

Celtic Warrior Queens Cartimandua and Boudicca: Guidance for Women Today?

By Mari Ziolkowski

Cartimandua and Boudicca – two women leaders living in what we now call the British Isles in CE 40 or so – one a Brigante tribal queen, the other a warrior leader of the Iceni. Both were confronted with the Roman invasion of their homelands. Both women had to make tough decisions about how best to protect their people. What do their decisions have to say to women today who continue to find themselves living in a male-dominated society?

Do we surrender to the more powerful oppressor as did Cartimandua, Queen of the Brigantes, to invading Roman legions in CE 43? What are the costs, and what are the benefits of becoming a 'client queen' in a male dominated society? Are we protected for a time, as was Cartimandua? If we are 'good girls' at work and at home, and don't make a fuss, is there a pay off in safety for

ourselves, or our family? Are our house and job safe, and our families safe because we are a team player? If we are challenged or attacked at work or in the streets, will the 'powers that be' fight for us as the Romans did at least once to save Cartimandua?

Do we turn in neighboring rebel leaders who seek sanctuary with us, and in doing so, buy protection for our tribe, as she did? Do we turn against or turn away from other women who rebel too much, or don't fit the mold, who are too big or too loud, or calling for too much change (like Boudicca)? And if we do, how does it serve us? As the 'good girl,' do we get to stay and play with the big boys? Or if we are always nice – then do we get to remain the pretty one, the desirable one? Are we allowed to have our piece of the sun then?

If we live freely, having as many husbands, or lovers as Cartimandua or Boudicca did, what happens to us in this culture? Are we celebrated, like the ancestress/Goddess Maeve was for having 30 men in one day? If we desire a second mate, as did Cartimandua, do others judge us for taking one as she was judged by Rome? Or do we internalize it all and instead act as our own worst judges? What if we are in danger of being attacked by our first husband, as she was? Will we be left on our own, or defended by the 'moral authority?' Are there strings attached to this defense? Are there 'morals' we must follow to get the protection of the male order? Do women who do not follow the prescribed morality get this protection? Or are 'morally loose' women left to fend for themselves?

And what if we fight to unite divergent tribes (divergent parts of ourselves?) and confront the Romans (or the current male order) on the battlefield, as did Boudicca, warrior queen of the Iceni? Do we risk all that we hold dear, as Boudicca did, risking the loss of our lover and our children? Do we risk violence done to ourselves and our own if we fight back, as African-Americans did time after time in the U.S. when they stood up? Do we risk being sent to jail if we are too strident in our call for justice – as U.S. women risked when they called for the vote? And what about the risk of being sent to the



Bouddicca Statue by Thomas Thornycroft, near Westminster Pier, London. Photo by A. Brady

mental hospital if you fought against the way things were 'supposed to be' in the first half of the 20th century in the good ole US of A? Electric shock therapy anyone?

Is meeting the oppressor head on and being willing to fight for our beliefs, even dying for them, the right path, as Boudicca chose? Is using all our spiritual power in service of our goal – to beat back the oppressor – the right path? Should we call upon all the warrior goddesses of old to arise and help us fight, as Boudicca did? Didn't the Romans conquer anyway, in spite of everything the flame-haired warrior queen could do to unite the tribes and to hamstring the Romans with tribal shamanic/dreaming powers? As recent elections demonstrate in the USA, when the good old boy network unites even 18 million women strong aren't enough to put a woman leader over the top.

What is the right path for us now? What are these two powerful women who lived two thousand years ago trying to tell us? Cartimandua lived longer than Boudicca. She saved the lives of some of her people. Should this be our measure of the right path? Boudicca stayed grounded in the values of her tribe. She gave her all – mind, body and spirit to find a measure to defeat the oppressor. Live free or die trying. Should her measure be our measure? Which of them made the right decision? What is the guidance that their choices offer us? What is the wisdom inherent in each of their paths? As we wrestle with being women of power two millennia later, what do their choices say to us now?

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References

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