

The Ocean of Story

Annex 5

Note on the Garuḍa Bird

The Garuḍa bird is the vehicle of Viṣṇu. It is described as half-man and half-bird, having the head, wings, beak and talons of an eagle, and human body and limbs, its face being white, its wings red and its body golden.

Garuḍa is the son of one of the daughters of Dakṣha. The account of its miraculous birth and how it became the vehicle of Viṣṇu is given at the beginning of the *Mahābhārata* (I, xvi). Other adventures in its life, such as the attempt to stop Rāvaṇa from abducting Sītā, are described in the *Rāmāyāna* and the *Viṣṇu Purāna*.

As we shall see in [Appendix I](#), Garuḍa is an enemy of the Nāgas (snakes), and in this connection it is interesting to note that in the well-known story of “[Sindbad the Sailor](#)” the *roc* is represented as attacking gigantic snakes. From *Rig-Veda* days it is obvious that the sun is meant when reference is made to Garuḍa, and the myth in the *Mahābhārata* confirms this. Garuḍa also bears the name of Suparṇa, which is a word used for the bird-genii appearing in rock-carvings, etc.

Gigantic birds that feed on raw flesh are mentioned by the *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, Book II, chapter xli. Alexander gets on the back of one of them and is carried into the air, guiding his bird by holding a piece of liver in front of it. He is warned by a winged creature in human shape to proceed no farther, and descends again to earth. See also Liebrecht’s *Dunlop*, p. 143 and note. See also Birlinger, *Aus Schwaben*, pp. 5, 6, 7. He compares Pacolet’s horse in the story of Valentine and Orson. A *Wundervogel* is found among nearly every nation. It is best known to Europeans under the form *roc*, or more correctly *rukh*, owing to its appearance as such in the second voyage of Sindbad (see Burton’s *Nights*, [vol. vi, pp. 16, 17 and 49](#)). See Ad-Damīrī’s *Hayāt al-Hayawān* (zoological lexicon), trans. by A. Jayakar, 1906, vol. i, pp. 856, 857.

In Persia we find the bird was originally known as *amru*, or (in the *Minōi-Khiradh*) *sinamrū*, which shakes the fruit from the tree bearing the seed of all things useful to mankind. In later Persian times it is called *sīmurgh* and becomes the foster-father of [Zal](#), whose son was the Persian hero Rustam (see Sykes’ *History of Persia*, 2nd edition, 1921, vol. i, p. 136). The word *roc* is also Persian and has many meanings, including “cheek” (e.g. *Lalla Rookh*), “hero” or “soldier,” “tower” or “castle” (hence the piece “rook” in chess), a “rhinoceros,” etc.

In Arabia the bird is called ‘*anqā* (“long-necked”), and has borrowed some

of its features from the phoenix, that curious bird which [Herodotus](#) describes (ii. 73) as coming to Egypt from Arabia every five hundred years. (See Ad-Damīrī, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, part i, p. 401, and the *Ency. Of Islām*, under “ankā.”) Other curious myths connected with the phoenix (which has been identified with the stork, heron or egret, called *benu* by the ancient Egyptians) will be found in Pliny ([Nat. Hist.](#), x, 2), Tacitus (*Ann.*, vi. 28) and *Physiologus* (q.v.). The *benu* has been found to be merely a symbol of the rising sun, but it hardly seems sufficient to account for the very rare visits of the phoenix to Egypt (see article “Phoenix,” *Ency. Brit.*, vol. xxi, pp. 457, 458).

It is interesting to note that not only the Indian Garuḍa, but also the other great bird (half-eagle and half lion) of classical antiquity, the griffin, was connected with the sun, and furthermore was a guardian of precious stones, which reminds us of the tales of the *rukḥ* whose resting-place is covered with diamonds.

Tracing the huge-bird myth in other lands, we find it as the *hatthilinga* in Buddhaghosa’s *Fables*, where it has the strength of five elephants. In a translation of these parables from the Burmese by T. Rogers, which is really a commentary on the *Dhammapada*, or “Path of Virtue,” we find a story very similar to that in the *Ocean of Story*. Queen Sānavati is pregnant, and her husband, King Parantapa, gives her a large red cloak to wear. She goes out wearing this cloak, and just at that moment a *hatthilinga* flies down from the sky, and mistaking the queen for a piece of raw meat snatches her up and disappears in the sky again.

This fabulous bird becomes the *eorosh* of the Zend, the *bar yuchre* of the Rabbinical legends, the *kargas* or *kerkes* of the Turks, the *gryps* of the Greeks, and the *norka* of the Russians (see Ralston’s *Russian Folk-Tales*, [p. 73](#), with the numerous bibliographical references on [p. 80](#)).

In Japan there is the *pheng* or *kirni*, while in China most writers cite the sacred dragon. This, however, seems to me to be quite incongruous. I think the *an-si-tsio* or Parthian bird is much more likely to be the origin of Chinese bird myths. It is simply the ostrich, which was introduced to the Court of China from Parthia in the second century A.D. (see *Hôu-Han-shu*, 88, and Hirth, [China and Roman Orient](#), 39). The Chinese traveller Chau Ju-Kua in his *Chu-fan-chi*, a work on Chinese and Arab trade of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, speaks of Pi-p’a-lo (i.e. Berbera) as producing the “camel-crane,” which measures from the ground to its crown from six to seven feet. It has wings and can fly, but not to any great height.” For other references to the “camel-bird” see Henri Cordier’s *Notes and Addenda to the Book of Ser Marco Polo*, 1920, pp. 122, 123.

Many of the encounters with these enormous birds are reported to have been made at sea, usually during a terrific storm, but sometimes in a dead calm. Ibn Batuta gives a description of such an encounter (see Yule and Cordier’s *Cathay and the Way Thither*, vol. iv, p. 146). All of these stories are now put down to the well-known effects of mirage, abnormal reflection, or water-spouts.

So much for the mythological side of the *rukḥ*.

We now turn to the other side--namely, the possibility of the stories of huge

birds being founded on fact.

Attention was first drawn to Madagascar as being the possible home of the *rukḥ* after the discovery of the great fossil *Æpyornis maximus* and its enormous egg, a model of which can be seen in the British Museum. The chief investigations were made by Professor G. G. Bianconi of Bologna, a friend of Sir Richard Burton (see the *Nights*, vol. vi, p. 49). More recently bones of the *Harpagornis* have been discovered by Dr Haast in New Zealand. This bird must have been of enormous size, as it preyed upon the extinct *moa*, which itself was at least ten feet high. The work of Professor Owen and H. G. Seeley (who has recently died) has proved beyond doubt the existence of gigantic birds in comparatively recent times (see Seeley, [Dragons of the Air](#), London, 1901, which contains descriptions of various large pterodactyls).

It is impossible to state with any certainty whether a particular species of bird has died out through the agency of man or through natural causes, except in those few cases where the age of the beds in which the bones have been found is accurately known.

In the last few years a fine specimen of the *Diatryma* has been described by Matthew and Granger (1917) quite seven feet in height.

In northern Siberia the bones of great pachyderms have implanted a firm belief in the minds of the people of the former existence of birds of colossal size.

Marco Polo describes Madagascar as the home of the *rukḥ*, and it was the discovery of the *Æpyornis* remains in the island which has made the story more credulous. Yule (*Marco Polo*, vol. ii, [pp. 415-421](#)) gives a comprehensive account of the *rukḥ*, with a note on "[Ruc's quills](#)," on pp. 596, 597. See also the article in the *Dictionary of Birds*, 1893, by Professor Newton. By far the best bibliography on the whole question of these gigantic birds is to be found in Victor Chauvin's *Bibliographie des ouvrages Arabes* (a truly marvellous work), [Part V, p. 228](#), under "Le Garouda," and [Part VII, pp. 10-14](#), where the subject is treated under the headings, "Rokh," "Garouda," "Anqâ," "Sîmourg," "Griffon," with a list of general works, including those by Bianconi, on the *Æpyornis* of Madagascar. For further details concerning the mythical history of Garuda see Jarl Charpentier, *Die Suparnasage*, Upsala, p. 220 *et seq.*--N.M.P.

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Prepared for www.wollamshram.ca/1001/Ocean/Ocean_Main.htm
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