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A Model of Tiruchirappalli, Rock Fort, Pith, South India, c.a. 1899-1920

The Tiruchirappalli Rock Fort, dramatically rising above the plains of the Kaveri River in Tamil Nadu, is among the most iconic fort–temple complexes in South India. The fort sits atop an 83-metre-high monolithic rock[1] that has, for centuries, shaped the city's religious and political identity. The Pallava ruler Mahendravarman I (r. 600–630 CE) first commissioned a cave temple on this site. Unlike his later Shaiva leanings, this early cave temple was unusually dedicated to the Trimurti—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—attesting to the transitional nature of religious and political patronage during his reign.[2]

Over time, successive dynasties fortified and embellished the hill. The Nayakas of Madurai, particularly Viswanatha Nayak (r. 1559–1564 CE) and his successors such as Chokkanatha Nayak, recognised the strategic advantage of the naturally elevated rock. They transformed the site into a formidable fortress, surrounding it with ramparts, gateways and bastions that gave it the character of an impregnable stronghold.[3]

At the heart of the complex are two temples: the Ucchi Pillayar Temple, perched atop the summit and dedicated to Ganesha, and the Thayumanaswami Temple, positioned midway up the hill and consecrated to Shiva.[4] The Rock Fort thus embodies layered architectural idioms: Pallava rock-cut beginnings, Chola and Pandya sanctification of shrines, and expansive Nayaka-Vijayanagara additions in the form of mandapas and stuccoed towers.

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[1]Leandro Alegsa, "Tiruchirappalli Rock Fort," *AlegsaOnline.com*, February 21, 2022, accessed August 21, 2025, https://da.alegsaonline.com/art/100078.
[2]K. R. Srinivasan, *Cave Temples of the Pallavas* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1964).
[3]Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
[4]"Tiruchirappalli Rock-Fort: A 19th-Century View (1870 Photo)," *Past-India*, posted February 2, 2025, accessed August 21, 2025, https://www.past-india.com/photos-items/tiruchirappalli-rock-fort-a-19th-century-view-1870-photo/

The miniature model under discussion, made of pith (Indian cork or sola), is an ivory-like delicacy, lightweight nature and capacity for intricate carving. The model has a label at the base that says, —was produced by the workshop of T. S. Nagarathinam Pillay & Bros. It exemplifies a unique architectural and symbolic ensemble—an expression of both spiritual devotion and political authority

Comparable examples of this Rock Fort model are preserved in the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad[5] (an image has been attached) though with some modifications in assemblages, but significantly it has the label which mentions, T. S. Nagarathinam Pillay & Bros., Pookulam, Trichinopoly, which marked its relevance with this particular model.


Model of Tiruchirappalli Fort, Pith, 20th century

[5] *"Explore the Museum,"* Salar Jung Museum, accessed August 21, 2025, https://www.salarjungmuseum.in/explore-museum.html