

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **Julius Caesar's Disease: A New Diagnosis by Francesco M Galassi and Hutan Ashrafian**

Hardback, 192 pages  
Pen & Sword Books  
November 2016

This book is the result of an investigation that followed an initial letter on the topic of Caesar's ailments published in 2015 in the journal *Neurological Sciences*. The authors are polymaths: one, a medically qualified palaeopathologist; the second, a junior surgeon.

As the title implies, *Julius Caesar's Disease* examines the condition that afflicted the famed Roman Emperor. In 2004, the neurologist JR Hughes, extensively cited in the book, proposed that Caesar likely had epilepsy. Four documented episodes were probably complex partial seizures. It is also possible that he had absence attacks in childhood and adolescence, and perhaps nocturnal seizures.

While focusing on epilepsy, the book courageously, if not audaciously, proposes – in opposition to beliefs entrenched over centuries – a new diagnosis. There are five chapters, but the reader must scan 120 pages before reaching the “Simpler Hypothesis and Novel Idea” in the fourth chapter. Here the authors argue that Caesar, while suffering from underlying cardio- or cerebro-vascular disease, may have experienced transient ischaemic attacks.

Galassi and Ashrafian debate at length the literary evidence provided by Caesar's principal biographers and other authors of antiquity. Importantly, they provide citations from these works in the original Latin and Greek texts with accompanying translations into English. Two citations, from Plutarch and Appian, strongly support the view that Caesar suffered from epilepsy, whatever the cause.

Whether Caesar had a stroke or a hangover on the day he was led by Brutus to his slaughter is speculation. The ancient literary sources suggest – more convincingly than for any other historical figure – that Caesar indeed suffered during his life from epilepsy. Although the authors decry “*exhibitions of erudite guessing or showy speculation*” in formulating hypotheses on the exact cause of Caesar's disease, they often succumb to the temptation!

Irrespective of whether one agrees with the authors' conclusions, this book is thoroughly researched and referenced, well-presented, and will be of interest to anyone with a keen eye into the past, especially to historians of medicine.

**Spyros Retsas**  
**April 2017**

Published online at [www.bshh.org.uk](http://www.bshh.org.uk).