

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF IMAGINARY AND MYTHICAL CREATURES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THEIR SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE

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Abstract:

The bestiary of Southeast Asia is rich with a wide variety of imaginary mythical/non-mythical creatures, all complete with their specific symbolic associations (some common to all countries in the region, some specific only to a few of them). While an exhaustive discussion would certainly be enough to fill a book, what I aim within the following paper is a much shorter account of those I encountered and had the opportunity to research during my trips to the area between 2016-2020. Leographs, for example, are very common and include the Burmese Chinthe (a leograph is a stylized motif of an imaginary lion-like creature mainly found in Indospheric or Sinospheric regions). The Chinthe guards temples in Burma (Myanmar). Other leographs include the Thai and Chinese-inspired leographs, while the Singaporeans have the Merlion (a lion with a fish tail). Mythical demons guard Thai temples called "Yaksha or yaks" (giant in the Thai language), while Cambodian and Laotian ones by the Naga. Vietnamese have a trinity of mythical creatures, including imaginary dragons, phoenixes, and tortoises, all possessing legendary attributes and functions that transcend the physical realm. Thai and Burmese mythical animals of Indian origin include Ganesha, the elephant god, one of the best-known and most worshipped deities in the Hindu pantheon. Airavata, another elephant-like creature, is believed to be guarding one of the points of the compass. In modern-day Burma, on the other hand, the zodiac is not monthly as is in the case of the western and sinospheric world. Days of the week are represented by real and imaginary animals that are given symbolic and mythical qualities and represent different cardinal directions. Garuda, the monster eagle, represents Sunday and Northeast, for example. The Buto Ijo are monsters who eat children for breakfast and are Indonesia's version of the orcs, while the Kinnari of Thailand seem to have the function angels play in Christian myth. These are some of the main ones I aim to discuss.

Keywords: Southeast Asia; Imaginary; Myth; bestiary; Thailand; Vietnam; Myanmar; Cambodia.

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I want to start this paper by mentioning the background that led to its development. Between 2016 and 2020, my work as a foreign language teacher catering to international students allowed me to travel to different countries around South East Asia. Apart from the work that allowed me to come into close contact with international students, I have dedicated a few months every year to traveling and exploring museums and archeological sites in the region. This paper is thus based not only on the reading material quoted in the bibliography section but also on my experience of actually living in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Burma (Myanmar), with almost all the images presented being part of my archive.

I will attempt as much as possible to steer and adapt the content of my paper to the conference theme by dividing the animals and mythological creatures presented into the three categories that this conference aims to address (Imaginary Creatures of Earth, Sky, and Water). However, sometimes, as we shall see, some of the animals presented either resist this classification by belonging to multiple realms simultaneously or their connection to an animal belonging to a different domain is essential. It needs to be mentioned (for example, animals that are part of the Burmese zodiac). On the other hand, I want to point out that I only covered the animals I encountered and enquired about.

Imaginary Creatures of the Earth

1. Leogryphs - (Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore)

ccc Sax Boria in „The Mythical Zoo” points out that male lions were ubiquitous in the ancient world in the visual arts. Sumero-Babylonian animal sayings are among the earliest literary works to have survived. There, the lion has already been imagined as the king of the animal kingdom. Later, the Egyptian goddess Hathor was sometimes depicted with a woman's body and a lioness head. When she fulfilled the function of a war deity, Ishtar was shown standing on a lion. The Romans adopted the Syrian goddess Cybele who was adopted as a mother goddess - their Magna mater - had a chariot pulled by lions (Boria, 2001). Boria

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remembers the practice of the Egyptians and Mesopotamians to place stone lions as guardians on each side of the doorways to



Fig. 1 Chinthe Guardian at Shwedagon Pagoda - Myanmar – Personal Archive

talk of a mythical spot in the Himalayas called Manosila where, among other things, a lion roars the doctrine (Woodward, 2005). Leogryphs are widely spread around South

East Asia (and Asia in general). In Fig.1 and 2, we have the image of the Burmese Chinthe. In Burma, they appear as guardians of temples, pagodas, and royal palaces. In this aspect, they are related to other leogryphs of Asian origin that function as protective spirits of the location they guard. They are also harbingers of good luck and prosperity. While the symbolic

temples and palaces, spreading eastwards to China (Boria, 2001). However, it should be noted that, although this symbolic function of guardian has reached Asia, it did not take the mantle of king of the animal kingdom because, in Asia, the tiger is more commonly regarded as fulfilling this role. Nevertheless, they were placed at temple entrances, and the Chinese brought them south of the Asian continent. Hiram Woodward notes in *The Art and Architecture of Thailand* that in Buddhist scriptures, there is



Fig. 2 Chinthe on Kyat (Currency) Burma – Personal Archive

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meaning of Asian leographs is similar, their representation and design are not. The leogryphs in Burma, Thailand, and Singapore are represented differently from those in China and Vietnam. Their size also varies. Fig. 1 shows one of the four pairs of Chinthe guarding the Schwedagon pagoda entrances.



*Fig. 3 – Lion Temple Guardians.
Thailand - Personal Archive*

For those who do not know, the Schwedagon pagoda is one of the most sacred places in the Buddhist world. It is said to house relics from four previous Buddhas: the staff of Kakusandha, the water filter of Konagamana, the robe of Kassapa, and eight pieces of the hair of Gautama. It is one of the oldest pagodas in the world (some say the oldest). The stupa's plinth is plated with 22.000 solid gold bars estimated at a weight of up to 60 tonnes of pure gold. As the Myanmar Times puts it, the Schwedagon pagoda contains more gold than the national gold reserve, and during the colonial era, it was said to have contained more gold than the deposits of the Bank of England. Four pairs of Chinthe guard this edifice, each about 10m in height, such as the one in Fig. 1. Each leogryph pair is located at each of the four entrances corresponding to the four cardinal points every 10 m in height.

The Chinthe acquires symbolic meaning through the Burmese zodiac, the Mahabote zodiac, or, as it is known, „the little key.” Unlike the monthly western version, the Mahabote is weekly. Each day of the week is associated with a different animal, a planet, and a cardinal point. The Chinthe is related to the planet Mars, Tuesday, and the cardinal direction of the South-East.

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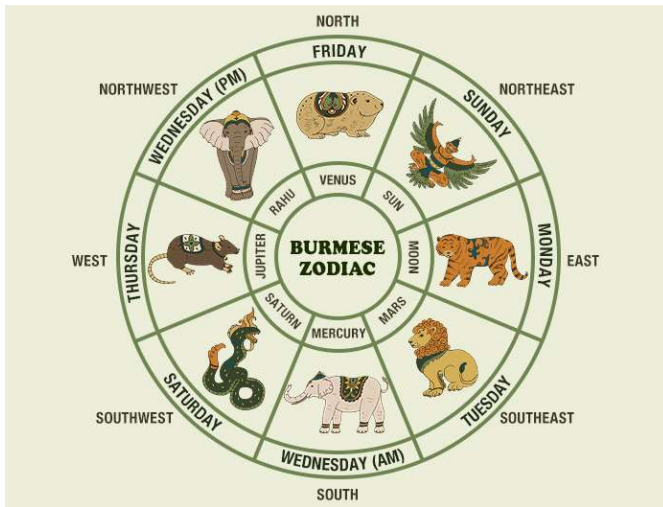


Fig. 4 Burmese Zodiac

The number 8 is of great importance in Burmese culture. In the local imagination, it is the perfect number. Therefore, 8 Chinthas guard the entrances to important pagodas. Although there are seven days a week, Wednesday gets two different animals in the zodiac (the tusked and tuskless elephant), so the overall number of astrological positions is 8.

Thai leogryphs are similar to the ones found in Burma. However, the Vietnamese/Chinese ones differ in terms of representation. Often when a pair of leogryphs were represented at a temple entrance, they were not represented as being identical, as is the case with the ones in Burma, Thailand, or Laos. The Vietnamese design originates in China, where they were erected to protect the Emperor's tombs and temples in the Forbidden City. The sculptors usually depicted the one on the right with an open mouth and paw on a ball, symbolizing the statue protecting the treasures of the temple as well as Buddhist law.

The one on the left was depicted with its mouth closed, thus guarding the hidden powers and secrets of Buddhism and the universe. In his book on Chinese mythology, Jeremy

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Roberts notes that lion representations were famous figures in art; they were imported from Africa as gifts to the Emperor (Roberts, 2010). Steven M. Kossak and Edith W. Watts show in *The Art of South and Southeast Asia* that there are also representations of the Buddha himself framed by leogryphs who assure protection (Kossak, 2001). Another significant work of art that we can mention is the *Portrait of Jnanatapa Surrounded by Lamas and Mahasiddhas*, in which the Esoteric Buddhist practitioner is portrayed guarded by a pair of lions (Kossak, 2001).

Lihui Yang, Deming An, and Anderson Turner quote an ancient apocalyptic legend emphasizing the protective symbolic imagery of the lion. According to the legend, two sibling students, a brother and a sister, visited a temple near a school. The school had a stone lion in front of it. They would hop on and ride the lion at the temple for fun. One day a monk told them to feed the lion every day with steamed bread, and they did as they were told. After a while, the monk told them they should pay attention to the lion's eyes, and when the eyes became red, they should enter the lion's stomach. One day after the girl fed the lion, the eyes turned red, so the two siblings did as they were told and got into the belly of the lion. Then they saw the sky turn dark, the wind blowing fiercely, and a loud crash. When they got out, they saw that the sky had collapsed and that all the people were dead. They survived by eating the



Fig. 5 Marble Lion Guardian - Vietnam – Personal Archive

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steamed bread gathered in the lion's stomach and looking for a house to live in. They encountered an old lady whom they asked what they should do after this near extinction of all humans. The old lady told them that they should get married. They bore five boys and five girls; after that, human beings became plentiful and populated the world again. (Yang, 2005) Yang, An, and Turner rightly make a parallel between this story and other flood myths encountered in Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa, New Guinea, Micronesia, and the Americas. However, there are also differences between the Biblical flood myth and the Chinese version, the main one being that in the Chinese version, what is emphasized is the conquest of the flood and the origin of civilization and not the torrent that came to punish human sin (Bodde, 1961: 402-403; Lu, 2002: 18-21). The essence of the myth is not that one should obey God's will and arrangement or the law of nature. Instead, praise is given for making every effort to conquer the natural disaster, no matter how arduous the task is, to save humans. (Yang, 2005) In any case, the body of the lion can be read as being Noah's ark, thus emphasizing its protective function even in an apocalypse. Therefore, lions appear in various forms and representations guarding temples, tombs, and palaces around both north and Southeast Asia.



Fig. 6 - Ty Huu Sculpted Mahogany Wood – Vietnam – Personal Collection

for gold, silver, and jewels. According to Roy Bates, it craves the smell of gold and silver and likes to bring money to its owner (Bates, 2008). It possesses the mystical power of drawing *cai qi* (wealth) from all directions. The male of the species is in charge

The Ty Huu is a Vietnamese hybrid mythological creature similar to the Chinese Pixiu with the head of a dragon and the body of a lion. In some representations, it also possesses wings, protruding eyes, and sharp teeth. Some are also depicted with one antler (male) or two (female). The creature is said to have a voracious appetite exclusively

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of wealth, while the female wards off evil. Displaying the creature at home prevents wealth from leaving the house. The legend of the Ty huu is more than 2000 years old, mentioned in Roy Bates' *Chinese Mysteries*. According to the legend, Ty huu violated the law of heaven by defecating on the floor of heaven. The Jade Emperor punished him with a severe spanking that caused his anus to be permanently sealed. The Emperor also decreed that the diet of the Ty huu would only contain gold, silver, and jewels. The creature can counter evil spirits, draining their essence and converting it to wealth. The Ty huu would be a loyal guardian of their master and even help him ascend to heaven after their death by flying them there on their backs. In ancient China, there was a law stating that only the Emperor was allowed to represent the Ty huu, a law enforced until the end of the Qing dynasty.

The Merlion is another fascinating lion creature appearing in Singapore and Vietnam. It is a lion with a fishtail. It is nowadays used to represent Singapore in various sporting and commercial activities. For example, the national tourism board chose it as national personification. The original Colony of Singapore's original seal, starting in 1867, was a lion and a tower used to symbolize “the lion city.”

On the one hand, the modern Singapore tourism board wanted to maintain the idea of “the lion city” but gave the lion a fishtail to reflect a particular legend from the Malay Annals. This text contains the genealogy of the Malay kings. In one of the

stories, Prince Sang Nila Utama lands on an island called Temasek and sees a mysterious beast, a lion. In its honor, he renames the island Singapura „the lion city” in Sanskrit. Thus, the emblem of a lion with a fishtail emerging from the sea



Fig. 7 - Merlion - Singapore

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would not be inappropriate.

2. The Naga (Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Laos)

It is worth pointing out that the image of the *naga* and *naga* cults is a worldwide phenomenon associated with all civilizations at some point in history. Its presence is felt today in Europe (Italy, Spain), the Middle East, and South and South-East Asia. Still, we can also mention the Maya in South America, ancient Egypt, and Mesopotamia or the Indus Valley civilization. P.K Kaul notes in *Naga Cult and Wooden Art in India* that all these countries and societies present marks of a *naga* cult, *naga* worship, or *naga* tradition in their history or culture. By *naga* cult, he means the faith, superstitions, popular religion, reverence, worship, hate, or curiosity associated with them (Kaul, 2008).

Xing Ruan hand mentions in *Allegorical Architecture – Living Myth and Architectonics in Southern China* that the *Naga* permeates the daily life of people on the Asian coast and the Pacific region in various mutated forms (including inland areas), in house carvings and boat motifs since prehistoric times (Ruan, 2007). Representations of *nagas* can be found throughout SE Asia. However, the countries they represent most are Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos (to a lesser extent Vietnam). While leogryphs are commonly depicted as temple guardians in Burma, Vietnam, and even to a certain extent in Thailand, the most relevant and highly represented mythological animal in the central part of continental South-East Asia in Cambodia and Laos are the *Naga*. That is not



Fig. 8 - Naga Water Fountain Phnom Penh – Cambodia – Personal Archive

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to say that the other countries do not have their own space for *naga* myths and representations (because they all do), but nowhere are they more central than in Cambodia and Laos.

The *Naga* (serpent in Sanskrit) is a half-human, half-serpent that appears commonly in Hindu and Buddhist folklore and scripture. Steven Kossak and Edith Watts note in *The Art of South and Southeast Asia* note the origin of Naga worship with the Indus Valley Civilization (around 3500 BC). Serpent kings called *nagarajas* and their consorts, *naginis*, are fabulous crocodile-like creatures believed to be associated with the cult of life-giving waters. They can assume either a fully serpentine or human form. They became part of the major Indian religions as minor gods, (Kossak, 2001) appropriated as guardians by other cultures. Jeremy Roberts notes that Buddhists distinguished between the evil mountain dragons portrayed in legends as making trouble for the people and water dragons considered beneficial. They spread the myths of the eight dragon kings of India. Nanda was the chief of the eight *nagarajas* (Roberts, 2010). From India, their worship spread to South East Asia.

However, as John Cady notes, indigenous to Cambodia in particular, was the nine-headed *naga* snake as a royal symbol. Kaudinya, the first mythical ruler of the kingdom of Nokor Phnum (a large kingdom dating 1st Century AD comprised of areas that today are part of Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam), was alleged to have married the beautiful daughter of the *naga* king. Henceforth, the *naga* symbol was featured in classical monuments such as Angkor Wat and is still observed today as a motif in the architecture of leading universities of Bangkok. This provided a direct



*Fig. 9 - Naga Balustrade - Angkor Wat
Cambodia – Personal Archive*

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association between royalty and the fertility principle (USA, 1996). A Chinese diplomat, Zhou Daguan, sent on a diplomatic mission to Cambodia in 1296, notes that the king's Palace included a golden tower in which the monarch slept every night. The ancient Khmer believed that in the building dwelled a genie in the form of a serpent. The creature was said to possess nine heads (the *Naga*) and that every night the genie appeared in the shape of a different woman with whom the sovereign coupled. Should the genie fail to appear for a single night, it was a sign that the king's death was at hand. Should the king forget to keep the daily habit, disaster was sure to follow (World History Documentaries, min. 21). While the creature was one of myth, archeologists do mention that it was customary for the landed gentry to send a woman from their family to be a member of the king's entourage and become a concubine, which bound the provinces to the center in a very physical manner. Zhou Daguan also notes that the Cambodian king had five wives and a harem of 3000 women (World History Documentaries, min. 22).

Priests dedicated to the *naga*-serpent tradition, indigenous to Cambodia, furthered solidified royal claims. Even nowadays, as Harris points out in his work on Cambodian Buddhism, in



Fig. 10 - *Naga (Detail) - Phnom Penh – Cambodia – Personal Archive*

Cambodia, the *nagas* are associated with entering the monastic life of a Buddhist monk. The ordination of the novices is explicitly termed the ordination of the *Naga* (puos nag). In traditional rite forms, *naga*

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spirits are called upon to enter the candidate's body (Harris, 2005). Nearby countries such as Thailand and Laos absorbed the *naga* cult and Theravada Buddhism from the much older Khmer culture.

In certain parts of Vietnam, it was customary to sacrifice a snake and consume its still-beating heart from a glass where the snake's blood was mixed with rice wine. The beating snake heart was considered an aphrodisiac associated with fertility, and consuming it would bestow upon the person the snake's symbolic divine attributes such as immortality, intelligence, and courage. In traditional medicine, the blood is supposed to heal headaches, while snake bile heals sore throat. The snake would then be prepared in 7 different dishes.

Nagas also appear in *The Reamker* (cca 7th century), a Cambodian epic poem based on the Sanskrit Ramayana. According to Judith Jacob and Haksrea Kuoch's analysis of *Reamker*, the *nagas* live in Patal's aquatic underworld (Jakob and Haksrea, 2007). Jeremy Roberts notes that, according to Buddhist lore, they had palaces in the underworld, and deities and immortals visited them (Roberts, 2010) David Leeming classifies them as personifications of terrestrial waters and door and gate guardians. He also notes that their primary role is as protectors of the underworld. They are also said to bestow fertility and wealth in certain places worldwide (Leeming, 2001). If the *Naga* are appropriately worshipped, they can bring about prosperity and, if not, disaster.

Another legend involving *nagas* and the transition from one historical age to another portrays the God Vishnu sleeping on the



Fig. 11 - Independence Monument – Phnom Penh Cambodia – Personal Archive

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sacrificial remnants of the old world, the remainder of the cosmic sacrifice represented by the *Naga* Sesa or Ananta (the infinite). Vishnu and his avatar Krishna are portrayed as conquerors of serpents, indicating their power over waters and the potential chaos represented by the serpent principle (Leeming, 2001).

Ian Charles Harris notes the ancient Khmer empire continuity in how they patterned the land. For example, Angkorian capitals were placed on the southern side of a sacred mountain and open to the east. It was also located at the confluence of two rivers, where the male and female *Naga* were supposed to meet. Such a location would ensure fertility in every sense of the term throughout the whole kingdom. However, Harris notes that if such features did not exist, they could have been built, thus explaining the colossal man-made reservoirs we can now observe in the Siem Reap region near Angkor Wat (Harris, 2005).

There are also many local legends mentioning the *Naga*. One of them is “Phadaeng Nang Ai” (“King Phadaeng and Princess Aikham”). The story is about the Khmer Princess Arkham, who falls in love with Lao King Phadaeng. Princess Aikham's father organizes a contest, the winner of which will get his daughter's hand in marriage. During the game, a *naga* prince named Phangki falls in love with the princess and tries to win her affection by turning into a white squirrel with a bell. Phangki ends up being shot by the kingdom's hunters. With his last breath, Phangkhi asks the gods to share the meat with everyone in the kingdom and that the people who eat his meat will die like him. When the *Naga* King Suttho finds out about his son's death, he orders his soldiers to kill everyone who ate the meat. King Phadaeng tries to save Aikham but then dies and becomes a ghost king who leads a spirit army against Suttho. The epic battle stops only when the God Indra intervenes and orders them to wait for the next incarnation of the Buddha (Arne, 2009).

Other stories such as the epistolary chronicles „Saan Son Thi Khud” („The Message of Wishes”) and „Saan Rak Samoenet” („The Message of Love”) are, on the one hand, metaphors describing love and passion by they also convey political meanings. For example, „The Sun-Blocking Message”

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portrays a giant garuda bird blocking the sun and overshadowing the moon. In this story, the Garuda represents the kingdom of Siam. On the other hand, the moon and its guardian, the Naga, stand for Laos. The story's closing line reflects the alienation of the Lao people within the Siamese empire (Arne, 2009).

The *Naga* is also an essential part of the wat (or temples) construction style in the area. In the case of the Vientiane style, the roof's edges represent different levels of Buddhist cosmology. They are decorated with dramatic *Naga* depicting the mythical sea serpent that protected the Buddha (Arne, 2009). More recently, the *Naga* was employed as a symbol of national independence.

The Independence Monument, built in the 1950s in central Phnom Penh, commemorated Cambodia's independence from the French and was designed to echo Angkorian architecture and is crowned with Khmer nagas deliberately (White, 2010). The *Naga* are also present at the Royal Palace and Silver Pagoda complex and Wat Phnom, two of the most important landmarks of Phnom Penh. Of course, the *Naga* are also present at Angkor Wat, Cambodia's

foremost symbol to the outside world, a temple initially dedicated to the God Vishnu. *Nagas* are also displayed at the Bayon temple, where we can find a colossal statue of the king



*Fig. 12 - Nagaraja Mucalinda
protecting Buddha
Sculpted Sandalwood – Yangon –
Burma
Personal Collection*

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Jayavarman VII (AD 1190) protected by the seven-headed *Naga*. The figure is entitled *Jaya Bot Mohania* and is displayed near the Victory gate of the Bayon temple complex (White, 2010). The Bayon temple's original purpose was to house a colossal statue of the Buddha protected by the *naga* king Mucalinda (Harris, 2005).

The Wat Phou temple in Cambodia also shows *nagas*, this time in a more negative symbolic association. The temple's central sanctuary shows images of Krishna defeating the Naga Kaliya, the God Indra riding Airavata, and Vishnu astride Garuda.

The exact symbolic origin and function of Khmer culture of certain representations of the naga-protected Buddhas are still debated among archeologists. The image was borrowed into Khmer culture in the 10th century. On the one hand, there is the story from Buddhist lore of the Nagaraja Mucalinda, a seven-headed king of the serpent gods. It is said that Mucalinda sheltered the Buddha by spreading the cobra-like hoods of his seven heads over him during a seven-day rainfall. When it stopped raining, the Buddha achieved enlightenment, and the serpent king was transformed into a young prince who honored Buddha (Roberts, 2010). This image symbolizes the fact that the Nagas are placing their powers in the service of the Buddha (Leeming, 2001). Jeremy Roberts notes that the nagas are said to guard the Buddhist scriptures in Tibetan Buddhism. In other legends, the Naga serves the Indian God Vishnu.

However, some archeologists believe that in the case of the Khmer representations, there is not enough evidence to postulate that for the Khmer, these images are representations that specifically or primarily evoke the episode in which a serpent shelters Sakyamuni during the third week following his enlightenment. Such archeologists instead postulate the theory that the fundamental concepts involve the serpent's function as a container of transformative powers and a means of transporting the soul to a heavenly realm. Beneath the *Naga*, there is a bird, which seems to be supporting the serpent. The type of representation appears to be very connected with Cambodian cultural hegemony, and we may note that it disappeared with it in the period after the thirteenth century

Creaturi imaginare terestre, aeriene și acvatică

(Woodward, 2005). In this artistic interpretation, we may deal, as Hiram Woodward points out, with a symbolic combination of real and imaginary realms. Thus, in his view, the bird and *Naga* belong to the fantastical realm. On the other hand, the vessel in which the Buddha sits belongs to the real (Woodward, 2005).

Ian Harris also mentions the *Naga* in the context of symbolically linking the earthly realm to the heavens, pointing out that placing *nagas* at temple entrances symbolizes the passage from one realm to another (Harris, 2005). This interpretation would also make sense in light of Zhou Duguan's observation about the Khmer King's night coupling with a *naga* princess. Thus, the coupling provides the monarch with a direct daily connection to the realm of the gods.

It is worth noting that Thailand and Laos absorbed the myth of the *naga* snake representation as lord of the soil and waters from Cambodia. However, Burma, although closer to India, the origin of the *naga* image, did not absorb this tradition (Cady, 1966). Therefore, their pictures of *Naga*-protected Buddhas are to be interpreted in the key of the story of Mucalinda. Burmese legends are also full of *Naga* appearances.

While traveling to Yangon, the capital city of Burma, I examined Schwedagon Pagoda, one of Buddhism's most sacred sites, and noticed many representations. Upon researching their origins, I encountered the legend saying that the *Naga* raised from the riverbed the hill on which the sacred pagoda stands (Muller, 1918). Further up north into Burmese territory, in the area known as Bagan, I observed more *naga* representations, particularly at Ananda temple (Ananda means „*Naga King*” in Sanskrit), where there are numerous terra-cotta plaques covered with *Naga* designs.

The *Naga* is also part of the Burmese zodiac (see Fig. 4), where it is associated with Saturday, the planet Saturn and the Southwestern geographical coordinate.

It is noteworthy to observe that the *Naga* in China, on the other hand, had a negative symbolic connotation. The Chinese interpreted the *Naga* as an evil dragon, most often associated with evil and destruction. They were creatures who guarded fantastic treasures, raided villages, and fought with the

Creaturi imaginare terestre, aeriene și acvatic

Garuda bird, which in China became associated with Lei Gong, the God of thunder (Roberts, 2010).

3. Garuda (Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos)

In Hindu and Buddhist mythology, the Garuda is a giant species of half-bird/half-man creature. A Garuda has a man's torso and face and an eagle's wings and beak. It has large wings and sharp claws. Sax Boria in *The Mythical Zoo* places Garuda in the same category of mythical birds as the European griffin, the Arabian Roc, and the Persian Simorgh (Boria, 2001). In Hindu mythology, the Garuda is the mount of the God Vishnu, used by God to travel through the cosmos. It is a beast of unfathomable power but also wise, gentle, and respectful. It is said that its wings can create storms. The Garuda is one of the main characters of the Indian epic Mahabharata (Wee and Flores, 2017). There are also representations of the Buddha riding Garuda (Woodward, 2005). Steven Kossak and Edith Watts interpret Garuda as a solar symbol of power (Kossak and Watts, 2001). David Leeming further emphasizes this role by noting that the Garuda represents both the sun and fire. According to mythology, the Garuda is the arch-enemy of the *Naga*.

The *Bhagavata Purana* tells how the Nagas present Garuda with an offering each fortnight to protect themselves from his tendency to devour them otherwise (Leeming, 2001). This mythological relation has been transferred to literature. For example, in the literature of Laos, we



Fig. 13 Garuda on the National Seal of Thailand

can find poems that associate Naga with Laos. In contrast, the Garuda is associated with Thailand (known back then as Siam), signaling the uneasy relationship

Creaturi imaginare terestre, aeriene și acvatic

between Laos and the Siamese Empire. The Khmers of Cambodia also focused on this symbolic dichotomy in the Cambodian epic poem *Reamker*, where we find numerous instances of *garudas* fighting *nagas*. We should not forget that the Khmer Empire's downfall was partly due to invasions from the Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya; therefore, the Khmer embraced the idea of Cambodian Nagas fighting Thai Garuda birds. On the other side of the fence, the Garuda can be found everywhere in ancient Siam and modern Thailand, from bank notes (since the 13th century), government documents and official flags. The emblem of the Thai government is a frontal image of Garuda in red, adopted by King Rama VI in 1893. The connection of the Thai with the Garuda can be traced back to an ancient legend from the Indian epic Ramayana. According to the legend, Vishnu made a deal with the Garuda. In exchange for immortality, the Garuda promised to become Vishnu's mode of transport. During the Ayutthaya period, Thais believed that the king was a god who came down from the heavens like a Garuda to serve humankind. Nowadays, a Garuda flag is exhibited above royal residences to signify the king's presence. Private businesses deemed worthy are awarded by the monarchy the permission to use the Garuda symbol on merchandise. It is considered a great honor and a mark of distinction for any Thai company.

Wat Phou in Laos is another temple where we can find a lintel portraying the God Vishnu on Garuda, Krishna defeating the Naga Kaliya, and the God Indra riding his mount Airavata, the flying elephant (White, 2010). It is significant to note that the confrontation between Krishna and Kaliya occurred because the Naga insulted Vishnu by taking an offering away from Garuda, Vishnu's mount (Leeming, 2001).

Garuda representations can be found in zoomorphic form (a colossal bird) or anthropomorphic (half human, half bird) in many places, such as the throne hall of the Royal Palace of Cambodia, the roof of which is decorated with both nagas and garudas. Nowadays, the throne hall is used for welcoming foreign diplomats and coronations (Eyewitness Travel, 2011). They can also be observed within the Angkor Thom temple complex on the Terrace of the Elephants and Banteay Kdei (Citadel of the Cells). The temple of Pre Rup is also decorated with balustrades where the Garuda is represented on the back of a three-headed serpent.

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Modern Indonesia has the Garuda bird adapted as the national emblem. In Burma, the Garuda bird is part of the zodiac representing Sunday, the sun, and the direction of the Northeast. (See Fig. 3) The commando forces of India also have the Garuda as their main symbol. Other countries that used the image include Japan, Mongolia, Nepal, Suriname, and the Philippines.

4. Yaksha (Thailand)

Yaksha is a class of nature spirits with animal features such as wings for ears, usually benevolent but sometimes capricious. They are connected with water, fertility, trees, the forest, treasure, and wilderness.

They appear in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist texts and ancient and medieval temples in South Asia and Southeast Asia as guardian deities (Wikipedia). The sub-variant of Yaksha representation I encountered during my trips to Southeast Asia was the variant present in Thailand.

The first such guardian every foreign traveler encounters is the giant five-meter-tall one exhibited at Suvarnabhumi International Airport. Underlying their primary function as gatekeepers and gate guardians, in this case, literally guarding the airport gate terminal. In the international airport, twelve more Yaksha stand vigilantly, protecting the people of Thailand from evil.

They can be found guarding the entrances to the Grand Royal Palace in Thailand and various vital temples such as Wat



*Fig. 14 - Yaksha at Wat Phra Kaew
Bangkok – Thailand – Personal Archive*

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Phra Kaew (The Temple of the Emerald Buddha), Thailand's most important Buddhist temple. The feminine gender of the Yaksha is Yakshinis, and they can also be found as temple guardians, the Yaksha on the right side and the Yakshini on the left. They are also very present in Thai folklore and Buddhist literature. They are the counterpart of what in the west we call the ogre ogresses (although more benevolent than the latter two).

David M. Lucas and Charles W. Jarrett uncover many of the Yak's symbolic significances in their research paper *The Yak of Thailand: Folk Icons Transcending Culture, Religion, and Media*. Initially, the Yak was a symbolic guardian and caretaker of the resources of the mystical forests of South Asia. Their



Fig 15 - Yaksha at the Royal Grand Palace – Bangkok – Thailand –

representations are tall as to convey a sense of power. What may be rather interesting to the foreign viewer is that in the local folklore, many people, particularly among the uneducated strata of society, believe that some of the Yaksha are real and not simply statues or representations of mythological creatures. For example, there are legends such as the one concerning the

Yaksha guarding the king's Palace. The legend goes that

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didn't. The Yaksha then played a prank on the wizard and threw him in the water and started to laugh. Upset, the wizard told the Yaksha that he would guard the royal Palace from then onwards and commanded him: „Go now! Stand like a stone and never leave your post! To this day, the Yaksha stands at the gates of the Palace in payment for his disobedient act (Lucas and Jarett, 2014).” Lucas and Jarett also note there are believers making offerings to the Yaksha:

„She approaches the Yak with head bowed, eyes to the ground. She carries a set of worship beads along with a small chain of flowers. About five feet from the base of the huge, imposing image of the Yak, she kneels. She speaks quietly toward the image but never raises her eyes (or head) to view the face or embodiment of the giant. For over five minutes, she speaks. After speaking, she puts the ring of flowers on the base of the Yak along with the beads. She backs away, never turning her back to the image before her. After she moves over 20 feet beyond the Yak, she turns and disappears into the crowd (Lucas and Jarett, 2014).”

„The Yak can read a person's heart. The Yak knows if you mean to desecrate the temple or cause harm to worshippers. Although the Yak may appear as a statue, he can come alive if necessary. He may come upon you later as you walk in another place or sleep in your bed at night. If the Yak wants to find you, he will find you. He prevents evil from coming into the sacred place or heart. (Respondent 47) (Lucas and Jarett, 2014)”

„My parents taught me that if I did not obey them, the Yak would come and eat me up. I believed them. I was afraid. In fact (laughing), I am still afraid. When I am walking by, I rush past the Yak if it comes to life!” (Respondent 22) (Lucas and Jarett, 2014)

Thus, we see how for many believers in that legend, the Yaksha guarding the Palace is not just a mere representation of a Yaksha; it is the genuine creature standing guard!

Lucas and Jarett conclude that taken together, the spatial configuration and formal composition of the Grand Palace

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demonstrate that Siamese architecture operates as a system of signs, a culturally constructed artifact, instead of an object existing in its given nature. It is bound with the concept of the Triphum, or the three realms of existence (Heaven, earth, and the underworld). The architecture of Siam [Thailand] is infused with cosmological symbolism.



Fig. 16 - Yaksha Guardians (Foto Personal Archive)

The Yak offers symbolic spiritual protection for the worshipping folk and the temple structure itself. In the temple's symbolic and spiritual world of the temple good battles evil, and Yaksha guardians keep the evil out while permitting good to enter. (Lucas and Jarett, 2014)

The Yaksha can be convinced to help in simple requests such as guarding a sum of money, providing safety in a family journey, or saving a dying loved one. Not all Yaksha statues, however, are perceived as real. Some are, and some aren't, according to legend and the people who believe in them. Generally speaking, the Yaksha conveys the idea of stability, protection, and power. Each Yaksha is

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endowed with a sword to guard the temple/palace from evildoers.

5. Kinnari (Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos)

The Kinnari is another mythical hybrid creature, half-woman, half-bird. Legend says that Kinnari lives in the Himavanta forest around mount Meru, the sacred mountain of the Hindus, a forest inaccessible to ordinary humans.

They are known for their carefree kindness, dancing, singing, and poetry, a traditional symbol of feminine beauty, grace, perfection, and accomplishment. They are known to inspire artists in this sense, like the Muses of Ancient Greece. Similarly to Christian angels, the Kinnari watch over the well-being of people in dangerous times and are innocent and harmless. In legend, they go together in pairs (kinnara is the male of the species). In the ancient Indian epic of the *Mahabharata* (*The Book of the Beginning*), the Kinnari make their symbolic nature known:



Fig. 17. Kinnari Statue Royal Palace – Bangkok - Thailand

„We are the everlasting lover and beloved. We never separate. We are eternally husband and wife; we never become mother and father. We are the lover and beloved, ever-embracing. In between us, we do not permit any third creature to demand affection. Our life is a life of perpetual pleasures. (Subodh, 2005)”

Burmese Buddhists believe that out of the 136 past animal lives of Buddha, four were kinnara. Legends of the creature can be found in Thai, Khmer, Burmese and Lao literature. Since the

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creature is half human, it is considered closer to the people and interacts with humans. Due to their wings, they can move from the sacred world to that of humans.

The most famous legend, including the Kinnari, involves the poetic story of Suthon and Manora found in the original Sanskrit source *Kinnari Jataka* from the *Mahavastu* (Great Story). The story can be found in different variants in Thai, Khmer, Mon, Shan, and Burmese literary contexts. The tale centers on the Kinnari Manora and prince Suthon. The story starts with Manora having a bath in a lake belonging to the human realm. However, she is captured by a hunter who uses a magic noose belonging to a *naga* and cannot return to the sacred Himavanta forest near mount Meru. In the human realm, she meets prince Suthon, heir to the kingdom with whom she falls in love and marries. However, the two are broken up because Suthon is sent to fight a battle for the kingdom. While he is absent, a court counselor misinterprets a dream of the king and requests the sacrifice of Manora. She escapes the kingdom and returns to the sacred forest when she finds out. When Suthon finds out she left, he undergoes a perilous journey facing a series of vicissitudes and trials to the sacred grove where, as we have previously mentioned, no mortal was allowed. He reunites with Manora, and the two live happily ever after. In the story, Suthon has the status of a Bodhisatva (Buddha-to-be), and Manora represents ideal beauty described in traditional Thai format with many epithets, metaphors, and similes.

The story enjoyed many translations into European languages. For example, in the German language we have



Fig. 18 – Kinnari Statue – Royal Palace – Bangkok - Thailand

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Muschelprinz und Duftended Blute: Liebesgeschichten aus Thailand, in French *Histoire de Nang Manora et histoire de Sang Thong: deux recits du Recueil des cinquante Jataka. Traduits du siamois* and in English *The Sudhana-Manohara tale in Thai: a comparative study based on two texts from the National Library, Bangkok and Wat Machimawat, Songkhla* (Williams, 2020).

There is also a Thai female folk dance, „Nora,” I witnessed while traveling through southern Thailand that has a title similar to the story and reenacts scenes from the tale (similar to opera). The performers wear wings, beads, and traditional Thai headgear costumes. Dancers move their bodies and limbs in intricate ways that require years of continuous practice by the dancers to master.

6. Vietnam's 4 Sacred Mythical Animals (Dragon, Phoenix, Tortoise, and Unicorn)

The four sacred Vietnamese animals are the dragon (Long), the unicorn (Ky Lan), the tortoise (Quy), and the phoenix (Phượng Hoàng), which respectively symbolize four cardinal characteristics: power, intelligence, longevity, and nobility. All four animals appear recurrently as architectural decorations in Royal Palaces, temples, pagodas, and tombs. According to Dang Van Ban, the dragon image in Vietnam represents the people's desire to free themselves from restrictions and limitations, symbolizing human aspiration and strength (Tuan, 2013).



*Fig. 19 - Imperial Dragon - Independence Palace - Ho Chi Minh City - Vietnam
(Foto Personal Archive)*

All four sacred animals are present in Chinese and other Asian cultures too. Due to the historical interaction and exchange between northern Asia and Vietnam, the Vietnamese versions partly share the symbolism of

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its roots in the northern part of the Asian continent. Within this subchapter, I will focus more on the Vietnamese specificities and legends that mention these animals and give them meaning within a Vietnamese context and less on the Chinese symbolism that has already been analyzed in many different works.

The dragon is associated with traditionally masculine attributes, while the phoenix is with female ones. This is why Vietnamese emperors would adorn themselves with dragon symbols in the pre-colonial age while empresses with phoenixes ones. They are also part of the broader dichotomy of Yin and Yang, the phoenix being associated with feminine Yin energy while the phoenix with the masculine Yang. These are characteristics that the Vietnamese dragon share with its northern counterpart.

Particularly in Vietnam, however, the dragon is also a national symbol since it is connected with the foundational myth of the Vietnamese people as descendants of the Dragon Lord Lac Long Quan. According to the legend, the Dragon Lord is a mythical creature that historically helped the Vietnamese people in their times of need, particularly in their struggle against foreign invaders from the Chinese empire. To quote one of my earlier articles on the topic:

„The Dragon Lord is what we may call a mythical marine „culture hero” or „civilization hero” that came from what now today is the South China Sea. According to legend, he taught the ancient people living in the Red River Delta (today Northern Vietnam) how to plant rice, wear clothes, and battle the local demons. Lac Long Quan instructed the ancient Vietnamese people to call him if they needed help. This event came to pass when the people belonging to the kingdom to the north (today's China) wanted to expand their empire to the south. The northern king came along with his army and his wife, Au Co. The southerners, who did not have a military leader then, invoked the help of the mythical Lac Long Quan. The Dragon Lord returned, and his strategy was to kidnap Au Co from the king and take her to the top of Tan Vien Mountain. The northern king retreated with his army when he could not defeat the dragon lord. Au Co fell in love with the Dragon Lord and gave birth to a sack of 100 eggs that grew up to be children. However, after some time, the couple split, and Lac Long

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Quan took 50 of the children with him back into the sea while Au Co took the other 50 with her into the mountains. Those left with Au Co grew up to be the ancestors of the Hung Kings and the Vietnamese people.”



*Fig. 20 - Dragon Fountain - Hoi An - Vietnam
(Foto. Personal Archive)*

There is thus a Vietnamese proverb saying that the Vietnamese are *con rồng cháu tiên* (children of the dragon and grandchildren of the fairy). Other folk tales include that of the present UNESCO Heritage site, Ha Long Bay (Dragon Bay) which is believed to be the creation of a dragon, the mountains and hills in the bay are explained as part of the dragon that is still under water.

Hanoi in the ancient past used to be called *Thăng Long*, meaning „rising from a dragon,” because of a legend stating that in 1010, a golden dragon suddenly made itself apparent near Emperor Ly Thai To's boat. The dragon thus became a symbol of nobility.

Regarding the Vietnamese image coding and representation, the dragon with five claws was only reserved for imperial use. At the same time, the one with four feet was associated with royal dignitaries and high-ranking officials. For commoners, their dragon could only have three claws (Chonchirdsin, 2013). Symbolically the Vietnamese dragon combines features of the crocodile, snake, cat, rat, and bird.

Different dynasties have created other representations of the dragon. Thus, when trying to date an ancient artifact that bears the image of a dragon, it can be quickly done by analyzing the

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specific representation characteristic of a particular dynasty.

That being said, if the dragon signifies the image of the Emperor, the phoenix (Phượng Hoàng) signifies that of the empress.

The Vietnamese phoenix is somewhat different from what we imagine a phoenix to be in the western world. In legends, it is



*Fig. 21. Phoenix Decorated Box - Ho Chi Minh City Museum
(Foto Personal Archive)*

represented as having the neck of a snake, a swallow's breast, a tortoise's back, and a fish's tail. Its song includes all five musical notes of the pentatonic musical scale, and the feathers have five different colors: black, white, red, green, and yellow. The bird symbolizes grace, virtue, and pride. The Vietnamese phoenix, similar to the one we know of in the west, also rose from its ashes; therefore, it has a similar symbolic function of representing rebirth and regeneration. Legend has it that it hides in times of trouble and appears only in prosperous times, thus symbolizing peace as well.

The combination of the image of dragons and phoenixes represents lovers' happiness, good luck, status, and fame, the union of Yin and Yang. The combination of these two images can be observed not only in Vietnam but also in Thailand and is considered to be highly auspicious.

The tortoise (Quy) is another sacred Vietnamese animal symbolizing longevity and strength. The turtle is present in many local legends, such as the legend of the turtle god that helped King

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An Duong Vuong build Co Loa citadel near Hanoi. In another myth in which historical fact is blended with folklore, King Le Loi defeated the Chinese invaders in the 15th century. He gained the independence of Vietnam with the help of a sword given to him by the turtle god, a disciple of the mythical Dragon Lord, after which he returned the sword to Hoan Kiem Lake (Lake of the Restored Sword). Hoan Kiem Lake is a famous lake in the center of Hanoi where a one-hundred-year-old tortoise lived until 2016. Many in Vietnam believe that the Hoan Kiem Lake turtle that died was the incarnation of the 15th-century turtle that supposedly helped king Le Loi. The death of the turtle was dedicated a day of mourning in Hanoi. Some saw the turtle's death as a bad omen, even for the Communist Party Congress that was held in the next few days, and the Communist Party itself tried not to report on the turtle's death until after the congress. The turtle, Cu Rua (meaning great grandfather in Vietnamese), was embalmed.

Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to see the turtle since I first arrived in Vietnam one year after its death in 2017. However, I have observed the images of stone turtles within the confines of the Temple of

Literature in Hanoi, Vietnam's first university, built-in 1070. There, on display, are 82 steles inscribed with the names of doctors (we would say PhDs today) who graduated from the Temple of Literature to underline the importance of learning and possessing an excellent academic record. Dr. Dang Kim notes,



Fig. 22. Vietnamese Unicorn - Ky Lan - Ho Chi Minh City Museum - Vietnam

Creaturi imaginare terestre, aeriene și acvatice

„In the early 15th century, influenced by Confucianism and its respect for teachers, the Le Dynasty built the steles to honor those with good academic records and preserve the tradition of learning to pass on to the next generation” (Tuan, 2013).

The Vietnamese unicorn (Ky Lan) is also represented differently than we are used to in western culture. In the west, we are used to the image of a white horse with one horn above its forehead. The representation of the Vietnamese unicorn varies. There are three different representations specific to other geographic regions in Vietnam.

1. – the feet and horn of a deer, dog ears, forehead of a camel, eyes of an eagle, nose of a lion, mouth of a crocodile, body of a horse, and tail of a bull.

2. – a deer with a massive horn, a tiger's mouth, a catfish's mustache, fishlike fins, and bull hooves.

3. – a dragon's head and the body of a horse.

The Ky Lan is known as Qilin in China, Kirin in Japan, Girin in Korea, and Gilen in Thailand.

It is said that the appearance of Ky Lan brings good fortune and prosperity. It is also associated with intelligence, peace, and mercy. The animal sometimes is placed at pagoda entrances as guardians fulfilling thus the role that the Naga has in Cambodia, the Yaksha in Thailand, and lions in China.

It is associated with the famous „unicorn dance” (known as Lion Dance in other Asian cultures), which is performed during the New Year Celebrations. This dance in Vietnam is dedicated to the Ky Lan. The main difference between the Unicorn and Lion Dance is that in the Vietnamese version Ong Dia, the God of the earth, comes down to dance with the unicorn. I have witnessed the Ky Lan dance on three occasions in Saigon during the New Year celebrations.

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