

*A Ferocious Pangulubalang Image from Meranti Omas,
Na IX-X Subdistrict, Labuhan Utara Regency, North
Sumatra*

Edmund Edwards McKinnon, Independent Researcher
Ichwan Azhari, Universitas Negeri Medan (UNM)

At the end of September 2021, a certain Pak Arun Rambe Rambe reported the discovery of an unusually ferocious pengulubalang figure in the hamlet of Batu Sinanggar, part of Meranti Omas village in Na IX-X sub-district of Labuhan Utara Regency of North Sumatra Province. The image which had been buried in the soil came to light accidentally on the 29th September, and was discovered by the wife of the cultivator Pak Sarpin Ritonga, when she was clearing tree roots prior to planting a dry rice crop.

In days gone by, a pangulubalang was essentially a guardian figure, set up outside a settlement to protect the inhabitants of a village from harm and to deter would-be attackers. Such images were considered to possess spiritual qualities.

The image which is cut from greyish stone, stands approximately 1 metre in height. Its hair style displays a typical traditional top knot and it has a rounded face with large staring eyes. The ear lobes appear to be pierced and elongated. The ferocious appearance is due to its teeth which are all sharpened to a point. Tooth filing among the so-called Batak tribes of northern Sumatra was an erstwhile common feature of their culture. This, combined with the habit of betel nut chewing, which produces copious amounts of reddish saliva, is undertaken with a wad of sirih leaves, and gave them a most ferocious appearance which may, in part, have been responsible for their reputation for indulging in anthropophagy. Coincidentally, the Pardembanan call themselves Halak Pardembanan, “people of the betel-quad” and the name Pardembanan as a geographic name translates as “the place where betel chewers live!” (Bartlett 1952, 629)

A close examination of the figure shows a small square hole cut into the chest of the abdomen – a fairly common feature of Toba imagery. This would have been a receptacle for *pupuk*, a magical substance, believed to give such images supernatural powers. Pupuk among the Toba was said to be prepared by a medicine man (a *guru* or *datu*) from the corpse of a kidnapped and murdered child (Joustra: 1926, 156, 157. Sibeth: 1991). There is a bracelet on the right wrist and the hands, although somewhat indistinct in the photograph, appear to be holding a diminutive human figure. The genital area is somewhat obscure. The legs are bent at the knee. As far as can be ascertained at the present time, there is no trace of any colouring on the image. The craftsmanship of this image appears to be superior to that of any of the images reported by Tichelman and Voorhoeve in their *Steenplastiek Simaloengoen* (Medan: Kouler & Co. 1936). This is an important recovery and we hope that adequate measures will be taken to ensure its preservation.

Without examination of the cultural context and the recovery of associated items such as earthenware or datable imported stoneware, such figures are difficult to date. In all likelihood, however, this figure is of mediaeval origin.

The cultivator, Pak Ritonga reports also that he found a receptacle – seemingly a bowl of some description, in the same general area as the image. Bowls were often placed at the foot of such statues in which their owners could place a gift to the image, probably a small amount of food.



Small stone bowl found in close proximity to the image

Westenberg (1892), a critical observer of Batak culture, and indeed one of the first to emphasize the impact of Indian influence among the Bataks concluded that the Bataklands had, at some time in the long forgotten past, been subjugated by a foreign element. Linguistic evidence suggests some form of contact with South Asians, especially among the Karo, probably by Tamils or people from one or other of the Dravidian language groups of southern India.

There may, or may not be, signs of some foreign influence in the style of this image.



The topknot (detail)



The Pangulubalang [Photo: Arun Rambe Rambe]

The elongated ear lobes and or the top knot may possibly suggest an element of foreign influence. Most regions of Sumatra in the pre-Islamic period were strongly influenced by Buddhism with images of the Buddha portrayed with elongated ear lobes and an usnisha, On the other hand, these may be purely indigenous traits as some Batak women are known to have extended ear lobes due to the types of personal decoration worn in the past. In the early nineteenth century, Anderson (1826,324) noted that the Toba people in Asahan were known by the holes in their ears.

During the 1970s, a report of recoveries of imported Chinese stonewares of the Song period from an itinerant trader named Abdul Rachman Lubis suggested the possibility of the existence of a mediaeval harbour settlement on the Sungei Silau Mati, a dried-up north bank tributary of the Asahan River which enters the Selat Melaka at Tanjung Balai. A small indigenous polity named Silo Maradja is known to have formerly existed in this general area (Bartlett 1952, 629). An erstwhile overland trail, which may have passed over very difficult terrain linking a trading location on the coast with the hinterland and formerly used by salt carriers may thus have passed by a former settlement site in or near Meranti Omas and linked the Silau Mati with the Batak highlands around Lake Toba. Again, coincidentally, a village by the name of Maranti appears in the list of kampongs (villages) attached to a Dutch language article on the Asahan region (Anon, 1911, 409). Whether this is the same location or another village with a similar name is not known.



The Coastal Pardembanan Region (Hutahaeen 2013)

Coincidentally, this recently discovered pangulubalang image is in the same general area of the foothills lying to the north-east of the Bukit Barisan mountain range but further to the north-west than the images found at Pasaguan mentioned in an earlier article (Edwards McKinnon 2020). The Na IX-X sub-district lies mainly to the north and west of the main road from Kisaran to Guntingsaga and Perbaungan. This would have been the periphery of the area mentioned by Bartlett (1930/31) as being occupied by an offshoot of the Toba people known as the Pardembanan of Asahan, an area which borders on Simelungun, the area occupied by the Timor Batak. This ethnic group were apparently first noticed and mentioned in European sources by John Anderson who mentioned that some of the daughters of the chiefs of the ‘Pardimbanan’ were beautifully fair (Anderson 1826, 1971,149). Later, however, he goes on to remark that “those (Battas) of Munto Panei are of the tribe Perdimbanan, and eat human flesh, are indolent, addicted to opium, and always engaged in war.”(Anderson 1826, 1971,

324,325), remarks which today would be regarded as highly racist, On the other hand, Anon (1911) makes only the briefest mention of the Pardembanan though frequently alluding to 'Bataks' in the Asahan region. Joustra (1926) makes no mention of the Pardembanan. They would appear, however, as a lowland offshoot of the Toba people, who would have played an important role in this area in earlier times.

As yet, little or no structured archaeological work has been undertaken in this region so that currently virtually nothing is known of the pre-modern history of this area other than that recorded in colonial times.

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- Map of the Batak Peoples downloaded 4 October 2021.

Photographs

Plate 1. Small stone bowl recovered in close proximity to the image

Plate 2. Topknot, courtesy of Billy Siahaan.

Plate 2. Pengulubalang in situ, courtesy of Arun Rambe