), Pancha Rathas, Arjuna's Penance, Shore Temple & Kanchi Kailasanathar | TNPSC Notes

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The **Pallavas** (about the 6th–9th centuries CE; capital **Kanchipuram**) took Tamil temple architecture from **rock-cut caves** through **monolithic rathas** to **structural temples**. **Mahendravarman I** (c. 600–630) cut a cave temple at Mandagapattu made "without brick, timber, metal or mortar"; at **Mamallapuram**, named after **Narasimhavarman I (Mamalla)** (630–668), the Pancha Rathas and Arjuna's Penance were created; and under **Narasimhavarman II (Rajasimha)** structural temples such as the **Shore Temple** and the **Kailasanathar temple** at Kanchipuram arose. The Mamallapuram monuments were inscribed as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984**.

தமிழில் படிக்க

These notes are written for TNPSC Group 1, 2/2A and 4 aspirants. Pallava art appears in the **Indian history and culture** unit and in the unit on **History, Culture and Heritage of Tamil Nadu**; "king – monument – place" matching questions and descriptive questions on the stages of architecture are frequent. Read next: Chola administration.

Important Pallava Rulers and Their Contribution to Art

Ruler (reign, c.)	Political events	Art / architecture
Simhavishnu (575–600)	Consolidated the later Pallava kingdom up to the Kaveri	–
Mahendravarman I (600–630)	Fought the Chalukya Pulakesin II at Pullalur; converted from Jainism to Saivism by **Appar (Thirunavukkarasar)**	**Pioneer of rock-cut cave temples** in Tamil Nadu – Mandagapattu, Pallavaram, Mamandur, Dalavanur, Siyamangalam, Mahendravadi, the upper cave at Tiruchirappalli Rock Fort; Sanskrit play **Mattavilasa Prahasana**
Narasimhavarman I (Mamalla) (630–668)	Defeated Pulakesin II in battles including Manimangalam and took **Vatapi** in 642 (general Paranjothi) – "Vatapi Kondan"; naval help to the Lankan prince Manavarma; Chinese pilgrim **Hiuen Tsang** at Kanchi (c. 640)	**Mamallapuram** – monolithic rathas and sculptured mandapas

Narasimhavarman II – **Rajasimha** (c. 700–728)	Peaceful reign; embassy to China	**Shore Temple** (Mamallapuram), **Kailasanathar temple, Kanchi**, Panamalai temple – structural temples
Nandivarman II (Pallavamalla) (c. 731–796)	Invasion of Kanchi by the Chalukya Vikramaditya II	**Vaikunta Perumal temple**, Kanchi – sculptured panels on Pallava history

Four Stages of Pallava Architecture

Stage	Period	Type	Examples
Mahendra style	Early 7th century	Rock-cut cave mandapas; massive pillars, door guardians (dvarapalas)	Mandagapattu, Mamandur, Pallavaram, Dalavanur
Mamalla style	7th century	Monolithic rathas, sculptured mandapas, open-air bas-relief	Pancha Rathas, Mahishasuramardini mandapa, Varaha mandapa, Arjuna's Penance
Rajasimha style	Late 7th – early 8th century	Built-up **structural temples**; lion pillars	Shore Temple, Kanchi Kailasanathar, Panamalai
Nandivarman / late style	8th–9th century	Small structural temples	Vaikunta Perumal, Mukteswara and Matangeswara temples at Kanchi

Mahendravarman I – Pioneer of Cave Temples

- **Mandagapattu inscription** (Villupuram district): says "Vichitrachitta" made this shrine for Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu without brick, timber, metal or mortar – key evidence for the start of rock-cut temples in the Tamil country.
- **Titles:** Vichitrachitta, Chitrakarapuli, Mattavilasa, Gunabhara – reflecting his interest in art, painting and drama.
- **Mattavilasa Prahasana:** a Sanskrit satirical farce that humorously portrays a Kapalika, a Buddhist monk and others.
- The **Kudumiyanmalai music inscription** (Pudukkottai district) is attributed to him by many scholars, though this is debated.

Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram) – Monuments

Mamallapuram, on the Bay of Bengal coast in Chengalpattu district, was a Pallava port. Its monuments were inscribed by UNESCO in 1984 as the "**Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram**".

Monument	Type	Highlights

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Pancha Rathas (Five Rathas)	Monolithic temples	Dharmaraja, Bhima, Arjuna, Draupadi and Nakula–Sahadeva rathas; the Pandava names are a later usage; the Draupadi ratha is hut-shaped; the Nakula–Sahadeva ratha is apsidal (gajaprishta); monolithic elephant, lion and Nandi nearby
Arjuna's Penance / Descent of the Ganga	Open-air bas-relief	Carved on two huge boulders; the cleft in the middle represents the descending Ganga; elephants, nagas, sages and a "penance" cat – one of the largest open-air reliefs in the world
Mahishasuramardini mandapa	Cave mandapa	Durga fighting Mahishasura; Vishnu reclining on Ananta
Varaha and Adivaraha mandapas	Cave mandapas	Varaha, Gajalakshmi and Trivikrama panels
Krishna mandapa	Relief	Krishna lifting Govardhana; pastoral scenes
Shore Temple	Structural temple	Rajasimha's time; two Siva shrines with a reclining Vishnu shrine between them; one of the earliest structural temples in Tamil Nadu
Tiger Cave (Saluvankuppam)	Rock-cut	A platform framed by tiger (yali) heads

- **Present link:** the informal India–China summit was held at Mamallapuram in October 2019, recalling Pallava-era links with China (Hiuen Tsang).
- The Tamil Nadu Government's **College of Architecture and Sculpture** at Mamallapuram keeps the sculptural tradition alive.

Kailasanathar Temple, Kanchipuram

- Begun by **Rajasimha** (Narasimhavarman II) and, as generally held, completed by his son **Mahendravarman III**.
- Built of sandstone; pyramidal vimana; a row of small shrines lines the inner side of the enclosure wall; rearing-lion pillars (a Pallava hallmark); traces of paintings.
- **Influence:** the Chalukya **Vikramaditya II**, who took Kanchi, admired the temple, left it unharmed and made gifts to it; historians see its influence on the **Virupaksha temple at Pattadakal**, built by his queen Lokamahadevi.

Significance of Pallava Art

- **Foundation of Dravidian temple architecture:** vimana, mandapa and enclosure shrines later reached their peak in Chola temples (Thanjavur).
- **Sculpture:** lively narrative reliefs of nature, animals and human life (Arjuna's Penance, Krishna mandapa).
- **Bhakti movement:** the age of the Nayanmars and Alvars overlaps with the Pallavas; temples became centres of worship and society.
- **Literature and learning:** the ghatika (centre of learning) at Kanchi; Dandin (Avantisundari Katha) at Rajasimha's court; Nandikkalambakam on Nandivarman III.

Writing Mains Answers (Group 1 / Group 2)

Stages in the evolution of Pallava architecture (about 150–250 words)

- **Introduction:** Pallavas of Kanchi; from cave to structural temple.
- **Mahendra style:** Mandagapattu inscription; cave mandapas.
- **Mamalla style:** Pancha Rathas, mandapas, Arjuna's Penance.
- **Rajasimha style:** Shore Temple, Kailasanathar.
- **Nandivarman style:** Vaikunta Perumal, smaller temples.
- **Conclusion:** base for Chola temples; UNESCO 1984; influence up to Pattadakal.

Mamallapuram – an open-air museum (about 150 words)

- Named after Mamalla; a Pallava port.
- Four kinds of monuments: rathas, mandapas, reliefs, structural temple.
- UNESCO 1984; tourism; College of Architecture and Sculpture; 2019 summit.
- Conservation challenges: sea erosion, salt-laden wind, tourist pressure.

Practice: Match the Following

Item	Match
Mandagapattu	Mahendravarman I – first cave temple
Pancha Rathas	Monolithic temples – Mamalla's period
Shore Temple	Rajasimha – structural temple
Vaikunta Perumal temple	Nandivarman II
Vatapi Kondan	Narasimhavarman I
Mattavilasa Prahasana	Play by Mahendravarman I

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- The Pancha Rathas were not built by the Pandavas – the names are later usage; they are not chariots but monolithic temple models.
- The Shore Temple is not of Mamalla's time – it is a structural temple of Rajasimha's period.
- Mamallapuram – UNESCO 1984; Thanjavur – 1987; do not swap them.
- Mahendravarman was converted to Saivism by Appar (Thirunavukkarasar), not Sambandar.
- Vatapi was captured by Narasimhavarman I (642), not by Mahendravarman.

Key Terms – Tamil / English (for the bilingual paper)

தமிழ்	English
குடைவரைக் கோவில்	Rock-cut cave temple
ஒற்றைக்கல் இரதம்	Monolithic ratha (temple)

கட்டுமானக் கோவில்	Structural temple
புடைப்புச் சிற்பம்	Bas-relief
விமானம்	Tower over the sanctum
துவாரபாலகர்	Door guardian
சிங்கத் தூண்	Lion pillar
கஜபிருஷ்டம்	Apsidal (elephant-back) form

Quick Revision Table

Year (c.)	Event
575	Simhavishnu
600–630	Mahendravarman I – cave temples, Mattavilasa Prahasana
630	Accession of Narasimhavarman I (Mamalla)
c. 640	Hiuen Tsang at Kanchi
642	Capture of Vatapi – death of Pulakesin II
c. 700–728	Rajasimha – Shore Temple, Kailasanathar
8th century	Nandivarman II – Vaikunta Perumal temple
1984	Mamallapuram monuments – UNESCO
October 2019	India–China informal summit at Mamallapuram

TNPSC Key Points (PYQ-style facts)

- Pallava capital: Kanchipuram; port: Mamallapuram.
- Pioneer of Tamil cave temples: Mahendravarman I; Mandagapattu inscription (Villupuram district).
- Mahendravarman's titles: Vichitrachitta, Chitrakarapuli, Mattavilasa, Gunabhara.
- Mattavilasa Prahasana – Sanskrit satirical play.
- Mamalla = Narasimhavarman I; Vatapi Kondan (642); general Paranjothi.
- Pancha Rathas: Dharmaraja, Bhima, Arjuna, Draupadi, Nakula–Sahadeva.
- Arjuna's Penance = Descent of the Ganga – open-air bas-relief.
- Shore Temple and Kanchi Kailasanathar – Rajasimha (Narasimhavarman II).
- Kanchi Vaikunta Perumal – Nandivarman II.
- Mamallapuram UNESCO – 1984.
- Kailasanathar's influence: Virupaksha temple, Pattadakal (time of Vikramaditya II).

Frequently Asked Questions

Who started rock-cut cave temples in Tamil Nadu?

The Pallava king Mahendravarman I. His inscription at Mandagapattu (Villupuram district) says the shrine for Brahma, Isvara and Vishnu was made without brick, timber, metal or mortar.

Which are the Pancha Rathas of Mamallapuram?

The Dharmaraja, Bhima, Arjuna, Draupadi and Nakula–Sahadeva rathas – monolithic temple models carved out of rock. The Pandava names were given later.

When did Mamallapuram become a UNESCO World Heritage Site?

In 1984, as the "Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram", covering the rathas, mandapas, Arjuna's Penance and the Shore Temple.

Who built the Shore Temple and what is special about it?

It was built in the time of Narasimhavarman II (Rajasimha). It is a structural temple built of dressed stone rather than cut out of rock, with two Siva shrines and a reclining Vishnu shrine between them.

What are the four stages of Pallava architecture?

The Mahendra style (cave mandapas), the Mamalla style (monolithic rathas and sculptured mandapas), the Rajasimha style (structural temples such as the Shore Temple and Kailasanathar) and the Nandivarman / late style (small structural temples).

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Frequently asked questions

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Practice questions

1. What was the capital of the Pallavas?

A. Kanchipuram
B. Madurai
C. Uraiyur
D. Thanjavur

2. Who pioneered rock-cut cave temples in Tamil Nadu?

A. Simhavishnu
B. Mahendravarman I
C. Rajasimha
D. Nandivarman II

3. In which district is Mandagapattu today?

A. Chengalpattu
B. Pudukkottai
C. Villupuram
D. Tiruvannamalai

4. Who wrote the Mattavilasa Prahasana?

A. Narasimhavarman I
B. Nandivarman II
C. Dandin
D. Mahendravarman I

5. Who converted Mahendravarman I from Jainism to Saivism?

A. Appar
B. Sambandar
C. Sundarar
D. Manikkavasagar

6. Who bore the title "Chitrakarapuli"?

A. Rajasimha
B. Mahendravarman I
C. Mamalla
D. Simhavishnu

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7. Who was known as "Mamalla"?

A. Mahendravarman I

B. Narasimhavarman II

C. Narasimhavarman I

D. Nandivarman II

8. In which year did Narasimhavarman I capture Vatapi?

A. 630

B. 642

C. 668

D. 700

9. Who was the Pallava general in the Vatapi campaign?

A. Paranjothi

B. Aniruddha

C. Karunakara Thondaiman

D. Ariyanatha

10. In which year were the Mamallapuram monuments inscribed by UNESCO?

A. 1984

B. 1987

C. 2004

D. 2019

11. Which of these is NOT one of the Pancha Rathas?

A. Dharmaraja ratha

B. Draupadi ratha

C. Karna ratha

D. Nakula–Sahadeva ratha

12. Which ratha is shaped like a thatched hut?

A. Bhima ratha

B. Arjuna ratha

C. Dharmaraja ratha

D. Draupadi ratha

13. Which relief is also called the "Descent of the Ganga"?

A. Arjuna's Penance

B. Krishna mandapa

C. Varaha mandapa

D. Tiger Cave

14. Who built the Shore Temple at Mamallapuram?

A. Mahendravarman I

B. Rajasimha (Narasimhavarman II)

C. Narasimhavarman I

D. Aparajita

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15. Which shrine lies between the two Siva shrines of the Shore Temple?

A. Durga
B. Murugan
C. Reclining Vishnu
D. Brahma

16. Who began the Kailasanathar temple at Kanchipuram?

A. Rajaraja I
B. Mahendravarman I
C. Nandivarman II
D. Rajasimha

17. Who built the Vaikunta Perumal temple at Kanchi?

A. Nandivarman II
B. Simhavishnu
C. Narasimhavarman I
D. Rajasimha

18. Which Pattadakal temple is held to show the influence of the Kailasanathar temple?

A. Papanatha
B. Virupaksha
C. Sangamesvara
D. Mallikarjuna

19. Which Chinese pilgrim visited Kanchi in the time of Narasimhavarman I?

A. Fa-Hien
B. I-Tsing
C. Hiuen Tsang
D. Marco Polo

20. What is the correct order of evolution of Pallava architecture?

A. Structural – cave – monolithic
B. Cave – structural – monolithic
C. Monolithic – structural – cave
D. Cave – monolithic ratha – structural temple

Answers with explanations

1. A) Kanchipuram – Kanchipuram; their port was Mamallapuram.

2. B) Mahendravarman I – Mahendravarman I – Mandagapattu.

3. C) Villupuram – Mandagapattu is in Villupuram district.

4. D) Mahendravarman I – A Sanskrit farce by Mahendravarman I.

5. A) Appar – Appar (Thirunavukkarasar).

6. B) Mahendravarman I – Mahendravarman I – reflecting his love of painting.

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7. C) Narasimhavarman I – Narasimhavarman I; Mamallapuram is named after him.

8. B) 642 – In 642 – hence "Vatapi Kondan".

9. A) Paranjothi – Paranjothi, later revered as Siruthonda Nayanar.

10. A) 1984 – 1984 – "Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram".

11. C) Karna ratha – The five: Dharmaraja, Bhima, Arjuna, Draupadi, Nakula–Sahadeva.

12. D) Draupadi ratha – The Draupadi ratha.

13. A) Arjuna's Penance – Arjuna's Penance – the cleft represents the Ganga.

14. B) Rajasimha (Narasimhavarman II) – A structural temple of Rajasimha's time.

15. C) Reclining Vishnu – A reclining Vishnu shrine.

16. D) Rajasimha – Begun by Rajasimha, completed by Mahendravarman III.

17. A) Nandivarman II – Nandivarman II (Pallavamalla).

18. B) Virupaksha – The Virupaksha temple built by Lokamahadevi, queen of Vikramaditya II.

19. C) Hiuen Tsang – Hiuen Tsang, around 640.

20. D) Cave – monolithic ratha – structural temple – Mahendra (cave) → Mamalla (ratha) → Rajasimha (structural).

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