



BOADICEA STATUE

At the western end of Westminster Bridge, right next to Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster, stands one of London's icons, a statue of Queen Boadicea* on her war chariot, her daughters are beside her, one hand holding a spear, the other outstretched in a royal gesture while her horses rear their forelegs in the air. There are no reins controlling the horses. Thousands of tourists pass the statue each day and most ignore it completely although it is worth learning about.

HISTORY

The sculpture was designed by one of Victorian England's greatest sculptors, Thomas Thornycroft, the father of William Hamo Thornycroft, who grew to become even more famous than his father. The elder Thornycroft started on the Boadicea sculpture in 1856 and took his time creating what he wanted, assisted at times by his son William. He exhibited the head of Boadicea in the mid-1860s, but the sculpture was not completed until just before Thornycroft's death in 1885. And then it was discovered that there was no money available to make Thornycroft's model.

In 1894 London County Council decided to excavate an earthwork on Parliament Hill known as 'Boadicea's Grave'. Unfortunately, the excavations proved to the satisfaction of the Society of Antiquaries that the earthwork contained no burials and had nothing to do with Boadicea. Nevertheless, Thornycroft's son, John Thornycroft suggested that it would make a suitable location to erect his father's sculpture. But yet again, no public money was available to cast the sculpture in bronze, so nothing was done.

A committee was created to launch a public appeal for £6,000 to cast the model. The necessary amount was raised by 1898 and the statue was cast. And yet one final obstacle remained; there was no location available to erect the sculpture. It was not until 1902, 17 years after Thomas Thornycroft's death, that a location at Westminster Pier was found and the statue was erected on a granite plinth.

*/ˌbɒdɪˈsiːə/

INTERESTING FACTS

Prince Albert and Queen Victoria were deeply involved in the sculpture, as it is assumed that Boadicea bears some resemblance to the young Queen but who knew how the warrior queen looked like.

Prince Albert also insisted on using horses from the royal stables to act as models for Boadicea's horse, whereas Boudicca probably used smaller horses the size of ponies.

To add, her chariot is also historically inaccurate; it is based on Roman chariots rather than the native British ones. It is highly decorated, with a sunburst on the base of the shaft and small sunbursts decorating each horse's chest. Elongated knives protrude from the chariot's wheels. These curved blades would have been used to cut down enemy soldiers in an all-out charge.

The horses are angled outwardly, and are not symmetrical.

BOADICEA

Who was a warrior woman?

Boadicea was the queen of the Iceni tribe, a native British tribe occupying what is now East Anglia. Very little is known about her life, and even those 'facts' are open to debate. Much of what we think we know comes from accounts written by Roman historians, who had had their own version but still.

When the Romans conquered Britain in AD 43 the Iceni, under their king Prasagustus, were given client kingdom status. That meant that the Iceni were subordinate to Rome but not directly part of the Roman empire. As part of the agreement, Prasagustus named the Emperor of Rome joint heir to his kingdom along with his wife and daughters. Unfortunately, Roman law did not allow inheritance through the female line, so when Prasagustus died in AD 60 Rome claimed the Iceni kingdom. They seized tribal property and the Iceni were treated like slaves. According to an account by the Roman historian Tacitus, When Boadicea had the courage to complain about this treatment, she and her daughters were violently whipped and even worse.

Proud and rebellious Boudicca could not stand more and raised her people in revolt against the might of Rome. With the aid of the neighbouring tribe of the Trinovantes she attacked Camulodunum (the Roman settlement that became Colchester), destroyed St Albans and burned London to the ground.

Roman historians claim that up to 80,000 people died in these raids. The Iceni offered no quarter and treated their enemies brutally. The Roman Governor Suetonius Paullinus realised that he was outnumbered and retreated from London to gather his forces. As a result, there were no Roman troops left to withstand Boadicea and her supporters, estimated to number some 200,000 men.

Suetonius Paullinus gathered 10,000 men and took up a position in a narrow gorge somewhere in the English Midlands to do battle with a rebel woman. The result was a success for the Romans who lost an estimated 800 men while Boudicca's Celtic army lost 80,000. So the Iceni and their warrior queen were defeated, and Britain was secured for the Romans.

What became of Boudicca?

Accounts differ. One version says that when she realised the battle was lost she poisoned herself and her daughters rather than let them be captured by the Romans. Another account says that she was mortally wounded in the fighting and was given a lavish burial after the conflict was over. Still, the location of her grave is not recorded.

NATIONAL SYMBOL

Accounts of her life and battles were published sporadically during the medieval and Tudor period, but it was not until the Victorian period that Boadicea, as she was then known, became a national symbol. And one man was responsible; Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Queen Victoria's Poet. Tennyson's poem 'Boädicéa', written in 1859 and first published in 1864, brought the Iceni queen alive to a new audience.

Tennyson's Boadicea was a bloodthirsty warrior queen, but more importantly, she was a symbol of Britishness at a time when Britain was ruled by a woman. The parallels are obvious, and Boadicea became a symbol of Britain and British independence just as Victoria became a symbol of the ever-expanding British Empire.

The interest to Boadicea is rising again these days. There is a luxury perfume Boadicea the Victorious which is produced by an independent British fragrance brand, and in 2019 a new film version of her life appeared on screens under the name of Boudica: the Warrior Queen.