# File name: Membercast Boudicca with Stephen Kershaw.mp3

**Moderator questions in Bold,** Respondents in Regular text.

KEY: **Unable to decipher** = (inaudible + timecode), **Phonetic spelling** (ph) + timecode), **Missed word** = (mw + timecode), **Talking over each other** = (talking over each other + timecode).

**(TC: 00:00:00)**

**Moderator: Welcome to the British Museum Membercast. Hello and welcome to the British Museum Membercast. I'm Iszi Lawrence and on this episode, I speak to Stephen P. Kershaw about Boudicca. She's just one of the barbarians featured in his book, Barbarians, Rebellion and Resistance to the Roman Empire. But yes, so I hope you enjoy this episode and do remember that the BM collection online is available to you right now. At the moment of recording, the Covid-19 crisis is still ongoing, so the museum is yet to open. We're hoping it will open soon and we will open it as soon as we can. Do also check out the BM website for future membership events, so there will be those happening as well. But for now, please sit back, relax and enjoy this interview with Stephen P. Kershaw.**

(TC: 00:00:54)

Stephen P. Kershaw: I suppose one of the things, as a historian, that I wanted to do was to give these people a voice, because for by and large, it's Romans who talk about the barbarians. We don't have so much coming back from the barbarian side, certainly not in the literature. We have it in archaeology and we have it in wonderful museum collections like exist in the British Museum, but for the most part, these barbarians are presented to us by the Romans.

**(TC: 00:01:24)**

**Moderator: Yes, and we're going to focus on one particular barbarian, because she's cool. Also, weirdly, even though I've had Julia Farley and everybody else, we've circumvented her. The Iron Age people in the British Museum, we're like, we can't possibly talk about Boudicca. Now, do you say Boudicca or do you say Boadicea?**

(TC: 00:01:42)

Stephen P. Kershaw: There's the thing. It's Boudicca.

**(TC: 00:01:44)**

**Moderator: Yes, I thought so.**

(TC: 00:01:45)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Definitely Boudicca. The Boadicea thing comes from, essentially, a misreading of a dodgy manuscript.

**(TC: 00:01:53)**

**Moderator: So, it's a bit like when we all say Clav divs when we mean I Claudius?**

(TC: 00:01:56)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Absolutely, yes. So, yes, it's Boudicca. She's written about by Romans who call her Boudicca and by Greeks as well, who call her Buduwicca.

**(TC: 00:02:08)**

**Moderator: Buduwicca? Nice. Because I should make it clear, because you've written a book, Barbarians, Rebellion and Resistance to the Roman Empire, and that it's not just Boudicca you write about. You write about dozens of others, and it's like an encyclopaedia of people who have fought the Romans and come out usually, to their error, really.**

(TC: 00:02:29)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes.

**(TC: 00:02:28)**

**Moderator: An amazing collection. Why does Boudicca stick out for you, particularly?**

(TC: 00:02:33)

Stephen P. Kershaw: She's such an interesting character. I guess because she's British, amongst all those barbarians, but she is, without question, a big personality, very big personality, who in many ways almost got the Romans out of Britain. Whether they'd have come back at a later stage or not is another question, but the chaos that she caused certainly led the Emperor Nero, it was Nero who was on the throne at the time, to seriously question Roman involvement in Britain at that time, because it was a horrendous event in the history of both Rome and Britain, I think. There were terrible mistakes made on, probably, both sides. Awful things happened. So, I was interested in Boudicca herself, her personality as it's portrayed to us by Roman historians, by the events that happened, and also, I think, by the way that the Romans used her in history. A Roman historian never tries to be objective or dispassionate. They always write with a motive, that there's something about it, and in many ways I'm very interested in the way that the Roman historians actually tried to manipulate the character of Boudicca to say something else.

**(TC: 00:03:56)**

**Moderator: Well, indeed. If you actually read the Roman historians, because you quote them in your book, it seems that-, yes, 'Boudicca had an uprising mainly because Nero wasn't manly enough.' That is-,**

(TC: 00:04:06)

Stephen P. Kershaw: That's right. Yes. It's fantastic, and she's presented in this as by historians who are hostile to Nero, as almost like this anti-Nero character. So, she is everything that Nero isn't and should be, and one of those is definitely his manliness. She, if you like, for the Romans, is a mannish woman, whereas Nero is a womanish man, and the Roman authors detest Nero's perceived effeminacy. He's all arty, he sings, he plays the lyre. The lyre as in a guitar-y kind of thing. That sort of thing. And to a hardline Roman, that's just the worst possible thing you could do.

**(TC: 00:04:58)**

**Moderator: So, take us through the history a little bit so we get an understanding of why, really, there was an uprising in Britain at this time. So, the Romans, initially the Romans invaded with Julius Caesar, but then they go away again?**

(TC: 00:05:10)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes. So, Caesar makes two expeditions to Britain in the middle of the first century BC. How successful those were, it's hard to tell, but he certainly puts Britain on the map for the Romans, and in subsequent years, anyone who's looking for a bit of glory, military glory, Britain is a good place to look. If you can out-Caesar Caesar, then that's going to bring you loads and loads of cool acclaim back at Rome. And various people think about it. Augustus has a think about it, Caligula as well, as there's stories, bonkers stories about him preparing an expedition and thinking better about it and having all his soldiers pick up seashells on the beach and take them back in Rome in triumph. Just completely crazy. But ultimately, it's the Emperor Claudius who invades in 43 AD, a very well-planned, very successful invasion, and the reason they come is partly for glory and partly because they have an odd feeling about Britain. They think it's much more prosperous and wealthy, perhaps, than it really is, that it has mineral wealth and all sorts of resources, but also, they come because it's strange, it's exotic. To a Roman, Britain is just this weird, exotic, strange place.

**(TC: 00:06:36)**

**Moderator: You describe it, they have a very weird idea about the geography of it as well and how it's aligned with Spain and it's rectangular, but also the North is dark?**

(TC: 00:06:47)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, it's curious, and it's interesting, the Romans have this thing, I think, is that barbarians live in barbaric places. Your environment dictates what you're like.

**(TC: 00:06:58)**

**Moderator: Well, I have been to Kent.**

(TC: 00:07:02)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes. And the Romans thought that the people of Kent were the most civilised of all the Britons, which I like. But yes, they have this curious idea about Britain, and particularly its orientation. So, they think that the west side of Britain faces Spain.

**(TC: 00:07:17)**

**Moderator: What?**

(TC: 00:07:18)

Stephen P. Kershaw: And there's this idea that it's dark all the time. They think it's much further north than it is, in a sense, and that it's foggy and misty and it rains all the time, and it's got these weird woad-painted inhabitants who have really strange social customs. It's ruled, in a sense, by the druids as well, who the Romans regard as very problematical and subversive. So, there's lots of reasons that one would want to conquer, if you like. So, Claudius comes for his own military glory, he comes to outdo the reputation of Julius Caesar, we could do with putting the druids in their place, possibly, and conquest, to a Roman, is always a good thing.

**(TC: 00:08:05)**

**Moderator: Yes. Claudius, I think he calls his son Britannicus. Is that right?**

(TC: 00:08:10)

Stephen P. Kershaw: He does indeed, yes. It was the biggest deal that Claudius had, really. He came and led the forces in person here, and certainly after the conquest publicised it like crazy with coinage and inscriptions and triumphal arches, the remains of which are still in Rome. One of the inscriptions there that you can still go and see it, where it talks about the kings of the Britons that he's subdued. And yes, and economically they think it's probably a good thing. There's a wonderful thing in Tacitus. Tacitus is a wonderful Roman historian, who has a fantastic turn of phrase all the time, and just one of the things he says is, conquest is worthwhile.

**(TC: 00:08:55)**

**Moderator: Just because it is, that's what Romans do.**

(TC: 00:08:58)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, exactly.

**(TC: 00:09:00)**

**Moderator: To be a Roman is to go and, yes, conquer.**

(TC: 00:09:04)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, so Claudius has made this conquest in 43, and from then on, the Roman forces fan out across the country, essentially bringing the rest of the country under control. By the time of Boudicca, which is in the beginning of the 60s AD, the line of demarcation, if you like, between what the Romans have and what they don't is the Fosse Way. So, if you draw a line between Exeter and Lincoln, everything on the Roman side, the southern side of that line, is coming under Roman control. Everything to the north is outside of their control at the moment, but the governor, who is Suetonius Paulinus, has gone to Anglesey, the Romans call it Mona, to subdue the druids, and at that point, all hell breaks loose behind him.

**(TC: 00:09:58)**

**Moderator: Right, because from what I learnt of Boudicca at school, I had a very-, (TC 00:10:00) I suppose I had quite a Roman historian view of it, because what happened was, her husband had died and left the lands to her and her daughters, but the Romans didn't recognise it. But I learnt it was because they were women, and that's why they didn't recognise women having the property rule, so they took everything over.**

(TC: 00:10:21)

Stephen P. Kershaw: That's fundamentally it. When the king of the Iceni, who was called Prasutagus, died, what he tried to do was to leave half the kingdom to his family, who were women, and the other half to Rome. His tribe had had a fairly fractious relationship with Rome in the past, but he seemed to think that this was a good compromise, but pure and simple, Roman law did not allow you to leave property, let alone a kingdom, to females. You just couldn't do that. It's just because you can't, because it's Roman law, it's the law. That's how it works, and obviously, under British custom, that would be acceptable. Boudicca wasn't the only queen of a tribe that we hear of.

**(TC: 00:11:12)**

**Moderator: Well, this is what confuses me, because let's briefly talk about Cartimandua, because I do love Cartimandua more than anything. For those of you who don't know Cartimandua, she was a bit further north, up in Yorkshire, and she basically got Nero to help out with her divorce. It was great.**

(TC: 00:11:30)

Stephen P. Kershaw: It's true.

**(TC: 00:11:31)**

**Moderator: By sending in a legion. She was just-, and she loved olive oil and that sort of stuff, and also, because I do a podcast about obscure people from history, Cartimandua is just-, because everybody's heard of Boudicca, nobody's heard of Cartimandua, and the fact that she basically hands over King Caractacus for a bit of olive oil and a thumbs up from some legionaries, it's great.**

(TC: 00:11:54)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Absolutely, yes. You've got to love Cartimandua.

**(TC: 00:11:56)**

**Moderator: But she's a client queen.**

(TC: 00:11:58)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes.

**(TC: 00:11:59)**

**Moderator: She's a client queen. She ousts her husband. The Romans let her still be the client queen, but Boudicca isn't allowed to be a client queen. She isn't given that status.**

(TC: 00:12:08)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, it's a strange one, and you can't always look for consistency in the Roman response to anything, and I think one of the things the Roman historians are keen to tell us this story about is that it is a story of Roman corruption and misrule here, and so the Boudicca story is about Roman officials and generals and what have you essentially getting out of hand and misruling their subjects in this sense, and they are seeing the Britons within their sphere, certainly as subjects, and this is the big problem, I think. And I think one of the great things about the barbarians, in a way, is that although they don't have their own voice, we can't go to a British historical tradition about Boudicca or Cartimandua, the Romans put words into their mouths which are fascinating, and that, in a way, allows the Roman historian to make points that they wouldn't necessarily be able to make. So, it's okay for a barbarian woman to criticise Roman misrule and the administration and corruption and so on in a way that, perhaps, it wouldn't be for a historian just to voice that directly. So, these barbarian characters, very often, are voice-, can emerge as voices of criticism of Rome by Romans. So, if you like, the history is being written by the victors, but it can be a very self-critical history as well.

**(TC: 00:13:41)**

**Moderator: Yes, because Boudicca, I hate spoilers, she ends up being killed, doesn't she?**

(TC: 00:13:46)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Again, there's two traditions. In one of them, she just gets poorly and dies.

**(TC: 00:13:51)**

**Moderator: Well, that's a bit rubbish.**

(TC: 00:13:53)

Stephen P. Kershaw: So, yes, it's a bit of a rubbish end.

**(TC: 00:13:56)**

**Moderator: Before we get to her end, let's talk about actually what she did, because we all know-, all, really, we know is she rode a chariot and then she burnt down Colchester or something. Is that right?**

(TC: 00:14:09)

Stephen P. Kershaw: That's pretty much, yes. The British were expert charioteers, the Romans were very impressed with their chariotry. It's highly unlikely, I have to spoil things for everybody, it's highly unlikely that Boudicca rode in a chariot with scythes. Sadly. There are some sources that say so, but highly unlikely.

**(TC: 00:14:29)**

**Moderator: So, that was the chariot where you had swords in the wheels so you could mow people down-,**

(TC: 00:14:32)

Stephen P. Kershaw: That's right.

**(TC: 00:14:35)**

**Moderator: Mad Max style, yes.**

(TC: 00:14:35)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, exactly. Which some cultures did use, but it's highly unlikely, sadly, that Boudicca's chariot had scythes.

**(TC: 00:14:47)**

**Moderator: Boo.**

(TC: 00:14:48)

Stephen P. Kershaw: You can discuss the nitty-gritty of that in the book, but fundamentally, none of the people who tell us that she had a scythed chariot were eyewitnesses of what was going on, so it's slightly unlikely. But whatever. Two things happen, I think, to trigger this. In the aftermath of Prasutagus' death, Boudicca is whipped, and her daughters are raped. So, it becomes personal for her, and she emerges as the ruler of the Iceni tribe. Also, their next-door neighbours, who were called the Trinovantes, who are in what's now Essex, the centre of everything there is at Colchester, where there is a temple to Claudius, and the Romans are developing the imperial cult there to worship Claudius and the emperor, I think to try to bond the British elite to Rome and its ways, but it doesn't work out like that. It's so expensive for them to do this. They need loads of money to build a temple, to administer the cult, and Claudius gives them some grants to do it, but also, Roman moneylenders come in on the scene and lend a whole load of money to the Brits, vast quantities, at high rates of interest. And then all of a sudden, just out of nowhere, they just call these loans in. So, all of a sudden, there's this horrendous situation. So, Boudicca has this personal grudge and the next-door neighbour tribe is oppressed both by Roman soldiers who are treating the locals like dirt and by Roman financiers. There's a huge flashpoint and the rebellion gets underway quickly and violently.

**(TC: 00:16:32)**

**Moderator: And it's a huge number of people that Boudicca manages to lead, isn't it? Because you think, maybe even a few thousand people would be quite a lot, but we're talking over a hundred thousand people?**

(TC: 00:16:44)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Absolutely, at least that's what the Roman sources tell us. 120,000 people. Quite how the Romans know this, as a historian, you want to say, how do you know that? But those are the figures that we're given. It's obviously a huge uprising. They take a soft target. So, they go to Colchester, which is defended by superannuated Roman soldiers, they're just veteran soldiers, it's not properly fortified, there's no-, so, the rebels just sweep in, and they just burn and they destroy, and the archaeology there in Colchester, there is a deep layer of ash that they've found from the burning. It's manifest there in the ground.

**(TC: 00:17:27)**

**Moderator: It's a wonderful proof that all of this really happened. Because that's the wonderful thing about these stories, is not only do you have all this written history, but you can actually go and see it for yourself.**

(TC: 00:17:40)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Very true, and again, as a writer trying to put this book together, you're constantly trying to get as many sources as you can, and sometimes to reconcile them between themselves, because the history and the archaeology don't necessarily tell you the same story.

**(TC: 00:17:56)**

**Moderator: Oh really?**

(TC: 00:17:57)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, it's true. In this case they do, I think, so you can read about the burning of Colchester in the Greek and Roman historians, but as you say, you can go and dig it up.

**(TC: 00:18:08)**

**Moderator: So, to get off subject a little bit, what parts of-, what archaeology counter-, offers a different opinion to the written? Have you got any, can you think of something off-hand?**

(TC: 00:18:20)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Off the top of my head, it's the kind of thing that, again, because the Roman historians are very keen to spin things very heavily, sometimes you might read in other situations of rebellions like this and barbarians sweeping through and destroying and what have you. And you would expect to find that in the archaeological levels, and you don't, so sometimes you're trying to say, well, was it this exactly? Did this exactly happen as you told us that it did? Can we corroborate this from the archaeology, and sometimes the answer is actually, no we can't.

**(TC: 00:18:58)**

**Moderator: The Romans just left because they didn't like the weather.**

(TC: 00:19:01)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, or something like that.

**(TC: 00:19:03)**

**Moderator: Was there loads of barbarians forcing us to leave? No, it's just cold.**

(TC: 00:19:04)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes. The Romans hated the weather over here.

**(TC: 00:19:11)**

**Moderator: So, after Colchester was levelled, pretty much, was burnt to ash, which we can still see today, what happens? Because presumably the Romans didn't just go, that's fine then, we'll just leave you to it.**

(TC: 00:19:23)

Stephen P. Kershaw: No, the problem was that Suetonius Paulinus, with two legions, was over the other side of the country, the exact opposite part of the country. He was on Anglesey. Two things happen, or don't happen. One is that a detachment is sent from, probably, Lincoln to try and deal with it, but that is ambushed and heavily defeated, and the other Roman forces are down in the region of Exeter, and their legionary commander just refuses to march.

**(TC: 00:19:54)**

**Moderator: It's a long way.**

(TC: 00:19:55)

Stephen P. Kershaw: It's a long way.

**(TC: 00:19:55)**

**Moderator: And this is before the M3. (TC 00:20:00) the idea of walking from Exeter, even to somewhere like Weymouth sounds like a long way, I feel. Go all the way.**

(TC: 00:20:08)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Absolutely.

**(TC: 00:20:08)**

**Moderator: To Essex, blimey.**

(TC: 00:20:10)

Stephen P. Kershaw: So, the legion in that area just doesn't get involved, and the rebels just make the most of it, and they pick the softest target. So, after Colchester it's London, and after London it's St Albans, which were the main urban settlements, and it's truly appalling, it's catastrophic, the atrocities committed by the British rebels, at least as described, again, in the sources, are stomach-churningly awful. I'm not going to talk about them here and now.

**(TC: 00:20:39)**

**Moderator: Go on. We can give a warning.**

(TC: 00:20:41)

Stephen P. Kershaw: No, you've got to read the book for that.

**(TC: 00:20:44)**

**Moderator: You know what Vlad the Impaler did? That. We can say that she's putting the Romans on display and torturing them to the point of deaths for everybody to see. Heads on spikes but worse.**

(TC: 00:20:55)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes. So, while all that grisliness is going on, Suetonius Paulinus has to try to get back, and he comes back, to start with, with his cavalry, and realises that that's not enough, he can't deal with the rebels merely with a cavalry force. He has to wait for his infantry to come, and as I say, that gives the rebels an opportunity, essentially, to sack first Colchester, then London, then St Albans. And what the Romans have to do, essentially, is they're grossly outnumbered, massively outnumbered, but they have to fight, and the sooner they fight the better, and that's what they do. Suetonius re-joins his infantry forces and they then march towards the rebels, and we haven't found the battle site. That would be nice. But the battle site is still elusive. But Suetonius needs to engage the Britons, needs to do so on terrain of his own choosing, and that's what he does in the end.

**(TC: 00:21:53)**

**Moderator: So, this is the wonderful thing about military history, which I've never really got into. I think it's quite a male-dominated side of the subject, is military history. And it is so much to do with the geography of the area. Logically, some military historian must have sat down and worked out, well, if I was going to defeat a load of Briton rebels, where would I send my legionaries in and do the most damage?**

(TC: 00:22:18)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes. They do, and got to love military historians, they love this kind of stuff. There's nothing they like better than maps and diagrams and things with arrows on, and yes, they've done exactly what you say. There's all sorts of people trying to work that out, but it's here that there's the gap in the archaeology. It would be good to find somewhere with, I don't know, huge amounts of weaponry, but it's tough. The description of the battle site is vague in our sources. The people who write about it weren't there. So, it's guesswork, we can only-, somewhere between London and Anglesey. About halfway between.

**(TC: 00:23:03)**

**Moderator: It was Slough. I bet you it was Slough.**

(TC: 00:23:04)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes.

**(TC: 00:23:06)**

**Moderator: The defeat of England.**

(TC: 00:23:07)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Maybe we've been looking in the wrong place, maybe.

**(TC: 00:23:11)**

**Moderator: So, the Romans obviously win at this point?**

(TC: 00:23:14)

Stephen P. Kershaw: They do. They always do in the end. The Romans can bring things to, if you like, a pitched battle, if they can fight in an organised way, then they're always going to win. If the barbarians, as they do constantly, throughout Roman history, if they can do things in a loose and improvised way, hit and run, then they can fight the Romans very effectively, but the moment it comes to a set piece battle, then that's the moment when the Romans are going to win. And again, you've got to love the Roman historians. There's almost a template that a Roman historian uses for a battle, which is, maybe you describe the location, but you set-, and then the troops will draw up their battle lines ready to go, and in this case, it's extraordinary, the Romans have got this well-defended place. Boudicca can't get round the back of them or anything, they've got to fight face to face in quite a confined space, and the Britons come in their huge horde swarming all over the battlefield, and they bring their wives and families to watch, and they set up a ring of wagons to watch the battle happen. So, the two sides-, and that's standard. So, the two sides come together, and then what you get is speeches by each commander, and you always have a speech, and the loser always goes first.

**(TC: 00:24:43)**

**Moderator: Right, okay.**

(TC: 00:24:44)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Interesting. So, it's a bit of a spoiler as to who speaks first. Usually, he's going to lose. In this case, it's Boudicca, and she says these things that are wonderful pieces of Roman rhetoric, goodness knows what she actually said, if anything, but it's beautifully turned Latin or Greek, and she inspires her soldiers. And of course, one of the things that the Roman audience find weird is an army commanded by a woman. In her speeches, she justifies this, she says, we Britons are used to women commanding our forces, and obviously, if the Britons were used to women commanding their forces, there'd be no need to say that. But she says it for a Roman audience. And we have these wonderful descriptions of her as well, with her flaming red hair and her plaid cloak, and she's there with the spear. She's formidable, and memorably described, and so she has the best lines as well. So, she can slag off Nero. She can make points about Roman maladministration and corruption and that kind of thing, in a way that the historian himself probably can't. So, she has her say, and the Roman commander is very brusque. He's almost like, keep calm and carry on, sort of thing. He just tells the Romans what they would do anyway. And then normally, then there would be an engagement, and in a normal battle, it would teeter on a knife edge for a bit, and then someone would do something really cool or decisive that would change the flow of the battle. In the British history, I love the bit where Julius Caesar's troops are coming ashore, and it's really difficult for them, and then all of a sudden, the eagle bearer of the 10th legion jumps into the sea and storms forward shouting, it's victory or nothing, and that turns the tide.

**(TC: 00:26:42)**

**Moderator: Julius Caesar marching through Gaul is like, it's so close, we nearly lost, it's so close, we nearly lost, the entire time, the whole time he's just massacring thousands of Gauls. How hard is this, really?**

(TC: 00:26:58)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, that's very true, and so it is, the more Roman battle scenes you read, the more alike they become. You've been in one Roman battle, you've been in them all. Apart from this one, because in this one, the two sides come together and the Romans just one straight away. There's no moment of doubt here, they just steam roller the British army and carnage, utter carnage, partly because there are so many of the Britons, they can't get away because of all these wagons that the spectators there. So, it becomes an absolute blood bath in the end, in which Boudicca is, in one account she's killed, in another she gets ill a bit later and then dies in an unassuming way.

**(TC: 00:27:46)**

**Moderator: Yes, that's rather disappointing.**

(TC: 00:27:48)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, it is. And I'm not sure how the Roman is supposed to think of this. It's just job done. That's it, we're all nicely sorted out now. We can get back to governing and being Roman.

**(TC: 00:28:01)**

**Moderator: I find it really interesting about how much of history is written for the history reader, really. It's not written to be and accurate account, it's written-, so, really, the story of Boudicca is really an understanding of Roman politics, in a way. Much more than it is the events that actually occurred.**

(TC: 00:28:18)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, very much so, I think. And, as I say, the Roman historian always writes with a motive. It's always about saying something else, in a sense. They strongly believe in lessons of history. We write, we read history to improve ourselves, to learn lessons, to see about the people of the past, who very often are better than us. That's a cliché Roman history as well, is that we are always worse than the people that went before us, and so we're going to write some history now to sort us all out, that sort of thing. It's never a neutral thing, and in a sense things like that, almost the events themselves, certainly, I think, very often the geography and the setting of it, are there to make points that are beyond the mere re-counting of a sequence of events, if you like.

**(TC: 00:29:13)**

**Moderator: But it is fun, the romance, because I often think of the-, I just went very posh. I often. No, I think of the British people at the time, these Iron Age, Celtic, and the descriptions of them. They had completely shaved bodies except for their moustaches.**

(TC: 00:29:29)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes. That was wonderful.

**(TC: 00:29:33)**

**Moderator: And that was just the women.**

(TC: 00:29:34)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Absolutely. No, they're phenomenal.

**(TC: 00:29:36)**

**Moderator: They're so romanticised.**

(TC: 00:29:38)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, it is, but one of the nice things is that having read that stuff, you can go to the British Museum, then, and a whole load of that stuff, the jewellery, the metalwork, the weaponry, is astonishing. These people are called, by the Romans, barbarians, and often regarded as being primitive and violent and weird, but certainly (TC 00:30:00) the Romano-British, the British metalwork and jewellery and what have you are absolutely staggeringly beautiful. Beautiful, gorgeous curvilinear designs, in those very characteristic Celtic motifs and the torques that they wear, these almost like-,

**(TC: 00:30:22)**

**Moderator: I know, I was-, torques, for those of you who don't know, and both Steve and I are wearing headphones, and you see so many pictures these days of people who have their big, chunky headphones around their necks, and it looks exactly like Iron Age torques.**

(TC: 00:30:36)

Stephen P. Kershaw: It does, yes.

**(TC: 00:30:38)**

**Moderator: And they are a status symbol again, and you're just like, this is so familiar, and yet so-,**

(TC: 00:30:42)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Absolutely, yes. It's a really good thing, it is, it's like having your headphones round your neck, except they're made out of heavy woven gold.

**(TC: 00:30:50)**

**Moderator: And they don't have podcasts in them, speaking to you.**

(TC: 00:30:52)

Stephen P. Kershaw: No, they don't.

**(TC: 00:30:56)**

**Moderator: Trying to get to the real people, it's almost impossible, isn't it? Because there's so much politics.**

(TC: 00:31:02)

Stephen P. Kershaw: It's very hard, because that's what, ultimately, that's what you want. You want to get to the real people, and I think, again, part of the problem with that is that, for the readership of an ancient historian, they know what the real people are like anyway, so they don't tell you. There's a whole load of stuff that we want to know, because it's not obvious to us, but they don't tell us because it is obvious to them.

**(TC: 00:31:25)**

**Moderator: But at least we know that Spain isn't off the West Coast of England.**

(TC: 00:31:31)

Stephen P. Kershaw: That's right. It's just so bonkers, and you think, how did that happen, and I think, in a way, once that kind of thing enters the historical tradition, it won't go away, so once it's become part of the received wisdom then it just gets embedded, and it seems crazy, because Roman surveying is astonishing. The Fosse Way road goes, I say, diagonally all the way across the country, pretty much, and it barely deviates about a mile out of true all the way. They're very good at surveying and, if you like, their military intelligence is very good, all those Roman roads and stuff, and yet, every now and again, something just goes completely haywire.

**(TC: 00:32:14)**

**Moderator: You what?**

(TC: 00:32:16)

Stephen P. Kershaw: And you think, what? Spain is beyond Ireland?

**(TC: 00:32:21)**

**Moderator: It's almost like it's twisted in a glass and looped around.**

(TC: 00:32:22)

Stephen P. Kershaw: It is, yes.

**(TC: 00:32:26)**

**Moderator: It's really odd.**

(TC: 00:32:27)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Absolutely. They then bring in these other weird things, which means that the Silures, the people of southern Wales, the reason they're a bit swarthy and they've got curly hair is because of their contact with Spain, thinks the Roman.

**(TC: 00:32:45)**

**Moderator: This great Spanish/Welsh breeding has-,**

(TC: 00:32:49)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes. Absolutely.

**(TC: 00:32:51)**

**Moderator: That's wonderful.**

(TC: 00:32:52)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Superb.

**(TC: 00:32:52)**

**Moderator: Because yes, you do-, obviously, Boudicca has the red hair, which is obviously very Celtic look.**

(TC: 00:32:58)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Very much so, and again, the Romans think that a lot of the red-headed people of the North, they get that from the Germans.

**(TC: 00:33:07)**

**Moderator: Right. Okay.**

(TC: 00:33:12)

Stephen P. Kershaw: There are very strange ideas about identity and ethnicity going on in the Roman world.

**(TC: 00:33:18)**

**Moderator: But I love that little extra justification. Well, obviously it's near Spain, because look at the people. They're very Spanish.**

(TC: 00:33:24)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes.

**(TC: 00:33:22)**

**Moderator: You've been to Swansea. So Spanish. They have a beach.**

(TC: 00:33:29)

Stephen P. Kershaw: Yes, that's right, yes.

**(TC: 00:33:31)**

**Moderator: Fantastic, and I just love the fact that when you study barbarians, you're actually studying the people who thought of them as barbarians almost much more than the reality of the people that were there.**

(TC: 00:33:42)

Stephen P. Kershaw: I think that's true, and so yes, the barbarians become a very fine vehicle for thought, in a sense. They're good to think with.

**(TC: 00:33:51)**

**Moderator: A massive thanks to Stephen P. Kershaw there. Do go online and check out those talks. You can go to the British Museum collection, you can search for talks, and you'll see what I mean. They do look exactly like chunky headphones. It's really quite-, I don't know, just go out and have a look at teenagers wearing their funky beats and you'll see. They look like Iron Age people. Maybe that's just me. Thank you for listening to this episode of the British Museum Membercast. To support the show, please share this episode with your friends and on social media. Use the hashtag Membercast. To get in touch, please email friends@britishmuseum.org. You can find out more about me at iszi.com, that is I-S-Z-I.com. We'll see you next month.**