CHAPTER FOUR

“THE HOLY PAIR”: THE FOUNDER CULT OF SERGEI AND GERMAN OF VALAAM

1. Roots of the Cult: Medieval and Pre-Modern Sources

1.1. Founders of Valaam in Valaamskaia Beseda

At the very core of the historiographic image of Valaam lies the cult of Sergei and German, venerated as the founders of Valaam monastery and said to have been buried under the silver cenotaph in the main church of the monastery.1 Sergei and German are respected as saints in both the Russian and Finnish Orthodox Churches. Moreover, they are seen as crucial entities in the network of saints of the Karelian area, which will be studied in more detail in the relevant chapters.2

In monastic tradition having a worthy founder or founders is, in general, a prerequisite to the sacredness of a monastery. Therefore, it can be claimed that the two founder saints, along with the other foundation legends such as St. Andrew’s visit, form no less than the sacral basis for the existence of Valaam.3 However, as noted above, the ‘canonization’ of Sergei and German (which, in practise, was accomplished by adding their festal day to Russian calendar of saints) took place no earlier than 1819 after appeals of the igumen and the visit of Tsar Alexander I to Valaam. What their exact status and the level of their sainthood was prior to this is difficult to define, since there were no official lists of saints in the Orthodox Church and the process of veneration, in general, was less strict and definable than in the Catholic areas of Europe.4

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1 A memorial tomb or an empty sarcophagus placed on a tomb (in Greek κενοτάφιον, 'empty tomb').
3 Stark, “Sacred person and sacred place in institutional and ‘folk’ narratives,” 134.
4 Korpela, “Christian Saints and the Integration of Muscovy,” 28. Levin, “From Corpse to Cult in Early Modern Russia,” 83–84. One has to point out that the use of the concept canonization is somewhat questionable
Ill. 3. The cenotaph of Saints Sergei and German in the lower church of Valaam’s main church.