Foreword

The symposium organized by the Animalia Research Center of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Szeged (SZTE BTK) in October 2024 focused on the role of animals in literature and the arts. The use of animal motifs has been a defining feature of our culture from antiquity to the present day. Every era depicted animals according to its own beliefs, faith, and aims — sometimes through allegory, sometimes imbued with rich symbolic meaning. Magical, religious, and "naturalistic" representations alike have been associated with specific spiritual, ideological, and moral values, and through visual imagery, animal symbolism could effectively convey messages even for illiterate members of the community. The thematic and formal analysis of literary and visual artworks, the hermeneutic richness of texts and contexts, the abundant symbolism of religious, historical, and poetic imagery, and the complexity of symbolic systems have offered endless interpretive possibilities in relation to animal symbolism. Despite our scientifically grounded modern knowledge about animals, the beliefs and convictions rooted in millennia-old traditions persist, constituting an integral part of the history of art, literature, and culture — thus continually affirming the legitimacy of research into animal symbolism.

A selection of the papers presented at the symposium will appear in the 2025/1 thematic issue of *Filológiai Közlöny*, while this richly illustrated volume — complying with the chapters' extensive use of visual materials — presents primarily art-historical analyses that explore the multifaceted meanings of animal motifs in verbal and visual works from antiquity to the present. Whether in ancient medical texts, aristocratic portraits, painterly allegories of early modern proverbs, major works of European lyric and epic poetry, contemporary Hungarian literary works and their illustrations, or small sculptures and public monuments, animal figures prove to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration, eliciting a wide variety of meanings and interpretations.

We warmly recommend the second volume of the Animalia eBooks series to the attention of readers interested in animal symbolism and the cultural history of Europe.

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