

Boudicca Transcript Season 4, Episode 6

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, we're looking at Queen Boudicca.

I'd love to know what you think of these episodes, so please come and find me on Twitter: [@GudrunLauret](https://twitter.com/GudrunLauret), or leave a comment on your audio player of choice. Alternatively, you can pop a message onto the relevant podcast page over at gudrunlauret.com/podcast, where you'll find the shownotes, useful links and an episode transcript – no email address required to access that.

When I was younger, Boudicca was known as 'Boadicea' – either because it sounded better than Boudicca or because a monk made an error writing her name down. Anyway, the latter is how she's referred to now.

In Terry Deary's children's book *The Rotten Romans*, he quotes the writer Cassius Dio, who said of Boudicca: "She was very tall. Her eyes seem to stab you and her voice was harsh and loud." I wonder if she was quite as fearsome as the contemporary accounts would have us believe, or if it was simply a dislike and distrust of a powerful woman?

Boudicca was born in Britannia in AD30, and married Prasutagus, King of the Iceni tribe, who lived in an area which is now (approximately) Norfolk. At that time, Britannia was made up of several such tribes, who had their own kings and controlled different parts of the country.

To the south of the Iceni, the powerful Trinovantes ruled much of what is now Suffolk, Hertfordshire and Essex. The Trinovantes were not too pleased when the Romans invaded, especially when the Emperor Claudius had their capital city of Camulodunum (Colchester) sacked.

Prasutagus, on the other hand, didn't want to oppose the Romans, and offered to make Claudius his joint heir, along with his two daughters, which would give the emperor control of the Iceni lands. Having made this decision in a misguided attempt to save his people, Prasutagus promptly died, leaving his widow at the mercy of the Romans.

Terry Deary says that the Romans overran the Iceni lands and had Boudicca whipped. This mistreatment led Boudicca to plan a rebellion with the Trinovantes, and claimed Camulodunum back. The Roman historian and politician Tacitus was in Britannia with his father in law at the time of the revolt, and his account is the main source for what happened next.

In around AD60, the Britons mounted their campaign against the Romans, with Boudicca chosen as their leader. She said she was going to war not as the queen, but as 'one of the people, avenging my lost freedom, my scourged body, the

outraged chastity of my daughters' and finishing up with the rather excellent line, 'This is a woman's resolve; as for men, they may live and be slaves.'

Having defeated a small group of soldiers and reclaimed Camulodunum, the Britons marched on to Londinium (London), where again, the Romans were unable to rally their troops, and the town was abandoned to the looters. From there, the rebels took Verulamium (St Albans), again meeting very little resistance. It's thought that the Britons' army killed around 70,000 people, many of whom were probably not Romans.

The accounts of the army's rampage across the south of Britannia highlight the pagan aspects of their behaviour. For instance, they took no prisoners and simply executed anyone they wanted to. Cassius Dio states that noble women were impaled on spikes and had their breasts cut off and sewn to their mouths. Boudicca clearly wasn't a feminist.

There is also a lot of emphasis placed on divination and looking for signs. Boudicca is believed to have released a hare from her dress and interpreting which direction it ran (it's not clear what exactly that symbolised).

Indeed, before Boudicca and the Britons even went to war, they saw signs that encouraged them in the belief that they was doing the right thing. At the Thames, a ruined, phantom town appeared, and unearthly screams were heard from the Roman senate house. The sea turned red, and the sand took on the shape of corpses as the tide went out.

However, the Romans had finally had time to regroup and summon troops from around the country to quash the rebellion. The governor Gaius Suetonius Paulinus, boss of Tacitus' father in law, amassed his forces in a narrow field with a wood behind them, to give them a strategic advantage.

It's claimed that Paulinus, fresh from battle near Wales, managed to gather only 10,000 soldiers to face 100,000 Britons. The Romans, though, were well-organised and better-equipped. By keeping open land in front of them, Paulinus removed the possibility of ambushes, and also the element of surprise from the Britons.

The infantry was able to march onto the rebels and bring them down with javelins, with the cavalry and auxiliary units continuing the slaughter. The huge group of Britons attempted to flee, with the Romans fast behind them.

Unfortunately, the Britons had been so confident of victory that they had brought wagons full of supplies ready for when the battle was finished. They had also invited their wives to witness their success, meaning that the soldiers simply slaughtered them too. The wagons also hampered any escape, meaning it was easy to bring down the rebels.

The location of this battle is unknown, although it's thought it took place somewhere along Watling Street, the old Roman road through the country. In the face of defeat, Boudicca did not want to become a prisoner of war or suffer another whipping, and chose to commit suicide by swallowing poison. Or at least according to Tacitus. Cassius Dio, on the other hand, said she died of an illness, although suicide seems to be the more likely explanation.

Thanks for listening! Please tune in next time, and let me know what you think of today's episode too.