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The Evolving Perception of Queen Boudicca

Marguerite Johnson’s *Boudicca* investigates the portrayal of Queen Boudicca in literature and art from antiquity to the present day. She places less emphasis on the historical figure and more emphasis on the various manifestations of Boudicca throughout the centuries. Of particular interest to Johnson is the portrayal of Boudicca in antiquity. A severe lack of source material hampers any definitive historical understanding of Boudicca. No contemporary or native accounts survive. One must view Boudicca through the outsider’s lens.

Johnson’s book is a part of the Ancients in Action series, which aims to introduce figures of the ancient world to general readers. The short work spans four chapters with a brief introduction and conclusion, totaling 140 pages. For the general reader, Johnson includes a helpful list of important places and people with brief descriptions in the front of the book. She offers only a basic map of Roman Britain with the location of various tribes.

Johnson’s study centers on the examination of Tacitus’ and Cassius Dio’s accounts of the 60/61 CE Boudicca uprising. In investigating the character of Boudicca, she wants to reverse the traditional methodological order where these accounts are merely supplements to broader historical accounts of the uprising. In essence, much of the book “functions as exercises in text analysis” (p. 15). Johnson is more concerned with the motivation and purpose behind the accounts than recreating a set of events. She emphasizes that Boudicca was a literary entity, a figure in Roman and Greek imagination.

In her first chapter Johnson provides limited background information on Boudicca, the Iceni, and the rebellion. She quickly covers Roman interaction with the Britons from the brief expedition of Caesar to the rebellion in 60/61 CE. She then introduces the concept of Boudicca as a symbol of freedom, resistance, and femininity masked in legend. Boudicca’s appearance and personality are idealized and exaggerated. The idealization and manipulation of Boudicca’s image is similar to that of Spartacus.[1]

Chapter 2 introduces the sources that Tacitus used and his background as a Roman statesman. Johnson argues that in the Annals the Roman encounter with the Britons on the island of Mona acts as a precursor to the role of Boudicca in the rebellion. Tacitus’ account of Boudicca’s speech emphasizes the theme of freedom versus slavery. Boudicca argues that the Romans had wronged the Iceni and had earned their hatred. Tacitus’ account is highly rhetorical and follows long-standing historiographical traditions. In his account Boudicca is less of a central figure than in Dio’s account, and he situates her within the larger tactical framework of the rebellion. Tacitus also describes the brutal sack of three towns by the Britons, but unlike Dio he does not connect Boudicca with the atrocities. Further, unlike in Dio, his speeches are in the third person. Boudicca’s speech hinges on thoughts of freedom and vengeance. Through her speech Tacitus is critical of Roman cruelty, oppression, and amoral behavior. In the speech of the Roman general Paulinus, Tacitus stresses the disarray of the en-
enemy army and highlights common Roman stereotypes of barbaric peoples. Meanwhile in his account of the final battle, the Roman army is a picture of military perfection through efficiency, order, and determination. Tacitus' account, although sympathetic to the Britons, ultimately is biased and celebratory. Johnson then contrasts Tacitus' negative assessments of Queen Cartimandua, Messalina, and Agrippina with his portrayal of Boudicca. Tacitus' Boudicca is more like the heroic, barbarian figures of Caratacus and Venutius. Although the stigma of her being a woman remains in his account, he considered Boudicca a separate and superior woman.

The next chapter introduces the sources that Dio used and his background as a statesman. His account of Boudicca is more dynamic, hyperbolic, and rhetorical than Tacitus' account. Dio was more interested in Boudicca as a character. She dominates his account of the rebellion and is the main figure behind the uprising. His depiction of Boudicca also is stereotyped, idealized, and masculine. He portrays her as a noble savage and leader of an uncivilized people. Dio's created speech for Boudicca emphasizes the familiar theme of freedom versus slavery but also mentions financial exploitation. Johnson argues that Dio creates an awareness of national identity among the Britons in his rhetoric that does not reflect the realities of tribal Roman Britain. Dio's account demonstrates a preoccupation with gender roles and reversals. He shared the misogynistic prejudices of his contemporaries and the strong character of Boudicca grabbed his attention. Dio's account is less balanced than that of Tacitus. He stressing the horrendous atrocities of the Britons and ignores the Roman mistreatment of Boudicca and her daughters. His account of the war is more vague and confused than Tacitus' account. Yet he too attributes ultimate victory to Roman discipline. Unlike Tacitus' Boudicca, who dies of poison after her defeat, Dio's Boudicca dies of a mysterious illness. Without her leadership the rebellion quickly dissipates. Dio's portrayal of Paulinus also goes much further than that of Tacitus. Dio's Paulinus is the ideal Roman general. In his speech Paulinus talks of Roman valor and heroism. He states that Roman vengeance is justified and that success in battle comes through honor, excellence, and manly spirit. Johnson argues that Dio used these speeches to create "a clear case of deliberate narrative symmetry that links the two leaders" (p. 108). Dio's objective was to contrast the alterity and barbarity of the Britons with the resolve and superiority of the Romans.

Johnson's final chapter discusses the image of Boudicca since antiquity. By late antiquity Boudicca had nearly faded from written history. Medieval writers mostly ignored her, and she was not reintroduced into the annals of history until the Renaissance. These writers distanced Boudicca from her bellicosity and portrayed her as an ideal matron. Elizabethan writers compared her with Queen Elizabeth. They depicted Boudicca "as a positive icon of national identity" (p. 114). Johnson argues that by the eighteenth century tension over Boudicca's gender began to soften. She increasingly became associated with British imperialism. To the Victorians she was "the legendary and larger-than-life warrior queen of England" (p. 117). To them she was a symbol of national pride, confidence, and identity. In more recent artwork, Boudicca has been increasingly sexualized. Meanwhile, women have adopted her image for political ends. Boudicca became a symbol of women's freedom and oppression in the early twentieth century. In recent years she has become an image of female strength and defiance in the battle against breast cancer. Johnson concludes that Tacitus' and Dio's versions of Boudicca are ephemeral creations. She finds an appreciation of the icon of Boudicca more important than assessing the accuracy of the surviving evidence. Johnson maintains that Boudicca remains "an elusive, ultimately imaginary icon" (p. 140).

Johnson's book is more focused on Tacitus and Cassius Dio than Boudicca. Those looking for a traditional biography will be disappointed. Her intended target audience is a mixture of developing students of ancient history and interested general readers. The significance of her work is the textual analysis of Tacitus' and Dio's accounts. She admits that the second parts of these chapters are more technically intensive and aimed at a more specialized audience. Her analysis of how these authors used the image of Boudicca to reflect Roman morals and concerns is insightful and worth consideration. She also makes some solid points about the importance of revenge in Roman thought and policy.

There are some issues with the book that must be mentioned. The use of endnotes and the select bibliography are unfortunate. On page 15 she calls Tacitus, "Tacitus." Her continual use of Dio Cassius over the more accepted Cassius Dio is jarring. Although it was not her main focus, a more detailed account of the Boudicca rebellion might prove useful to the general reader she hopes to attract. Also her brief conclusion lacks a summary of her major arguments. Her analysis of Tacitus and Dio does not always give the reader a clear sense of which account should be favored and where. On page 56 she cites the treatment of Caratacus after his capture
by the Romans as a motivation for Boudicca’s apparent suicide. Yet can it be demonstrated that native Britons were aware of his fate in Italy? If yes, then they would have known that the Romans pardoned him and gave him honors. It seems that Boudicca’s own harsh experience at the hands of the Romans and her crushing defeat would have provided plenty of motivation for her suicide. Additionally, given Johnson’s frequent discussions of ancient prejudices, stereotypes, and concepts of the “Other,” it is surprising that she did not make use of Benjamin Isaac’s definitive work on proto-racism in the ancient world.[2] Finally, her rather underwhelming conclusion that Boudicca remains “an elusive, ultimately imaginary icon” may leave some students and general readers unsatisfied.

Notes


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