Galen’s Four Temperaments in 1893 at Chicago’s Post-Graduate School of Anaesthesia

Born over 500 years after the death of Hippocrates, Galen of Pergamon (129 CE to c.216 CE), a Greek physician to several Roman emperors, reoriented medicine from the Hippocratic humoral system toward a Galenic temperamental one. From animal sacrifices to the gods, pre-Classical Greeks had observed that the topmost layer (serum) of freshly settled sacrificial blood was actually yellow. This leading layer likely sparked concepts of elemental fire, Hippocratic “yellow bile,” and the Galenic “choleric” temperament of leading, goal-oriented motivators. The second buff layer (leukocytes) reflected elemental water, Hippocratic “phlegm,” and the Galenic “phlegmatic” temperament of water-like, calming mediators. The third air-reddened layer (erythrocytes) inspired concepts of elemental air, Hippocratic “blood,” and the Galenic “sanguine” temperament of garrulous, “air-filling” talkers. The final, reddish-black bottom layer (clot) congealed elemental earth, Hippocratic “black bile,” and the Galenic “melancholic” temperament of depressed, bottom-line, analytical perfectionists.

In 1893 at Chicago’s Post-Graduate School of Anaesthesia, professors taught that “Physiognomy, Phrenology, and Temperament” provided clues to each patient’s unique mixture of Galen’s choleric, phlegmatic, sanguine, and melancholic temperaments. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Inc.)

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