

QUEEN BOUDICCA OF THE ICENI

by Kerri Ryan MA

Queen Boudicca was the ruler of the Celtic tribe known as the Iceni during the first century CE living in the area now known as Norfolk, England. After the death of her husband the King, she formed an uprising against the despised Romans with other Celtic tribes in 61CE. The resulting bloody war that was fought, is remembered throughout history as one of the most significant insurrections against the mighty Roman forces, even though Boudicca lost.

Historians write that Boudicca (whose name meant Victor) was "huge of frame, terrifying of aspect, with a harsh voice. A great mass of bright red hair fell to her knees and she wore a great twisted golden necklace and a tunic of many colours over which was a thick mantle, fastened by a brooch". She carried a long spear to cause dread in all who set eyes upon her.

As the Romans built up a strong military influence over the native tribes of England, their colonization introduced taxes, financial hardship and squeezed the economy into production of food and weapons to feed the Roman military. The Romans were also bent on the eradication of the Pagan Druidic religion as its priests retained a great control over the native Celts.

After the death of her husband and the ruination of the agreements in place to retain some control of their people, Boudicca, who had no male heirs, was arrested and her two daughters raped. All her wealthy estates were liquidated and the royal lineage sold into slavery.

In 61CE insurrection was in the air. Used to small uprisings, the Romans paid no heed but this time Boudicca met with several other tribes to raise an army that would initially launch its campaign on what is today known as Colchester due to the fact there were few fortifications there. This campaign was successful and took the Romans by surprise. The Britons in battle painted themselves blue to frighten the enemy and the women would appear in black robes carrying torches as did the Druid priests who shouted curses meant to frighten the Romans.

Over the next three weeks Boudicca's army estimated to be at around 100,000 launched two other successful attacks, the next being London, where the Romans were slaughtered mercilessly. Horrific atrocities were inflicted on its women and the heads of Romans were offered up by Druid priests in ceremonies honouring the Celtic goddess of Victory, Andraste. It is said the Roman women were rounded up, taken to a grove that was dedicated to Andraste and had one of their breasts cut off and stuffed into their mouths. They were then impaled with large skewers. This was in some ways a cruel parody of the rape of Boudicca's own daughters and was in response to the savage slaughter of Druids earlier on. A few days later it was in St Albans where they were also successful.

By now, Boudicca had devastated three main Roman cities and the number of dead Romans and collaborating Britons was numbered at 70,000. Boudicca's unruly army was difficult to control against the elite Roman forces whose tactical precision saw a huge final battle mark the end of Boudicca's uprising. Outmanoeuvred and tactically vulnerable, Boudicca's army was soundly defeated amid massive death and bloodshed. She fled back to Norfolk and fearing a terrible death at Roman hands, ingested a deadly poison. She was allegedly buried

with all the treasures of the last ruler of the Iceni royal line in a grave that remains even today a well-kept secret.

