

Boudica

Britannia Victorious?

By Chris Wood

Boudica is famous. Her revolt against the Romans in 61CE is a key event in British history and we all think we know a lot about her. There are many books devoted to her¹ and her image is well-known.

Or is it? Certainly Thomas Thornycroft's striking (and fanciful) bronze statue of *Boadicea and her Daughters* in a chariot, that has faced the Houses of Parliament in London since 1902, is very different to J. Havard Thomas's marble, affronted mother *Buddug*, that has stood in Cardiff's City Hall since 1916. Both are again very different to Alex Kingston's spirited, Estuary-English-adorned portrayal in the 2003 ITV television film, *Boudica*.

In fact we know very little about her. Even famous details of the story of the revolt she led are open to doubt. She appears in history suddenly and briefly. We have no real record of what she said or thought, just rousing speeches embellishing later Latin stories, in the same way that Shakespeare gave fine orations to English Kings. Given our lack of knowledge, even her name could have been an honorific: assuming it comes from a Brythonic Celtic language, it means 'Victorious', or even 'Victoria'².

Boudica was married to Prasutagus, King (for want of a better term) of the Iceni group of tribes or peoples in the northern part of what later became known as East Anglia. Prasutagus had an arrangement with the Roman occupying forces, whereby he was a 'client king', *i.e.* allowed to rule with minimal interference so long as he supported them. (He came to power after

¹ Miranda Aldhouse-Green (2006) *Boudica Britannia: Rebel, war-leader and queen*, Pearson. John Davies & Bruce Robinson (2009) *Boudica: Her Life, Times and Legacy*, Poppyland. Graham Webster (1993) *Boudica: The British Revolt Against Rome AD 60*, 2nd edition, Routledge.

² Kenneth Jackson (1979) 'Queen Boudicca?' *Britannia* 10, p. 255.

an earlier revolt, in 47CE, which was sparked by the Roman policy of disarming the Iceni.) This arrangement only lasted for his lifetime. When he died (in 61CE³), he left half the land and resources of the kingdom to the Roman Emperor, half to his two daughters. This was not enough for the Romans, who now expected to absorb the Iceni territory into the Empire and its governance. They also chose that moment to recall certain loans they had foisted upon the Iceni, in a process the recipients may well have interpreted as gift exchange, *i.e.* the debt was in terms of allegiance rather than gold. The Roman authorities also set about exacting these demands in a heavy-handed fashion.

Boudica may well have been of a more anti-Roman persuasion than her husband⁴ and we do not know anything about the Iceni's system of succession. However, she clearly took control and protested against the take-over, the loss of sovereignty and resources, and the demand for the loan repayments. Although she was not, it seems, a beneficiary of her husband's legacy, Boudica would at the very least have been acting on behalf of her daughters⁵. There is also evidence from across Iron-Age Europe for high-status women taking control in the absence of their menfolk⁶.

The Roman response was autocratic, inflammatory and callous. The Iceni nobility were treated as less than slaves and Boudica herself was flogged, while her (presumably virgin) daughters were raped. The purpose was the assertion of the superiority of the Roman Empire and its army, and its expectation of the subservience of women, by total humiliation⁷.

We have the details of these Roman actions from Tacitus (along with the basic account of Boudica's revolt and Gaius Suetonius Paulinus' slaughter of Druids on Anglesey)⁸. He was writing half a century later, but is probably more reliable on these matters than the other main source we

³ There has been much debate about whether these events occurred in 60 or 61, but the latter seems most likely. See Kevin K. Carroll (1979) 'The Date of Boudicca's Revolt', *Britannia*, 10, pp. 197-202, for the detailed reasoning.

⁴ Miranda Aldhouse-Green (*op. cit.*).

⁵ They may possibly not have been her biological daughters; if they were Prasutagus' children from a previous marriage, it is plausible that the inheritance would go to them rather than to Boudica. Another explanation might be that Boudica had not accepted or been granted Roman citizenship and therefore could not inherit under *Roman* law.

⁶ Bettina Arnold (1995) 'Honorary males' or women of substance? Gender, status and power in Iron-Age Europe', *Journal of European Archaeology* 3(2), pp. 153-68.

⁷ Miranda Aldhouse-Green (*op. cit.*).

⁸ Tacitus *Annales* 14.29-37.

have, Cassius Dio⁹, who was writing nearly two centuries later, and was something of a sensationalist.

Whilst Tacitus does present a speech by Boudica (doubtless fabricated, as it would have been extremely unlikely that any Roman correspondent would have heard it), it is from Dio, and Dio alone, that we have the over-blown orations, the description of her appearance, the atrocities in Camulodunum (Colchester) or Londinium (it is not clear where they allegedly took place) and the tales of Boudica invoking Andraste/Andate (he uses both forms), releasing a hare, and performing bloody rites in a grove dedicated to this goddess.

What is clear is that Boudica led an armed host of her people south, into the land of the Trinovantes, quickly gaining their support, angry at the imposition of the *colonia* at Camulodunum. They sacked that town, taking no prisoners, then Londinium and Verulamium (St. Albans), before heading north on Watling Street. Gaius Suetonius Paulinus rushed his forces south from Anglesey, choosing a battleground on which to face (and defeat) the British army, probably near Manceter (North Warwickshire).

There is an argument that the presence of many women and children in Boudica's army might mean that they were actually engaged in more than a punitive rebellion; the Helvetii undertook a tribal migration to a place beyond Roman control a hundred years before, and those of the Iceni and Trinovantes following Boudica may have been attempting something similar¹⁰.

Whatever the aims of the revolt, it ended in defeat. Boudica, according to Tacitus, ended her life with poison. There were repercussions in the Roman administration as well, but the latest thinking suggests that there was little punitive treatment of the remaining Iceni and any extra military presence in the region was temporary and geographically limited¹¹. Perhaps the Romans had learned their lesson from what sparked the revolt, or perhaps most of those who remained in the Iceni territory were ready to accept Roman rule, so that carrots were more effective than sticks. One major

⁹ Cassius Dio *Roman History* 62.

¹⁰ The suggestion was made by B.R. Hartley and cited in Sheppard Frere (1999) *Britannia: A History of Roman Britain*, 4th edition, Folio Society, p. 76, note 2.

¹¹ David Gurney (2017) 'British Wolves and Roman Foxes', paper at the Norfolk Archaeology and Historical Research Group's Roman East Anglia Conference, 22nd July 2017, at the University of East Anglia, Norwich.

change, however, was the deliberate and careful dismantling of the Iceni ceremonial and religious centre at Thetford¹². This would have been the symbolic heart of the area of greatest anti-Roman sentiment and those who had not participated in the revolt, finding themselves in greater favour perhaps, may well have collaborated in the transfer of cultic activity to a more Romanized establishment elsewhere¹³.

Boudica appears to have been rediscovered in the 16th century, when Tacitus's sympathy for the 'barbarian' met the uncomfortable European recognition of the 'noble savage' in the New World. Another Roman-era female figure was also brought back into the light at this time, Britannia. Ironically, she first appears in a print accompanying a 1577 tract by Dr. John Dee, exhorting Queen Elizabeth to build up the English navy in order to colonize North America. From 1672 She appears in a familiar pose on low-denomination English coins (the ones people see the most): seated with a shield and olive branch (the peace of victory), along with a spear, which turns into Neptune's trident in 1797, emphasising naval power. From the early 19th century She wears Minerva's crown (which had reappeared in the previous century in decorative arts)¹⁴.

Britannia appeared on Roman coins from early in the 2nd century, often seated holding a shield and spear, derived from Minerva as Roma, the tutelary goddess of Rome, whose image in turn came from that of Pallas Athene on Greek coins¹⁵. It was common for defeated lands to be represented as females: distraught at subjugation, but also as powerful defenders of their (Romanized) provinces. Both Britannia and Boudica were ambivalent characters from the perspective of those in power – Britannia symbolised the British province, strong but subjugated; Boudica – as seen in Tacitus and Dio¹⁶ – the rebellious but also noble savage.

The blades that Thornycroft and others before him put on the wheels of Boudica's chariot appear to have derived from spikes that adorned Britannia's shield on some Roman coins, and Britannia's throne with a shield at the side easily becomes a wheeled vehicle. Britannia became less

¹² Daphne Nash-Briggs (2012) 'Sacred image and regional identity in late-prehistoric Norfolk', in T.A. Heslop, Elizabeth Mellings & Margit Thøfner (eds.) *Art, Faith and Place in East Anglia: From Prehistory to the Present*, Boydell, pp. 31-49.

¹³ Speculatively, this could have been the shrine complex north of Great Walsingham.

¹⁴ Katharine Eustace (2016) *Britannia: Icon on the Coin*, Royal Mint Museum.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Eric Adler (2008) 'Boudica's Speeches in Tacitus and Dio', *Classical World* 101(2), pp. 173-95.



QUEEN BOADICEA LEADING THE BRITONS AGAINST THE ROMANS.

common during the reign of Victoria, as the appropriately named Queen herself was the female defender of the land, but came back in the 20th century and is now most frequently seen on the 50p piece. She was even portrayed as Boudica on the investor's bullion coin issued by the Royal Mint in 1997¹⁷.

The figures of both Boudica and Britannia have been used for many purposes over the years, from patriotic tub-thumping to symbols of Feminism. Following the union of England and Scotland in 1707, Britannia was used to symbolize British unity, and can indeed be seen as a version of the Goddess of Sovereignty. And when that sovereignty is challenged, perhaps Her image is that of Boudica.

Boudica, "Victoria", is a powerful local, indeed national hero, a symbol of defiance and protection, the spirit of action to right wrongs. Whatever the actual motivations of the flesh-and-blood woman, the name of Boudica has

¹⁷ Eustace *op. cit.*

taken on this mantle in the British consciousness. As such, she is much safer to call upon than Andraste. This goddess has been taken up enthusiastically by some, looking for a local manifestation of the ‘Great Goddess’, indeed a strong, Feminist manifestation. All sorts of attributes have been given to Andraste, from hares and the moon, to equation with the Morrigan. If what Dio wrote is true, then we should be very wary of the price She might demand of a petitioner. What after all has become of Her over the centuries, unremembered and unable to evolve with us? And if Dio made Her up or even embellished Her, what is She?

The spirit of Boudica, however, has developed with us through the centuries and when we call upon Her, we call upon the power and meaning with which people have filled Her memory over the centuries.

Safer perhaps, but there is always a price to pay. Boudica’s campaign did end in disaster, after all. Her memory and spirit live on, but at enormous cost to her and her people. There are patterns in history too. A later rebellion, that of Robert Kett in 1549, led to the deaths of at least 3000 Norfolk people and the execution of the leaders, but there was an impact on the first Poor Law¹⁸. Hope for justice has to spur us on. But there can be a price to pay for the energy of Boudica – and she had nothing left to lose...

There can however be safety in syncretism. Britannia embodies elements of Minerva, of Roma, of Neptune, and of Sovereignty. She and Boudica share much and meet in Victoria. We can sing *Rule Britannia*, wield a trident from our rocky throne, guarded by lion and shield, and keep Boudica as a last resort.

Alternatively, we can embrace the righteous energy of Boudica, conscious of the need to honour it and acknowledge our gratitude in the form of appropriate offerings. Saying “No!” should not need to be the same as pressing the self-destruct button. If, as magicians, we can hold on to the headlong rush of Boudican fury, whilst sitting calm and alert as Britannia, then perhaps we can be victorious in our work.

¹⁸ Kett’s Rebellion sparked the levy of a poor rate in Norwich, the architect of which, John Aldrich, was asked to model the national scheme at the suggestion of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker, who had preached in Kett’s camp (and had to beat a hasty retreat, as his audience was not appreciative). See Matthew Reynolds (2005) *Godly Reformers and their Opponents in Early Modern England: Religion in Norwich c. 1560-1643*, Boydell.