CHAPTER TWO

QUEST FOR THE PAST

1. Valaam’s Need for a History

Valaam’s activity in the field of historiography seems to have been considerable also when compared to other monasteries. Some of the work was done by travellers and layman writers, repeating the ideas of Valaam’s past in their own writings. However, the ideas had to be there to be repeated. As we shall discuss, the leaders and monks of Valaam were actively participating in the process of sketching the imagery of Valaam’s history. One might ask why was so much time and energy dedicated to the historiographical efforts of Valaam Monastery? What made the honourable past so important for the island monastery which was already well on its way in terms of development—and greatly benefiting of its location close to the capital?

In order to speculate on the issue, we have to take a look at the monastic scene of Russia in general. What was being undertaken in other monasteries in terms of relationships to the past?

Some old, famous and wealthy monasteries, such as Kiev Pechersk Lavra and Trinity Lavra of St. Sergei, did not need to explicitly justify their existence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They had gained firm statuses as religious institutions because of their ancient and relatively well reported history and connections to the power structures of their respective time periods.

Numerous other monasteries were also able to lean on hagiographies and other textual references to their honourable past: their early histories were more or less effectively documented through the lives of their founders and other saints.¹ In the nineteenth century, these documentations were gradually turned into publications. For example, when it comes to northwestern monasteries, two booklets—Skazanie ob ikone Konevskoi bozhei i materi and O zhitiy prepodobnogo Arsenia Konevskogo—were published in 1813 on neighbouring Konevets Monastery. Its past was, at least in hagiographic sense, better known

¹ Robson, Solovki, 291.
than that of Valaam.\(^2\) Solovki Monastery, in its turn, produced a three-volume compilation called *Geograficheskoe, istoricheskoe i statisticheskoe opisanie stavropigial’nogo pervoklassnogo Solovetskogo Monastyria* (1836).\(^3\) Undoubtedly, these kinds of publications produced by the other monasteries of the northwest area were adding to the pressure on Valaam to produce something similar.

On the other hand, there were some other famous monasteries in Russia, such as Optina Monastery, which had been developed into a truly flourishing place only in the nineteenth century. The details and date of Optina’s foundation were, as in the case of Valaam, not very well known. It had been leading a somewhat languishing existence until the turn of the nineteenth century, when it was energetically revived due to the general monastic revival in Russia. From the turn of the nineteenth century onwards, Optina Monastery developed into one of the most famous Hesychastic centres and a popular place for pilgrimage and spiritual tourism.

However, despite these similarities with Valaam’s development, there was obviously not a comparable need to reconstruct the early history of the monastic settlement in Optina: the history of the monastery is reported mainly from the eighteenth century onwards, the emphasis being on the image of the monastery as a genuine fruit of the post-Petrine Hesychastic movement.\(^4\) In the same way, say, Sarov Monastery—founded only at the turn of the eighteenth century—was able to lean on the fame of its *starsy*.\(^5\)

The re-established Valaam seems to have existed in some in-between state in the Russian monastic culture. Most importantly, it could not base its claim of distinctiveness on a historical continuum due to the hundred years of desertion and the lack of any detailed hagiographical or documentary sources. It was not a ‘new’ monastery either (such as, e.g., Sarov or Aleksandro-Nevskii Monastery in St. Petersburg). Valaam had existed in one form or another prior to the Swedish period, which was also taken as a justification for its re-establishment. Optina, in its turn, was able to lean on its successful participation in the Hesychastic

\(^2\) CGIA, f. 19, op. 15, 749. About printing of the “The tale of the Mother of God of Konevets” and “About the life of venerable Arsenii Konevskii” (1813).

\(^3\) Dosifei, *Geograficheskoe, istoricheskoe i statisticheskoe opisanie stavropigial’nogo pervoklassnogo Solovetskogo Monastyria* 1836. Robson, *Solovki*, 293.
