

Garuḍa in Japan

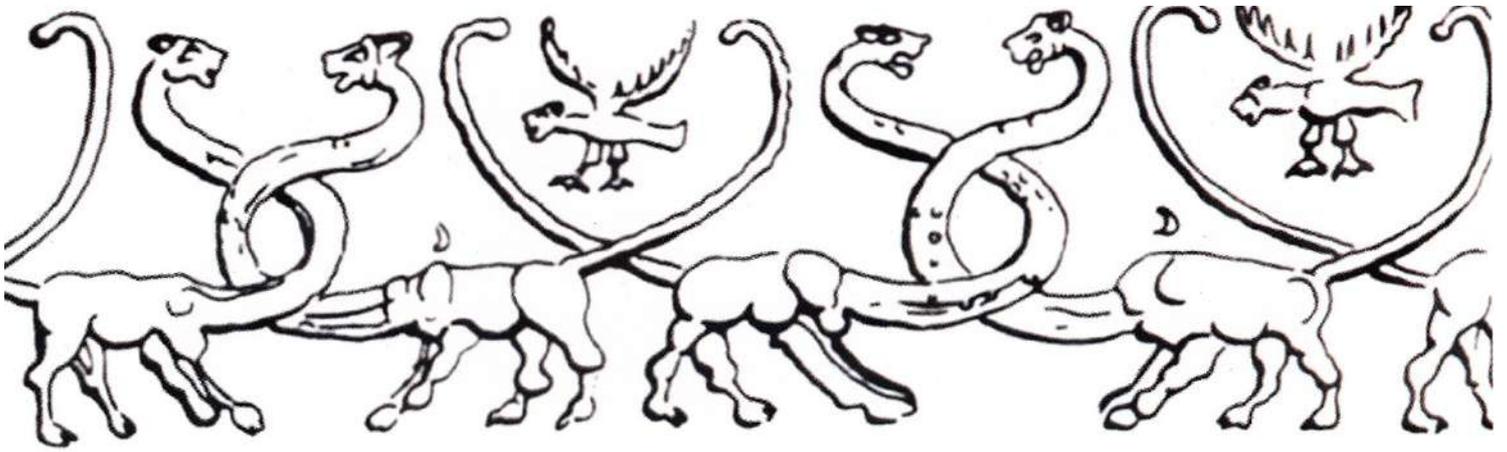
Prof. Etsuo Yamamoto

The symbolism of Bird and Snake as two major principles of the universe was born in Mesopotamia. It is quite obvious from the pattern on the cylinder seals of 3000 BCE. Subsequently, this motif was used often in Sumer (figs. 1,2,3). Clay seals which were a combination of a seal made around 2600 BCE during the Mature Harappan Period (2500-1500 BCE) and the pattern of bird and snake are preserved in the Karachi Museum, Pakistan. There was trade relation between the Mesopotamia and Indus Civilizations those days and the seals belonged to the owner of the cargo. Bird is believed to denote *Garuḍa* and snake, the *Nāga*. This was the first ever pattern of *Garuḍa* and *Nāga* in India (fig. 4). In the *Ṛgveda* compiled in India in c. 1500 BCE bird was regarded as a god and was called *Garutman* or *Suparṇa*. Later, divine bird in *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* was called *Garuḍa* and divine snake was called *Nāga*.

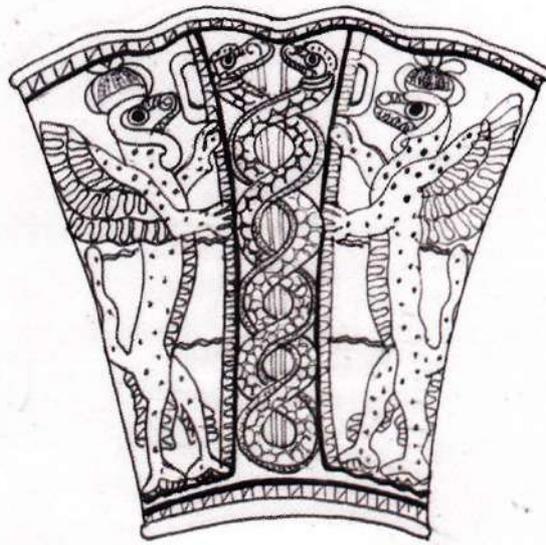
Around 2nd century BCE the faith of Viṣṇu and *Garuḍa* Pillar inscription flourished in India. Its instances are also to be seen in the inscription of Bharhut (fig. 5) belonging to the second half of 2nd century BCE where a queen-like lady carrying a *Garuḍa Dhvaja* is riding a horse. The inscription on the Heliodorus Pillar (fig. 6) of Besnagar, belonging to the same period is also important. In the *Vedic* mythology, *Garuḍa* was sitting on top of the cosmic pillar, the lowest end of was supported by *Nāga*. This was the expression of cosmic which dualism.

In Kuṣāṇa period (mid 1st century CE to late 5th century CE) *Garuḍa* was always depicted carrying *Nāga* (or *Nāgī*) in its long beak (fig. 7). In Gupta period (319-578 CE), *Garuḍa* was an integral part of Vaiṣṇavism and it was used as a Royal Emblem of Guptas. As Vaiṣṇavism was adopted as the National religion by Gupta rulers. Brahmanical faith prospered leading to the decline of Buddhism. In the process, there was a trend to adopt Brahmanical gods into Buddhism. *Garuḍa* and *Nāga* also became guardian deities during this time.

Let us now see what happened to *Garuḍa* which went Eastward from India alongwith Buddhism. There are many images of Maitreya engraved on the walls



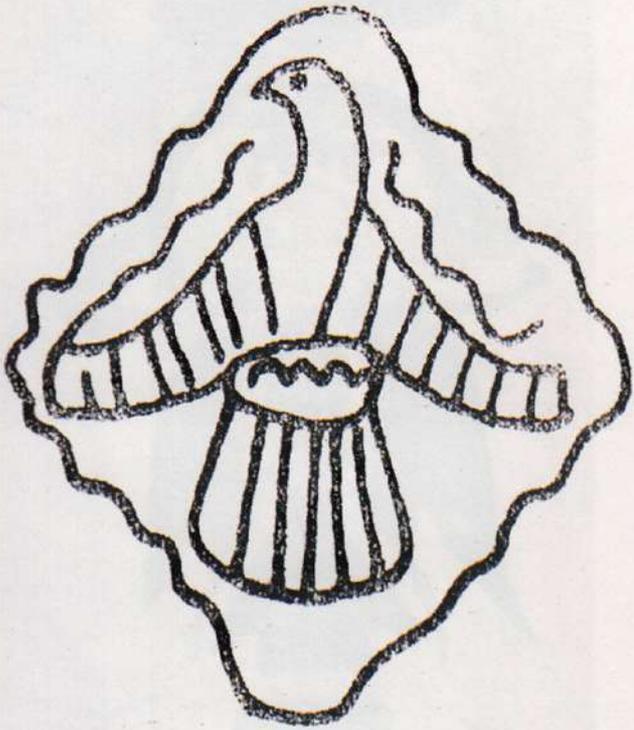
6.1: Mushhush and Anzu, Cylinder seal, 3000 BCE



6.2: Goblet of King Gudea, 2200 BCE



6.3: Cylinder seal of King Gudea, 2200 BCE



6.4: Seal of Bird and Snake, Indus Valley, 2300 BCE



6.5: Garuda-dhvaja, Bharhut (M.P., India), late 2nd century BCE



6.6: Heliodorus Pillar, Besnagar (M.P., India), late 2nd century BCE



6.7: Garuḍa, Gandhāra, 1st-3rd century CE



6.8: Cave 54, Kumta Thousand Buddhist Caves, China



6.9: Unkou Buddhist Cave, Sichuan Prefecture, China, late 5th century CE

of the cave temple in the Tamil Basin along the Silk route. The author would like to draw attention of the readers to the fact that on all the ceilings of Maitreya's cave *Garuḍa* is drawn (fig. 8). This also reminds of the relation between *Garuḍa* and *Viṣṇu*.

Leaving aside the Phoenix and Dragon based on the Taoist thought on immortalism, *Garuḍa* and *Nāga* as the guardian deities of Buddhism have not been found in Zhongyuan or in other words, central parts of ancient China. Perhaps they were destroyed by repeated vagaries of nature and wars. Existence of *Garuḍa* can be imagined from *Asura* among stone-made eight-guardian-*Devas* of Buddhism (late 5th century CE) that still survive in the Sichuan province (fig. 9). But in Japan, *Garuḍa* and *Nāga* were created in the 8th century CE.

There are two strong theories since the year of introduction of Buddhism in Japan. One puts it in 552 CE and the other in 538 CE. And then, there have been many new theories about its introduction in the recent years. However, based on the historical evidence there is no doubt that Buddhism was officially introduced around the middle of the 6th century CE during the reign of Emperor Kinmei (509-571 CE).

However, it was not the first time that Buddhism was transmitted to Japan. Before the official introduction of Buddhism, it had been transmitted to Japan as personal faith by Korean immigrants to Japan. They had even brought with them the statues as well as scriptures of Buddha. Those days, Japan had primitive Shintoism as the native religion. Buddha introduced as Śākyamuni, Bodhisattva, Myōō etc. was easily accepted as a god equal in rank to Shinto gods.

Horyūji Temple of Nūra (fig. 10) is known as the existing oldest wooden structure in the world. It was constructed in 607 CE but was burnt in a fire in 607 CE. It was soon re-constructed and was completed in 711 CE. Its 5 storey pagoda is 31.5 m. tall and among the central pillars, the one on the outer most part is estimated to be based on the tree rings belonging to 591 CE and is older as compared to other parts. It is believed that it was used from the original structure that got burnt down.

In the basement to the north side of the 5 storey pagoda of Horyūji temple, there is an image of Śākyamuni in *nirvāṇa* with eight-guardian-*Devas* of Buddhism such as *Garuḍa* and *Nāga* and his disciples watching under the *śāla* tree. This is the existing oldest image of *Garuḍa* and *Nāga* dedicated at the time of erection of



6.10: Horyūji Temple

the 5 storey pagoda in 711 CE. In case of a seated figure, there is a core wood on the square-shaped base plate and straws are wound around it and the mud mixed with cut straws is heaped up. After having put 3 layers of mud, finally white clay is put and coloured. Arms and fingers have copper wire as the core. Even part of the dress has copper plate as the core and it is believed that the shape was created using mud.

24 years later a life-size (149.73 cm.) statue of *Garuḍa* was created and was presented to the Nishikondō (an image hall situated to the west of a pagoda in temple grounds) of the Kōfukuji temple. *Garuḍa* of the Kōfukuji temple has the head of a bird and body of a human being.

The origin of Kōfukuji temple is traced to the Yamaśina temple of 669 CE, enshrining Buddha image. When the capital was shifted to Kyoto in 710 CE, it was renamed Kōfukuji and moved to present location in Nārā. And the Niśikondō which does not exist anymore was constructed by the Empress Kōmyō in 734 CE to hold the first memorieal service of her mother. A look at Kōfukuji Mandara (12th century CE) reveals that Niśikondō with principal Sakasanzon image in the centre, has the images of Brahmā, Taishakuten (Indra) eight-guardian-*Devas* and 10 leading discpiles etc. around it. The eight-guardian-*Devas* of Buddhism include *Asura, Garuḍa, Nāga, Gandharva, Kinanara, Hibakara, Deva* and *Kumblanda*. Eight guardian deities of Kōfukuji are all in human form except *Garuḍa* who has the head of a bird and body of a human being. These gods were adopted from Brahmanism and became the guardian deities of Buddhism.

Garuḍa of Sanjūsangendō unlike *Garuḍa* of Hōryūji and Kōfukuji plays a flute. The author has never come across *Garuḍa* playing flute elsewhere out of Japan. This *Garuḍa* is made of wood and belongs to the 13th century CE. Flute-playing *Garuḍa* is drawn in *Grabha-Koṣa* Mandara which Kūkai brought from China in 806 CE. The *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* is said to have been created in India around the middle of 7th century CE and the Indian priest Śubhakarasiṃha (637-735 CE) translated it into Chinese around 725 CE. Eka (746-805 CE) was of the opinion that the esoteric points of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* cannot be conveyed in words and asked the painter to draw Mandaras (*maṇḍalas*) and gave them to his discpiple Kūkai. And Kūkai at the time of his return to Japan after he completed his studies in Tang China in 806 CE carried these Mandaras with him. In the Mandara passed on to China from India, perhaps *Garuḍa* became a flute-playing



6.11: Sahasrabhujā, Sanjyuusangendou Temple

one due to imagination of the painter. *Garuḍa* of Sanjūsangendō was also perhaps created under the influence of *Garuḍa* of the Mandaras carried home by Kūkai. *Garuḍa* in Sanjūsangendō also plays flute and it is believed that it has been fashioned after the Manadara was brought by Kūkai from China.

Sanjūsangendō was completed on 30 January 1165 CE. At inception, it was a full-fledged temple with five storied pagoda etc. However, it got burnt down in 1249 CE and only its main temple part was rebuilt in 1266 CE. Sanjūsangendō that survives today is the one constructed then. Those days, it had vermilion exteriors and its interiors were also quite colourful.

In Sanjūsangendō, with the thousand-armed goddess of Mercy seated Senjū Kanon at the centre, a total of 1032 Buddhist images could be seen. 1001 images of thousand-armed goddesses of Mercy and twenty-eight guardian-*Devas* (flanked by gods of wind and thunder) are interesting. It is twenty-eight guardian-*Devas* which guard the thousand-armed goddess of Mercy. The thousand-armed goddess of Mercy is *Sahaśrabhujā Āryāavalokiteśvara* (fig. 11). It is believed to be reincarnation of Avalokiteśvara under the influence of Brahmanism. *Garuḍa* alongwith *Nāga* is part of twenty-eight guardian-*Devas*.

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