

2017 Annual Scientific Meeting
FIT Open Mic Abstracts

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PRESENTATION INFORMATION

Title of Presentation:

The Poisoning of Claudius I: Rome's Accidental Emperor

Abstract:

The forgotten child from a high-ranking family of the Roman Empire, Claudius would unexpectedly grow to become one of its greatest emperors. Afflicted with a disfiguring illness from childhood, he was mocked, ostracized, and hidden from public life. This mysterious illness allowed Claudius to dedicate himself to academic pursuits. His isolation from public life likely saved him from the fate suffered by other nobles under the rule of Caligula. After the assassination of Caligula, with Claudius hiding for his life behind a curtain, he was hailed as the new Emperor of Rome.

Despite his minimal governing experience and physical deformities, he grew into one of the most successful emperors in Roman history. He expanded the empire to Britain, built lasting infrastructure, and proved a capable and competent administrator and ruler. However, his eventual downfall after a 13-year reign is shrouded in mystery. Historical sources have described his illness and ultimate death by poison, but the exact culprit is unknown. Claudius's fatal flaw may have been his choice in spouse and successor. With his fourth wife seeking to place her own son from a previous marriage on the throne, she may have seized her brief window of opportunity to poison the emperor.

The death of Claudius is an unsolved toxicologic mystery, but this has not stopped scholars from speculating in this historical game of Clue®. The murder weapon is suspected to be poison, but which one?

Objective 1:

Utilize clues from historic texts and the aftermath of Claudius's death to identify if he was poisoned.

Objective 2:

Describe the timeline of Claudius's death and his presentation of illness.

Objective 3:

Form a differential diagnosis and attempt to identify a suspect poison.