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Otherness in Medieval Document Decoration

The following paper draws attention to certain images in medieval documents that, despite their minor artistic value, may be seen as records of the social standing of different minorities living in the environment from which a particular document originates. The aim of this text is to contribute to the sparsely researched neutral and positive depictions of the Other in medieval art and point to some oversights made in the past. It will be stressed that certain depictions of the religious Other found in medieval secular documents may be seen as positive or at least neutral from the religious point of view, while also highlighting the issue of theological beliefs not necessarily playing a central role when it comes to decorating legal documents. This particular approach is especially significant when considering the fact that the studies that do exist concentrate largely on the pejorative aspects of such representations. The underlying theme of this text is thus the discussion of whether thinking of anti-Semitism is in fact justifiable in the case of ornamentation of written objects with secular contents. It is not a profound analysis of a single unit, but rather a presentation of the pertinent examples found in the extensive charter corpus published thus far at monasterium.net. Special attention is given to three documents issued in Speyer in the middle of the 14th century, which show Jewish faces stemming from the initial letters. The existence of the Jewish community in Speyer is well attested to in archival sources and it represents one of the most important Jewish settlements on the Rhine. This makes the three charters especially instructive examples when discussing the depictions of the religious Other in secular documents and the span of their possible meanings.