A Greek physician and philosopher of the 2nd century AD. For centuries he was the supreme authority in medicine. Hence ‘Galenist’, a follower of Galen’s medical theories.

Galen (129–ca. 216 CE) was the most prolific and influential of all medical writers of antiquity. The incomplete but indispensable standard edition by Carl Gottlob Kuhn comprises twenty volumes. Prolixity is no guarantor of ability or reputation, but Galen’s claims to each rest not only on his immense output, but on the depth and scope of his writings. Galen composed more than 200 treatises, ranging from anatomical, physiological, pharmaceutical, prognostic, and therapeutic works, treatises on dietetics and plant medicine, Hippocratic commentaries, works devoted to attacking medical rivals such as Asklepiades of Bithynia and competing medical sects such as Empiricists and Methodists, texts on epistemology, language, logic, psychology, ethics, and moral philosophy, excurses on literary criticism, philology, and rhetoric (including an Attic dictionary in forty-eight volumes), and commentaries and compendia on Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics. A number of these works are either lost or exist only in fragments. Some, such as the second half of Anatomical procedures, exist only in Arabic translation. Galen’s extant works account for some 50 percent of his known output, and make up almost 11 percent of all surviving Greek literature to 350 CE (the largest percentage for any single author), and only 25 percent of Galen’s work has been translated into a modern language.

Galen was born in Pergamon into a prominent and wealthy family. His father, Nikon, was deeply learned, an important and wealthy member of the Pergamene elite, a Roman citizen and renowned architect. Nikon was involved in the renovation of Pergamon’s temple complex of Zeus-Asklepios, sponsored by the former senator and native Pergamene, Costunius Rufinus, under imperial decree in about 140. Galen appears to have been an only child (he mentions no siblings, nor is there any evidence that he married), who worshipped his father. In contrast, he compared his mother, who he stated had an irascible nature and who allegedly abused both her husband and their servants, to Xanthippe. Nikon embarked his son on a career as a philosopher (or at least at the beginning, took the fourteen-year-old Galen with him to attend philosophical lectures at Pergamon). Galen would later state that his father made it possible for him to receive instruction from representatives of each of the four chief philosophical schools.

Two years later, Nikon dramatically altered this pedagogic trajectory, after being informed in a dream by Asklepios that Galen must now study medicine. Galen, respectful of his father’s wishes, and probably at this time possessed of a high regard for the importance of Asklepios in his father’s own professional sphere, readily acceded to this change. In later life, Galen would refer to himself as the servant of Asklepios. The death of Nikon three years later (149/150) left Galen not only
comparatively wealthy but also allowed him to complete a medical education which, in its length and depth, was without parallel in antiquity. Galen devoted the next ten years in pursuit of medical learning, journeying throughout the Mediterranean in pursuit of teachers and texts. Four of those years were spent in Egypt, and although Galen is uncharacteristically reticent as to what he did there, it is clear that he must have benefited from Alexandria's reputation, established since Herophilos and Erasistratus, in anatomical science and physiological theory. Galen returned in 157 to Pergamon and was appointed physician to the gladiators, a post requiring a significant amount of practical skill in anatomy. In the autumn of 162, Galen arrived in Rome, the logical place for anyone wishing to establish a reputation, and where he would remain, apart from an absence from 166 to 169 (which Galen ascribes either to growing professional jealousy or a fear of Plague) for the rest of his long working life.

The beneficiary of an established Pergamene expatriate elite network, such as the famous and influential Eudemus the Peripatetic, Galen soon came to the attention of several of those that formed the Second Sophistic. Galen's medical successes, including curing Eudemus of quartan fever (malaria), established his reputation. He documents some of these events in the semi-autobiographical *On prognosis*. Galen soon found appointment as a court physician to Marcus Aurelius, who regarded him as "the best of physicians and the first of philosophers," although as with so much else that Galen recounts and records, we have only his word for this encomium. The absence of any other contemporary source for Galen's life makes a proper biographical study impossible. Galen's is also often the sole voice in his critical descriptions of the work of others, which necessitates great care in coming to terms with his writings. Further, much of Galen's writing is laced with a fierce polemic strand, directed both at past as well as contemporaneous opponents, medical and philosophical, and these biases and prejudices must be taken into account.

At the beginning of his stay in Rome, Galen gave public anatomical demonstrations. These exhibitions were not only important for an ambitious doctor, they also highlighted what for Galen was the most important part of medicine, namely, anatomical science. Galen believed that detailed structural and functional knowledge of the body was the hallmark of a good physician. The body was conceived of in teleological terms, as a deliberate and ordered construct of Nature or Demiurge, even though, for Galen, it was impossible to know whether the gods exist, how many there may be, or even whether the soul is mortal. Notwithstanding such agnosticism, Galen's teleology, exemplified in his magisterial *On the use of parts*, offers the most sustained argument from design ever produced in antiquity. Galen's arguments on the structural and functional economy of the body went far beyond any teleological arguments made by Aristotle. Although his demonstrative and experimental methods had their origins in Aristotle's work in natural science and in the anatomical and physiological advances of Herophilos and Erasistratus, Galen claimed a deep philosophical allegiance to Plato, and it is useful to regard his teleological standpoint in the light of Middle Platonism. Only Plato in philosophy and Hippocrates of Kos in medicine merit Galen's unqualified praise and are raised to semi-divine status. In particular, Galen's Hippocratic commentaries, as well as his blanket endorsement of Hippocrates as the greatest of all medical practitioners, with Galen as his most faithful exegete, created an idealized portrait of the Koan physician that would prove both more influential and longer lasting than Galen's own legacy. One consequence was the embedding of Hippocratic humoral theory into medical theory and practice for the next 1500 years. Another is the continuing debate on the role of the Hippocratic Oath.

Galen died sometime in the reign of Caracalla. His place of death is unknown. He left neither school
nor successor. His sheer encyclopedic comprehensiveness was taken as evidence that there was nothing further to discover in medicine, that it had, in his hands, reached its apogee. In response, attempts were made, which began in his lifetime, to render the Galenic corpus into a more manageable format, a strategy which would itself become codified as Galenism, under which the Galenic corpus was edited, summarized, and redacted. This complex set of processes was first seen in the medical encyclopedia of Oribasios of Pergamon, and was later developed in the sixth-century *Summa Alexandrinorum*, where a number of Galen's key texts, chiefly those of a practical and therapeutic nature, were converted into sixteen compendia. Reformulations were also made. The influential medieval therapeutic doctrine of the non-naturals, for example, derived from a late Alexandrian recasting of Galenic material. Productions such as these not only made Galen more easily accessible, but also created a more dogmatic Galen. Offering a complete medical and philosophical system of the body, underpinned by the authority of the most prolific medical writer in antiquity, Galenism became one of the most influential and pervasive of all synthetic medical systems, vestiges of which were still present in the nineteenth century.

The last thirty years has seen sustained and critical scholarly attention paid to Galen, beginning with the first conference in Cambridge in 1979. There is a growing recognition that Galen not only has much to contribute to an understanding of the cultural and intellectual milieu of his own era, but that he also offers a necessarily imperfect but indispensable window into earlier periods of medical practice and philosophical speculation. Galen is a key nodal point both for examining medical and philosophical concepts he inherited and those which he retained, transformed and bequeathed. He throws into stark relief the question of medicine's transmission and reception in Late Antiquity, as well as the role of the doctor in society and the extent to which medical practices reflected society's concerns. The most remarkable physician antiquity ever produced, atypical because of his uniqueness, unique because of his writings and their influence, Galen's success was made possible not only due to his intelligence, wealth, background, and the opportunities these afforded, but also because a highly literate Hellenocentric culture allowed his ideas to develop on fertile ground, and permitted his goal of a conceptualization of medicine that is best apprehended philosophically, to reach a critical audience.

**SEE ALSO:**
Anatomy; Medicine, Greek and Roman; Teleology.

**References and Suggested Readings**


Julius Rocca

APA    Chicago    Harvard    MLA


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