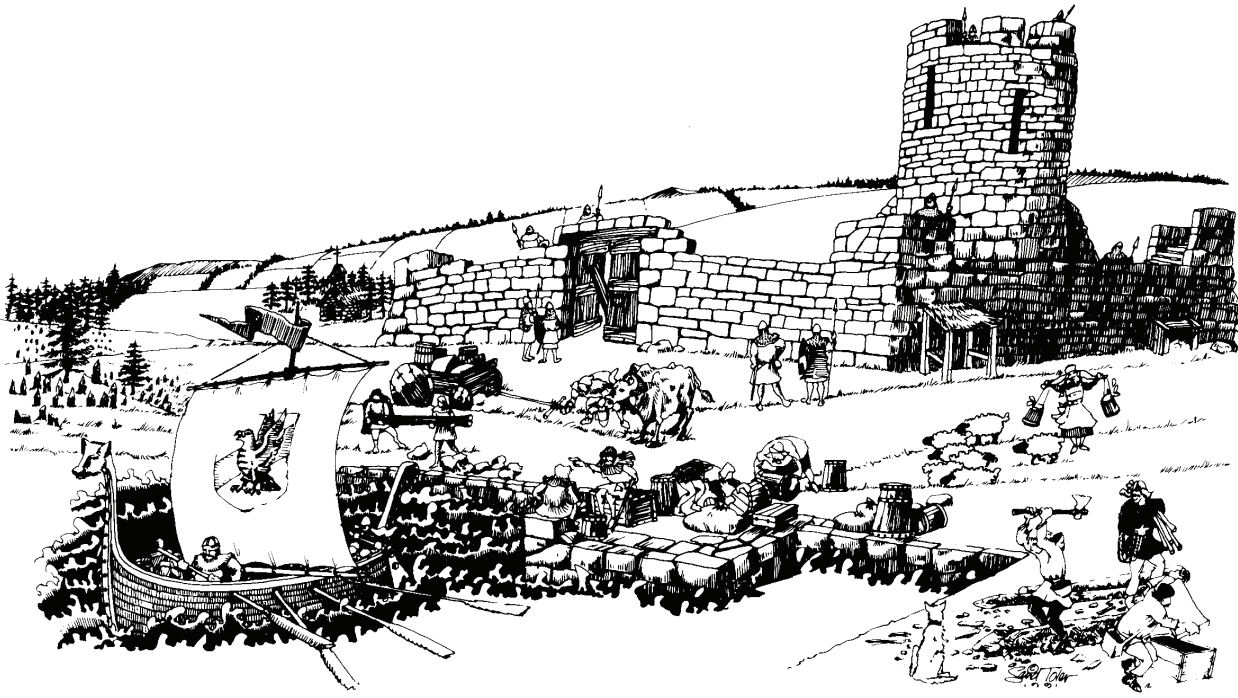


Chronicles of Valsemē



With great joy and celebration, Lord Rurik and Lady Brienne — Baron and Baronne de Valsemé — announce the birth of their sons, born the first day of September in this year of our Lord, 913. The babes are whole and fit, perfectly formed and identical in every way. They possess their mother's dark locks and their sire's steel-blue eyes and cleft upon the chin.

Now I would hold you to a confidence — for I have no wish to be known as a gabbling sort of scribe — but I have it from the castle folk that when Lady Brienne's time came, Lord Rurik remained by her side, cooling her brow, till the midwife did at last bar him from the chamber. Thereupon, his brother Lyting, friend Ketil, and the good monk, Brother Bernard, sought to ease his concerns with cups of strong ale in the hall. As you might recall, the baron's and baronne's bedchamber lays behind the main hall, separated by naught but a wood partition and a thick draping of curtain. This did little to mute the Lady's anguished cries. They rang out clear in the great room, I am told, rising to the rafters and chilling the spine. Brother Bernard jested to his companions that 'twas a marvel to see three Norsemen so pale of face. But Lady Brienne's next scream brought all four men to their feet, and the monk swiftly blessed himself and took up his beads.

Lord Rurik abandoned the *dais* and headed for the chamber, mindful of the perils of childbirth. He vowed he would not leave his ladywife alone in this, no matter what custom — or the midwife — decreed. But his steps halted before the partition door as a babe squalled lustily, protesting its rude entry into this world. The baron then did smile mightily and enter in without delay or thought to announce himself. The attendant women were understandably taken aback. The midwife scowled as she finished tying the child's cord and passed him to Lady Aleth to be bathed and rubbed with salt. She scolded the Lord roundly for interfering with women's work and enjoined that he withdraw. But Lady Brienne cried out of a sudden, gripped with fresh pain, and called her husband's name. He hastened to her — and praise God that he did — for within her womb, a second child grew impatient and now burst forth upon life and the chamber with as little announcement as his sire. Indeed, the babe entered the world apace, birthed into the baron's very hands.



Once mother and children were properly tended, Lord Rurik took up his sons upon his knees and accepted them in the time-honored tradition of the North. He then named each one as he and his lady had agreed: the eldest and heir, Richard Atli, after the child's grandsires who both once ruled as barons of Valsemé; the younger, Guillaume Kylan, after the great-grandsires on each side, one an earlier baron of Valsemé, the other a chieftain of Limfjord. (The children are called Richard and Kylan.) Lord Rurik remained with Lady Brienne a time longer, delighting with her in their new family. When the three fell to a peaceable slumber, he rejoined the men in the hall and instructed the butler to bring forth one of his special flasks from Byzantium.

Later that same day, as is the practice in these times, the infants were borne to the church wrapped in silk and brocade and baptized there. Since the children be males, two godfathers and one godmother were chosen — Lyting, Ketil and Lady Aleth. The midwife accompanied them bearing the Christening bonnets, and little Elsie saw to it that

flowers decorated the church door. A much grander celebration was forestalled until Lady Brienne recovered from the birthing and ended her confinement. On that day, before she could do so much as offer a cup of wine, 'twas necessary that she be "churched." Lady Brienne dressed in her crimson and gold wedding gown and, amid an entourage of family and friends, carried a lit taper to the church. There, Brother Bernard met her on the steps. He blessed her with the sign of Christ's cross, sprinkled her with holy water, and prayed over her. Then giving her the end of his stole to hold, he led her inside the church and completed the ceremony.

After the Lady's churching, a great feast followed in the hall. As you might guess, Elsie now resides in the manorhouse itself and helps attend to the twins. During the celebration, Lord Rurik and Lady Brienne noted that young Waite sat with the dog, Patch, in a corner looking glum to his toes and fully forgotten in the household's excitement. The Lord bid him over to the *dais* and revealed to Waite his need for a new "body squire" — one expected to see to his personal needs within the hall and without. Of course, it required that Waite move into the manorhouse. Patch was also welcome.

Lord Rurik then rose at his place and announced his plans to further secure Valsemé and enlarge its fortifications. The baron spent many years in the fabled city of Constantinople, a city of immeasurable wealth which many desire to master. But it has always been her system of defense walls that have protected her through the centuries and ensured her sovereignty. Drawing upon his knowledge of them, Lord Rurik intends to construct an outer curtain wall. 'Twill enclose a sizable tract of land beyond the present bailey wall and be higher, thicker, and built of stone. 'Tis a costly undertaking, needless to say, and a new worry for the *seneschal*, Bolsgar, who keeps the accountings for the affairs of the barony.

Meanwhile, Michaelmas (September 29) is upon us — one of the quarter days marking the beginning of winter. 'Tis unthinkable that the year could slip so quickly past. Yet, harvest has ended, the storehouses stand full, and the castle year draws to a close. As the days grow short, Lord Rurik and Lady Brienne enjoy a brief respite inside the manorhouse, blissfully content with their fine sons. All in all, it has been a good year.

May this parchment find you well, and may the days smile upon you.

Anita of Gordon

Chronicler

