

## Cross-Cultural Visual Semiotics Analysis between Garuda figure Candi Kidal, Indonesia and the Grand Palace, Thailand

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### Abstract

### Original Research Article

Garuda is one of the most enduring mythological figures in Southeast Asia, functioning simultaneously as a religious, cultural, and political symbol. Originating from Hindu cosmology, Garuda appears across regions with varying visual forms and ideological meanings. This article examines the visual semiotics of Garuda as represented in the reliefs of Candi Kidal (East Java, Indonesia) and the architectural-symbolic manifestations in the Grand Palace, Bangkok (Thailand). Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in visual semiotics, iconography, and cross-cultural analysis, this study investigates how Garuda's form, posture, narrative structure, and spatial placement articulate different systems of meaning. Using semiotic and iconographic analysis, the research examines how the mythological Garuda, originating from Hindu cosmology, transforms visually and conceptually within two distinct cultural frameworks. In Indonesia, Garuda's imagery at Candi Kidal manifests as a sacred protector symbolizing liberation and spiritual ascension, while in Thailand, it evolves into a royal emblem embodying power, divinity, and state identity. The study reveals how each visual form conveys differing ideological narratives spiritual transcendence in Java and political- theological authority in Siam yet both remain rooted in shared cosmological archetypes. By comparing their symbolic forms, aesthetic syntax, and contextual meanings, this paper demonstrates that Garuda functions as a semiotic bridge uniting the region's mythic imagination and visual identity. In Java, Garuda embodies moral struggle, devotion, and spiritual liberation, whereas in Thailand, Garuda signifies royal authority, state power, and cosmological sovereignty. This research contributes to Southeast Asian visual studies, semiotics, and design scholarship by positioning Garuda as a dynamic visual sign shaped by local epistemologies, power relations, and historical contexts.

**Keywords:** Visual Semiotics, Garuda, Candi Kidal, Grand Palace Thailand, Cross-Cultural Analysis, Southeast Asian Art.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Garuda occupies a central position in the visual and symbolic traditions of Southeast Asia. Originating from ancient Indian mythology, Garuda is known as the vahana (mount) of Vishnu and embodies power, speed, protection, and cosmic order. As Hindu-Buddhist ideas spread throughout Southeast Asia between the 5th and 15th centuries, Garuda underwent significant visual and conceptual transformations, adapting to local cultures, political systems, and spiritual beliefs. This study explores the visual semiotics of the Garuda figure as a transnational symbol in Southeast Asian visual culture, focusing on its representations in Candi Kidal (East Java, Indonesia) and the Grand Palace (Bangkok, Thailand).

In Indonesia, one of the most significant early representations of Garuda appears in Candi Kidal (13th century), associated with the Singhasari Kingdom. The relief depicts Garudeya, narrating the myth of Garuda's quest to liberate his mother, Winata, from enslavement. This representation emphasizes moral struggle, devotion, and spiritual liberation. In contrast, in Thailand, Garuda appears prominently in royal architecture, especially in the Grand Palace, Bangkok, where Garuda (Phra Khrut) functions as a symbol of kingship, divine authority, and the state. Rather than narrative relief, Thai Garuda is monumental, emblematic, and heraldic.

This study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How is Garuda visually constructed as a sign in

- Candi Kidal and the Grand Palace?
2. What semiotic meanings emerge from differences in form, posture, and context?
3. How do these representations reflect distinct cultural ideologies and power relations?

### 1.1 Garuda in Hindu Mythology and Southeast Asian Visual Culture

Garuda's mythological origin is found in the *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*. Scholars such as Kramrisch (1976) and Zimmer (1951) highlight Garuda's dual nature: part human, part bird, symbolizing transcendence between earthly and divine realms.

In Southeast Asia, Garuda becomes localized. Sedigawati (2014) notes that Javanese Garuda emphasizes narrative relief and moral didacticism, while Strickland (2010) observes that Thai Garuda evolves into a royal emblem tied to Chakri kingship. Garuda originates from Hindu cosmology, prominently featured in the *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas* as the son of Vinatā and the eternal enemy of serpents (nāga). As Vishnu's vahana, Garuda symbolizes cosmic order (ṛta), speed, protection, and the triumph of dharma over chaos (Zimmer, 1951; Kramrisch, 1976). In Indian art, Garuda is often depicted as a hybrid being—half man, half bird—representing transcendence between the earthly and divine realms. Zimmer (1951) interprets Garuda as a symbolic mediator, embodying spiritual ascent and liberation. This mythological foundation becomes the primary source for Garuda's diffusion into Southeast Asia through Hindu-Buddhist cultural transmission between the 5th and 15th centuries. However, as scholars of Southeast Asian art emphasize, imported symbols were never adopted passively. Instead, they were localized and recontextualized according to indigenous cosmologies and political systems (Coedès, 1968; Holt, 1967). This process of localization resulted in diverse visual interpretations of Garuda across the region.

In the Javanese context, Garuda appears prominently in temple reliefs, most notably at Candi Kidal. Scholars such as Sedigawati (2014) and Munandar (2011) argue that the Garudeya narrative carved at Candi Kidal emphasizes moral struggle, filial devotion, and liberation. The relief visualizes a specific episode of the Garuda myth his quest to free his mother which aligns with Javanese ethical values and spiritual symbolism. Here, Garuda functions as a didactic visual narrative, guiding viewers toward moral reflection rather than political domination.

Conversely, in Thailand, Garuda (Phra Khrut) evolves into a royal and state emblem. According to Strickland (2010) and Thongchai Winichakul (1994), Thai Garuda imagery is inseparable from the ideology of divine kingship (*devarāja*). In royal architecture such as the Grand Palace, Garuda is monumental, frontal, and aggressive, emphasizing authority, protection, and cosmic legitimacy. The image of Garuda subduing the

nāga symbolizes the king's role in maintaining order and sovereignty.

### 1.2 Cross-Cultural Semiotics and Power

Cross-cultural semiotic studies highlight how shared symbols can generate divergent meanings across societies. Eco (1976) notes that signs are open systems whose interpretations depend on cultural conventions. In this sense, Garuda operates as a floating signifier, retaining a core mythological identity while adapting to local ideological needs.

From a political semiotics perspective, Mitchell (2005) argues that images are not merely representations but active agents within power structures. The Thai Garuda exemplifies this function by visually reinforcing state authority, while the Javanese Garuda at Candi Kidal communicates ethical and spiritual values through narrative relief.

Thus, the contrast between Garuda at Candi Kidal and the Grand Palace reflects two different semiotic regimes: Narrative–spiritual semiotics in Java and Emblematic–political semiotics in Thailand. This distinction provides a theoretical foundation for understanding Garuda not as a static cultural symbol but as a dynamic visual language shaped by historical discourse, religious ideology, and political power.

## 2. METHODS

This research employs a qualitative-narrative using interpretative methodology. Primary data include photographic documentation of Garuda reliefs at Candi Kidal and architectural ornamentation at the Grand Palace. Secondary data derive from art historical texts, archaeological reports, and cultural studies literature combining:

### A. Visual Semiotic Analysis

Examining form, gesture, composition, and symbolic attributes. Visual semiotics analysis examines how images function as systems of signs. According to Saussure (1983), a sign consists of the *signifier* (form) and the *signified* (concept). Roland Barthes (1977) expands this framework by introducing denotation and connotation, emphasizing cultural codes embedded in visual forms. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that representation is not a mere reflection of reality but an active process of meaning-making shaped by cultural discourse. Thus, visual symbols like Garuda must be read within their historical and ideological contexts. Visual semiotics provides a critical framework for understanding how images operate as systems of meaning within specific cultural contexts. Rooted in structural linguistics, semiotics conceptualizes visual forms as *signs* composed of a signifier (visual form) and a signified (concept or meaning) (Saussure, 1983). Within visual culture, this relationship is never neutral; it is socially constructed and historically conditioned.

Roland Barthes (1977) extends Saussure's model by distinguishing between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (culturally coded meaning). In visual artifacts such as temple reliefs and royal emblems, denotation refers to the recognizable figure of Garuda, while connotation encompasses ideological meanings such as power, devotion, or sovereignty. Barthes further introduces the concept of myth, a second-order semiological system through which images naturalize cultural values and political ideologies. This perspective is crucial for analyzing Garuda, as the figure operates not merely as a decorative motif but as a mythic sign that legitimizes social order. In this sense, Garuda functions as what Barthes describes as a "speech chosen by history" (Barthes, 1977). Building upon semiotics, Stuart Hall's theory of representation emphasizes that meaning is not inherent in images but produced through discourse. According to Hall (1997), representation is an active process that constructs reality rather than reflects it. Visual symbols such as Garuda gain meaning through shared cultural codes, belief systems, and power relations. Thus, the differing representations of Garuda in Java and Thailand should be understood as culturally articulated meanings shaped by distinct ideological frameworks. Hall's constructionist approach is particularly relevant for cross-cultural analysis, as it allows visual signs to be interpreted as sites of negotiation between tradition, authority, and identity. Garuda, therefore, can be read as a discursive symbol, continuously redefined by religious, political, and cultural contexts.

## B. Iconographic Analysis

Iconographic analysis is a methodological approach in art history and visual culture studies that aims to identify, classify, and interpret symbolic meanings embedded in visual representations by situating them within their historical, mythological, and cultural contexts. This method is based on the premise that visual artifacts function not merely as aesthetic objects, but as carriers of cultural knowledge, belief systems, and ideological values. This analysis is useful for tracing mythological references and narrative structures.

The analytical framework of iconographic analysis was systematically articulated by Erwin Panofsky, who proposed three interrelated levels of interpretation. The first level, pre-iconographical description, involves the formal identification of visible elements such as shapes, gestures, postures, attributes, and compositional structures. At this stage, the analysis remains descriptive, focusing on what is visually present without interpretive judgment. The second level, iconographical analysis, seeks to identify themes, narratives, and motifs by correlating visual elements with literary sources, mythological texts, and established cultural conventions. In the context of this study, this level is used to associate the visual representations of Garuda with the Garudeya narrative found in Hindu texts

such as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas*, including Garuda's relationship with Vishnu, the naga, and the myth of amṛta. This step allows the researcher to recognize Garuda not merely as a winged figure, but as a mythological symbol with specific narrative functions.

The third level, iconological interpretation, focuses on uncovering the intrinsic meaning of the image by relating it to broader worldviews, ideological structures, and socio-cultural conditions of the society that produced it. At this level, the representation of Garuda at Candi Kidal is interpreted as a visual articulation of spiritual liberation, devotion (*bhakti*), and moral legitimacy in Javanese culture, whereas the Garuda imagery in Thailand is understood as a manifestation of royal authority and cosmological sovereignty. Through this multi-layered approach, iconographic analysis enables a comprehensive reading of visual symbols from formal appearance to deep cultural significance.

## C. Comparative Cultural Analysis:

Contextualizing each representation within its socio-political and religious framework. Comparative cultural analysis is a methodological approach used to examine how similar symbols, narratives, or visual forms are interpreted and reconfigured across different cultural contexts. This approach is grounded in the understanding that cultural meanings are not universal, but are constructed through specific historical, social, and ideological frameworks. As such, shared symbols may generate divergent meanings when embedded within distinct cultural systems. In this study, comparative cultural analysis is employed to examine the visual representations of Garuda at Candi Kidal (Indonesia) and the Grand Palace (Thailand), both of which derive from a common Hindu cosmological source yet function within different cultural and political environments. The comparison does not seek to establish hierarchical value between cultures, but rather to reveal the processes through which symbolic meanings are localized and transformed.

## 3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

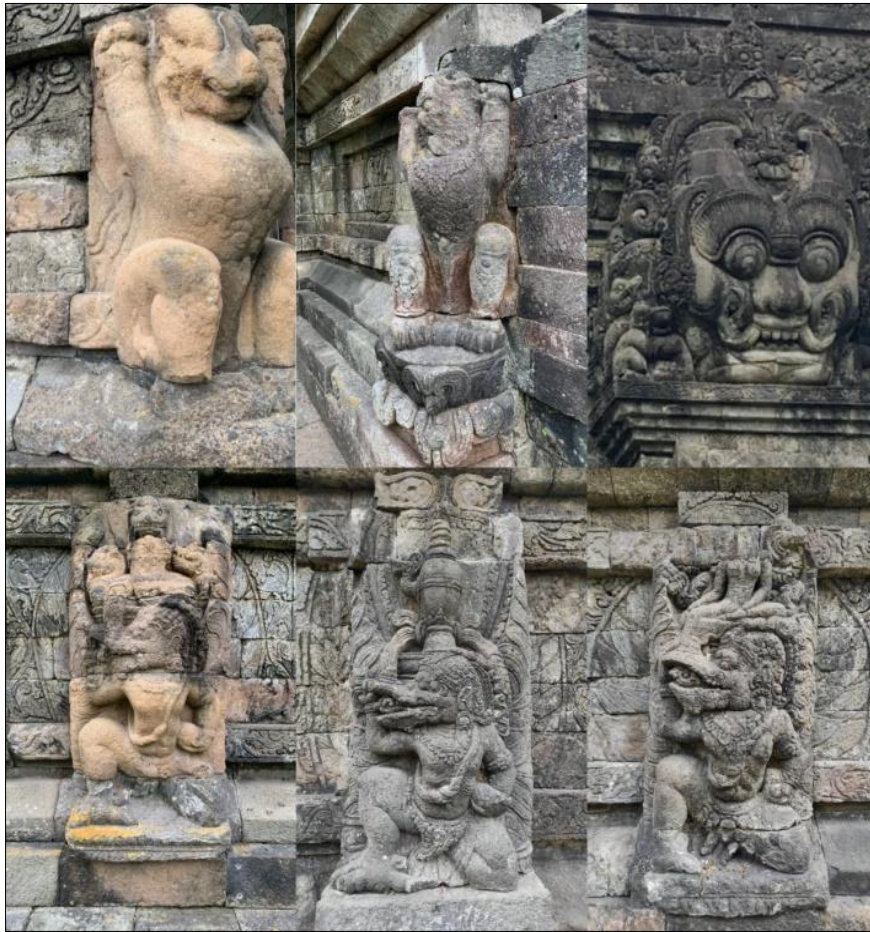
### 3.1 Garuda at Candi Kidal: Visual Semiotics of Liberation

Candi Kidal is located in Kidal Village, Tumpang District, Malang Regency, East Java, Indonesia. Geographically, the temple lies on the eastern slopes of Mount Bromo–Semeru, an area historically associated with sacred landscapes in ancient Javanese cosmology. The location reflects the Javanese conception of sacred space, where temples were often constructed in proximity to mountains believed to be the dwelling places of gods and ancestral spirits. Candi Kidal was constructed in the mid-13th century (circa 1248 CE) during the Singhasari Kingdom period. The temple is widely recognized as a mortuary temple (candi pendharmaan) dedicated to King Anusapati, the second



ruler of the Singhasari dynasty. Historical sources, including the *Nāgarakṛtāgama* and archaeological interpretations, suggest that Anusapati was deified after

his death and associated with the Hindu god Shiva, while the Garudeya reliefs function as symbolic narratives related to his spiritual ascension.



**Figure 1: The Garuda (Garudeya) relief at Candi Kidal, Indonesia**

Candi Kidal was built as a mortuary temple for King Anusapati. The Garudeya narrative may function as a metaphor for royal legitimacy and spiritual ascent, linking kingship with moral responsibility rather than absolute power.

The Garuda relief at Candi Kidal depicts a humanoid figure with wings, kneeling or standing in a reverent posture while carrying Vishnu. The body is slender, expressive, and narrative-driven, carved in high relief with emphasis on gesture rather than monumentality.

Thus, the Garuda imagery at Candi Kidal must be understood within a funerary and commemorative context, rather than as purely decorative or political symbolism. At Candi Kidal, Garuda appears in three principal relief panels, collectively known as the Garudeya reliefs, located on the lower exterior walls of the temple base (foot of the candi). These reliefs are arranged sequentially, forming a narrative cycle that depicts episodes from the Garudeya myth, particularly Garuda's quest to liberate his mother, Vinata. The

placement of the Garudeya reliefs on the lower zone of the temple is significant in Javanese temple architecture. This zone represents the *bhurloka* (the earthly realm), where moral struggle and worldly bondage occur. The Garudeya narrative carved at this level visually communicates the journey from suffering toward liberation, aligning with the spiritual symbolism of the temple as a site of transformation. Formally, the Garudeya figures at Candi Kidal are rendered in high-relief stone carving, emphasizing clarity of form and legibility of narrative. The Garuda figure is depicted as an anthropomorphic being with a human torso, arms, and legs, combined with avian wings, claws, and bird-like facial features. Unlike later emblematic Garuda representations, the Garudeya figure at Candi Kidal appears slender, elongated, and dynamic, with bodily gestures suggesting movement and effort rather than dominance. Garudeya is frequently shown in kneeling or semi-crouching postures, particularly when carrying Vishnu, indicating humility and devotion. The wings, though visually prominent, are not exaggerated for monumentality but integrated harmoniously into the body, functioning as symbols of spiritual ascent and

transcendence. Facial expressions are calm and composed, reinforcing the ethical and devotional tone of the narrative. The Garuda (Garudeya) reliefs at Candi Kidal function as an integral visual component of the temple's architectural and symbolic system. Their narrative placement, stylistic restraint, and bodily expressiveness emphasize ethical struggle, devotion, and spiritual ascent, rather than political authority or visual dominance. This distinguishes the Candi Kidal Garuda from later royal and state-oriented representations in Southeast Asia. The spatial setting of Candi Kidal reinforces its ritual function as a religious and commemorative monument, situated within a landscape that symbolically mediates between the human realm and the divine.

### 3.1.1 Visual Semiotic Analysis

The visual representation of Garuda, locally conceptualized as Garudeya, at Candi Kidal constitutes a complex semiotic system in which mythological narrative, spiritual ideology, and visual form are deeply intertwined. Carved as relief panels on the base of the temple, Garudeya functions not merely as an ornamental motif but as a narrative signifier that communicates moral, cosmological, and spiritual meanings within the Javanese Hindu-Buddhist worldview of the thirteenth century (Munandar, 2011; Sedigawati, 2014).

At the denotative level, the relief depicts an anthropomorphic winged figure characterized by a human torso, avian wings, and dynamic bodily posture. Garudeya is often shown kneeling or standing in a reverential stance while carrying or accompanying Vishnu. The figure's slender proportions and expressive gestures emphasize movement and narrative continuity rather than physical dominance, distinguishing it from later monumental representations of Garuda in Southeast Asia (Holt, 1967; Kramrisch, 1976).

At the connotative level, these visual elements signify values of devotion (*bhakti*), sacrifice, and filial piety. The kneeling posture and submissive gesture connote humility and spiritual obedience, aligning with the Garudeya myth in which Garuda undertakes immense trials to liberate his mother, Vinata, from enslavement. Wings function as symbolic markers of transcendence, representing the ability to traverse cosmic realms and mediate between the human and the divine (Zimmer, 1951; Barthes, 1977).

From a mythological and ideological perspective, the Garudeya relief operates as a visual narrative of liberation (*mokṣa*) and ethical struggle. The act of bearing Vishnu signifies the subordination of physical strength to divine order, suggesting that moral righteousness supersedes brute force. In Barthesian terms, Garudeya functions as a mythic sign, through which cultural values such as devotion, harmony, and spiritual ascent are naturalized within the visual language of Javanese temple art (Barthes, 1977).

Spatially, the placement of the Garudeya relief on the lower section of the temple reinforces its didactic and transitional function. Positioned at the liminal zone between the profane and sacred spaces, Garudeya visually narrates the journey from worldly bondage toward spiritual liberation. This spatial semiotics corresponds with the role of Candi Kidal as a mortuary temple, where the Garudeya narrative metaphorically parallels the posthumous ascension of the soul (Munandar, 2011; Kramrisch, 1976).

Within Stuart Hall's constructionist theory of representation, Garudeya at Candi Kidal can be understood as a culturally constructed sign whose meaning is produced through Javanese religious discourse rather than being fixed by its Indian mythological origin. Although derived from Hindu cosmology, Garudeya is rearticulated in the Javanese context as a spiritual and ethical exemplar rather than a symbol of political domination. This process demonstrates how visual symbols are localized through cultural negotiation and discursive practices (Hall, 1997).

In conclusion, the visual semiotics of Garudeya at Candi Kidal reveals a representation grounded in narrative, spirituality, and moral philosophy. Unlike later emblematic depictions of Garuda as a symbol of sovereignty and state power, Garudeya functions as a visual articulation of ethical devotion and liberation. This confirms that mythological figures in Southeast Asian temple art operate as dynamic semiotic constructs shaped by local epistemologies and cultural values (Eco, 1976; Mitchell, 2005).

### 3.1.2 Iconography Analysis

The iconography of Garuda, locally referred to as Garudeya, at Candi Kidal (East Java) presents a narrative-driven visual system deeply embedded in Javanese Hindu-Buddhist cosmology of the Singhasari period (13th century). Unlike emblematic or heraldic representations found in later Southeast Asian contexts, Garudeya at Candi Kidal is rendered as a mythological protagonist whose visual form conveys ethical struggle, devotion, and spiritual liberation (Munandar, 2011; Holt, 1967).

At the level of pre-iconographical description, the relief panels depict an anthropomorphic winged figure with a human torso, bird-like wings, and expressive bodily gestures. Garudeya is shown in dynamic postures—kneeling, standing, or carrying Vishnu—often with elongated proportions and rhythmic movement. The carving emphasizes narrative continuity rather than symmetry or monumentality, indicating that the figure is intended to be read sequentially as part of a story rather than as an isolated icon (Kramrisch, 1976; Sedigawati, 2014).



At the level of pre iconographical analysis, these visual elements are identifiable as references to the Garudeya episode derived from Hindu textual sources such as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas*. The narrative centers on Garuda's quest to obtain *amṛta* in order to liberate his mother, Vinata, from enslavement by the nāga. In the Candi Kidal reliefs, the act of Garudeya carrying Vishnu signifies divine acknowledgment of Garuda's moral integrity and devotion. This iconographic motif positions Garudeya as both servant and chosen vehicle (*vāhana*) of Vishnu, reinforcing the ethical dimension of the myth (Zimmer, 1951; Kramrisch, 1976). At the iconological level, the Garudeya reliefs articulate a distinctly Javanese worldview in which spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*), filial piety, and moral struggle are central values. The narrative of Garudeya is widely interpreted as an allegory for the soul's liberation from worldly bondage, a theme particularly significant given Candi Kidal's function as a mortuary temple. Scholars argue that Garudeya's ascent mirrors the posthumous journey of the deified king Anusapati, whose soul is symbolically elevated through the Garudeya myth (Munandar, 2011; Holt, 1967). The spatial placement of the Garudeya reliefs on the lower section of the temple further reinforces their iconological meaning. Situated at the liminal zone between the earthly and the sacred, the reliefs serve a didactic and transitional function, guiding devotees from the profane realm toward spiritual transcendence. This placement reflects Javanese temple semiotics, where narrative reliefs

operate as moral instruction and cosmological mapping rather than as political symbolism (Kramrisch, 1976; Sedigawati, 2014).

From an iconographic perspective, Garudeya at Candi Kidal differs fundamentally from royal or state-oriented representations of Garuda elsewhere in Southeast Asia. While sharing a common Hindu cosmological origin, the Javanese iconography emphasizes narrative ethics and spiritual devotion rather than sovereignty or domination. This demonstrates how iconographic systems are culturally adaptive, transforming shared mythological figures into localized visual expressions aligned with specific ideological and religious concerns (Panofsky, 1955; Eco, 1976).

In conclusion, the iconographic analysis of Garudeya at Candi Kidal reveals a visual strategy centered on mythological narration, moral exemplarity, and spiritual ascent. Garudeya is not reduced to an emblematic symbol but remains a narrative agent whose visual form mediates between text, ritual, and cosmology. This confirms the role of iconography as a critical tool for understanding how Javanese temple art translates universal myth into culturally specific visual meaning.

### 3.2 Garuda at the Grand Palace: Visual Semiotics of Power and Sovereignty



**Figure 2: The Garuda (Phra Khrut) at Grand Palace Thailand**

Garuda (*Phra Khrut*) is prominently represented throughout the Grand Palace (Phra Borom Maha Ratcha Wang), located in Bangkok, Thailand, along the eastern bank of the Chao Phraya River. The Grand Palace serves as the symbolic and ceremonial center of Thai kingship and functions as a nexus of political authority, religious practice, and cosmological

order. Unlike a single temple structure such as Candi Kidal, the Grand Palace is a large architectural complex comprising royal halls, gates, walls, pavilions, and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (*Wat Phra Kaew*). Within this spatial system, Garuda appears not as a narrative relief but as a recurrent emblematic figure integrated into architectural and ceremonial elements

across the palace grounds. Garuda (Phra Khrut) is depicted with a muscular body, wide wings, sharp talons, and an aggressive stance. Often rendered in gold and vibrant colors, it dominates architectural surfaces as a standalone emblem rather than a narrative figure.

The construction of the Grand Palace began in 1782 CE during the reign of King Rama I, the founder of the Chakri Dynasty, following the establishment of Bangkok as the new capital of Siam. Since its inception, the palace complex has undergone continuous expansion and renovation by successive monarchs throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The use of Garuda (Phra Khrut) as a royal and state symbol dates to the early Chakri period and was gradually formalized as the official emblem of the Thai monarchy and state. Consequently, the Garuda representations at the Grand Palace are not attributable to a single moment of artistic production but reflect a long-term visual and ideological continuity in Thai royal culture.

In contrast to the limited and narratively defined Garudeya reliefs at Candi Kidal, Garuda symbols at the Grand Palace are numerous and widely distributed. They appear in various forms and media, including Sculptural figures and reliefs on palace gates and walls, Decorative ornaments on roof finials and architectural edges, Motifs on doors, columns, and ceremonial structures, Garuda emblems in royal insignia, seals, and state iconography. Due to this widespread and repetitive use, the exact number of Garuda representations cannot be precisely quantified. Instead, Garuda functions as a ubiquitous visual marker of royal authority, continuously reinforcing the symbolic identity of the palace as a sacred political space.

Formally, Garuda Phra Khrut is typically depicted as:

- An anthropomorphic figure with a muscular human torso
- Large, fully extended wings
- A frontal or dominant standing posture
- Frequently shown grasping or subduing nāga figures

From a formal perspective, Garuda Phra Khrut is rendered in a monumental, symmetrical, and hierarchical style. The body is portrayed as powerful and muscular, with clearly defined limbs and an assertive facial expression conveying authority and vigilance. The wings are extended laterally in a balanced and symmetrical manner, emphasizing stability, control, and cosmic order. The visual treatment is iconic rather than narrative. There is no sequential storytelling or episodic depiction; instead, Garuda is presented as a timeless and immediately recognizable symbol. The formal emphasis on scale, symmetry, and repetition reflects the aesthetic logic of royal architecture, where visual clarity and ideological legibility are prioritized. Garuda (Phra Khrut) at the Grand Palace operates as an institutional

and ideological symbol rather than a mythological narrative character. Its monumental scale, repetitive presence, and emblematic clarity transform Garuda into a visual language of sovereignty that unites religion, kingship, and cosmology.

This formal role contrasts sharply with the narrative and ethical emphasis of Garudeya at Candi Kidal. The comparison highlights how differences in visual form correspond to distinct cultural constructions of power and spirituality, demonstrating that Garuda's meaning is shaped not by myth alone but by the architectural, political, and cosmological systems in which it is embedded.

### 3.2.1 Visual Semiotic Analysis of Garuda at the Grand Palace, Thailand

The visual representation of Garuda at the Grand Palace in Bangkok operates as a highly formalized semiotic system in which mythology, royal ideology, and state power are visually articulated. Unlike the narrative relief-based depiction of Garudeya at Candi Kidal, Garuda in the Thai context appears predominantly as a monumental emblem, integrated into architectural ornamentation, royal insignia, and ceremonial iconography. This transformation reflects a shift from mytho-spiritual narrative toward political-theological symbolism (Peleggi, 2002; Reynolds, 2006).

At the denotative level, Garuda is represented as a powerful anthropomorphic avian figure with an expansive wingspan, muscular body, and assertive posture. The figure is often shown grasping or overpowering nāga figures, a motif repeatedly rendered in sculptural reliefs, roof finials, gates, and royal seals. The sharp angular wings, symmetrical composition, and frontal orientation emphasize dominance, stability, and visual authority rather than narrative movement (Stratton, 2004; Woodward, 1997).

At the connotative level, these visual features signify royal authority, cosmic order, and divine legitimacy. In Thai visual culture, Garuda (*Phra Khrut*) is closely associated with the Chakri monarchy and functions as the official emblem of the Thai state. The act of subduing the nāga symbolizes the triumph of divine law (*dharma*) over chaos, while the monumental scale of Garuda imagery communicates permanence and sovereignty. This aligns with the Southeast Asian concept of *devarāja*, where kingship is legitimized through cosmological association (Peleggi, 2002; Tambiah, 1976).

From an ideological perspective, Garuda in the Grand Palace functions as a mythic sign that naturalizes political power. Drawing on Barthes' theory of myth, the visual dominance of Garuda transforms historically constructed royal authority into a seemingly timeless and sacred order. The mythological origin of Garuda in Hindu cosmology is thus recontextualized within a

Buddhist- royalist framework, producing a hybrid symbol that simultaneously references divine ancestry and modern nationhood (Barthes, 1977; Reynolds, 2006).

Spatially, the strategic placement of Garuda imagery throughout the Grand Palace reinforces its semiotic function as a guardian and legitimizer of royal space. Positioned on gates, roofs, and ceremonial thresholds, Garuda marks the palace as a cosmologically sanctioned center of power. This spatial semiotics aligns with Thai mandala-based conceptions of political space, in which the palace operates as the symbolic axis of the kingdom (Tambiah, 1976; Woodward, 1997).

Within Stuart Hall's constructionist framework of representation, Garuda in Thailand can be understood as a culturally produced sign whose meaning is generated through royal discourse and state ritual rather than mythological narrative alone. While sharing a common cosmological origin with Javanese Garuda, Thai Garuda is rearticulated as a symbol of sovereignty, bureaucratic authority, and national identity. This demonstrates how visual signs function as floating signifiers, acquiring different ideological meanings through cultural and institutional contexts (Hall, 1997).

In conclusion, the visual semiotics of Garuda at the Grand Palace reveals a transformation of a shared mythological figure into a powerful emblem of political theology. Whereas Garuda at Candi Kidal emphasizes spiritual devotion and liberation, Thai Garuda embodies authority, order, and state legitimacy. This contrast highlights the dynamic nature of visual symbols and underscores the role of cultural context in shaping semiotic meaning across Southeast Asia (Eco, 1976; Mitchell, 2005). In Thailand, Garuda is the official emblem of the monarchy and state institutions. Its placement in the Grand Palace reinforces the king's divine mandate, aligning political power with cosmological legitimacy. Garuda (Phra Khrut) signifies royal authority, cosmic kingship, and state power. Garuda grasping the naga symbolizes the triumph of order over chaos and the king's role as protector of the realm.

### 3.2.2 Iconographic Analysis of Garuda at the Grand Palace, Thailand

The iconography of Garuda at the Grand Palace in Bangkok represents a highly codified visual system in which Hindu mythological origins are reinterpreted through Thai Buddhist kingship and royal aesthetics. As a dominant motif in palace architecture, ceremonial insignia, and state emblems, Garuda (*Phra Khrut*) functions not as a narrative figure but as an authoritative icon embedded within political and cosmological symbolism (Woodward, 1997; Peleggi, 2002).

At the level of pre-iconographical description, Garuda is depicted as a large anthropomorphic avian

figure characterized by a muscular human torso, powerful outstretched wings, taloned feet, and a commanding facial expression. The figure is frequently shown in a frontal and symmetrical stance, emphasizing stability and dominance. In many instances, Garuda is portrayed grasping or overpowering nāga figures, a visual motif consistently repeated across sculptural reliefs, roof ornaments, gates, and royal seals within the Grand Palace complex (Stratton, 2004; Woodward, 1997).

At the level of iconographical analysis, these visual features are identified as references to well-established mythological narratives derived from Hindu cosmology, particularly Garuda's role as the eternal adversary of the nāga and as the divine mount (*vāhana*) of Vishnu. Textual sources such as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas* describe Garuda as a celestial being embodying speed, strength, and cosmic order. In the Thai context, however, these narratives are selectively emphasized to foreground Garuda's role as a protector and enforcer of divine law rather than as a participant in extended mythological storytelling (Zimmer, 1951; Kramrisch, 1976).

At the iconological level, the meaning of Garuda extends beyond mythological reference to articulate a broader worldview rooted in Thai political theology. Garuda becomes a visual embodiment of royal authority and state legitimacy, closely associated with the Chakri monarchy. This transformation aligns with the Southeast Asian concept of *devarāja*, in which the king is positioned as a cosmologically sanctioned ruler whose authority is derived from divine principles. Garuda's image thus functions as a symbolic extension of the monarch's power, reinforcing the sacred nature of kingship and the hierarchical structure of the Thai state (Tambiah, 1976; Peleggi, 2002).

The spatial deployment of Garuda imagery throughout the Grand Palace further enhances its iconological significance. Positioned on gates, rooftops, and ceremonial thresholds, Garuda serves as a guardian figure marking the palace as a sacred political center. This spatial arrangement reflects mandala-based cosmological conceptions in which the palace operates as the axis mundi, reinforcing the idea that political authority is inseparable from cosmic order (Woodward, 1997; Reynolds, 2006).

From a comparative perspective, the iconographic function of Garuda in Thailand contrasts sharply with its narrative and devotional role in Javanese temple art. While both traditions draw from a shared Hindu cosmological repertoire, Thai iconography abstracts Garuda into a timeless emblem of sovereignty, detaching it from narrative specificity in favor of ideological clarity. This demonstrates how iconography operates as a culturally adaptive system, capable of transforming mythological figures into visual



instruments of power and identity (Panofsky, 1955; Eco, 1976).

In conclusion, the iconographic analysis of Garuda at the Grand Palace reveals a deliberate visual strategy through which myth, monarchy, and cosmology are synthesized into a coherent political symbol. Garuda's transformation from mythological character to royal emblem underscores the role of iconography in mediating cultural continuity and ideological authority within Thai visual culture.

#### 4. Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of Garuda representations at Candi Kidal, East Java, and the Grand Palace in Bangkok reveals how a shared mythological figure derived from Hindu cosmology undergoes significant visual and ideological transformation when embedded within different cultural, religious, and political systems. Although both representations originate from the Garudeya myth, their visual forms and symbolic functions diverge in response to distinct historical contexts and cosmological worldviews (Zimmer, 1951; Hall, 1997). This comparison demonstrates that while Garuda retains a shared mythological core across Southeast Asia, its visual articulation and symbolic meaning are not fixed. Instead, Garuda operates as a floating signifier whose meaning is produced through specific cultural, religious, and political discourses (Hall, 1997). In Java, Garudeya embodies spiritual devotion and liberation; in Thailand, Garuda materializes as an emblem of sovereignty and cosmic order. Together, these representations reveal how visual culture mediates between shared cosmology and localized ideological expression, positioning Garuda as a semiotic bridge within Southeast Asian visual identity (Eco, 1976; Mitchell, 2005).

The comparative framework focuses on several key dimensions:

1. Visual form and artistic style, such as narrative relief-based representations in Java versus monumental and emblematic depictions in Thailand;
2. Symbolic function, where Garuda operates as a symbol of spiritual liberation and moral devotion in the Javanese context, and as a symbol of royal authority and state sovereignty in the Thai context;
3. Socio-political and ideological context, including the roles of religion, kingship, and cosmology in shaping visual meaning.

##### 4.1 Visual Form and Artistic Style

In Candi Kidal, Garuda—referred to as Garudeya—is rendered in narrative relief form, carved into the stone surface of the temple base. The figure is characterized by elongated proportions, fluid movement, and expressive gestures that emphasize storytelling and sequential reading. Garudeya often appears kneeling or

carrying Vishnu, with wings functioning as narrative devices rather than symbols of domination. The relief style prioritizes rhythm, continuity, and moral narration over symmetry or monumentality, reflecting Javanese sculptural traditions rooted in didactic temple art (Holt, 1967; Kramrisch, 1976).

In contrast, Garuda at the Grand Palace is depicted as a monumental, frontal, and symmetrical figure integrated into architectural ornamentation and royal insignia. The Thai Garuda (*Phra Khrut*) displays a muscular body, expansive wingspan, and assertive posture, often shown overpowering nāga figures. The artistic style emphasizes stability, hierarchy, and visual authority, aligning with court aesthetics that prioritize emblematic clarity and political symbolism over narrative expression (Woodward, 1997; Stratton, 2004).

##### 4.2. Symbolic Function

The symbolic function of Garuda in Candi Kidal is primarily spiritual and ethical. Garudeya serves as a narrative agent representing devotion (*bhakti*), filial piety, and liberation (*mokṣa*). His visual portrayal communicates moral struggle and spiritual ascent, resonating with the temple's function as a mortuary monument associated with the deification of King Anusapati. Garudeya's role is thus pedagogical and soteriological, guiding devotees toward spiritual transcendence (Munandar, 2011; Zimmer, 1951).

By contrast, Garuda in the Grand Palace functions as a symbol of sovereignty, protection, and state authority. As the official emblem of the Thai monarchy and state, Garuda embodies royal power and cosmic legitimacy. The recurring motif of Garuda subduing the nāga symbolizes the triumph of divine order (*dharma*) over chaos, reinforcing the king's role as the upholder of cosmic balance. In this context, Garuda is detached from narrative myth and reconstituted as a timeless emblem of political theology (Peleggi, 2002; Tambiah, 1976).

##### 4.3. Socio-Political and Ideological Context: Religion, Kingship, and Cosmology

The socio-political and ideological contexts of the two sites play a decisive role in shaping Garuda's visual meaning. In Java, the Garudeya narrative is embedded within a syncretic Hindu-Buddhist cosmology that emphasizes spiritual liberation, karmic ethics, and harmony between the human and divine realms. Kingship is expressed symbolically through moral exemplarity rather than direct political imagery. As such, Garudeya at Candi Kidal reflects a cosmology in which power is subordinated to spiritual legitimacy (Munandar, 2011; Hall, 1997).

In Thailand, Garuda is integrated into a Buddhist-royalist cosmology centered on the concept of *devarāja*, where the king is regarded as a cosmologically sanctioned ruler. Religion, kingship, and state ideology

converge in the visual deployment of Garuda across the Grand Palace, transforming mythological symbolism into an instrument of governance. The palace itself functions as a mandala-like cosmic center, and Garuda's presence reinforces the sacralization of royal space and authority (Tambiah, 1976; Reynolds, 2006)

This comparison demonstrates that Garuda functions as a floating signifier, whose meaning shifts according to cultural discourse and political needs.

**Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Garuda Representations: Candi Kidal (Indonesia) and Grand Palace (Thailand)**

Analytical Aspect	Garuda (Garudeya) – Candi Kidal, Indonesia	Garuda (Phra Khrut) – Grand Palace, Thailand
<b>Visual Form &amp; Artistic Style</b>	Rendered as narrative stone reliefs on the temple base; elongated proportions, fluid gestures, and dynamic postures. Emphasis on storytelling and sequential reading rather than Symmetry or monumentality.	Depicted as monumental, frontal, and symmetrical figures integrated into palace architecture, gates, roofs, and royal insignia. Muscular body, expansive wingspan, and assertive stance emphasize power, hierarchy, and
<b>Analytical Aspect</b>	Garuda (Garudeya) – Candi Kidal, Indonesia	Garuda (Phra Khrut) – Grand Palace, Thailand
	Wings function as narrative and spiritual markers rather than symbols of domination (Holt, 1967; Kramrisch, 1976).	visual authority rather than narrative continuity (Woodward, 1997; Stratton, 2004).
<b>Symbolic Function</b>	Functions primarily as a spiritual and ethical symbol. Garudeya represents devotion ( <i>bhakti</i> ), filial piety, moral struggle, and liberation ( <i>mokṣa</i> ). Acts as a didactic figure guiding devotees toward spiritual transcendence, closely related to mortuary symbolism and posthumous ascent (Munandar, 2011; Zimmer, 1951).	Functions as a political and royal emblem. Garuda symbolizes sovereignty, protection, and cosmic legitimacy of the monarchy. The motif of Garuda subduing the nāga represents the triumph of divine order ( <i>dharma</i> ) over chaos, reinforcing royal authority and state identity (Peleggi, 2002; Tambiah, 1976).
<b>Religion</b>	Embedded within a syncretic Hindu-Buddhist cosmology emphasizing karma, devotion, and liberation. Religious meaning is oriented toward individual spiritual ascent rather than institutional power (Kramrisch, 1976; Munandar, 2011).	Embedded within Theravāda Buddhism infused with Hindu cosmology. Garuda is recontextualized as a guardian of Buddhist kingship, integrating Hindu myth into Buddhist royal ideology (Woodward, 1997; Reynolds, 2006).
<b>Kingship</b>	Kingship is expressed indirectly and symbolically. Garudeya is associated with moral exemplarity and the deification of King Anusapati, where royal legitimacy is linked to spiritual virtue rather than overt political imagery (Holt, 1967; Munandar, 2011).	Kingship is expressed explicitly and institutionally. Garuda operates as the official emblem of the Chakri monarchy, visualizing the king as a cosmologically sanctioned ruler within the <i>devarāja</i> tradition (Tambiah, 1976; Peleggi, 2002).
<b>Cosmology</b>	Reflects a cosmology focused on vertical spiritual movement— from earthly bondage toward transcendence. Garudeya mediates between human and divine realms, symbolizing ascent and liberation (Zimmer, 1951).	Reflects a mandala-based political cosmology in which the palace functions as the cosmic center. Garuda marks royal space as sacred and reinforces cosmic order and territorial sovereignty (Tambiah, 1976; Woodward, 1997).
<b>Overall Visual Meaning</b>	Garudeya operates as a narrative- spiritual sign, emphasizing ethics, devotion, and liberation. Meaning is produced through mythological storytelling and ritual context.	Garuda operates as an emblematic-political sign, emphasizing authority, stability, and state power. Meaning is produced through royal discourse and institutional representation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Garuda serves as a powerful semiotic bridge between mythology, art, and political ideology in Southeast Asia. While sharing a common mythological origin, the Garuda of Candi Kidal and the Grand Palace embodies divergent cultural

values—spiritual liberation in Java and sovereign authority in Thailand. Understanding these differences enriches cross-cultural visual studies and supports culturally grounded creative practices.

The transformation of Garuda from a narrative agent in Java to a political emblem in Thailand illustrates Hall's theory of representation, where meaning is constructed through cultural articulation. Garuda is not a fixed symbol but a dynamic visual language shaped by ideology, power, and belief systems.

For contemporary visual communication and design, this study offers insights into how traditional symbols can be recontextualized without losing cultural depth.

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