

BOOK REVIEW

Boudica: Warrior Woman of Roman Britain. By CAITLIN C. GILLESPIE. *Women in Antiquity.* Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xv + 193. Hardback, \$74.00. ISBN: 9780190609078.

Caitlin Gillespie's fascinating book reveals why the study of Boudica, a British noblewoman of the Iceni who perished in 61 CE leading a rebellion against Roman occupation, is at once so difficult and so critical. Among many challenges are the frustrating absence of any contemporary British writing and ancient authors' disagreements over the significance of Boudica in particular and history in general. While Boudica (S) for Tacitus symbolized the bravery of a victimized mother waging a just war against a cruel empire, Dio's account highlighted Boudica's retaliatory atrocities. Modern scholarship reflects ancient idiosyncrasies, and Gillespie examines trends and methodologies helping or hindering our knowledge of ancient Britain.

Chapter 1 examines the history of the Romans' presence in Britain. Occupied partially by Caesar, it remained "untamed" until Claudius made it a province. Roman writings display deep ignorance about these newest conquered enemies. Many Romans could not distinguish Britons from Gauls, and many considered the British desire for Roman luxuries, paradoxically, part and parcel of their inborn, barbaric inferiority. We do not know what titles the Iceni gave Boudica and her husband (the Roman client king Prasutagus), but what matters, argues Gillespie, is that "her people followed her command" (30). Whatever the cause of the revolt— money, violence against family and religion, Roman greed— modern scholars estimate a staggering death toll: 35,000 Romans and allies perished at Camulodunum (Colchester), Londinium (London) and Verulamium (St Albans), and in the final Roman victory (battle site unknown), 100,000 Britons and 11,000-13,000 Romans fell. Afterwards, Boudica died from poison or illness, perhaps mercifully, for Gillespie explains that, had Boudica lived, she would have witnessed the towns she razed quickly rebuilt, bigger and better than before (33).

Gillespie in Chapter 2 sifts carefully through literary and archeological records to create a fuller picture of a British noblewoman in Iron Age East Anglia.

Noting that Dio's term "queen" would have raised ancient hackles, Gillespie juxtaposes the morally upright commander Boudica with (36-40) disastrous queens foreign and local. Under an irreparably damaged system of Roman clientage, Boudica's unenviable task was to bring together a people who, material evidence suggests, lived in wildly differing conditions. Boudica and her people probably inhabited simple roundhouses and lacked the coinage, advanced pottery techniques and urbanization found elsewhere in Britain, while other client monarchs in East Anglia luxuriated in Roman palaces.

In Chapter 3, Gillespie explores Boudica's unique position among rebelling British chieftains. Using Boudica as a foil for the spoiled ladies of the Julio-Claudian court, Tacitus bears witness to almost unthinkable attacks on the most noble Britons by the lowest Romans: Boudica's beating and her daughters' rapes. Tacitus' Boudica turns her private misery into a rallying cry for all Britons, and the archeological record, revealing the furious violence with which her compatriots destroyed Roman sites, seems to mirror her wrath. Showing that motherhood occupied an almost sacred position among the Iceni, Gillespie argues that Tacitus styles Boudica as an imperial-age Lucretia or Verginia as she displays her (and daughters') bodies in a campaign against a dissipated autocrat (64-65).

Dio's Boudica (Chapter 4) is a bold warrior whose manly courage ridicules the weakness of an effeminate Nero. His literary portrait of the tall, golden-haired, gold-adorned Boudica draped in a military cloak mocks the loathsome personification in stone of captive "Britannia," a relief in Aphrodisias depicting a prone, half-naked woman threatened by a hypermasculinized Claudius (75). Dio's queen is a fierce Amazon whose body is no longer an object of pity; in her eloquence she rivals the empress Livia. She is also a priestess in her own right, skilled at divination and one possessed of an excellent head for history, as she rails against both Eastern and Roman queens of yore who wallowed in luxury, neglecting their people. Gillespie adds that grave goods suggest that female warriors may have been more common in Britain than previously supposed (89).

Chapter 5 establishes Boudica's place among the *duces feminae* of Roman literature beginning with Dido. While Tacitus throughout the *Annals* uses *dux femina* to describe women drunk with their own power, when he labels Boudica so, he expects his audience to perceive the Dido-like heroism of a commander (95-96) willing to give her life for her principles. Moreover, Tacitus submits that British women, not equipped with sword and shield but hair-raising screams, engage in battle by inciting their countrymen at Mona and Camulodunum.

In Chapter 6, Gillespie illustrates the emphasis on religion in accounts of the revolt and the tragic results of religious hatred on both sides. Boudica herself receives a very public omen from her patron, the war-goddess Andraste; thus Gillespie compares Boudica with prominent female seers well known to Romans (105-108). Unprovoked Roman destruction of a site of suspected Druidic human sacrifice at a cult center at Mona was answered, not surprisingly, with more human sacrifice: Dio claims Britons tortured, mutilated and impaled captive women as a sacrifice to Andraste at Londinium. Gillespie demonstrates that Roman outcries against torture and human sacrifice to savage gods real or imagined was hypocrisy of the highest order, since the pages of history prove Romans not infrequently guilty of similar cruelties (111).

In Chapter 7, Gillespie concludes that Boudica, when held up to other indigenous peoples who tried to stay the Roman war machine, stands out for her exemplary motherhood and *virtus* (117). Gillespie leaves us in no doubt of the impression Boudica left on Romans, arguing that Tacitus' designation of the Boudican revolt as a *clades* recalls the infamous Varian disaster (121-126). She was commemorated even in antiquity not for failure, but for inspiration. Tacitus records that in the reign of Domitian, the British chieftain Calgacus invoked Boudica when exhorting his own troops, but in vain.

Having explored under the guidance of this accomplished and promising scholar the lasting significance for Romans of Boudica's life and death, we learn in the Epilogue that Boudica was, centuries later, viewed as the embodiment of "queen, rebel, mother and warrior woman" (133). The ancients would perhaps find much to approve in the public commemorations of Boudica gazing over modern Britain. As Dio might have imagined, a glorious Boudica in bronze rides atop her chariot, eternally triumphing over Londinium. In a marble group in Cardiff, she appears as a Tacitean Mother of Sorrows, her arms encircling her daughters. Gillespie observes that some Britons have recently called forth Boudica howling from her grave to symbolize British nationalism in debating Britain's newest revolt from the European Union, "Brexit" (130).

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