

## **‘My rooster speaks like a human!’: Animal speech in ancient literature**

**Interdisciplinary Conference at the University of Potsdam (Germany), 27-29 September 2018**

Organizer: Dr Hedwig Schmalzgruber (Department of Classics, University of Potsdam)

### **Confirmed keynote speakers:**

Prof. Dr. Annetta Alexandridis (Cornell University)

Prof. Dr. Ursula Gärtner (Universität Graz)

Prof. Dr. Janet Spittler (University of Virginia)

### **- Call for Papers -**

When Micyllus the cobbler is addressed by his cock one morning, he is terrified by this seemingly sinister omen. Yet, the animal convicts him of his lack of education: Clearly, Micyllus hasn't read his Homer, for otherwise he would know that even the horse of Achilles, Xanthus, had already spoken to his master, making prophecies and reciting epic verses. From the point of view of literary history, the eloquent cock in Lucian's dialogue *Gallus* is therefore in prominent company, and many more examples of articulate animals can be added from ancient Greek and Latin literature: Animal figures in fables, choreutae and protagonists in some of the comedies of Aristophanes, the mice and frogs in the late Hellenistic *Batrachomyomachia*, the mosquito in the pseudo-Virgilian *Culex* or the oxen speaking in the context of omens in the works of Livy, Tacitus and Pliny the Elder. In early Christian times, wild and tame animals in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles<sup>1</sup> or a ploughing ox destined for slaughter in Arnobius' apology *Against the Heathen* acquire human voice.

Speaking animals can be found in various genres of ancient literature, 'animals' being understood as creatures occurring in nature in contrast to eloquent mythological hybrids, and 'animal speech' being understood as verbal utterances of literary animals in contrast to animal communication and animal languages. The conference aims at a synoptical and systematic access to the scattered material in order to examine it for the completely different quantitative and qualitative character of animal speech, for contexts relating to literary, cultural and intellectual history and for the concepts of animality and humanity behind it. The scope ranges from the mere mentioning of the fact of animal speech to rhetorically elaborated monologic or dialogic animal speech. Animals with permanent or just temporarily conferred faculty of speech take on different narratological functions as minor characters with short parts or as protagonists and central actors; they speak for themselves or serve as a mouthpiece for supernatural powers or the (implicit) author. Accordingly, they are used in multiple ways for moral instruction and as ironically unmasking mirrors of human behaviour, for theological and philosophical reflection and paraenesis, for prophecy or even for parody and comic effects, whereby the reasons for the added value of the animal speakers are just as multiple. A stimulating basis for discussing the topic is offered by the heuristic distinction drawn by Roland Borgards between 'semiotic' animals, which occur in texts *exclusively as signs*, as bearers of meaning, and 'diegetic' animals, which occur *also as beings*, as comprehensible elements

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Matthews, C. R. (1999), 'Articulate Animals: A Multivalent Motiv in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles', in F. Bovon et al. (eds), *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 205-232 and Spittler, J. E. (2008), *Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: The Wild Kingdom of Early Christian Literature*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck.

of the narrated world, and between 'realistic' and 'fantastic' animals<sup>2</sup>. For the definition of the latter, the relationship between the narrated world and the time and culture, in which the narration takes place, is relevant, which means for instance that animal speakers in the Bible are not fantastic, but theologically explainable phenomena. Of particular interest are cases which elude unambiguous interpretations and those in which the fictionality or plausibility of animal speech is reflected upon in the text or paratextually. Crossing the borders between animals and humans<sup>3</sup>, speaking animals blur the anthropological difference, albeit in the medium of literature, and thus challenge the traditional dichotomies between subject and object, between culture and nature, between free action and instinct-bound behaviour<sup>4</sup>. In this respect interesting connections can be established to the current *Animal Studies*<sup>5</sup> by exploring how the animals in question can be located between anthropomorphisation and animality, between individuality and stereotype, between their own value and their use as rhetorical and allegorical instruments by humans.

The conference will deal with animal speech in Greek and Latin texts from the very beginnings to late antiquity, also taking into account other ancient literatures which show motivic parallels to these texts or continue to have an effect upon them. Here speaking animals in the Old Testament, but also in Mesopotamian and ancient Egyptian animal tales can be considered in particular. The (cultural-)historical contextualisation of the phenomenon is just as relevant as graphical and sculptural representations in ancient art which are related to a specific text or to an oral or written textual tradition. For instance, an Attic red-figure calyx-krater is painted with actors in bird costumes obviously performing a scene from a comedy, while a kylix from the same period probably shows Aesop conversing with a fox. The iconographic analysis of such objects can provide insight into artistic strategies of visualization of animal speech, into the medial interaction between image and text or independent traditions of the visual medium and into the visual staging of the border crossing between animality and humanity. Thus, the conference topic encourages an intense interdisciplinary exchange of research findings in the fields of Classical Philology, Theology, Jewish and Religious Studies, Ancient Oriental Studies and Egyptology as well as Ancient History and Archaeology.

The following key questions may provide guidance for the thematic orientation of the conference papers:

- In which ancient Greek or Latin (or Old Testament, ancient oriental, ancient Egyptian) narratives do animals gifted with human speech occur? Are there tradition lines and mutual relations with regard to history of motifs and genres?
- In which form, for which purpose and in which functional contexts do speaking animals appear in ancient works of art? (How) do these objects interact with textual traditions?

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Borgards, R. (2012), 'Tiere in der Literatur – Eine methodische Standortbestimmung', in H. Grimm and C. Otterstedt (eds), *Das Tier an sich. Disziplinenübergreifende Perspektiven für neue Wege im wissenschaftsbasierten Tierschutz*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 87-118 (here 89) and Borgards, R. (2016), Chapter V.3 'Tiere und Literatur', in id. (ed), *Tiere: Kulturwissenschaftliches Handbuch*, Stuttgart, J. B. Metzler, 225-244 (here 226-228).

<sup>3</sup>For this topic see Alexandridis, A. et al. (eds) (2008), *Mensch und Tier in der Antike: Grenzziehung und Grenzüberschreitung. Symposium vom 7. bis 9. April 2005 in Rostock*, Wiesbaden, Reichert.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Borgards, R. (2016), Chapter I 'Einleitung: Cultural Animal Studies', in R. Borgards (ed), *Tiere: Kulturwissenschaftliches Handbuch*, Stuttgart, J. B. Metzler, 1-5 (here 2).

<sup>5</sup>Apart from the manual edited by R. Borgards (cf. note 2) see also Ortiz Robles, M. (2016), *Literature and Animal Studies*, London and New York, Routledge; Campbell, G. L. (ed) (2014), *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (containing several articles about genres of ancient literature), and Gilhus, I. S. (2006), *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas*, London and New York, Routledge.

- What is the added value of the animal speaker in terms of narratology, argumentation or composition?
- To what extent is there a tension in the text or image between anthropomorphism and animality, and what effect does it have on the reader or viewer?
- What is the position of the speaking animals between semiotic character and tangibility in the narrated world, between realism, imagination or the superhuman sphere?
- In which historical, social, religious and discursive contexts can the respective animal speech be located, and what consequences does this have for the interpretation?
- How is the appearance of speaking animals theoretically reflected upon and assessed by ancient authors?

Researchers from Germany and abroad are invited to email an abstract for a paper (up to 500 words, in German or English) and a short CV to Dr Hedwig Schmalzgruber ([schmalzgruber@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:schmalzgruber@uni-potsdam.de)) by **30 November 2017**. You will be notified of the acceptance of your proposal by 31 December 2017. The time allocated for a paper presentation is 30 minutes, with a further 15 minutes allowed for discussion; the subsequent publication of the papers in an edited volume is envisaged. The languages of the conference are German and English. Subject to adequate funding, speakers' accommodation expenses and a travel allowance will be covered.

**Organization:**

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