



# The clan is watching over my shoulder

Ancestor cult and sword art of the  
Batak in North-Sumatra

Volume 2







## 01 *Piso Sanalenggam*

Pakpak-Batak (possibly Toba)

Probably 17th or 18th century

Total length 68cm

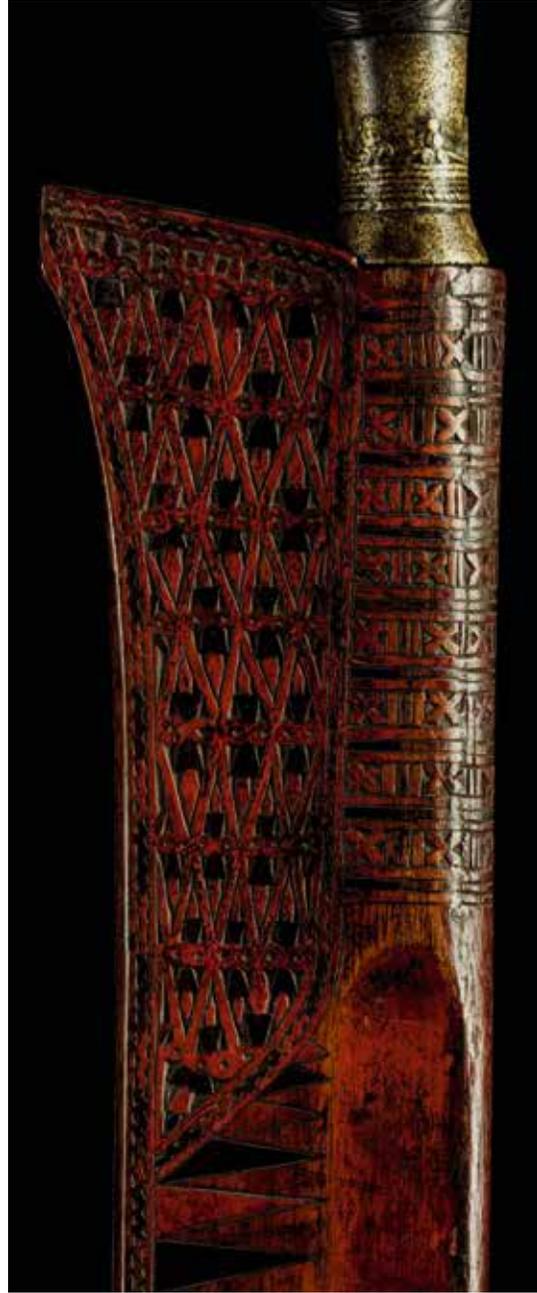
The *piso sanalenggam* (literally "knife with a red-black sheath") is one of the oldest and most venerable blade objects of the Batak. It is usually associated with the Pakpak and Dairi Batak, but is likely to have been common among all Batak groups who had earlier contacts with South India / Sri Lanka. The Toba, who otherwise tended to retain the Tahi or Khmer element in their blade design, also knew the *surik* (the old designation), as Müller's (1893) explanations prove.

The blade of the *piso sanalenggam* is strongly bulbous and front-heavy. It is made of refined steel, the cutting edge is selectively hardened and very thin and sharply ground. The cutting edge describes a pronounced S-line. In principle, the shape characteristics correspond to those of the more common *piso goluk taka*, except that these have a much slimmer, knitted shape. As explained, this may have to do with Thai influences in North Sumatra during the establishment of the Môn-Khmer empires, which were then replaced by the East Javanese power zenith in the 13th/14th century. The *piso sanalenggam* predates this era. The shape is still close to the inward curved sickle sword in *kopis / falcata* style, which was probably brought to India by the Macedonians in the 3rd century BCE. In Ayanta and Hoysala, these blades have been regularly depicted on temple friezes since at least the 5th century CE, but probably earlier.

The Indo-Levantine *surik* form has spread as far as Sera and Tanimbar. *Piso sanalenggam* are basically to be seen in connection with sacrificial acts by the *datu* (priests). As in India (dhussedra festival), animal sacrifices were required on many occasions, but especially in connection with burials.

The bulbous edge of the *piso sanalenggam* is well suited for severing the fore-neck of larger mammals with one blow; smaller animals such as goats, poultry etc. can also be easily decapitated with it in one movement. This type of killing is considered particularly fertility-enhancing due to the release of large amounts of blood.







## 02 *Piso sanalenggam*

Pakpak-Batak (possibly Toba)

Probably 17th or 18th century

Total length 72cm

This example corresponds closely to object no. 1, but has an indented mass in the forked pommel area, which can probably be interpreted as *pupuk*, a substance enriched with soul matter. This gives the object additional strength in a similar way as is achieved with guardian figures by inserting it into the openings provided, usually in the head or chest area.

The *piso sanalenggam* is probably connected with the South Indian or Sinhalese influences in the first millennium, where the *kopis* form has survived until today (as it has in Nepal, as the *khukri* of the Gurkha). It is subject to a strict canon of form and decoration. The handle depicts an aristocratic-looking figure with bent knees, crowned by a two-pointed headscarf. The resulting split pommel shape shares a link to other Indonesian blade objects and may ultimately be traced back to hornbill symbolism. The figure wears a checkered *kain* (*poleng* pattern as a symbol of ambivalence) and holds his hands in a rhombus posture typical of Batak, as also found among the Dayak. The base of the handle is set in a thick-walled brass ferrule of typical Toba make. The scabbard is cut in a low-relief and coloured reddish-black; the spaces in between are partially filled with resinous black paste. The geometric motif field, divided into rhombs, can be interpreted as a derivation from Indian *patola* textiles, which

once embodied royal status. The shape of the entire knife in the scabbard is reminiscent of a canoe, which can possibly be understood as a reference to the transmigration of souls. Overall, this *piso* type as a whole embodies a level of Indian cultural input enriched with ancient Austronesian elements, which is clearly different from the Thai and Khmer moulds.





## 03–05

The examples presented here represent a very rare and symbolic object type with a very long history. The origins can be traced back to the Levantine Bronze Age and illustrate the possibly far-reaching cultural-historical significance of blade forms.

03 This *piso sanalenggam* corresponds to the other two examples with the exception that the stylised representation of a mythical bird creature (hornbill?) is recognisable on the head of the handle figure, which probably refers to a mediating function of the *datu* to the world of the gods.

19th century

Total length 65 cm

04 This is a slimmer, lighter *piso sanalenggam* with a forked pommel, as is also occasionally encountered. It seems that this handle shape was developed under Acehian influence; it is not originally peculiar to the *surik*.

18th or early 19th century

Total length 53 cm

05 This *golok* is orientating itself to the *piso sanalenggam*. The mouth of the scabbard is showing a stylized *singa*.

20th century

Total length 53 cm





**06** *Piso halasan, kalasan, eccat, engkat*  
Toba-Batak, 18th/19th century  
Total length 85 cm

An *eccat/piso hallasan* in classic Toba style. The back blade has the waisted shape of the *goluk/golok*. The surface is or was well polished and free of all file marks. It has a refined structure. The thickness of the blade increases strongly towards the neck, as is characteristic of many Thai-*dha*. This creates a "sculptural" effect that enhances the organic appearance of the piece.

The grip is made of an antler sprout with a golden-brown patina, which ensures the perfect transition to the scabbard by means of an appropriately shaped plate-like brass end and a conical neck. The patina on the grip suggests that it has been worn for many years.

The scabbard can be considered exemplary for an *eccat/engkat* of the high class; only the carrying chain is missing. It is made of blackened wood and has brass fittings on the cast foot and mouthpiece, which are decorated with ball and double play and interlace motifs. The ferrules are held together with dovetail connection.

One can very clearly recognise the casting from a lost mould by the fact that real braided bands have been skilfully cast on the mouth and foot pieces. The detailed casting is of excellent quality. The nose-like element from the outside of the foot piece remains a mystery in its



meaning; it has an almost humorous effect. The piece can be considered exemplary of a Toba-*eccat* in every respect. As with almost all high quality blade objects, the visual component of this piece is joined by a high Haitian quality. In other words, it feels very good, is light, robust and excellently balanced.





## 07 *Andar-andar*

Karo-Batak, probably 19th century  
Total length 63.50 cm

The blade of this object is slender and has a double-edged blade in the front part. It has a wedge-shaped cross-section, rhombic in the front part. The metal structure shows traces of refinement, i.e. pre-industrial production (homogenisation of the steel by "folding"). The surface is filed and polished. The base of the blade is slightly broadened and decorated on one side with fine work. It has a geometric appearance because it is composed of right-angled and arc-shaped cutouts.

The blade is of slender, medium-pointed form, probably a result of European influence (fencing with emphasis on thrusting).

The handle is of *sukul jering*-form and is made of black horn (probably buffalo, perhaps antelope) with a long silver ferrule. A silver fitting reminiscent of an eye is applied to the thickened, curved rear part. The shield is made of dark hard wood and is held together by numerous silver bands. The upper part is covered with silver plate chased in geometric-spiral motifs. The broadened mouthpiece is cut in low relief; the cavities are filled with shell lime paste (*kauri* flour). The motifs are clearly reminiscent of Dayak art.

The partial use of *suasa* (copper-silver-gold alloy) on the upper edge of the scabbard fittings, the fine graduation on the borders of the fittings, the quality of the blade and the filigree form are clear indications of Karo work. *Piso* of this quality are to be considered prestige objects of the upper class (*datu*).





**08 + 09** *Piso halasan/piso gading*  
Toba-Batak, 19th century

Two representatives of a type of *piso gading* ("ivory knife") apparently widespread among the Toba until the 19th century.

08 is of excellent manufacturing quality and classic elegance. The slightly curved back blade with an elongated point is very strong and has a selectively hardened edge, as the dark shadow along the cutting line indicates. It is made of refined steel (with folded structure). The broad, strong neck leads smoothly into the patinated ivory handle, whose surface is divided into oval burred structures. These ensure a good feel. The piece can be described as a serious weapon. Total length 72 cm

The scabbard, concisely curved at the bottom, is covered with dark skin in the half near the point. The mouth area is enclosed in a two-piece, thick-walled cast mouthpiece, projecting at the top, to which the original carrying chain leading to the base of the scabbard is attached. The mouthpiece is decorated with fine ornamental geometric low-relief bands. The degree of wear suggests that it was worn for a long time.

09 is of comparable type, but slimmer, lighter and more "economical" in design. It is likely to be somewhat younger. The non-ferrous metal elements are missing; the palmwood scabbard is held together by rattan braiding. The bend in the base of the scabbard is very striking. Total length 72 cm

Apart from the mermo-forms, knives of this type are probably best described as functional weapons or weapons designed for use. They were used alongside thrusting spears in conjunction with skin shields, *hampang-hampang*, after the spears had been thrown. However, close combat was usually avoided.





**10** *Amanremu, mermo, klevang*  
Karo or Dairi-Batak (?), 19th century  
Total length 67 cm

This piece illustrates in a particularly concise way the intercultural connections between Southeast Asian regions, in this case Sumatra and Borneo. The *manremu* or *amanremu* is a representative of a form that has spread throughout the Malay coastal area of the large islands of western and central Indonesia – not always under this name, which is restricted to northern Sumatra, but as a slightly curved blade under *parang tangkin*, *duku candung* etc. – forms that are also widespread in West Borneo and still in use today (mainly as tools for controlling the secondary forest, in the sense of the Latin American machete). Similar blades are already depicted on Candi Borobudur.

The blade is blunt in the quarter close to the handle, which allows it to be handled far forward for lighter chopping work. It is smoothly polished, made of excellent material (with a folded structure indicating non-industrial steel) and widens to an abruptly raised "tip" for maximum cutting effect.

The handle, forked at the back, is of black horn and in excellent condition. It is a stylised, somewhat more monumental-looking variant of the Aceh sikin handle called *nganga* or *katungangan*.

Of particular interest here are the reliefs carved into the widened mouth area of the scabbard, which are filled with lime paste. The state of preservation is particularly good and allows a comparison with Dayak art. Parallels with the

*aso* (dragon) can be seen very clearly, especially in the splayed forks of the stylised mythical creatures, which are reminiscent of open jaws as on the *aso* and have taken on a completely stylised form here.





**11+12** *Amanremu, mermo, klevang*  
Karo or Simalung Batak (?)  
19th century

*Amanremu* were a much-used and feared weapon in the Aceh war, along with the *sikin*. A one-handed chopping blade (which as a weapon was always to be wielded in conjunction with the shield) could hardly be made more efficient. Swords of this type prompted the Dutch to introduce a *klevang* themselves to counter the Indonesians in the frequent skirmishes in the Aceh War. As original tools that were only "misappropriated" in the conflicts of the 19th century, the *mermo* or *manremu* often has a blunt "point" that was often sharpened afterwards.

11 is a small but high-quality Karo-Batak knife with a *gokuk* blade, a two-piece wooden scabbard and a forked *baba buaya* ("crocodile's mouth") handle made of horn, as is preferably found on *mermo* (hand knives). It can be dated to the late 19th century.

Total length 33,50 cm

The same description can be applied to 12 as to cat.no.10, except that the rungs of the forked end of the handle are additionally covered with precisely fitted silver plate. The base of the black horn grip is set in a silver ferrule that prevents splicing. The scabbard is characterised by functional requirements; it lacks the relief carving as in cat.no.32.

Total length including scabbard 71,50 cm





### 13 *Piso podang*

Toba-Batak, 18th/19th century

Total length 85 cm

This type of *podang* can be attributed with certainty to the Toba-Batak. The blade is imported. It shows a very clear refined structure, which indicates that it was probably set in the Malay region. Such blades were traded on a large scale along the coasts; they probably originated largely in the 18th and early 19th centuries, where they were produced in manufactories in Northern India, e.g. Punjab (Lahore etc.). The quality varies greatly, and European products may also appear on the market in this context, especially worn-out models. Large quantities of sabre blades, some of excellent quality, were traded everywhere after the Napoleonic wars, during which they were produced on a large scale.

The handle figure, cast in lost form using the brass casting method, depicts a long-haired, jewellery-wearing, kneeling person with a sacrificial bowl on his head containing a cock. The wearing of sacrificial bowls on the head is documented above all for mediums (*sibasos*) who had contact with the afterlife "at the request of their customers". As can be seen from the jewellery, this is a high-ranking sacrificer who is probably turning to the ancestors in connection with funeral rites. To call the figure a protective figure, *pangulubalang*, is nonsensical. These are/were village protective statues animated with *pupuk*, magical substances (e.g. corpse parts processed in a special way). They are subject to a different level of meaning and accordingly have different design features.

The cross piece is integrally cast with heat

and decorated with double spirals. Its shape is based on Indian cross vessels as they have been common since the 16th century. Ultimately, it is a combination of a Batak handle in the figural Thai style (from an older cultural level) and Mughal-era influences.

The decoration of the brass scabbard with black coating is consistent with the handle and probably indicates a common manufacture. The quality and degree of wear may indicate that it was made in the 19th century. The blade is probably older.





**14** *Halasan, piso gading*  
Toba-Batak, 18th/19th century  
Total length 65 cm

The traditional name for this object, *piso gading*, refers to what is probably its most striking element, namely the extremely thick waisted ivory handle, the surface of which is divided longitudinally into concave fields. The bars separating these fields are unfortunately slightly worn, probably to ensure a slightly better grip. This must have been done in the recent history of the object. The patina in the concave surfaces represents the original condition. Handles of this type have a purely representative function; the high density of the ivory results in an extremely "top-heavy" structure, which disqualifies the piece as an everyday implements (traditional clothing component). The blade is within the usual *goluk taka* shape, it is slender, strong, pointed at the back and has a strongly thickened neck that is bent backwards. The refined structure bears witness to its relatively old age (mid-19th century or older).

The scabbard is in the typical salvaged shape. Rather atypical for Toba products is the material (silver alloy) of the fittings, which are cast in great detail in a lost form. The former thick carrying chain has been replaced by a thin brass chain. Typical are the toggles and spiral motifs, which can be traced back to the Continental Bronze Age. The scabbard body is wound with fine silver wire. The round gold inlay at the mouth of the scabbard with stylised Islamic writing suggests that it belonged to a high-ranking owner of the Muslim faith. The piece may date from the earlier 19th century, when

some circles in the Batak area (via Minangkabau) turned to Orthodox Islam.

An old, high-status piece that probably functioned as a high-status gift (*piso*) between clan representatives.



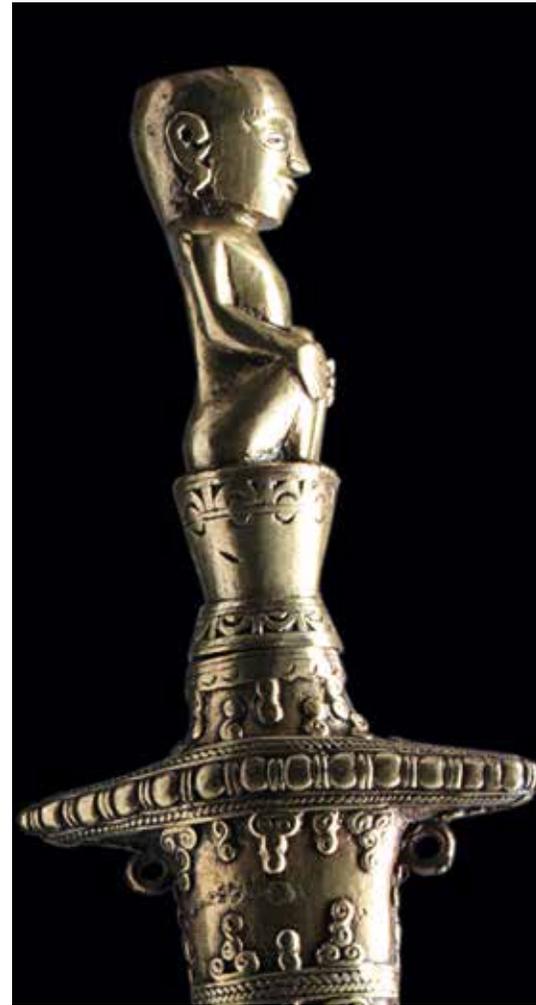


**15** *Piso halasan, kalasen, perladju*  
Toba-Batak, 19th century  
Total length 60 cm

An example of a Toba-Batak *piso* with a figurally designed handle cast in lost mould in yellow cast iron and the same scabbard fittings. The things are relatively simple wrought iron work, showing signs of use and resharpening. The grip, which also shows traces of many years of handling, depicts a squatting figure with an ear pendant, the hair of which is formed by inserted tufts of reddish horsehair. The bowl is made of dark palm wood and has a widened mouthpiece, the opening of which merges smoothly into the *tumpal*-like base of the squatting figure (*tumpals* are usually associated with the representation of deified ancestors).

It is likely that the handle and scabbard fittings are made of bronze – and not brass, as sometimes claimed – as pewter was a sought-after commodity from the earliest historical period. This was also one of the reasons for the establishment of Malaka (and possibly already Funan) in the first centuries of our era, as tin is abundant in this region.

On the other hand, there is no evidence for the processing of or trade in zinc. It is worth mentioning that tin has a special symbolic meaning within the warrior emblemata in Southeast Asia and the (pre-Islamic) Philippines, probably in connection with the production of bronze weapons with the time of the "metal-age intensification" (according to W. Marschall. 1995).



*Piso* of this type may have been primarily intended as gifts between clans, e.g. at weddings or alliances, but, as the traces of use show, were certainly also worn and used.





**16** *Piso halasan, kalasen, perladju*

Toba-Batak, 18th/19th century

blade possibly older

Total length 75 cm

This piece corresponds to 15, but the thin leather covering of the scabbard (one can see the individual segments) is still present. The curved blade of refined steel seems to be made from an old pedang or sabre blade. It definitely belongs to the 19th century; a much older age is also conceivable. This is not unusual, good blades were valued commodities.

The handle corresponds almost completely to the aforementioned piece, except for details such as braided band appliqué or at the base.

The piece shows a beautiful old patina; the scabbard fittings have been executed with care and smoothed after casting. Overall, the casting quality of the mouthpiece and grip is remarkable.

A high-quality representative of this probably best-known type of Batak blade object.





**17** *Piso halasan, kalasen*  
Toba-Batak, 18th/19th century  
Total length 64 cm

The shape of this object is not unknown for the blade objects of the Toba-Batak (as *piso halasan*). However, the handles of these knives, which are reserved for the upper social class, are usually made of ivory, which is why the knives are then called *piso gading* (*gading* = elephant ivory). It is extremely rare that they are made of yellow metal (probably bronze, because of the availability of tin and the colour, which lacks the "butter-yellow tone" of brass), as in the example shown here. As prestigious objects, the handles can assume oversized dimensions. The material ivory has a magical quality with a distinctly masculine component. Ideally, the ivory comes from the tooth tips of old bulls. The yellow metal used here, however, also has a high prestige. The Toba-Batak in particular are masters of the yellow metal casting process, while the Karo tend to use silver techniques and very differentiated carving.

The blade is that of a *goluk taka* and is probably a Karo work, it is elegant and of high manufacturing quality. Unusual is the type of "little teeth" that visually break up the shoulder of the blade. The notches in the back seem to have been added later.

The scabbard does not appear to have been originally associated with this blade, but it is probably of similar date and provenance. It is made of finely grained, reddish-brown hardwood and has brass fittings in typical Toba style. The scabbard mouth, balanced on one

side, is decorated with geometric motif bands in low relief.

On the top of the handle, which is only suitable for limited use, is a silver plate showing a Muslim script field in relief. The knife shows signs of long lasting wear, but is primarily to be regarded as a prestige object.





**18** *Piso halasan, kalasan, eccat*  
Karo-Batak, 18th/19th century  
Total length 68 cm

This is a Karo-*eccat* of special significance. The blade is single-edged, slender and has a strong spine and wedge-shaped cross-section. At the narrowest point, a few centimetres in front of the blade neck, there is a small protrusion that can be interpreted as a hint of a male genitalia, according to similar elements on the *nyabor* and *langgai tinggang* (cutting blades, *parang*) of the Iban-Dayak.

The back is straight, the point in the back is elongated and the edge is curved in an S-shape. The metal shows refined structure and is darkly patinated, which will have been done in the Malay area (Batak blades are originally blink-ground). *Pamor* and deliberately induced welding structures (*pamor*: "pattern-welding") as in Java, Aceh and South Sumatra, Malaysia and Sulawesi do not exist among the Batak, only technically designed laminates and processing features (selective hardening, laminates with a hard cutting layer). The broadened blade root leads into an abruptly stepped strong neck. Above this rises a double tapered ferrule of brass with soldered appliqué of finely braided wire mesh and S-double spirals. The ferrule is probably a Toba work that has been "recycled". The spaces in between seem to have been filled with a black resinous substance, which can be interpreted as *pupuk*, magical substance with soul matter, to animate the object. This practice is attested, but would have to be verified in individual cases by chemical analysis.

Above the handle clamp, the most voluminous part of the handle, a group of figures is arranged in typical Batak fashion, in this case carved from ivory (*gading*). On top of a crouching figure holding the characteristic sacrificial chicken as a symbol of a reverent way of life with *adat*-like honouring of the ancestors, another smaller figure crouches with hand posture in a respectful pose (in this combination probably ancestor and descendant). The long hair of both figures is indicated by symmetrically arranged spiral motifs typical of Batak, which go back to ancient Chinese and Inner Asian decorative forms. The scabbard mouthpiece is also made of ivory. It consistently continues the handle design. The handle and scabbard mouth are coloured brownish-red, probably with betel juice. The scabbard mouth fits precisely to the shoulder of the blade. The back shows the same axially symmetrical motifs as the "hairstyles" of the grip figures. On the sides, two squatting male figures are depicted in a row, hands around the knees. The squatting posture can be interpreted as a birth (and rebirth) posture and is a common Mela and Polynesian concept. The eyes are accentuated by fine inset metal pins. A fifth, central figure on the front (cutting side) is female and depicted in a standing posture. She shows an upswept hairstyle, perhaps referring to the hairstyle of the topknot, which is no longer common today. She may be a cultural hero or clan founder of high rank, or the founder of the *piso*.



The scabbard has a bent foot, slightly widened at the base in a flowing line. The body of the scabbard is made of black wood of high hardness (palm wood) and is covered with silver bands of varying width. The upper quarter is covered with silver. Additional applications of *suasa* bands elegantly set off the silver-covered areas, which have additional fine silver braiding bands and soldered double rows of spirals, from the dark wood. The decorative shapes correspond to those of the handle, which emphasises the symbolism of the *piso* unit (blade-handle-sheath). As an overall ensemble, our piece is a reference to the importance of ancestral succession and kinship relationship, and may have functioned as a wedding gift or gift between high-ranking bride's parents.







**19** *Piso halasan, kalasan, eccat*  
Karo-Batak, 18th/19th century  
Total length 86 cm

Approximately the same statements can be applied to this piece as to 18. The blade is practically identical, although considerably larger, and shows a very distinctive hardening shadow. The neck is clearly bent backwards. In contrast to cat.no.18 the ferrule of the hilt, which is octagonal in cross-section, is also a typical Karo-work. The base is made of braided and twisted silver wires, above which rises a combined *suasa* and silver ferrule. The structure and shape of the ivory handle strongly remind Khmer or Thai blade objects. On top of a squatting figure in a reverent posture with long hair stylised into S-lines sits an almost identical but smaller figure crowned by a suggested topknot, which in turn is finished off by a silver cap. The ivory is darkly patinated. The figures have a Polynesian-looking overall habitus. They are almost "classically batakian" in their rapt, mask-like facial expressions.

The scabbard largely corresponds to the scabbard of cat.no.18, except for one significant detail: the ivory scabbard mouth is formed by a group of phallic standing figures, a rather rare phenomenon in Batak objects. One is reminded of Nias, where this representational emphasis is often found. The facial expression of these figures is also an excellent example of Batak art. The expressive masculinity of the figures is probably indicative of a male owner or addressee – perhaps in the context of a gift-giving ceremony with fertility wishes. The rim of the scabbard mouthpiece is set in a flanged silver plate. The base of the scabbard is also

made of patinated ivory.

This piece also represents the highest rank of *piso* objects and is to be regarded as a representative piece for the highest class of the Karo aristocrats. The reference to Burmese and Thai forms is particularly clear here.





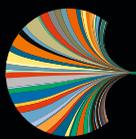


**20** *Piso halasan, kalasan, eccat*  
Karo-Batak, 18th/19th century  
Total length 68 cm

This object can be placed in a row with 18 and 19. The blade has the same characteristics and can be assigned to the 18th or 19th century. The handle, however, is mounted in such a way that the handle points to the cutting side. Interestingly, the tang or the neck of the blade is not bent backwards in accordance with this basic design, but straight, which indicates a purposefully applied design. Due to local overloading, however, the bend is more pronounced than intended; the violent indentation can be seen on the octagonal silver *suasa* ferrule of the hilt. The grip figures are somewhat less expressive and grandiose in habit than in the two aforementioned pieces. The ivory scabbard mouthpiece (patinated like the handle, probably with betel decoction) shows two standing figures (male – female, probably an ancestral couple or wedding pair) with a "Polynesian" profile and a lizard (lizard or weakened crocodile) as a fertility symbol in between. Because of their regenerative capacity and proximity to the earth, lizards and snakes are one of the most important fertility symbols and are directly linked to agricultural fertility (and the headhunting that promotes it). They embody the earth and female fertility – in contrast to male hornbills and *singa*, the latter of which have undergone a multi-layered enrichment of meaning.







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