

Independently of his principal role in Vaiṣṇava iconography as the vehicle (*vāhana*) of the god Viṣṇu, *Garuḍa* is one of the animal themes readily retained by the Cham sculptors. Because of his solar symbolism as the younger brother of Aruṇa, the charioteer of the sun god Sūrya, and also because of his association with the victory over the gods for the *amṛta* (the elixir of immortality), *Garuḍa* could only play an important role in the monuments where he is in some ways the incarnation of the idea of victory. On tympana, accent pieces, metopes, antefixes, or here as corner piece, *Garuḍa* is omnipresent in the Cham temples.

According to the *Mahābhārata* and a number of *Purāṇa*, *Garuḍa* was born of the union of the sage Kaśyapa and the beautiful Vinatā. Since his birth his solar nature was affirmed: he was so luminous that the gods in fact confounded him with Agni (god of fire), asking him to shine less brightly. His partnering in association and opposition of the light and obscurity, air and water, *Garuḍa* is frequently represented in company with the serpents he masters. The legend accounting for the inexpugnable enmity of *Garuḍa* and the *Nāga*, his half-brothers, tells of how the fabulous bird realised that his mother was enslaved to Kadrū, the other wife of Kaśyapa, who had given birth to the *Nāga*. *Garuḍa*, afflicted by the sad fate of his mother, wanted to help and devised a pact with the *Nāga*: as he could fly both high and fast, he would steal for them the *amṛta* from the palace of Indra in exchange for the liberation of his mother. After a series of adventures and a terrible fight with the guards of the celestial palace, *Garuḍa* returned victorious with the vase of *amṛta*. Being true to their word, the *Nāga* liberated Vinatā. Shortly afterwards however, Indra came secretly to recover the *amṛta* and the *Nāga* could only watch as the precious vessel disappeared. In the hope of finding tiny drops of *amṛta*, they began licking the grass *kuśa* that grew where the vase had stood but the cutting grass cleaved their tongues which have ever since remained forked.

Carved here in the highly decorative and somewhat mechanical style of Tháp Mãm, the combat of *Garuḍa* and the *nāga*¹ takes on a supernatural and fantastic character. This piece formed part of the base of the tower-sanctuary; it could have been set at a corner or a redentation.² The comma of Tháp Mãm invades all the decorative parts of the sculpture: it outlines the



eyes, the bill, the pectorals, the top of the thighs, adorns the edge of the wings and is found in the diadem and the necklace. This completely artificial treatment of the mythical bird is the opposite of the realistic making of the serpents whose bodies curve with nervous suppleness around the arms of their powerful conqueror. For them, the struggle is already in vain: with arms uplifted in a gesture of victory, *Garuḍa* affirms his supremacy. This posture, very close to that to be seen in Khmer art of the Bayon style (end 12th-early 13th centuries) – for example on the Elephant terrace of Angkor Thom or along the fourth enclosure wall of Preah Khan of Angkor³ – accords point by point with the position of the preceding telamon lion and confers a happy harmony with the dissimilar iconographic themes.

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- 1 The word is here in italics to designate generically the class of fabulous beings which are the serpent *nāga* and not only the offspring of Kaśyapa and Kadrū, the half-brothers of *Garuḍa* in the legend. The latter has anyway become a kind of *primus inter pares* in the class of *garuḍa*.
- 2 For other pieces of the same kind, one should consult HCMC 1994, no. 55, p. 64, Phạm Thúy Hợp 2003, no. 51, p. 87 (in. LSb 21185), Boisselier 1963 (1), fig. 197; Ducrest and Vandermeersch 1997, p. 189 (inv. 41.27), unfortunately without illustration and with a mistaken bibliographic reference to Boisselier 1963 (1), fig. 197 which is a different piece.
- 3 Boisselier 1955, pl. 32.