
BOUDICA WARRIOR QUEEN

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BOUDICA WARRIOR QUEEN

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At the northwest corner of Westminster Bridge in London, along the Embankment and at the edge of the Pier, is a large statue of a woman with two girls in a chariot drawn by two fiery steeds.¹ If one leaves the Tube through the Pier exit, one will be at the rear of the statue's basis and may well notice nothing. If one approaches along the bridge sidewalk, one may find vendors and their booths blocking the view toward the front of the statue complex. One may not even be able to make out the name BOADICEA.

Several years ago, I asked a man assembling his stall who Boadicea was. He did not know. Indeed, one may wonder how many of the vast population of London and the millions of visitors have any idea who this woman was and why her statue is there, in a choice location very near the Houses of Parliament and the great tower of Big Ben.

It may be that the relative anonymity of the woman named Boudica (corrupted into Boadicea) will soon come to an end. In fact, she may already be on the way to renewed general renown, of which she may have thought when she led one of the most successful provincial revolts against Roman power. Her triumph, though ultimately fruitless, ranks her with Arminius, the Germanic chieftain, as Rome's most bitter, brutal, and successful enemies of the early empire.

Yet we must first discuss her most immediate predecessor in resistance to Rome, to whom Tacitus devotes almost as much space in his narrative as to her. For it is his career and its outcome, marked by the speech which he delivered before the emperor, which enable us to appreciate the circumstances which led to Boudica's revolt.

Caratacus was a son of Cunobellinus (Shakespeare's Cymbeline) who fought against Rome in the Claudian invasion of 43–47 AD and, when defeated, fled to the Welsh mountains, where he gained the support of the Silures and Ordovices. His final battle resulted in defeat, but before it began he roused his followers, stating that "this was the day, this the battle which would be the start either of the recovery of their freedom or of eternal slavery; and he called out the names of their ancestors who had beaten back the dictator Caesar and through whose courage they themselves, free from the axes and taxation, kept undefiled the bodies of their spouses and children" (Tacitus, *Annals* 12.34).²

He himself then fled to the Brigantes, whose queen, Cartimandua, put him in chains and handed him over to the Romans. In the year 50, he was paraded in Rome before the emperor, along with his wife, daughter, and brothers, in a mock triumph before the praetorian camp. His reputation was great because of his long resistance to Rome's forces; many were there as spectators. When he neared the tribunal upon which Claudius sat, he did not display fear or humility, but addressed the emperor directly:

If the degree of my nobility and fortune had been matched by moderation in success, I would have come to this City as friend rather than as captive, nor would you have disdained to receive with a treaty of peace one sprung from brilliant ancestors and commanding a great many nations. But my present lot, disfiguring as it is for me, is magnificent for you. I had horses, men, arms, and wealth: what wonder if I was unwilling to lose them? If you wish to command everyone, does it really follow that everyone should accept your slavery? If I were now being handed over as one who had surrendered immediately, neither my fortune nor your glory would have achieved brilliance. It is also true that in my case any reprisal will be followed by oblivion. On the other hand, if you preserve me safe and sound, I shall be an eternal example of your clemency.

Tacitus, *Annals* 12.37

He was indeed spared, along with his family, and probably spent the rest of his life in Gaul. His address to the Emperor is one of Tacitus' most brilliant indictments of Roman expansion and rule.

The chief ancient source for the life and career of Boudica is Tacitus (c.55–c.120 AD) in his *Agricola*, the biography of his father-in-law who served in Britain at this time, and the *Annals*.³ Tacitus surely learned of the revolt from the older man when he had married into the family and very likely from others, such as Petillius Cerialis, who had commanded the ninth legion at the beginning of the revolt and had seen most of his men annihilated. Boudica was the wife of the wealthy King Prasutagus, ruler of the Iceni, who lived in what is now Norfolk in East Anglia, and bore him two daughters. When Prasutagus died, he designated the emperor Nero as joint heir with his children, expecting thereby to preserve half his kingdom for them. The procurator (the chief financial officer of the province), however, treated the Iceni as a conquered people rather than as allies; he had Boudica flogged and her daughters raped. In her outrage, she persuaded the Iceni to revolt, gained the Trinovantes and other tribes as allies, and, taking advantage of the governor's absence in the west on campaign against Mona (Anglesey), led the onslaught which resulted in the destruction with the utmost savagery of three Roman cities, Camulodunum (Colchester), Londinium (London), and Verulamium (St. Albans). Many thousands of Roman citizens and their supporters were slaughtered. Recent excavations in Colchester have revealed that the rage of Boudica and her followers led not only to the extirpation of all people but to the complete destruction of everything built or done by the enemy. "It was a murderous, determined, intensive and deliberate attack."⁴

Tacitus' narrative is extraordinarily vivid. He himself was a child when the uprising occurred but *Agricola*, then aged twenty, was in Britain:

His first military service was in Britain under Suetonius Paulinus, a conscientious and cautious general, when he had been chosen to be the latter's aide; his performance satisfied his commander.⁵

Tacitus, *Agricola* 5.1

We do not know whether Agricola was present with his commander at the final battle, but it seems very likely. An adjutant is invariably at his superior's side. But whether there or not, Agricola certainly knew all the details of events, and there can be no doubt that Tacitus learned much from him when he, Tacitus, married Agricola's daughter in the year 77:

During his consulship, he betrothed his daughter, at that time a girl of outstanding promise, to me, a young man, and after his consulship gave her to me in marriage; he was at once put in command of Britain and was also appointed a pontifex.

Tacitus, *Agricola* 9.6

Tacitus' presentation in the *Agricola* is largely impressionistic, with broad sweeps and little precise detail. This stems from the fact that Boudicca is part of a larger narrative, covering five chapters, which traces the stages in Rome's conquest of Britain up to the governorship of Agricola. The *Annals*, since they are far more spacious, offer much more, particularly in the presentation of the two leaders and their forces. I now offer several passages about Boudicca's uprising, the first from the *Agricola*, the others from the *Annals*.

Passage A:

When they had aroused each other by these and similar remarks, with Boudicca, a woman of royal blood, as their leader (for they make no distinction of sex in their positions of command), they all began war; they went after the soldiers who were scattered in forts and then, when the garrisons had been stormed, attacked the colony itself as the capital of slavery, and anger and triumph omitted no kind of savagery found among barbarians. And unless Paulinus had quickly brought aid after hearing of the revolt of the province, Britain would have been lost.

Tacitus, *Agricola* 16.1–2

Passage B:

As Boudicca, carrying her daughters before her in a chariot, approached each tribe, she testified that it was of course customary for the Britons to take the field under female leadership; yet now she was not, as one sprung from great ancestors, avenging her kingdom and wealth but, as one of the people, her lost freedom, her body battered by beatings, and the abused chastity of her daughters. The desires of the Romans had advanced to the point where they left no bodies, not even old age or virginity, unpolluted; yet the gods were assisting their justified vengeance: the legion which had dared battle had fallen; the rest were concealing themselves in camp

or looking around for flight: they would not bear even the noise and shouting of so many thousands, still less their assault and brawn. If they weighed up within themselves their resources in armed men and their reasons for war, they must conquer in that line or fall. That was the design of a woman; the men could survive—and be slaves!

Tacitus, *Annals* 14.35

The Roman governor is also given a speech to his troops; it is shorter and more to the point. These are people whom the legions have defeated many times already. The soldiers' response was what Paulinus, indeed any Roman commander, expected.

Passage C:

Such was the ardor which followed the leader's words, such the expeditiousness which the veteran soldiery—with its considerable experience of battles—had shown for the launching of its javelins, that Suetonius, sure of the outcome, gave the signal for the fight. At first the legion was motionless in its stance, keeping the narrowness of the place as a fortification; but, after they had used up their weapons with sure aim against the closer approach of the enemy, they burst out as in a wedge. The auxiliaries' attack was the same; and the cavalry, extending their spears, broke through every effective obstacle. The rest presented their backs despite the difficulty of escape (because the surrounding vehicles had cordoned off the ways out). And the soldiery did not refrain from the execution even of women; and baggage-animals too, transfixed by weapons, had enlarged the heaps of bodies. Brilliant was the praise acquired that day, and the equal of ancient victories. There are those who transmit that a little less than eighty thousand Britons fell, with roughly four hundred soldiers killed and not many more wounded. Boudicca ended her life by poison.

Tacitus, *Annals* 14.36.3–37.2

Boudicca vitam veneno finivit. That is a very modest obituary of one of the most remarkable figures who appear in the entire narrative of Tacitus' *Annals*. The fate of her daughters we can only guess.

In his brilliant narrative, Tacitus tells us very little indeed about her appearance and personality. For such details, we must turn to the narrative of Cassius Dio, who wrote some 170 years after the events. Dio was a senator and consul from the Greek east, who composed his lengthy narrative of Rome's history largely in the decade of the 220s. Although he probably used historians whose works have since disappeared, his understanding of the early principate could not have been very keen. He records the following about Boudicca the individual:

The person who was thought worthy to be their leader and who directed the conduct of the entire war was Boudicca, a Briton woman of the royal family and possessed of greater intelligence than often belongs to women. ... In stature she was very tall, in appearance most terrifying, in the glance of her eye most fierce, and

her voice was harsh; a great mass of the tawniest hair fell to her hips; around her neck was a large golden necklace; and she wore a tunic of divers colours over which a thick mantle was fastened with a brooch.⁶

Dio's Roman History 62.2.3–4

These were events of the late fifties and early sixties of the first century of our era. Rome's reprisal was brutal at first, but then the province was pacified and in subsequent centuries prospered. Boudica's uprising was, so to speak, a last gasp. Yet it has never failed to arouse compassion and admiration in those who know her story. Soon that circle may be substantially enlarged.

In the autumn of 2003, *Masterpiece Theatre*, the finest gem of public television, offered a ninety minute saga of outrage and bloodshed, starring Alex Kingston as a wild and vicious woman and warrior. She gave a vivid portrait of what Boudica might have been like in those momentous years more than nineteen hundred years ago. An offering very different from most of those which have given *Masterpiece Theatre* renown, such as versions of the novels of Jane Austen or Anthony Trollope, it bore the warning that it contained material unsuitable for a younger audience. In fact, in Atlanta the customary broadcast time was pushed back an hour. The impact upon the viewer was indeed great, as Kingston gave a virtuoso performance as the "crazed" queen. This was followed by two further television presentations. In 2005, the series "Battlefield Britain" included a program on "Boudicca's Revolt." In 2006, the History Channel devoted a program to the warrior queen, with commentary by seven scholars.

The year 2003 also saw the publication of the first volume of a projected trilogy on Boudica, by a splendid English novelist, Manda Scott. Its title is *Dreaming the Eagle* (New York: Random House). The second volume followed less than a year later, entitled *Dreaming the Bull*, and now the trilogy expanded to become a tetralogy. Volume three, *Dreaming the Hound*, was published in 2005 and the last, *Dreaming the Serpent Spear*, in 2006. The four volumes offer some 1750 pages of enchanting and learned narrative. The entire work is a major achievement whose audience should reach far beyond professional historians and devotees of Celtic culture. On the dust jackets of the first two volumes, in small type, are the words A NOVEL OF BOUDICA, THE WARRIOR QUEEN. For volumes three and four, Boudica's name is the title. Scott has woven a spell-binding narrative around the small core of known material. We do not know what life in early Britain was like; archaeology and history give guidelines, but the human factors must be invoked. This is where Scott excels; she has produced characters about whom the reader cares. Although the ultimate outcome of Boudica's life is known, how she reached that point must, historically, be left uncertain. As every distinguished novelist is able to do, she molds the reader's imagination.

More than a third of a century before Scott began her epic tale, there had appeared in the United Kingdom a splendid novel by George Shipway entitled *Imperial Governor* (St. Albans: Granada), written as the personal memoir of Suetonius Paullinus, in which, it goes without saying, Boudica plays a major role. Published in 1968, the book is one of the finest novels on ancient Rome which I have been privileged to read.

Perhaps, however, the greatest stimulus for a potential "pop culture" atmosphere around Boudica was the announcement, in early 2004, by Mel Gibson that his next project, after the

extraordinary *The Passion of the Christ*, would be a movie on the British queen, tentatively entitled *Warrior*. That news was followed by the reports that three further studios were contemplating the same subject, Paramount with *Tribeca Warrior Queen*, Dreamworks *Queen Fury*, and an unnamed one with the title *My Country*. Certainly there will not be four movies about Boudica; one might predict that Gibson, with the impact of his previous offering and his own financial resources, will carry the day. But whoever presents the viewer with a large screen Boudica, the queen will have gained a renewed immortality in the modern era.

Nor is this all. About a decade ago, an English composer began an opera on the queen. Gillian Carcas wrote a piece of 35–40 minutes length, entitled *Boudica*. Scored for seven solo roles and a chamber ensemble, it was intended as the first act of a full-length opera, but can be played independently. A friend who knows the composer has commented upon the virtuosity of the piece. We may also hope that Carcas will be able to extend the work, but, at present, she is content with the one act.

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned the statue at Westminster Bridge. I now return to it. The work of Thomas Thornycroft, it was placed in its present location in 1902, although it had, almost five decades earlier, been planned for a park location in connection with Prince Albert's great Exposition. One may assume that action was finally taken because of Queen Victoria's death in 1901, and the location chosen so that 'Boadicea', whose name meant *victory*, could gaze at one of the greatest, if not the greatest, architectural achievements of the late reign, the Houses of Parliament. The intent is transparent, to link the first and the last of Britannia's great female rulers. If, indeed, a movie on "*Braveheart with a Bra*" does appear, vendors at Westminster Bridge should all know the story of Boudica, the warrior queen.

William Cowper produced in 1780 one of the finest tributes to her in the English language, entitled *Boadicea: An Ode*.

When the British warrior queen,
Bleeding from the Roman rods,
Sought, with an indignant mien,
Counsel of her country's gods,

Sage beneath a spreading oak
Sat the Druid, hoary chief,
Ev'ry burning word he spoke,
Full of rage and full of grief.

Princess! if our aged eyes
Weep upon thy matchless wrongs,
'Tis because resentment ties
All the terrors of our tongues.

Rome shall perish – write that word
In the blood that she has spilt;
Perish hopeless and abhorred,
Deep in ruin as in guilt.

Rome, for empire far renown'd,
Tramples on a thousand states,
Soon her pride shall kiss the ground —
Hark! the Gaul is at her gates.

Other Romans shall arise,
 Heedless of a soldier's name,
 Sounds, not arms, shall win the prize,
 Harmony the path to fame.

Then the progeny that springs
 From the forests of our land,
 Arm'd with thunder, clad with wings,
 Shall a wider world command.

Regions Caesar never knew
 Thy posterity shall sway,
 Where his eagles never flew,
 None invincible as they.

Such the bard's prophetic words,
 Pregnant with celestial fire,
 Bending as he swept the chords
 Of his sweet but awful lyre.

She with all a monarch's pride,
 Felt them in her bosom glow,
 Rush'd to battle, fought, and died;
 Dying, hurl'd them at the foe.

Ruffians, pitiless as proud,
 Heav'n awards the vengeance due;
 Empire is on us bestow'd,
 Shame and ruin wait for you.

Less than a century later, in 1860, the poet laureate wrote a longish poem, of which these lines give a taste:

So the Queen Boadicea, standing loftily charioted,
 Brandishing in her hand a dart and rolling glances
 lioness-like,
 Yell'd and shriek'd between her daughters in her
 fierce volubility.



The Statue at Westminster Bridge

These lines are from the pen of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in a tour de force, an English national hymn, so to speak, entitled BOADICEA, written in the Galliambic meter of Catullus' *Artis* poem. The poem has not received much critical approval.

Vergil stated that Rome's mission was to rule the world, spare the defeated, and crush the proud:

tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento
 (hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem,
 parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.

Aeneid 6.851–53

But, as Caratacus pointed out so vividly, every victory produces losers. Among the greatest of these in Rome's history was Boudica, a magnificent figure in her own right, even more so because she was a woman. *Dux femina facti...*

ENDNOTES

¹An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of CAMWS in 2005. I am grateful to the editor and the anonymous readers for their suggestions.

²All translations from the *Annals* are from A.J. Woodman, *Tacitus. The Annals* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004).

³*Agricola* 15–16; *Annals* 14.31–39.

⁴P. Crummy, the archaeologist in charge, in *The Observer*, December 3, 2000.

⁵All translations from the *Agricola* are my own, from *Tacitus. Agricola, Germany, and Dialogue on Orators* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006).

⁶The translation is by E. Cary in the Loeb Library edition of *Dio's Roman History* VIII (London/New York) 1925.

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