

MEDICAL TREATISES Richard Stapleton, c.1430

[Medieval medicine](#) relied heavily on the theory of humours created by the Ancient Greek physician Hippocrates. There were thought to be four humours: the bodily fluids blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. Each of the humours was associated with certain characteristics. Good health was the result of a balance between humours, whereas illness was thought to be caused by an imbalance. An excess of one humour caused symptoms produced by its particular characteristic.

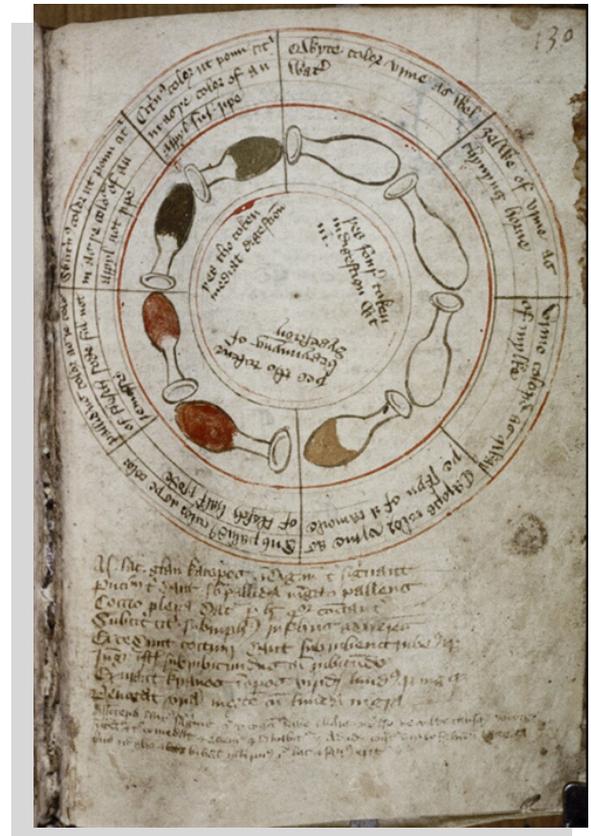
Examination of a patient's urine (uroscopy) was thought to be important because it could indicate the balance of humours.

Richard Stapleton was Master of Balliol College, Oxford. He recorded this collection of medical ideas, including this uroscopy chart which was used to diagnose illness. You can view it online at [Digital Bodleian](#).

The colour and thickness of urine were believed to be influenced by the qualities of the dominant humour. These varied according to temperament, age, and other factors. Moist humours created a thicker urine and hot humours created deeper coloured urine.

Humour	Qualities	Age
Blood	Hot and moist	Childhood
Yellow bile (choler)	Hot and dry	Adolescence
Black bile	Cold and dry	Maturity
Phlegm	Cold and moist	Old Age

To assist diagnosis, the manuscript has both hand-coloured pictures and written descriptions. One sample is described as "Carops colour urine as the skyn of a camoule." 'Carops' comes from the Greek 'charopos' meaning 'light brown', which is helpful because in 1430 it's unlikely that many English readers would have seen a camel.



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Questions

1. A *phlegmatic* person is someone who is calm and peaceful but unemotional. **Which of the four humours do you think medieval physicians would associate with these qualities?**
2. **How would a medieval doctor expect the urine of an elderly person to differ from that of an adolescent?**
3. **What do the use of Greek terms such as 'charopos' and a mention of camels tell us about the original source of the descriptions used in this manuscript?**

FURTHER READING

Read this [2016 blog post](#) from the [British Medical Journal](#) about the influence humour theory continues to have.