

SEECHAC

Société Européenne pour l'Etude des Civilisations de l'Himalaya et de l'Asie Centrale

European Society for the Study of Central Asian and Himalayan Civilisations

in collaboration with

Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities

Call for papers for an international conference

Animals as Guides and Messengers in the Art and Literature of Central Asian and Himalayan Societies

24–26 November 2025

SEECHAC is happy to announce that its eighth international conference will be held in Munich from 24-26 November 2025. We invite contributions that adopt a multidisciplinary approach to the theme of animals as guides and messengers in the art and literature of Central Asian and the Himalayas.

Animals feature in the art and literature of Central Asia and the Himalayas at least as prominently as divine and human beings, and yet they are significantly less represented in scholarly works. Similar observations have been made about the invisibility of animals in accounts of historical warfare, in spite of the crucial role they have always played. Animals as guides and messengers have had a very pragmatic role in human societies, from the canaries in European coalmines, to carrier pigeons during the World Wars, and the network of mounted riders that enabled rapid communication across the vast expanses of the Tibetan and Mongol empires. (It is often forgotten that it was the term for the mounts in this network, *slung rta*, that gave its name to the homophonous “wind horse,” *rlung rta*, of Tibetan iconography.) As symbolic beings, animals have perhaps an even greater significance throughout the region in myth, ritual, art, and literature. The world came into existence from a turtle (*rus sbal*), while numerous myths attest to the origin of certain divinities from the eggs of birds; the Buddha himself is believed to have manifested in a range of animal forms in his previous lives as a bodhisattva; divinatory manuals explain the meaning of animal behaviour – fish fighting in streams, stags locking antlers, owlets screeching from rooftops, mice squeaking at dusk – whether observed in real life or seen in dreams – and what these

sights portend for anyone who encounters them; the bones of horses and sheep in excavated tombs, as well as mural paintings and ritual narratives, attest to the role of these animals as psychopompic guides for the souls of the dead on their way to the afterworld. Other animals, such as flying squirrels and especially bats, which are reputed to speak the language of both gods and humans, feature in indigenous Tibetan rituals as intermediaries between our world and the realm of the gods.

SEECHAC, in collaboration with the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Munich, invites contributions from the fields of archaeology, art, religious studies, anthropology, and other domains to explore the many roles that animals have played, and continue to play, as guides and messengers.

If you would like to present a paper at this conference, please send a title and an abstract of not more than 500 words to seechac.munich@zos.badw.de by **30 April 2025**.

Due to the high number of expected participants and the limited number of time slots for the presentation of papers, the organisers will have to make a selection based on the abstracts submitted. All participants will be notified by **1 July 2025** about whether their papers have been accepted.

The conference fee will be **150 Euros**, which will cover conference materials, coffee breaks, three lunches and two dinners. Details will be sent to the accepted speakers.

The definitive programme will be announced by **1 November 2025**.

On behalf of the organising committee:

Prof. Dr. Petra Maurer (Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich)

Prof. Charles Ramble (President of SEECHAC)

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