In the 13th century, anti-Greek and anti-Russian sentiment are evident in diverse sources from Western Europe; though the polemics directed at both groups demonstrate similarities and often take the form of sectarian hostility against eastern Christians, religious difference is tangential to criticisms of Greeks and Russians. That attitudes toward the two ethnicities worked independently of each other may be seen in the Weltchronik of the Viennese patrician Jans Enikel, who on the one hand engages in typical disparagement of Greeks, yet writes approvingly of Russians and their liturgical practices. While this author is aware of the ecclesiastical differences between East and West, he nevertheless pens a version of a folktale in which Russians and Greeks defer to the Roman Pontiff. Enikel seems to have selected these two lands in order to contrast an idealized vision of a past Christendom with the reality of a fractured international Church in his own day; based on the position of the folktale in the chronology of his chronicle, it is apparent that from Enikel’s point of view this was a recent development.

1. Introduction

The expression is used less often now, but most educated people will still understand to what the warning “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts” refers. Yet long after the Byzantines – a label that still indicates convoluted treachery – had disappeared, Greeks were characterized as dishonest both in reference to the Trojan Horse legend and on account of the much later conflicts between Western Europeans and the Byzantines. In his commentary on Psalm 101, Luther commented on the punishment that Greeks were continuing to receive for their duplicity (Luther 1914: 258-59) and as late as the 19th century Mark Twain could count on his readers to share a suspicion of Greek integrity even as he swiped grapes from their vineyards (Twain 1984: 277-78). Some chapters after describing his visit to the Acropolis, Twain wrote of his admiration for the Russian imperial family (Twain 1984: 309-319), in keeping with the good relations that existed between 19th-century Russia and the United States. Still, Americans of this period would often take a skeptical stance to their eastern ally;
while Mark Twain’s pretended disdain of Greeks had been inherited from centuries earlier, criticism of Russia was based on the modern, liberal accusation that in Lincoln’s words to his friend and former business partner, “they make no pretence of loving liberty” (Lincoln 1907: 218).

The twin ideas that Greeks are insufficiently Christian and dishonest rely on events in classical and medieval history and were perpetuated as Greeks were under Ottoman control. In the late Middle Ages, perceptions of Russians were tied to those of Greeks, but as Russians acted on the international stage, those perceptions were subject to change because the origins of medieval anti-Greek and anti-Russian sentiments were to be found not in moral ideology, but in the political conflicts of the 12th and 13th centuries. Yet in these centuries Western Europeans had mixed feelings about their Eastern Orthodox contemporaries; the Viennese patrician Jans Enikel in the 1260s, just as Mark Twain in the 1860s, could write favorably of Russia, while already having absorbed the usual attitudes toward Greeks.

2. Latin and Byzantine Hostilities in the 12th and 13th Centuries

In the legendary material telling of the rebellion and flight of Herzog Ernst, the hero and his comrades make a stop in Constantinople. There the Eastern Roman Emperor treats Ernst honorably and provides him with men, supplies, and ships (Bartsch 1970, lines 2037-122 and Rosenfeld 1991, lines 1863-908). The Byzantine Emperor and his realm are presented in a favorable light. Though composed at different points in the 13th century, when relations between eastern and western Christendom were at a nadir, both Herzog Ernst B and D retain a respect for Byzantium more appropriate to an earlier period in which the tales surrounding Herzog Ernst were formed. By the early 13th century, the Greek Byzantine Empire had been temporarily replaced by the Latin Empire of Constantinople and suspicion had long characterized a view many crusaders held toward Greeks. Few German poets would praise a Greek emperor unless traditional epic material demanded it. Yet although the schismatic status of the Orthodox Church in the eyes of Latin Christians justified the distrust of Greeks and the eventual conquest of the Eastern Empire, ecclesiastical differences were a point of contention only in a limited sense. As late