

International Conference on Animals. 24-26 October 2024

ZOOMATHIA International Research Network



"They only lack speech", Animal Sounds, Voices and Language in Nature and in Ancient and Medieval Texts



Ms. New York, Pierpont Morgan Libr., M 397, f. 6r

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Location: Campus Condorcet, Aubervilliers (Thursday 24 PM, Saturday 26) – Collège de France, Paris (Friday 25)



Ms. Cambridge,
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De naturis animantium: Leonum est fremere uel rugire, tigridum rancare, pardorum felire, pantherarum caurire, ursorum uncare uel saenire, aprorum frendere, lyncum urcare, luporum ululare, serpentium sibilare, onagrorum mugilare, ceruorum rugire, boum mugire, equorum hinnire, asinorum rudere uel oncare, porcorum grunnire, uerris quiritare, arietum blatterare, ouium balare, bircorum miccire, haedorum bebare, canum latrare seu baubari, uulpium gannire. (SUETONIUS, *Prata*, frg. 161)

The list of animal vocalizations preserved in a fragment of Suetonius (1st cent. CE) has undergone numerous revisions and additions over the ages, spanning from Antiquity to modern times. Notable contributors include Isidore of Seville, medieval glossaries, and Alexander Neckam, among others in the Latin world. Within the human soundscape, animal voices populate our auditory experience. This begs the question: do these voices constitute a genuine language? Are they exclusively ours or shared with other species? Are they mere cries, voices, or perhaps even words? Do they betray an intelligence akin to that of humans? Such inquiries have intrigued diverse cultures, each offering nuanced and sometimes intricate answers. In Western society, prevailing beliefs are shifting towards an "anti-speciesist" stance, challenging the notion of human exceptionalism both morally and in terms of cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural capacities. This trend towards reclassifying humans as "human animals" reflects a desire to reintegrate *Homo sapiens* into the broader animal realm, echoing certain Aristotelian continuist philosophies. What roles, functions, and meanings did ancient and medieval societies attribute to animal vocalizations?

The colloquium's objective isn't to approach the theme of animal cries and sounds solely from a lexicographical perspective, as often explored, but rather to delve into other dimensions of animal vocalizations. Specifically, the focus lies on examining Greek and Roman antiquity, as well as the Latin, Byzantine, and Arabic Middle Ages. It aims to explore the concepts formulated by ancient thinkers and observers to describe and interpret animal vocalizations, along with the frameworks they devised to distinguish between mere noise and structured language. Did they differentiate between a cat's purr and its meow, or the contextual variations in a bird's song? Through observation and analysis, how did they transition from identifying sounds to labeling them as cries or songs? What criteria elevated birdcalls to the status of song, while quadrupeds, despite being domesticated, were relegated to mere cries, from barks to bleats to neighs? Additionally, the symposium seeks to ponder why animals have occasionally been endowed with voices to express societal reflections that even fictitious humans might hesitate to voice. While ancient societies occasionally applied human paradigms to animals, they also depicted animals articulating sentiments deemed inappropriate or perilous for

humans to express. Lastly, how did ancient cultures represent and interpret this realm of animal sounds through imagery and music?

In his *History of Animals* (IV.9.535a-b), Aristotle discerns various types of sound emission (*dialektos, phonè, psophos...*), positing that some animals possess voices while others produce mere sounds. However, his distinction rests on physiological grounds rather than semiotic value. The capacity to articulate sounds containing vowel and consonant phonemes, limited to select animals with mobile tongues, neither defines nor governs the ability to convey messages through sound. Building on this, ancient and medieval scholars and zoographers pondered the notion of animal "language," at times describing and often naming it according to species, thus initiating the field of mimophonetics.

By scrutinizing ancient documents—written or pictorial—and archaeological artifacts through the lens of contemporary scholarship, this symposium aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue with life and behavioral sciences, aligning with the ethos underpinning the international research network Zoomathia, advocating for cross-pollination between zoology and ethology.

The symposium invites contributions exploring four main perspectives:

1. Animal language *versus* human language (theoretical approach): How do we define animal vocal expression using theoretical frameworks developed for humans? Is there a shared communicative element in cries and sounds? Is human crying a hypolinguistic or paralinguistic phenomenon? How did ancient thinkers distinguish between mute animals (ᾠα ἄλογα, *animalia muta* or *muta bestia*, "bestes mues") and those capable of "speech"? What insights do original myths offer on the emergence and divergence of animal and human languages?
2. Animal soundscape and comprehension (intra- and extra-specific exchanges): Examining the intelligibility of animal sounds and articulated voices (e.g. in philosophical and grammatical debates); the relationship between language, comprehension, and language acquisition (the debates on *logos* and *prudentia*, and the possible pre-eminence of the sense of hearing over that of sight); exploring the potential for human-animal intercommunication (e.g. in certain saints); evaluating the functions of animal vocalizations in human and animal societies (e.g., the cries of birds of prey, ecolocalization), and their emotional impact (e.g., the effects of rooster crowing, cat purring); interpreting animal sounds, particularly in the context of omens.
3. Cries, songs, imitation, musicality (depicting sound, depicting voice): Exploring non-linguistic sound emissions; drawing parallels between animal and human vocalizations; examining the cultural assimilation of animal sounds in literature, poetry, song, and music; investigating the role of animal cries in folklore (e.g., bird-singing competitions) and their onomatopoeic significance (mymophony); exploring the onomastic distinction of animals from one another by the cry they emit (e.g. zoononyms, *verba sonandi*); exploring how animals learn human language (e.g. parrots or monkeys).
4. Animal speech (representations of animal voices beyond sound): Analyzing depictions of talking animals in various societies through literature, iconography, and epigraphy (e.g. in Byzantine fables and romances as Ὁ Πουλολόγος, Συναξάριον τοῦ τιμημένου γαδάρου, Διήγησις παιδιόφραστος περὶ τῶν τετραπόδων ζώων..., in fabliaux, Renart's novel, in Farid al-Din Attar's "Conference of Birds" as in the 22nd epistle of the *Ikhwân al-Safâ*); considering the portrayal of sound, voice, and speech in cultural artifacts (e.g. Aesop or Adam talking to animals); exploring instances of animals assuming roles typically reserved for humans in storytelling traditions.

The advisory board will select proposals for papers. Papers may be presented in French, English, German, Italian, or Spanish. Submissions can be sent **before May 1, 2024**, to: isabelle.draelants@irht.cnrs.fr; jean-charles.ducene@ephe.psl.eu; stavros.lazaris@college-de-france.fr; arnaud.zucker@univ-cotedazur.fr. The program will be announced in early June 2024.

One of the organizers' goals is to expedite the publication of the colloquium's findings; therefore, written contributions will be requested shortly after the conclusion of the colloquium.

Following the symposium, there will be a half-day meeting involving partners of the Zoomathia International Research Network (IRN).



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