



Review Article

Images of Boudicca

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Boudica: Iron Age Warrior Queen. By R. Hingley and C. Unwin. Hambledon and London, London, 2005. Pp. xviii + 293, illus 8. Price: £19.95. ISBN 1 85285 438 3.

Boudicca: the Warrior Queen. By M.J. Trow and T. Trow. Sutton, Stroud, 2003. Pp. v + 250, illus. Price: £20.00. ISBN 0 7509 3386 0.

Queen Boudicca's Battle of Britain. By R. Hunt. Spellmount, Staplehurst, Kent, 2003. Pp. xi + 140, illus. Price: £18.99. ISBN 1 86227 194 1.

Boudicca has been an almost constant object of interest and imagination and much has been written of her over the last two thousand years. According to Dio she released a hare from the folds of her dress which ran in a lucky direction; Boudicca has set many hares running over the years. Here are three more books about her and her revolt. Although all written for the general reader, the three are very different. *Boudica: Iron Age Warrior Queen* stands out as by far the most scholarly. The book is the result of an interesting collaboration between Richard Hingley and Christina Unwin. The first part, by Hingley, analyses the available archaeological and documentary evidence. The second part, by Unwin, examines the way in which Boudicca has been represented and what she has symbolised in more recent history. Trow, in *Boudicca: the Warrior Queen*, presents a thorough, detailed, and relatively conventional account of the revolt, in its social and historical context, with a concluding chapter on later interpretations of Boudicca. Hunt, in *Queen Boudicca's Battle of Britain*, goes much further than the others in speculating about and proposing alternatives to the conventional view of the sequence of events during the revolt, on which he focuses.

Hingley's opening chapter summarises the current state of understanding of the Late Iron Age and Conquest period in South-East England and East Anglia. He then moves on to consider the accounts of Tacitus and Dio, their motivations for writing them, and their value to archaeologists. The third chapter details the available archaeological evidence for the revolt. Hingley is exemplary in setting out the archaeological evidence in as unbiased a fashion as possible, analysing the various ways in which it could be interpreted, together with its reliability and limitations. Inevitably this approach has led to a constant repetition of phrases such as 'the evidence may indicate', 'it has been suggested that ...' and 'it is possible that ... but equally likely that ...', thus underlining the limitations of the evidence and the difficulties of linking events recorded and interpreted by Tacitus and Dio with interpretations based on archaeological data. He illustrates this with explanations of ways in which evidence may have been misinterpreted in the past. This section of the book is up-to-date, fully referenced, and accompanied by useful plans and maps. The result is an admirable, concise account of the archaeological evidence, an assessment of its value, and a general survey of what is known about the Late Iron Age culture and economy in the area involved.

Hingley points out (69) that 'since the 1980s archaeologists have effectively undermined much of the evidence that has previously been associated with Boudicca's rebellion'. The reader might therefore ask whether there is really any evidence for the Boudiccan revolt apart from the accounts of Tacitus and Dio. Indeed this is a question that Hingley himself poses. The archaeological evidence rests heavily on the interpretation and dating of destruction deposits in the three towns: Hingley concludes that firm evidence remains for Boudiccan destruction at Colchester and London, but less so at Verulamium. Evidence from rural sites such as Gorhambury, Park Street, and Kelvedon, or from settlements such

as Braintree, Baldock, Chelmsford, Heybridge, and Braughing is difficult to recognise or date with sufficient precision. However, the appearance of forts at Great Chesterford, Grandford, Woodcock Hall (Saham Toney),¹ and Gosbecks (although the latter may in fact have dated from the Conquest period), together with the fortification recently uncovered in London, might in itself be taken as evidence for unrest in this area in the Neronian period.

A question addressed in all three books is how much support Boudicca had from other tribes. Hunt, in particular, suggests that disaffection was widespread. The impression of Boudicca as a British national leader (implied to some extent in Hunt's title) is reinforced by the set speeches given to her by Dio. In fact, as all three books acknowledge, there was no such thing as a British national identity and we must constantly guard against seeing the position simply in terms of Romans versus Britons. Having said this, the particular circumstances at the time of the revolt, with the imposition of taxes and attempts to strengthen direct Roman control, must have left pro-Roman factions isolated.

Both Hunt and Trow suggest that the Druids were actively involved in planning and executing the revolt. The Druids are usefully described in all three books, but it is left to Hingley to point out that neither Tacitus nor Dio mentions them as playing any direct part in the Boudiccan revolt. Both authors might have been expected to have made something of it if the Druids had been believed to have been significantly involved. It seems equally likely that the absence of Paulinus in Mona provided greater opportunity for Boudicca rather than being the result of a deliberate plan to draw him away.

In considering the extent of the revolt, it is useful to assess how the various tribal and clan groups, whose élite were manifested by showy equipment and imported luxuries, reacted to imperial administration and gradually became incorporated into the largely urban tradition of the Roman Empire. Under Claudius the policy seems to have been to support more or less friendly factions in East Anglia and the South-East while areas further west and north were secured. Existing centres were maintained (at Verulamium) and perhaps protected (at Gosbecks). At Folly Lane and Stanway leading families continued to be buried with showy goods and with traditional ceremonies. By the late 50s, as initially friendly chieftains aged and died, the time came to regularise the situation with the full integration of friendly territory into the new province. According to Tacitus, much of the resentment prior to the revolt appears to have been due to the loss of land and hence wealth suffered by the leading Icenian and Trinovantian families. However, at Colchester excavations to the south-east of the *colonia*² have revealed tracks and field-systems, but no clear indication of centuriation. West of the *colonia* there are hints of it in the form of the road pattern, but centuriation clearly did not affect the entire area around the *colonia*.

Another factor in assessing the extent of the revolt is the evidence for the reprisals mentioned by Tacitus. It is frequently suggested — as Hunt in particular states — that the Icenian area was impoverished for generations after the revolt, as a result of severe reprisals. There is no clear indication from archaeological evidence of the establishment of an imperial estate in Icenian territory, or of poverty of ordinary Trinovantian and Icenian rural areas following the catastrophe, nor in the territory of any others which could be among the unidentified 'other tribes' that Tacitus tells us joined in the revolt.

In any case the evidence is varied and no one piece can be taken as indicative of the fate of the larger area. The cessation of the Stanway graves, arguably those of a pro-Roman aristocratic faction in the Conquest period, could be seen as the result of reprisals against a leading Trinovantian family, but in the Icenian area this is balanced by Hutcheson's recent study suggesting continuing production of high-status horse-gear in north-west Norfolk throughout the later first century.³ On the other hand, Mackreth has argued that the Colchester-derived 'rearhook' brooches were a 'badge of the Iceni' and suggests that their disappearance after the mid-first century may be an indication of reprisal against the Iceni following the Boudiccan revolt and that the 'survivors of the tribe presented new market opportunities' allowing new brooch varieties to appear in the region.⁴ In Cambridgeshire, Gibson and Lucas have argued for changes in the pattern of the production and distribution of pottery in the later first century, with new production centres replacing earlier localised pottery manufacture at seasonal fairs and markets.⁵ Whether this was the result of

¹ Bates 2000, 203.

² Crummy 2004.

³ Hutcheson 2005.

⁴ Bayley *et al.* 2001, 112.

⁵ Gibson and Lucas 2002, 117.

widespread disruption of the existing social structure, and whether it applied to Norfolk and Suffolk as well as Cambridgeshire is not clear, but studies such as these could cumulatively throw new light on the impact of the revolt on the rural population as a whole, rather than simply on the élite sections of it. The problems are clearly complex and the only way they are likely to be elucidated is through detailed studies of a wide range of categories of evidence, and so beyond the scope of any of the books reviewed here.

Just over half of *Boudicca: Iron Age Warrior Queen* consists of a study by Christina Unwin of the development of the perception of Boudicca from Tacitus to the present day. It is a detailed and fascinating account, showing how differing attitudes to women, political and religious preoccupations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the growth of the British Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the post-imperial situation of the late twentieth century all determined the way in which Boudicca and her role were interpreted. The author cites numerous sources, many of which will be unfamiliar to archaeologists, and with the extensive bibliography that is included this is particularly valuable. She demonstrates how, from the earliest times, Boudicca was seen as a symbol, though what she was a symbol of changed dramatically through time. It provides a valuable demonstration of how the interpretation of an 'historical event' reflects the biases and prejudices of the time. (Trow also has a final chapter usefully covering similar ground in less depth.)

Hingley and Unwin take the view that there is much that we do not know, and quite probably will never know, about either the circumstances that led up to the revolt, or the course of it. In reality, the only 'facts' are the different ways in which they have been interpreted and symbolised over the centuries.

The authors of the other books start from a very different base. While accepting that there are many gaps in our knowledge about the events of the revolt, they both attempt to fill in these gaps with interpretations and speculations. Before embarking on either book, readers would be well advised to take Hingley's warning (38): 'There is a strong desire to find evidence that will fit in with the stories told by the classical writers, with the result that archaeological information has been effectively misinterpreted'.

Hunt and Trow both take Tacitus and Dio as starting points. Both are readable and entertaining accounts, and quote many extracts from these sources. Hunt usefully provides translations of the sources in an appendix. Both warn about the likely bias of Tacitus in particular and rightly stress how classical authors produced works that were designed for rhetorical effect, to be read aloud at social gatherings, rather than being seen as factual records of events. Nevertheless, neither Trow nor Hunt really addresses the question of what Tacitus was actually talking about. Was he telling a moral tale, illustrating current ideas about contemporary decadence? How far was his account coloured by his views of Domitian, following his *damnatio memoriae*, and his general dislike of the equestrian class (hence his unsympathetic account of the role of the procurator)? How important was it to him to bolster the reputation of Agricola? At the same time Hunt's and, to a lesser extent, Trow's accounts are coloured by their own preconceptions. Hunt's interpretation of Tacitus' account is particularly slanted to his own views on modern bureaucracy, and the 'military mind'.

Boudicca: the Warrior Queen gets off to an unpromising start with an emotional fictional evocation of Boudicca's feelings as she faces the final battle. Trow then changes mood and proceeds with a substantial and generally useful account of the historical and social background to the revolt and of the events of the revolt itself. Trow attempts to incorporate the results of recent archaeological discoveries, but the book is marred by inaccuracies in some of these references. For instance, the account of the early years of Verulamium is confused, although the addition of plans might have helped. There is no substantial evidence for the fort which Trow places at Verulamium, while at Colchester it is wrongly stated that the legionary fortress and Temple of Claudius were placed at Sheepen, which is confused with the *colonia* site. Elms Farm, near Maldon, in Essex, was, by any reckoning, far from the borders of the Icenian territory.

Hunt's approach is by far the least conventional of the three and he is certainly not afraid of radical new interpretations. The suggestion that Peddars Way previously ran across the Wash, but was cut by a tsunami following an earthquake affecting large areas of East Anglia in the fourth century A.D., is particularly striking. Some may think it is a pity that in backing this up more reliance is placed on Stukeley and 'an old book on ancient Fenlands' than on more recent work on the Fenlands.⁶ Hunt admits that much of his book is speculation, and goes on to justify this (88): 'This is all speculation. Should we be indulging in such flights of fancy? Well, we are trying to fill in a huge gap left by our sources,

⁶ For instance, Gurney 1986, 137.

and there is nothing wrong with reasoned speculation, provided one doesn't then draw firm conclusions from it'.

This is fair enough, but Hunt goes on to build speculation on speculation so that it can become difficult to distinguish between speculation and evidence-based conclusions. For example, much of his analysis of the timing and sequence of events is coloured by his assumption that Peddars Way provided a direct passage from Lincoln to Norfolk at this time. Hunt argues that at the beginning of the revolt Cerialis, with the Ninth Legion at Lincoln, headed for Norfolk but was met and defeated by Boudicca who chased his cavalry back to Lincoln. Meanwhile, he argues, it was not Boudicca, but the Trinovantes, who rose up and sacked *Camulodunum*.

One of Hunt's more interesting speculations concerns the site of the final battle between Boudicca and Suetonius. He argues that Suetonius brought his whole force back from Mona towards London, pursued by Boudicca's forces moving across from Lincoln. Verulamium was thus sacked before London, from which Suetonius made a strategic withdrawal to the south, backed by friendly forces from Cogidubnus. Hunt thus places the final battle south of the Thames in the region of Box Hill. All this is not impossible. However, it rests on at least two doubtful assumptions: that Boudicca went north-west to fight Cerialis rather than south to attack *Camulodunum*, and that Suetonius brought his whole army with him to London at once rather than making a cavalry reconnaissance. Even if these assumptions were accepted, there would seem little reason for Suetonius not to have confronted Boudicca at an earlier stage in the Midlands, rather than retreating with his full force and allowing the sack of Verulamium and London. From Boudicca's point of view, to isolate the Roman army from possible reinforcement or supplies from Gaul, it would also have been more sensible to try to intercept him somewhere further north and west, perhaps in the south Chilterns, thus cutting him off from both the Kent coast and any bases, such as *Claesentum* or the recently discovered early harbour at Bosham, on the Sussex coast.⁷

From the start of his book, Trow plumps on *Mansuedunum* for the site of the final battle, while Hingley wisely does not opt for any particular site (although mentioning *Mansuedunum* as a possibility) and reminds us of Fulford's suggestion that it may have taken place nearer to Verulamium. At the risk of starting another Boudiccan hare, we should also bear in mind the discovery of numerous lead sling shots at Windridge, a short distance south of Verulamium.⁸ The site lies between Watling Street and Akeman Street, the latter leading to the Conquest-period fort at Alchester. The sling shots were found by metal detecting and during subsequent fieldwalking so their context is uncertain, but presumably they are an indication of at least a skirmish taking place here some time in the first century A.D., if not a battle.

In summary, Trow and Hunt provide entertaining and vivid accounts, although their warnings about the biases of classical writings have not always prevented the authors' own preconceptions from dominating their accounts, particularly in the case of Hunt. By contrast Hingley and Unwin provide a useful and authoritative summary of the data as it is today, combined with a fascinating and salutary analysis of the developing interpretations and perception of Boudicca and the revolt. With a fine bibliography, *Boudica: Iron Age Warrior Queen* will be a valuable addition to the study of the subject for serious student and general reader alike.

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⁷ *Britannia* 32 (2001), 374.

⁸ Greep 1987.