

Garuda, the Man-Bird as a Guardian King

Indonesia, Central Java, 9th-10th century

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Garuda is the mythical Lord of Birds in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. He is primarily known as the solar vehicle for the Hindu god Vishnu, preserver of the universe, whom Garuda transports with great speed to resolve calamities in the world. This superb sculpture with bulbous eyes, an eagle's beak, and large claws is a rare depiction of Garuda as a powerful demon-king and guardian (*rakshasa*).

Richly adorned, he sits cross-legged on a lotus plinth. His wings and tail feathers fan out across his back. His missing arms may have once held a serpent (*naga*)—the staple of his diet. His finely chiseled features and the curving lines of his robust body, reflecting Indian artistic conventions, convey a ferocious yet meditative and noble presence.

This magnificent sculpture attests to a period in Central Java that witnessed the flourishing of hundreds of Buddhist and Hindu temples with ambitious sculptural programs, including the great stupa at Borobudur.



Back: Garuda's dense, tightly curled hair is characteristic of a powerful demon-king and guardian. His wings (now damaged) fan out across his back over the tail feathers.