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Mid-Fourteenth Century Crypto-Portraits: Eastern Central Europe as center of production

Research into the representation of sovereigns is a line of inquiry that lies at the crossroads of numerous disciplines, such as art history, history, and anthropology. While this interdisciplinary subject has been generally well-studied, certain lacunae still exist. As with the field of Medieval Studies, Eastern Central Europe is rarely evoked in international scholarship that deals with the imaging of kings, these far-flung monarchies being omitted from the larger European context of the period. As a central nodule for the consolidation of power in the region, Eastern Central Europe needs to be reinserted into the historiography.

For this presentation, I would like to focus on one particular aspect of medieval royal images, that of the use of crypto-portraits. Briefly, one can describe a crypto-portrait as a representation of a saint, biblical, historical or mythological character that was painted to resemble a contemporary figure- often with the addition of attributes proper to the portrait's subject. If we make an inventory of such representations, it seems that this type of portraiture started to spread from Eastern Central Europe to other parts of the continent in the middle of the fourteenth century. While similar phenomena appeared in Western Europe a little bit later, these outcroppings were inferior in number compared to Eastern Central Europe.

In my paper, I will discuss a selection of mid-fourteenth century crypto-portraits primarily from the court of Emperor Charles IV (†1378). Guided by the use of contemporary written sources and historical evidence, this examination will result in a better understanding of the modalities of transfer for this type of portraiture and reasons why these exchanges had been taken place.