



English

The Khyung and the Great Sacred Birds

A Comparative Study of Mythical Birds
Across Civilizations

tibetanmyth.com • October 2026

An article prepared for tibetanmyth.com. Compiled: October 2026 (research notes compiled October 1, 2026).

Reading note: this article keeps three layers strictly apart. **[Myth]** marks narrative material from traditional literature and oral tradition; **[Scholarship]** marks conclusions drawn by researchers; **[Archaeology]** marks excavated objects or datable textual evidence. They are labeled wherever the distinction matters.

Introduction

The giant sacred bird is an image shared by civilizations across the world: the Tibetan **khyung** (ཁྱུང་), the Indian **garuḍa** (गरुड), the Chinese **peng** and **fenghuang** (phoenix), the Persian **Simurgh**, the Greek **phoenix**, the Egyptian **Bennu**, the North American **Thunderbird**, the Arabic **Roc**, the Slavic **Firebird**, and the Mesopotamian **Anzu**. This article examines each in turn — name, region, date and textual source, image and story — and then compares their shared motifs and asks which resemblances reflect real historical transmission and which arose independently.

The investigation begins with the Tibetan khyung, because it is the least familiar to most readers and because its story illustrates the central question of this study: when two traditions worship a great bird, did one borrow from the other, or did each invent its own?



Part 1: The Tibetan Khyung (ཁྱུང་, Wylie: khyung)

1.1 The Word and the Image

[Scholarship] The Tibet Museum's collection page defines Garuḍa as "the mythical bird of Indian origin known in Tibetan as Khyung," and adds a crucial qualification, citing Robert Beer's *Tibetan Buddhist Symbols* (2003, pp. 125–129): "The meaning of Khyung in the Tibetan context and of Garuḍa in the Indian mythology is very similar, **but in Tibetan art the Khyung is often represented horned.**" That pair of horns — an eagle wearing horns — is the single most distinctive visual signature of the Tibetan bird, and it is absent from the standard Indian garuḍa image.

Three features define the khyung's image in the scholarly literature:

- **Eagle form.** Chögyal Namkhai Norbu calls it "the garuḍa eagle" in his foreword to the first volume of the *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* (2013).
- **Horns.** Beyond Beer, the archaeologist John Vincent Bellezza observes that "the horned eagle is a totemic creature of Upper Tibet."
- **Plumage.** No scholarly source found in this research discusses the khyung's feather color in any detail. Thangka paintings usually render it in gold or warm ochre-red tones, but that is an observation about iconography, not a textual record — so it is left as an open question.

A note on translation. Many popular articles render *khyung* as "roc," but scholars reject this. A peer-reviewed paper (Yan et al., *Religions* 2022, 13, 719) states in a footnote: "While many articles translate khyung as roc, scholars generally believe that khyung and roc are two completely different cultural phenomena. Although they share some similarities, they also differ greatly, so they view the phonetic translation as being more accurate to convey the meaning of khyung." In other words, *khyung* should be transliterated, not translated as "roc."

1.2 Different Stations in Bön and Tibetan Buddhism

[**Scholarship**] In the **Bön** tradition, the khyung is bound to the element of fire. Namkhai Norbu writes that in the ancient civilization of Zhangzhung, "the Tibetan khyung, the garuḍa eagle ... symbolised the fire element in Bon." The bird is thus not merely a decorative creature but a cosmological power — fire itself, given wings.

[**Scholarship / living practice**] In contemporary Yungdrung Bön, that fire-power is still ritually alive.

Khyung Mar (ཁྱུང་དམར་, "the Red Khyung" or "Red Garuḍa") is an important tantric deity and healing practice. The Yeru Bon Center describes Khyung Mar as a "wisdom protector, and a manifestation of pure awareness ... represents the fiery power of energy ... protects against outer, inner, and secret obstacles," and presents the lineage as ancient.

[**Scholarship**] In **Tibetan Buddhism**, the khyung occupies a different, more functional station — primarily a protector deity and an auspicious beast:

- It is one of the **Four Dignities** (Four Sacred Animals) printed at the corners of the wind-horse prayer flag (see 1.4).
- In Mongolian mountain-deity liturgies written in Tibetan, the mountain god "dispatches the khyung [Garuḍa] and vultures as his messengers" (René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz's translation, cited in Krisztina Teleki's study of Mongol mountain-deity thangkas).
- Buddhism absorbed Garuḍa as a *class* of protector deities — unlike Hinduism, where Garuḍa is a single god (see Part 2).

In short: in Bön the khyung stands closer to the cosmological plane — an elemental fire-god and a shamanic bird of power — while in Tibetan Buddhism it is more often a protector, an auspicious emblem, and a translation equivalent. Its divinity is, in a sense, "functionalized."

1.3 Origins: Zhangzhung, Bön, and the Earliest Texts and Artifacts

(a) The Zhangzhung kingdom and place-name evidence. [**Scholarship**]

Zhangzhung (also spelled Shangshung) was the ancient kingdom and cultural sphere of western Tibet that preceded Tibetan Buddhist civilization (roughly 500 BCE–625 CE), and it is closely tied to Bön. Norbu proposed an etymological hypothesis: the name "Shangshung" may originally have been simply "Shung," and "the word 'Shung' [zhung] corresponds to the Tibetan khyung." Near Mount Kailash there is still a place called **Khyunglung** (ཁྱུང་ལུང་, "khyung valley"), which Norbu notes "was for a time capital of the kings of Shangshung."

The ruins of **Khyunglung Ngulkhār** (ཁྱུང་ལུང་དངུལ་མཁར་, khyung lung dngul mkhar), on the upper Suttle southwest of Mount Kailash, are identified as the site of that Zhangzhung capital. A Tibetan-tourism archaeology page glosses the name plainly: "Khyung means the Garuda, a mythical bird."

(b) Rock-art evidence. [Archaeology / Scholarship]

On Tashi Island in Lake Namtso, northern Tibet, the **byaru** rock carvings show a kneeling worshiper at an altar in the upper register and a larger bird figure below. Researchers (Zhang 2006; Nancuojie and Cheng 2015, discussed in Yan et al., *Religions* 2022) interpret this as a Zhangzhung Bön "bird shaman" — a ritualist cloaked in feathers, performing in bird form, in communion with the divine bird "khyun." The feathers of the shaman's headdress, they write, "resembled birds with horns" — a striking match for the horned khyung, and a sign of the shaman's power.

The same paper's footnote 18 records a Zhangzhung royal tradition: the eighteen kings of Zhangzhung wore **bya-ru** ornaments. "'Bya' means bird, and here it refers to the khyung of birds, or the bya-brgya-khyung (the king of a hundred birds). 'Ru' refers to the horn." The "dome bird horn" was the crown ornament of Zhangzhung kingship — a marker of royal power — and Tibetan texts record that differences in byaru materials corresponded to differences in royal rank.

(c) Imperial-period Tibetan texts. [Archaeology / Scholarship]

Bellezza cites Old Tibetan funerary ritual texts (circa 8th–9th century): the horses that carried the souls of the dead to the heavens wore horned headdresses, and the horns were given bird-like attributes. Later Yungdrung Bön texts say that bird horns can subdue the evil forces blocking the dead on their journey to rebirth.

The Dunhuang Tibetan scrolls are an important textual carrier of bird lore from the Tibetan imperial period (8th–9th century) — for example, traditions of bird divination in which crows foretell fortune and misfortune, interpreted by ritual specialists. However, this research did not recover a specific Dunhuang manuscript number containing the word *khyung*; that remains a gap (see "Unverified / Research Gaps").

(d) Bön canonical texts. The sources retrieved here are second-hand: Norbu's fire-element teaching and the contemporary Khyung Mar practice. No original Bön canonical passage on the khyung (such as a khyung tantra) was directly consulted. That, too, remains a gap.

A chronological summary. [Scholarship] The verifiable evidence chain for the khyung — the horned sacred bird — runs as follows: Zhangzhung-period place names and royal ornaments (byaru) → imperial-period (8th–9th century) funerary texts and rock art → later Bön tantric practice (the Red Khyung) → the contemporary wind-horse flag image. Direct textual evidence predating the arrival of Buddhism (7th century) still rests mainly on place-name studies and rock-art interpretation, and scholars continue to debate how much weight they can bear.

1.4 Regional Distribution and the Four Dignities on the Wind-Horse Flag

[Scholarship] The **wind horse** flag (**lungta**, ལུང་རྟ་, rlung rta) carries at its center the wind horse itself, bearing a flaming jewel, and at its four corners four auspicious beasts — the **dragon, the snow lion, the garuḍa/khyung, and the tiger** — together called the **Four Dignities** (Four Sacred Animals).

The wind horse itself is a pan-Himalayan concept (fortune, the "wind horse"). The University of Virginia's Mandala project notes an earlier spelling, ལུང་རྟ་ (klung rta, "river horse" or "horse of space"), and reports a linguistic hypothesis that the Tibetan word for "wind" (rlung) and the Chinese word for "dragon" (pinyin: long) sound alike, so that "dragon horse" (lung ma) may have been corrupted into "wind horse." That hypothesis is speculative and not settled in the field.

Regional distribution. [Scholarship] The points where khyung imagery or belief can be verified are:

- **Ngari (western Tibet):** Khyunglung Ngulkhar, the Zhangzhung capital site southwest of Mount Kailash;
- **Northern Tibet:** the Tashi Island rock art at Namtso (the bird shaman);
- **All of Tibet and Mongolia:** the Four Dignities on wind-horse flags (used across the Tibetan cultural world), and the khyung as messenger in Mongolian mountain-deity liturgies;
- **Kham and Amdo:** no dedicated studies of khyung worship or imagery in these regions were found in this research. Bön has deep roots in eastern Kham (today's Ngawa in Sichuan, among other places), but the direct link to khyung imagery there has not been verified.

1.5 The Khyung and the Indian Garuḍa: Assimilation or Import?

[Scholarship] Two scholarly framings exist, and they are really complementary:

The translation-equivalence / fusion view. The Tibet Museum and Beer represent the mainstream dictionary position: *khyung* is the standard Tibetan translation of Sanskrit *garuḍa*; "the meaning of Khyung in the Tibetan context and of Garuḍa in the Indian mythology is very similar." On this view the Indian origin holds: Buddhist translators rendered *garuḍa* as *khyung*, and the Indian myths — the serpent-eagle enmity, the protector-deity status — were accepted along with the word.

The indigenous-preexistence view. The Zhangzhung–Bön evidence chain (the horned bird shaman, the byaru crown, the fire-element symbolism, the Khyunglung place name) indicates that the Tibetan plateau already possessed its own sacred "khyung" bird cult before Buddhism arrived. When Buddhist translators later borrowed the ready-made word *khyung* to translate *garuḍa*, the indigenous bird was assimilated to — overlaid by — the scriptural "garuḍa." But Tibetan art **kept the indigenous markers, above all the horns** (the Indian garuḍa is normally hornless).

[Scholarship — synthesized judgment] The evidence favors the model of **"an indigenous bird that pre-existed, then merged with garuḍa in translation"**: not a simple one-way import, but a fusion of a native belief with an imported concept. This matches the familiar pattern in Tibetan Buddhist history of taming and absorbing local deities. One caution is in order: direct textual evidence from the Zhangzhung period is still thin, and the conclusion rests mainly on place-name studies, rock-art interpretation, and the retrospective narratives of later Bön texts — so its evidential strength is moderate rather than conclusive.



Part 2: The Indian Garuḍa (Sanskrit गरुड)

2.1 Vedic Origins: Garutman

[Myth / Scholarship] Garutman (गरुत्मन्, "the flyer") is the Vedic-era predecessor of garuḍa:

- In the *R̥gveda*, the sun is compared to a bird soaring through the sky, and an eagle carries the soma elixir from heaven to humankind. The Vedic texts call this bird **Syena** (श्येन, "eagle").

- The **Suparṇākhyāna** ("Tale of the Fair-Winged One"), a late-Vedic poem regarded as one of the earliest traces of Indian epic poetry, tells the legend of Garuḍa's theft of the elixir — the prototype for the corresponding episode in the **Mahābhārata**.
- In the **Bhagavad Gītā**, Krishna declares himself "Garuḍa, king of birds, among birds."

2.2 The Epics and Purāṇas: Viṣṇu's Mount and the Feud with the Nāgas

[**Myth**] The **Mahābhārata**'s Ādi Parvan preserves the birth myth of Garuḍa:

The sage Kashyapa had two wives: **Kadru**, mother of the serpents (nāgas), and **Vinata**, mother of the birds. By a trick, Kadru won a wager and made Vinata her slave. Vinata's son Garuḍa bargained with the serpent clan for his mother's freedom: he would steal the gods' elixir of immortality (**amṛta**) in exchange. Garuḍa battled the gods — defeating Indra himself — seized the elixir, and on the way met **Viṣṇu**, to whom he promised eternal service as his **mount (vāhana)** and banner emblem. Indra contrived so that the serpents never drank the elixir; they licked the grass blades on which it had rested and cut their tongues — which is why the serpent's tongue is forked, and the origin of the image of the serpent sloughing its skin toward "long life."

From then on, Garuḍa and the **nāgas** were sworn enemies, and Garuḍa preyed on serpents. The **Mahābhārata** also describes the Garuḍas as a whole race of serpent-eating birds.

[**Scholarship**] The image of Garuda evolved over time: first conceived as a bird, it later became half-bird, half-man — a human body with an eagle's head, wings, and sometimes talons. It was honored as "king of birds" and associated with the sun (its body could eclipse the sun). Regional variants of the name include the Thai **Krut**, the Burmese **galone**, and the Japanese **karura**.

2.3 Garuḍa in Buddhism and in Chinese Buddhist Art

[**Myth / religious history**] Buddhism adopted Garuḍa as one of the **Eight Legions** (aṣṭasenā) — the eight classes of beings: devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, and mahoragas. Unlike Hinduism, where Garuḍa is a single god, in Buddhism the garuḍas are a **class** of protector deities who war with the nāgas until the nāgas take refuge in Buddhism (in texts such as the **Mahāsamaya Sutta**, the Buddha temporarily mediates between dragons and golden-winged birds). The **Paṇḍara Jātaka** (J. 518) preserves further episodes of Garuḍa–Nāga combat.

[Archaeology / art history] Garuḍa entered Chinese Buddhist iconography through Indian and Central Asian transmission:

- A Song-dynasty (960–1279) **iron garuḍa pendant**, recorded in an auction catalogue, shows the bird with outstretched wings, hooked beak, and talons seizing a serpent. The catalogue notes: "Garuda entered Chinese Buddhist iconography through the transmission of Indian and Central Asian traditions, where he became known as the great bird king (Jialouluo). Images of Garuda symbolized protection, strength, and victory over malevolent forces, particularly serpentine nāga spirits." Such pendants were worn as protective amulets.
- The **kalaviṅka** (कलविङ्क) — the human-headed, bird-bodied musician-dancer of Dunhuang murals — belongs to the same avian bestiary of Buddhist art. The scholar Edward Schafer observed that East Asian religious art often confuses the kalaviṅka with the kiṃnara, though they are distinct beings.

[Myth — the key fusion case] **Dapeng Jinchi Mingwang, the Great Peng Golden-Winged Wisdom King**. This is the clearest specimen of cross-civilizational fusion among all the sacred birds. In Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, the Wisdom King is a great protector deity, and legend makes him the Buddha's own "maternal uncle": the primal phoenix Yuanfeng, chief of all flying things, bore the Peacock and the Golden-Winged Great Peng; the Peacock swallowed the Buddha and was enthroned as Buddha-Mother, while the Peng was enthroned as the Buddha's uncle. In the classic novel **Journey to the West**, the Golden-Winged Great Peng Eagle is the chief of the three demons of Lion-Camel Kingdom (he swallowed an entire country's people and reigned as king for five hundred years) before the Buddha subdued him and made him a dharma protector. **The Complete Tale of Yue Fei** casts the hero Yue Fei as the Peng's reincarnation. The 302nd line of the **Śūraṅgama Mantra** invokes "the great peng golden-winged bird," whose traditional exegesis calls the golden-winged bird "king among birds, eater of dragons, wings spanning 330 yojanas (roughly 3,960–4,950 kilometers); when it beats its wings, the sea parts in two and the bottom is laid bare."

[Scholarship] The significance is structural: here the full chain is visible — Indian Garuḍa → the Chinese Buddhist "golden-winged bird" → convergence with the native Chinese **peng** into the "Golden-Winged Great Peng." It is the best-documented fusion specimen in the entire comparative field.



Part 3: Sacred Birds of Other Civilizations

3.1 China: Zhuangzi's Peng, the Fenghuang, and Han-Dynasty Bird Motifs

(a) The Peng. [Myth]

The source is the opening of **Zhuangzi**, "Free and Easy Wandering" (mid-Warring States period, roughly 4th–3rd century BCE): "In the Northern Darkness there is a fish, and its name is Kun... It transforms into a bird, and its name is Peng. The back of the Peng — no one knows how many thousand li it spans; when it rises in flight, its wings are like clouds hanging from the sky... It rides the whirlwind upward ninety thousand li." Quoting the **Qi Xie**, a book of marvels: "When the Peng journeys to the Southern Darkness, the waters are smitten for three thousand li, it rides the whirlwind up ninety thousand li, and it rests on the six-month gale." The cicada and the dove laugh at it. The point of the fable is "the perfected person has no self, the spirit-like person has no merit, the sage has no name" — the Kun-Peng is an allegory for the sage's vast transformation and the pursuit of carefree wandering. The **Liezi**'s "Tang Wen" chapter likewise records: "There is a bird, and its name is Peng; its back is like Mount Tai, its wings like clouds hanging from the sky."

[Scholarship] A caution about translation: the English world's habit of rendering "peng" as "roc" began with Herbert Giles's 1889 translation of **Zhuangzi**, which borrowed the Arabic **rukh** (familiar from **The Thousand and One Nights**) to give English readers something recognizable. But the peng's Daoist meaning — transformation and cosmic scale — is utterly different from the Roc's image as a predatory giant bird. The equivalence is a translator's confusion and should not be taken literally.

(b) The Fenghuang (Chinese Phoenix). [Myth / Scholarship]

The **fenghuang** is the auspicious bird of ancient Chinese mythology, appearing "when the world is at great peace, under benevolent rule," sometimes in flocks. There are several kinds — **huang** (the imperial bird), **luan** (the simurgh-like bird), **feng** (the phoenix proper). It has five colors and the look of a pheasant; its head markings signify virtue (*de*), its wing markings righteousness (*yi*), its back markings ritual propriety (*li*), its breast markings benevolence (*ren*), its belly markings good faith (*xin*) — the so-called **Five Virtues** (Ulrich Theobald, ChinaKnowledge.de, 2012).

[**Scholarship**] The fenghuang began as a genderless divine being symbolizing the unity of yin and yang; in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) it began to appear as a male–female pair (the male called *feng*, the female *huang*), symbolizing marital bliss and fidelity in keeping with Confucian harmony. From the Ming–Qing period onward it was routinely paired with the dragon (dragon = emperor, phoenix = empress) as an emblem of imperial harmony. It has **no etymological or mythological connection** with the Western phoenix — the shared English name is a translation loan and must not be confused.

(c) Han-dynasty bird motifs. [Archaeology / Scholarship]

- A Han-dynasty pictorial-stone rubbing of "Vermilion Bird and White Tiger" (excavated at Dongguan, Fangcheng, Henan; now in the Nanyang Han Dynasty Stone Carving Museum; published in *Complete Collection of Chinese Art: Painting*, vol. 18, no. 167) shows, between the door-knocker rings, the Vermilion Bird (the red phoenix) facing the White Tiger, with a feathered immortal holding a lingzhi fungus before the phoenix.
- A study of the Han-dynasty **luan** bird (Min Yue et al., Chinese journal article) describes it as an auspicious, sacred, noble bird of exaggerated size and elongated form, its feathers rendered in red, yellow, blue, and green; it appears alongside immortals, celestial horses, dragons, and phoenixes in pictorial art. In folk magical belief it was seen as a demon-quelling bird; in Han Buddhist art the luan stood at the early stage of Buddhist transmission, combined with bodhisattvas, lotuses, and flying celestials.
- Phoenix and bird motifs continued unbroken through Tang–Song murals and scrolls, Ming–Qing court painting, jade, bronze, and ceramics, and palace and mausoleum architecture — constantly reinvested with new meanings.

3.2 Persia: The Simurgh

[Myth]

The name descends from Avestan ***Saēna meregha*** ("the Saēna bird") through Middle Persian ***Sēnmurw*** to New Persian **Simurgh**. The Zoroastrian ***Avesta*** (roughly 1500–500 BCE) already records it: the bird nests in the **Tree of All Seeds**, and when it takes flight it shakes loose the seeds, which scatter across the world and grow into healing plants. It is associated with the divine glory ***xvarənah*** (farr).

In Ferdowsi's ***Shahnameh*** (circa 1010 CE), the Simurgh raises the abandoned albino prince **Zal** on Mount Alborz, gives him feathers to summon her in need, and later aids Zal's son, the hero **Rostam** — including instructing the caesarean birth by which Rostam is delivered. The Simurgh bears a deep enmity toward serpents, dwells in a well-watered paradise, has copper-gleaming feathers and healing wings, and is unimaginably ancient, having "seen the world destroyed and reborn three times." She embodies universal wisdom.

In Sufi poetry, Attar's ***Conference of the Birds*** (***Mantīq al-Ṭayr***, 12th century) makes the Simurgh the goal of the birds' quest: the hoopoe proposes that the birds seek a king and find the Simurgh; after terrible trials, the thirty birds (Persian ***sī murğ***, "thirty birds") arrive and see only their own reflection in a lake — the pun revealing the Sufi theology that "you are the Simurgh." Rumi's ***Masnavi*** likewise mentions the Simurgh three times ("the nest of the **sī murğ** lies beyond Mount Qaf").

The Simurgh's image is a composite giant bird — peacock's body, dog's or lion's head, lion's claws. It appears on Sasanian silverware and in Safavid manuscript painting.

[Scholarship — a documented transmission chain] The Simurgh article records explicitly: "Through heavy Persian influence, the simurgh was introduced to the Arabic-speaking world, where the concept was conflated with other Arabic mythical birds such as the ghoghnuṣ ... and further developed as the rukh (the origin of the English word 'roc'). Representations of simurgh were adopted in early Umayyad art and coinage." This is a **textually documented transmission chain**: Simurgh → Arabic rukh → Roc.

3.3 Greece: The Phoenix; Egypt: The Bennu

The Bennu. [Myth]

The Egyptian Bennu bird took the form of a heron, with two long feathers behind its head, sometimes crowned with a sun disk or the Atef crown. It was the sacred bird of the sun god Ra (or Atum), tied to creation and to the cult center of Heliopolis, and its image on funerary scarab amulets signified rebirth.

The Phoenix. [Myth / Scholarship]

- The Greek *phoenix* first appears in Hesiod's poetry (circa 700 BCE): in a riddle, the phoenix is called the longest-lived of creatures, living 972 times a human lifespan.
- Herodotus, *Histories* II.73 (circa 450 BCE, from his Egyptian travels): at Heliopolis he heard of the phoenix — a sacred bird "like an eagle," red-and-gold in plumage, which every five hundred years flies to Arabia and back, carrying its dead father wrapped in myrrh to bury him in the temple of the sun.
- The scholar Joseph Nigg (*The Phoenix: An Unnatural Biography of a Mythical Beast*) argues that the Western phoenix tradition **begins** with this Herodotean passage; Nigg also notes that no phoenix appears in ancient Greek art or pottery.
- Later Greco-Roman writers (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* X.2; Tacitus, *Annals* VI.28, and others) added the motifs of fire, the pyre, and rebirth from ashes: Pliny says the bird builds a nest of cinnamon and frankincense and dies in it, and a worm gives rise to the new bird. The canonical version — self-immolation on a pyre of aromatic wood, the chick reborn from the ashes — took shape here. The cycle was given as 500 years, 1,461 years, or 7,006 years in different accounts.

[**Scholarship**] On the Bennu→phoenix relationship: the name *phoenix* may derive from Bennu, and the sun-and-rebirth association is similar — **but the Egyptian sources never mention the Bennu's death**; rebirth by fire is a Hellenistic addition. A possible animal prototype: a giant heron fossil discovered in the United Arab Emirates in 1977 (**Ardea bennuides**, extinct around 1500 BCE), named by Ella Hoch of the University of Copenhagen.

3.4 North America: The Thunderbird

[**Myth**] The Thunderbird is not a single legend but an image shared by many North American tribes, interpreted very differently from tribe to tribe (synthesized from tribal-tradition surveys):

- **The Plains tribes** (Lakota, Dakota, Cheyenne, and others): the Thunderbird is a sacred spirit-being associated with the west, the direction of thunder. It brings the rains the grasslands need to live, but it can also loose destroying storms. In Lakota the thunder-beings are called ***Wakinyan*** (plural, the winged thunder ones), and they war with ***Unktehila***, the great horned serpent of the underworld waters. Lightning is the weapon cast from the Thunderbird's eyes; it is both destroyer and healer.
- **The Pacific Northwest Coast** (Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth, and others): an eagle-like giant that can snatch up whales; its image crowns totem poles; it battles the sea serpent, protects humankind, and embodies clan lineage.

- **The Great Lakes / Ojibwe:** the culture hero Nanabozho created the Thunderbirds to fight the underwater spirits; the Thunderbird is a moral enforcer that punishes wrongdoing; it comes with spring and departs with autumn.
- **The Menominee:** the Thunderbird is the messenger of the Great Sun.

The image: a bird larger than anything earthly, wings covering the sky; feathers in deep blue, green, white, and other symbolic colors; a common motif on shields, war bonnets, and beadwork.

[Scholarship] The Thunderbird's opposition to the water monster / great serpent (Wakinyan vs. Unktehila / Mishipeshu) runs parallel, motif for motif, to the Garuda–Nāga opposition — but **there is no evidence of any transmission between them**. It should be treated as independent, convergent myth-making across cultures.

3.5 Arabia: The Roc of Sindbad (Arabic *rukḥ*)

[Myth]

In **The Thousand and One Nights**, on Sindbad's **second voyage**, a tropical island holds a giant white egg (fifty paces around); the colossal **rukḥ** bird darkens the sky and "feeds its chicks on elephants." Sindbad ties himself to its foot with his turban and is carried off the island the next morning. On the **fifth voyage**, merchants smash a rukḥ egg, and the parent birds drop boulders to sink the ship in revenge. In Arabic tradition the rukḥ nests only on Mount Qaf at the center of the world — and, by a suggestive coincidence, the Persian Simurgh's nest also lies beyond Mount Qaf (see Rumi's line in 3.2), hinting at overlapping legend-circles. Folk compilations describe a white giant bird with a forty-eight-foot wingspan, palm-leaf-sized feathers, and eggs over 150 feet around — colorful but weakly sourced.

[Texts and travelers' accounts]

Marco Polo's **Travels** (1298) records the **rukḥ**. The Chinese writer Zhou Qufei, in **Lingwai Daida** (1178), describes a giant bird on a great island off Africa whose "feather quills could serve as water vessels"; Kublai Khan was presented with a "peng feather" that was in fact a raffia palm leaf passed off as a roc feather.

[Scholarship — a possible real-world prototype] The extinct Madagascan elephant bird (over nine feet tall, flightless) and the giant eagle (wingspan over ten feet) may be the exaggerated sources of the legend.

3.6 The Slavic Firebird and the Mesopotamian Anzu

The Firebird (Russian *zhar-ptitsa*, "heat/fire bird"). [Myth]

Afanasyev's collected texts describe it: "golden feathers, eyes like eastern crystal"; its plumage glows red-orange-yellow like a bonfire and keeps shining even when a feather falls off — a single feather can light a great hall. Later images show a fire-colored small peacock or falcon with glowing "eyes" in crest and tail.

The typical tale: a hero (often Prince Ivan) picks up a fallen feather, is commanded by his father the tsar to capture the living bird, meets a magical helper (the Grey Wolf) on the road, and brings home the prize. The Firebird is both blessing and source of calamity. Classic versions include "Prince Ivan and the Grey Wolf" and Yershov's *The Little Humpbacked Horse*; Stravinsky's ballet *The Firebird* (1910, premiered by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes) carried it onto the world stage.

[**Scholarship**] The Firebird has parallels with Iranian bird legends, with the Grimms' "The Golden Bird," and with the Russian Sirin bird.

The Anzu (Akkadian; Sumerian *Imdugud*). [Myth]

The Mesopotamian Anzu is a lion-headed, eagle-bodied giant bird. Its beating wings raise whirlwind sandstorms; its beak is like a saw; it is tied to the south wind and to lightning, and one tradition makes it the son of the goddess Siris.

In *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird* — a text composed around the Ur III period (21st century BCE), surviving mostly in Isin–Larsa-period copies (20th–18th century BCE) — the hero Lugalbanda feeds the Anzu's chicks and is granted supernatural speed, crossing seven mountain ranges in a day.

In the *Myth of Zu*, Anzu begins as the guardian of the god Enlil's shrine; while Enlil bathes, Anzu steals the **Tablet of Destinies** and flees to the holy mountain. None of the gods dares fight him, until the warrior god Ninurta defeats him and recovers the tablet.

[**Archaeology**] Lion-headed eagle Anzu figures already appear on Early Dynastic III (circa 2550–2500 BCE) alabaster reliefs.

[**Scholarship**] Among the earliest giant sacred birds of Mesopotamia (3rd millennium BCE), the Anzu combines storm power with the motif of usurping divine authority — one of the ancient sources of the "giant bird – storm – kingship" motif complex.



Part 4: Comparative Study

4.1 Shared Motifs

Across these traditions, five motifs recur with remarkable frequency.

Association with the sun, fire, and the sky. Garuda is tied to the sun god Sūrya (his brother Aruṇa is the sun god's charioteer) and his body can eclipse the sun. Bennu and the phoenix are sacred birds of the sun god. The Thunderbird wields lightning. The Firebird's feathers burn with flame-colored light. The Anzu is linked with lightning. The Tibetan khyung symbolizes the fire element in Bön. The Simurgh nests in the Tree of All Seeds and is bound to the divine glory, the sacred light. The pattern is plain: the greatest of birds belongs to the greatest of heights — the sky, the sun, fire.

The status of "king of birds." Garuda is "king of birds" in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The Tibetan khyung is the *bya-brgya-khyung*, "king of a hundred birds." Chinese Buddhist exegesis calls the golden-winged bird "king among birds." In Attar's poem the Simurgh is the king the birds set out to find. Each civilization crowns its own bird.

Mount or helper of gods and heroes. Garuda is Viṣṇu's mount. The Simurgh raises the abandoned prince Zal and aids the hero Rostam. In the Firebird tales the hero gains the bird's feather as the key to his quest. The Anzu grants Lugalbanda miraculous speed. The great bird carries, rescues, and empowers.

Opposition to serpents, dragons, and water monsters. Garuḍa and the nāgas are sworn enemies. The Thunderbird (*Wakinyan*) wars with the underwater horned serpent (*Unktehila* / *Mishipeshu*). The Simurgh bears "a deep enmity" toward serpents. The Chinese Buddhist golden-winged bird "feeds specially on dragons." The Tibetan khyung is likewise described in folk craft traditions as a dragon-subduing bird — though the scholarly citation for that last claim is weak. Bird against serpent, sky against water: one of mythology's most durable polarities.

Rebirth and longevity. The phoenix and Bennu embody rebirth (a Hellenistic motif in the phoenix's case). The Simurgh has "seen the world destroyed and reborn three times," and one version has her immolating herself in fire after 1,700 years. The Chinese fenghuang is the eternal auspicious bird whose appearance means the world is at peace.

4.2 Functional and Symbolic Differences

[Scholarship] The motifs may be shared, but what each bird *does* — its cultural function — differs sharply from civilization to civilization:

- **The Tibetan khyung: protective.** It is a protector that clears obstacles (the Khyung Mar practice), a guardian auspicious beast on the wind-horse flag, a funerary guardian that subdues the demons blocking the dead — with a cosmological coloring (the fire element).
- **The Indian garuḍa: serpent-subduing and martial.** The eater of serpents, the serpent's enemy, Viṣṇu's mount and battle-gear; at the same time an emblem of kingship (it appears on the national emblems of Thailand and Indonesia).
- **The Chinese fenghuang: auspicious and political.** The sign that "the world is at peace under virtuous rule," the personification of the Five Virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, good faith); from the Ming–Qing onward, a symbol of the empress and of marriage.
- **The Chinese peng (Zhuangzi): philosophical.** A Daoist allegory of transcending petty knowledge and wandering free — with no religious cult attached.
- **The Persian Simurgh: wise, healing, maternal.** The foster-mother who raises heroes, the healing feather, and in Sufi mysticism the ultimate metaphor of divine union.
- **The Greek phoenix: cyclical time and resurrection.** A philosophical-religious metaphor of longevity and rebirth from ashes, later absorbed by Christianity as a symbol of resurrection.
- **The Thunderbird: natural force and moral order.** Master of storm and rainfall, and the tribes' enforcer of moral conduct.
- **The Roc: exotic spectacle and adventure machinery.** A giant obstacle and escape vehicle in seafaring literature, with no deep religious symbolism.

- **The Firebird: the object of the quest.** The fairy-tale treasure that is "so near and yet so far," bringing both blessing and calamity.
- **The Anzu: the usurper.** The rebel who steals the Tablet of Destinies, combining storm's destructive power with the crime of seizing divine authority.

These differences are the reason scholars insist the birds cannot simply be equated — the *Religions* 2022 paper rejects translating *khyung* as "roc," and Giles's rendering of the Zhuangzi "peng" as "roc" is likewise regarded as a misleading translation.

4.3 Transmission Chains and Independent Origins

Chains with textual support. [Scholarship]

Four transmission or fusion chains rest on documented evidence:

1. **Simurgh → rukh → Roc.** Persian influence carried the Simurgh into the Arabic-speaking world, where it merged with native Arabic bird lore and developed into the *rukh* — the origin of the English word "roc." Early Umayyad art and coinage already used Simurgh imagery.
2. **Garuḍa → the Chinese "golden-winged bird" / Dapeng Jinchi Mingwang.** Transmitted through the Indian–Central Asian Buddhist tradition (attested by artifacts such as the Song-dynasty iron garuḍa pendant), the garuḍa merged with the native Chinese "peng" into the "Golden-Winged Great Peng."
3. **Garuḍa ⇌ the Tibetan khyung (fusion).** Buddhist translators used *khyung* to translate *garuḍa*; but the indigenous horned bird pre-existed (see 1.5), so this is an overlay rather than a one-way import.
4. **Bennu → phoenix.** The name and the sun-and-rebirth motif were inherited, though rebirth-by-fire was a Hellenistic addition.

Independent origins. [Scholarship]

The Thunderbird of North America parallels the Garuḍa–Nāga opposition motif for motif, yet no transmission evidence exists — it must be counted as independent, convergent origin. The Chinese fenghuang and the Western phoenix share no etymology (their shared English name is a translation loan creating a false correspondence). The Firebird's parallels with Iranian bird lore are noted by scholars as "parallel" only, with no claim of transmission.

[Scholarship — the field's overall view] No single "one source, global diffusion" theory of the giant sacred bird commands consensus. The safer model is "**multiple centers of origin plus regional**

transmission chains": verifiable textual and artistic transmission links connect India, Iran, Central Asia, China, Tibet, and Arabia (the chains above), while North America, Mesopotamia, and the Greco-Egyptian world each developed the "giant sacred bird" image on their own. What they share is humanity's universal symbolization of a common natural experience: sky, sun, raptor, serpent.

A Note on Modern Reinterpretations

[**Scholarship**] This research found **no scholarly source** interpreting the Tibetan khyung as a "metal flying machine" or as alien technology; no verifiable traditional text supports an "ancient astronaut" reading of the khyung. The related fringe discourse that does exist is the generalized "ancient astronaut" theory — Erich von Däniken-style claims, or the Indian "Vimana" flying-machine thesis (such as the disputed paper at the 102nd Indian Science Congress in 2015) — all of it **modern pseudo-scholarly reinterpretation** with no archaeological or philological basis, classed by mainstream scholarship as misreadings of poetic metaphor.

This article's position: any claim presenting the khyung, the golden-winged bird, or their kin as prehistoric flying machines must be explicitly labeled a **modern reinterpretation**, and must never be confused with traditional mythic content, scholarly views, or archaeological evidence. Nothing in this article's main argument contains such readings.

Conclusion

1. The Tibetan **khyung**'s most distinctive native features are its **horns** and its **fire-element** symbolism. Its Zhangzhung–Bön roots are supported by a triple strand of evidence: place names (Khyunglung Ngulkhar), rock art (the bird shaman, the byaru crown), and imperial-period Tibetan funerary texts (the horned divine eagle). After Buddhism's arrival, *khyung* became the translation of *garuḍa* and the two merged — but the horns and other native markers were retained.
2. The Indian **garuḍa**'s complete genealogy runs: Vedic Garutman / Syena → late-Vedic and epic elaboration (*Suparṇākhyāna*, *Mahābhārata*) → Viṣṇu's mount and the feud with the nāgas → the Buddhist Eight Legions → the Chinese "Golden-Winged Great Peng" and the Tibetan khyung.
3. Cross-civilizational comparison shows that "bird-king – sun – serpent-foe – rebirth" is a high-frequency shared motif complex; but the **functions** of the birds — protector, auspicious omen,

philosophical allegory, healer, resurrection symbol, moral enforcer, adventure device — differ so greatly that simple equation is impossible. Scholars explicitly reject translating *khyung* as "roc" (*Religions* 2022), and Giles's "roc" for the Zhuangzi *peng* is likewise a misleading translation.

4. Transmission rests on documented chains (Simurgh→Roc; Garuḍa→Golden-Winged Great Peng; Garuḍa↔khyung fusion; Bennu→phoenix); the rest is mostly independent, convergent origin. A "single global origin" hypothesis lacks sufficient evidence.

Unverified / Research Gaps

Honesty about limits is part of the work. This research could not securely establish:

1. **Dunhuang manuscript numbers for *khyung***. Dunhuang Tibetan scrolls carry bird-divination traditions (reported via *Religions* 2022), but no specific scroll number containing the word *khyung* was recovered.
2. **Bön canonical originals**. No original Bön canonical passage on the khyung was directly consulted; the account rests on Norbu's teaching and contemporary Bön-center materials as second-hand sources.
3. **Khyung worship in Kham and Amdo**. No dedicated studies were found; only Ngari (Khyunglung), northern Tibet (rock art), the pan-Tibetan region (wind-horse flags), and Mongolia are verified.
4. **The khyung's plumage color**. No scholarly literature discusses it.
5. **Khyung-centered thangka specimens**. No specific museum-held thangka centered on the khyung was located (only textual descriptions of the khyung as messenger in Mongolian mountain-deity thangka literature).

The report's sources were checked through indexed public web materials rather than a full page-by-page live audit; readers should treat the evidence levels stated above accordingly.

Sources

Part 1 — the Tibetan khyung

1. Tibet Museum, "Garuda – The mythical bird" (citing Robert Beer, *Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, 2003, pp. 125–129) — <https://tibetmuseum.app/index.php?w=coll&cat=S&id=439>

2. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, foreword to the *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research*, Vol. 1 (2013) — <https://www.scribd.com/document/397988023/ensenanzasdzogchen-fragmento>
3. John Vincent Bellezza, JVB 2017 paper on Old Tibetan funerary texts — <http://www.tibetarchaeology.com/pdf/JVB-2017.pdf>
4. Yan et al., "'Ritual and Magic' in Buddhist Visual Culture from the Bird Totem," *Religions* 2022, 13, 719 (peer-reviewed) — <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/8/719>
5. "Kyunglung" (Khyunglung Ngulkhar, Zhangzhung capital site) — <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyunglung>
6. Yeru Bon Center, "Khyung Mar: The Red Garuda" — <https://yeruboncenter.org/event/khyung-mar-the-red-garuda-santa-fe/>
7. Krisztina Teleki, "On Several Thangkas Depicting Mongol Mountain Deities" — <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-05416517v1/document>
8. Wind horse and the Four Dignities: Buddhist Channel overview — <https://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=5%2C12580%2C0%2C0%2C1%2C0>; "Wind Horse" — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wind_Horse; UVA Mandala, "Lungta: Wind Horse" — <https://texts.mandala.library.virginia.edu/text/lungta-wind-horse>

Part 2 — the Indian garuḍa

1. "Garuda" — <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garuda>
2. AstroVed, "Garuda: The Divine Vahana of Lord Vishnu" — <https://www.astroved.com/blogs/garuda-the-divine-vahana-of-lord-vishnu>
3. Song-dynasty iron garuḍa pendant, auction catalogue entry — <https://www.2bhardt.de/cms/lotdetailspdf/6326/>
4. "Kalaviṅka" — <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalaviṅka>
5. "Dapeng Jinchi Mingwang" (Great Peng Golden-Winged Wisdom King) — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dapeng_Jinchi_Mingwang

Part 3 — sacred birds of other civilizations

1. "Peng (mythology)" — [https://grokipedia.com/page/Peng_\(mythology\)](https://grokipedia.com/page/Peng_(mythology)); Victor Mair's *Zhuangzi* translation, excerpted — <https://www.thedaobums.com/topic/20997-chuang-tzu-chapter-1-section-a/>

2. Ulrich Theobald, "fenghuang, phoenixes," ChinaKnowledge.de (2012) — <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Myth/personsphoenix.html>
3. Min Yue et al., on Han-dynasty luan-bird imagery — <https://cjournal.hep.com.cn/1007-6867/CN/PDF/Y2025/V53/I04/30>
4. "Simurgh" — <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simurgh> ; "The Sasanian Simorgh and Its Reflections in Islamic and Byzantine Art," *European Scientific Journal* — <https://eujournal.org/index.php/esj/article/download/20215/19703>
5. "Bennu" — <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bennu> ; "What Is the Origin of the Phoenix Myth?" — <https://www.history.com/articles/phoenix-bird-myth-origins> ; "Phœnix (bird)," *The New International Encyclopædia* — [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_New_International_Encyclop%C3%A6dia%2FPh%C5%93nix_\(bird\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_New_International_Encyclop%C3%A6dia%2FPh%C5%93nix_(bird))
6. Thunderbird surveys — <https://birdshow.blog/secrets-thunderbird-native-american-symbol> ; <https://www.historydefined.net/thunderbird/>
7. "Roc (mythology)" — [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roc_\(mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roc_(mythology))
8. "Firebird (Slavic folklore)" — [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Firebird_\(Slavic_folklore\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Firebird_(Slavic_folklore)) ; "Firebird," Myth Encyclopedia — <http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/Dr-Fi/Firebird.html>
9. "Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird" — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lugalbanda_and_the_Anzud_Bird ; Anzu overview — <https://www.deliriumsrealm.com/anzu/>

Modern reinterpretations (fringe discourse, cited only to mark its existence)

1. Tsem Rinpoche, "Chariots of the Gods" — <https://www.tsemrinpoche.com/tsem-tulku-rinpoche/me/chariots-of-the-gods.html> ; "Ancient Aliens or Ancient Indians" — <https://vocal.media/history/ancient-aliens-or-ancient-indians>