Myth of Garuda



Relief plaque depicting Garuda

"*Garuda was able to fly faster than any bird even at his birth. Garuda preys relentlessly on serpents and has even become a symbol against the illnesses caused by snake venom*"

Garuda is depicted as having a beak, talons and wings of a bird along with the body of a human. He is the mightiest god of birds, the enemy of serpents, and the mount for Lord Vishnu, the Hindu god charged with protecting and maintaining the welfare of humankind. Arguably, Garuda can fly anywhere to protect man’s interests.



Bronze figure of Garuda

Inside the Emerald Buddha Temple is a long line of golden Garudas standing guard with their wings outstretched, serpents in their clasps. The myth of Garuda explains why he is the enemy of serpents. Garuda's father, an ancient sage, had two wives: Kadru and Vinata who were fierce rivals. Kadru mothered a thousand serpents before Vinata had two children who were hatched from their eggs. Vinata's first child was a half-formed son. She waited a long time for her second son to be born.

At long last Garuda was born. Even at birth, he was able to fly faster than any bird. One day Vinata lost a bet against the fraudulent Kadru and as a result of the gamble, became a slave to Kadru and her serpent sons. Learning of his mother's plight, Garuda made a deal with his snake stepbrothers: he would bring back *amrita*, the elixir of immortality, which was fiercely guarded by the gods in heaven, in exchange for his mother's freedom.

Garuda overcame the many guardians of the elixir by using his strength and wisdom and was soon in possession of the *amrita*, but on the way back he was waylaid by the gods Vishnu and Indra, the lord of heaven. Instead of fighting, they made a deal. In return for letting him go, Garuda would become Vishnu's loyal mount and he would also ensure that Indra could retake the elixir before the serpents could drink it. Garuda managed to do this by convincing the snakes to perform proper rituals before consuming the *amrita*, and while they did Indra swooped in and reclaimed the elixir. Ever since, Garuda has preyed relentlessly on the serpents and in some countries even became a symbol against the illnesses caused by snake venom.



Framed architectural detail depicting Garuda preying on a serpent