HAL
open science

# Impressions from the International Conference "Animals and Words" (Darmstadt, May 26-27, 2014)

Thierry Buquet

## To cite this version:

Thierry Buquet. Impressions from the International Conference "Animals and Words" (Darmstadt, May 26-27, 2014). 2014. halshs-01083383

**HAL Id: halshs-01083383**

**https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01083383v1**

Submitted on 17 Nov 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Impressions from the International Conference “Animals and Words” (Darmstadt, May 26-27, 2014)

June 7, 2014
By Thierry Buquet

Conrad Gesner, Icones animalium, Zurich: Froschauer, 1553, p. 28

Animaliter is an international research network, which acronym means ‘Animal in literature’. The core team gathers scholars from Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Animaliter’s main research project is to publish an on-line encyclopaedia of animals found in medieval literature (in Romance, Latin, German and Scandinavian languages). Many scholars from many countries (Italy, France, Spain along with the countries cited earlier) are involved in the redaction of the various chapters. Linked to this in-progress encyclopaedia is a very useful animal-bibliography, which is available on-line (see “References” at the end of the post for all web-links). Animaliter also organizes regularly scientific conferences, as meetings for the scholars involved in the network (see Buquet 2010), but also for young scholars such as PhD candidates. The 2014 meeting took place in Germany in Darmstadt (Technische Universität) on May 26-27, 2014. The topics of the conference, entitled “Animals and Words”, included “Talking about animals” (naming, classifying, describing, qualifying), “Talking with animals” (disputations, dialogues) and “Talking Animals” (typology of voices and signification).

As it would be rather unfair to describe each paper in just a few words, I will concentrate here on several of the themes of the conference and debates that took place in a quite subjective way, through the biased distorting lens of my own research and professional interests.

## In search of words, using Digital Humanities

Digital humanities were invoked several times during the conference, something that is hardly surprising in a Technical University such as Darmstadt. Text and data mining is used to explore and formalize the language of hunting in medieval sources (vocabulary, semantic, linguistics). This analysed discourse on hunting was represented by frames (or “*graphes*” as we say in French), in a kind of web-semantic data graphic model (Simone Schultz-Balluff, Bochum). Louise Borek (Darmstadt) presented another type of experience with language, creating a digital inventory of the colours of horse hide from different medieval German textual corpora.

These Digital humanities projects rather interest me, they also puzzled me, and not only because my knowledge of German was not sufficient to follow all the arguments. If reduced to a minimal form, a danger exists in these kinds of projects for researchers to be restricted by the words themselves, counting and “framing” them without enough historic contextualization. Except for such risks, however, digital lexicography could be of great use in helping scholars understand medieval texts about animals.

## Exchanges with the Oriental world, Arabic influences on medieval animal-literature

One point that interested me, found in several of the papers, was the influence of the Oriental world in various aspects of medieval literature about animals. For example, Raymond Llull’s well-known *Books of Beasts* was probably inspired by the Arabic animal-fable *Khalila and Dimma*, and not by the Romance of Renart tradition (Marco Maulu, Sassari; see Maulu 2013). In Spanish literature, a dispute between a man and his ass (*Disputa de l’Ase*, by Turmada, 1417, in Catalan) was probably influenced by the ‘Disputation of the animals versus man’, part of the *Epistles* of the *Ikhwan al-Safa*, an Arabic encyclopaedia written in the 9th century AD (Llucia Martin, Alicante). As the *Ikhwan al-Safa* describes an animal-society that puts humankind on trial, it may be possible that as this text diffused into and was translated in medieval Spain it may also have influenced Lull’s *Books of Beasts*. In this book, there is the story of a society of animals who send an embassy to a human king. The Ox evaluates humankind as the worst of all the beasts on Earth, nasty, luxury-loving and foolish with no consideration for the ambassadors of the animal kingdom.

## Moralizations, interpretations

One major theme of the conference was the interpretations of animal behaviour, really observed or mythical. One family of scholastic texts, the *Distinctiones*, are compilations of words taken from the Bible with moral exegesis borrowed from the Church Fathers. *Distinctiones* contains many moral interpretations about animals, *in bono et in malo*, in bad or good sides. Ilya Dines (Jerusalem) illustrates this using the case study of the dog in William of Montibus' *Distinctiones* (end of twelfth century), which combines more than forty different sources, mainly borrowed from the Church Fathers. These *distinctiones* concerning the dog will be later included in some English Bestiaries of the thirteenth century. *Distinctiones* are moral treaties for intended clerics – and not medieval "*Summae*" or encyclopaedias, as discussed during the very interesting debate following the paper. These encyclopaedias nevertheless provide very important information about animals and their interpretation based on a Christian mentality. *Distinctiones* seems to be a major source for historians of animals that are sometimes neglected.

Wilfried Schouwink (Heidelberg) examined the status of the pig regarding Augustine's commentary: *Omnis creatura bona est*. Moral interpretations of this animal (and of the boar) are various, far from the "idée reçue" of the bad and unclean pig. The most striking example of these spiritual interpretations concern the tusks of the boar, signifying the two swords coming out the Judge's mouth of the Apocalypse, which could be found in Ulrich von Lilienfeld's *Concordantia caritatis*.

Larissa Birrer (Zürich) investigated the area of talking animals through the treaties of the interpretations of dreams. She presented a ninth century Byzantine treatise, known as *Achmet's Oneicriticon*. In the bestiary part of this treaty, talking animals are seen or heard in dreams appear mainly as a negative sign; only singing birds are positively interpreted. Achmet provides a Christian interpretation of an Antique Greek treaty on dreams by Artemidorus, where talking animals are, most of the time, seen as auspicious signs. Later, Latin and Romance translations of *Achmet's Oneicriticon*, will transform passages about the monkey, reversing a monkey talking and kissing the dreamer (a sign of betrayal in the original text), into the dreamer talking to a monkey (a sign of bestiality or love 'against nature' "*immundo amore alicui copubilatur*"; "acouplera a autrui par amour ordre"). As demonstrated here, translations from one cultural world to another (Antique Greek, Byzantine, Latin and Romance languages) may result in a radical transformation of the way animals were interpreted.

## The word and the real thing

Animaliter deals mainly with literature and philology. So, most of the papers were solidly grounded on good textual and manuscript studies, preventing papers from becoming too abstract or theoretical.

However, as Richard Trachsler (Zürich) noted during the conclusions of the conference, being very close to the texts and to the words may have one major limiting aspect. The words, extracted from literary texts (romance, poetry, religious treaties, etc.) have to be compared to certain realities. Trachsler chose examples from technical medieval lexicography dealing with horse colours (the paper by Louise Borek discussed abover) or one on horse gaits (Caroline Limpert, Bamberg) to illustrate these difficulties. R. Trachsler added that literature studies about animals have to be compared to results from other scientific disciplines in order to properly to evaluate what medieval texts have left to us. Paul Wackers (Utrecht) argued that the historian of texts have to understand how medieval authors dealt with what they consider as "reality" and how they put it in words, and not particularly with the medieval reality itself. With the example of the goose transported by a fox in a fable, R. Trachsler explained that a better knowledge of the real size of this bird many centuries ago could help in better understanding some of these texts. Were these birds smaller in the High Middle Ages than nowadays? These questions made sense for a member of the Medieval Data-Network such as myself! One may answer to this: Of course geese were smaller! Therefore, I am deeply convicted that help from zooarchaelogists could be useful to resolve problems like this, just as understanding medieval mentalities towards animals would be of use to zooarchaeologists interpreting their finds. The boundaries of scholarly fields should be more permeable with scholars using data in intelligent ways from other disciplines; clearly understanding what data is or is not transferable. Trachsler's remarks make me remind once again of the purpose of such a network as MAD: linking expertise and data between different scientific disciplines to built better scholarship on animals. Studying animal history needs various skills, sometimes very far from medieval studies: zoology, ecology, animal behaviour, veterinary knowledge, etc. and even studies of objects made from the bones of these animals. Archaeology may be sometimes our only source about the way animals were treated in daily life by ordinary people; and that one must not forget that literary sources were not aimed at the great mass of people. If medieval literature probably borrowed folklore or popular attitudes to animals, it doesn't mean that this learned literature was an exact mirror of animal realities.

During the discussion after Clara Wille's paper on vultures, in which she made the assumption that this bird was rare according to the sources, Baudouin Van den Abeele (Louvain) explained that the vulture was probably not so rare in Northern Europe, citing Albertus Magnus, who observed and described this bird and its nesting habits in Northern Germany. This shows, once again, that medieval literature was probably not so very attentive to the "real things of the real world". Albertus was an exception, using personal observations frequently in the *De Animalibus*. Sometimes, he compared his observations with the traditions of legends through the compilation of tales or folklore, as in the case of the ostrich's ability to eat and digest iron (see Buquet 2013). Observations on the elephant in Africa or in India, based on travel accounts from the end of the Middle Ages, brings some interesting information about the distance between literary tradition and observed 'true' facts. As Thomas Gauthey (Paris) illustrated this in his paper, many pilgrims, carefully examining captive or domesticated elephants, remarked that contrary to the tale, this animal has knees and can bend its legs and sit at the command of its master.

***

Literary sources must be compared to other texts (personal testimonies, travelogues, chronicles, financial accounts, archives, charters) or archaeological data, if we want to obtain a more complete view of medieval animals in the Middle Ages. This does not mean that literary studies or philological analysis are useless; on the contrary, they give much useful and fascinating information to historians and archaeologists about the way animals were perceived, through words and names, language, moral interpretation and discourse. The Darmstadt conference fulfilled this purpose very well, raising a variety of new and stimulating questions to be dealt with in the future. We await publication of the papers, which will not be edited in a special proceedings volume, but in forthcoming

regular issues of the journal *Reinardus*, after peer-reviewed selection.

## Appendix: list of animals studied in specific papers

- Dog (I. Dynes, Jerusalem; S. Schultz-Balluff, Bochum)
- Donkey (L. Martin, Alicante)
- Elephant (T. Gauthey, Paris)
- Giraffe (T. Buquet, Beirut)
- Horse (M. Peireins, Deinze; L. Borek, Darmstadt; C. Limpert, Bamberg)
- Leopard and *lonza* (M. Maulu, Sassari)
- Pig and boar (W. Schouwink, Heidelberg)
- Singing birds (A. Prudenzano, Berlin)
- Snakes (A.M. Compagna, Naples)
- Squirrel (S. Weibel, Zürich)
- Vulture (C. Wille, Zürich)

## References

### Weblinks

- Animaliter: http://www.animalier.info
- Animaliter encyclopaedia: http://www.animaliter.uni-mainz.de/
- Animaliter list of contributors: http://www.animaliter.uni-mainz.de/autorinnen/
- Animalier's online-bibliography: http://animaliterbib.uni-trier.de:8050/minev/Bibliographie/bibliographien
- Programme of the Darmstadt conference: http://mad.hypotheses.org/220
- *Reinardus* journal: https://benjamins.com/#catalog/journals/rein/volumes

### Sources cited


- Albertus Magnus:
  - *De Animalibus Libri XXVI : Nach Der Cölner Urschrift*. Edited by Hermann Stadler. 2 vols. Beiträge Zur Geschichte Der Philosophie Des Mittelalters 15-16. Münster: Aschendorff, 1916.
  - *On animals : a medieval summa zoologica*. Translated by Kenneth Francis Kitchell and Irven Michael Resnick. 2 vols. Foundations of natural history. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Ikwan al-safa: *The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn. A Translation from the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, Lenn E., Goodman and Richard Mac Gregor, eds. Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- *The Oneirocriticon of Achmet. A Medieval Greek and Arabic Treatise on the Interpretation of Dreams,* ed. Steven M. Oberhelman, Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1991.
- Turmeda, Anselme, *Dispute de l'ane*, éd. A. Linarès, Paris: Vrin, 1984.


### Papers cited


- Buquet, Thierry. "Retour de journées d'études : Les animaux exotiques dans la littérature médiévale occidentale." *Girafes.net*, June 20, 2010. http://www.girafes.net/animaliter-gottingen-2010/.
- Buquet, Thierry. "Fact-Checking: Can Ostriches Digest Iron ?" *Medieval Animal Data-Network*, October 5, 2013. http://mad.hypotheses.org/131.
- Maulu, Marco. "Ramon Llull e la scrittura allegorica nel *Llibre de Les Bèsties*." *Rhesis (Literature)* 4/ 2 (2013): 251–273.


---


**To cite this post** : Thierry BUQUET, "Impressions from the International Conference "Animal and Words" (Darmstadt, May 26-27, 2014)", *Medieval Animal Data Network* (blog on Hypotheses.org), June, 7th, 2014. **[On line]** http://mad.hypotheses.org/312

Graduate in history and philology at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes études (EPHE, Paris), **Thierry Buquet** is a CNRS engineer at the French Institute of the Near East (Ifpo, Beirut), after being at the Institute of Research and History of Texts (IRHT, Orleans) for fifteen years. He is now manager of digital humanities and electronic resources at Ifpo. His scientific works are devoted to the history of exotic animals in the Middle Ages, from Orient to Occident, mainly the African and Asiatic fauna (big quadrupeds like Giraffe, Elephant, Cheetah, Panther, Lion, Zebra, etc.). His research interests are the history of princely menageries, the history of animal names, the history of zoological knowledge and its transmission from the Antiquity to the Renaissance.

Personal webpage : http://www.ifporient.org/thierry-buquet



Thierry Buquet's other posts

g+1 0 Tweet 4 Like Share 19
Print This Post

Tags: Animaliter, colloquium, moralizations, philology, words

Posted in: Animal survey, Events & colloquia, Topics, Literature

Comments are closed.

# OpenEdition:

- OpenEdition Books
  - OpenEdition BooksBooks in the humanities and social sciences
  - Books
  - Publishers
  - Further information
- Revues.org
  - Revues.orgJournals in the humanities and social sciences
  - Journals
  - Further information
- Calenda
  - CalendaAcademic announcements
  - Announcements
  - Further information
- Hypotheses
  - HypothesesResearch blogs
  - Blogs
  - Further information

- Newsletters and alerts
  - NewsletterSubscribe to the newsletter
  - Alerts and subscriptionsAlert service
- OpenEdition Freemium

Search

the blog
in OpenEdition

Research blogs
TwitterFacebookGoogle +
Ifpo