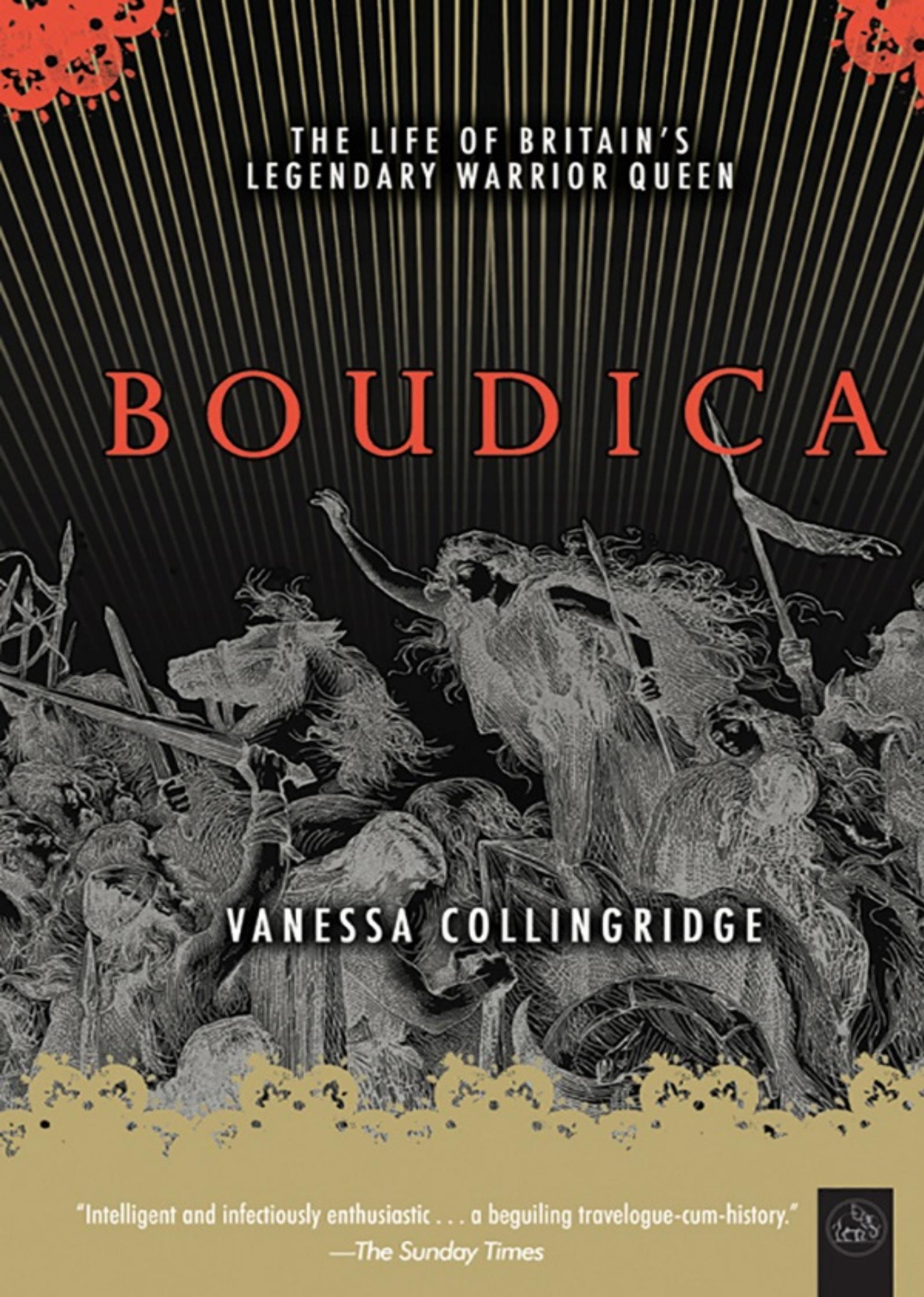


THE LIFE OF BRITAIN'S  
LEGENDARY WARRIOR QUEEN

# BOUDICA



VANESSA COLLINGRIDGE

"Intelligent and infectiously enthusiastic . . . a beguiling travelogue-cum-history."

—*The Sunday Times*



*For my parents, Gordon and Irene,  
and their redheaded tribe of Collingridges.*

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# TIMELINE

## **BC**

- 1000 Bronze Age Urnfield culture exists throughout Europe
- 800 Iron Age Celtic Hallstatt culture appears in Europe and expands
- 600 The *Massiliote Periplus* is written in the Greek port of Massilia (Marseilles), describing two distant islands of Ierne (Ireland) and Albion (Britain)
- 550 Hillforts built across southern Britain, including Danebury Ring, Hampshire
- 500 Greek writer Hecateus describes the Keltoi  
La Tène culture evolves and starts to spread through Europe
- c 400 Celtic tribes “The Gauls” invade northern Italy
- c 390 The Gauls sack Rome
- c 325-320 The voyage of Pytheas, who describes Britain and Ireland as the Pretannic Islands
- 218 Celts ally with Carthage in Second Punic War
- c 200-100 Development of large fortified settlements called *oppida* in Europe  
First Belgic migrations from the Continent to Britain  
Romans fight and finally defeat the Cimbri and Teutones  
Danebury hillfort is abandoned for unknown reasons
- 60 First triumvirate: Pompey, Crassus and Julius Caesar
- 58 Julius Caesar campaigns in Gaul
- 55 Julius Caesar’s first invasion of Britain
- 54 Julius Caesar’s second invasion of Britain
- 52 Gaulish rebellion led by Vercingetorix; defeated at Alesia  
Commius flees to Britain
- 49 Caesar crosses the Rubicon
- 46 Vercingetorix is paraded through Rome and then executed
- 44 Julius Caesar murdered by fellow Romans; end of Roman civil war
- 43 Second triumvirate: Marc Antony, Lepidus and Octavian
- 31 Battle of Actium: Antony and Cleopatra defeated by Octavian
- 27 Octavian becomes first Roman emperor, Augustus

## **AD**

- 9 15,000 Roman soldiers wiped out by native Germans in Teutoberg Forest, ending Roman expansion in region
- 14 Augustus dies; Tiberius becomes emperor
- 37 Tiberius dies; Caligula (Gaius Caesar) becomes emperor
- 40 Emperor Caligula abandons invasion of Britain at French coast
- 41 Emperor Caligula murdered; Claudius takes imperial throne
- 43 Emperor Claudius invades Britain; Caratacus leads resistance
- 47 First revolt by the Iceni tribe, soon quashed by Romans  
Publius Ostorius Scapula leads military action against tribes of Britons

48	Romans help Cartimandua retain power as Brigantian Queen
c50	London established as Roman trading port
51	Caratacus finally defeated in battle, handed to Romans by Queen Cartimandua of the Brigantes
54	Emperor Claudius dies, probably poisoned; Nero becomes emperor
52-58	Conquest of Wales continued under Aulus Didius Gallus, then Quintus Veranius
57	Cartimandua's husband, Venutius, rebels against her
59	Emperor Nero has his mother, Agrippina, murdered
58-61	Gaius Suetonius Paulinus becomes governor of Britain
60	Client King Prasutagus of the Iceni dies, leaving his lands jointly to Nero and his two daughters. His Queen, Boudica, attempts rule in his place Suetonius invades Anglesey to extinguish Druid resistance Boudica rises up in revolt against the Romans, sacking Colchester, London then St Albans before being defeated and dying Widespread retribution against the rebellious tribes of Britons
68	Nero commits suicide
68-69	"Year of the four emperors"; finally, Vespasian becomes emperor
69	Venutius splits from Cartimandua who takes Vellacatus as her new consort; Venutius leads army against her; she is rescued by Romans but disappears from history
71	Romans defeat Brigantes under Venutius and annexe territory
79	Mount Vesuvius erupts; Vespasian dies; Titus becomes Emperor
81	Titus dies; his brother Domitian becomes Emperor
84	Tacitus claims that Agricola, provincial governor of Britannia, defeats Calgacus's army of 30,000 Caledonian warriors at Mons Graupius
122-30	Hadrian's Wall built
410	Roman Britain ends

## INTRODUCTION

**“Whoever were the first inhabitants of Britain, whether natives or immigrants, has never been answered: don’t forget we are dealing with barbarians” Tacitus, *Agricola*, xi.**

The red layer was the colour of African earth. Flecked with shards of blackened pottery and charcoal, it could have been the debris of any human settlement anywhere on the continent. But this was not in Africa, or the blood-red clays of India, or the deserts of South America: this was in Britain and deep underground in the basement of a hotel in Colchester. The last sun that this soil had seen was a faint disc of light through a choking blanket of smoke. Two millennia ago, fire had wrapped up the town’s population and all their belongings in a thousand degrees of burning – a temperature so unimaginably hot that it could melt glass back into a liquid and cook the clay of the buildings into the rock-hard ceramic bones of death. This was the mark of an Iron Age Zoro; this was the destruction layer of Boudica.

Boudica – the Iron Age queen of the Iceni tribe – left her indelible signature on the landscape of Britain in the form of a layer of charred, red earth in Roman Britain’s largest three settlements, which she burned to the ground. But much more than that, she has also branded her legacy into the British psyche to the extent that almost two thousand years on, we are using her name as a byword for strong women leaders, fictional characters – even as the epitome of the nationalist or Celtic patriot. Dramatically, she is cast as another Braveheart, rolled back in time and space to the lands of East Anglia and the time of the Roman conquests; in reality, Boudica was a collaborator turned rebel and then infamous warrior queen.

But until recently, for someone with such a tight grip on the British imagination, we’ve known very little about the real woman from antiquity; in fact, we still don’t even know her real name. We grew up calling her “Boadicea” which turns out to have been an early gaffe after a scribe mistook her name in Latin and transposed two vital letters; however, it sounded right so it stuck for centuries until we realised the mistake. Over the past few years, she’s been correctly renamed “Boudica” from the Celtic word “bouda” or “victory”; it’s a chorus that was allegedly chanted again and again before warriors went into battle – but we still cannot even say for sure whether this was her real name or just a title.

Boadicea, Bonduca, Boudicca or Boudica, she’s a figure who has not only been cherished from our past but one who has been continually reinvented to serve as a

“woman of our age”. Such is her draw that whenever there has been a strong or high-profile woman in power (whether politically, economically, or in any other field), Boudica has been the reference point or role model in both words and pictures. Boudica may mean different things to different people but her brand image is so great that she is instantly recognisable across the generations and throughout much of the western world and the Commonwealth.

The trouble is, when we blow the dust off our schoolbook knowledge, it quickly becomes apparent that we know only the headlines about Britain’s most famous warrior queen: here was a Briton who fought the Romans, had some big battles – and then died. The few scant details of her story can be made to fit the relevance of almost any latter-day political scenario of queens, empires or fights against oppression – yet the more we pick our way through myth, folklore and other people’s histories to get to the real story of Boudica, the more we realise that the pared-down truth behind the stories has a power and resonance that surpasses even legend.

Archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century have added much intriguing flesh to the bare bones of her story – but as our knowledge of the “real” Boudica builds and grows, what has emerged are the parallel but entirely *distinct* lives of a real historical woman versus the fictional characters we have created in her name for the last two thousand years. Until the last few decades, Iron Age Britain was thought to be the almost passive recipient of waves of immigrants from a more developed mainland Europe who introduced a new, more sophisticated culture and ideas. However, as the scientific rigour of archaeology has improved, the reality in the ground tells an altogether different story: an Iron Age Britain rich in regional diversity and complexity, with social, economic and military links that extended for thousands of miles into Europe and the Mediterranean and for a privileged part of the population at least, a geographical mobility that would be impressive today. Whatever the Romans chose to believe, these people were certainly not “barbarians” in any modern sense of the word. Suddenly, the world of the late Iron Age and early Roman period becomes a deeply textured, fascinating blend of influences and ideas: the Boudica of antiquity emerges as the product of her time, her contacts and her noble class – most likely a wine-drinking, fashion-conscious, bi-lingual Roman citizen with a sophisticated palate and relatively cosmopolitan tastes – far removed from the raw stereotype we were taught about in school, and all the richer for that. But in whittling down the legend to find the real Boudica the debris should not be discarded: just like tea leaves in the bottom of a cup, what is left behind can have an intrinsic value of its own. The cultural and political accretions that have been forced on her story over two millennia tell their own story of the hopes, dreams and prejudices of the chroniclers throughout the ages who built Boudica into the icon she still is today.

Instead of a single biography of Boudica, this book explores the search for the *biographies* of Boudica – who created them, and why. And the story that emerges is much more than a tale of a woman who led her people against a foreign army: it’s about our culture and ourselves, and how we shape our heroes to serve specific purposes, regardless of whether or not the facts actually fit the story at all. The story of Boudica is therefore both the exemplar and the allegory for how we make our histories.

The legend of Boudica's revolt against the Romans ticks all the boxes of a modern epic: with its sex and violence, agony and ecstasy, glory and honour – and the tension of certain doom, it's a swashbuckling, heart-rending *morality* tale of two radically different worlds colliding. The lead character is a true freedom-fighter in the mould of Scotland's William Wallace, struggling to protect a cherished way of life and waging some valiant battles against a seemingly invulnerable enemy right down to the same tragi-heroic ending. But what has made this story endure for almost two thousand years are the twists that still entrance us today, for not only does the hero ultimately lose – the defeated fighter was a woman.

This point might seem obvious but it is critical to the understanding of Boudica's place in the history books. Jenny Hall, Roman curator at the Museum of London, agrees: "The Roman army was heavily defeated by Boudica's army; now that was bad enough, but to be heavily defeated *by a woman* was extremely embarrassing. So, to alleviate some of that embarrassment they had to build up her story even further, making her out to be absolutely terrifying. That's not to take away from her achievements, though – she really did cause them serious problems, almost wiping out a whole legion and destroying their three most important towns."

While the Iceni queen was ruling over her people in what is now East Anglia, further west another Briton was raising an army against the Romans. Caratacus was a mighty warrior who led a remarkable war of resistance against the foreign invaders for almost a decade. In many ways, he outshone Boudica completely: he managed to unite disparate tribes into an effective force of freedom-fighters and then lead a successful guerrilla campaign against the Romans which diverted their attentions from empire-building to mere survival. It took one of the best armies in the world eight long years to defeat this legendary fighter and by the time of his eventual capture, he was revered throughout Rome and her provinces as a great soldier and leader of men. Yet two thousand years on, his name is little more than a wisp of memory in the wake of the warrior queen because he was just another male insurgent. His lesson – never to take on the Romans in a pitched battle – was ignored by Boudica to her cost but while she failed to benefit from his tactical skills, she did benefit from the mystique that built up around him. To Rome, Caratacus was a product of the dark and dangerous island of Britannia where wild, hostile landscapes were teeming with savage, painted and fearless fighters. So while his harrying attacks may have made him famous for a few years, his real legacy was in shoring up the myth of a barbarous Britain: this set the scene for something even more alien and threatening to the patriarchal Roman mindset – a *woman* who dared to step outside the "normal" role of wife and mother, and to take up arms against Rome. For not only the Romans, but also the Anglo-Saxons, the Elizabethans and today's Britons, her sex is not just a point of curiosity, it is fundamental to understanding her longevity and why she has endured the snakes-and-ladders of fame and infamy over the last two thousand years.

The key to understanding her tumultuous journey through history lies not in Boudica's story but the broader context of Roman culture. As sure as David beat Goliath, in great world myths and legends the underdog is meant to win; such are the ways in which heroes are made. And according to this formula, Boudica should have earned her place

in history by beating the Romans in that last, fateful battle and sending them scurrying back to Rome. But that is to read the history books from a British point of view; to the Romans who were writing the first accounts of the warrior queen, *they* were the underdogs, grossly outnumbered and facing a ferocious and barbaric enemy. They needed to win to preserve their honour as the occupying force, but more importantly, they needed to beat Boudica precisely because she was a woman: a further defeat would be the ultimate ignominy. Had she beaten them, she *could* have been the most powerful woman in the western world; instead, she became one of the most infamous.

It was this infamy that brought me to her story over twenty years ago when we learned of her at school. Growing up in the Seventies and Eighties, there was inevitably an undercurrent of discussion about the role of women in society throughout my childhood which I absorbed like a sponge, unwittingly at first but then as a more deliberate act of enquiry. From the feminist movement to the Indian bandit queen Phoolan Devi and the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, the whole spectrum of what women could achieve in life was now being questioned. And along with that questioning came my search for new and “edgier” role models who challenged the traditional gender stereotypes that straddled the boundaries between the sexually “incontinent” vamp and the housewife indoors.

Ironically, my growing passion for what was then endearingly called “women’s issues” came from my father, who was as far from the liberal fringe as it was possible to get. Our family was large and rumbustious and between us we held pretty much every shade of political persuasion which made for years of very noisy dinner-table discussion. As the youngest and arguably the most extrovert of the children, I didn’t see why any avenue should be barred to me, not least on account of my sex – and what started as a strong-willed desire for independence became a fully-fledged, bra-burning (if only I had been old enough to wear one) mentality.

Certainly, I cannot remember a time when I wasn’t acutely aware of the inherently political nature of women’s position in society and – much to my father’s disgust and my now extreme embarrassment – by the grand old age of twelve, I would proudly read *Cosmopolitan* magazine and call myself a feminist!

Against this backdrop, it’s hardly surprising that learning about a warrior queen called Boadicea had a particular resonance with a young, impressionable child on the look-out for strong and feisty mentors. To me, she represented so much more than just a rebel leader: she embedded herself in my world view and sharpened my antennae for women who dared to challenge the status quo. It was a high-falutin basis on which to start my lifelong interest in Boudica but there was something a little more down to earth that made me pin my colours firmly to her mast.

There are not many female heroes in our history books and even fewer were known for having the same untamed thatch of red hair that cursed my childhood. I was too much of a tomboy to be drawn to stories of damsels in distress or cloistered princesses yet here was a queen who fought for her people on muddy and bloody battlefields; a perfect role-model for an ungainly ginger child. Boudica – or Boadicea as she was to us then – became my personal mascot, someone who I could look up to with a quiet sense of communion. The girls could have their blonde-haired Barbies; I would have my kick-ass carrot-top Queen.

It might at first seem a trivial point but Boudica’s red hair is as much a part of the

whole Boudica legend as her other symbols – the scythe-wheeled chariot (a nineteenth-century invention) and the spear; and, whether it was true or not, the mere fact that she was *said* to have red hair is highly significant as it marks her apart from the Roman “norm”.

Although two classical commentators recount Boudica’s story, we only know of the trademark red hair by the writings of one of them: the Greek historian, Cassius Dio, who died around AD 235 – one hundred and seventy-five years after Boudica’s final battle. He gives us our only physical description of the woman who almost drove the Romans out of Britain:

*“In build she was very tall, in her demeanour most terrifying, in the glint of her eye most fierce, and her voice was harsh; a great mound of the tawniest hair fell to her hips; around her neck was a large golden torc; and she wore a tunic of many colours upon which a thick cloak was fastened with a brooch. This was her general attire.”*

CASSIUS DIO BK 62: 2

The scene is awe-inspiring – a powerful piece of imagery that has shaped our views of Boudica for almost two millennia: here is the classic picture of the warrior queen. But while it makes great drama, it is almost *too much* of a classical portrait, built on the widely held stereotypes and myths that abounded in the writings of the day about the “barbarians” that lived in the lands of Gaul and Britannia. Again, what seems unique by itself is in context just more Roman propaganda. How much of Cassius Dio’s description was a genuine account and how much a romantic embroidering of the facts will never fully be known but some “facts” do ring true. The “large golden torc” is credible enough, as precious torcs dating back to the late Iron Age and early Roman period have been found in buried hoards, presumably because their owners wanted to keep them safe in times of trouble (the fact that they were never reclaimed suggesting that their owners’ grim judgement of the situation had been correct). As for the tunic, we know from archaeological evidence that the ancient Britons were show-offs and did indeed favour brooches, the more richly decorated the better; and they used to weave a kind of plaid or tartan, the best of which would certainly be of “many colours” to show off the design.



*“Stroppy Cow. Just because we pronounce her name wrong.”*

However, rather than painting an impressive picture, everything in Cassius Dio’s description seems designed to instil the reader with an awe that is also tainted with disgust: like the Amazons to the Greeks, everything about the other culture was upside-down and just plain *wrong*. To a Roman audience, a woman ruler was a vile oxymoron as only men were fit to govern: queens, with their deadly blend of sex and power, represented a perversion of the natural order. The mere fact that the Britons had monarchs was a sign that they were culturally backward: according to the Roman version of history, Rome had got rid of its monarchy more than five hundred years earlier, when it found the system was inherently corrupt. They had then progressed from the high ideals of the Republic to the magnificence of the Roman Empire, both of which had the moderating influence of the Senate to provide the necessary checks and balances on the supreme power of its leaders. As the most powerful nation on earth (so they thought), their system of governance was clearly superior.

What’s more, no Roman (and for that read “civilised”) woman would have spoken with a “harsh” voice or allowed her hair to go untamed; and what Roman female, let alone a queen, would have been flattered by being referred to not as “stately” or “powerful” but as “fierce”? The underlying suggestion of barbarism is never far below the surface in the classical texts about Boudica in an attempt to underline the fact that she’s from a less cultured, less developed and less worthy race than the Romans. Everything about her signals her “otherness”. Even the reference to her “tawny” hair – interpreted through the ages as meaning “red” – sets her apart from the more “normal” darker Latin hues.

The exotic savagery of the redhead is underlined in a popular story about the Emperor Caligula who so embarrassed by the small number of prisoners he had to display at his victory parade that he collected together the tallest of his Gaulish prisoners and made them firstly grow their hair then dye it red, so the Roman crowds would know that he had conquered the mighty barbarians. Here, red hair was the ultimate symbol of an inferior race, and one that contrasted with the obvious glory of Rome.

But it wasn’t just uncivilised people who sported red hair, though it was likely to be symbolic of a flaw in their morality. There is a popular belief that one of the most infamous queens of all time, Cleopatra, may also have been ginger as a result of her Macedonian ancestry stretching back to the famous fellow redhead, Alexander the Great. Although there is only a slim chance that this was true, any red hair she sported would have been most likely dyed with henna in the custom of the day. According to the Greek historian and biographer, Plutarch (AD 46-126), Cleopatra dressed herself and liked to be *addressed* as the “new Isis” after the most powerful of all the Egyptian deities. This idea is supported by the discovery of a figurine of the goddess with gilded hair and heavy, red-coloured eyebrows which was excavated from Pompeii. We know that Cleopatra took great pride in her appearance and, as the last in a line of Greek rulers in Egypt – and with at least two high-profile Roman lovers and her own Macedonian ancestry, she certainly had a number of “looks” to draw upon for inspiration; she may well have chosen to dye her hair red. This seemingly unconnected

fact takes on a more ominous tone when put in the context of the events of AD 60. Cleopatra died in 30 BC so the twenty-one years of her rule that gave Rome so much cause for concern were still very much within political and folk memory by the time of Boudica's revolt. Queens *per se* were problematic to Rome – but red-headed queens? They would have been condemned by their very existence.

It wasn't just Romans who were chary of those who looked different, though their legacy may have compounded the prejudice. All over Europe throughout the next two thousand years redheaded people were somehow perceived as dangerous. At best they were "abnormal"; at worst, a manifestation of evil. The trend towards demonising those with red hair was accelerated by the spread of Christianity throughout the Old World: Judas was said to have been a redhead and he went on to betray Jesus Christ, an act which was enough to condemn an entire genotype.

By the Middle Ages, the negative associations between hair colour, Jews and the Devil are well-recorded: despite their prevalence in northern Europe, there are numerous historical examples of redheads being witches, redheads being unclean and something best avoided and also redheaded women bringing bad luck to sailors and fishermen. Even today, the currency of the colour holds true throughout the western world: red signifies danger and devilment. It's a shorthand sign of warning that would not have been wasted on readers throughout history, and certainly not on readers of Cassius Dio's description of Boudica: here was a woman who stood in stark contrast to the Roman ideal. The truth is that Boudica may not have had red hair at all; but just saying that she did was another warning that marked her out as strange, foreign and dangerous.

Of course, the history of Boudica that has come down to us today was originally written by those who defeated her and they selected their facts for more reasons than mere reportage. "Tawny" hair is merely one example; embedded within the lines of Tacitus and Cassius Dio are all the prejudices, coded beliefs and covert politicking that you would expect from the editor of a modern tabloid newspaper. Classical texts were written to make the writer and patron look as good as possible; they were constructed as entertainment, as likely to be read out to an audience as quietly to oneself and were therefore full of drama, rhetoric and moralising. They are certainly *not* a statement of the truth, however hard their tags of "annals" or "histories" may try to convince.

Unlike the Romans who prided themselves on their literary culture, the Britons and, indeed, their Celtic-speaking neighbours in mainland Europe had no strong tradition of writing things down: knowledge was largely the preserve of the elite band of Druids who were their political and spiritual leaders. This means that while we have the two main Roman documentary sources of Tacitus and Cassius Dio, in terms of written evidence from a *British* point of view (and even the term British, we will see, is problematic), there is precious little from the period leading up to – and immediately after – the Boudican revolt. What scant writing survives comes not from books at all but from inscriptions on coins and memorial stones and while these might provide important information in terms of dates, dynasties and cultural influences, they are severely limited in what they can add to the narrative of Boudica's life.

However, a string of exciting discoveries has meant that we are now far from reliant upon solely the two early historians' version of the story. Balancing the classical writings of the day, other forms of "evidence" we have for Boudica and the revolt of

AD 60/61 are the material remains from the early Roman era in Britain, some from archaeology and more recently, from metal detectorists. It is these *material* finds that provide us with a more genuine insight into the lives of the ancient Britons and offer a window into a world that is breathtaking in its juxtaposition of material simplicity and cultural complexity. Over the last eighty years, since Sir Mortimer Wheeler championed the modern, systematic dig, archaeology has been transformed from the former gentleman's pursuit of antiquarianism into a science – and transformed along with it has been our understanding of the Iron Age and the impact of the Roman conquests on the population of Britain. The legacy of this change in revealing the true story of the past cannot be overstated: archaeology has made history sharpen up its act.

In turn, archaeology has been challenged by another mode of study. Until the last two decades or so, metal detectorists were the pariah of the archaeological world; archaeologists claimed they were ruthless profiteers who blundered and plundered their way through the British landscape with careless regard for the context of their finds and in so doing destroyed potentially important information from the sites where their “treasure” had been found. These accusations were on top of the more basic charges of often not keeping good records of the find's location so it was lost again to history – or simply hunting treasure for money rather than pleasure or understanding. Archaeologists wouldn't talk to the detectorists – and the detectorists wouldn't talk to the archaeologists. This stand-off did no one any good and undoubtedly encouraged some detectorists to indeed bypass the academics when they made an interesting find. However, it could not be denied that the technology itself was useful in turning up metal finds buried perhaps for centuries or even millennia in the ground – and it was doing this with relentless success.

Thankfully for both sides, a sea change which had begun in the early 1970s now began to gain momentum – and it centred largely on the very region of the country that was once Boudica's homeland. Realising that both sides were losing out in the archaeological stand-off, the Norfolk Museums Service began to forge closer relationships between the amateurs and the professionals, with museum staff sharing their knowledge in exchange for detectorists showing their discoveries. Within months, the scheme was paying dividends with all manner of amateur finds – from coins and brooches to pieces of horse gear – being brought to the attention of curators. As well as adding to the general basket of knowledge about Norfolk through the ages, the significance of this move was that for the first time in thousands of years, the rank and file of Iron Age Britain were given the chance to have their own voices heard, through the material remains of their daily lives. Until this point, the history of Iron Age and early Roman Britain was known largely through the classical texts and archaeological discoveries such as stone buildings and rich funerary sites, which inevitably focus on the stories of the wealthy and those of high status. Now, through schemes like the Norfolk one, which was expanded to a national network of so-called Finds Liaison Officers under the Government's Portable Antiquities Scheme, ordinary British people are going out and (on the whole) responsibly digging up the stories of ordinary people's lives – and then working with the museum service to put that knowledge into the public domain.

This democratic making of history through finds of everyday lost items and deliberately buried hoards has hugely advanced our understanding of the time when

Boudica rose up, gathered her vast army of warriors, farmers, smithies, labourers – and other women – and turned on the foreign invaders. By sharing that knowledge, the amateurs have forged a connection with professionals who can then synthesise and collate all of the pieces of information to help recreate the jigsaw of knowledge about everyday life around the time of the Roman invasions. Just as importantly, however, this new relationship has also built up a strong connection between local people and their local history, giving people a real sense of ownership over the past that, in turn, fosters a desire to learn even more. Suddenly, history has become deeply personal – and the irony is that by making it personal and focussing on real, ordinary people, it’s sometimes easier to see the bigger picture of what was happening two thousand years ago.

When it comes to the story of Boudica, that bigger picture is an intricate tapestry of imperial designs, firstly by the Roman Empire and then by the British. These are explored in the first few chapters of this book. It took little more than a century for the people in what would become Rome to move from living in small wattle and daub huts to living in proto-urban settlements with streets flanked by brick and stone houses. This rapid transformation would continue apace: just over four centuries later, Rome was perhaps the most lavish city on earth with an empire that was without rival across the western world. This immense achievement was not down to luck but good resources, confidence and design. From their earliest days, Romans tended to be cosmopolitan and outward-looking, always hungry for the best of whatever was on offer elsewhere. For ambitious politicians in need of military success, geographical barriers were merely barriers in the mind, to be overcome in the relentless pursuit of glory, wealth and the slaves that were needed to keep the empire functioning. The limits of Romanisation would be rolled forever outwards until the power at the centre began to fail and the whole system became too unwieldy. But until that time, Rome needed evermore lands to plunder in the same way a growing foetus will continue to feed from its mother even when she is starving.

Caesar’s conquest of Gaul laid the basis for his raids on Britain, and these were followed almost a hundred years later by the invasion of the Emperor Claudius in AD 43 that led, in turn, to the Romanisation of almost the entire country. And what couldn’t be achieved militarily was achieved by economic, political and cultural contacts, and by the sheer weight of time. But this rolling-out of Empire wasn’t achieved in a monochrome, even fashion: progress was patchy with some serious clashes in style, but it is precisely when there is a check to the grand design that it becomes most interesting to pause and take a closer look: these are the moments when there is most to learn about both sides, when strengths and weaknesses are forced into the limelight. These are the moments when the entire pattern of history can change.

It is into this context of two cultures clashing that the long, colourful threads of Boudica and her fight against the Romans are carefully woven. But before we can understand the importance of this British tribal queen in her own lifetime and beyond, we need to follow the threads of her story back to the very origins of Rome as a city – and as an idea – for it is only by understanding the Roman mind that the story of Boudica makes real and meaningful sense. These threads stretch back to over a thousand years before Boudica was even born. The stories of how Rome came to be are known as “foundation myths” and it is these that encapsulate the dreams,