

For our knowledge of Queen Cartimandua we are reliant upon a single source, Tacitus, who undoubtedly recorded actual events and individuals in first-century northern Britain. But 'his evident intention to moralise'³² biases his character sketches and Cartimandua is presented as devious, promiscuous and unreliable, while Venutius gains sympathy because of his faithless wife and because he (quite naturally in Roman eyes) chafed under female authority. Relevant, here, is the patriotic harangue put into the mouth of the Caledonian freedom fighter Calgacus, who defied the Romans under their governor Agricola more than 20 years after Cartimandua betrayed Caratacus. Tacitus refers to a later Brigantian rebellion, in which the tribe, 'with only a woman to lead them, burned the colony, stormed the camp and, if success had not made them grossly careless, might have cast off the yoke'.³³ It is clear that Tacitus is here confusing the Brigantes with the Iceni, and Cartimandua with Boudica, for it was the Icenian who burned Colchester and nearly put paid to Britannia as a Roman province.

When we come to examine the textual evidence for an Icenian noblewoman named Boudica, however, the situation is quite different from the record for Cartimandua. For one thing, we have two sources: Tacitus and Dio. For another, Tacitus has no platform to express either his moral perceptions or his anti-royalist sentiments, for Boudica is loyal, courageous and straightforward, despite her enmity towards Rome, and there is no reason to doubt her chastity. Tacitus, at any rate, appreciated these qualities. Furthermore, she was not a queen but the widow of a king. Nevertheless, the savagery of her revenge caused her actions to be treated with opprobrium by both writers.

Boudica the 'victorious'

However, the one person who most roused them to anger and persuaded them to go to war against the Romans, the one person thought worthy of leading them and who directed the course of the whole war was Boudouica, a woman of the British royal family who possessed more spirit than is usual among women. Having collected an army of 120,000, she mounted a tribunal made in the Roman fashion out of earth. In stature she was very tall and grim in appearance, with a piercing gaze and a harsh voice. She had a mass of very fair hair which she grew down to her hips, and wore a great gold torque and a multi-coloured tunic folded round her, over which was a thick cloak

fastened with a brooch. This was how she always dressed. And now, taking a spear in her hand so as to present an impressive sight, she spoke.

Dio Cassius *Roman History*³⁴

Thus, Dio Cassius has immortalised the British freedom-fighter of the Iceni, with her bright flowing hair (see Plate 14), piercing eyes, massive build and brightly coloured garments.³⁵ Cassius Dio Cocceianus was born in about AD 163, a Greek from Nicaea in Bithynia (Asia Minor), and came to Rome in about AD 180, in his late teens.³⁶ Dio's perspective is somewhat different from that of Tacitus. In addition to living and writing over a century after the events in Britain he recorded took place, the later historian came from a hybrid Greek and Roman socio-political milieu: born a Greek, he became a Roman senator and a consul. His gargantuan *Roman History* was 80 books long and he wrote in his native language. Although Dio was to all intents and purposes a member of the Roman aristocracy, he never ceased to think of himself as Bithynian, and spoke of going home to his home city of Nicaea. An interesting aspect of Dio's life was his liking and respect for the Roman empress Julia Domna, an able woman who combined a penchant for philosophy with a flair for politics. Indeed, she apparently did a great deal of the Emperor Caracalla's work for him.³⁷ So, in the course of his career at Rome, Dio had contact with powerful women, albeit that none was of the same calibre as Boudica.

In assessing the value of Dio's comments on Boudica, as a historical account, we should bear in mind that not only was the author far removed in time from events in first-century Britain, but he almost certainly did not go to the province himself, so all his descriptions of the country are second-hand.³⁸ He spent ten years assembling data from the work of earlier writers but, like most ancient historians, he does not make a habit of naming his sources.³⁹ One of his favourite genres within the *Roman History* is what Fergus Millar has termed 'tragic history': accounts of human disasters, such as earthquakes and massacres, in order to play on the emotional impact on his audience of these events.⁴⁰ His account of the Boudican Rebellion and, in particular, of the atrocities committed by Boudica in cities like London,⁴¹ fall neatly into this category. We ought also to take into account the elements of fiction that form portions of Dio's work, and we can assume that he would have been unable to resist embellishing the drama of episodes like the Boudican campaign.

As in the case of Tacitus, then, we must read Dio with caution and with an understanding of the background and context that caused him to compose his particular brand of historical record. We should not assume that his physical description of the British war-leader owes any more to fact than to literary licence. His creation of a huge, manlike woman, with arresting features and bright hair – all physical characteristics completely alien to those Mediterranean women of whom Dio would have had most experience – may be entirely or partially fictitious, but it certainly adds to the storyline. Dio's Boudica is strange, outlandish and barbaric (like Britain itself); her gender is ambiguous and her clothing and adornments are all stereotypic *topoi* of 'otherness'.

Both Tacitus and Dio call the Icenian freedom fighter by the name of Boudica or Boudouica, a title or epithet deriving from a Celtic word 'bouda', meaning 'victory'.⁴² She only appears in the literature in the context of conflict, so we have no means of knowing whether this was the name she was born with or whether it was an honorific title bestowed upon her by her followers or adopted by the woman herself as a propaganda exercise. But Boudica seems to have identified herself with victory: it was to the goddess of this virtue to whom she prayed at the sacred grove in London, after committing unspeakable acts of bestiality towards Roman Londoners. Dio tells us that she conducted sacrificial rites and orgiastic feasting 'in the grove of Andate ... the name they gave to Victory'.⁴³ In this way, Boudica the woman identified herself with the invincibility of Victory the goddess, and thus presented herself to Britons and Romans alike as being above mere humanity, in the same way as she is depicted as beyond gender. There is, moreover, a subtle irony here in the differing treatments of British and Roman 'victory'. While Boudica ('the victorious one') and Andraste, goddess of victory were, for the present, in the ascendant, in the run-up to the rebellion the Roman statue of Victory at Colchester apparently fell with 'its back turned as though it were fleeing the enemy'.⁴⁴ This proved to be a sinister omen of what was to befall the Romans at Boudica's hands.

A hatred of all things Roman

Indeed the gods gave them advance warning of the disaster: during the night a clamour of foreign voices mingled with laughter had been heard in the

council chamber and in the theatre uproar and lamentation, but it was no mortal who uttered those words and groans; houses were seen underwater in the river Thames, and the Ocean between the island of Britain and Gaul on one Occasion turned blood-red at high tide.

Tacitus *Histories*⁴⁵

It was Venutius, husband and consort of Queen Cartimandua, who was described by Tacitus as harbouring 'a hatred of all things Roman' (see Figure 5.1). But such a phrase applied equally, if not more so, to Boudica. We should examine how and why she was turned from the consort of a pro-Roman client-king to an implacable foe who almost brought down the Roman government in Britain and nearly caused the emperor to abandon Britain altogether. The key to her attitude or, more strictly, her attitude as interpreted through the prism of authors from the classical world, may lie in her alleged speech to the Britons before she led her forces first against three Roman cities and then against Suetonius Paulinus's army. The 'speech' belongs to the well-known genre of fictional harangues created by writers for dramatic effect and, perhaps unwittingly, to express their own perceptions and attitudes. Boudica's speech, written



FIGURE 5.1 ♦ 'Romans go home!' graffito, on display in the Museum of London.

Source: © The Museum of London.

by Dio,⁴⁶ has its counterpart in a monologue put into the mouth of Paulinus as he prepared to engage Boudica's forces in the final pitched battle.

We deal in the next chapter with the events immediately leading to the Boudican Rebellion and the course of the British war itself. But, in the context of examining the persona of Boudica herself, it is worth taking a close look at parts of her harangue of the British army, since it is used by Dio as a mouthpiece for expressing the downside of Roman imperialism, rather in the manner of Tacitus, and for presenting Boudica as a free and noble spirit, to be admired rather than despised. This is interesting, for there is a stark contrast between the historian's sympathetic treatment of her motives and his utter condemnation of her behaviour in Roman London, where she is presented in terms of total barbarity and inhuman cruelty. Dio compiles the speech in three sections, two referring to the past, the third to the future.⁴⁷ The first part is worth quoting in full, for it clearly presents the rationale behind the rebellion and allows us to understand the attitudes of some conquered provincials for whom the Roman way was far from the 'American Dream', albeit attitudes imposed upon the protesting Britons by a Graeco-Roman writer seeking to write as dramatically as possible and using old sources as his raw material. But it is worth pointing to the close resemblances between this Boudican 'speech' and Tacitus's creation of another British resistance-harangue, that of Calgacus at the time of Agricola's governorship of Britain.⁴⁸ The stock phrases concerning freedom, Roman oppression and British defiance against slavery are all present in both reported speeches.

Boudica allegedly began her harangue thus:

You have learned from actual experience what a difference there is between freedom and slavery. As a result, though some of you through your ignorance of which is better were previously deceived by the Romans' tempting promises, now at least you have tried them both and understand how great a mistake you made in preferring an imported tyranny to your ancestral way of life. You have realised how much better is poverty with no master than riches accompanied by slavery. For what great dishonour, what extreme of grief have we not suffered from the moment these Romans arrived in Britain? Have we not been entirely deprived of our most important possessions, and pay taxes on what is left? In addition to pasturing and tilling all our other property for them, do we not also pay an annual tax on our very bodies? How much better would it have been to be sold to masters once and for all, rather

*than to ransom ourselves every year and retain the empty name of freedom! How much better to have been slaughtered and perish than to go around with a tax on our heads! But why do I mention this? Not even death is free with them; you know how much we pay even for the dead. Among the rest of humanity death frees even those who are slaves; only among the Romans do the dead live for profit. Why is it that though we have no money – how could we have any, from what source? – we are stripped and despoiled like murder-victims? And why should they moderate their behaviour with the passage of time when they have treated us like this from the outset, a time when all men show some consideration even for the animals they have newly caught?*⁴⁹

Boudica here compares past with present, the blandishments of the occupying Romans when they first arrived in Britain and the surreptitious creep of oppression and, in particular, the crippling burden of taxation, presumably in both money and kind (corn and meat). There is a keen detestation of servitude in any form: that is the driving force of Boudica's hatred. We know from archaeological evidence, in the form of slave gang-chains,⁵⁰ that some late Iron Age Britons practised slavery (probably, for the most part, prisoners of war) (see Figure 5.2). We also have literary testimony: the first-century Greek geographer Strabo⁵¹ refers to British exports of slaves to the classical world, along with hunting dogs and grain, while his contemporary, Diodorus Siculus, commented that the Gauls adored Mediterranean wine and would trade a slave for a single amphora-full.⁵²

Tacitus records how, after the Boudican Rebellion, an imperial freedman, Polyclitus, was despatched from Rome to assess the damage done to Britain by the rebels themselves and by Paulinus's reprisals, both of which left the province in political and economic ruin. While Polyclitus, with his enormous retinue and the power of his close association with Nero, succeeded in overawing the Roman army, the Britons were unimpressed by his status as an ex-slave and scoffed that such a person should hold high office in the Roman government: 'The British marvelled that a general and an army who had completed such a mighty war should obey a slave'.⁵³ Clearly the nuances of freedman status were lost on a people for whom men and women were either free or unfree. Caesar, writing a century earlier, commented on the Gallic social hierarchy, stating that 'the common people are regarded almost as slaves'.⁵⁴

The Britons' contempt for Polyclitus resonates strongly with an episode recorded by Dio at the time of the Claudian invasion in AD 43.



FIGURE 5.2 ♣ Bronze amulet depicting a bound captive or slave, from Brough-under-Stainmore, Cumbria.

Source: © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum.

When Aulus Plautius, the first commander of the occupying force, assembled his army on the north-west coast of Gaul, the soldiers demurred at embarking for Britain, for they were reluctant to sail off the edge of the world, as they saw it. So Claudius sent his representative, an imperial freedman named Narcissus, to speak to the troops, who were so incensed at being addressed by one of slave status that they refused to allow him to open his mouth. But then their sense of the ridiculous restored their good humour: shouting 'Io Saturnalia', they agreed to follow Plautius's command.⁵⁵ This phrase refers to a winter festival in the Roman calendar, the Saturnalia, held in honour of Saturn, an ancient Italian god of agriculture, when slaves and their owners changed places for a day, masters waited on their servants and slaves wore the clothing of the free.

In her speech, Boudica makes much of the burdens of taxation visited upon the Iceni and the Trinovantes under Roman occupation. The taxes were imposed in order to maintain the army, the new Roman towns, like Verulamium and London, and such 'amenities' as the great temple of Claudius at Colchester, built and financed by Britons with loans from Romans like Seneca, the irony being that the British taxes were buying the symbols and realities of foreign domination. But we need to view such sentiments, as expressed in the speech, in the context of how internal British politics were conducted prior to the Roman invasion. In speaking of neighbouring Gaul, Julius Caesar makes the telling comment that the common people were crushed beneath tax burdens: 'Most of them, crushed by debt or heavy taxes or the oppression of more powerful men, pledge themselves to serve the nobles, who exercise over them the same rights as masters have over slaves'.⁵⁶ So the Gauls, and probably the Britons also, were already burdened with taxes as part of their indigenous class-system economy. Indeed, if we can believe Caesar's testimony and apply it to the British situation a hundred years later, Prasutagus and Boudica herself were involved in grinding the faces of the poor in their own tribe before the events of AD 60.

The second section of Boudica's speech analyses the reasons for British oppression by Rome. Here, Dio attributes to Boudica a nationalism that embraces the entire island of Britain:

*We allowed them [the Romans] to set foot upon our island in the first place, and did not immediately drive them out as once we did the famous Julius Caesar. We did not make even the attempt to set sail, a frightful prospect for them while they were still far away, as we did in the case of Augustus and Gaius Caligula. For this reason, though we inhabit so large an island, or rather a continent as it were, surrounded by the sea, and though we have a world of our own and are separated from all the rest of mankind by the Ocean to such an extent that people believe we live in another world under another sky, and some of them – the most erudite included – have hitherto not known for certain what we are called, yet we have been despised and trampled under foot by men who understand nothing except giving vent to their greed. But if we have not done so in the past, let us do our duty now, my countrymen, friends and kinsmen – for I consider you all my kinsmen inasmuch as you inhabit a single island and are called by one common name – now while we remember freedom, so may we bequeath it to our children both as a term and a reality. For if we forget altogether that happy state in which we grew up, what will they do who are reared on slavery?*⁵⁷

In reality, there is little evidence to suppose that Boudica was operating on a national scale. There is no mention, in either Dio or Tacitus, that the Icenii and Trinovantes teamed up with the discomfited Silures nor with disaffected elements among the Brigantes, and it seems to have been an exceptional circumstance that led even to collaboration between two neighbouring tribes, let alone any strong alliances further afield. Dio puts into the mouth of Boudica an awareness of a national identity, based on Britain's island status, because it makes a good story and enhances the tale of British rebellion to a grand scale, as though the whole of the province had risen up in arms against their colonial oppressors. The reality is that much of southern Britain, including the lands belonging to Togidubnus (see Chapter 3), remained loyal to the Romans, and we know that Cartimandua's kingdom also stood firm, despite the anti-Roman sympathies of Venutius.

The remainder of Boudica's speech, as invented by Dio, says a great deal about the supposed polarity between the 'noble savages', as represented by Boudica and her people on the one hand and the decadent Romans on the other. Thus the Britons were seen as tough, used to enduring hardship and living off the land, whereas the Romans were soft, too accustomed to easy living and could not cope if they were cold, hungry or deprived of their wine and olive oil. Britain itself is depicted as a world of rugged terrain totally alien to the intruders: mountainous, boggy and full of icy, swift-flowing rivers. Dio makes the Icenian leader allude to the Romans scornfully as hares, while her Britons were dogs and wolves.⁵⁸ The reference to hares as timid, hunted animals⁵⁹ is the more interesting since, in the next passage, the author describes a divinatory rite enacted by Boudica that involved the release of a hare in honour of Andraste, goddess of victory.⁶⁰ (We will see in following chapters that both hares and wolves were significant creatures for the Britons.)

The other striking element in Boudica's alleged harangue is her persistent reference to gender, and particularly to inverted gender. We have an intimation of this in her scornful allusion to the softness (and implied effeminacy) of Roman soldiers, who needed to eat kneaded bread, who sought shelter from the sun and wore copious protective body armour.⁶¹ In the following passage, she (or rather Dio) is more forthright in voicing contempt for effete Roman customs and especially that of the imperial house:

I thank you, Andraste, and I call upon you woman to woman, not as one who rules over Egyptians with their burdens as Nitocris did, nor over Assyrian traders as did Semiramis – this much we have learned from the Romans – nor yet indeed as one ruling over the Romans themselves, as once Messalina did, then Agrippina and now Nero – for though he has the title of man, he is in fact a woman, as his singing and playing the lyre and painted face declare – but as one who rules over Britons who have no knowledge of tilling the earth or working with their hands, but are experts in the art of war and hold all things in common, even their wives and children. Through this the women too possess the same valour as the men. As queen, then, of such men and women, I pray to you and ask for victory, safety and freedom from men who are insolent, unjust, insatiable and impious – if indeed we ought to call them men when they bathe in warm water, eat fancy food, drink unmixed wine, smear themselves with myrrh, sleep on soft beds with boys – boys past their prime at that – and are slaves to a lyre-player – and a bad one at that. May this woman, Domitia Nero, reign no longer over me or you men; rather let her lord it over the Romans with her singing; for they deserve to be slaves to such a woman, whose tyranny they have put up with for so long. For us on the other hand may you alone, Lady, for ever be our leader.⁶²

So for Boudica/Dio, British women are as good as men, but the Romans are to be derided because they are ruled by a man/woman and the Romans themselves behave like pampered females, while Boudica and her sisters act like men. There is a mixed message there, or is there? What seems to be revealed is that male attributes were valued. Boudica does not extol the virtue of women as women but of women as men.

Red queen, white queen

In the council chamber, known as the Moot Hall, at the top of the splendid town hall building in the centre of Colchester, there are three large Edwardian stained-glass windows commemorating British monarchs who had a special impact upon the history of the town (see also Chapter 9; and Plate 25). The middle window is dedicated to the queens and was presented by the Ladies of the Borough under the aegis of Emily Sanders, Mayoress 1898–9 and President of the Committee in 1900. The large central roundel depicts Queen Victoria and around the edges of the window are smaller portraits of other powerful female monarchs, all with their names inscribed beneath them, including Eleanor of Aquitaine and Queen Elizabeth I. The portrait at bottom right depicts 'Boadicea':