

The Boudica myth

CHRIS RUDD

Some myths are so attractive, culturally and commercially, that they just won't go away, no matter how irrational they may be. Santa Claus coming down the chimney to give gifts at Christmas is one such myth. Queen Boudica minting coins to fund her rebellion is another. I have five questions for those of my colleagues who persist in perpetuating this myth.

1. Why so many?



1. Norfolk God silver unit, VA 794. Struck c.30-10 BC, but still attributed by some to Queen Boudica, AD61. The head has a moustache and boar-skin headdress. The horse has a Y-shaped head and 'broken' foreleg, with a kite-shaped box below.

Literally thousands of so-called 'Boudica' coins (fig.1) have been found and dozens of different dies are known. By any normal survival ratio this indicates that well over a million coins were probably minted. Such a vast quantity of coins, with so many different die varieties, usually implies that they were made in distinct phases over a substantial period of time - several months at a minimum or, more plausibly, over several years.

My first question is: how could so many coins have

been struck in such a short space of time as the Boudican rebellion of AD 60?

All the archaeological evidence suggests that the Boudican rebellion was a sudden uprising, executed with great speed and without long-term planning or preparation. It is true that many of the grievances that fuelled the rebellion had accumulated over several years. But the revolt itself was swift - so fast and unexpected that the Roman administration in Britain was caught completely off guard.

Dr Paul Sealey, assistant curator of archaeology at Colchester Museum and author of *The Boudican Revolt against Rome* (Shire, 1997), confirms that the rebellion was brief. He says: 'We know the Iceni had not sowed any crops in the year in which the revolt erupted. This must surely mean the revolt was planned at least before about May. The length of time that elapsed between the march on Colchester and the final battle with Suetonius need not have been that long: it might only have taken four or five weeks, possibly less. The key factor is the extraordinary speed of march that a Roman army could achieve in a crisis. I reckon Suetonius could have got his army back from Anglesey to the Verulamium region within a week. Perhaps this takes us down to mid-summer. But we know fighting spilled over into the next year because Tacitus says explicitly that troops were put into winter quarters. I reckon the winter of AD60/60 was spent in decimating the Iceni and Trinovantes in their homelands, and that the fighting petered out in the spring of AD 61.' (pers.comm. 23.3.01).

If coins had been minted to finance this sudden uprising, they must by definition have been emergency coins - coins struck in a hurry to meet an unforeseen need, to fulfil an urgent military purpose. If this had actually been the case - if all 'Boudica' coins had been issued in haste within a single brief episode, say within a four or five weeks at most, how do we account for the fact that there are so many of them?



2. A few of the dozens of sub-types and varieties of so-called 'Boudica' coins. Is it credible that so many different coins were struck immediately before or during such a sudden, brief and mobile rebellion?

How do we explain the presence of so many separate sub-types and die varieties within this extensive series? (fig.2) How many different moneymen and mint-sites do we calculate were required to produce such a vast and varied quantity of emergency coinage in such a short space of time? How do we imagine Boudica managed to lay her hands on such a huge pile of silver bullion without advance notice? And how do we suppose that so gigantic a minting operation - undoubtedly one of the biggest in Ecenian history - was organised so efficiently immediately prior to a rebellion and conducted so quietly and so secretly that it wasn't detected by a single Roman administrator stationed within Ecenian territory?

2. Why so good?

My second question is: why are 'Boudica' coins of such good quality?

If they were indeed emergency coins, issued in haste without the customary care, we'd expect them to exhibit some signs of this, wouldn't we? We'd expect to discover some sloppy die cutting. We'd expect to find a higher-than-average percentage of irregular flans of inconsistent size and weight. We'd expect to see a higher proportion of off-centre coins, double strikes and brockages.

But we don't. 'Boudica' coins as a whole don't display any of the hallmarks of an emergency coinage. The overwhelming majority of them (I'd say 95 out of 100, on average) are well designed and well executed. They are mostly well struck, well centred and show an incredible consistency of alloy and weight. They are certainly not the sort of coins you'd think were made in a hurry on the eve of, or in the midst of, a tribal uprising.

In 1987 Robert Van Arsdell, the distinguished numismatist who declared that Queen Boudica minted coins, said "there was evidence they were hastily struck" and cited a solitary brockage (fig.3) in support of this. When set alongside the thousands of well struck 'Boudica' coins, I don't find this single brockage very convincing.



3. A single badly made coin, like this 'Boudica' brockage, isn't evidence that thousands of well made coins were struck in haste.

3. Why so male?

My third question is: why are 'Boudica' coins so masculine in character?

Along with Queen Cartimandua of the Brigantes, Queen Boudica of the Ecenii (or Icenii, if you prefer) was one of the great women of ancient Britain. Though the martial role she played was more typically masculine, there was nothing masculine about her mentally or physically (except for her tall stature). She had long red hair, she had breasts, she had heterosexual sex and she bore two daughters. We are told she worshipped a female deity, Andrasta. Furthermore, we may reasonably surmise that her gender was no barrier to high status and high power, firstly because she felt she had a right to inherit her husband's estate, and secondly because she saw no

problem with a woman defending that right by force of arms.

Boudica and her fellow Britons were ahead of their time because women enjoyed a level of emancipation not found in the seemingly more advanced Roman world. Women here could be leaders and warriors. The Roman historian Tacitus found this astonishing: in a thousand years of Roman history, no Roman matron had ever led an army. Dr Sealey says: 'We know from rich graves in Yorkshire that men and women could be accorded equally lavish funerals, irrespective of their gender. With one possible exception, the decorated mirrors from Iron Age Britain are recovered from female graves. In other words these smart mirrors were made very much with women in mind. The fact that bronzesmiths produced masterpieces like the Desborough mirror for an almost exclusively female clientele speaks volumes for the status of women in prehistoric and early Roman (native) Britain. Tacitus himself says that the Britons were remarkable because they saw nothing untoward about being ruled by a woman. The status of women in early Britain was in fact far higher than it was in the Roman world, and their standing suffered when Britain was incorporated in the empire.' (pers. comm. 23.3.01).

If Boudica had in reality issued coins, wouldn't you expect them to be more female in character? Wouldn't you expect them to have a woman's head on the obverse? Perhaps Boudica's favourite war-goddess, Andrasta? Or even Boudica herself? (fig. 12). Why not? By AD 60 several female royals had featured on Roman coins - Octavia (second wife of Mark Antony), Cleopatra (Mark Antony's lover), Livia (wife of Augustus), Julia (daughter of Augustus), Antonia (younger daughter of Mark Antony and Octavia), Agrippina Senior (daughter of Agrippa and Julia), Caesonia (fourth wife of Caligula) and Agrippina Junior (sister of Caligula and mother of Nero). Being a queen herself, Boudica was probably familiar with the who's who of Roman royalty, and quite possibly saw some of the Roman coins which showed the heads and the names of regal Roman women. Indeed, coins attributed to her own husband have a Roman-style head and Roman-style inscription on his coins. So wouldn't you expect Boudica to have followed his example? (Since Dr

Jonathon Williams read the inscription as *ESVPRASTO* an attribution to King Prasutagus looks less secure).

I must admit there was a time when I imagined that the head on 'Boudica' coins may have been the head of Andrasta. But I abandoned this fantasy in 1996, over a year after Dr Jonathon Williams had pointed out to me - in public - that most 'Boudica' heads have a moustache. (fig.2e-h) Yes, we sometimes cling to our fantasies long past their sell-by dates, don't we?



a. Mossop Proto Head



b. Phallic Corn Ear



c. Bearded Punk



d. Faceless and Phallic



e. Odin's Eye



f. Mossop Dead Head

4. *Early Face-Horse types, c.50-30 BC. Their big noses, chevron hair and crescentic hairlines indicate a stylistic progression to the Norfolk God ('Boudica') types which probably followed soon afterwards.*

For example, I find it hard to let go of my quirky 'Ecení' spelling, even though most Celtic scholars are against it. When someone demonstrates to me that 'Ecení' is definitely wrong, then hopefully I'll have the humility to drop it and revert to 'Icení'.

4. Why so retro?

My fourth question is: why are 'Boudica' coins so old fashioned in style for coins supposedly struck in AD 60?

What is 'modern' and what is 'old fashioned' is a matter of opinion and highly subjective. So I'll tread carefully here. However, I trust that we are objective enough to agree on broad definitions of design.

For example, wouldn't you agree that 'Boudica' coins, if minted in AD 60, are decidedly retrograde in design and of a surreal style not seen on Celtic coins of eastern and south-east Britain for two generations?

Wouldn't you agree that 'Boudica' heads have more in common with the Celtic-style heads on Early Face-Horse coins, c.50-30 BC, (fig. 4) than with the Roman-style head on the alleged coins of King Prasutagus, (fig.5) which Van Arsdell dates AD 50-60?



5. AR units of Esuprastus, VA 780, c.AD40-43. Probably the last coins struck by the Ececi and clearly of Roman style. If Boudica issued coins later, wouldn't they be of Roman style too? Photos © British Museum.

Wouldn't you agree with Derek Allen that 'Boudica' heads were probably derived from the Juno Sospita denarii of L.Roscius Fabatus, 64BC, (fig.7) or L.Papius Celsus, 45BC? If you agree with Michael Crawford's dates (as most people do), you must also then agree that both of these 'Boudica' prototypes were minted over a century before the Boudican rebellion. Surely, if Boudica was going to model her coins on a Roman denarius, wouldn't she have selected a more recent and more prestigious type, like Esupratos did, such as a denarius of Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius or Nero?



6. Ale Sca silver unit, VA 996, one of the last coins minted in or near Ececian territory, c.AD40-43. See how similar the horse and letters are to those of Esuprastos (Prasutagus?) If Boudica issued coins, wouldn't you expect her horses to be equally similar, equally realistic in style? Why would her engravers copy horses from coins struck a generation or two earlier?



a. Roman

b. Hungarian

7. AR denarius of L.Roscius Fabatus, 64BC, probable Roman prototype for the heads on Norfolk God types. Juno Sospita's goatskin headdress is replaced by a boarskin headdress. Hungarian imitations of this denarius display a branch behind the head, just as the British imitations do.



a. Norfolk Boar Star

b. Duro Can

8. The boarskin bristles on 'Boudica' coins closely resemble the bristles on these Boar-Horse coins, c.30-10BC. Clear evidence, wouldn't you say, that 'Boudica' coins are closely related in time, as well as style, to Boar-Horse coins?

Wouldn't you agree that the curved spiky 'hair' (actually a boarskin headdress) on 'Boudica' heads (fig.1) looks amazingly similar to the curved spiky bristles on the boars of Boar-Horse coins, c.30-10 BC? (fig.8)

Now let's look briefly at the reverse of 'Boudica' coins, which I consider to be equally retrograde in style as the obverse.

For example, wouldn't you agree that the Celtic-style horses on 'Boudica' coins have more in common



a. Toney Curly Top



b. Mossop Dead Head



c. Ece Six



d. Aesu

9. Like the horses on all 'Boudica' coins, the horses on these other Ecenian coins have a Y-shaped head and 'broken' foreleg. All four types were almost certainly issued well before AD 43, the top two perhaps c.40-10 BC, over seventy years prior to the Boudican revolt.



a. Kite gold stater



b. Soham Dead Head



c. Toney Curly Top

10. The 'kite' on these coins is like the 'kite' on 'Boudica' coins, isn't it? These coins were all struck c.45-10 BC. So why would Boudica's moneyers select a symbol that hadn't been used on coins for over seventy years?

with the Celtic-style horses on Toney Curly Top (CNG 39.2266 and Chris Rudd 35.18), Mossop Dead Head (Chris Rudd 4.13), Ece, Saenu and Aesu, (fig.9) than with the Roman-style horses on the coins of Ale Sca (fig.6) and the coins of Esuprastos, (fig.5) which were struck shortly before

or shortly after the Roman invasion of AD 43? Van Arsdell dates Ece AD 45-50, Saenu AD 50-55 and Aesu AD 55-60, which is convenient if you're proposing that Boudica issued coins in AD 60 or 61; but these neat little five-year stepping stones are laid on sand, not rock. There is no solid numismatic proof that the coins of Ece, Saenu or Aesu post-date the coins of Anted and Ecen. If they do, then it's unlikely to be by more than a decade or two, and almost certainly not after AD 43.

Wouldn't you agree that the kite-shaped box below 'Boudica' horses is remarkably akin to the kite-shaped box on Corieltauvian Kite Type coins, c.45-10 BC, and the kite-shaped box on Soham Dead Head (Chris Rudd 15.27) and Toney Curly Top (BMC 3554 and Chris Rudd 4.14, 6.11), both c.40-1 BC? (fig.10)

Based on the above stylistic comparisons, I'd guess that 'Boudica' coins may have been struck around the time of the last Boar-Horse series - probably a bit later - and before the coins of Ece, Saenu and Aesu. I guess too that Boar-Horse, 'Boudica' and some Pattern-Horse types may have been issued within a much tighter time-frame than we currently imagine and that there could have been some overlapping of these series, as Derek Allen suggested in 1970.

5. Why no name?

My fifth and final question is: why don't 'Boudica' coins carry Boudica's name?

Anyone who could lead a rebellion that destroyed three towns and thousands of people must have been a powerful personality with a strong sense of self-worth and self-identity. That Boudica was a forceful individual and charismatic commander is amply attested by Tacitus, Cassius Dio and current archaeology.

Like other Celtic war-lords, she was probably belligerent, boastful and bursting with fiery pride. Like Margaret Thatcher during her Falklands war, she probably never missed an opportunity for courting favourable publicity.

I find it hard to believe that such a dominant and domineering leader would have conducted her anti-Roman campaign anonymously. I find it hard to believe that such a vocal and regal character - a ruler

in her own right seeking personal revenge as well as settling tribal grievances - would have forgotten to sign her coins BOVDICA, particularly since the last two coin types struck in her territory (probably Ale Sca and Esuprastos) were both boldly branded on both sides.

In *Celtic Coinage of Britain* Van Arsdell claims that Caratacos, another famous freedom fighter, was striking coins with his name on during his anti-Roman campaign, AD43-51. The coins are distinctly Roman in design and clearly labelled CARA. So why should Boudica, who was fighting a more personal war than Caratacos, issue coins without her name on? Do we truly believe that this amazonian queen, with her loud voice and long red hair, was more modest than Caratacos and less keen to promote herself and her cause?

For a whole generation or more before Boudica, almost all Ecenian and Ecenian-associated coins had been inscribed with Celtic names. One may be a mint or site name (DVRO CAN). One may be a tribal name (ECEN or ECENI), though this is by no means certain. The others are probably all personal names (ANTED, ECE, EDN, SAENV, AESV, ALE SCA, AEDIC SIA, ESUPRASTO), though some are obscure and contentious. What is incontrovertible is that the vast bulk of British coins struck in eastern, south-east and southern England c.AD1-43 were inscribed coins, inscribed with names of the rulers who issued them.

For over forty years - sixty years if I adopt Van Arsdell's dating - leaders of the Ececi, Corieltauvi, Catuvellauni, Trinovantes, Cantiaci, Atrebatas and Regni who struck coins put their names on those coins. So, if Boudica struck coins, why did she decide - and surely it must have been a conscious decision, not an oversight - that they should be nameless coins, orphan coins of no declared parentage? As far as I'm aware, such a dramatic volte face - reverting from inscribed coins to uninscribed coins and putting the mint-clock back by forty to sixty years - has no precedent in Celtic coinage, not in Gaul nor in Britain. (fig.11)

Why should Boudica of all people, one of the most powerful personalities in Celtic history, suddenly decide to produce unbranded currency? It was Boudica who was leading the revolt. It was Boudica who, according to Van Arsdell, was paying the



a. Durnacos



f. Verica



b. Tincomaros



g. Cunobelin



c. Dubnovellaunos



h. Amminus



d. Boduoc



i. Caratacos



e. Tasciovanos



j. Esuprastos

11. For over 100 years before the Boudican rebellion Celtic rulers on both sides of the Channel struck silver coins with their names on. So why don't the so-called 'Boudica' silver units carry her name?

revolutionaries. So why isn't Boudica's name on what he claims to be her revolutionary coins?

We could argue perhaps that Boudica was merely fronting a coalition of dissidents and that to place her name on coins that would be used to pay Trinovantian

troops, as well as Ecenian soldiers, would upset her allies. But is it credible? If power sharing had been a problem in managing the rebellion - and there is no evidence that it was - wouldn't Boudica have had the wit to devise a diplomatic compromise? Such as adding one or two other names to the mercenary money?

We could argue perhaps that, in the eyes of Boudica, an inscribed coin was a Roman coin, a despicable denarius of pillagers and rapists, and that she therefore deliberately eschewed any inscription to keep her coins uncompromisingly Celtic and uncontaminated by the Latin letters of her foes. But is it credible? In *Celtic Coinage of Britain* Van Arsdell claims that King Prasutagus, Boudica's husband, was issuing inscribed coins - coins with his name on and a Latin legend (fig.5) - for ten years immediately prior to the Ecenian rebellion of AD60. If inscribed coins were okay for her husband (says Bob) - the husband whose land she was reclaiming and whose daughters she was avenging - why weren't inscribed coins acceptable to Boudica?

If inscribed coins were liked by other well known Celtic rebels - Vercingetorix, Commios and Caratacos, to name but three - why should they have been anathema to Boudica? Are we suggesting that Vercingetorix, Commios and Caratacos were all unknown to her, that she was unaware of their anti-Roman exploits and heroic reputations, that she had never seen a coin of Commios or Caratacos, or that she in some way felt superior - more Celtic, less romanised - that these famous warriors?

We could argue perhaps that Boudica was influenced by druids, that druids were averse to committing their sacred lore to writing and that, because the Ecenian revolt of AD 60 may in part have been a holy war, the druids may have advised Boudica not to inscribe her coins. But is it credible? There is certainly some evidence that the last Ecenian rebellion was spurred by religious fervour; the destruction of the Roman temple at Colchester and the savage treatment of Boudica's victims testify to this.

But would druidic influences have really outweighed commercial considerations in the case of these hypothetical Boudican coins? I think not. My reading of the situation is that the Boudican revolt of AD 60 was largely caused by the confiscation of land, the

eviction of aristocrats, the conscription of young men and demands for the repayment of large loans made by Claudius and Seneca. Yes, of course Boudica had family scores to settle with the Romans. But they alone would not have won her the widespread support of the Ecenian and Trinovantes. Two Celtic tribes would not have risked their lives or livelihoods because two girls had been raped. There must have been more commercial reasons for declaring war. Moreover, if Boudica had paid her warriors in silver coins - silver coins that she had specially commissioned for this war - she would surely have stamped her name on every single piece of them.

Or are we suggesting that all her moneyers (there must have been more than one to produce the thousands of coins Van Arsdell claims are Boudica's) simply forgot to inscribe her coins, due to the rush and panic of preparing for the revolution? I doubt it.

I don't care if the Boudica myth outlives me. It probably will, because it's a nice idea and has Van Arsdell's name behind it. But if collectors expect me to sell 'Boudica' coins (we get at least one request a week) they will continue to be disappointed.



12. This rare silver unit of Boudica seems to have been derived from coins of Livia (RIC 46) and Claudius (RIC 116). Note the waist-length hair of Minerva, a personification of the warrior-queen? Unpublished and unknown. Drawn by Sue White.

The drab fact is that Boudica issued no coins, at least none that we yet know about (fig. 12). There are three reasons. One, she didn't need any coins of her own, because there were plenty of others available in AD60. Two, the Romans wouldn't have allowed her to mint any. Three, she didn't have time, because she died soon after her husband and because, in between his death and hers, she was totally preoccupied with leading one of the biggest, bloodiest and briefest rebellions in British history.

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