

Queen Boudica in London

In AD43 the Roman army invaded Britain. At that time, Britain was divided into tribal territories. The Romans formed alliances with tribes in the south-east, like the Iceni and the Trinovantes, to create a new and peaceful province called Britannia.

In AD59, the King of the Iceni died. He hoped his wife, Boudica, would succeed him. However, the Roman Emperor had other ideas. His harsh treatment of the royal family led the Iceni to rebel. They attacked Colchester, London and St Albans. These towns were largely undefended as the Roman army was away fighting Druids in Wales.

The Roman historian Tacitus estimated that 70,000 people were killed in the rebellion. This may have been an exaggeration as estimates suggest that 10,000 people were living in London at the time, with perhaps similar numbers in the other two towns.

Although there are many stories about how Boudica died, the truth has yet to be discovered.

What sparked the Boudican Revolt?

In AD59, Prasutagus, King of the Iceni of East Anglia, died. He left his kingdom to be ruled jointly by his wife Boudica with Nero, the Roman Emperor. He'd hoped this would keep his kingdom intact. Instead, Nero seized the kingdom. Boudica was treated like a common criminal and publicly flogged. Her daughters were raped.

The furious Iceni, led by Boudica, were joined by a tribe from Essex called the Trinovantes. They also bore a grudge against the Romans. Their land and property had been taken by army **veterans** (ex-soldiers) who had set up home in **Camulodunum** (Colchester), their tribal centre.



Tombstone of a Roman soldier, 1st century

The ninth legion was sent to put down the revolt. However, it was ambushed on its way to Colchester with only the cavalry managing to escape. The Romans regarded this as their worst ever defeat in Britain. Both sides were now set on avenging past humiliations.

The Roman historian, Tacitus, first spelled Boudica incorrectly as *Boudicca*. Later writers made his mistake worse by calling her *Boadicea*.

Why did Boudica attack London?

Two hundred elderly and ill-equipped soldiers were sent from **Londinium** (London) to help defend Colchester. They were defeated after a two-day siege. The rebels then turned their sights on London.

London represented everything the rebels loathed about Roman rule with the population living a Mediterranean lifestyle. But, instead of going straight there after their victory in Colchester, the British tribes spent the summer of AD60 celebrating and looting.

This enabled the Governor, Suetonius Paulinus, to reach London from Wales with a small cavalry force. He then evacuated as many people as he could to **Verulamium** (St Albans). More important Londoners escaped by boat.

Some abandoned their shops, others buried their possessions for safety, intending to return and retrieve them. A Roman jeweller hid these **intaglios** (engraved stones for finger-rings) in a pot buried in his workshop.

So, by the time Boudica's forces arrived, London was both deserted and undefended.



Intaglios, AD60

Did Boudica destroy London?



Burnt pottery, AD60

The tribal army spent several days in London burning the town, and torturing and killing anyone who had stayed behind. The houses, shops and workshops were built of wood and **wattle and daub** (woven twigs covered in clay), so burnt easily.

Archaeologists have found layers of burnt buildings and objects. This is evidence of the AD60 Boudican fire of London. These fragments of burnt Roman pottery were found by archaeologists in the remains of an abandoned shop. As it burnt down, the wooden shelves collapsed causing the pottery to fall onto the floor and smash into pieces.

Recent excavations on the outskirts of Roman London have also uncovered the remains of some British-style roundhouses that had been untouched by fire. Perhaps they had been saved on purpose.

Boudica's feats and fate captured the Victorians' popular imagination. They compared her with another great British queen, Queen Victoria.

How did Boudica die?

Having destroyed London, the rebels next target was St Albans. On the way, they met the Roman army returning from Wales. The rebels were doomed. They were no match for this disciplined army.

They could not attack in force as the battlefield was confined on both sides by a wood and a narrow pass. They couldn't escape as they were trapped by their wagons, which they had parked behind them so their families could watch.

According to Tacitus, 70,000 Britons were slain with the loss of just 400 Roman soldiers. He said Boudica poisoned herself, whereas the Greek writer Dio Cassius wrote that she fell ill and died. No one knows the truth.

Even though the revolt was crushed, the Romans took revenge for the loss of the ninth legion by repeatedly destroying tribal crops. In AD61, Emperor Nero appointed Classicianus as **procurator** (chief financial minister) of Britannia to restore peace and financial prosperity.



Classicianus' 1st century mausoleum (tomb)



Nobody knows where Boudica is buried. One myth even suggests she is buried underneath a platform at King's Cross station.

What did Boudica look like?

Two classical authors wrote about Boudica. Tacitus, a Roman senator and historian, wrote about these events 50 years afterwards. The Greek writer, Dio Cassius, wrote about them 150 years later using Tacitus as his source.

Both wrote stories that appealed to their readers in Rome. They emphasised the barbarity of having a female leader. Dio Cassius described Boudica as 'very tall in stature, most terrifying in appearance, most fierce in the glance of her eye, with a harsh voice and a great mass of red hair that fell to her hips'. There is no way of telling whether this was true.



Boudica's statue on Westminster Bridge shows her as a warrior queen, but incorrectly shows a chariot with scythed wheels.

See also

Collections Online is an online database which allows users to find out more about the Museum of London's objects, both on display and in store. Go to

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections

Museum of London's online resource: *Living in Roman London*, contains more material on Boudica

<http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/londinium>

Further reading

Sealey P, *The Boudican Revolt Against Rome* (Shire, 1997)

Further resources for teachers/tutors

Explore the images for this topic in the Picturebank:

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank.

Visit the Museum

The Roman London gallery at the Museum of London will help you find out more about life in Roman London.