

# The face that launched 80,000 deaths

CHRIS RUDD

**I**N AD 60 Queen Boudica and her rebel army of British resistance-fighters attacked and destroyed the Romano-British cities of Colchester, Verulamium and London. The destruction of these three cities and their mostly unarmed citizens was devastating, total and savage.

All three cities were burned and men, women and children were killed without mercy. Tacitus tells us that when Boudica sacked London "all those left behind were butchered, the British took no prisoners, nor did they consider the money they could get for selling slaves. It was the sword, gibbet, fire and cross" (caedes, patibula, ignes, cruces).

Cassius Dio says the women of London had their breasts cut off and stuffed into their mouths, and long skewers were thrust through their bodies lengthways—an unmistakably sexual slaughter.

Tacitus reports that 80,000 Roman citizens and allies lost their lives in Colchester, Verulamium and London. 80,000 is probably a grossly inflated body count but, even if half that figure was the reality of the mortality, then the carnage was still colossal and shocking in its brutality. Why was the sacking of the three cities and the slaughter of an entire detachment of 1,500 Roman infantry—sent to rescue Colchester by Petillius Cerealis, who escaped Boudica's ambush—conducted with such extraordinary ferocity? What—or who—could have inspired such demonic hatred of the Roman conquerors and their native collaborators?

Two words contain the answer: *revenge* and *religion*. The Boudican rebellion of AD 60 was partly a reprisal for grave political and social grievances suffered by the Ececi and Trinovantes

and partly a religious crusade. Seventeen years of Roman repression and injustice provided the fuel for the holocaust. Religious abuse provided the torch.

### Tribal grievances

In AD 47 Ececi warriors were disarmed, despite their nominal independence, and the revolt that followed was severely crushed. In AD 60 Roman administrators confiscated property from Ececi noblemen, Boudica was flogged and her two daughters were raped. The story is well known, so I won't repeat it. What is less well known is that the Trinovantes too were victims of Roman colonial tyranny, which is why they were so ready to join Boudica in her rebellion.

Their first major grievance was that all around Colchester their land was seized and given to Roman veterans. "Tacitus describes the land taken from the Trinovantes as captured territory (*agri captivi*)" writes Dr Paul Sealey in *The Boudican Revolt against Rome* (Shire Archaeology, 1997). "If the *agri captivi* were deemed to have been won by expelling the enemy, an authorised Roman could help himself to as much land as he wished, when he wished. This is what happened at Colchester. Natives were driven from their lands and treated as captives and slaves.

"Another tribulation that led the Trinovantes to join the Boudican revolt was the temple of Claudius. After the death of Claudius in AD 54, the senate at Rome declared him a god and the construction of a temple for him began at Colchester . . . a source of grave offence to the Trinovantes; they saw it as the citadel of an everlasting tyranny. Moreover the expenses of the cult were such that people appointed as priests faced bankruptcy and abused their position to extract funds from their reluctant fellow countrymen."

### The war-goddess

By the end of AD 60 the Ececi and Trinovantes could tolerate the tyranny no longer and the volcano of accumulated anger and hatred exploded. At the front of the burning and the butchery was Queen Boudica, one of Britain's national heroines. Behind the burning and the butchery stands another female, a sinister and shadowy female whose face is known only to a few and whose name has been almost forgotten. She is Andraste, war-goddess of the Ececi.

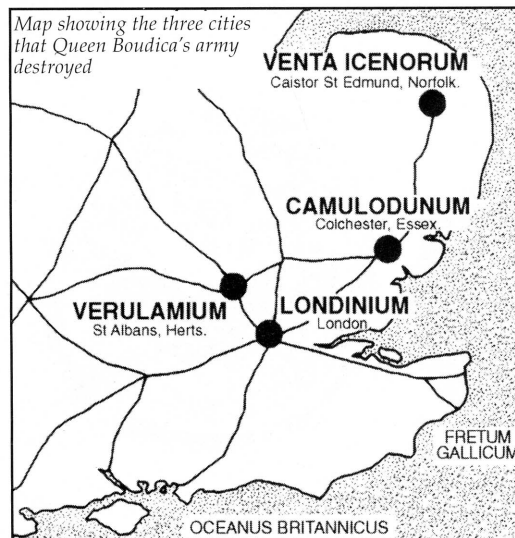
It is strange that so little can be said about a Celtic goddess who inspired so much bloodshed and

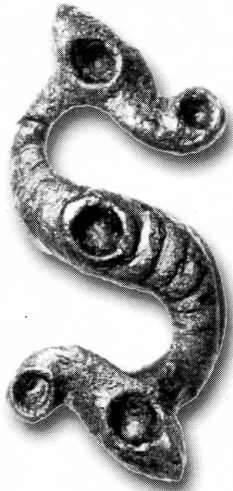


The historian Cassius Dio (c. AD150–235) described Queen Boudica as: "In stature she was very tall, in appearance most terrifying . . ."



Bury Diadem silver unit, 15mm. Struck by Ececi, c. 50–40 BC. Andraste's face is repeated in reverse on the mane of the galloping horse and on the quatrefoil before it.





Bronze dragonesque brooch, 30mm c. 100 BC/AD found near Catterick, Yorkshire, in 1998. The brooch depicts a two-headed serpent with ram's horns, a popular symbol in Celtic Britain and Gaul.

destruction. All we know is that Andraste was a war-goddess worshipped by Queen Boudica and the Eцени, and that human sacrifices were performed in her name. It was probably the blood-thirsty cult of Andraste that gave the Boudican revolt its religious zeal and demonical cruelty.

Cassius Dio says: "While they were doing all this [massacring Roman women] in the grove of Andate [Andraste] and other sacred places, they performed sacrifices, feasted and abandoned all restraint. Andraste was their name for victory and she enjoyed their special reverence." Cassius Dio also tells us that Queen Boudica released a hare before setting out on a campaign, while invoking Andraste. The hare was sacred to the Celts, who believed that the fate of a battle could be predicted by releasing a hare and watching which way it ran. Andraste could also have been associated with Andarta, a deity worshipped by the Vocontii of Gaul.

## Bury diadem

Dr Anne Ross, author of *Pagan Celtic Britain* (Constable, 1993), believes Andraste could be the goddess whose fierce face stares threateningly from a silver coin of the Eцени struck c. 50–40 BC and known as the Bury Diadem. She writes: "The female head portrayed in profile depicts a woman of obvious powers of a supernatural nature. The strong features suggest a force which is divine rather than mundane, threatening rather than benign. The well defined nose which is balanced by the sharply jutting chin are features which are made even more sinister by the great eye which the skill of the craftsman has managed to imbue with a baleful expression. The floriate ear is largely a motif which occurs elsewhere in Celtic art.

The woman's rank is indicated by the coronet or diadem which encircles and controls her hair, which is pulled up through it and dressed in stiff curls, not only to enhance its natural fairness, but to stiffen it.

At either end of the coronet a lunar crescent is depicted, an important symbol among a people whose priests were noteworthy for their expertise in matters of astrology. We may suggest that we have here a great warrior queen such as Boudica of the Eцени of Norfolk—she herself was a priestess—but it is more likely that we see the goddess whom she, and no doubt her royal ancestors too, worshipped."

Is she then Andraste, "The Invincible"? Her somewhat baleful expression may perhaps express the element andras, meaning "a curse, evil, devil" in Welsh. The symbol that is depicted in front of her, which confirms that she is not a woman of this world, is a dragon or serpent which terminates at either end in a ram's head.



Celtic war-goddesses also appear on several early and very rare gold coins of north-west France. This unique half stater, 16mm, shows a naked female warrior dashing into battle with a Normandy-type sword. Her divine status is confirmed by a knobbed neck torc. She holds the last lock of her long hair in her right hand (normally the sword hand) brandishing it like a javelin, suggesting that she can control the sea as a weapon of war. This remarkable Celtic coin, now sadly lost, was found at Falaise, France, c. 1844.

Two- or three-headed gods and monsters are commonplace in Celtic art, and the ram-headed serpent is a frequently-appearing motif. It is associated with healing springs and waters, but also with war.

Boudica, queen of the Eцени in the 1st century AD, was both warrior and priestess. Before going to do battle with the Roman troops she released a hare, for purposes of augury, and sacrificed captured Roman women in honour of Andraste. Thus, in the imagery of the Bury Diadem we may glimpse a fragment of Celtic history and mythology. It has been said that the art of Celtic coin decoration is in itself a mini-mythology. This beautiful silver example, with its potent symbolism, seems to endorse this statement." ("The Bury Diadem", Chris Rudd list 41, p. 3).

Another distinguished archaeologist and Iron Age numismatist, Dr Jeffrey May, looked at a photograph of this Bury Diadem and said "That's not Andraste, that's Maggie Thatcher!" Though spoken in jest, his jibe highlights an important point: we don't know for a fact who these deities are on Celtic coins. We can only guess. My guess is that the frowning female face belongs to Andraste, the goddess that launched 80,000 deaths.



The head of a Celtic goddess, possibly Andraste, appears on this Selsey Diadem gold stater, 12mm c. 60–50 BC.



Queen Boudica's war-goddess Andraste is probably associated with the Gaulish goddess Andrasta, who was worshipped by the Vocontii of Gallia Narbonensis. Another Celtic war-goddess (or is it the same one in a different guise?) is seen riding naked across these gold staters of east Armorica, traditionally attributed to the Redones, c. 175–125 BC, whose tribal name survives in the town of Rennes, north-west France.